

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LAINIEY DAVIS

roots *of* love



*Spicy
Romance
Series
Starters*

ROOTS OF LOVE

SPICY ROMANCE SERIES
STARTERS

LAINY DAVIS

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Indulge in a triple shot of scorching-hot romance with “Roots of Love,” an irresistible collection of laugh-out-loud series starters from USA Today bestselling author Lainey Davis. This set includes:

Fireball – An Enemies-to-Lovers Romance:

Samantha Vine has it all - a successful tech startup on the brink of an IPO, a group of supportive friends, and more money than she knows what to do with. When she butts heads with starchy science teacher AJ Trachtenberg during a field trip, sparks fly. But soon their fiery clashes turn to passionate encounters neither was expecting. Can these two wounded souls heal their old hurts and forge a lasting connection?

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FIREBALL

AN ENEMIES TO LOVERS ROMANCE

CHAPTER 1

SAMANTHA

I WILL SELL this house today. I always channel Anette Bening in *American Beauty* when I think I have more on my fork than I can chew. *I will sell this house today*, I chant, symbolically referring to nailing an interview with a reporter from *Forbes* and meeting community leaders and all the other tasks that come with running a tech startup on the cusp of going public.

Forbes is just another interview. I've done a hundred of these by now.

Mirror check reveals my hair is looking fabulous. My skin has that peachy glow I get after a nice workout. Not a hardcore Pound workout with drum sticks—a nice stroll on the treadmill in the company gym before popping up to my office.

I check my watch. 7:55. Just a few minutes until my assistant arrives and just a few more minutes until the reporter strolls into my space. I lick my teeth and check the mirror again. Hearing a tap on the door, I turn my head, smile in place.

“Oh.” I shake my head, seeing my CFO, Logan, and not my assistant. “Hey, friend.”

She struts into the room holding a small bundle of yellow flowers. “Just wanted to bring you some sunshine before your big interview.” She shrugs and sets them on my desk.

I look up at her, awed by the gesture. “That was really freaking nice of you, Logan.”

She winks and pats the desk. “Knock ‘em dead, Sam. I know you will!” Logan makes her exit and I pick up the flowers, giving them a sniff even though I know tulips don’t really have a scent. I never know what to do when people do nice things for me like that, out of the blue.

It makes me uncomfortable, and I fully recognize that that’s probably really telling, in terms of my mental health. I remind myself I’ve bought Logan flowers plenty of times.

Another tap on my door frame reveals my assistant, but she’s not alone. It’s go time.

“Morning, boss,” Audrey says, nodding her head at the sleekly dressed man by her side. “I’ve got Mr. Childers here, from *Forbes*.”

He flashes a toothy grin and I clench. I don’t like this guy. My spidey senses tell me he’s out to portray me in a bad way. But I’ll win him over. I always do.

He hurries over to me with his hand outstretched. “Call me Isaiah, please.”

I offer him my standard firm-grip-handshake. “Pleasure to meet you, Isaiah. Audrey, would you be able to put these in some water for me when you get a chance? I’d love to have

them on my desk later.” She smiles and gestures for the bouquet.

Isaiah starts talking. “So, Sam. Can I call you Sam?”

I hold up a finger for him to wait as I make sure Audrey gets what she needs and is on her way. Once she closes the door I sigh and put on my public smile. “Sorry. Hello. Sam is fine. Where should we start?”

He gestures around the room. “This is an impressive upgrade from a tiny dorm room.”

I laugh the expected laugh and tell him about starting Vinea in my “spare” time in college, coding the software late at night when I should have been sleeping but needed to silence all the shouting in my head. Between the demands of my statistics degree program and my siblings calling me for all the things teenagers typically ask of a parent...well, let’s just say I had a lot of anxious energy to burn off.

“Yes, I can tell you’re very ... energetic.” Isaiah thumbs through some notes. “So, you’ve compared Vinea to relationship management software? Tell me what that means.”

“Vinea has become *essential* for a half million scientists worldwide,” I tell him. “Our software is cloud-based. Do you know how many researchers were relying on paper? Emailing spreadsheets back and forth? Version control is a real problem, even for brilliant minds.”

Isaiah frowns. “So it’s an online version of a spreadsheet? For researchers?”

I shake my head, trying not to roll my eyes. “Vinea lets scientists track, measure and forecast their scientific work. There is so much repetition in labs, and researchers studying living cells...well there is just too much data to track and manipulate by hand. I know there’s a problem in the world of life sciences research, and I know that Vinea can solve it.”

A buzzing sound interrupts my train of thought and I look down to see my phone dancing across my desk. My brother’s name flashes on the screen and I silence the call, turning the phone upside-down. “Sorry,” I say. Isaiah nods. “As I’m sure you know from your prep work, my focus is tailored solutions for research institutions. Academic researchers use Vinea free of charge to track their work.”

Isaiah nods again and holds a finger in the air. “I think I’ve read that you get people hooked while they’re in school so they’re dependent on Vinea once they enter the workforce?” He arches a brow at me sinisterly. My phone buzzes again and I slap the side button, holding it in and hoping this turns the damn thing off.

I smile again so I don’t shake him. “While it’s true I do want my solutions to spread like a vine and dig their tendrils into every lab, I want to be clear that the scientists using Vinea aren’t ‘roped in’ so much as they are transformed by how we can help them and their work. Think how much headspace these folks have to make sense of patterns and correlations once they have an accurate handle on the trends in their data.”

The phone continues to jump across the desk, more insistently now. “Do you need to answer that?” Isaiah frowns

at the phone.

“No, please accept my apologies. It’s my family calling. I think they’re just excited for me. You know, talking to such an important publication...” I try to stall as I succeed in turning off the phone. My family has no idea I’m talking with *Forbes* today. My brother probably needs help ordering new underwear and doesn’t know his damn size.

“Isaiah,” I tell him, trying to take back control of the interview, “in the past year Vinea has secured over \$200 million in seed investments and we have a valuation of \$900 million. My investors find us because all the life sciences companies in their portfolios adopt our solutions. Because biotech company leaders and entrepreneurs become accustomed to my software in graduate school. We believe this is the future of—“

The door to my office opens and Audrey pokes her head in, grimacing. “I’m sooo sorry, Sam. It’s the Colonel on the phone. He says it’s urgent.”

Audrey hurries to take Isaiah on a tour of the building and I hope she catches my nonverbal cues and prayers to take him by Logan’s office. Logan can charm even the slimiest of slime balls, and Isaiah seems none too pleased at being interrupted.

“I’m the CEO of a company,” I tell myself. “A reporter should expect my time to be in demand.”

I'm really good at appearing confident on the outside, when it's usually chaos in my brain. I take a deep breath and stare at the phone on my desk for another beat. The red "hold" light flashes at me insistently. I pick up the handle. "Hello?"

"Samantha." My father's sharp voice makes me shiver as if he were in the room to me, yelling at us Vine kids as if we were his soldiers. "I'm not happy to be making this call this morning."

"Well," I tell him. "I'm also not happy about the interruption. May I ask what's so urgent?"

"You did not send the notarized paperwork your brother requires in order to sell the beach house, Samantha."

I blow out a breath. I recall hearing something about paperwork but Audrey hasn't put anything on my desk recently. "I don't believe I received paperwork." I have to speak this way to my father, as if we are colleagues, rather than father and daughter. This is how he's always been, and this is how life was growing up with the Colonel at the helm of our family.

"I don't have time for impertinence, Samantha. Your brother has important real estate development on the line here."

I'm the CEO of an almost-billion-dollar company, I want to scream at him. I have important shit I'm in the middle of, too. But I can't say these things to my father and my brother is incapable of hearing them. My brother never remembered to actually send me the paperwork, and we both know it.

“Please tell Sean I’m happy to sign paperwork if I receive it,” I tell him. “As you and he are aware, we have notaries on staff here at Vinea. I can and do handle these requests promptly. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have a reporter waiting and I cannot take advantage of his time.”

I’m able to hang up with my father only because there’s another person’s time to consider. I don’t have to check my email to know I’ll be receiving a frantic attachment from my brother’s attorney. It’ll be couched as a “resend” but the time stamp will show the real story.

And it won’t matter. This will all just be another example of Samantha not doing enough to support the family in their time of need. My mother devoted everything to taking care of us, and when a pulmonary embolism took her from us in my teens, everyone just shoveled her responsibilities onto me.

I take another deep breath and remind myself that this is why I’m a terrific CEO. This experience is what has allowed me to squeeze more hours out of every day. I stand and smooth out my skirt, taking off down the hall in search of Isaiah.

“I’m soooo sorry, Sam.” Audrey hurries up from her desk and starts to chase after me. “He was just so mean on the phone! I thought it was a real emergency this time.”

I squeeze her arm. “You don’t have a thing to apologize for, Audrey,” I tell her. I know how my father speaks to people. “I’m sorry you had to field that call. Now, can you take me to that reporter so I can finish what I started?”

She smiles and gestures down the hall toward the conference room. I freeze, because I momentarily forgot that

we invited all these people to come in today. My community relations manager said it would be good for Isaiah to see how Vinea gives back and builds partnerships, and make it easier for the reporter to grab quotes from people all at once. I can only imagine what Isaiah will try to worm his way into getting them to say.

I groan and then form fists, squeezing a few beats and releasing, trying to redirect all the energy flying around inside my body. Then I push open the door, stick a smile on my face, and head into the room, keeping my eyes fixed on Isaiah and his smarmy smile.

CHAPTER 2

AJ

FROM: Vinelli, Kellie

Sent: Monday, August 28

To: [All Staff]

Subj: Morning Middle School Memo!

Good Morning Faculty! Who's ready for action?! We had a terrific first week last week!! Today we've got standardized tests in ELA so don't forget those positive incentives!! And let's not forget that AJ Trachtenberg will be representing Franklin Middle School at the Vinea Community Conversations meeting! Thank you, AJ!!! Can't wait to hear your report!

Have a great day On Purpose!

Kellie Vinelli, Principal

I don't care what my colleagues say. They sent me to this meeting because they didn't want to be here. See also: how I got chosen as science department head for Franklin Middle School.

You'll be a great representative for our kids, AJ!

You're the best one to remind all those folks about our students, AJ!

Pure shtuss, as my Bubbie would say.

It's rough being a realist in a workplace where people overuse exclamation marks.

I sigh and straighten my tie, then reach for my folder and climb out of my compact Honda Fit.

Yes. I'm 30 years old and I drive a Honda Fit, even though I'm 6'-1". No, I don't think a man at my stage in life should be driving something flashier. No, I don't care that my sister drives a Range Rover.

I live in the city, I parallel park in the city, and I'll always choose fuel efficiency and dependability over prestige. I grunt at the haters who aren't actually here today and make my way inside the Vinea campus.

Who calls their workplace a campus? It's obnoxious, as is the perky person assigned to greet me, but I do accept the coffee they're holding out, because it smells amazing.

Hold on...yep. Tastes amazing, too. Okay, I will agree to release one layer of surly attitude in exchange for coffee this good.

"Let me just give you a quick overview of our campus." The greeter, a person whose name tag says Shane (They/Them), gestures to the left. "We've got all-gender restrooms throughout the building. There's a space out back

for service animal relief if you need that, and we have a multi-sensory room on each floor.”

It gets harder and harder to stay irritated with Vinea the more Shane lists the accessible features of their workspace. Pardon me. Their *campus*. I nod in thanks as they guide me to the conference room, snagging a coffee refill on my way in the door.

I thumb through the handouts for today’s meeting. Community leaders from all over Pittsburgh were invited to sit down with Vinea to see how the company might be able to “give back.” It feels like they want a tax break to me. I clench and release a fist as I remember my students. My seventh grade science students would love to see a space like this, to just be in the building and peek at computer scientists and their support staff.

I have to remember my students. Not everything is about me and my corporate cynicism. *Get it together, Adriel.*

I smile at the guy who sinks into the seat to my left and shake hands with him when he introduces himself as the leader of an organization that finds summer jobs and internships for teens in the city.

I nod and tell him, “I really hope Vinea can sponsor a few positions for you, man. This would be great experience for science-minded kids.”

He nods back. “From what I understand, they agree to just about everything, as long as it’s a good cause.”

I scratch at my stubble, wishing I'd made more effort to shave today. Our principal said the same thing—told me to ask for anything and they'd probably give it to us. I'm just planning to ask for a field trip for the kids. Why didn't I think bigger?

Before I can dwell on it too long, the conversation around the table gets started. The Vinea staff are leading icebreakers while we wait for the CEO. Sam, the handout says, will be joining us for a "community conversation."

I try to focus on what folks are saying, but I'm distracted when the door pops open and a breathtaking, blonde-haired woman slips into the room. She's flanked by a scowling man in a suit and another Vinea employee, who waves at Shane.

"So sorry to keep you all waiting," the blonde says. "I'm Samantha Vine and I'm here to learn from you all."

Samantha—Sam. She is not at all what I was expecting, and that rattles me. I thought I had learned by now not to get attached to expectations. Shane starts leading introductions while I chastise myself for assuming the CEO was a man. I work really hard to overcome these sorts of preconceived notions. I take my role as a teacher seriously, and I take it even more seriously that I teach in a school district where more than 80% of my kids are living in poverty and food insecurity. My students deal with people's assumptions day in and day out, and I want to be one person in their life who wants to know them for who they are.

But also, this woman...she does not look like the CEO of a tech company on the brink of blowing up to the elite tier. This

woman looks like a model. Someone who'd fit right in with Carnegies. From her perfect hair to her impeccable clothing, she's a picture of wealth and poise. Just like all the women in my past who've always judged me and made assumptions, had their own expectations based on wealth and status. Just like all the jerks who judge my students.

I feel my face scowling when Shane calls on me for introductions. They raise their eyebrows, gesturing at me to talk about myself, but I haven't been paying attention to what anyone else said around me, and I don't know if I'm supposed to name my favorite breakfast cereal or what. Best to cut to the chase.

"I'm AJ Trachtenberg," I huff out. "I teach middle school science for Public Schools of Pittsburgh. I'm sure you know we're under funded and we're always looking for companies to sponsor field trips for our students to enrich their—"

"Field trips to the museum?" Samantha interrupts me, one blonde brow arched quizzically as she asks for clarification.

"Well, no," I stutter, though field trips to the science museum would be amazing. There's never any money for *anything*. "Field trips *here*. For tours and job shadowing. So the kids can see data science in action."

She taps a pen on the desk and glances at the scowling man beside her. Who is that guy? "I'm not sure this is the best environment for your middle schoolers, Mr. Trachtenberg." She gestures around the room. "Our data scientists are working with very complex algorithms."

“And you think because my students live in poverty they can’t comprehend what it is your employees do for a living?” I’m fully in a lather now. Peak surly. I take back my gratitude about the coffee. My lower back is starting to sweat. I hate when people underestimate my students.

“No,” she says, shaking her head emphatically, causing some of the yellow waves to tumble over one shoulder. “Absolutely not what I meant. Perhaps I should clarify that—“

“Forget it.” I slap my folder closed and cross my arms. “We’ll just take them to Google.” I realize this is an empty thing to say, both because we don’t actually have a relationship with the tech giant and also because the companies aren’t remotely the same.

It doesn’t matter, though, because my words have the desired impact. Samantha Vine is flustered, stammering her way through the rest of the introductions as she assures everyone else in the room that Vinea strives to be a place where every voice is considered and welcomed.

Lip service. She’s no different from any other money-hungry mogul.

As soon as the presentation wraps up, I leave my stuff on the table and stomp out to the parking lot. I don’t even grab a third coffee on my way out the door.

By the time I get to the car, I feel like an asshole. I remember how welcoming Vinea’s physical space is. I know I have a hair-trigger temper. But the fact remains that she doesn’t want my students here, and by proxy she doesn’t want

me. I don't have time for people who don't want me in their space. Not anymore.

CHAPTER 3

SAMANTHA

THE ONLY THING saving me from curling in a ball and crying is the promise of meeting up with my friends. We call our little group Foof...Fresh out of fucks. It's a sort of ridiculous name for a bad-ass group of entrepreneurs, engineers and queens of the Steel City.

I feel so at ease when I'm with them, like I really don't have to pretend or put on a fake smile or any of that. I can actually free my fucks with these gals...and I need that, because everyone else claws at me, demanding attention I can't spare and hurling mean words at me if I say as much.

As often as we can, Foof huddles up in the event room of our friend Esther's bar, Bridges and Bitters, and these meetings are my recharge. Esther bought an old building in Lawrenceville and transformed it into the most amazing spot. She went for a speakeasy feel, with reclaimed wooden everything and these cozy settees. But honestly, we could meet on a milk crate by the river and I'd still walk away energized from these women.

A few days later, and I'm still reeling after I chased off Mr. Grumpy Teacher from our meeting and stumbled through the

rest of my interview with the guy from *Forbes*. I definitely appreciate Esther's vintage velvet furniture as I collapse in a heap.

"That bad?" She arches a dark brow at me as she moves some furniture around the room to get ready for the rest of Foof to arrive.

I drape a wrist across my forehead. "If I had a corset on, I'd be asking you to slice the laces." She pats me on the shoulder and heads back up front to mix a batch of cocktails for us. My friends shuffle in, some of them excited about their day and others looking like they want to join me tying one on.

Logan links arms with her sisters-in-law as they make their way in. As they all chat about life, I sit up and rest my elbows on my lap, propping my forehead against my palms. "I wish I could have a do-over," I mutter.

"Tell me about it." Celeste Sheffield, actual grandma and the oldest member of Foof, sits next to me, patiently waiting for me to spill my guts.

I take a deep breath, thinking back over the wretched day, from the annoying call from my dad to my magazine interview not going well. I bite my lip, trying to decide the worst part of it all. "I told a middle school science teacher I didn't think young students would gain much from touring Vinea," I tell her. "So now this guy thinks *I* think his students are too stupid, because of poverty." Celeste pats my leg in a motherly sort of way I really appreciate.

"I was just so overwhelmed with the *Forbes* reporter there and thinking about how much work it'll be to prepare for

going public. Who has time to prep for a bunch of tween visitors? But I guess what I said came out wrong and AJ took offense.”

Celeste swirls around the ice in her drink and looks at me. “What if you called and explained? Said you realized your mistake? You could extend your invitation to the students after all.”

I cringe. “Ugh. Apologies are the worst, though. Like, now this guy is going to know I say dumb things when I go off book.” Men thinking I’m stupid is a big, fat trigger for me after living with the Colonel. He’s so domineering and immersed in a hyper-macho military world. Everything has to be precise with him. Language, thought processes, all of it. “Can I make Logan call?”

Logan laughs and shakes her head, wagging a finger at me. “I just run the numbers, boss. You’re the one with your name on the building.”

It’s true. My name is on the damn building. So why do I feel like such an imposter all the time? I’ve spent my entire life trying to fill someone else’s shoes...I got thrust into that role after my mother died. I didn’t mean to start a company in my free time from my dorm room, but I did. Now, ten years along the way, I’m on the cusp of going public with my business-baby and I can’t drum up the ovarly power to call someone and apologize?

“Gah. Fine. I know, I know. I’ll call him and grovel.”

“That’s the winning spirit!” Esther winks as she slides me a glass of something magical.

“What’s this yummy drink?” I stir the liquid with the sprig of rosemary she stuck in the glass. Esther uses the Foof meetings to test out her new concoctions before adding them to her cocktail menu each month.

“I think I’ll call this one Atonement.” She waggles her eyebrows as she takes a sip. “It’s tequila reposado, Amaro, lime, pineapple and some simple syrup.”

“I only know what half of those mean,” I tell her. “But it’s damn good.”

“Repent and find out,” she tells me and shrugs. “Since when do you care what some man thinks of you?”

I always care. I bite my lip and look around the room. I can’t let any of these women know how terrified I am of disapproval, of failure. No, that won’t do at all. Gotta keep faking it. I’m a go-getter, damn it.

“Okay, okay, I’ll call him. Sheesh.” I take another sip of the drink, which is not quite a margarita, but is tart and sweet and smooth all the same. It tastes classy. Sexy. I stand up off the settee and wander into the hall. The quiet music Esther has playing in the bar creates a nice ambiance. It’s loud enough that you can hear it, but still have a conversation with someone.

Like, say, a smoldering, grouchy science teacher I insulted earlier today...

I roll my eyes at myself for being nervous to call him and pull out my phone. Shane is a terrific manager of community relations, and I’m sure they sent me notes on everyone who

was at Vinea today. Sure enough, there's a contact list in my inbox. They even made it clickable, so I just have to tap the name AJ Trachtenberg and the phone starts dialing.

It rings. And rings again. And rings some more. I take a sip of my Atonement. God, Esther really makes a damn good drink. Finally, the voicemail picks up and a low voice seems to growl at me. "This is AJ. Leave a message. I'm unlikely to respond."

I pull the phone from my ear and stare at it, hanging up before I can reconsider.

Was his voice that sexy earlier today? Or am I just drunk on Atonement? Who says that on their voicemail message?

I toss back the rest of my drink and set my glass on the bar. Gah. I have to call him again. But...then I get to hear his voice again... Should I waste my time leaving him a message if he doesn't pick up? Is this effort wasted? I tap redial and it rings ten more times. Ten freaking times before I hear the smooth baritone. The phone beeps at me, and I stammer into it. "Hi. Hello, Mr. Trachtenberg. This is Samantha Vine from Vinea. I was hoping I could talk to you about what we discussed earlier today. About your students. I mean, I would love to welcome your students to Vinea....You caught me a bit off guard earlier..."

I realize I haven't yet actually apologized, but can't decide if that's something I should even do over voicemail when he's unlikely to respond. I sigh. "Anyway, I'd appreciate a call back so we could talk about this further."

I hang up and slap myself in the forehead, groaning, before I walk back into the room full of my friends.

CHAPTER 4

AJ

I MISSED two calls last night. Nobody ever calls me apart from my parents and my Bubbie, so I never bother to answer my phone. I almost choked on my beer when I finally listened to the voicemail and it was from *her*. The blonde bombshell I happened to be Googling when I silenced her calls.

I'm not quite sure what to make of her wanting to discuss my students, so I decide to just ignore her call. We're dissecting frogs this week in my seventh grade science class. I have a lot to prepare and I don't have time to listen to someone else tell me about their incorrect assumptions about my students.

I wipe off my glasses, straighten my tie, and stride into my classroom, ready to face a room full of young teens who smell worse than the formaldehyde in the bins of frogs I stacked under the back window. "Morning, scholars," I say to my first period class.

They stagger in slowly from breakfast in the cafeteria, teasing each other, talking about football. I pull out my notes for first period and start arranging everything on my desk until a cracking voice interrupts me. "Yo, Mr. T."

I look up. “What’s up, Dante?”

“What’s the deal with the new art teacher?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, like, how do I say his name?”

“Ah.” I reach in my drawer for a dry erase marker and write Mx. Tran on the board. “Remember, their pronouns are *they and them.*”

The bell rings and everyone takes a seat, silently waiting for me to elaborate. “And the M-x honorific is pronounced MIX.”

Dante taps on his desk a few times. “Okay, but, like, isn’t that weird?”

“Well, would it feel weird if I called you ‘miss’?”

He laughs but then looks around. “Well, yeah. Cuz I’m not a girl.”

“Right. Well Mx. Tran is non-binary. They are not a girl, either. Or a boy.”

Jayden seems to ponder this a bit and raises his hand. “Doesn’t someone have to pick, though?”

This is actually fitting in with my lesson plan about the reproductive organs in the frogs we’re about to dissect, so I brighten up. “Glad you asked, Jayden. Let’s make a list of all the things that make a girl and a boy.” I draw two columns on the board and turn back to the class.

“Okay, who’s got something for our list?”

“Boys have short hair,” says Maya, a red-head with a long braid tossed over one shoulder. Another girl with a buzzed undercut turns around and says, “Yeah, but so do girls.” She turns to face me. “Girls wear skirts.”

Someone brings up the kilts on *Outlander*. The kids debate breasts and beards. We go back and forth this way for awhile, not settling on a single trait that seems to fit just one of the columns. Dante seems more confused than ever. “Mr. T, isn’t this science class? What does all this have to do with biology?”

I grin and erase the columns from the board, writing “gonads” instead. I tell them to pull out their textbooks. We talk through the diagram of the frog reproductive systems, and I tell them how tadpoles sometimes switch sex before metamorphosing into frogs.

“Any given amphibian could be genetically male based on chromosomes, but have female gonads,” I tell them. “Who can remember what we talked about with chromosomes?”

We talk through the different chromosome arrangements for a bit and I’m just about to pivot back to the frog diagram when Jayden interrupts me again. “Yo, Mr. T. There’s someone at the door.”

I look over my shoulder to find *her* standing there. Samantha Vine, leaning against my doorway with her arms folded, wearing the hell out of a pair of checked pants and a bright red top.

CHAPTER 5

SAMANTHA

DOES Steel-City Sweetheart Samantha Vine Have the Chops to Go Public?

By: Nick Ackerman, Business Analyst

Investors everywhere have one question on their mind this month as Vinea prepares for its IPO: when can I get in? The tech startup has soared to notoriety, enjoying nearly universal adoption from healthcare research institutions and biomedical companies alike. But is the company ready for the public stage? Moreover, is its leader prepared for the level of scrutiny that follows CEOs of publicly traded companies? Stay tuned as we follow the news this week on MarketView.

I don't have the heart to read the entire media summary Audrey pulled up for me this morning. I'm sure it's all the same thing each time: can I handle the competition in a big pond?

So, since I need a distraction and since AJ Trachtenberg never called me back, I decide to just pop by the school and

hope I can catch him. I know it's a terrible idea, and probably disruptive. But the idea that he thinks *I think* something just hangs over me like a cloud. And besides—aren't kids excited about field trips? Even if he doesn't want to forgive my little misstep, shouldn't he just get over it to give the students a fun trip?

I also know that if I don't take care of this now, I'll get mired in a thousand other things at work and also stress out at the idea that my family might call me and yell at me for something else I didn't anticipate. Honestly, the weight of this thing with AJ Trachtenberg might be the straw that breaks my back this week. And I don't have time to find a spinal surgeon.

I approach the front doors of the school and ring the buzzer, explaining to the guard that I'm just here to talk to Mr. Trachtenberg.

I fumble my way through asking for directions to the main office until a guy in a button-down stops in his tracks. "Did you say you're here to see AJ?"

"Yes!" I brighten up at this ally, come to save me in the middle of my ill-advised mission. "I'm Samantha Vine. AJ and I had a bit of a misunderstanding yesterday at the Vinea event and I've been trying to track him down."

He holds out a hand. "Doug Rogers," he says. "Let me walk you up to his room."

"Oh. Won't he be teaching in there?"

Doug grins and nods. "He will indeed. I believe you will throw him off his game entirely."

I start shaking my head. “I can just leave him a note. It’s just that it was hard to reach him over the phone.”

“Sam. Can I call you Sam?”

“Please do.” I love when people drop formalities. I grew up with a colonel for a father. I’ve had enough uptightness to last me a few lifetimes.

“Sam,” Doug continues. “Nothing would thrill me more than to mess with AJ’s head. He thinks he’s unflappable and he drives the rest of us wild with that chip on his shoulder. Humor me, please. I’ve got three sons and I teach in a middle school.” He grins and I can’t help but like him. Apparently AJ Trachtenberg is grumpy with everyone, not just me. Whew.

I shrug. “Show me the way!”

Doug leads me up a flight of stairs and points to a door decorated with cardboard microscopes and double helixes. Doug pushes the door open a few inches, grins and waves, heading back down the stairs as I lean against the doorframe to listen. AJ is really different when he’s with his students. He seems animated as they talk about frog reproduction. I try not to laugh, remembering my own boring encounters with biology teachers. AJ seems passionate about his *students*, not just the subject matter.

Eventually, one of the kids notices me and I smile. AJ grimaces at me and I swear, he growls. Right there in front of his students, he growls like a wolf. Or maybe a grizzly bear. He’s a very hairy person, I observe, noting dark strands on the backs of his hands, his neck, his jaw. I have to stop thinking about his jaw.

AJ says, “Class, this is Samantha Vine. She’s come to judge your aptitude for science.”

I frown. “Actually, I came to apologize. I didn’t know I’d be disrupting your class. But I’d love to invite you all to my company, Vinea, for a tour. Once you’re done with the frog gonads.”

A girl raises her hand and says, “Mr. T, can we do whatever she’s talking about instead of dissect the frogs?”

The class murmurs excitedly. Someone says, “Yeah, Mr. T. It smells like butt in here. No offense.”

AJ just blinks and looks like he’s grinding his teeth. The girl raises her hand again. He calls on her. “Yes, Margot?”

“Ms. Vine—what do you do at Vinea?”

I push off the door and walk into the room, grinning. “We dissect frogs.” The class bursts out laughing and groaning and I wait for them to settle down. “Actually, I’m a data scientist.” I look over at AJ to see if he seems like he’ll murder me, but he’s just quietly simmering off to the side, so I continue. “I designed a software tool that helps scientists with their experiments. Have you all done experiments and lab reports and stuff like that?”

They all nod. “Okay, well, you know how you had to write down all your data and results each time? One of the things we do at Vinea is make an electronic notebook for our clients. They can keep everything in one place and also share it with other partners, even if those partners are far apart from each other.”

“Can’t they just email each other?” The girl, Margot, seems like she’s ready to hear more about my work. Which I find energizing. I really regret saying no to AJ yesterday. Why did I let that reporter knock me off my game so much?

“Well they could, yes. But with our cloud based software, all the notes are in one place. And if people make them searchable, others might not have to repeat experiments that have already be done.”

“So you made an online notebook?” Maya starts taking notes as I’m talking but AJ raises one dark brow at me, the other sinking low enough to nearly hide his dark, judgmental eye.

“Sort of,” I say, hesitating. *Aha*. Here’s where I was concerned initially about visiting with tweens. I don’t know how to talk about my machine learning models that I built to make data entry standard and useful for all my clients, across industries. “When I was in college, my biology class was visiting a dairy lab. They were trying to study what to feed the cows to get the most milk. I saw that they were taking notes by hand, emailing each other...there were a lot of mistakes and there was no easy way to make sense of the data. To find patterns. So I built an algorithm, a computer code, to read over the data and notice things.” I shrug. “At first it was mostly about helping scientists take notes. But I’ve added stuff since then as I built my team.”

“What kind of stuff?”

I open my mouth to respond, but AJ chooses that moment to step forward.

“That’s enough, Dante. We’ve got work to do here.”

The class groans. I smile. “I promise to tell you all about it when you come visit. I’ll set everything up with Mr. T.”

Just then, he takes me by the elbow and starts walking me toward the door. I’m so stunned by the jolt of energy I feel shooting out of his fingers that I nearly trip. So then he reaches his other hand out to steady me and I’m surrounded by a crackling current. I think laser beams are shooting out of all his many hairs, just zapping me all over the place. I stare at him, realizing I’m hot for teacher.

Once we’re in the hall, he gestures toward the stairs.

“Well,” I look around, hoping Doug will materialize to save me again. “Are you going to at least call me back?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“What? They were into it. I’ll pay for everything. I know you said funding is an issue. I’ll get Shane to put together a full day program and you can tell me if anyone has dietary restrictions and—“

“Samantha!” He uses his stern teacher voice when he says my full name and I feel it in every one of my nucleotides.

“Yes?” I whisper, shaking away the sudden fantasy I have of him rapping my knuckles with a ruler. I never even went to Catholic school, so I’m not sure where that comes from.

He rakes a hand through his dark hair, and a loose piece tumbles across his forehead. This man is a snack and he apparently hates me and that’s a really bad combination,

because now I'm fully immersed in a very deep desire to make him like me. Oh god, I'm seeking his approval.

"Look," he says. "Why don't I connect you with someone from the high school. Like you said, these kids are young for your kind of subject matter."

I shake my head. "I pity the fool who tells these kids they can't be data scientists." He raises a brow at me again. "Pity the fool? Mr. T? Don't they tease you about that all day?"

AJ rolls his eyes. "They're way too young for that reference."

"Really?" He doesn't respond. "Wow. So anyway, I was thinking about what you said during our brief, if unfortunate, encounter. And I'd love to spark inspiration for them. Give them an idea of some different career paths. Some of them might not even know—"

I'm interrupted by a shrill bell ringing above my head and the hallway is soon filled with teenagers, shouting, throwing paper at each other, and rushing past me like a current. I'm swept back against the wall.

"Maybe another year," AJ hollers above the din.

I shake my head at him, suddenly determined to get his students into my building, unsure if I need it for them to actually get inspired or if I am really this desperate for AJ to change his opinion of me. "I'll get you a bus," I shout, and then the students file into the classroom doors. Another bell chimes overhead. "Wow. That is really freaking loud."

He nods. “Yes. It is. Now, if you’ll excuse me.” And just like that, he spins on his heel and walks back into the classroom, slamming the door behind him.

CHAPTER 6

AJ

BY THE TIME I swing through the teacher's lounge to grab my lunch, I've nearly forgotten that Samantha Vine interrupted my class this morning. I definitely am not trying to identify the unique blend of aromatics she uses in her cosmetics and I am absolutely not picturing her each time I bring up gonads with my students.

I will admit to being even more of a growling beast than usual when I see Doug leaning against the refrigerator, smirking at me.

"Had a visitor this morning?" He slurps his PM coffee like a man who doesn't care if it keeps him up past midnight.

"You brought her up to my classroom? In the middle of first period?"

"I did, yes." *Slurp.*

"Come on, Doug. There are protocols for these things. Does she even have clearances? Did you at least take her by the office?"

Slurp.

"Why are you like this?"

He sets the coffee mug on the counter and steps away from the fridge door so I can lean in and snatch my lunch. I yank the bag free and slam myself down into the rickety chair next to the photocopier. Doug slowly crunches a carrot, the sound of his chewing seeming to echo off the floor. Finally, he squints at me. “AJ. Are you suggesting I should have left the CEO of a wealthy tech company—who has tried to offer some financial support to our public school students—on a hard, uncomfortable chair in the office?”

“Yes!” I fling my hands out to the side, but bang my elbow against the copier in the process. I should have just kept my stuff under my desk and eaten my warm lunch alone in my classroom, where I could scroll through online cat videos in peace.

Doug shakes his head. “She said she is the CEO of Vinea, and I know for a fact you were there the other day to ask them to sponsor a field trip. And, as a member of the English department, I would have enjoyed a silent day here at the school, alone with my thoughts, if our students got to embark upon a scientific adventure.”

I make a sound at him, one my colleagues have often described as a growl. “I’ll find you a famous author your students can visit instead,” I tell him, taking a huge bite of my sandwich. Cold meatloaf on white bread. Bubbie’s finest. Delicious.

Doug snorts out a laugh. “Yes, because you run in the same social circles with famous authors.” When I flip him the bird, Doug points a finger at me. “You know my wife’s sister

Alice married a Stag. And you also know Emma and Thatcher Stag do a writing and glass-blowing workshop with the kids every winter. We've got the arts all settled."

I actually forgot Doug's wife had that link with local celebrities. I could continue arguing with him just to prove a point, but I don't want to be petty. "Look, Doug, she implied our students aren't qualified to visit her precious space with her fancy coffee and there's no way I'm ever setting these kids up to feel less-than."

He arches a brow at me. "What did she say?"

I try to recall her exact words, and when I can't, Doug jumps in again. "She came here in person to apologize. The CEO of a company in the middle of some very public business dealings. That means something, AJ." He shrugs and rinses his coffee mug before tucking it under his arm along with the remains of the bag of carrots. "Return her call. Let her woo the kids."

He walks out of the room just as two fellow science teachers bustle in. I nod my head at my colleagues as I continue eating my sandwich. Leo slaps a worksheet on the copier and then turns to look at me, smirking even more annoyingly than Doug. "Heard you had a visitor." He waggles his eyebrows.

"This is exactly like middle school," I mutter around a mouthful of sandwich.

Heather laughs as she waits her turn for the copier. "Duh, AJ. But seriously, who the hell scares off a community partner

looking to sponsor a field trip? I heard her say she'd even pay for bussing."

I roll my eyes. "There's no way you heard her say that in the middle of a class change."

"Oh I heard it." She points one tawny finger at me. "You know damn well this school has to scrimp to provide soap in the washrooms. Why would you deny these kids a flipping field trip with career exploration opportunities? Go back to your hidey hole right now and call her back before the bell."

I sigh and set down my sandwich. "What exactly am I supposed to say to her?" I truly am hoping Leo and Heather have suggestions because when I think of talking to Samantha Vine, nothing remotely P-G comes to mind. And I can't set myself up for that sort of thing. Not anymore.

Heather rolls her eyes and holds up her hand, pretending it's a phone. In a mock deep voice, she says, "Hello? Ms. Vine? Yes, I can't stop thinking about your offer and I'd be delighted to take you up on it. If you could just put me in touch with your admin team, we can coordinate the details post haste." She mimes hanging up an old-school phone.

"Post haste?"

Leo taps his photocopies on the counter to straighten them and then hits me over the head with the stack as Heather steps up to the copier. "Come on, dude. Grow up. She apologized. She offered the kids a treat." He leans back and studies me. "Is that a new sweater vest?"

I nod and tug at my collar.

Leo nods his approval and Heather starts chanting, “Call her now. Call her now.”

Eventually, I hurry out of the room just to get away from their meddling. They’re right, of course. Everything about the Vinea building suggested that Samantha is a person who considers the needs of others. Whatever she said yesterday that set me off was likely more about me being sensitive than her being malicious.

And I am sensitive. Maybe I’ve always been, but definitely since my last breakup. I believe the phrase Leo uses is “frayed nerve.” He keeps suggesting I see someone professionally. He’s probably right.

I lock the door to my classroom and pull out my phone, scrolling through to my missed calls. I clear my throat and tug at my collar again as I hit the green phone icon. She picks up after 2 rings. *Shit.*

“Excuse me?”

“Did I say that out loud?”

“Is this AJ? Mr. T?”

I clear my throat. “Yes. Hi. Hello. I’m sorry I swore at you. I thought it would go to voicemail.”

She laughs and I hate how much I enjoy the sound of it. “Well now we don’t have to play phone tag. What’s up?” It’s like her voice strikes some sort of perfect frequency that lines up the cells in my body. Nope. This will not do.

“I, uh, well, thank you for your offer to treat the students to an in-depth tour of your facilities. And to provide

transportation.”

“Oooh, are you saying yes? This is terrific.” I hear a clicking sound and imagine her typing a rapid email off to an underling while we speak. Must be nice to have underlings... although there are enough people in my life reminding me I could have underlings, too, if I hadn’t chosen a life of “servitude.” “What sort of time frame were you thinking?”

“I, uh, wasn’t quite expecting us to work through the logistics right this minute.” My collar seems to be shrinking in the afternoon heat. I keep pulling it away from my wind pipe.

“Hmm, well I’d like to settle as many details as possible right now to avoid unnecessary back and forth. Much more efficient if we just hash it out, right?” She doesn’t give me time to respond. “You’ll need time for permission slips and such, right? So let’s look two weeks out. That’s mid-September. How’s the 17th?”

I shake my head. “No school that day. For Rosh Hashanah.”

“Oh, really? It’s late this year.”

“You’re familiar with Rosh Hashanah timing?” I’m not accustomed to people like Samantha knowing about Jewish traditions. I expected her to respond with some inane question about matzah. If I’m honest, I was hoping I’d get to tell her she had her holidays mixed up. It’s much easier for me if the women I’m attracted to show me their flaws right up front, so I know not to get attached.

She continues talking. “Mm hm. Lots of my employees use their flex holidays in September for the Days of Awe. Okay, well, how about Wednesday of that week?”

Days of Awe. This woman knows the lingo of my people. I gulp. “I guess that’s fine.”

“Wonderful! And how many students do you have?”

By the time Samantha Vine is done, I’ve agreed to let her team “craft” the permission form to include questions about dietary restrictions and access needs, and she vows to send a courier with printed forms by the end of the school day so we can distribute them at dismissal. She practically sings me off the phone and hangs up, leaving me staring at the phone in my hand as my fifth period students start jiggling the knob of my classroom door.

CHAPTER 7

SAMANTHA

RATHER THAN WORK on the tasks I need to check off for Vinea's upcoming board meeting, I spend my time planning AJ's field trip. Which of course irritates Shane, because it's their job to work on this sort of community relations project. So they give me a talking-to, which I appreciate, and leave me alone in my office with binders and slide presentations to finalize.

Mercifully, my friend Chloe calls me, saving me from staring into space when I should be working. "Hi, friend," I chirp, remembering that today is a special day for her.

"Did you send me these flowers? These gorgeous, gorgeous flowers?"

Ah. I forgot I did that. "Well, yes. You deserve them. It's not every day my friend launches a book." I hear her take a deep sniff. "I don't really think ranunculus have a scent, chum."

"They're just so delicate and decadent. You really shouldn't have."

"Oh, knock it off. I can afford it and you're worth it and you said you were mentioning them in your book, so I thought

it was a nice release day surprise.”

“When did I say I put them in the book?”

I shrug and tap a finger on the desk. “One of the Foof meetings. A while back.” Chloe writes historical romances, and they’re equal parts spicy and mind blowing. She creates these characters who just feel so real, and I love how all her books end with everything happy. Not just the love part, but all the siblings get along by the end and everyone feels fulfilled professionally, too. Her books are the juiciest fantasies I’ve ever encountered.

“Well, I’ve got your signed copy right here, as per usual.”

I smile at that, imagining adding the colorful paperback to the shelf in my living room. I don’t ever read physical books anymore, but I love having copies of Chloe’s books. I’ve got our friend Emma’s books, too. So many Foof members are out there producing amazing things. It makes me that much more determined to succeed with Vinea. “I’m really glad you called, Chlo. You snapped me out of a funk.”

“Well, I’m just floored that you remembered to do something nice for me even with everything you have going on.” I don’t tell her I set a reminder in my calendar for the day before all her book launches so that I get a card out to her at minimum. I know she’s dealing with some sadness that her husband doesn’t really seem to celebrate her book releases, so I just want to make sure there’s one person who knows her in real life, that’s rooting for her. Chloe sighs. “What’s the next step with your I. P. O. thingy?”

I groan. “Well, Logan handles most of all that, thankfully. I’m waiting for the fact checks for the magazine article, though. I can’t shake the feeling that the reporter is out to portray me as a ditz.”

“You’re the furthest thing from a ditz I’ve ever known. Wait. That sentence is weird. My brain is fried.”

“Go drink champagne or stare at your flowers or something. I gotta get back to my data cave.”

We say our goodbyes and hang up and I stare at my monitor some more. I really can’t afford too much time with my thoughts unmoored like this. I take a deep breath and pull up my calendar, thinking I can just look at the week ahead and maybe settle on what I need to be doing. Each day is a rainbow of appointments and reminders. Red for Foof meetings or Foof-related reminders. Green for Vinea meetings and deadlines. Ah, there’s a blue one for Mom’s birthday.

She’d be turning 60 tomorrow if she had lived. Twice my age. In another universe, I’d be busy planning her a kickass party. You bet your butt I’d get ranunculus for her, and any other flower she wanted. I tamp down the sadness creeping in as I realize I don’t even know what sort of drink she’d love to be sipping as I sat her on a glistening throne, wearing a shimmery boa.

“Nope,” I say, closing the lid to my laptop and standing up from my desk. “This isn’t going anywhere.” I drive myself to Esther’s bar, knowing I should confide in my friend that I’m feeling my grief today, but also knowing I probably won’t tell her this. Nobody likes a downer.

Before I go in the door to Bridges and Bitters, I pull up my phone and make a donation to the American Heart Association in my mom's name. That's better than dwelling on something I can't change. Feeling slightly more upbeat, I make my way inside and grin when I see the place is packed.

There must be some sort of sportsball event happening. This city goes nuts for its sportsball, although sporty people usually go to sporty bars to watch games and things. Maybe Esther has finally reached a level where she's packing people in on a random Thursday. I shoulder my way up to the bar and see her simultaneously pouring drinks and offering instructions to another bar tender, who's trying to keep up.

I stare at them for a bit, transfixed as they work in unison, and then I feel someone staring at me. I turn my head and frown when I identify the hard, dark glower of Mr. Grumpypants himself. "AJ Trachtenberg? What the hell are you doing in my happy place?"

His eyebrows shoot up, like he's surprised I recognized him. Okay, maybe he's taken aback by the vehemence of my words. But it is not okay for him to be here right now. This is my friend's bar, where I come to smash the patriarchy. Where I'm supposed to open up about my dead mom, or not, depending on the vibe I get from Esther.

I shake my head and slap the bar. "Esther, what's going on in here?"

"Hosted a training session," she mutters. She doesn't even look up at me as she keeps stirring and pouring, her strong arms whipping around bottles like she's a machine. I feel

compelled to figure out a way to make things more efficient for her, to help her streamline this process somehow, but I feel a sharp poke in my upper arm, yanking me back to the present.

“Are you following me?”

Is he seriously asking me this? He looks serious. Shit, he looks good in his teacher clothes, all dark and growly. “Why would I be following you? And why are you so mad at me?”

Esther slides a drink into my hand at that moment and I don’t bother to look down at it. I bring the glass to my lips and stare at AJ, waiting for him to explain himself. Why *is* he mad at me? Only my family gets mad at me. Seriously. People love me.

AJ looks at my hand and my drink. “So you just happen to be here tonight? When there’s a professional development session for science educators?”

I take a big sip of my drink, smacking my lips in response to the tarty blend of amazing flavors. “AJ. This bar, this mixologist...these are my things that I do with my spare time. I am not here to pander to science teachers. But seriously why are you mad at me? Is this because I came to your school?”

He runs a hand through his hair and sighs, taking a pull from his bottle of beer. He should have let Esther choose something for him to drink. I bet a stiff drink would wipe that mean smirk off his face. The crowd around the bar thins out as people acquire their drinks and make their way toward the tables and booths.

I rest a hip against a stool and stare as AJ slides into the adjacent seat, still staring at me with one brow raised. “You shouldn’t have come to the school. But if you did, you should have waited in the office and not interrupted my class.”

“Your friend brought me up to your class. I would have been perfectly happy to sit outside the principal’s office and wait.”

“I would have made you wait for a long time.”

I roll my eyes. “There you go again being mean. You really do have a Mr. T temper.”

AJ barks out a laugh, surprising us both. He takes a quick drink to hide his frustration at being amused by something I said. “I should get back to my group,” he says, looking like he can’t decide which is worse: staying next to me or returning to the other science teachers, who are staring at him from across the room.

I wave. He glowers. “Well don’t let me keep you,” I tell him, and he huffs away. I barely even stare at his ass.

“You gonna tell me more about that whole situation?” I turn to see Esther leaning against the bar, grinning at me.

I hook a thumb back over my shoulder. “That’s the guy who I was awkward with at Vinea the other day, so then when you all advised me to call him and apologize, he wouldn’t answer his phone.”

“Oh lord. What did you do?”

I bite my lip. I hadn’t expected Esther to take his side in all this. “Well. I went to his school to apologize and reiterate my

offer to give the kids a tour and a nice day. I've even lined up some data scientists to do some activities with them. Wait til you hear about it. We're giving them access to the software and designing some little learning games for them. It's going to be a whole thing."

"So he was already upset with you, and you went to his workplace unannounced, and now you showed up at a work thing he's attending at my bar?"

I hand her my empty glass. "I guess none of that is technically incorrect."

She rinses the glass and puts it in the sink behind the bar. "Well. He's looking at you like he can't decide if he'd rather fuck you or run you over with his station wagon."

I turn around and see that AJ is indeed looking at me from across the room, an unreadable expression on his dark face. I think his stubble grew in a little more since he walked over there. Is he really irritated because I invaded his space? This just makes me more determined than ever to win him over. I love a challenge, and there's nothing more challenging than trying to make a grouchy person happy.

When I turn back to face my friend, she laughs and shakes her head. "I can feel you plotting from here, Sam."

"Well what would you do if someone didn't like you?"

"Lots of people don't like me." She shrugs. "That's their problem."

"Hmph." I fold my hands on the bar and try to remember why I came down here to begin with. I guess it's a successful

visit if it distracted me enough to temporarily forget. “I’ll win him over,” I tell her.

Esther laughs and starts washing glasses. “I’m sure you will.”

CHAPTER 8

AJ

“YOU WANT to tell us what that’s all about?” Leo grins at me as he takes a sip of his beer, the smug jerk. I roll my eyes at him as I settle into my chair across from Nathan Cho, a science teacher from a neighboring district. The two of them do not look like they want to debrief about the training we just attended regarding online alternatives to dissection for students who conscientiously object.

“The blonde doesn’t look like a teacher,” Nathan says.

I frown at him. “‘The blonde’ is the founder and CEO of Vinea.” I practically grunt my defense of Samantha.

“No shit?”

Leo nods and elbows Nathan. “She dropped by the school the other day to apologize to AJ about some misunderstanding. Because he didn’t call her back.”

“Ooh, she called you? Dude, why wouldn’t you lock that down?”

I take a long swig of my beer, draining it, and I set it on the table with a little too much strength.

Leo scratches at his chin. “I bet this is about Lara.” He turns toward Nathan. “AJ’s witch of an ex. She fucked him up in the head.”

I don’t even like hearing her name, and I resent having my almost-fiancee brought to my consciousness. Maybe it’s not fair to even think of her as my almost-fiancee, since she was pretty clear our future together was all a figment of my imagination. *How could you honestly think I’d marry someone like you, Adriel?*

Shame and embarrassment wrestle for dominance in my guts and I shift in my seat uncomfortably at the memory. Eventually, I realize Leo and Nathan are staring at me with slightly softer expressions. “Hey,” Leo says. “It’s been like two years. You gotta at least go have your rebound fling.”

Nathan taps his beer bottle with his wedding ring. “I’ve been out of the game a long time, but I’m pretty sure it’s not even a rebound at this point.” He and Leo turn around to stare at the back of Samantha’s head as she talks to the bar owner, who apparently actually is her friend.

“Quit staring at her. Come on!”

They slide back around in their seats. Nathan sets his empty drink on the table and rises to his feet, stretching. “Well this has been invigorating,” he says. “But I have to get home to the other Mr. Cho.” He shakes open his jacket and slides it on. “Don’t let the tech lady wait too long. You’ve got her number? Use it.” He whistles as he walks out of the bar and Leo nods enthusiastically.

“What he said, man. Come on. It’s like fate, her following you to school and then showing up here. This city isn’t that small.”

I start to cycle through all the excuses I give my parents and my Bubbie for why I haven’t been dating since my love life exploded, landing on, “She’s not even Jewish, Leo.”

He seems to consider this for a beat and then shrugs. “Well, Lara was a nice Jewish girl, right? That didn’t work out so well for you.” I wince. He holds up a hand. “I’m not trying to be harsh, AJ. It’s just that it seems like you’re working awfully hard to come up with a reason not to dabble in some romance.”

“Dabble in some romance? Where do you even come from? And besides, that woman is insufferable.”

He leans forward, pinning me with a dark, mischievous grin. “I’ll tell you what. Either you try to make something happen or I’m going to go full Italian Stallion and see if she’s looking for a good time.”

“Leo! God, can you not objectify every woman we encounter?”

He chuckles and runs a hand through his dark hair. “She’s a beautiful woman, AJ. I’m a single man. We already know she’s smart. I can think of worse ways to spend an evening than taking her out for dinner.”

At his mention of worse evenings, I try to suppress the dread I feel each day after school when I return to my apartment, which I’ve still not rearranged after Lara left. Every

evening is a reminder of what I no longer have, what I never really had to begin with. Sparse furniture, only a few mismatched dishes. What once seemed minimalist and fiscally responsible, I now see through Lara's perspective. My evenings are austere, below society's expectations. Subpar. Women like Lara expect a certain lifestyle, and that lifestyle is not compatible with the public school teacher whose parents chose lives of service rather than riches and glamor.

My family has money—old money, Lara would say. There are entire wings of medical schools named for the Trachtenbergs. My parents bucked the trend to open a neighborhood clinic, and supported me when I switched my major from pre-med to science education. My college girlfriend on the other hand...Lara thought my interest in teaching was a phase I'd outgrow.

I'm not going to get burned a second time. Samantha Vine is like a blonde, waspy version of Lara, all smiles and friendly speeches...until she realizes there's no significant nest egg, there's not going to be a luxury car, and there won't be a restored Victorian in the east end of the city, let alone a McMansion in the suburbs. Leo and I stare at the back of Samantha's head. "She's out of my league, man," I say to Leo, shoving the table away from me as I rise to leave.

Leo reaches for my wrist and looks me in the eye. "I keep telling you, AJ. You've got it wrong. *You* are out of Lara's league. And Madam CEO over there would be lucky to have a guy like you."

I shake my head and yank my hand free from his grasp, leaving the bar without looking back. I find my car and, even though it's out of the way, I drive through my childhood neighborhood. Someone is setting off firecrackers, as per usual on nights when it doesn't rain. I pass the small building that houses my parents' medical clinic, looking shabby and stucco as it always has.

I think often of my father, who earned his medical degree at Vanderbilt and chose a family health practice in a clinic that supports patients with limited resources. He found my mother, a woman who also values making a difference over making a fortune. It's super cliched that she's the nurse in his clinic, but the two of them love their life together.

They're out there every day, diagnosing diabetes in the "pre" stage and curing people of chlamydia and all I ever wanted to be was just like them. *Someone like you*, Lara said the night she upended my life.

I cross from Greenfield into my new home in the Squirrel Hill neighborhood, where I can walk to both my grandmother's condo and our synagogue for services. I thought moving to a neighborhood with a larger Jewish population would be a concession for Lara, where we'd do great and humble things but live among the wealthy peers Lara values so deeply.

Someone like you.

I snort at the memory and growl, "Never again!" I squeeze my Honda into a tight spot outside my building and head inside, determined to keep Samantha Vine out of my thoughts.

CHAPTER 9

AJ

“OKAY, HEAR ME OUT.” Doug leans against the counter in the teachers’ lounge, munching baby carrots as usual.

“Whatever you’re about to say, I hate it.”

“My wife wants me to come with her to a book thing.”

I shrug. “You love books. You’re an English teacher.”

He groans. “Yes, but this is a romance book release thing. Amy said there will be some other men there, but I was hoping you’d come along.”

“You want me to come along with you on a date with your wife? To a romance book event?”

He nods. “Yes. I’d like you to keep me company while my wife swoons. Maybe you meet another swooning woman... plus I will owe you.”

I arch a brow. “Owe me what?”

He holds his palms up. “Name your price. Recess detail? School dance chaperone?”

“Wait. I have to chaperone the dance? Since when?”

Doug waves a hand, dismissively. “AJ. Please?”

I sigh. This sounds like the absolute last place on earth that I want to be...apart from alone in my empty apartment, I guess. I act like a huge jerk about it, but Doug is a good friend and a solid colleague. We've taught together since I was fresh out of student teaching. I groan. "Fine. Text me the details."

And that is how I find myself under-dressed at the Fort Pitt Museum, surrounded by people in 18th century costumes, gushing over the historical romance talents of romance author Chloe Petals. This party is like someone wanted a re-do on their bar mitzvah, with over-the-top decor and costuming only the ultra rich can pull off on a weeknight. Doug and Amy are nowhere in sight and I scowl as I dodge women in huge skirts and bonnets with giant feather plumes that tickle my nose.

I wander up to a table with stacks of books on it. *Rebel Heir* appears to be the sequel to *The Redcoat*, in which a colonial woman falls for a British soldier. And then they have a child. Who apparently grows up to be the hero in this next bodice ripper.

As soon as I form the thought of the words *bodice ripper*, I turn to see a heaving bodice. Samantha Vine stands beside me glaring, with her hands on her costumed hips. She's dressed in a low-cut blue gown with a bow in between her breasts, and I cannot draw my eyes away.

"What in the hell do you think you're doing here, Trachtenberg?" She hisses at me and snatches the book from my hand, slapping it back on the table and shaking the stack.

“Maybe I’m here to meet Chloe Petals,” I growl back at her. “What’s it to you?” This woman gets my goat every time, and we seem to be running into each other everywhere. If she’s not insulting my students or disrupting my class, she’s galavanting around playing dress-up.

Samantha snorts. “As if Chloe wants you here. You’re not even in costume.” She pokes me in the shoulder and I stare down at her lace cuff. It flutters as she breathes heavily at me.

“If you must know, I’m meeting a colleague and his wife.”

She shakes her head. “You’re impinging. You keep showing up at my events with my special people.”

I arch a brow at her. “This is your event?”

Samantha rolls her eyes. “I’m throwing this party for Chloe, yes. *Someone* has to champion her and her amazing writing.”

I open my mouth to retort but I feel a hand on my shoulder. “God, AJ, so sorry we’re late. Amy had an issue with her dress.” I turn to see Doug in a long wool coat and tri-corn hat, which he doffs at Samantha. “Good to see you again, Sam.”

She purses her lips, like she really can’t believe I was telling the truth about why I’m here. Recognition flashes across Samantha’s face and she seems to compose herself. “Doug Rogers, right?” She offers him her hand like some English lady and he actually kisses her knuckle, earning him a swat from his wife.

“Oh, sorry, this is Amy. Aim, this is Samantha Vine.”

Amy's face lights up. "Oh, you're from that Foof group, right? Alice loves hanging out with you." Amy is dressed as a bar maid and I try to avert my eyes from her bosom, which leads me to stare back at Samantha's. I swear if that bow moved, I could see her nipple. I cannot be standing here in jeans thinking about Samantha Vine's nipple.

By the time I compose myself, Samantha and Amy are gushing about Sam's friend group, and Doug has grabbed my arm. "We can just ease away now and find the bar."

As we step inside, I swat Doug in the stomach. "You didn't tell me it was a fucking costume party."

He cringes. "I only found out an hour ago."

"And it didn't occur to you to call me or something?"

His eyes widen. "I did call, man. Your voicemail message says you don't take messages." He shrugs and reaches into a metal bucket, extracting two plain glass bottles of beer. I sigh and take a swig. I look around the room, which is mostly full of women fanning themselves with copies of *Rebel Heir*. There is just one other man that I can see, dressed as a colonial soldier, complete with a fake musket. At least I hope it's fake. He's got his arm tightly wound around a woman who is talking animatedly to... "Aw, hell."

Samantha whips her head to the side at my words, seeing me again. She strides over to Doug and me. "You're like a child," she says. "Following me around. I have enough people in my life trying to con their way into my free time."

“Look, I don’t know what your problem is, but I’m just trying to drink a beer with my buddy here.” I elbow Doug, who is mid-sip on a beer and spills some on his cravat.

“Shit,” he says. “I gotta go find some paper towels or something. This is a rental.” He rushes off toward the bathroom as Samantha’s eyes flare at me.

“I hope that doesn’t stain.”

“Well, lucky for him, he’s friends with a science teacher. I’ve got tricks that can get stains out.”

Samantha furrows her brow. “Okay, that’s actually pretty useful.” We stare at each other for a few beats and I will myself not to look at her chest. It doesn’t work. It’s all I can do not to reach out and cup those full globes. I squeeze my beer bottle with both hands.

A woman steps up to the podium at the front of the room and taps on the microphone a few times, causing the guests to wince and then hush. “Hi, everyone,” she says, nervously. “I’m Chloe Petals.” Samantha lets out a whoop that sets off a round of applause. “I just want to thank you all so much for being here with me tonight, to celebrate my new release. I can’t tell you what it means for me to have home-town support.” She sniffs. The crowd claps again.

Chloe points a gloved finger toward Samantha. “I would be remiss if I didn’t acknowledge the extraordinary support of Samantha Vine, the most amazing friend anyone could ask for. I know that sounds generic and I’m a writer so I should be able to do better.” Chloe sniffs again and blows Samantha a kiss. “I’m just thankful is what I am. All of you, everyone who

reads my books, makes it possible for me to keep on writing them.”

A dark-haired woman in the crowd yells, “Chloe, we love you!” I recognize her as the bartender from the other night. What did Samantha call her? Expert mixologist? I really am intruding on Samantha’s social circle, and I don’t understand how that keeps happening. I don’t socialize with this type anymore.

Chloe opens a copy of the book and begins reading from a chapter apparently set around the Treaty of Paris. I note that Samantha is watching the crowd rather than Chloe, a look of pleasure on her face.

I step closer and lean in to whisper, “It was nice of you to do this. Host a party for her.”

She turns to face me, her eyes shining with emotion. She seems to struggle to think of a comeback and eventually just nods. “Thank you,” she says.

By the time Chloe finishes reading, Doug has returned from the restroom looking none the worse for wear. Samantha drifts away and Doug studies me. “You want to hate-fuck her,” he says. I don’t bother denying it.

CHAPTER 10

SAMANTHA

I HATE that I have to attend a weekly calendar meeting with my staff, but I accept that such a thing is part of being the person in charge. That doesn't make it any easier to pay attention to Audrey as she details all the investors coming in to Vinea to chat with Logan and all the places Shane needs to go to discuss community relations.

I miss holing up in a room with my computer, three monitors blinking at me as I code furiously, chasing down the rush of a successful program that meets its objective: streamlining something important for people. Making their lives easier.

I sigh and look up at the screen, where Audrey is talking through the color-coded map of leadership obligations. Logan is in her element, syncing up links and bios for each executive in real time, attaching all the pertinent info to each calendar entry. I'm so glad I poached her from that shitty investment firm where they were treating her like crap.

I smile and admire my leadership team as they sit there, thriving. But, soon, it's time to hear my list of responsibilities. My job has shifted so dramatically since I built my flagship

software product. I used to jump out of bed with a busy mind and tinker with code. The first time I sent my program to another researcher, waiting to hear their opinion of the program was exhilarating. Like riding a roller coaster. The flurry of amazing text messages I got in response? Felt like one of the loops halfway through the ride, when you're over the nerves and just loving the weightless experience of inertia.

"Mmm," I say by accident, causing the team to turn and look. "Sorry. Was waxing nostalgic for a minute. Tell me more about this keynote address I'm delivering."

Audrey folds her hands in front of her and leans toward me. "I hope the rest of the team will support me in saying I think it's time we brought in more support."

The room fills with murmurs of agreement and I look around. "What sort of support?"

Shane raises their hand. "Marketing and communications, please! We have to stop outsourcing to an agency. You need someone in-house and you need to stop writing your keynote addresses yourself. All due respect," they pause and I nod, gesturing for them to continue. "A pro can come in here, whip up company emails, spruce up our web copy, talk to the press, and bang out a speech for you and it'll feel like you wrote and said it all. I'm serious."

I bite my lip. I'm friends with writers. I'm no stranger to the impact of good professional communicators. I'm just upset that it hadn't occurred to me that we needed that here at Vinea. Well that's not true. I always feel this desperate need to do everything myself. Who else can do it as well as me? Then I

cringe, because I look around this table at all these people I love who are amazing at their jobs. I groan, suddenly worried our tremendous growth hasn't been as well thought out as I assured the public. "What else do we need? Don't hold back on me, team."

They all start speaking at once until Audrey grabs a dry erase marker and starts taking notes on the walls. I'd forgotten the conference room had walls we could write on. That must have been Audrey's idea. Soon, we have a plan in place to hire a vice president of business strategy, a communications director, and a few others whose titles I frankly don't understand. But I trust Logan and Shane and Audrey when they say we need them.

I don't love the idea of conducting this many executive job searches in the short amount of time before we go public. I start to panic a little bit, worrying that we should have had this sort of team in place long before we started accepting the level of investment we're getting.

There are only a few minutes left in the meeting when we get to the calendar item I was most looking forward to discussing: the Franklin Middle School field trip. I perk up as Audrey reviews the plan of action, starting with the swanky chartered bus picking up the kids, continuing with the amazing breakfast and lunches we're bringing in for them, and culminating in a bunch of hands-on activities we set up, including some coding workshops and fully loaded touch-screen tablets for the school to keep.

Logan figured out that if we donated all this stuff to the school PTA, we didn't have to go through all the red tape of having the school board approve the tablets, and soon she and Shane are engaged in a technical battle of wits about fiscal and community responsibility. Audrey uses the opportunity to lean in to me and whisper, "did you happen to see that your dad's birthday is next week, too?"

Crap. I swallow. "Yep, thanks Audrey, I've got it all in hand."

I do not have it in hand. I haven't made restaurant reservations anywhere, let alone made travel accommodations, bought a gift, or wrangled up my siblings for a celebration the Colonel won't appreciate anyway. I'm going to have to charter a damn private plane if I want to be here for the field trip and also make it home to Virginia.

Logan and Shane agree to disagree about something and the meeting adjourns. I retreat to my office to figure my shit out before I have to meet with a research hospital CEO. "Okay," I say to the empty room. "This is fine." I pull out my phone to call my father, who answers after one ring.

"Colonel Vine speaking."

"Hey, Dad. How's your day going?"

"Samantha I don't have time for casual conversation."

I close my eyes. "Noted. Have you given any thought into how you'd like to celebrate your birthday?"

He pauses and I clench my teeth together. This could go so many directions, and I really wish I could predict which it

would be. My father is like a computer program I can never crack. He's not predictable, except that his actions are predictably unsettling. Eventually, he says, "I anticipate my children organizing a suitable celebration."

Of course. And by "children," he means me, because I'm the oldest. So, obviously, I'm meant to take on the full burden of organizing the meal and the gift so that my siblings aren't inconvenienced by my "failure to plan ahead." We went through this routine when Dad turned 50 the year I was launching Vinea while simultaneously attending school full-time with a double major in statistics and computer science. God forbid my brother or sister call a bakery or a restaurant.

I shake my head. That's defeatist thinking and I need a growth mindset here. "Of course, Dad. I was just checking if you had a particular restaurant in mind. Or an experience! My friend Orla just took her dad on one of those pedal bar rides. It looked so fun, the whole family riding around sipping some suds..."

"We have open container laws here in Virginia, as you well know, Samantha."

"Right. Anyway, I'll call up the trattoria like usual. Six o'clock, right?"

"That is the standard time dinner is served."

"Okay, well, I'll probably meet you there since I'll be traveling from my office." I hurriedly wrap up the conversation before he can realize that I'm not taking a day off work to travel down there and spend quality time with my siblings.

I fumble around my desk for a piece of paper so I can write “CALL DAD” and then cross it off with flourish. I realize I own a tech company and could do this electronically. Sometimes the physical act of marking off a list feels cathartic. I decide to add CALL SEAN and CALL SARAH. And I add an H to her name just because I know it would piss her off if she saw it. I also know I’m not going to call her. She hasn’t spoken to me in years apart from absolute essential communication at holidays. I’ll send her a text after I give Sean his marching orders.

I manage to quickly book the restaurant online and order a small cake from my favorite bakery here in Pittsburgh. I figure I’ll just bring it with me on the flight, which I’ll have to book later. I’ve just about got myself psyched up to call my brother, when Audrey taps on the door. “Crap,” I say to her. “It’s time for the hospital guru, isn’t it?”

She nods. “Remember, she’s Belgian, so all the parts of her name have a French pronunciation.”

I squeeze her arm. “I appreciate you, Audrey. Always making me look good.” I stand up from my desk, smooth out my skirt, fluff up my hair, and walk away from chores that make me groan, toward a meeting that should fill me with energy.

Except I’m not quite feeling this meeting. I know the whole thing could be a quick email. Most research hospitals are already using Vinea in their labs, and sharing data across studies at different institutions. Our program makes it easier for labs to collaborate as long as they all have the right

permissions. Of course, Vinea has the permission forms and International Research Standards built in as clickable options. My meeting today with Madame Dubois-Devos is just a formality. Yet instead of feeling excited to shake hands with someone else who loves my work, I feel unsettled.

As I walk with Audrey to the door, I decide it must be because my father was once again emotionless. I plaster on a smile and drum up my best French pronunciation as I greet my guest.

CHAPTER 11

AJ

“THIS BUS IS SICK, YO.” Maya and Jayden run their hands along the smooth white exterior as they stare at their ride for the field trip. Leo stands beside me, chewing complimentary pastry noisily in my ear as the students file onto the massive, gleaming double-decker bus parked outside the school. Vinea has somehow set up a breakfast cart on the curb, with smiling servers keeping up with the masses of Franklin students clamoring for croissants and cold-pressed juices.

Leo elbows me in the ribs. “She sent food for the whole school, you know. Not just the kids going on the bus.”

“Mmm.” I grunt at him, fidgeting with my clip board, suddenly wondering if I’m under dressed again for *this* adventure in a shirt, tie, and sweater vest. The bell rings for first period and Leo starts wrangling seventh graders inside the vehicle. I climb inside and am hit with a fresh scent. The air doesn’t smell like bus air at all. The temperature is cool, the ambient music is soothing, and the driver grins at me as I make my way to the top level to count students, who are all beside themselves stroking the leather arm rests and adjusting their overhead lights.

Margot raises her hand and I nod at her. “Mr. T...this is amazing.”

I nod. “It’s really something.”

“Mr. T?”

“Yeah, Jayden?”

“This company has fuck-you money.”

The kids burst out laughing and I take a deep breath, reminding myself they are young tweens exercising their independence. Margot grimaces, and says, “They must be rolling in ice if they can casually send this sort of stuff for us.”

I nod at her. “Vinea is on the brink of becoming publicly traded on the stock market. Do you all know what that means?”

Margot and her classmates shake their heads. The kids I grew up around talked about investments at the breakfast table. My students rely on the school to provide their breakfast. “Well.” I fidget with the clipboard again. “We’ll go over it in a little more detail later, but let’s just say your first impression is pretty spot on, even if your language is crude.”

Eventually, with all students accounted for, I head back down to the first level of the bus, where Leo pats the seat beside him, smirking. “I heard that.” He takes a sip of coffee.

“How did I miss the coffee? I only saw ginger carrot juice.”

Leo hands me a coffee and winks at me as I inhale it greedily. I can’t hold back the moan of pleasure. I need to find

out where Vinea orders their coffee and start ordering these beans by the bushel. “AJ, I’m just saying, there might be another explanation for why CEO Vine would roll out this kind of bling.” He emphasizes each syllable of CEO with a fist pump.

I raise a brow at him, too blissed out by the coffee to engage him with proper sarcasm.

“She could be trying to impress you.” My eyes widen at him. “She could be trying to get in your pants.” He pops the P in pants and nudges me with his shoulder. The bus lurches forward and the students all start applauding before I can tell him he’s being ridiculous.

All morning, as the kids are treated like royalty, I should be focused on the career readiness information Samantha’s staff is presenting for the students, but I can’t get past Leo’s suggestion that this decadent, wet dream of a field trip might in some way be an effort to impress me. *Someone like me.*

I remember my first interaction with Samantha at the nonprofit thing and decide it’s possible I misjudged her. Although, come to think of it, we haven’t seen her yet today.

Shane, who I remember from the last time I was here, is breaking the students into groups to test out Vinea’s software programs. Once Shane sends the kids off with various Vinea employees, I pull them aside. “Hey,” I say and they smile.

“Mr. Trachtenberg,” they say, extending a hand for a shake. “I remember you from our nonprofit summit. I’m delighted to build this partnership with our public schools!”

“Oh.” I never know how to respond to enthusiastic people. Even before Lara ripped my emotional guts out I was more of a silent observer than a gesturing shouter. “Well, this is indeed terrific for the students. But I was wondering...” I can’t believe I’m both asking about the whereabouts of the CEO and nervous about doing so, but here I am. “Are we going to be seeing Ms. Vine today? To thank her, you know, for the hospitality.”

Shane smiles wider. “She’s meant to drop in on one of the sessions later, yes.” They lean in conspiratorially and whisper. “She’s having a very, very dramatic week, though, so I didn’t want to preview that for the students in case it doesn’t work out.”

“Oh, of course,” I say, nodding. I remember how I told Margot the company was on the brink of going public. And I remember how the Vinea CFO explained that process for the middle schoolers while also highlighting the ways finance and math can fit into careers in STEM fields.

This entire fucking day is basically our principal’s fantasy. Samantha Vine is showing these kids a future they could grasp and giving them contact information for mentors who want to help them get there. And why shouldn’t she. Isn’t this why I teach? To offer opportunities and epiphanies to young minds?

I wander out the door into the hall, intending to check in on one of the student groups, but I catch sight of Samantha through the windows of a conference room. She’s pacing and clenching and releasing her fist, passing the phone to her other hand and repeating the motions. She looks more like she did

the day I met her, like she's on the brink of exploding. I think of how casually she leaned on the door in my classroom and dropped dissection jokes, how she tossed banter at me at the bar like it was nothing.

I wonder which is the real Samantha. I can just make out her words as she paces by me and I hide my face behind a pamphlet. "Sara, do you think it's fair of you to say that to me? It's reasonable for an adult to chip in for a parent's birthday gift...I'm not asking you to pay for the meal...Of course I didn't ask if you were available tonight. Today is his birthday. I also am not available tonight, but I'm making it work...I'm not rubbing anything in your face. I have to get back to work."

I watch as she slaps her phone on the table and takes deep, heaving breaths. I watch as she smooths out her skirt, like she's preparing for battle rather than leaving the battle. She opens the door, and I expect her to approach me or Leo or the students, but she breezes right past us down the hall.

Two men in designer suits stand holding folders, eyebrows raised, expecting something. "Gentlemen!" She beams at them. "So sorry to keep you waiting. Please make yourselves comfortable and we can go over the paperwork together."

I don't like the disappointment that rolls through me as I realize I'm not going to get to talk to her. Not for a while at least. And then I force myself to stop thinking about it. I walk back into the room where my students are navigating an online program used by the world's most prestigious scientists and research institutions. And I feel proud seeing how well they understand the concepts and the scientific terminology.

By the end of the day, Dante and Margot have both proclaimed they will be applying for summer coding camp scholarships and the rest of my students have already figured out how to link their new tablet devices together to join worlds for a massive Minecraft game. Shane informs the students there is wifi on the bus, and I've never seen middle schoolers file back into a coach so quickly in all my years as an educator.

We're about to close the doors and shove off when a blonde blur comes rushing out the sliding glass doors of the Vinea headquarters. "Wait!" Samantha swings her way into the bus and leaps up the staircase. She stretches up toward the top level and then squats down to wave at the ground level. "I hope you all had a terrific day," she says and smiles as the students all cheer. Beside me, Leo also cheers. I glower at him, inexplicably, and he shrugs. "I so wish I could have spent more time with you but I know we'll meet again when you all apply for summer internships with Vinea, right?"

When she winks, I think every human on this bus falls in love with her. I worry about the reaction I'm having in my pants as she tells the students how to access her contact information in the tablets they all received, and encourages them to "at" her on social media. With a final wave, Samantha pivots off the bus and rushes back inside the building. As the bus pulls away, I watch her staff descend upon her, each person waving papers and vying for her attention.

"You've got it bad, amici." I realize I'm leaning across Leo to stare out the window, and I feel myself blush as I sit back in my own seat. "You should ask her out. I'm telling you."

“Does she look like someone who has time to go on a date with a middle school teacher in a sweater vest?”

Leo punches me in the arm. “She’ll make time when you ask her.”

I spend the rest of the ride back silently stewing, angry with my friend for leading me down a line of thinking I’ve tried to suppress. No more fancy women who want fancy things. I’ve done that already and I’ve got the emotional scars to prove it. Samantha Vine can have her swanky company with excess riches and amazing coffee.

I’m fine over here with my family, my work, and my students. “Shit,” I murmur as the bus pulls up outside of the school. “I forgot to ask where they get their coffee.”

CHAPTER 12

SAMANTHA

VINEA LAUNCHES SWEEPING Search for Candidates in Key Roles

By: Chip Tulley, Inside Business Reporter

Recruiters are cracking their knuckles this week as Vinea launched a series of high-level job searches to fill roles in communications, Human Resources, and corporate strategy. Inside Business noted postings on various job boards, all emphasizing a desire to locate diverse talent to quickly fill roles as the company prepares for a public option later this fall. Does this broad job search indicate trouble at the helm of the tech startup?

“All right, hit me.” Audrey falls into step with me as I make my way back to my office. She’s got a stylus in hand, ready to cross things off her electronic agenda. I wish I’d thought to use that the other day when I was angry-listing. I experience a minor wave of concern that my piece of notebook paper wound up in unfriendly hands, but I don’t have time to dwell on it, not with Audrey beside me. She explains how Shane

hired a recruiter specializing in inclusive hiring and Vinea already lined up prospects for a few key roles.

“We’ve got the candidate for communications tomorrow. The strategy specialist candidate asked to come Friday, but I said we need to move to next week since you can’t spare an hour two days in a row.”

“That sounds smart. But ugh. Can I really not spare an hour on Friday?” I look at her hopefully and she shakes her head.

“Okay, so I know you need to leave for the private air strip in a few minutes, but I really need you to approve these forms for the S.E.C.”

“S.E.C sounds like a Logan situation. Isn’t that for money stuff?” I have zero mental capacity to concentrate on money stuff at this point in my day.

“Logan has already signed.” Audrey looks at her notes. “She says, ‘tell Sam to go for it. Everything’s in order. I got you, babe.’”

I arch a brow at Audrey as I reach for the pen she’s holding out while we walk. I pause to lean on the wall. “Did Logan really add that last part?”

Audrey nods and gathers back the signed forms. “She did. Okay, in your office you’ll find gals from the investment bank Logan selected. They want to talk with you before moving forward. They know you have a hard stop in—“ Audrey checks the time. “Seventeen minutes. Give me your phone so I

can charge it during the meeting. My intern is finishing up packing your bag.”

“I’m not staying overnight.”

“Oh, I know, but we thought you might want to change for dinner or just have some comfy things for the flight back. We’ve got you, babe.”

I press open the door to my office and look over my shoulder. “When did you get an intern?”

An hour later I arrive at the airport, having spent the entire car ride with Shane and Logan talking me through the finer points of our price stabilization plan and community members who want to join our board of directors prior to the public stock offering. I don’t even get a chance to check my texts before I have to hand my ID to the pre-check security person.

Audrey follows me on the plane and for a terrifying moment I’m worried she will be coming with me to Virginia to tell me more things I need to think about and I won’t have a minute to prepare myself to “enjoy” my family. But she just hands me my phone and pulls me in for a hug.

“I know they’re mean to you,” she says. “But I want you to know we all love you here. We appreciate your amazing work.”

I feel tears well up, but I don’t let them spill. I don’t have time for that. Haven’t in years. “I’m moved, Audrey. I hope you all know how much I value you.” She gives me a thumbs

up and backs off the plane. An instant later she shoves her hand out as the flight attendant is about to close the door.

“The cake!” Audrey’s other hand starts waving the pink bag containing my father’s sugar-free birthday cake. I lean forward to grab it from her and when I clutch the bag to my chest, I see that someone stuck a cupcake in there.

A green sticky note on the wrapper says SAM, and I moan in gratitude as I greedily peel it open and cram the decadent chocolate into my mouth. My staff is amazing. I can’t believe I put them in a position to all feel overworked, just because I couldn’t let myself cede more control of the company. Audrey, Shane and Logan really push me. I need to compensate them better.

Energized, I pull out my phone and refuse to allow myself to groan or frown as I scroll through the messages from my family. My *happy birthday* text to my father shows as read, although there’s been no response. That’s par for the course.

My brother has repeatedly texted to ask where the dinner will be and what time. His final message reads, “Nvrmind I found it.”

Also par for the course.

I put my phone back in my bag, opt not to change clothes, and spend the rest of the flight speed-reading all the briefs and memos from Shane, Logan and Audrey. I start to wish I had a co-CEO and will myself not to get my phone back out to look up whether such a thing exists.

Once again longing for the late nights just making coding magic happen, I prepare for landing. I know Audrey arranged for car service to and from the airport and I look out the window, laughing as I notice we are sharing space with the military planes. In another universe, I could hop in a Jeep and share a ride to dinner with my father. The proud Colonel could show off his daughter, the one whose software is (as of two days ago) being used by military researchers.

I try to imagine how I might bring such a thing up to my father, that my company has secured military contracts. It's been so long since we've talked about anything other than my brother's bright future...

Outside the restaurant, I catch sight of said brother, who nods silently in greeting. I notice he is not carrying a gift bag. He doesn't seem like he's got a birthday card in his jacket pocket. "Hi, Sean," I say and I wait for him to pull the door open, since my arms are full with my carry on and the cake. Sean pulls out his phone to check something and I have to clear my throat and say, "A little help?"

"What? Oh." He reaches past me and opens the door. I breathe long and slow through my nose, approaching the host stand.

"Vine, party of four," I say with my best smile.

The young woman at the podium looks up at me nervously. "Some of your party has already arrived," she says, in a tone that suggests my father got here early, and is upset that the rest of us are not also early. I follow her around the corner to the window table, which glows in light from a charming candle

arrangement and a soft pink light fixture above. Dad doesn't like to eat in places that are too dark, because he likes to be able to see both the menu and his food.

When I made the reservation, I asked them to keep the house music low and the lighting a little higher, at least in the area where we're seated. I turn to the hostess. "Thank you so much for your attention to our special requests," I tell her. The pinched look on her face eases up a bit. I look at my father, who is concentrating on his crossword puzzle. "It's 5:58, Dad. Almost time for your birthday party!"

I slide into the chair across from him. "Oh. Hello, Samantha." Dad checks his watch. "Cutting it a bit close, are we?"

I pat his hand. "Not as close as Sara, right?"

Sean rolls his eyes and Dad looks at his watch again. "I don't think we should be expected to wait for her if she's late. Do you know what you'll order?"

Sean huffs out a laugh. I pat Dad's hand one more time. "The server hasn't even brought menus yet."

"We eat here multiple times a year, Samantha. I think you know what they serve."

I shrug. "Maybe I feel like duck today. Or fish. We don't always have to get the same thing."

"Well, I will be getting the same thing." He looks over his shoulder. "I'm glad some places know to keep the racket down with the background music. I like to hear myself think."

This is as close to a thank-you as I'll get from my father.

A few moments later, the host hustles back to the table with my sister, who is wearing all black and a scowl to match. It's been years since she's spoken to me unnecessarily. I know that she's actually mad that our mother passed away, but it's getting harder and harder to be the person who bears the brunt of my entire family's grief in that regard. I miss Mom, too.

"Happy birthday, Dad," Sara says, sinking into the seat by his side. I can't decide if it's more awkward to have to sit across from my sister or if it would be worse to be next to her, my shoulders rubbing against the angry, black fabric covering her angry, black soul.

Our server arrives with the menus and asks if we'd like to hear the specials. I open my mouth to say yes, but Dad cuts him off. "We all know what we want already," he says. "I'll have the chicken, my son will have the pork chop, and both my daughters like the scallops."

The server blinks a few times and looks around the table as if to confirm. I weigh the pros and cons of standing up for myself and asking for a god-damned minute to read the menu, to choose what food I eat at the dinner I planned and will pay for. And I decide to nod. I start calculating the number of seconds remaining before I can leave.

Dad looks at my brother. "Sean, why don't you tell your sisters about the progress you're making with your real estate investment. Now that all the appropriate paperwork has been received."

I close my eyes and drink from my water glass, vowing to at least buck tradition and get a glass of wine with my meal,

despite what my disapproving father thinks. Sean begins to toss around developer slang as I feel my phone buzzing in the bag pressed against my calf under the table. Slowly, painstakingly, I lean to retrieve it without drawing attention to myself.

I glance at the screen to read the preview from Audrey. *Just a reminder to write your keynote speech for the science educators event.* I let the phone slide back into my bag and pat my brother on the shoulder as if I've been listening the whole time. I'm not sure when I stopped trying to get him to look up from his own navel. At some point I just realized I couldn't make him be kind or considerate of others.

I think about Audrey's message, about a gathering of science educators. Someone comes to refill our water glasses and I grab his arm. "I'd like a glass of your house white wine, when you get a chance, please." I smile brightly at him as my father scowls.

"Samantha, really? You can't go one night without imbibing?"

"It's a party, Dad. I'm going to have a glass of white wine with my scallops."

He grunts. "Sorry, Sean. Please continue."

My brother looks like he's jealous, even more so when the server slides the cool glass of wine into my hand and I take a satisfied swig. "Anyway," he says, "I'm pretty excited about the net cash flow..."

I stop listening, sipping my wine, smiling into my glass, and thinking about grumpy AJ Trachtenberg sitting at a benefit dinner. If I'm speaking there, he'll have to look at me. I think about how it will feel to have those dark eyes burning through my soul as he stares.

"Samantha, is there something you'd care to share with us?" Dad has his arms crossed, frowning at me.

"Oh. Sorry. I was just thinking about work."

"About your computer stuff?" Sean tries to reach for my wine and I move it out of his reach.

"We landed a military contract this week, and I'm feeling really excited about this use of our software. It's a fantastic opportunity."

My siblings and my father just blink at me. They have no idea what I do and they don't ever ask me to elaborate on it. Often, if I talk about work, they scold me for boasting. It must sound jarring for them to hear that my "little college side project" has grown to this sort of magnitude.

"Which military contract?" My father scratches at his chin, contemplating. I know the work he does centers mostly around the troops and strategy, not research.

"Obviously I'm not allowed to talk about the particulars," I say as my sister's jaw drops. "But Army biomedical researchers will be using my software to track their projects and ease collaboration with their partner universities." Nobody is interrupting me, so I take a sip of wine and keep talking. "You know, the military has a beautiful, unparalleled data set

for the healthcare of service members, since they all use ServeCare. They have anonymized data about absolutely everything, so it's been a real gift to sync up the database with all the functions of our programs.”

Sean squints at me. “I thought you made video games or something?”

I turn to glare at him. “Why would you think that? I've never even played a video game.”

He shrugs. “You started doing all this in college. Don't college kids just sit around and play video games?”

I bite my lip, considering how best to respond. “Vinea makes lab work easier, more reliable, and recreateable. I know you all think I'm just bragging when I talk about work, so you might not be aware that I have built partnerships with every major medical research institution in the country, now including the U.S. military.” I shrug. “I did think of the idea in college, yes. But I am now CEO of a corporation. And we form legitimate partnerships.”

Dad purses his lips. “Well.” He nods. “It sounds like we're keeping you from your work.”

You are! I want to scream. *You didn't ask me what worked with my schedule and you never ask me anything about myself, my needs, or my feelings.* I want to tell all of them that I want them to actually want to spend time with me, and not because they want me to do something for them. That all I've ever wanted from them is a hug and to hear that we're all in this together.

Instead, I say, “I’m happy to be here celebrating your special day, Dad.”

By the time the server brings my scallops, my wine is gone and my enthusiasm is completely drained.

CHAPTER 13

SAMANTHA

I DIG into my carry-on bag in the back of the car, yanking off my heels and sliding my feet into the soft ballet flats the mysterious intern packed for me. I squeal when I find a pair of sloth-patterned pajama pants and slide those on underneath my skirt, which I then shimmy off as we coast through the light traffic en route back to the private runway.

By the time I reach the jet, I've transformed from respectable business maven into a sloppy Abercrombie model...with a killer bag. As soon as the flight attendant tells me I'm allowed, I whip out my phone and start up a video chat with the Foof group.

Only Chloe and Esther answer, and Esther is back lit from the bar so she's more of a fuzzy presence. "My family is so miserable," I tell them.

Chloe mimes giving a hug. "I forgot today was the big fancy birthday party."

I roll my eyes. "The Colonel got judgmental when I ordered WINE. One glass!" I hold up a finger to the lens.

Esther leans close to the screen. "What did they serve, do you know? Was it any good? I'd kill to find out their profit

margin on a house wine.”

“I did not take the opportunity to ask for the sommelier,” I deadpan. I groan and let my head drop back on the headrest.

“I’m surprised how good the connection is from your fancy airplane,” Chloe says, munching on something white and flaky.

I tilt my head to stare at her. “What on earth are you eating?”

She holds it up to the screen. “It’s hard tack. I made it myself. I’m doing research.”

“Hard tack?” Esther fake gags and then steps off screen to pour a drink.

Chloe nods. “My next hero is going to be a lowly soldier and not an officer or anything.”

“Oh my god, Chlo, please don’t go full method and give yourself scurvy trying to write about hunger.”

She shakes her head. “I promise, I won’t. But hey. You look like you need a hug.”

I nod. “I really fucking do. Work is just bananas right now. All I wanted to do today was hang out with those kids on the field trip at work but I had to take meetings the whole day. The whole day!”

Esther pops back on screen, one eyebrow raised. “Field trip? Am I hearing that you spent time today with Professor Pout?”

“Who?”

Chloe claps her hands. “That’s what we’re calling your grouchy crush. Esther says he liiiiiikes you.”

I roll my eyes. “He can’t stand me. Which, as you know, is a huge trigger for me. Nobody hates me apart from my own family, damn it!”

“So you didn’t win him over yet?” Esther laughs and leans her elbows on the bar. She must have me propped against a tap.

“I didn’t even have a chance to talk to him. But I’m sure he’ll be excited about our debrief conversation tomorrow.”

“You’re gonna de-brief him all right. Even if he wears boxers!” Chloe snorts.

“Good one, Chloe.” Esther gestures to give her a high five through the screen.

They tease me for a few more minutes before Esther gets slammed with customers and Chloe’s husband comes home from work. “I gotta go try to talk to him,” she says, crunching the last bite of her hardtack. “See you at the next Foof meeting?”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” I say as she hangs up. I wonder if she realizes how truly I mean those words, how very vital it is for me to be there with people who listen to me, who see me, who notice all the ways I try so hard. Without my Foof ladies, I drown in the voices of my family. I need my friends in Pittsburgh to help me remember what’s real.

I feel that choking, sweaty approach of tears and I shake my head rapidly. I reach in my bag to see what else the intern

shoved in there and purr in delight when I find a bag of apple chips. “I freaking love these things,” I mutter, reaching in to the crisp, cinnamon treats.

My mom used to pack these for outings because they were so light weight. I remember her doling them out to me and my siblings. She made her own, I think, dehydrating them in the oven in our on-base housing. I love that Audrey and the intern knew to stick them in my bag for a treat.

Nestled below the apple chips are Shane’s notes about the field trip. I smile at their neatly typed bullets about community awareness and their plan to ask one of the teachers to join the Vinea focus group.

I wonder if they’re thinking of inviting AJ to the group. I sort of doubt it. The two of them didn’t hit it off when they first met. Not that I hit it off with AJ, either. I chuckle at Chloe’s joke about de-briefing him. He definitely seems like the sort of guy who wears plain white briefs beneath those neatly pressed teacher-slacks.

Why doesn’t he like me? I was obviously frazzled in that meeting when I initially said we weren’t a good fit for a middle school field trip. I sigh, thinking about all the wisdom I’ve ever heard about first impressions.

I suppose I don’t have time to worry about AJ Trachtenberg and his early notions about me. I’m on the brink of a public stock offering. I have meetings from sun up until sundown, and then I have shit to read all night to prepare for the next day’s meetings. So why can’t I get him out of my head?

The plane lands in Pittsburgh and I feel overwhelmed for a moment, not sure what comes next. Did I drive my own car to the airport? How am I getting home? Thankfully I see a woman waving a sign with my name on it and I take a few minutes to marvel that I've become one of those people who has a professional driver meeting her at the airport. With a sign and everything.

I step into the back seat of the car, laptop fired up, ready for the evening's reading all snuggled in my sloth pajamas. And yet my thoughts keep drifting to a pouting science teacher and all the ways I want to make him approve of me.

CHAPTER 14

AJ

“YOU’RE LATE.” My Bubbie hefts herself into the front seat of my car, tucking her skirts inside so I can close the door without getting grease on her good clothes.

“Nice to see you, too, Bubs.” I climb in my side, grinning, and lean across to give her a kiss before pulling out for the short drive to our temple. It would be faster to walk, by the time I find parking, but Bubbie has been complaining about her hips recently, so here we are.

“No kippah? What is this—Sunday school?” She clucks her tongue at me until I lift the console compartment and pull out the battered old yarmulke I keep there for just this sort of emergency.

“I just forgot, is all. I couldn’t find my keys this morning. I was running a little behind.”

She shakes her head and pats my hand on the gear shift. “You’re never going to find a nice girl in a wrinkled old head covering like that, Adriel.”

“I thought we go to services to find peace. Nobody said anything about ladies.” I wink at her.

Bubbie crosses her arms and studies me for a few minutes until I pull up outside the doors of the synagogue. She waves at the ushers at the door and I run around the car to open her door and help her up the steps. “You gonna wait for me here while I park?”

She shakes her head. “Nah, I’m going down front and talk with Helen. *She’s* getting a new grand baby this fall.”

I mutter under my breath as I help her up the last step, and hurry back to the car. I have to circle the block a few times before I find a parking space and I just make it inside as the doors are closing and the service begins. Bubbie pats the bench seat next to her and we spend a quiet hour following along with the service.

I say a quick prayer that just this once, we’ll sneak out and immediately leave, but I know full well the morning has just begun. I used to take turns with my sister, Avi, driving Bubbie to services. My parents are somehow exempt from going except for the High Holidays...and to be fair, they do open the clinic on Saturdays to see newborns and their dazed parents.

But, Avi has moved to the suburbs. A few months ago, she got tired of the traffic crossing the river from the south and decided it was against the spirit of the sabbath for her to drive “all this way” to take Bubbie to shul. I close my eyes and listen to the choir and remind myself I like coming here. I like the stillness here, I like the predictability and cyclical nature of the service.

Autumn always means themes of forgiveness, renewal. Maybe this will be the year I feel renewed...

“Adriel!”

I whip my head to the side and realize my grandmother is shouting my name. She stands at the end of the bench with a pair of women, one old, one far too young for me. *Oh please don't let this turn into a setup attempt. Please, oh please, oh please.* “Yeah, Bubs? Sorry, I was...contemplating the readings.”

Bubbie rolls her eyes. “Yeah right. Stand up, Adriel, and come see who I have here. You remember Ruthie Cohen? She’s back from university. In Boston!”

The younger woman, Ruthie I guess, waves timidly. “Congratulations on graduating,” I say, standing and making my way out of the seat. “Any job prospects?”

Ruthie opens her mouth to say something and her own grandmother butts in. “She’s got offers from major banks all over the place. All over! But our Ruthie chose to come home here to Pittsburgh, didn’t you, sweetheart? Gonna be working downtown.”

Ruthie nods. I nod. “That’s great,” I say, tapping my fingers along the smooth wood of the bench back. I have nothing further to say to this 22-year-old my sister used to babysit.

Bubbie drapes an arm around my waist, pulling me close against her stout body. “Adriel is up for a major award. Science teacher of the year!”

I shake my head. “No, that’s not it, Bubbie. I told you, it’s a social dinner. Lots of teachers are invited.”

She waves a hand and leans toward her friend. “They’re giving him a cash prize.”

“It’s for the school, Bubs.” I turn to face Ruthie and her grandmother. “The organization is donating funds to a few different public schools for STEM enrichment.”

Ruthie’s eyes go wide. “Are you a teacher? That’s so wonderful. I bet your students love you.”

I’m not sure what I’ve said or done to give her that impression, but I can objectively admit that the Franklin Middle School students do seem to admire me, so I thank her. I look over my shoulder. “Hey, Bubbie, things are thinning out here. You want to go grab coffee and I can get the car?”

She clucks her tongue again. “You’ll come with me for that coffee, young man. And we’ll stay for bagels, too.” She turns to her friend. “Did they order them from the same place this time? I hear she trucks the water in from Manhattan so they taste just like a New York deli bagel.”

I shuffle along as they argue the merits of various bagels. My scientific opinion is that the minerals in the water from New York might contribute toward that perfect taste and texture of the bagels there. But I don’t want to go off on a tangent about the chemistry of bagel production, so I just silently enjoy mine.

I appreciate that my grandmother wants me to be happy. I mean, really she wants me to get married and have babies because that’s what Jewish culture says means she has succeeded as a grandmother. But ultimately, she’d like me to be happy. I can admit that I haven’t been too thrilled with the

world since Lara left me. I think again about Leo's suggestion that I see someone professionally about it.

By the time I dab my mouth with the napkin, finished with my bagel, I see that Ruthie has gone and my grandmother frowns at me slightly as she continues nibbling and chatting. Eventually I tell her I need to get home and prepare for my award speech, a small white lie that gets her to nod so I can trot off to grab the car and take her home.

There's always a chance I'll get called upon to say a few words at the dinner. My colleagues insisted I attend the science educator event, as head of my department. They know my background, and know that I know how to talk to rich people. They should also know I'm terrible at schmoozing, though I'd be lying if I didn't admit to feeling my heart race when I saw Samantha Vine is the keynote speaker.

Samantha Vine is everywhere I look these days, except when I draw up the nerve to try to speak with her at her own company. I wonder again whether Leo is right that she seemed interested. Or whether he's right that I need to get out there and just do something reckless and fun. She's busy with her company doing...whatever it is that's going on there.

I'm busy with my students and my empty apartment and my family.

I pull up out front of the synagogue and put my blinkers on, waiting for my grandmother to emerge. I decide to fire off a text to Samantha before I lose my nerve again.

Saw your name on the science educators dinner. Hope we can catch up.

Once I send the message, I stare at it in agony, worried it's the dullest message any man has ever sent a woman. I watch as it shows as "received" and I practically hyperventilate as the three dots appear on the screen. She's typing something back.

I wondered if you'd be there!

I wait, as three dots appear again, as if she has more to say, but then they stop. Nothing else. Her message conveys absolutely nothing about whether she, too, is interested in reckless fun of the naked variety. Frustrated, I shove my phone back in my pocket and drive my grandmother home.

CHAPTER 15

SAMANTHA

SHANE POKES their head into my office, grinning. “I just got the cutest email,” they say, walking to my desk with their iPad.

“You walked over here to show me? Why not just forward it to me?” I raise a brow and lean toward their screen.

“Because,” they say, clicking open the window. “I want to watch your face while you watch it.”

A video starts to play and I recognize the teens from Franklin Middle School who had come here for their field trip. Warmth spreads through my chest as I watch the shaky video panning the room of smiling, waving youngsters. “Yooooo, Ms. Vine! Our teachers said we should show you this stuff!” An unseen teen walks around a classroom, pausing at each desk where students are pecking away at their devices. “Since we all got these, Mr. T is letting us use your program to, like, write up our lab reports from this dissection.” The screen zooms in on a girl whose face I remember, but whose name escapes me. The girl clicks her tweezers at me, beaming. The narrator flips his camera around and grins, braces glinting in the overhead light of the classroom. “This is actually pretty cool. So, yeah. Thank you!” He flips the camera again and he

must count down from three, because all the students in the room yell, “Thank you!” And the video fades to black.

“Wasn’t that delightful?” Shane bounces on their toes. “I wish we could use it for something.”

I furrow my brow. “Why can’t we?”

They roll their eyes at me. “They’re minors, Sam. For all I know, the school didn’t even authorize them sending us this video. It came from an email handle that included the word banging.”

I laugh at that. “Sounds about right to me. Could you forward it to me, anyway? I promise to only use it for personal joy.”

I pull up my phone to send a message to AJ about the video and I see that I never finished texting him about the science dinner. Ugh, he must think I was being weird. Fully expecting his voicemail, I call his number and gasp a little bit when he answers. “Why are you answering the phone?”

His voice is deep and unamused. “Did you call to test me or something? Isn’t it normal for people to answer when the phone rings?”

“Well you never have before this!”

“I’ve never been available to talk when you called.” He pauses. “Today I’m available.”

“It’s the middle of the day. Why are you talking on the phone while your students are sending me emails?” I have no

idea why I'm getting snippy with him when I really do want to talk to him. Something just compels me to bicker whenever he opens his mouth.

AJ is silent for a moment and I hear him inhale before he says, "I'd like to pause and ask for clarification about the email. My students emailed you?"

I smile, unable to help myself. "They sent me the cutest thank you message. Well, they sent it to Shane, but they showed it to me. They're using Vinea to document their lab reports! And you're still dissecting frogs?"

He coughs. "We've moved on to sheep hearts. I hadn't realized they sent you something."

I frown. "You're not there with them? I guess that's why I don't hear anything in the background?"

"If you must know, I'm home sick today."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I thought teachers never get sick? I remember some of my teachers telling me that they build these impenetrable immune systems. It inspired my science fair project one year in fact—"

"It's pinkeye," he blurts.

"It's what?"

"Pinkeye. Conjunctivitis. It's extremely contagious but I'm about to do my third treatment. Plus my Bubbie made me matzo ball soup, so I'll be back tomorrow."

"Wow, AJ. I haven't even thought about pinkeye for at least a decade."

He sighs again. “One minute I’m getting an all-faculty memo about it and the next, my eyes are crusty and itchy. I’ve learned my lesson about giving the students high fives.”

“Aww,” I squeal. “You give high fives! They love you. Seriously, I can tell.” I hear him clear his throat uncomfortably. “Well, anyway, I just wanted to let you know I love the video and we obviously won’t share it since we don’t have releases from their parents or anything like that.”

“I’d appreciate you sending it to me so I can see what they said.”

“You’d have to give me your email address, Mr. Trachtenberg.” Apparently I’m flirting with him now. Which, yes. I want to flirt with him. He’s sexy, damnit. In a hairy, grouchy, untouchable sort of way.

“Surely you can get that information from Shane?” I can’t read his tone, so I decide he’s flirting right back.

“Or you could just tell me and I could send the video without interrupting Shane’s work.” He reads off his address. “Adriel? That’s your first name?”

“It is, yes.”

“But you go by AJ?”

“She says, as she goes by Sam.” Okay that was definitely a flirty response.

“Fair. Okay, *Adriel*, I’ll send you the super cute video your amazing students sent me. And I’ll tell you it made my day. Things are rough over here.”

Thank you, *Samantha*,” he parrots. A pause, and then, “The kids make my day brighter, too.”

I smile and we’re both silent for a few beats. “Okay, well, I guess I’ll see you at the dinner thing.”

“I’ll be the one with the bloodshot eyes.”

I must be sitting with a moony expression, because Audrey and Logan enter my office, take one look at me, and burst out laughing. “What in the world has you making that face?” Logan peers over my shoulder, but my phone screen has gone to sleep so she just takes a seat across from my desk and plunks her things on her lap.

I wave a hand. “Shane shared the thank you video the students sent after the field trip.” I shrug. “It made me feel good.”

Audrey bites her lip. “Well! I’m definitely glad you got some serotonin. Are you ready to review financials and then finalize your speech for the science educators dinner?”

I cringe. “Finalize?”

She blinks at me. “It’s tomorrow, Sam. Let me see what you’ve got.” Logan nods, encouragingly.

“I got a whole lot of nothing,” I admit. “I was going to write it tonight.” I cringe again. I was also going to sign off on the finance reports tonight. There’s just not enough tonight to go around.

Audrey places her palms on my desk. “I know you know this, but you cannot continue to do everything personally.” I slump a little lower in my seat, knowing she’s right but also not sure how to rebound. Audrey rolls her eyes. “I’m going to send an emergency message to the agency we used for our last annual report. Maybe they have someone who can whip up some keynote bullet points for rush pay.”

Audrey starts clicking away furiously on her laptop. Logan pops her lips a few times and decides to capitalize on the silence. “Moving right along to financials,” she says. And for the next hour I listen intently as she and Audrey walk me through some of the basics I need to know before I speak with our board next week. It’s going to be a long night.

CHAPTER 16

AJ

FROM: Vinelli, Kellie

Sent: Thursday, September 28

To: [All Staff]

Subj: Morning Middle School Memo!

Good Morning Faculty! Thank you to everyone who turned in progress reports! As a reminder, AJ Trachtenberg will represent Franklin Middle School at tonight's Science Educators Celebration and his student Margot Costa will give remarks! Attached you'll find some follow-up tips from Nurse Battle about staying vigilant during this latest outbreak of conjunctivitis!

Have a great day On Purpose!

Kellie Vinelli, Principal

I stand outside the robotics company hosting this dinner, wondering how in the hell anyone is supposed to recognize that this is a robotics company. I guess that's part of the

intrigue of the whole thing. The brick building in the industrial Strip District neighborhood shows no outward signs that it contains state-of-the-art technology and boasts some of the top scientific minds in the industry on its payroll.

There's just a tiny sign beneath an awning. And, of course, the swanky cars lining the street. I wonder if those belong to any of the other teachers attending or if they're all the deep-pocketed donors' vehicles. Either way, I remind myself, I'm about to eat fantastic food and celebrate some really cool opportunities for students.

I lean against the railing, waiting for Margot's arrival. She was beside herself when her essay was selected to be the highlighted student speech for the evening. I offered to give her and her mother a ride to the event, but as they declined, I decide to wait for them outside instead so we can all walk in together.

A few blocks away, I see a bus slide to a stop on Butler Street and they emerge, looking nervous. "Margot!" I cup my hands over my mouth to shout at them and then wave. I see palpable relief on her mother's face as they make their way toward me.

Margot's mother looks around, nervously. "Used to be, nobody would go to this neighborhood after dark," she says, biting her lip.

I laugh. "Ah, that was before the Pittsburgh Renaissance," I joke. This whole neighborhood used to be filled with Italian families who worked in the various factories that once lined Smallman Street. Ever since the new Children's Hospital was

built here, there are fewer Moose Lodges and more craft breweries and, of course, hot new robotics laboratories in the renovated former factory spaces. “Seriously, though. I’m happy to drive you both home afterward so you don’t have to take the bus!”

Margot grins. “I like the bus! I take notes for my sociology observations.”

I nod, impressed. “You’re taking sociology this year?”

“Mm hm. At the gifted program. I’m making notes about commuters.”

I smile at her and then remember that I never learned her mother’s first name. I stick my hand out for her to shake. “You can call me AJ,” I tell her, hoping she’ll offer a response, but she shakes her head.

“Better to stick with the formalities. It’ll help me feel better at this whole thing.”

I redirect my attention to Margot. “Well, then, ladies. Shall we go inside?”

We step inside to another dimension. The lobby somehow feels naturally lit, even though there are very few windows in the brick facade. Soft classical music plays as we make our way down the polished concrete halls. A black-clad host offers to take our coats, but I didn’t wear one over my suit jacket and Margot seems reluctant to part with hers. I wave a hand and try to get the Costas seated somewhere, preferably with some snacks.

The dinner is being held in a massive room, clearly an old assembly line area of the former factory, a space now flanked by offices. High-top tables decorate the perimeter and a stage has been constructed atop what looks like a giant funnel. “I wonder if that used to pour molten metal,” Margot says, pointing.

“Don’t point,” her mother hisses, and I smile.

“I bet it did,” I tell her. Finding our names on the seating chart, I glance around our table assignment, delighted to see we will be sitting with other folks from the city public schools. And then I see another name that stops me cold. As Margot drags her mother off toward the crudités, I stare at the seating chart.

I see Lara’s name in neat, sans serif font, listed as the plus-one for the CEO of an autonomous vehicle company headquartered here in the Strip. Lara is here with the folks footing the bill and I’m here with the kids receiving the financial support. I feel nauseated. I feel enraged that my ex is going to be here on the arm of her new, wealthy lover. And here I am, still the lowly science teacher in a poor, urban middle school. And then on top of it all, I feel shame for feeling this way. Of course my students depend on these contributions from local businesses. I chose this work, helping students envision a different and more prosperous future. My boss won’t come out and say it, but my upbringing makes it possible for me to be a liaison here.

I look over at Margot again and shake my head. I’m not going to allow myself to forget why I do this. Margot can’t

change the circumstances of her beginnings, and neither can any of her classmates. But I can help her and all these students change the trajectory of their future. That's why I do this. That's why my whole family lives a life of service. We care about people, damn it.

I make my way to the bar and grab a bottle of lite beer, chugging down half of it as I mentally prepare myself to see Lara. I'm sure she'll look good.

But then I look up to see Samantha Vine gliding into the room and I can't believe I ever thought Lara looked beautiful. Samantha is sunshine and radiance. Everyone around her knows her, or pretends to, anyway. An entourage of people follow her as she makes her way to the front table, setting her wrap over the back of a chair. I watch as she greets people and kisses cheeks.

I watch as Margot makes her way toward Samantha, too, and I clench my jaw, waiting for a cold dismissal. But it doesn't come. Samantha squeals in delight upon seeing Margot and throws her arms around my student. I watch as she enthusiastically shakes hands with Margot's mother and then seems to introduce them to the people standing all around her.

I'm so intent on watching them that I forget to look for Lara. So of course I'm caught off guard when I hear her voice. "Is that really you, AJ? What on earth are you doing *here* of all places?"

CHAPTER 17

AJ

I TURN, beer still held to my mouth, and I swallow. “Lara,” I say coolly. I don’t feel the need to remind her that I’m a science teacher or that this is a celebration of science educators, so I just stand, expectantly, as she clings to the arm of her date, a man in skinny jeans and Converse sneakers. At a formal dinner.

The guy looks between Lara and me and makes a face. He eventually sticks a hand out. “Lance Dallas,” he says. “I’m here with Voyager.”

I return his shake, hoping my hand is cold and wet from clutching the beer. “AJ Trachtenberg,” I tell him. “I’m here with Public Schools of Pittsburgh.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “For real? Wow, man. That’s noble of you.”

“That’s me,” I clench my jaw again. “Noble.” I watch Lara’s hand as she traces Lance’s pec, and I note the glistening skating rink on her left ring finger. She sees me see it and I don’t miss the look in her eyes. A smug expression that conveys *see? I found myself a real man with real ambition who buys me real jewels I deserve.*

I'm spared from continued small talk with my ex when someone clinks a spoon against a glass and asks us all to find our way to our seats. "Guess I'll have to catch up with you later," I say, but I don't look at either of them as I shoulder my way to my seat. Margot is bouncing in her chair when I arrive.

I try to rein in my foul mood, but it's difficult. I keep looking across the room at Lance and Lara, even when I know I'd rather be looking across the room at Samantha Vine. Why do I always seem to choose the path that punishes myself?

"Mr. T did you see Ms. Vine is here? And she remembered me from the field trip!"

"Well I'd hope she'd remember you. It was just the other day."

She sighs. "Yeah, but there were like 100 of us. She knew my *name*."

Margot's mother beams. "Your name is on the program, too, toots."

"That's true! Mr. T, did you see?" She waves a program in my face so I can see her name typed on the order of speakers, right after Samantha Vine's remarks. It occurs to me that, as title sponsor of the event, Samantha's company has given more money to the cause than Lara's fiance gave. I don't like how that makes me feel smug. I look back at Margot's name, reminding myself to stay focused on my students. The light in my life. Everything else is just a fruitless distraction.

"They spelled it right and everything," I say, plucking a roll from the basket in the middle of the table. I give a wave to

my colleagues from neighboring schools and we chat as the wait staff passes out the salad course. Once everyone is chewing, Samantha makes her way to the stage.

I'm supposed to focus on her words, I'm sure, but I can't get past the sight of her in a dark green wrap dress. It nips in at her waist and flares out, stopping right below her knees. The neckline isn't scandalous by any means, but the way it hugs her chest makes my pants feel uncomfortably tight in the crotch. I adjust my tie as she begins speaking and I find myself jealous of the microphone that gets to be pressed so close to her ruby red lips.

This whole experience is like a sine wave for me. I vacillate between rage and distracting lust. Leo is definitely right, I decide. I need to jump this woman's bones. Or...ask her if she's interested in that. I don't even know how, but my body needs me to try. Nevermind the fact that every time I speak to Samantha, we wind up snipping at each other. She doesn't need to consider me as relationship material. Everyone needs a good time once in awhile. I could give Samantha Vine a good time.

I listen as she talks about what an honor it is for Vinea to fund summer learning opportunities for children as well as professional development for educators. I'd be lying if I pretended not to be excited about the summer workshops in chemistry and biology. Eventually Samantha calls Margot up to the makeshift stage and leads the applause. Samantha stands off to the side, listening attentively. Margot talks about opportunities like the field trip Vinea sponsored and mentions

a summer coding camp she's evidently earned a scholarship to attend.

The room laughs at Margot's self-deprecating poverty jokes and applauds at the poignant moments. And then I stop listening because I watch Samantha pull a cell phone from a pocket in her dress and stare at the screen instead of listening to Margot. I practically growl as Samantha backs off the stage, making her way out of the room while Margot continues speaking, unawares.

I can't believe she's running out while my student is talking. The very same student she greeted so warmly a few minutes ago. How rude can one woman get? I look up and catch Lara glaring at me as I glare at Samantha. I drag a hand through my hair, realizing I'm falling apart. I have too much baggage to successfully attend these sorts of community events for our school. Why in the hell does Principal Kellie Vinelli keep choosing me for her exclamation-point-peppered ideas? I feel like I can't escape the lifestyle Lara was so desperate to pursue.

My chicken dish is served and I find I can't even taste it above the depths of my outrage. Margot returns to the table, beaming, unaware that her new hero so rudely ignored her while she was speaking. That just infuriates me further. Once I congratulate Margot on her poise and excellent speech, I excuse myself from the table and prowl off in search of Samantha.

I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to say or do when I find her, but I hear her voice coming from a room off

to the side. Following the sound of her shouting, I make my way along the dimly lit hall.

From the sound of Samantha's muffled voice, she's pissed about being asked to drive someone somewhere. Figures. She probably has a driver. I'm sure Lara and Lance have a driver. They probably all have butlers.

I'm so busy stewing in frustration...okay, maybe a speck of jealousy...that I shout when the office door suddenly flies open and Samantha bursts halfway out of the room. My shout startles a server carrying a tray of desserts as she passes me in the hall.

There's a shriek and a crash behind me. Samantha gasps. I turn to see a tray of plated cake slices toppling to the floor as the server moans. "No," she wails. "No, no, no not again!" She drops the tray she'd been carrying and covers her face with her hands.

Well shit.

I can't have this woman losing her job over my nosy outburst.

"I'm terrible sorry," I say. "This was entirely my fault. Please let me speak with your manager to tell them so."

The woman shakes her head and sighs. "I'll just dump all the cake in the trash barrel. This sort of crowd doesn't ever eat it anyway. Maybe my boss won't even notice."

"NO!" Samantha and I shout it at the same time, startling us both. Samantha squeaks and I look over to find her still standing there, her face contorted in horror. "Did you say

you're going to throw this away?" Samantha stoops and begins picking up some of the plates of cake. She balances a few of them on her forearm like she's been slinging plates in a diner her entire life. This woman is constantly shattering my expectations. Or something.

The server looks at Samantha strangely and starts trying to take the cake away from her. "Ma'am, this has been on the floor. Of course it has to be thrown away."

"Oh, come now," I say, putting on my best teacher voice. "Half of these landed plate-down. Nothing touched the ground." I start picking up small plates, too, grateful the thick acrylic plates didn't shatter under the decadent dessert. The cake slices are beautifully presented. Dark chocolate sponge with a fudgey icing and a raspberry sauce decorating the plates.

"We can't just waste them," Samantha says, and I find myself nodding in agreement with her. A moment later, the caterer backs away from us with half the floor-cake, muttering under her breath about "crazy-ass rich people."

I look at the plate in my hand and realize she's talking about me, both the absurd part and the presumed wealth. I guess I really do look good in this suit.

Samantha remains crouched next to me, working to stand without upsetting the balance of cake plates in her arms. She's not being careful about the drape of her skirt, and I catch a glimpse of black lace between her thighs as she wobbles on her heels before finally making it back up to her feet.

She bites her lip and looks over her shoulder. “We can’t just waste these,” she repeats.

I’m breathing heavily now as I, too, stand up. “We definitely cannot.” She looks over her shoulder at me as I enter the doorway. Samantha starts stacking plates of cake on a desk in the office, and blushes when she sees how I’m watching her. I can’t help it. Between her reluctance to waste good dessert and the way she looks in that damn dress, I’m struggling to keep myself together. Samantha brushes past me, en route to gathering another armload of cake. Her breath hitches as she watches me stoop to pick up more plates. When I walk into the office to set them down, I see she’s begun digging in to one of the pieces of cake. She pauses to lick icing off her knuckle, and the sight is so hot that I finally lose my fucking mind.

CHAPTER 18

SAMANTHA

AJ TRACHTENBERG HAS me pressed against a desk, and his erection is digging into my stomach. My hand hovers in the air near my mouth as I stare into his dark eyes, flashing in the light of the office whose door he just kicked shut on his way to pounce on me.

His chest heaves as he takes my face in his big, hairy hands and before I can finish licking the frosting off my lips, he's doing it for me. His tongue is hot and wet and I groan at the feel of it parting my lips.

I draw a shaky breath as I feel him moan into my mouth. I lean in to the pressure of his palms against my cheeks, melting back against the desk as he kisses the hell out of me. And then abruptly stops.

“What?” I hiss at him, leaning forward in an attempt to grab his tie and pull him back against my mouth.

“I'm furious with you.” He clenches his jaw and I see a vein bulging in his neck, right where his dark hair curls a little bit behind his ear.

“You're always furious with me.” I reach for him again and he wraps his arms around me, pulling me up from the

desk, against that delicious body of his. He's so tall and firm and fuck! I wonder if the rest of him is as hairy as these beautiful hands now splayed across my ass.

AJ buries his teeth into my neck and it hurts so good. I lean into him, thrusting my hips against his, desperate for some sort of friction. He backs away again.

"You made me make that poor woman spill cake," he growls. And then he sticks two fingers into a slice of cake on one of the plates and I watch, transfixed, as he picks up a glob of cake and brings it to his mouth, his pink tongue coming out to lick those beautiful digits clean.

"I made you? What? I was taking a phone call from my father about his eye surgery." I should put my hands on my hips or tell him to mind his own business, but I don't. I just reach for a plate and start feeding myself some of the cake AJ dug into with his bare hands.

I start to wonder if the cake tastes like AJ. Or if AJ tastes like cake. I glare at him around my index finger, licking icing off my nail.

His face shifts, slightly. "I didn't know your father was sick."

I stab a finger into the cake. "He's not fucking sick. And he can take a fucking cab to get his cataracts sliced off if my brother isn't available. I'm not. Flying. There. For. This." I stab the cake with each word and finally scoop a giant mouthful of cake toward my face.

I feel a clump of it fall onto my chest as I cram the cake into my mouth and I groan around the mouthful. “Dis is so gut.”

AJ has stepped closer to me again, his nostrils flaring a bit as he breathes, staring at me while I chew. He reaches out and wipes his finger along my collar bone. Slowly. So slowly. I feel the rasp of his calloused skin against my chest and my breath catches while I wait for whatever he has planned next. As I swallow the cake, AJ dips his head and licks my skin.

I’m done. I’ve melted and I’m done now. I start to sink and, feeling me topple, AJ picks me up and props my bottom against the edge of the desk. He uses his hand to brush the plates of cake to the side to make space for me and then he steps in between my legs.

Wow. Just wow. Why on earth have I not been seeking out party sex with grouchy, bearded, hairy men? As I catch my breath, I decide I want more of what I just had. I want more of the cake, more of the kissing, more of this sexy shoving his body against mine, please and thank you.

“You drive me wild.” He’s leaning over me like I’m a barbell he’s about to heft up, his hands splayed on the desk beside my skirt. I look at his crotch and I actually see the fabric of his pants twitch as his bulge throbs in there. I reach for it, cupping him, savoring the way his head falls forward like he’s on the brink of passing out.

“I’ve always been wild,” I tell him. I hear the music pick up outside and figure the speaking portion of the evening must have ended. People are probably looking for us. I can’t find it

in me to care. I've been so stressed out, so busy, so frantic. And right now, I've got decadent buttercream and hairy man and all of it is mine to eat. For right now.

I start to unzip his fly, but AJ catches my hand. "We don't even like each other. This isn't right."

I arch a brow at him. "Who said anything about liking each other? I don't need to like you for you to fuck me on this desk."

His eyes flash. "Is that what you want, Samantha?" I like the sound of my name in his mouth, the way his plump lips look as they press together to pronounce the M. The way his tongue peeks between his teeth on the TH sound. I'm so close to him I can see it all, and rather than answer him, I grab his tie again and pull him against my lips.

But wait. No. I'm not supposed to be doing this here. He's mad at me for some reason, and I'm mad at my family and this is a benefit event for science educators. I need to go be responsible and ... he pulls back from the kiss and takes a few steps away from me. "What are you doing?"

AJ shakes his head rapidly and begins adjusting his tie. "AJ." I cross my arms over my chest protectively, feeling exposed and chilled in the absence of his body heat. "What are you doing?"

I watch him swallow and lick his lips, lips I know taste like cake. "Samantha, I..." He runs a hand through his hair and sighs. "I need to get back out to Margot and my colleagues. I shouldn't have followed you or eavesdropped on your call."

“I don’t care about that,” I spit out. “Why did you stop—touching me?”

Rather than answer, AJ gives his suit a final pat and grabs two plates of cake from the desk. Without another word, he balances both plates in one hand, opens the door, and leaves the office. “Huh,” I say out loud. “So this is what this feels like.” I have never had a man initiate sex and then walk away before either of us reaches the crescendo. I do not like this.

There’s no way I can go back out there and just mingle with people. I have icing residue on my chest and I can still feel the echoes of AJ’s heat tingling along my front. I eat a piece of the cake, trying to decide what to do, and notice the fire safety map posted by the door to the office. Studying it as I dig into another slice, I see that I can circumnavigate the party and sneak out the front by way of the coat check.

I grab a slice of cake for the road and get the hell out of there. By the time I reach my car, I realize my tears have gathered and are now leaking from the corners of my eyes. I touch my cheek in surprise. I don’t typically cry. Who has time to sit and feel feelings? “Oh boy,” I mutter, shoving a final bite of cake in my mouth and tipping the plate into a trash can as I dig my phone out of my pocket.

I need to talk to someone. I bite my lip. My friend Orla has a baby and I don’t want to wake her up with a call. Esther is probably elbow deep in bar patrons and I’m pretty sure Logan was looking forward to a night on top of her Callum. I press a knuckle into one of my temples, fretting. I’ve been working so

hard lately. I really, really could have used a pleasant, sexy diversion tonight.

Instead I'm maybe crying a little bit in the dark, alone. I need a mom right now. Isn't that what people would do when something like this happens? Call their mom and vent about the awful man who rejected their advances?

Orla also lost her mom. She'd know what to say right now. But she's also been telling us all about how Nora is teething and not sleeping. "Shit," I mutter, unlocking my car and sinking inside.

"Are you cursing at me?" I hear a voice coming out of my phone. "Hello?"

My eyes widen and I fumble for the screen. "Oh, god, Orla, I must have boob-dialed you or something. Were you asleep?"

She yawns loudly. "I was not asleep, actually. I'm driving to the freaking north hills to get eye drops for the rabbit. Did you know rabbits can get pinkeye?"

"I'm sorry. What are you talking about?" Suddenly I forget why I was so upset as Orla vents the details of her husband's pet rabbit's conjunctivitis. She tells me about playing Rock Paper Scissors with Walt to see who "got" to leave the house to get the eye drops while the other adult stayed home to manage baby bedtime.

"This is so weird. AJ had pinkeye the other day!"

"The grumpy science guy?"

"Yeah."

“You know that shit is super contagious, right?”

I had not considered that. I tap at my face, wondering if I got pinkeye from making out and didn't even get an orgasm out of it. “Can I just skip to the part where I called you cursing?”

“Yes,” she says. “Sorry. Distract me with tales of a world that doesn't involve massaging a small mammal's tear ducts.”

I shake away the mental image Orla paints and remember the tears. “AJ fucking Trachtenberg,” I mutter. I tell her about the floor cake and the sexy kissing.

“Sounds promising,” Orla says. “Why are you calling me cursing instead of going for round two?”

I groan. “There wasn't even a round one. He just... stopped.”

“Come again?”

“I'd like to come the first freaking time! Orla, he just stopped. Licked my damn collar bone, sucked the frosting off his finger, and smoothed his tie and left the room.”

She makes a humming sound. “He sure does send some mixed messages.”

“Thank you! It's weird, right? Does he think I'm gross? Is he kissing me on purpose to mess with my head?”

“Listen, I'm about to arrive at the vet hospital, but I think it's safe to assume he's not purposefully messing with your head. From what you've said he seems very starchy.”

“Starchy is a pretty good adjective here, yes.”

I hear the click of her turn signal. “I wonder if it scared him to give in to his passion like that? Sam, I see the vet tech waving at me. Let’s talk through this some more after I deal with the rabbit eye.”

I sigh. “It’ll simmer. I’ll probably just go home and fall asleep.”

She laughs. “I’ve met you, Samantha Vine. You will go home and agonize over this and then do something amazing with your frantic worried energy, like build an algorithm to catalogue men’s facial expressions or something.”

“That’s not the worst idea you’ve ever had...”

She laughs again and we hang up. I feel slightly more validated hearing Orla agree that AJ sent confusing signals, but try as I might, I can’t let go of the sting at having him walk away. I don’t run to my computer to build out an algorithm as Orla suggested, but I do spend most of the night combing through resumes from Shane and Audrey, sorting them into piles and hoping I can trust my team about hiring more staff. Clearly I can’t trust my own instincts these days.

CHAPTER 19

AJ

LEO AGREES to meet up for breakfast at the bakery near school. Provided I buy, of course. My hands are still shaking as I approach him, seated at the little cafe table on the sidewalk. I can't even pretend it's because I had too much sugar last night.

Leo taps his chin and then crosses his arms over his chest as I sit down. "You look like shit, Trachtenberg."

I nod. "I've been eating my feelings. I think I understand what that means now."

He arches a dark brow at me. "You're going to have to elaborate. You just used the F-word with me, man."

I puff out my cheeks as a server stops to take our orders. I roll my eyes as Leo orders a week's worth of pastries in a to-go box. "Well," I start again. "Lara was there last night."

"Oh, shit!" He beckons for the server to come back and orders an entire pot of coffee for us. "Was this the first you saw her since...everything?"

I nod and tell him about her ring, her smug expression and my snowballing emotions, ending with me leaving Samantha alone on the desk with all that cake.

“You left her there? Just licked and left?”

I close my eyes and nod. When I open my eyes, he’s got his phone out, tapping away furiously. “Who are you texting? This is private, Leo.”

He talks with his mouth full. “I have to at least get Doug’s take on this, man. This is advanced. This is honors-level friend work and I’m more of a remedial pal.”

I shake my head rapidly. “No, Leo, please. You’re not remedial. You’ve been such a good friend and I just want to forget that this ever—“

“Oh, good.” Leo drops his phone back into his jacket pocket. “Doug is on his way. Oh, wait, yep! There he is. He did say he was close. Doug!” Leo waves his arms as our colleague parks across the street and then drags a chair over from the next table. It’s early enough that we’re the only people seated outside.

“I hear my services as a married man are required?” Doug grabs a pastry from the box and Leo nudges the coffee pot closer to him as Doug opens his travel mug to fill up.

“I have no explanation for walking away from Samantha Vine last night,” I moan. “Hell, I have no explanation for kissing her in the first place.”

Doug laughs. “No explanation? Come on, AJ.”

I stare between them, waiting for one of them to offer some sort of advice. Something to make me feel human again instead of this quivering ball of...what have I become,

exactly? When neither of them says anything, I admit, “She’s intoxicating.”

Leo nods. “And you’re into her, man. You find her attractive.”

“Yes, obviously. So what do I do about it?”

Leo shakes his head and Doug groans. Leo leans forward and slaps the side of my head, causing me to yelp.

Doug says, “AJ, I’ve been married for a long time. I’m married to a very loud, very assertive woman. I’m here to tell you to be straight with this woman.” I wait for him to continue.

This is evidently the wrong response because Leo smacks me again. “Call her,” he says. “Tell her you’re an idiot and you want to apologize to her.”

“In person,” Doug adds. Leo nods.

What they’re suggesting sounds so logical, and yet more difficult than I think I can manage right now. “I don’t think I can call her. I humiliated her.”

Leo takes a long sip of his coffee and sets the white mug down gently on the metal table. “I know you don’t want to hear this right now, but all of this shit about Lara? How she made you feel like you’re trash? You need to work on that.”

“Work on that? I’m working on trying to forget her, actually.”

He shakes his head. “You still believe all that shit she said, deep down. That’s why you walked away from Samantha last

night and that's why you're hesitating about calling her. Because you don't think you're worth her time."

I feel my guts churn as his words hit a little too close to home. I swallow as Doug pats my hand. "I agree with that assessment. And if you were one of my writing students wrestling with imposter syndrome, I'd assign you some mantras." He nods and leans over to his shoulder bag, pulling out a pad of sticky notes and a pen. He quickly scribbles "I'm an awesome person" on one of the notes, peels it off, and tries to stick it to my sweater. It falls into my lap.

Leo moves to pick it up and I swat his hand away. Doug says, "It'll stick better to your mirror. That wool you've got on is something else. But really, AJ. You're a catch. She's a catch." He shrugs. "Just call her."

I look at the note, trying to decide if he's right, if I'm letting my baggage from Lara interfere with ... everything. Leo gestures for Doug's pen and writes in scratchy handwriting "I'm a dead sexy, hairy wolf." I laugh and feel a little better, which I suppose was the entire goal of calling Leo this morning.

"I still don't feel like I can just call, though. I need, like, a warm-up gesture to smooth things over." I take a nibble of a scone and watch Leo's face transform into a wide grin.

"Send her some cake, man." He points at the bakery. Doug holds out a hand for a high five, which Leo offers with a resounding smack.

"Cake," Doug grins. "Who doesn't like cake?"

Leo snickers. “We’ve already established that both AJ and Samantha are fans of the medium.” Doug checks his watch and they gather up their stuff to leave. “See you in a bit, man.”

I brush off the table and open the door to the bakery, hearing the bell tinkle as the door shuts behind me. The woman working behind the counter smiles, recognizing me from outside. “Get ya anything else?”

I stick my hands in my pockets and wince. “I need a good apology cake.”

CHAPTER 20

SAMANTHA

INVASIVE VINE? Pittsburgh Tech Startup CEO Too Flighty for Lasting Fame

Isaiah Childers, Forbes correspondent

“There is no bottom.” I stand by Audrey’s desk and take off my shoes. My mom used to do that when she got home from work—take off her high heels and drop them inside the front door and just dive in to whatever disaster awaited her, whether that was peed sheets to wash or the frenzied clutter from getting three kids out the door for daycare in the morning.

Audrey raises a brow at me when I set the shoes next to her desk. “You okay? Wait. I can see that you’re not. Let me start again.” She looks up to Logan and Shane, who are cringing around a print copy of *Forbes* magazine. Audrey stands up and places her hands on my shoulders. “We love you. And we’re a team here at Vinea. And we’re going to figure out a solution to this.”

The feature story about me has run in today's edition, and the reporter did not paint a flattering picture. Shane looks particularly irate as they stare at the magazine. "I hate this part where douche canoe calls you flighty and distracted," they say. "If you were a man, this would probably be a glowing analysis of you managing multiple irons in multiple fires." Audrey snorts.

Logan bites her lip. "This doesn't seem to have been edited very well," she says. "There are no quotes from your major early investors. No interviews with anyone from the board. It's like he wrote a day in the life piece but only captured the stressful parts of your day!"

I take a deep breath and squat down to pick up one of the shoes. And then I bang the heel of it on the polished concrete floor a few times while roaring in frustration. The heel snaps off the shoe and Shane gently plucks the ruined footwear from my hand, shaking their head. "Sam, let's be solution-focused."

They look up at Logan, who takes a deep breath and sits down on the floor next to me. Shane and Audrey follow suit, just sitting on the floor in their fancy work clothes while I noisily fall apart. I might be able to handle an article slamming me on a normal day, but not after getting rejected and not when we're on the cusp of bombing our IPO. I look at Logan, hoping she will come through with some good news in the face of this very public shaming.

She pats her thighs. "Okay, so most important is we've got growth and profits out the wazoo. From a numbers

perspective, we are golden.” She raises her brows and nods at Audrey. Audrey raises her brows and claps her hands.

I shake my head. “This article was supposed to prop me up as the leadership beacon the company needs to forge ahead. Our board is going to want...I don’t even know.” I start rubbing my temples.

Shane pats my shoulder with the hand that is not holding the shoe. “The board will want to know you’ve put wheels in motion to hire additional leadership talent. Check!” They hold up the shoe to outline a checkmark in the air. “We fast tracked the candidate for the marketing, which is great timing!” Their voice gets a singsong quality as they gesture with the shoe. “The new person was between jobs after having a baby and can start immediately. I’ll just text them that immediately can be today.”

My spine crushes in on itself a little as I consider that the solution to this problem is out of my personal control. The answer to Vinea’s new public relations crisis is to winnow more and more administration of the business out of my hands. “Doesn’t this make me a big failure?”

Logan looks confused. “What would give you that idea?”

I gesture all around me. “I am a disaster at the helm. I’m steering this ship into an iceberg. And other captain metaphors...”

Logan pats my arm. “Can you list any major companies where one person does all the work?” I blink at her a few times. She continues with her leading questions. “Do you have secret advanced degrees in business administration or strategic

development?” I shake my head and she smiles. “Sam, honey, this will always be your company. You will always be the founder and it will always have your name on the building.” Logan shrugs. “You just get to partner with more people now to keep the momentum.”

Logically, what she’s saying registers. But on the heels of dinner with my father, and conversations with my family, and AJ’s rejection...all I hear is that my failure to woo that *Forbes* reporter is costing me the opportunity to bring Vinea to the next level. “When’s our next board meeting? I need to go to my office and prepare.”

Shane shakes their head. “Sam,” they say. “Let’s on-board the marketing pro and get their take. We hired someone to shape board remarks. Let’s use that expertise.”

I snap my eyes to each of my team’s faces. “Okay, so what do you suggest I do? Go sit in my office and work on my cuticles?” They all cross their arms and squint at me. I wince. “I’m sorry for my tone. What should I do?”

My fingers itch to go code something, to find a solvable problem and dig in. Audrey’s face brightens and she pulls up an app on her tablet to show me. “First of all, I’m renaming myself Operations Manager or Chief of Staff,” she says. I gesture for her to continue. “We’re working on the policies and procedures piece of the IPO packet and you’ve got a binder of codes of conduct, employee handbooks, and workplace hygiene documents to read carefully and sign off on.”

I wrinkle my nose. Shane slides me a business card. “You’ve also got one more conversation with a potential board member and I think you’ll really like this one,” they say.

I look around at them and back to the *Forbes* article sitting up on Audrey’s desk. She reaches up and flicks the magazine into the recycling bin. “Okay,” I tell them. I nod. “Okay. It’s good to have a to-do list.”

“Yes,” Logan says. “Love a good list.” She squeezes my leg and the three of them hustle off toward the kitchen. I realize we’ve had this intense conversation before most of the staff even arrives. My stomach grumbles, but I ignore it, heading to my office to bury myself in paperwork.

A few hours later, my desk phone rings and when I answer, I don’t recognize the voice on the other end. “Ms. Vine?”

“Yes?”

“I’m Noelle? Audrey hired me as admin?”

“Oh. That sounds nice.” I move to hang up the phone but Noelle continues.

“We’ve had a delivery for you. Would you like me to bring it in? It’s just that there’s a Do Not Disturb sign on your door...”

Did I put that up? I honestly can’t remember. My stomach growls again. I’m not taking good care of myself today. “Yes, Noelle, please bring in whatever it is.”

A perky brunette enters my office carrying a bakery box. My interest is piqued. “Here you go, Ms. Vine.” She sets the box on my desk and tucks her hair behind her ears, like she’s waiting for me to open the package.

“Call me Sam,” I mutter as I run a nail along the seal on the pink box. I lift the lid to discover a thick slice of decadent cake. I gasp. My stomach growls loudly and my mouth waters.

Noelle peers over my shoulder. “Oh that looks yummy,” she says. “There’s a card inside!” She points along the back of the box, where a lined index card is wedged behind the cake.

To my knowledge, this has not been on the floor.
Regards.

-AJ

I stare at the note, uncertain what to make of his words. I flip the card over, but there is nothing else. No further note on the back. Noelle squints as she reads over my shoulder. “That’s a weird note, Sam,” she says. She puts her hands on her hips. “You want me to get you a fork?”

“Please.” She hustles out of the room and I stare at the tidy, slanted handwriting. What am I supposed to make of this? On the one hand, the man went out and bought me cake. And either had it delivered or brought it to me at work. But this note...is he flirting?

Noelle returns with the fork and I inhale the first half of the cake, pausing to savor as I move on to the rest of it. I check the time and realize it’s late enough in the day that AJ is

probably done teaching. One more bite of cake and I pull out my phone to send him a message.

What's with the note?

He writes back almost immediately.

You got the delivery?

I send him a selfie of me with a forkful of cake.

He calls me. I answer but neither of us speaks. I huff. “This is all really weird, Trachtenberg. Seriously. What’s with the note?”

He groans. “I was trying to be flirty. You know. Floor cake. The party...”

“This is you flirting?”

He huffs. “Yeah, well, we can’t all be good with people. You’re welcome for the cake.” My phone beeps as he hangs up.

“What the fuck? What the actual fuck?” I call him back. “Are you trying to get under my skin? Are you in cahoots with the *Forbes* people?”

“Who? No. Oy vey, Samantha. I’m trying to get into your pants.” I pull the phone away from my ear and stare at it. When he speaks, it sounds like his voice is tiny and far away. “God, I am colossally terrible at this. Objectively bad. I’m sorry. Forget I called. Forget I sent you weird notes and cake.”

“No!” I shout at him as I bring the phone back to my ear. “I will not forget the cake, sir. This cake is excellent. Where’s

it from? There's no branding on the box."

"I'll tell you if you tell me where Vinea gets its coffee." I can hear a laugh on the edge of his words. I like it.

"If I knew that answer, I'd give it to you. Audrey used to handle the coffee but she promoted herself so I'm not sure what happens next."

He blows out a breath. "Can we start over?"

I shake my head. "No. I don't want to start over." I grip the edge of my desk and decide to just say what's on my mind. "I want to pick up where we left off."

"What does that mean to you exactly..."

"The part after you were licking frosting off my collar bone but before you ran out of the room!"

CHAPTER 21

AJ

I DID DO THOSE THINGS. I licked frosting off her peachy smooth collar bone and fled the scene in terror when I realized how much I like her, how much power that gives her to hurt me. “Well,” I respond. “Did you save any frosting? For licking purposes?”

“Are we actually going to do this or are you going to leave me with blue ovaries again?”

“Blue ovaries?”

She snorts. “Men get blue balls. I want an equivalent thing for when a man gets me all lathered up and then sneaks away.”

I close my eyes and swallow. “I vow to leave you fully satisfied if you give me another opportunity.”

“I’ll text you my address.” She hangs up the phone and I stare at it as a message comes through with her info.

I’m not sure how long I stare at the phone before Leo and Doug strut into my classroom. Doug actually has a bag of popcorn and Leo raises a brow at me. “Did you take care of it?”

I nod. “She...sort of commanded me to come to her house later. Is that normal?”

Doug nods while Leo shakes his head. “Nothing about this is normal, hombre.”

Doug talks around a mouthful of popcorn. “Just bring her something, man. Flowers or chocolate.” He shrugs. “Amy always appreciates a frozen margarita.”

I look at my watch. “You think I should show up at her house with alcohol?” Both Leo and Doug nod. I sigh. “I’m going to mess this up again. I should just cancel. Send her some apology beer.”

“No,” Doug and Leo shout at the same time. Doug hands Leo the popcorn and clasps my shoulders. “AJ. Adriel. Do not cancel. Stop and grab a bottle of Prosecco. Take it to her at her house. Go.”

I nod and stand up, grabbing my bag stuffed with all the papers and tests I need to grade this weekend. Obviously, I wasn’t able to concentrate enough to do so last night. Leo pulls a tin of mints from his pockets and opens it. I grab two and crunch them. I swallow and leave my friends. In my mania, I neglect to stop at the liquor store and as I stand on Samantha’s stoop I debate running away again to go get the booze.

Before I can complete that set of mental gymnastics, the door flies inward and I’m being hauled inside by my tie.

“Let’s get one thing straight,” Samantha says, tugging my tie for emphasis as she kicks her door shut. My eyes widen.

“You are absolutely not leaving here until I come. Last night was just plain rude and it’s not fair to leave a woman in that sort of state.”

She releases my tie and I stare at her. “I apologize,” I mutter. “I fully intend to—well I can do better. By you. In terms of orgasms.”

Samantha rolls her eyes. “Is this you groveling?” Her annoyance triggers whatever force last night allowed me to manhandle her in that office.

“You’re always swinging that big tech energy at me,” I growl, backing her into her living room. I spot a couch over her shoulder and steer us toward it until her ass hits the back of the leather upholstery.

She stares at my crotch and licks her lips and only then do I begin to pay attention to how fucking hard I am for her. My dick is throbbing inside my pants. I can practically feel the scratch of the zipper through my boxer briefs and I move a hand to open my fly, just to relieve the pressure.

Samantha likes this. I can tell by the way her breathing increases...and also because she bunches up her skirt and spreads her legs wide. “God, AJ, yes. I need you to fuck me with that thing.”

I have my dick in my hand now, giving myself slow tugs as I stare at her, watch her practically beg me to invade her. How long has it been since I found relief from anyone other than my own hand? I groan as she lifts her skirt.

She adjusts her hips, spreading her legs more so I can stand between them. “You were fucking teasing me in that hallway,” I grit out, my fingertip stroking her upper thighs. I skirt the area of her panties, never touching them. Teasing as her breath increases.

“I did no such thing,” she pants. She digs her fingers into my shoulders, waiting.

“Mmm hmm, you did.” I skate the pad of my finger along the seam of her panties and she moans. I feel a surge of heat and wetness and my cock jerks in response. “Your skirt fell open while you squatted on the floor, picking up cake.” I drag my fingers near her clit while I talk and she leans back, her spine curving like a comma. “Admit it, tease.” I bend over her, my mouth close to her ear.

“I wanted you to look at me,” she whimpers, and as soon as she says so, I slide a finger inside her panties. “Holy shit,” she moans. She clamps around my finger and groans as I press a thumb against her clit. She is all softness and scalding heat as she begins to writhe beneath my touch. I love how it feels to make her feel good.

“Oooooohhh, god. How are you so good at this?”

“You like that?” I arch a brow, a little surprised that my fingers can bring her this much pleasure.

Samantha grabs my cheeks in both palms. “You better keep doing what you’re doing, Trachtenberg.”

I grin. Her eyes glitter in the afternoon sunlight and the next thing I know she’s kissing me. I respond thrust for thrust,

my tongue matching the rhythm of my finger as I stroke her until the dam bursts.

Samantha bucks her hips and nearly falls over the couch. I feel like an orchid, my limbs wrapped around her awkwardly as I try to hold us both up and keep from hitting the ground as she comes all over my hand.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” I hiss, nibbling at her collar bone as she comes. I already feel better about damn near everything.

Samantha’s pupils are huge, her movements languid as I slide my hand out of her body. Her mouth hangs open and she smiles. “AJ Trachtenberg,” she slurs. “Sex expert.” Still half slumped over the couch, Samantha runs her hands along my chest.

My hands fumble in my pants pockets, seeking my wallet and the lone condom that only lives in there because the school nurse handed them out to all the faculty at a training. I say a quick prayer that whatever brand the public schools purchased in bulk is effective and I roll the condom on as Samantha yanks my tie again.

She grabs the wrapper from my hand and throws it, and then her hand is on my cock, guiding it toward her wet heat. I think I black out from the pleasure as she shoves me inside her. I grip her shoulders and thrust. I feel the bare mound of her pussy against my pubic hair and I grunt like a caveman, rutting against her without withdrawing.

She loves the friction of that move. I feel the flutter of her muscles gripping me tighter, and so I continue hammering against her. I’m ramming her against the edge of the couch

now, probably bruising her ass cheeks, but I'm beyond caring. "I didn't know it would feel this good," I groan.

Samantha starts moaning and biting whatever she can get her teeth on. She bites my ear and my nose before she clamps down on my tongue and I yelp in pain. Startled, I pull out and stare at her. "I don't think so." Overcome with a surge of emotion, I spin her around and pin her hands down to the frame of the couch with mine. "Keep them there," I say, using one of my hands to line myself back up as I toss her skirts up with the other. I slam into her from behind, staring at her ass jiggling with the force of my intrusion.

This sex is hot and dirty and totally unlike me, and I don't even care because it feels so damned good. Samantha shakes her head, tossing her blonde hair. I feel the silken strands of it brush against my arm and I gather it up in one hand, lazily tugging on it as I fuck her. She moans. "You like that?" I tug harder and she groans, louder this time. "Sshhh," I hiss against her ear. I lean over her, putting my full weight on her back as she's bent over the sofa.

Sam keeps moaning louder, so I cover her mouth with my palm, half worrying she'll bite my hand, half hoping she'll leave a mark. I feel her breath against me, coming in short bursts, and then she starts thrusting her hips back to meet mine as I ram into her faster and faster. I hear the sounds of our bodies slapping together in the living room, and I smell her arousal mixed with the latex and my own pre-cum. It's a buffet of senses and as I feel her white teeth sink into my calloused hand, I know I'm nearly gone.

I reach around Samantha's hip and find her clit again, burying my fingers in her folds and swirling in the rhythm that drove her mad the last time. I press my lips to the place where her shoulder meets her neck as I press my thumb into her clit and together, we topple over the edge of bliss. "I can feel you," she pants. "I feel you filling me up inside."

I'm spurting like mad, mildly concerned I'll overflow the condom with pent up desire. And then I'm drowning in the aftermath of bliss. My senses dull and I practically fall asleep, still inside her, still half hard. I feel her ribs expanding beneath me as Samantha draws deep breaths, also trying to recover.

Eventually, I slide my hands from her mouth and hip, letting my fingertips graze her ass one last time. I commit the sight to memory, the round globes of her backside as my wet cock slides out of her body.

Sam turns around, using her forearm to brush her hair back from her face. What we just did felt powerful, a surge of relief mixed with a heady danger. Emotionally, I cannot afford trysts with beautiful, wealthy women. Not anymore. But she looks sated and perfect and I know without a doubt that she has the power to destroy me. I pull off the condom as I stare at her, terrified.

She bites her lip and looks at me, concerned, and asks, "Am I going to get pinkeye?"

CHAPTER 22

SAMANTHA

“WHAT?” He blinks at me. Just stands there with a wet condom in his hand, his pants sliding down his legs, blinking.

“You said you had pinkeye and my friend Orla says it’s really contagious and, well, your hands have been all over me...am I going to get pinkeye?”

AJ laughs, and the sound shatters the tension and worry I had been building in the moments since he pulled out. I’m not exactly sure how I went from blissed out to worried about contagion so quickly, but here I am. Half naked, disheveled, concerned.

“I don’t think you’re going to get pinkeye, Samantha.” He looks around, probably in search of a trash can for the condom, and I push off the back of the couch, nodding for him to follow me to the kitchen.

“How can you be sure?” I shimmy my undies back into place and smooth out my skirt a little, waiting my turn to wash my hands at the sink. It feels...nice, standing next to him in the kitchen, talking about eye germs, washing hands together.

AJ turns to me, grabbing a dish towel to dry his hands. I stare at those fingers again. I love his hands, I realize, not just

for how they made my body feel but for the shape of them. Long and elegant, calloused and sturdy, all at once. His voice is smooth and reassuring as he says, “I told you, I did a course of the eye drops. Look—I don’t have any lingering redness.” He opens his eyes wide, which makes me giggle.

“True. No bloodshot residue.” He hands me the towel and I dry my own hands before looping it back over the handle to the oven. I turn to face him, crossing my arms over my chest. “You’re not going to leave, are you?”

“Do you want me to leave?” He arches a dark brow and I shake my head.

“No, AJ. Adriel. I want you to stay. I probably want you to bang me again later. After we eat something.”

He grins. “Glad we cleared that up.” He looks around the kitchen. “I guess this is your place?”

I smack the counter. “Ha! I should give you a tour, right? Offer you a drink? I’m doing everything backwards.” I gesture around the kitchen. “This is a room I never use, except for the fridge and microwave. You’re familiar with the sofa. There’s a powder room and laundry back there.” I point toward the little alcove behind him.

My townhouse is small but it has everything I need: tiny deck, tiny yard with a tiny tree. I pay someone to deal with plants out there so it generally looks nice.

“This isn’t what I was expecting,” AJ says, peering out the sliding glass door to the patio.

I notice a heap of negative press articles I was torturing myself by reading and quickly gather those up and flip them over. “You thought I’d live in a sleek condo or something?”

He shrugs as he pulls the door open. I hear cicadas and feel a rush of warm air. The light is orange and I realize we might be about to experience a sunset together. Or something. “I thought you’d live in a penthouse,” he says, stepping outside and leaning on the deck rail. I follow him out and stand next to him.

“Are you disappointed?”

He shakes his head, looks at me for a moment, and then drapes an arm over my shoulders before gazing at the horizon again. “This house suits you,” he says. I’m surprised to realize I’m glad he approves of where I live. I’m further surprised to feel myself leaning in against his shoulder, resting my cheek against his wool sweater and feeling his body heat as the sky quickly shifts to brilliant purples and pinks.

We lean on the railing as the city slides into twilight and whatever spark there was between us...it doesn’t melt away with the light. It morphs into something different. Something, frankly, a little bit scary for me. I like leaning here in the stillness with Adriel Trachtenberg. I liked the furious coupling in my entryway, sure. But I like this quiet with him, too.

I place a hand on the rail and he moves his other hand close to mine, tapping my pinky with his. I grin at him. “We could walk up to Mad Mex,” I tell him. “Get some margaritas and giant burritos...”

AJ loosens his tie and undoes the top few buttons of his shirt, giving me a delicious peek of chest hair above the collar of his sweater. He picks up my hand and kisses my knuckles. “Or,” he says, and licks the dip between my index and middle finger, “we could order it for delivery and you could show me your bedroom while we wait.”

I feel a rush of heat through my center at his words and I raise my eyebrows. “You have some really good ideas,” I tell him.

He nods. “Did you save any of the cake?”

I spit out a laugh. “Please! I inhaled that as soon as I got it.”

He shrugs and tugs my hand, heading back inside. “I assume those stairs lead to your room?”

“Aren’t we going to order the food first?” I trot along behind him, nearly tripping over the shoes he toes off in my kitchen. He’s in a real hurry here.

“I’m too distracted.” AJ squeezes my side, causing me to yelp as his touch tickles. He steps behind me on the stairs, lifting my skirt as I walk up toward my room. By the time I’ve led him to the door, he’s pulled my blouse over my head and unfastened my bra, and a sigh escapes my lips when he spins me in his arms. “I want you very badly,” he says, easing the strap off my arms and tossing my bra to the side, leaving me naked apart from my panties. “In case that wasn’t clear earlier.”

I swallow. "I want you, too. A lot." He nods and lifts his sweater and shirt off together, revealing the hairiest chest I think I've ever seen. I gasp and dig my fingers into his fuzz. "Oh my god, I love this," I coo. "It's like a pelt."

"A pelt? Seriously?"

I nuzzle my cheek against his pec and lick the pebbled nipple peeking through the dark hair. "Yes. A pelt. I love it." My skin seems to glow in contrast to AJ's. I begin tugging at his belt but he lifts me up and sort of hurls me at the bed, both of us landing on the mattress with a grunt.

"I wish I had more frosting to lick off you," he says, exploring one nipple and then the other as I continue reaching for his zipper.

"Well, we already played that game." I cheer as I manage to unfasten his pants and he hisses when I find his cock inside, hard and hot like the last time. And then he jumps off the bed and I sit up, confused. "What are you doing?"

He's bent over, wriggling out of his pants as he picks up his tie from the tangled clothes on the floor. "Another game," he says, tugging the tie between his hands. He pauses. "Blindfold or tied up?"

My jaw drops. "I want to see you," is all I can manage before he nods and climbs back onto the bed, grinning as he crawls between my legs and lifts my arms above my head.

"Good," he says. "I like this idea better anyway." He loops the tie through the side of the headboard and pauses as he knots it around my wrists. "I've never done this before," he

admits. My breasts are lifted in this position and I feel exposed. I really, really like it.

“Me neither,” I confess, wriggling to get comfortable as AJ considers his work. He nods, smiles, and then bends his head to bite my breast. I moan as he plays with my nipples, tickles his fingers along my sides. Tied up like this, I can’t reach out and dig into his hair or stroke that thick cock of his. I’m just lying here, enjoying myself. And AJ makes it very, very enjoyable. Nobody has ever done this—created a scenario where all that’s expected of me is to enjoy myself. I want to whimper at the very idea of it.

He pauses periodically to smile up at me as he kisses my lower belly, strokes my thighs, and presses my legs wider. I groan as he licks between my legs, feeling his shaggy hair tickle my stomach in contrast to the warm, wet pressure of his tongue on my clit. “Oh shit, that feels good,” I moan, straining against the tie. My back bows up off the bed as AJ licks and strokes.

“You’re delicious,” he purrs, giving me another lick before sitting up on his heels, one hand on his cock, the other toying with my wet folds. “Tell me you’ve got condoms up here?”

I nod. “Drawer,” is all I can spit out, hoping it’s true, that I still have some in there and that they’re not expired. AJ leans to the side and flicks on the bedside lamp, filling the room with a warm glow as he rummages in the drawer. He holds up my vibrator, nodding at it, and then finds the box of condoms, making a delighted sound as he extracts one foil packet.

I lick my lips, watching as he rolls it on. I expect him to slide inside me then, but he sits beside me, touching me and toying with my clit, driving me insane. “What are you doing?” I pant, lifting my hips up toward him, growing desperate.

“I believe this is called edging, Samantha.” He emphasizes the M and Th sounds again, like he did the first night.

“Ooh, you’re terrible,” I groan, but I know what he’s doing now. He’s building me up, dragging me right to the cusp, and then backing off. And each time I can tell that whatever is building is bigger and more powerful than anything I’ve experienced to date.

Finally, when I can’t take it anymore and I’m glistening with sweat, tugging against the tie, he stretches out over my body, lines himself up, and slams inside me. Both of us cry out. One of my hands slips free of the tie and I drop it to his back, feeling him move. Lying this way, his hips dig into my pelvis just right and my head drops back onto the mattress as I feel a crescendo building in my spine.

“Oh, god, I’m so close. So close, so close,” I pant. AJ wipes my hair back from my brow and presses deep inside me. He stares into my eyes as I shatter, spasming around him and straining on the tie, digging my fingers into his shoulder.

“Samantha,” he whispers, rolling his hips along with mine as I come and come and come. “Samantha,” he says again before his body stiffens and he roars. I feel him pulsing inside me and I gasp as the final tremors of both our climaxes threaten to shake the room apart.

CHAPTER 23

AJ

I WAKE up in a pile of nacho chip crumbs and blonde hair, trying to find the source of the ringing noise that yanked me from an amazing dream. Gradually, I realize it wasn't a dream. I'm still naked, still tangled in bed with Samantha Vine and the remnants of our late-night "funky fresh Cal Mex" feast.

The pieces fall together. We shared to-go margaritas. We started eating burritos downstairs and finished eating chips and guac upstairs, with enough sex in between that my dick feels a little chapped. And now it's Saturday. Saturday.

"Shit!"

I sit up, whipping my head around the room in search of my phone as Samantha rolls onto her side and makes a groaning sound. "Wazzamatter?"

"I'm so late. I have to take my Bubbie to the synagogue." I find my phone and silence the alarm, trying to decide what to do. I simply don't have time to go home and shower. Stooping to gather up my clothes from the floor, I nearly trip over Samantha, who is inexplicably standing in my way.

"What's a bubbee?"

I blow out a breath and wince, worried I just hit her with some foul post-burrito halitosis. “My grandmother. I take her to our synagogue every week and I have to pick her up in...” I look at my phone screen. “Ten minutes. Shit, shit, shit.”

Samantha nods. “I’ll come with you. Grandmas love me.”

I freeze. “Sam. You can’t come with me. Come on.” I start hopping into yesterday’s pants. My clothes are wrinkled but still presentable. This can be okay. I glance up and she’s glaring at me, nostrils twitching.

“You don’t want me to meet your Bubbie? After I bought you burritos?”

I make a sound between a hiss and a moan, fumbling with the buttons on my shirt, staring incredulously as Samantha quickly steps into some sort of one-piece flowy pantsuit. Is she even wearing a bra? “Samantha, I really don’t have time to discuss this right now.” I glance around the room, patting down my sweater and blowing a breath into my palm. This is a nightmare.

She shakes her hair and looks ready for the limelight. Seriously, how is this woman so effortlessly gorgeous? She makes a wicked face at me. “I’ll lend you a toothbrush if you take me with you.”

Five minutes later we’re both crammed into my Fit. I still have no idea what’s happening here but I have no time to contemplate the impact of showing up to shul with a woman. Bubbie is going to interrogate me for hours about this. Hours.

As I pull up in front of her apartment, I decide it's not actually such a terrible thing if Bubbie and the other yentas jump to conclusions about me and Samantha Vine. I look at her again. She's smearing some shiny gloss on her lips, wearing mirrored sunglasses that match her outfit. She's a knockout.

Compared to her, I look exactly like what I am: a wrinkled grouch. But actually, I'm not really all that grouchy today. Apart from the chapped penis, I'm feeling pretty good. And then my grandmother screams.

I didn't even notice her coming out of her building, but as she peers into the window of my car, noticing Samantha, Bubbie shrieks and clutches her chest. Panicked, I scramble out of the car and run to her side. "Oh my god, Bubbie! What's wrong?"

Samantha eases out of the car, her face etched with concern. "Mrs. Trachtenberg? Are you all right?"

Bubbie grips Samantha's arm, her hand like a claw as she stares into Sam's face. "Adriel," she whispers. "Who is this gorgeous creature?" Samantha beams, seemingly relieved that my grandmother is just being dramatic, rather than having a stroke.

"I'm Samantha Vine," she says, patting my grandmother's hand. "I'm the reason your grandson was late this morning. He told me how important punctuality is to you, and I just wanted to apologize in person." My grandmother looks like she's going to faint in a puddle of bliss.

"Adriel," she croaks. "You are forgiven. But you are in so much trouble for keeping this vivacious woman a secret. Is she

coming to services? Tell me she's coming with us to services. Rose Ackerman is going to explode when she sees."

As if the matter is settled, my grandmother reaches for the back door of the car and makes to hoist herself inside. Samantha gasps. "Mrs. Trachtenberg, no! I insist you sit up front with AJ. Let me climb there in the back." And again, as if the matter is settled, Samantha ducks into the back and clicks her seatbelt into place.

My grandmother beams as she climbs into the car. She twists herself around to face Samantha, utterly ignoring me, and asks, "How do you know my Adriel?"

Samantha peeks over the top of her sunglasses. "It all started with a big misunderstanding," she says. "But then we mended fences at an event this week."

Bubbie claps her hands. "The teacher of the year awards! Are you a teacher, too? Isn't it wonderful how Adriel was being recognized?"

"Bubs, I told you, that's not what it was."

Samantha chuckles. "He was being recognized, though. And his student, Margot, was a speaker at the dinner. She sent me her talk afterward. That gal is going places!"

I meet Sam's eye in the rearview mirror. "Margot sent you something?"

She nods. "Yes, I got her mother's information from the program organizers. Margot's already going to the coding camp this summer but I made sure to let her mother know how

vital those sorts of public speaking skills can be, even in the realm of computer science.”

“Samantha owns a tech company,” I tell my grandmother as I pull up in front of the temple.

I wait for Bubbie to climb out but she just glares at me. “I’m not going in there alone and miss the chance to see everyone notice your new girlfriend, Adriel. Go ahead and find a parking place and we’ll all walk together.”

“Oh, I’m not sure about...girlfriend isn’t...I...” Samantha looks panicked as I drive slowly up the street in search of a parking space.

“This is all very new, Bubs,” I tell her.

My grandmother snorts. When I finally park the car, she climbs out and clings to Samantha like, well, like a vine. I pop my emergency kippah on my head and smile, watching the two of them mount the steps to the temple. Every person within earshot listens as Bubbie introduces, “My AJ’s Samantha, isn’t she gorgeous?” And I like the sound of that, the implication of her as mine. I keep waiting for Sam to reveal something, some discomfort at the association with me, but it doesn’t come.

She shakes hands with all Bubbie’s friends and laughs at their jokes and seems to genuinely enjoy the butterscotch candies they offer as we find our seats. In the years we were together, Lara only ever reluctantly joined my family at services on the major holidays. And even then, she pouted the entire time like she had somewhere better to be.

Samantha just invited herself along this morning even after I told her she couldn't come, and honestly I'm not sure what to make of it all. But I do know that I'm sitting in shul with my arm around Samantha Vine, like we're a couple. Like I'm someone she cares about in return. As she snuggles closer to my side, I allow myself to believe it.

CHAPTER 24

SAMANTHA

I HAVE no idea what the hell I'm doing.

I mean, I know what I'm doing. I'm inserting myself into AJ's family life like some clingy girlfriend. I just don't understand why.

The thought of him brushing me off again, even to go take his grandma to church—wait. I can't say *church* for Jewish people. Synagogue. Why in the hell did I invite myself to the synagogue with him? Am I supposed to talk about hell with Jewish people?

"Samantha?" AJ nudges me with his shoulder.

"Hm?" I smile at him and realize the service has ended. He gestures toward the aisle and I gather my things hurriedly, rushing to stand next to his smiling grandmother. As soon as he's on his feet, he startles me by pressing a kiss to my cheek. A casual, light touch of his lips, as if he's used to doing that. As if this is something we do together—kiss for no reason. I flush, delighted by the attention. And then my racing thoughts take charge again, wondering how on earth I came to be here.

A man's family and religious outings shouldn't be part of whatever I needed to sort out in my head. I just wanted AJ to

stop being mad at me. Didn't I?

Well, I also wanted him to make up for leaving me hot and bothered at the science educators dinner. And he made up for that. Repeatedly. I didn't even think I'd want him to sleep over after all that, but we got to eating burritos in bed, and talking about true crime documentaries...and here we are. Unshowered, wrinkled, at temple with his Bubbie.

"And this is *Samantha*," Bubbie says, emphasizing my name like I'm the most important person she's ever met. I smile at the perky older woman who has approached us in the aisle.

"Pleased to meet you." I shake her hand as I feel AJ stiffen at my side. He draws his arm around me possessively and when I look up at him, his face has regained some of that cranky crust I'm used to.

Bubbie pats my shoulder. "Samantha owns a business! Isn't that something? Samantha, this is Nancy Cohen. My Avi used to babysit her Ruthie."

I can't quite make sense of who Avi and Ruthie are, but I smile warmly regardless. Nancy furrows her brow. "Is your family from here, Samantha? I don't recognize you."

"Oh, I'm a military brat," I say, really hoping to steer conversation away from my family. "I grew up all over."

"Samantha is the founder of Vinea," AJ says, his voice steady and perhaps containing a note of pride. "Her company has been very good to my students."

I grin at him. “I’m glad to finally hear you admit that! Your students are amazing, by the way. It’s a good thing you threw a temper tantrum and made me call you to apologize.”

He guffaws as Bubbie looks at him strangely. AJ says, “If only you just called! Bubs, she stormed into my classroom. Unannounced.”

Mrs. Trachtenberg gasps. “Oh, Adriel does not like to have his lesson plans disrupted.” She shakes her head and I laugh.

“I gathered that much.” I slide my arm around his waist and squeeze. “But it worked out in the end.”

I shiver as I feel AJ’s fingers running through my hair, gently, and again somehow possessively. Like he’s claiming me through the motion. We walk to another room in the building, where there are tables heaped with bagels and coffee.

I beeline for the coffee as I feel AJ’s fingers reaching to clasp mine. He’s really leaning in to acting like a boyfriend here, and I don’t hate it. I give his hand a squeeze as I wait my turn for the coffee. A teenager pours me a mug full and I add a splash of milk, take a sip, and purse my lips.

I look at AJ and he nods. “It’s burnt, shitty coffee, Samantha. This is what people drink outside of your world.”

“My world?” I arch a brow at him and try to decide what to do with the coffee. Exhaustion wins out and I take another reluctant sip.

“Your world,” he repeats. “Vinea, where you somehow manage to have the best coffee I have ever tasted in my entire life.” He takes the mug from my hands and places it on a

folding table and then takes both my hands in his, meeting my eyes. “I’m begging you to tell me your source. This is me.” He squeezes my hands for good measure. “Begging.”

I laugh. “What will you give me for this information?”

He turns his head slightly and frowns, but his eyes twinkle and I know we are still flirting. And I’m still enjoying it. “Almost anything you want,” he whispers, just as his grandmother sidles up to us again.

She squeezes my arm. “Samantha, I don’t know why my Adriel waited so long to tell me about you, but I want you to know I am so glad to meet you. You have to come join us this week for brisket.”

“Well, I’ll try my best to clear my schedule if you send me the details.”

Bubbie smiles and sighs. “It’s so good to see you happy, Adriel.” She leans toward me conspiratorially. “He’s been a mess since that business with Lara. Terrible thing, how she left him.”

AJ swallows. “Bubs, please let’s talk about something else.”

She shakes her head. “Honestly, who does she think she is? The Queen of Sheba? Anyway, he’s found you now and I can already tell I like you better.” Bubbie pats my cheek, and when I look at AJ he’s clenching his jaw, his entire body stiff and his demeanor has grown dark. I smile, but feel uncomfortable in the tension. When AJ says he’s ready to head out, I feel relief.

As we drive her home, Bubbie talks about the meal she and her children will be preparing for me...sometime in the future. "What can I bring? This sounds delightful." I lean forward in AJ's tiny car to better hear his grandmother, but AJ screeches into a parking spot outside of her building.

"Samantha has a very busy schedule, Bubbie. Let's make sure she's actually free before you assign her part of the meal."

I open my mouth to protest, to say I meant it when I'd clear my schedule, but he glares at me in the rear view mirror. I snap my mouth shut, confused. As Bubbie exits the car and waves, I just barely manage to get myself in the front seat and buckled before he peels out, aiming the car toward my house.

"What's up, AJ? You're acting strange."

He's silent as he shifts gears and checks his mirrors for pedestrians before turning right. I smile, enjoying how carefully he drives, how he actually shares the road. "You're the one who said you're swamped preparing for your company going public."

He accelerates to try and make a yellow light, which turns red, and he slams on the breaks, growling. I grip the handle above the window. "I can make time to eat a meal. What's this really about?"

He looks over at me. "Two days ago we were barely speaking to one another and now you're joining my family for holiday meals? You don't think that's a little inappropriate?"

I swallow, recoiling from the sting of his words. "I like you, AJ. Why are you being hurtful right now? You got weird

when your grandmother brought up your ex.”

He grunts. “Well, my ex makes me feel really fucking weird, Samantha.”

My eyes widen. “Okay, well, maybe sort out your feelings about that before you come back to my house for another booty call.”

He turns into my driveway, stops the car, and runs his hands through his hair. He takes a few deep breaths and then turns to face me. “You’re right. I’m sorry I got moody.”

I hesitate as I loop my fingers through the latch to open the door. “So am I invited for brisket or not?” AJ’s face shifts around, like he’s experimenting with different moods and expressions. I roll my eyes. “Just forget it.” I pull the door open and start to climb out of his tiny car.

He places his hand on my arm when I reach for my purse. “What if we tried a date first? Just the two of us? Without my parents...”

“A date?”

He sighs. “Yes. I’d like to ask you out. If you’re still interested.”

“What sort of date?”

AJ pauses, as if he can tell that his answer will determine whether I tell him to fuck off forever or invite him back into my bed. He licks his lip and says, “Would you like to help me document chimney swift migration patterns?”

I gasp. Data? Science? Birds? “Yes.” I nod. “Very much yes. Text me the info.” I close the car door and wave as I head back inside my house. In a single morning, AJ Trachtenberg has managed to tug me through most of the major emotion groups. I’m going to go back to bed while I’m riding the current “fellow geek sees my passions” high.

CHAPTER 25

AJ

“SHE CAME to church with you and your grandmother?” Leo and Doug stare at me in the teachers’ lounge as they share a bag of baby carrots.

I nod my head. “I mean, we call it a synagogue. But yeah.” I tell them about Samantha inserting herself into my morning and how nice it felt. How I could almost allow myself to believe that this could be a regular thing. Not a one-off. Not some weird fluke where she got in a mood. I was the one in a mood... “She seemed eager to meet Bubbie for some reason.”

Doug shakes his head. “Not ‘some reason,’ man. She’s into you.”

I wince. Leo munches a carrot, nodding. “She’s definitely into you. I think it was the apology cake that sealed the deal.”

I reach for the bag of veggies, considering. “Do I really want to woo a woman who is actually turned on by my fumbling attempts at romance? I told you what I ended up writing on the cake note, right?”

“There’s a fish in the sea for everyone,” Leo says. “Or something like that.” The bell rings and Doug rolls up the carrot bag, sticking it back in the fridge. He and Leo grab their

worksheets from the table by the printer, leaving me alone in the lounge. This is my prep period, but I'm not making notes about our upcoming unit on birds, or how they differ from reptiles.

No, I'm sitting alone in a room, staring out the window and thinking about how nice it felt to hang out with Samantha Vine this weekend.

Until Bubbie brought up Lara. Just hearing her name curdled my stomach, made me remember all the vows I made to myself about not risking that humiliation again. No more wealthy women, I swore. Or women who desired that sort of status. So what do I go and do? I start falling for a woman with a literal billion dollars of investment, whose name is all over the press and whose company swings Big Tech Energy.

I chuckle, remembering Samantha using that phrase. She's always witty and self-deprecating. I try to remind myself what Leo has insisted all along, that Lara is an idiot asshole. *Her words say more about her than me*, I repeat. But it's really fucking hard to change the thought patterns that have been etched into my life the past few years.

After school, I rush home to change into jeans and hiking boots before swinging by to grab Samantha for our birding date. I still can't believe she's into this idea. I'm mainly checking it out to see if it's a good citizen science opportunity for my students. The local Audubon society hosts these events where people try to count the chimney swifts, keep track of how frequently they visit their familiar haunts. It hadn't actually

occurred to me that Samantha's software would be perfect for this sort of project, especially the way it lets people share data.

I pull up to her house and nearly faint when she pops out her front door wearing tight jeans and a fitted flannel shirt. This woman has the body of a Baroque sculpture, with thighs I long to squeeze again.

Samantha opens the door to my car and climbs in, grinning. "I brought binoculars," she says, shaking a small, expensive pair. "I wasn't sure what all we'd need."

"Just our eyes and something to take notes," I say, still staring at her. My car is filled with her scent, her shampoo and her soap. It's distracting.

"Notes?" She arches a brow. "You know what I do for a living, right?"

I nod. "I'd love to see how we can take field notes using Vinea."

She smiles, a broad, bright expression that fills my car with light. I can't go another second without kissing her, and so I do. I lean forward and wrap my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her close, and just kissing her. She moans softly, happily, resting her hand on my shoulder as she returns the kiss. "Hi," I say when I pull back. She tucks her hair behind her ears and buckles her seatbelt. I grin and begin driving as she fiddles with the radio, clapping her hands when she finds the local public radio station, which is playing bluegrass.

“This seems like excellent birding music,” she says. “Although, I guess we need to be quiet while we’re watching?”

I nod. “But we don’t need to be quiet on the way there.” She taps her thighs along to the music and chats with me about the stress of her work day. She apparently intends to dive back into paperwork when I drop her off this evening. It’s just about dusk when we arrive at the park where we’re going to sit and observe the chimney swift tower, a tall wooden structure built by Audubon volunteers to attract the birds so they don’t try to nest in people’s active chimneys.

Samantha seems delighted as I grab a blanket and snacks from the hatch of my car. “I didn’t know you were going to feed me,” she says, settling next to me on the ground a safe distance from the tower. “How does this work?”

I shrug. “We just wait,” I tell her, offering her some crackers and pre-sliced cheese, which she takes, her hand lingering against mine.

“Aren’t you missing a meal with your family?” She whispers, which isn’t entirely necessary but I like how it necessitates us sitting closer together, so I don’t say anything about her volume.

“Nature calls,” I whisper back. “Or something like that.” We wait in comfortable silence for awhile and, seeing no birds, Samantha asks for more details about the project. I explain how the organization raised funds to build these towers throughout the area. “Hundreds of birds might roost in each one during migration, like right now, but the birds are

extremely territorial. So only one pair will nest in each tower during nesting season.”

“So you brought me here to look at grouchy birds who like to be alone?” She nudges me with her shoulder.

“Not alone,” I respond. “With their mate. And their babies. But nobody else.”

“That actually sounds pretty nice,” she says wistfully, looking at the skyline again, pulling up her binoculars and frowning when she doesn’t see any birds. “Oh!” She exclaims and then slaps a hand over her mouth. “Are those the birds?” She whispers and points and sure enough, a dozen or so chimney swifts swoop and loop from above the trees, making their way toward the tower as the sky rapidly darkens.

“It smells like rain,” Samantha says, not taking her eyes off the birds.

“Petrichor,” I say, trying to count how many I see.

I lose my place when Samantha says, “Petri what?”

I start to count again, pointing with my finger. I note two dozen birds and then turn to her. “Petrichor. It’s the word for how it smells when it’s going to rain.”

“There’s an actual word for that?”

I nod, reaching for her. I drape my arm around her as we watch the birds tumble through the air. She gasps as they swirl, forming a funnel cloud, then a spiral, and then finally dive into the wooden tower just as the skies open up and rain begins to fall in the rapidly growing darkness.

But she doesn't run toward the car. She brushes her wet hair back from her face and cuddles against me, mesmerized, until the last bird sinks into the roost. "Thank you, AJ. This is amazing." Her lips are warm against mine as she turns in my arms in the autumn rain. We kiss until the world fades away, until I forget that we're in a county park in a populated urban area. Until she presses gently on my shoulders and I lean back on the blanket, pulling her on top of me, and feeling her settle between my legs.

"Wait," I say, clasping her hand. She looks around.

The park is deserted between the dusk and the rain. Samantha grins and shakes her head. "I don't want to wait," she says, sliding a wet hand down the waist of my jeans. I groan, feeling her fingers reaching for my stiffening cock. When she wraps her palm around my shaft I gasp. It feels so good to be touched, to be wanted this way.

"I don't have anything," I stutter around her kisses. "Condom I mean." Samantha doesn't stop stroking me but rolls to the side, resting her elbow on the blanket.

"Then we won't have intercourse," she says and, with a damp rush, she tugs my jeans open and sinks her beautiful mouth to meet my sensitive skin. If someone had suggested that I, AJ Trachtenberg, would be getting a blow job in the rain in the park, I...well I wouldn't have laughed because I don't do that very often. But I certainly wouldn't have thought that was realistic.

And yet, here I am, gasping and moaning as my hands stroke Samantha's golden hair, watching as her lips slide along

my cock, dying of the pleasure of it. Of the forbidden nature of oral sex in nature.

“Fuck, Samantha, fuuuuuuck.” She holds me steady with one fist as the other traces along my stomach. She alternates firm sucks with long licks of her tongue. She swirls around my tip and my hips jerk up in response.

“Mmm,” she sighs as she works. “I’ve wondered what you taste like.”

“You have? Oh shit. Oh shit oh shit oh shit.”

“Mm hm.” She pops off the end of my dick, drooling a little in a way that should be disturbing but is instead deeply arousing. “You like this?”

“Oh, god, Samantha, yes. Yes, shit. I’m going—I’m so close. So close.” My entire body stiffens as I feel my orgasm building in my spine, overtaking my entire nervous system. Samantha lowers her mouth even further and I feel my tip slide along the back of her throat before I erupt into her mouth. I pant and gasp, shuddering as she swallows, stroking my thighs and my stomach as the waves of pleasure ebb.

“That was really hot, AJ,” she says. When I arch a brow in confusion, she laughs, leaning on her elbow on the blanket beside me as I lie in the rain with my junk exposed. “I like making you fall apart,” she says. And damn it, I like it when she makes me fall apart, too.

CHAPTER 26

SAMANTHA

EVENTUALLY AJ and I climb back into his car and blast the heat. He lets me wrap the blanket around myself as the dark settles in and the air gets a lot colder, quickly. The rain stops as we drive back to my house. “The petrichor smell is getting stronger,” I say, biting my lip as he pulls up outside my house.

I want to invite him in. I don’t have time to invite him in. But I want to invite him in. He smiles in the glow of the streetlight. “Soon it’ll just be miserable when it rains. There’s nothing more dreary than rain in November.”

“But rain in autumn is fine?”

He nods. “Petrichor,” he repeats, reaching out and touching my face. There doesn’t seem to be any purpose to his touch, other than a desire to feel my body.

“Come inside?” It comes out as a plea and I feel myself clenching, desperately hoping he doesn’t turn me down.

He smiles and nods, turning off the car. I climb out and look at the damp blanket I had wrapped around me. “I could put our things in the dryer,” I tell him.

“Then I’d have to stay for the whole cycle,” he says, leaning on the wall next to my door. “Don’t you have to work tonight?”

“I can spare an hour,” I tell him. I hand him the blanket and unlock the door. He follows me inside and I stoop to unlace my sneakers. He does the same and then follows me up the steps to the laundry, where I toss the blanket into the dryer. “Want me to dry your...shirt?” AJ grins and strips off his shirt, standing in my laundry room topless and hairy.

I feel suddenly bashful, and I grab a robe, tossing it on as I drop my damp clothes into the dryer. This is all really unexpected, both the vulnerability and my desire to have him stay but not fuck me right now. He just leans on the dryer, grinning, like he’s perfectly content to stand in my laundry room half dressed while I’m in a robe. I clear my throat. “Will you tell me about your ideal tool for recording the bird migration observations?”

He arches a brow and tilts his head, like the question took him by surprised. “Ideal tool? I guess.” I head down the stairs toward my living room, where my laptop is nestled on the coffee table amidst a heap of my homework from Audrey and Shane and Logan. AJ follows and plunks onto the couch, reaching for the blanket I have draped over the back. He wraps it around his shoulders and then drapes it over both my knees when I sit next to him.

He runs his fingers through my hair. “We need to track the date, number of birds observed, a space for behaviors...oh and the number on the tower.”

“There was a number on it?”

He nods. “There was.”

I sigh, leaning a little more deeply into him. “Okay, well what are you hoping to note with all these observations?” As he lists out info about migration patterns and population health I realize it’s like a lullaby for me. Never in my life have I snuggled on a couch with a man as he talked data and correlation to me. “God, this is nice,” I blurt out, and then touch my fingers to my lips. I hadn’t intended to say that out loud.

But AJ nuzzles closer and presses a kiss to my temple. “This *is* nice.” His voice is a gentle, low lullaby. I reach for my laptop and pull up the Vinea web-based program. With a few clicks, I’ve got a simple bird observation tool set up, and with a few clicks more, I’ve got it labeled for Public Schools of Pittsburgh with AJ as the project administrator.

“There,” I say, gesturing at the screen. “Your students can make bird notes and share them. Or not share them. But based on your project goals, it seems like you’d want to share them with other birders, right?”

He stares at the screen for a long time, and without saying a word, he pulls the laptop from my hands and sets it gently on the table. “What are you—“ He pivots on the couch so he’s facing me, his body twisted around mine. He cups my cheek with one hand and leans in, kissing me so gently, so slowly and deeply.

A sigh escapes my lips as his tongue explores my mouth. He pulls back and looks into my eyes, his thumb caressing my

cheek. “I love that you did this for my kids,” he says, letting the blanket drop from his shoulders.

“It’s nothing,” I breathe. “It’s what my software already does.”

“It’s everything,” he says, and then he slithers down to the floor, on his knees on the area rug as he peels open my robe. “I want to thank you properly.”

“You don’t have to do that.” My words are punctuated with gasps as I feel his hands on my thighs. My skin is still a little cool and his is so warm, so delightfully warm against my body.

“Have to? Samantha.” He kisses my thighs, his hands stroking and gently nudging my legs apart. “This is my pleasure.” He lifts my hips and tugs my underwear down my legs. I gasp as he yanks them all the way off and tosses them over a shoulder as he situates himself between my legs. His hands and lips are everywhere—except where I’m growing increasingly desperate for them to be. My mind races, thinking of all the things I should be doing, of how he probably doesn’t actually want to be doing this.

“Samantha.” He takes my hand and presses a kiss to my palm, setting it on his shoulder. “I want to do this. I want to make you feel good. I want this very much, beautiful.”

“Oooh.” I think my spinal column explodes when he calls me beautiful. My body collapses into the couch as he finally dips a tongue between my legs, his mouth hot and so wet, his touch delicious on my needy skin. I keep my hand where he placed it and drop the other hand into his hair, burying my

fingers in his messy, dark mop as AJ licks and strokes my body.

My hips rock up to meet his mouth and he groans in approval, goading me on as I thrust against his knuckle. “You taste amazing,” he moans, “Exactly perfect.” I don’t have time to doubt him because I start coming on his tongue. I gasp and jolt, digging my hands into his body as waves of pleasure break through me. The room fills with light and my head snaps back as my orgasm rolls on and on. Somewhere I hear his voice encouraging me. “Yes, Sam. Just like that. God, you’re so sexy when you come for me.” He presses the heel of one hand against my clit as I spasm around one of his fingers.

I don’t know how much time passes, or if I passed out or what, but when I gain awareness of my surroundings, AJ is kneeling in front of me, tucking my robe back into place and groaning a bit as he stands. Somewhere in the house, I hear the buzzer of the dryer finishing its cycle. He grins. “I should let you get back to work.”

Before I can protest he jogs up the stairs and when I see him next, he’s tucking in his shirt with his picnic blanket draped over one shoulder. He comes back in the living room and sits on the arm of the couch, leaning forward and kissing the top of my head. “Are you going to be okay or did I break you?”

That makes me laugh and snaps me a little bit out of my orgasm-coma. “It will take more than one of those to break me, Trachtenberg.”

He grins again, a crooked half-smile. “I’m up for the challenge of seeing what pushes you over the edge.”

I groan and let my head flop back. “This public offering. That’s what’s going to push me over the edge. If I even get that far.”

AJ starts tying his shoes. “What do you mean?”

I shrug. “There’s been a lot of bad press about me lately. Did you see the article in *Forbes*?”

He laughs. “I’m not sure what made you think I’m the kind of guy who reads *Forbes*.”

“Fair. Well, they basically implied I’m a huge ditz.”

AJ frowns. “That couldn’t be further from the truth.”

“Well, thank you, and I know that. But...” I flip my hair back out of my eyes and gesture at my piles of work. “Let’s just say I need all the good news puff pieces I can get right now. I wouldn’t hate it if your school bragged about me on social media, for instance...”

As soon as I say it, I know it’s the wrong thing to say. AJ purses his lips and his demeanor shifts. “I should go,” he repeats, standing.

I bite my lip. “I didn’t mean I expect that. That’s not why I made the bird page for you.”

He nods. “I know. But thank you for saying so. And I really should get going.”

“I really should let you.”

He looks at me for a few beats, nods, and turns. When I hear the door click shut I can't help but worry that my big mouth just messed up the best thing I've had going for me in a long, long while.

CHAPTER 27

AJ

MY SISTER CALLS as I'm driving to work. I groan when I see her name come up, knowing I was the topic of family dinner conversation last night. "Good morning, Avi."

"So Bubbie says you're getting married." She cuts right to the point. I appreciate that as I need to go inside and certainly don't want this conversation overheard.

"Yep, Av, and she's expecting twins, too. Did she mention that part?"

My sister laughs. "So is there anything to this or has Bubs been huffing glue at yenta craft hour?"

I sigh. "There's a woman. It's...new." She squeals. "Please do not squeal."

"AJ, do you realize what this means?"

"This means nothing. This means I'm seeing someone."

"You took her to temple and she met Bubbie." My sister blows a raspberry. "That ain't nothing."

"Look, Avi, I just pulled up at work. I can't have middle schoolers overhearing this conversation."

“I’m surprised they don’t know already, what with Bubbie taking out an ad in the newspaper.”

“She did not.”

“Adriel Trachtenberg is officially moving on after the ice bitch stabbed him in the heart.”

“Come on, Avi, please.”

“All right, all right.” My sister sighs. “Can I meet her?”

“Goodbye, Avi.” I hang up before she can come back at me. I don’t get long to recover, though, because Leo and Doug are waiting for me outside the door.

“You’re really putting me through the gauntlet,” I groan, but then I perk up when Doug offers me a wax paper bundle.

“My sister in law made scones,” he says. “I’ll trade you for details about date night.”

I gesture for the pastries as Leo groans that it’s not fair since he didn’t get any carbs. “How did you two even know about date night?” Leo swipes his badge to get us in the door and we make our way up to the teachers’ lounge to drop off our lunches.

Leo looks at me strangely. “You were going on and on about the bird watching,” he says. “You absolutely never take that sort of stance on being the one to do recon on a potential student project.”

“And how exactly does that translate to date night?”

Doug pushes open the door to the lounge and clicks on the lights. “You telling us you didn’t take a certain data analyst

along with you to count birds?”

I sigh. “Fine.” I unfold the wax paper and the buttery scent of the scones fills the room. Leo’s stomach growls. I snap it in half and hand it to my friend as I tell them most of the details of my night with Samantha.

Doug is grinning like he just won a contest or something. “I’m really happy for you, man. This is giving me life this week. Did I tell you my oldest needs to start wearing deodorant? Things are not okay for me at home.”

Leo wipes his hands on a paper towel as he finishes chewing the end of his portion of scone. “But something’s off,” he says. “Your shoulders are practically up at your ears.”

“I’m not tense,” I say, as I consciously lower my shoulders and roll my neck, trying to relax.

“What happened,” Leo asks, leaning against the copy machine and then jumping when his hip causes it to whirl awake.

I take a bite of the scone, trying to decide how to tell them about the niggling fear eating at me, that Samantha is using my students to bolster her reputation. Using me, too. I dab a napkin at my stubble, which has almost progressed into beard territory. “She’s having some issues with work. Something about bad press.”

Doug’s eyebrows fly up. “I read that article, actually. That reporter seems like a jackass. The whole thing felt uncalled for.”

I nod. “Sam says the IPO is at risk now, that the board is questioning her leadership in response to all the articles.”

A clattering sound comes from outside the room and the three of us turn our heads to the hall. Margot pokes her head into the room, trailing a backpack so heavy she pulls it on wheels like luggage. “Sorry. I got here early to meet with Mr. Rogers about proofreading my profile for the coding camp...”

Doug nods and grins. “I remember, Margot. Let’s go take a look.”

She hesitates. “Mr. T, did you say Samantha is having trouble with Vinea?”

I scowl. But if Doug is reading the media, it’s not like Margot won’t just go do an internet search. “There was a negative article about her company, yes. But I’m sure she and her staff will overcome this.”

“Can we do anything to help? She did so much for us.” Margot squeezes her backpack handle so tightly her fingers turn white.

“Nothing for you to worry about, Margot. I’m sure Ms. Vine wants you to focus on school.”

She nods and follows Doug out of the room. I listen as their voices trail off when they arrive at his classroom. Leo slides in next to where I’m leaning against the counter. “What’s really eating you about what Sam said?”

My heart races and I close my eyes. I feel like I want to just tamp down this hunch, as if saying it out loud will call it to life. “Just...echoes of Lara, I guess.”

Leo snorts. “Sam isn’t Lara, dude.”

I purse my lips. “She’d do anything for this company, though, and if the board is having concerns...”

“Okay, ask yourself this. Would a woman sit with you in the rain to count birds if she was using you to finagle good press?”

I shrug. “I don’t fucking know, man. Clearly I don’t have a good track record understanding women’s motives. I shouldn’t even be allowed to try.”

Leo pats me on the back. “Don’t say that, AJ. You’re a catch. Remember that.” I roll my eyes. “I’m serious. And she’s a catch, too. I’m glad you caught each other.”

“Thanks, Leo.”

“Don’t mention it. Now.” He rubs his palms together. “Let’s say we play rock, paper, scissors for who has to proctor recess this week.”

I laugh. “No way. I’m department head. I have responsibilities. Recess detail is for *regular* teachers.”

“There it is,” he says, pointing at me. “There’s the grouchy bastard we know and love.”

CHAPTER 28

SAMANTHA

MORE TROUBLE at the Helm of Vinea: Board Questions Vine's Leadership

Pittsburgh Business Herald

Can Vine Swing a Public Company?

Tech Daily

I ask Audrey to stop sending me headlines. They're starting to impact my focus, and I need to stay sharp as we onboard our new team members this week. Audrey and Shane seem to have that part under control, though. I feel like an audience member as I sit in the overview meetings with our new marketing and business strategy execs. What I really want to do is dig back into the software. AJ's bird project got me thinking of all the potential partnerships out there with citizen science organizations. We could offer free access to Vinea for these folks to track data, tease out correlations.

My phone buzzes in my lap. A text from AJ. I notice my stomach flutter at the thought of him. Or is that an impending heart attack?

Are you free for dinner tonight?

I bite my lip. I'm not free. Not at all. But I want to be.

I could make time for a quick bite,

Maybe someplace near Vinea?

Want me to bring tacos to you at your office?

Oh my god I love that idea!

Good. See you at 6.

I can't stop smiling as we wrap up the meetings. I even smile as I sift through contracts with new clients, and that part generally tends to make me nervous. Despite the headlines recently, we've landed a few new partnerships with companies researching new vaccines. It thrills me to no end to think my company might play some small role in helping to eradicate a disease like Lyme.

I'm still riding that high hours later when I hear a tap on my door and look up to see AJ leaning against my door frame, wearing his typical sweater with collared shirt and tie, looking dark and hairy and delicious. "Hey," I say. And then I smell

the tacos. “Oh my god, get in here with those.” My stomach starts gurgling. “I think I skipped lunch.”

“That’s not good,” he says, sitting in a chair at the round table in the center of the room. Which means I have to get up and walk away from my computer to get to the tacos. My joints creak as I stand. He frowns. “How much are you working, Sam?”

I shrug and reach for a brown paper bag. “A lot.” I pull out the tray from Baby Loves Tacos, gleefully assembling the soft tortilla with spiced meat and corn salsa and pickled cabbage. “It’s just until the IPO,” I say around my mouthful of food. I’m so hungry I don’t even care that he’s looking at me drip food all over the place. I note that he somehow manages to eat his taco in tidy bites. “You shaved,” I say, reaching my hand across the table to feel his cheek.

He nods. “It was time.” I mock a frown at that and he laughs. “It can be a beard again in a few hours. Any time you want.”

I wink at him. “I always want.” The phone on my desk rings and I groan. All the admin staff have left for the day. “I have to get that,” I whine and he nods. When I pick up the receiver, Logan’s voice comes frantically through the line.

“Samantha, you need to call General Watson right now. They’re threatening to end their contract.”

“Wait.” I set down my taco and wipe my hand on my skirt. “What?” Logan repeats herself and explains that the military contract is apparently at risk in response to the recent bad press.

“Their lawyer said something about a good faith clause? I don’t even know. You need to call him.”

“Text me the—“

“Already sent you the number. Call from the office phone.”

I glance over at AJ. “This is going to take just a few minutes,” I tell him. He nods and continues eating his taco. I dial the line and wait until I hear the deep, stern voice of one of our biggest new clients. “General Watson, this is Samantha Vine from Vinea. How are you this evening?”

“Well, Ms. Vine, not great, if we’re being honest.”

“Logan tells me you’re having some concerns about our contract?”

He spits out the expected response to the relentless headlines that have been questioning my leadership lately. “And further, you failed to reveal your personal connection to Colonel Vine here at my own god damned military base. When I spoke to him he didn’t even seem too aware of our partnership.”

I sigh and sink into my desk chair. “General, may I be frank?” AJ arches a brow and watches me, continuing to eat his taco and making me very hungry.

“Please.” The general clears his throat.

“My father wasn’t aware of our business particulars because I keep my personal life separate from my work. I would hope you would appreciate that discretion, as someone with security clearance.”

He grunts. “It makes me wonder what else you haven’t revealed.”

I frown. “General, I’m the architect of this software. I sought you out personally because of the unprecedented data set available via your service members. Your top researchers agree with me that our partnership can be essential to keeping your forces battle-ready. How many enlisted folks did you have out with Lyme disease last summer after training exercises? With sexually transmitted infections? Vinea is partnering with the institutions looking to solve these health crises.”

“Hmm.” I hear him moving around in his desk chair.

“My father hasn’t let my mother’s death or even his recent cataract surgery impact his work. Don’t let clickbait headlines persuade you. I’m ready to grow this company. Sir.”

There’s a long silence in which AJ chews and stares at me and the general says nothing. Until he says, “Well I was not aware that Colonel Vine was a widower.”

“It’s been a long time, sir. Like I said, we Vines keep our personal lives separate from our work.”

He coughs. “I appreciate you taking the time to call me about this issue.”

I sag in relief. “I appreciate the opportunity to reassure you we are the real deal.”

“Have a good night, Ms. Vine.” He hangs up.

I set the phone in the receiver and begin to massage my temples. And then I feel hands on my shoulders. I look up to

find AJ standing behind me, his big palms kneading my muscles. I melt. “Do you want to talk about it?” His voice is gentle, no hint of sarcasm or pointed digs. I shake my head. He starts to rub my scalp and I moan. “I’m sorry you lost your mother. Will you tell me about her?”

I smile and begin to purr as his fingers press into the tense skin all over my head and neck and shoulders. He’s good at this. “Her name was Liza. She did everything for us.”

“Liza Vine,” he murmurs.

“And when she died, someone had to do all the things.”

“Let me guess,” he presses a kiss to the top of my head. “That someone has been you.” I nod. “So you do all the things for your family, and you do all the things here.”

“I’m very good at doing things.”

“Mm hmm.” His voice is so low, so soothing. I’m about to fall asleep right here. “Except remembering to feed yourself and stand up often enough that your knees don’t creak.”

“Paging Dr. Trachtenberg,” I joke. “Your patient is ignoring her health.”

He chuckles and keeps kneading. “Dr. Trachtenberg is my father. And my grandfather. And my aunt.”

I turn my head slightly to see him better. “But not you?” He shakes his head. I close my eyes. “You’re great with your students. They’re lucky to have you.”

“Thank you,” he whispers, giving me a final squeeze. “You look like you could fall asleep right here.”

I rest my head back against the chair. “I’ll sleep when I’m retired.”

“What if I drive you home and you sleep right now?” He walks around the chair and squats on the floor in front of me, his face etched with concern.

I shake my head. “There are only a few weeks left. I’ve got to find a way to reassure the board that I’m on this. I can’t have contracts like the U.S. fucking Military threatening to pull funds.” All the relaxation from AJ’s touch is slipping away rapidly. “I have to call Logan back and then I have to go over all these notes for the vaccine researchers.” I gesture around the room.

AJ scowls. “How will you get home? You don’t seem like you’re in a great headspace to drive.”

I shrug. “I’ve slept on my office couch before.”

“Samantha.”

I hold up a hand, stand, and stride back over to my taco. Even with the long delay, it’s still an explosion of amazing flavor in my mouth. I almost cry, it tastes so good. I swallow my bite. “You brought me dinner and massaged my neck and that was fucking amazing. And now I have to get back to work.”

He puts his hands in his pockets and looks around the room, hesitating. Finally, he nods. “I’d like to see you again. Soon.”

I close my eyes. I have no idea how I can make that happen and still salvage my business reputation. I really need

to talk with Shane and the marketing team about some sort of PR defense. Shit. AJ is still waiting for me to answer him. “I’ll try,” I tell him. “This weekend?”

He nods, kisses my cheek, and walks out of the office.

CHAPTER 29

AJ

MY FAMILY IS GOING to murder me. They've said so, repeatedly. They thought I was bringing Samantha to dinner after services and...I didn't want to overwhelm her with everything going on at work, so I didn't bring it up.

Avi glares at me as she scoops potatoes onto her plate. Angry potato scooping, if that's a thing. Bubbie squeezes my father's hand as she laments, "You should see this girl! The most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life—apart from you and Avi, of course." My mother and sister wave away her remark, hanging on her words. Bubbie arches a brow. "Of course, if the three of you made more of an effort to get to the synagogue, you'd know what she looks like, wouldn't you?" I chuckle at her ability to weave guilt into every conversation, for everyone in the room. Bubbie points a fork at me. "I shouldn't let you have brisket, Adriel. Imagine that poor woman sitting all alone, starving."

I roll my eyes at that. "She's an adult with a career, Bubbie. She ate dinner on her own long before she met me."

To my surprise, my mother joins Bubbie with a stern expression. "That's exactly the point, Adriel John. She was on

her own, and now she's with you."

Avi nods. "Yeah, bro. She's missing out on the opportunity for Mom to show her pictures from your bris."

Mom tries not to laugh but ends up snorting her wine. Dad's shoulders shake as he tries not to laugh. My parents absolutely did pull out that specific photo album to show my prom date. I sigh. The truth is I'm feeling really confused about Samantha. I no longer think she'd consciously use my students as a PR opportunity for her company, but I'm not convinced she wouldn't do so unintentionally.

Then I have other moments of confusion. When she was on the phone with that military guy, expertly handling him, oozing competence and confidence, I found myself once again drowning in my own feelings of inadequacy. Until Samantha turned those big, brown eyes at me and told me she thinks I'm an amazing teacher, like she might actually mean it. She didn't seem to care that I didn't follow the family career path. I curse Lara under my breath, wondering if it counts as progress that I can at least recognize that my response is due to her words and actions.

With these thoughts swirling, I eat my meal silently while my family argues about my shortcomings in not bringing a date to family dinner. I don't usually bring my phone with me to meals—or anywhere, really. But I have it in my pocket today, and I feel a surge of emotion when it vibrates with a message. Glancing down, I see that it's from Samantha.

You made me feel really good the other night.

I grin, trying to return my phone to my pocket before my family notices me acting like a middle schooler. I've taught enough of them to know it's obvious when someone is lap texting. But then another message comes in and I feel my heart squeeze.

This is me being vulnerable, telling you I had a hard fucking day and you made me feel better.

The truth is I had no idea what to do when I saw her so visibly upset. Bringing dinner was easy—everyone likes tacos. But then I had to sit there listening to a booming male voice question her authority and her business leadership. I felt powerless, and then I felt an overwhelming urge to touch her. Not in a sexual way, but just to somehow let her know I...care about her. Fuck. I care about Samantha Vine. More than care.

I close my eyes tightly, trying to ward off the stream of thoughts that were about to envision a future with her, glimpses of her actually seated around this table trading witticisms with my mother and then curled in bed with me, her clacking away on her laptop as I read or graded papers. “No,” I say out loud, before I can catch myself, and my sister narrows her eyes at me.

“No? Like, no you're never bringing her to dinner or just no, not next week?” I hadn't realized they'd continued discussing Samantha's Trachtenberg family debut. I shake my head. “I don't know. It's all very new.” I look at my plate of half-eaten food, my appetite slipping away. I look up at my mother and say, “She's not even Jewish.”

Mom smiles and squeezes my father's hand. He shrugs. Bubbie leans back in her chair like I just revealed something shocking. Which, I guess I did. Mom takes a swig of her wine and says, "The heart wants what it wants, AJ." I feel a weight lift and I realize I've been dreading telling my family about this aspect of Samantha.

My relief is short-lived when Bubbie snorts and says, "Well, she can always convert," which sets off a series of explosive shouts from my father and sister. I grin when Avi calls Bubbie a "nebbly old yenta." I never really thought my family would be unsupportive of anyone I dated, but it's nice to hear my parents and sister sticking up for Samantha, even if I still don't know where things are heading with her.

Suddenly the enormity of this conversation exhausts me and I feel a strong impulse to leave. "I'm sorry, but I have to go grade papers. I wish I could stay longer."

That last part's a lie. Sort of. I stand up to find my mother behind me with her arms out, wrapping me in a jiggling, squeezing hug. "Are you going to invite me in for career day this year?" She taps my chin and looks into my eyes, reaching up to brush my hair back from my face. "You work too much."

I laugh. "This from the woman who hasn't taken a day off in years."

She swats my shoulder and I kiss her on the forehead, clap my father on the cheek, and deposit my plate in the kitchen. When I turn around, Bubbie is standing near me with a frown and her arms laden with repurposed margarine containers.

“Adriel John,” she scolds. “You go take that woman some food.”

“Bubs, I told you, I have to grade—“

My grandmother presses a gnarled finger to my lips. “There’s matzo ball soup here, Adriel. Everyone needs matzo ball soup.” I sigh and accept Bubbie’s peace offering. I really should go home and grade papers. But once again I find myself unable to resist the urge to understand more about the swirl of emotions and confusion that light up my brain whenever I think of Samantha Vine.

I drive to her house, knowing I have to deliver the soup, and smile when I see that she’s got her heavy front door open to allow the breeze through her screen door. It doesn’t occur to me that she might not be alone in there until I strut up the walk, raise my fist to rap on the door, and hear a chorus of cackles from inside.

CHAPTER 30

SAMANTHA

OF COURSE ESTHER would have Bridges and Bitters closed for deep cleaning this afternoon when I need her most. Thankfully I was able to convince some members of Foof to come to my house for an emergency meeting. To listen to me implode.

I beg Esther to bring drinks, order way too much food for delivery, and drape myself across my couch like a regency-era duchess in need of smelling salts. Nicole, Orla, and Logan arrive first, telling me they're skipping some sort of torturous family running event.

Chloe comes bearing heaps of glossy photographs of potential cover models for us to help her "research" and Piper arrives with Esther, each of them carrying giant glass jugs of alcohol.

Piper slams hers onto my hardwood floor and points a sweaty finger at me. "Only for your crisis would I skip a workout today. It's gorgeous outside!"

Esther nods. "Are you sure you don't want to walk by a river or something?"

I shake my head and point at the pile of newspaper clippings on my coffee table. "I can't risk someone taking my

picture and trying to spin me as someone shirking responsibilities to go galavanting.”

Logan groans. “You told Audrey to stop sending you clippings and here you are obsessing over them alone? Sam!” She squeezes my leg. “You need to ignore these assholes.”

Nicole wedges herself onto the couch beside me, resting a hand over her stomach. “Someone catch me up. I’ve had my head in a toilet for three months while this lichen takes root.”

Orla snickers at her but says, “The media has it out for Sam, and it’s giving her board the heebie jeebies going into their initial public offering.” She looks at Logan. “Did I call it the right thing?” Logan nods.

Nicole frowns. She works as a business strategist and has experience taking a company public in the past. I tried to hire her a year ago but she’s committed to her current job. “Your marketing team should really have a plan for this, Sam. What are they submitting to various media outlets?”

My head flops back against the couch as I mutter about only recently acquiring a real marketing staff. Chloe hands me a glass and I take a swig of the sweet, boozy contents. “I don’t even like this aspect of...everything.” I gesture toward my front door. “Honest to god, all I want to do is lock myself in a cave with 3 monitors and code something fantastic.”

Logan pats my leg. “You already did that, babe. And people love it! And it’s about to get easier for people to access it. You’ll see.”

“Hm.” I take another swig. “Esther, you delightful witch. This is amazing.”

She smiles. “I’m trying this out for pumpkin spice season.”

I take another swig and frown. “I don’t taste anything pumpkiny, though...”

Esther cackles. “Because I fucking hate pumpkin spice. Everyone knows the apple is the star of the show in autumn.” Everyone laughs. “That’s an Autumn Pimm’s Cup with brandy, local apple cider, sliced apples from the same orchard, oranges, and a cinnamon stick.”

I’m about to comment when I hear a tap on my screen door. I turn my head to see none other than Adriel Trachtenberg biting his lip on my stoop. I wonder how much he heard, feeling sheepish about him knowing I haven’t been loving my role as CEO. That was information for Foof ears only.

I’m about to get up and let him in when Chloe beats me to the punch, springing up from the couch and squealing. “You were at my release party,” she says to him. She clutches his hand. “Thank you so much for your support. Truly.”

He arches a brow at her. “My pleasure,” he grunts, with no joy whatsoever. It makes me laugh. He clears his throat. “I’m sorry for barging in. I didn’t mean to crash your party.”

Nicole and Orla stand up and start clearing away glasses. Nicole looks AJ up and down and says, “We were just leaving anyway.”

“What? You absolutely were not leaving.” I grab the neck of the bottle before Piper hauls it away. Chloe and Esther grab one of the paper bags of food. “We’re going for that walk,” Piper says. “As the resident fitness expert, I need to look out for my friends’ cardiovascular health.”

“But I don’t want to walk.” I pout and take another swig of my Pimm’s Cup.

Esther grins. “We know you don’t, babe.” She pats AJ on the shoulder. “We’ll leave you here with this guy.”

Before he can protest and before I can convince them otherwise, Foof has faded out of the house without a trace. Except for the glass bottle of hooch I’m cradling in my lap like a baby. Eventually, AJ deposits a plastic grocery bag on my coffee table, sinks into the couch beside me and grips my thigh, sending heat soaring to my crotch.

“I was worried you’d still be in your office,” he says, giving me a small smile.

I shake my head. “I came home eventually.” He gestures for the alcohol and I hand him the jug.

He takes a sip and his eyebrows shoot up. “This is delicious.”

“Isn’t it? Esther is so good at what she does.”

We pass the jug back and forth a few times before he says, “My family is angry with me because I didn’t bring you to dinner today.”

I sigh. “I probably would have been a distraction today anyway. So much going on.” I gesture around vaguely and he

nods. “Isn’t it early for dinner, though? What time is it?”

He stretches out on the couch and drapes an arm around my shoulders. I surprise myself by instinctively curling in closer to him, like a magnet snapping into place on the fridge. “Is there a better vocabulary word for late lunch? We ate at my parents’ house after services.”

“Lupper? Dunch?”

“Definitely not dunch.” He starts stroking my hair and it’s almost enough to make me forget all the stress of this week. All the stress of last night. “How long until this all wraps up for you?” He tilts his head so I can feel his breath on my skin as he talks.

“Supposed to be this week.”

“Want to know what I think?”

I press a hand against his chest and push back a little so I can see his whole face. “Actually, no. I don’t want to talk about work at all, if that’s okay.”

He gives a small smile. “That’s definitely okay.” And then he leans in to kiss me. I realize this is what I’ve been hoping for, or needing at any rate. I moan in relief as he deepens the kiss, one of his hands cradling my cheek.

“I want to have dirty, rough, hairy sex,” I tell him, nipping at his finger, which he withdraws as his eyes widen. Those eyes darken as he nods his head. I yelp when he wraps my ponytail around his fist and tugs, tilting my head back. “Yes,” I groan as he licks my throat.

“Get upstairs,” he growls and I feel a rush of excitement. I don’t have to decide anything, because he’s telling me what to do right now, and he’s taking off his shirt.

“Fuck, yes,” I whoop, scampering up the stairs as he chases after me, shedding his clothes along the way. When we get to my room he shoves me against the wall, kissing me as his hands are rough along my boobs. “I wish you had a ruler,” I pant. “I want you to rap my knuckles with it.”

He pauses. “You understand corporal punishment is illegal now, right?”

I roll my eyes. “You’re fucking up my fantasy, Adriel.”

He arches a brow and says, “Hmmm.” He slides his belt out from the loops on his pants and smacks his left palm with the leather. My eyes fly wide. He grins. “Too much. Got it.” He tosses the belt over his shoulder and spins me around so I’m facing the wall. In a few yanks and tugs, he’s got my ass exposed as my palms press into the pale blue paint.

I gasp when he slaps my ass, the crack echoing through my townhouse. His fingertips massage my skin as he cups my cheek where his palm stung a moment before. “How’s this for a fantasy?” AJ’s voice is low in my ear and I swallow in anticipation, waiting to see what he’ll do next. Loving that I don’t know.

He draws his hand back and slaps the other cheek and I whimper in pleasure, especially when his fingers cup between my legs, drawing my moisture along my body as he massages. His teeth sink into the skin beneath my ear and I feel his fingers everywhere at once—he rubs them along my nipples,

my stomach, my ass, but never my clit. “Please, AJ,” I beg. I feel a desperate throb between my legs as my clit longs for his attention.

From over my shoulder, I hear AJ crinkling a condom wrapper and then I feel a steadying hand on my hip before a swell of pressure between my legs as he sinks inside me. I release a guttural moan, melting into the wall, my nipples loving the friction against the matte finish as AJ settles his cock inside me.

“Holy fuck, you feel perfect,” he grunts, and then he starts to thrust. Slowly at first, he slides in and out while he traces all his little teeth marks with his fingertips. At least I imagine he can see them, illuminated like stars along my skin. Or burn marks where he has seared into my central nervous system.

My palms slide against the wall, slick with sweat as my body wriggles, seeking friction. “You need to come, don’t you?” He tugs my hair again and turns my head so I can see his eyes. I nod as much as I can with my hair around his wrist and he grins, a wicked flash among his dark hair. AJ slides his hand to my crotch and barely touches me before I come, pulsing and squeezing around the massive invasion of his thick cock.

“Fuck,” we say together. “Yes.” I moan and come and start to slide down the wall. Once I’m on my knees he backs up and hauls me up against his chest, pounding into me a few more times before he howls and I feel him come. Heaving, panting, exhausted, we both crumple to the floor in my room. When I

look up at the wall, I see sweat marks from my boobs, and we laugh, both of us thrilled by this memento.

It's nearly dark when I hear my phone ringing from somewhere downstairs. I lift my head from the fuzzy pillow of AJ's chest and frown. I really don't want to get out of bed, but I'm probably too close to the IPO to ignore calls, even on a weekend.

AJ groans as I try to slither out of bed. He reaches for me feebly, but I grab his t-shirt and slide it on as I head down my steps. I find my phone on the coffee table. I've missed several calls already from Shane and Audrey, and now it's Logan trying to get through. "What," I say. "I'm here. Sorry!"

"Eep! Sam!" Logan is in full excite mode. I take a seat to prepare myself for her news. "You've gone viral."

"I was already viral. Remember? Blonde bimbo tries to do business blah blah..."

"No," she sounds assertive. "Good viral. I'm sending you a link. Keep me on speaker when you pull it up."

I squint and navigate to my messages as the phone bings in my hand. Logan sends a link to the video of the Franklin Middle School students thanking Vinea for the field trip. It looks like an extended version of the video—more than what I had seen. I smile as the kids ham for the camera and joke about their data analysis.

Logan says, "They included a hashtag. Learn with Vinea! And it's trending."

“Really?” I smile. On speaker, Logan talks about some of the commentary she’s finding online about the impact companies like Vinea can have on public education. I almost cry, I’m so touched.

But then I hear something behind me and I look over my shoulder to see AJ. And he’s not happy.

“Hey, Logan, I have to go. But thank you for sending this to me, okay?”

“Absolutely, Sam. Audrey and Shane wanted me to assure you that the marketing team and the community engagement staff is on it.”

She clicks off and I sigh, until I realize that AJ is really, steaming mad. He grips the couch as he stands behind me barefoot in his slacks. “Where did you get that video?”

“Logan just texted it to me.”

He points to my phone. “You assured me that you would not share that content. And now it’s gone viral?”

I swallow and start to shake my head. “AJ, it’s not the same video. Look, let me show you—“

“This is so unacceptable, Samantha. These are children. Not pawns in your PR adventure.”

I furrow my brow at him. “PR adventure? You know I’ve been under intense scrutiny that is often unfair and untrue.”

“Oh I know all about it. And you had an ace in your sleeve, didn’t you? A way to save face when everyone was picking apart your leadership abilities. Nevermind that you

had to lie and steal footage of minors without parental permission!” AJ shoves his bare feet into his shoes and bends over to pick up his button-down. He fumbles with the buttons and looks around for his keys, snatching them and his phone off my coffee table.

“Where are you going?”

“Back to my apartment to call my boss and figure out the legal ramifications of your little stunt.”

I stand up and glare at him. “You have no right to speak to me this way and you cannot just storm out of here every time you get mad!”

He rolls his eyes at me like I’m one of his middle schoolers. “I should have never been over here to get mad to begin with. Women like you are only looking to get ahead, and I don’t know what it will take for me to learn that once and for all.”

He strides toward the door and I hurry to insert myself in his way. “Women like me? What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” I think back to how stiff he got when his grandmother brought up his ex at the synagogue. “I don’t like being compared to your past asshole girlfriends when I have done nothing wrong here. All I’ve been is honest with you.”

He throws his hands in the air. “You’re right. You’ve been very honest that your top priority is your company and guiding it to this next phase. Congratulations, Samantha. You did it. And you got some good dick along the way. Good night.”

When I don't move out of the way, he growls and marches through the kitchen, out my back door, and through the side gate before I crumple to the floor in shocked silence.

CHAPTER 31

AJ

FROM: Vinelli, Kellie

Sent: Monday, October 9

To: [All Staff]

Subj: Morning Middle School Memo!

Good Morning Faculty! Just a quick reminder that many of our students' guardians have NOT signed photo release forms! Please do not share images (including video) of your students online in any capacity! This includes field trips!

Have a great day On Purpose!

Kellie Vinelli, Principal

I'm right back where I was last year. No. I'm worse off than that. Not only have I let myself believe a woman could have feelings for me, again, but now I also have to meet with my perky boss and problem-solve a social media disaster. I wonder if I need to call my union rep...

Unable to stand being alone with my thoughts a second longer, I drive in to work obscenely early on Monday. Where I am, of course, also alone with my thoughts. And the smell of adolescent feet. I try grading papers at my desk, but the sound of my pen scraping along exams irritates me. Everything irritates me, from terrible teachers' lounge coffee to the feel of ball-point pen on copy paper, to Samantha fucking Vine using me as a prop to bolster her image in the press.

I stand up and hurl my pen and hear someone laugh when it clatters to the ground. I turn my head to see Doug leaning against my door frame, munching a donut. He points at me. "Any idea what prompted Vinelli's latest memo?"

I frown at him and walk over to pick up my pen. Doug walks into the room and sits on top of one of the student desks. He offers me a donut. I frown at it, but accept it when he continues to shake the donut at me. I don't even like donuts, but I eat most of it before I even realize I'm doing so. He pulls a travel coffee mug from the crook of his arm and slurps it for a bit while I brood.

"Samantha's been using me," I finally mutter, and then close my eyes because I hate how it feels to say that out loud.

Doug sighs. "Tell me why you think so."

I press my palms to my desk and I feel my nostrils flare. "So you haven't seen the viral video of our students, shilling for her company? She's been crafting this for months." My mind spirals as I blurt all my dark assumptions to Doug. "Her snap instinct was to have nothing to do with our students, and

then she relentlessly demands we go there for a field trip? Her team must have seen us coming a mile away.”

Doug taps his fingers on the desk. “But didn’t our kids reveal that they were the ones who made that video? Not her or anyone from Vinea?”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, they made the video on devices conveniently donated by Vinea. She’s probably got trackers on all of them, mining all the kids’ data for her cloud or whatever it’s fucking called.”

Doug stares at me and I slump back in my seat. He says, “AJ, you’re really assuming the worst here. I saw the two of you together at the book party...she didn’t look like a woman using people for her own gain.”

I roll my eyes. “Back then she was just trying to get into my pants.”

This gets a laugh out of both of us. Doug leans forward and the desk tips a little. He rights himself and shakes his head. “Sometimes people like doing things for other people. There’s that whole theory about love languages...acts of service...”

I snort. “Service makes her feel shitty. She’s been doing service for her entire family for years. All kinds of shit for her siblings that they should do for their own damn adult selves.”

“Like drive her grandmother to church every week?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? And you know it’s not called church.”

He holds his hands up. “Sorry. Synagogue. But AJ, do you drive your grandmother out of obligation? Do you resent it? Do you have ulterior motives in researching citizen science projects for your kids to pursue?” He raises a brow and I growl at him.

Just then, Leo saunters into the room shaking his cell phone. “Saw Vinelli’s email, dude. Then I saw the video. Hashtag Learn with Vine!”

“Shut the fuck up, Leo.” As soon as I say it I wince. “I’m sorry.” I dig my fingers into my hair and tug, groaning.

Leo looks at me, then looks to Doug, who says, “He’s back to thinking Sam had ulterior motives in humping him.”

Leo cackles. “Humping! I think the kids are calling it vibing right now, right?” Doug shrugs. Leo turns to me and sits on the edge of my desk. “Look, this is about Lara and you know it, AJ.” Turning to Doug, Leo says, “His ex left him because she’s a gold digger and it fucked with his head.”

“That sucks, man. But I don’t think you have to worry about that with Samantha...”

My eyes flash when I look up. “Oh no? You don’t think she’s also using me to get ahead? Remember the viral student video where the kids’ parents didn’t sign release forms? Causing me to have to sit in a room with exclamation-point-Vinelli?”

Leo starts shaking his head and running a hand across his throat and I look past his shoulder to see Margot standing in

the door to my room. She looks like she's been crying. "Mr. T?" Margot wrings her hands.

"Margot. I'm sorry you had to hear some of that. What can I do for you?"

Doug and Leo act like they're getting ready to leave but they take their sweet time about it, so I know I'm not going to get out of talking through this with them. I take a deep breath as Margot approaches my desk. "I think I did a bad thing."

Leo arches a brow and Doug leans forward. She looks between them and back to me. "Me and some of the kids were talking...about how I heard you say Ms. Vine is getting a bad shake in the media." She bites her lip and rocks up on her tiptoes. "We wanted to help and show people how awesome she is."

Doug whistles. Leo moon walks out of my classroom. I stare at Margot for a few beats. "Margot, nobody is angry. But what did you do? Specifically?"

She bites her lip again and fidgets with her hair. She shrugs. "We added some stuff to that thank you video we made and then..." She swallows and shrugs again. "We all posted it online."

CHAPTER 32

SAMANTHA

VINEA JUMPS to \$38 billion market cap as public investors get their first crack at the popular data analysis solution

Investor Daily News

Vinea Stock Continues To Climb on Day 1 of Trading

Stock Sense

Audrey beams as she calls the executive leadership meeting to order. I'm so proud of her and grateful for all she's done for this company. And me. I feel my eyes well up a bit as she says, "I'm so excited to gather here with a full roster on such an important day. I cannot wait to see what we all achieve together."

In the past month, Audrey, Logan and Shane have set up entire teams in marketing, Human Resources, finance, and business development. That last one makes me feel the most grateful, even as it makes me clench my jaw. I'm working really hard on admitting to myself that delegating these tasks is a sign of success. This is still my company, even if I'd rather

hole up with my tech team and continue developing our products.

“We’ve had some amazing feedback from our board of directors,” Audrey continues. “Major kudos to our marketing team for propping up the recent social media excitement about Vinea! Sam, do you want to be the one to share the good news with the group?”

I press my lips together. I’m still sort of waiting for someone to say they’re just kidding and the SEC said no thanks to Vinea joining the stock market. “Shouldn’t this be Logan’s time to shine? She did most of the work on this.”

Logan shakes her head and pats my hand. “Go on, Sam. Say it out loud. Say the words.”

I look around the table at my friends, and colleagues I hope will soon be my friends. All I’ve wanted for so long was to create a place where everyone felt like their work is valued and seen. I take a deep breath and glance at the sticky note I’ve been clutching since Logan met me at my office door this morning. “Well,” I swallow. “About 16 million shares of Vinea stock will begin trading on Wednesday morning.”

The room erupts in cheers and everyone stands, walking around to pat me on the back and hug one another.

When all the shouting dies down, I notice Logan and Shane calling their spouses. Audrey video chats her mom. I feel a wave of grief wash over me. My family doesn’t even know this is happening and my mother...I honestly can’t remember enough about her to guess how she’d respond to this news. My thoughts drift briefly to AJ’s hands on my

shoulders, the feel of his furry chest against my cheek. He'd probably take me out to dinner if he didn't think I was—I'm not actually sure what it is AJ thinks of me. I step out of the conference room and tackle some emails ahead of the wave I know is coming. At least I can save my new assistant and marketing team a little busywork that way.

The work day is a blur of questions and joyful conversations. Logan leads an information session with the entire staff explaining how many shares of the company they'll each get and what they are and are not allowed to do with them the first day. I feel like hot garbage and want to go home, change into leggings, and watch *The X Files* for about 30 hours.

But Logan strides into my office and tells me we have to go to Bridges and Bitters. When I shake my head, she leans across my desk. "Remember a few years ago when I wanted to go crawl in a hole or move back to my hometown and live with my mother?" I shake my head again. "Yes, you do. I know you remember how you showed up at my office and dragged me to a Foof meeting and changed my life."

I purse my lips. "My life has already changed," I tell her. I gesture around the room. "I have everything I ever wanted."

She crosses her arms and glares at me. "No, Samantha. No you don't. Come on." She physically hoists me from my chair and walks me down the hall.

"I don't want to ride in that ridiculous jalopy your boyfriend drives."

She laughs. “That’s a cheap shot, madam. You know he’s my fiancé now.” She hustles me outside and into one of the giant white buses I had reserved for AJ’s students. I really can’t seem to get away from him, or rather the memories of chasing after him in hopes of...what? What did I expect from him other than what he gave me. How did he phrase it? Good dick.

That’s all I have mental space for anyway. I’m not sure why I’m this worked up about it going away. I sink into the first seat behind the driver as the entire staff loads into the bus. I perk up when some of the developers climb aboard, waving at me.

When we get to Bridges and Bitters, Esther greets us with a tray of fragrant drinks. She sets the tray on a table and points at me. “This girl is on fire,” she shouts, and lights the tray of drinks with a match as the Alicia Keys song blasts from the sound system. My staff bursts into applause.

I have to admit this is an amazing greeting. And by admit, I mean I start crying. Esther rushes around the table and pulls me into a hug. “Sam, come on. I told you it’s apple cider season. Are you sad your special drink isn’t pumpkin spice?”

That makes me laugh and I shake my head. “Apple cider is perfect, Esther. Thank you.”

Logan wheedles her way into the hug. “Esther told me about the grand entrance and I was a little worried. But...it’s really true, Sam. You’re on fire! You’re a fucking smash hit.”

I gasp. “Logan, I didn’t think you used language like that.” We both laugh and I sip the cocktail, a mix of Fireball whisky,

hard apple cider, and true love from my true friends. “I was told there’d be cakes?”

Esther gestures toward the bar, where there’s a display of tiny, decadent desserts from Le Beau Gateau. “You’ve got a choice between bete noir, lemon cake, and burnt almond torte.” Seeing my face, Esther laughs and hands me a plate. “Or take one of each. It’s your party!”

I do just that and park myself in a cozy booth with cake and whisky, watching wistfully as my entire staff gets hammered.

Only it’s not just my staff. I look around, confused. My friends are all here. All of them. All the Brady ladies, all the Stag ladies, Esther, Chloe, Piper...we haven’t had a full Foof showing like this since Orla’s baby shower. Every woman is beaming and shaking a shiny green pompon. “Samantha Vine! You did it!” Nicole smacks a kiss on my lips and hip checks me. “You’re all over the news.”

Orla scowls as Esther hands her a cocktail. “Why do you look like that?” She glances at Logan, still holding on to my arm. “Why does she look like her rabbit has pinkeye?”

And then something terrible happens. I start to cry.

“Oh, hell,” Esther says. She puts the whiskey down on the bar and walks around. She wraps me in a firm hug and pats my hair and I don’t know why I’m crying, but I definitely get mascara tears all over her shirt.

After a few minutes of this Esther guides me down the hall to the meeting room where we usually gather so the regular

patrons don't have to endure our cackling. It's mostly me cackling, usually.

With a gentle nudge, Esther pushes me into the chaise lounge and I sigh. As she sits beside me I see that everyone else has followed her in, with Celeste bringing up the rear carrying a tray of snacks. I smile at that. She's really leaning in to being a mom and grandma these days.

"Tell us what happened," Esther says.

My lip wavers as I look around the room, at all these women I fiercely defend on the regular. All these women who have offered me advice every step of the way as I launched Vinea from nothing. "I should feel happy," I tell them. "I just reached the pinnacle of success in my business."

"Damn right you did." Nicole pumps her fist in the air.

I shake my head. "I realized the other day that...I don't like what I'm doing anymore." I think about all the time I spent this past month reassuring board members that our work was the same it has always been. That our product has not changed in its usefulness. "I'm just not cut out to be a figurehead like this." I shake my hands in the air. "It all feels like constant bullshit and all I want to do is talk about data and stretch my fingers over a really tricky data correlation map."

Piper smiles. "I know a little bit about how it feels when your dream job doesn't turn out quite how you imagined it." Logan grunts her agreement. "Sweetie, it's okay to change your goals."

I scrunch up my face. “I don’t think my goals are different. I want Vinea to be everywhere. I want everyone to be able to access this software, to collaborate and share data and change the shape of research.” I take a swig of the signature cocktail Celeste offers. “This is really good.”

Esther squeezes my leg. “I splurged for you, friend. You’re worth it.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

She recoils. “What the hell do you mean? You’re the most supportive Foof in this whole group. You’ve been fresh out of fucks longer than anyone else here.”

“Ha!” I shake my head. “It’s all a lie. I have so many fucks, Esther.” I hiccup. “So many.”

Orla says, “Why don’t you tell us a little bit about your fucks and we’ll see how we can help you release them.”

Everyone nods and so I take a deep breath and I tell them about my family. How I can’t seem to stop doing everything for them despite their utter lack of appreciation for that effort. “And now work is starting to feel a little bit like that. A huge responsibility I wasn’t expecting to take on...” I take a huge, shaky inhale. “And when I stopped just once to do something nice for myself, it all turned to shit and he yelled at me and said I was using him.”

I start sobbing again as my friends stroke my hair and rub my arms. I’m not sure who all steps in to support me, but when I open my eyes again I see a sea of faces in front of me, looking concerned. Nicole pats my leg. “Tell me who we need

to kill, Sam. I have pregnant lady hormones and I'm not afraid to use them."

I whimper a little and give them a summary of how AJ assumed I disseminated the thank-you video from his students. How he accused me of being nice to them to gain positive press. "And then he acted like he was just giving me sex to be nice to me or something."

At this, the Foof members collectively gasp and Esther smashes a bottle against the table. She brandishes the jagged neck. "Let me at him," she says. "I stood up for him!"

I shake my head. "He really did give me good sex."

Celeste taps her nails on the wooden table and scrunches up her face. "You know what I think?"

I shake my head. "No, but I'd love to hear."

She nods. "I think you should be so proud of yourself, honey. You did all this." She gestures around the room. "You made this group for all these women! You've all done so much for each other. And you built that whole company to boot."

"Hear, hear!" Juniper raises her glass and smacks the table.

Celeste nods. "I watched my husband and then my son deal with jobs that made them miserable, with people who made them cringe." She shrugs. "Life is too short for either of those things." She walks over to me and squeezes my shoulder. "Let's celebrate today's success, send you to bed, and get you a career coach tomorrow."

Nicole perks up. "I love this advice," she says. "Who do we know who coaches high power executives?"

Maddie and Emma trade glances and everyone starts murmuring, trying to think of someone to help me sort out my feelings about work. I sip my drink and stare at my friends, loving them all so much I don't know what to do apart from try to buy them anything their hearts desire.

“But guys,” I say, waiting until the din dies down. “What the hell do I do about AJ?”

Esther snorts. “Fuck him.”

I sob-laugh. “I want to! I really, really want to...”

Orla shakes her head. “Huh-uh. He's gonna need to grovel before that can happen.”

Logan nods. “Big time. Nobody says mean things about my boss.”

I let out a final long moan and I really do feel a little better about everything when I'm done. “You guys are the best thing in my life,” I tell them.

Chloe leans in for a hug and kisses me on the forehead. “Right back at you, sweetie.”

CHAPTER 33

AJ

I PAT MARGOT'S hand as we sit in the chairs outside the principal's office. "Ms. Vinelli won't be angry," I assure her.

Margot's eyes widen. "She's never mad," she says. "I just don't want anyone to be disappointed."

"Oh, Margot, nobody is disappointed in you." My heart surges at the thought of her anxiety about this. "This is a problem for adults to manage. For instance, I should have monitored the tablet devices' ability to access the internet..."

I'm cut off by our principal opening her office door, setting off a series of tinkling door chimes. "Mr. Trachtenberg! Ms. Costa! Please, come in!" Margot hops up and walks into the office, familiarly taking a seat in a papasan chair and squeezing a fuzzy throw pillow onto her lap.

I follow less enthusiastically and perch on the edge of a folding chair. Kellie Vinelli sinks into her white chair and drapes her arms over the arm-rests. "Now," she says, smiling as ever. "Who can tell me why I've asked you to come here today?"

I roll my eyes and stifle a groan. "I know my students were pictured in a video recorded during my class, and that the

video is circulating the web.” She opens her mouth and I hold up a finger. “I also know we didn’t get photo and media release forms from all the kids’ guardians this year and that we are not allowed to have such a video circulating the web.”

Kellie Vinelli smiles and steeples her fingers on her lap. “That’s about the gist of things. Very good, Mr. Trachtenberg.”

Margot starts squirming in her seat and finally bursts out, “It was my fault. I encouraged everyone to make the video. At first we just emailed it to Ms. Vine to thank her for the field trip! But then it was my idea to expand it and post it online.” Her cheeks flush. Kellie nods as she speaks and opens her own mouth to reply when Margot jumps to her feet. “I just got the best idea.” She claps her hands. “Mr. T, what if we call all the adults and ask them to send in their forms?”

I groan audibly this time. Half my students’ parents and guardians haven’t listed active phone numbers. Ms. Vinelli taps her chin with a manicured nail. “May I see the video in question?”

I furrow my brow at her, incredulous that she hasn’t even seen the thing and yet she sent schoolwide memos about it, complete with her signature exclamation points. But Margot is unperturbed, rummaging in her bag for her Vinea-issued tablet. I cede a mental point to the principal’s genius when I observe her studying the lack of security to access the device and open some of the apps. My stomach turns at the thought of how much worse things could have been than the students posting a positive video.

As Margot plays the video, Kellie notes the students whose faces are visible: only five, including Margot.

When the video stops, Kellie sighs. “Well, Margot, we do know your mother gave permission for us to use your picture.”

Margot grins. “One down, four to go, right?”

Kellie nods. “Why don’t you head on to class, dear? Mr. Trachtenberg and I will discuss some of the specifics of this growth opportunity.”

Margot nods and heads out of the room, looking relieved. I ease up at her change in demeanor. I can handle a consequence. I just don’t want my middle schoolers to feel discouraged. When the office door clicks shut again in another tinkle of chimes, Kellie adopts a more relaxed posture. “AJ. Adriel. You know, I’m not sure which you prefer?”

“AJ is fine.”

“Do you have contact information for the other four students who appear in that video?” She raises a brow and points to the list on her desk.

I nod. “Some of them. Between me and Leo I bet we can at least make contact.”

Kellie bites her lip. “I’m sure you know I need you to collect the tablets so the district IT staff can set up security features.” I nod again. She smiles, back to her cheery demeanor. “Excellent! So you’ll deposit the devices with my admin by end of day and retroactively get me those release forms! Wasn’t it so good to catch up?”

My eyes widen as I realize I’m being dismissed.

I hide in my classroom during my prep period, too overwhelmed to go and get my lunch from the teachers' lounge. I'm not surprised when I hear a tap on my classroom door, however, and look up to see Leo. He slides into the room and closes the door behind him. "Want to tell me why I just got a memo to collect the students' tablet devices?"

I blow a raspberry. "Did you know they all have social media apps on them? And that the students have been faking older birthdays to access them?"

Leo winces. "Whoops."

I snort. "Yeah. Whoops. I managed to get 18 from my first class. Two of the kids said they left theirs at home. They all moaned that they won't even be fun anymore by the time we give them back."

Leo perches on the edge of my desk. "This is all your fault," he deadpans. I smack his leg. "Well," he says, crossing his arms, "what's with the data analysis bird thingy you brought up at the staff meeting. Will they be able to access that on the locked down, no-fun tablets?"

I nod. "Should be able to." I flip open my laptop, intending to show him the website where Samantha made the rough section for the kids to collect data on the chimney swift migrations. "The kids can join local researchers tracking frog populations, owl hoots, lots of different things throughout the city." I pause while the site loads. "Hell, we can walk right over to Frick Park to do all this and still use the school wifi to enter the data." The page opens with a fluttering bird

animation. I feel a lump form in my throat when I see that she fine-tuned the whole thing, making it look professional and organized, adding tabs for other citizen science projects all suitable for middle schoolers to use. I turn to Leo. “I’m such an asshole,” I whisper.

He nods. “I know, AJ. It’s okay.”

“She really does just want to help people,” I mutter. Leo continues nodding. “I fucked up with her, Leo. What do I do?”

He grips my shoulders. “You need to go apologize.” He nods his head toward the door. “Go on. I’ve got prep last period today. I’ll cover your class.”

I feel my heart race and I shake my head. “I need to clean up my mess here first.”

Leo grins. “You don’t think I can collect some iPads from your damn honor students? They probably already heard the rumor and turned them in downstairs. These little weasels will do anything to avoid getting in trouble.”

I grab my keys from my desk drawer and stuff them in my pocket. “Thank you, Leo. Seriously.”

“Any time, man. Now think big with that apology, AJ. And then go bigger than that.”

CHAPTER 34

SAMANTHA

LOGAN STEPS into the conference room and claps her hands. “Today is a good day, buddy. We did it!”

I smile at her. It’s been a whirlwind for sure. Even my father called to acknowledge that he read about the public offering, which is about the closest he comes to telling me he feels proud.

The past few nights, instead of running around drinking with my team, I curled up on my couch and kept coding the data entry pages for AJ’s nature projects. I even did some digging and found some other local projects that could use a similar data entry page, so I got all that loaded on the site. I smile, thinking about Margot maybe doing a data plot this summer after all the students chart the birds using the towers in the city parks.

Audrey pecks me on the cheek, drawing my attention back to the moment. “Look,” she says, “I know you’re wiped out. It’s been a heck of a haul getting to this point.” She claps her hands. “Which is why I’m sending you home. As Chief of Staff, I can make these kinds of decisions.”

Shane gives her a thumbs up. I shake my head. “I can’t go home. I’m in charge here.”

Logan pats my shoulder. “You are in charge. It’s your company and you can do whatever the fuck you want. Weren’t those your words?”

“You can’t hold me accountable for things I said when I was drunk on Fireball.”

Another pat from Logan. “Come on, babe. Let me call you a ride home. You’re beat.” I sigh and let her guide me outside. She’s right—I am exhausted. This week in particular has felt a month long. We get to the parking lot and for a second, I think I see AJ standing there. I rub my eyes, but when I pop them open again, he’s still there. In fact, he makes eye contact with me and strides in my direction.

I shake my head. “Nope,” I say, spinning on my heel. “You had your turn.” AJ’s eyes are intense as he stares at me from beneath a fringe of dark hair.

By this point, Logan and Audrey have noticed AJ and look concerned. “What’s going on out here?” Logan frowns.

AJ wrings his hands as he looks me in the eye. “I owe you an apology. I owe you so much more than an apology. My students posted that video online themselves and I jumped to conclusions about you, Samantha.”

“Figures,” I mutter. I take a deep breath. “I’m used to people assuming the worst about me. You’ve read the news lately, right?”

Logan and Audrey back away. “We’ll be inside if you need us, Sam.” I close my eyes and nod, listening to their retreating footsteps. I feel so relieved to see him, to hear him admitting he was wrong, that I worry I still might be dreaming.

“Walk with me?” He gestures away from my office building, toward the bicycle path along the river. I follow him and sink onto a stone bench overlooking the Allegheny.

He sits next to me and squeezes his legs with his hands. “I wasn’t fair to you. You kept showing me who you were, who you are. And I kept not believing you.”

I huff, letting out a little of my frustrations with him. “Well, it’s for the best anyway. I would have just gotten attached and then you’d go off and die on me.” He pulls his head back and I stare at him. “Oh, aren’t we both exploring how our past wounds impact our relationships? My bad.” After my Foof crew suggested a career coach, I had an introductory session with a woman who is a licensed therapist specializing in helping executives meet their goals. We talked a ton about my mom. I might have also unloaded to her about AJ.

“Well I have no intention of dying anytime soon, unless it’s possible to burn up from shame.” He looks at a trio of kayakers paddling past. “You’re right that I have old wounds I need to address.” He rakes a hand through his hair. “I let myself believe the worst about you because I couldn’t let myself believe you see the best in me.”

I stare out at the water. “You brought me tacos,” I mutter. “Do you know how few people I let realize I need help

remembering to eat?”

“If I promise to never take that privilege for granted ever again, could I maybe bring you tacos tomorrow?” I shake my head no. His face sags. “Okay. That’s fair. Thank you for letting me apologize, anyway.”

“I’m busy tomorrow,” I tell him, pressing my lips together briefly. “I have to go count chimney swifts at the park with some teenagers.”

AJ breaks into a grin and slides closer to me on the bench. He reaches for my hand and pulls it to his chest. “I swear, Samantha, they would vaporize in a haze of Axe body spray if you showed up while they were counting birds.”

I nod. “We’d have to record that as a weather event on the form.”

AJ smiles and leans his forehead against mine. His warmth fills the space around me and I feel like I want to cry again. My emotions are all over the place today. “I’d ask if I could kiss you here, but I’m afraid your staff is standing at the window waiting to put us on Instagram.”

I laugh and lean closer to him, savoring his scent. “Well then you better take me somewhere else to kiss me, Adriel.”

CHAPTER 35

AJ

SAMANTHA TELLS me she's way too tired to walk all the way to her car and asks me to kayak her home. I laugh and offer her a piggy-back ride instead. "You're no fun," she pouts, but laughs when I stoop and ease her up onto my back, skirt be damned.

"We've already established that," I tell her, hiking her up higher and squeezing her thighs as she grips my neck. "Are you drunk? Am I taking advantage of you?"

Sam cackles. "You better take advantage of me, Trachtenberg. I was promised some extensive groveling."

When we reach my car, I lower her to the ground and help her inside the passenger seat. As I walk around to the drivers side, reaching for the gear shift, I finally understand why people enjoy driving an automatic. I have to keep my hand away from her to downshift at every traffic light. Samantha stares at me quietly while I drive. I speed up to catch the next light when it's yellow and she cheers. She looks confused when I pull up outside of my building in Squirrel Hill. "Where the hell are you taking me?"

I shrug. "My place. I can take you to yours if you'd rather?"

She shakes her head. “No, this is fine. I want to see where you live.”

I rush around to open her door and help her to her feet. “Let’s get something clear.” I clasp her hands. “This apartment is where I’ve been wallowing. You bring me to life, Samantha Vine.”

“Well that’s a really nice thing to say.” Her lip quivers and I lean to kiss her, giving her ass a squeeze to try and lighten the mood after revealing something so heavy. I guide her inside the building, up the stairs, and inside my door, where she stops to laugh incredulously. “This is your home? Did you just move in? Why don’t you have any possessions?”

She paces around the room, her footsteps echoing in the near-empty space. “I can’t deal with this. Honey, I’m going to need to take you shopping for furniture. And decorations. At minimum a portrait of me...”

I step close to her and nibble her earlobe. “I like the idea of that,” I tell her. “But there is one essential piece of furniture here that I’d like to show you right now.”

“What’s that? A concrete block bookshelf?”

She squeaks when I give her a gentle shove down the hall. She laughs when she sees my bed, just a mattress and box spring on the tiny metal frame that came with it from the store. I flick on the overhead light, squint up at the fluorescent glare, and decide I can make do with the glow from the hall light. “Let’s get you naked,” I tell her.

She bites her lip. “Am I going to get to stroke your pelt?”

I nod, kneeling in front of her to help her out of her leggings and ankle boots. “I certainly hope so.” Samantha lifts her dress over her head and sits on the bed, naked apart from a dark green bra and matching panties. “You’re a goddess,” I whisper, letting my fingertips skate along her body. “I’ve been such a fool.”

“Mmm, this is an excellent early grovel.” She reaches behind her back to unhook her bra and tosses it over my shoulder. “I’m going to need to see more man-bear, please.” I chuckle and start to undress, pausing frequently to kiss and pet her. Samantha coos when I finally take off my undershirt. I’ve never had a woman so excited by my body hair. I should have taken that as a sign early on. I sigh, reminded again that I have some atonement to achieve tonight.

Kissing my way up her body, I climb on top of Samantha, who wriggles beneath me like she’s trying to burrow into my stomach. Her movements turn to rolling hips and her coos turn to breathy sighs as I slide downward, licking my way along her silky skin until I hook my teeth around the waistband of her panties.

Once we’re both fully nude, I pause to admire how we look together. She seems to shine in the shitty light of my apartment and I nearly disappear in the darkness, except for the fierce erection that points straight out toward Samantha. Like a compass guiding me toward true north, my dick twitches until I settle myself between her thighs.

“This feels so nice,” she says. “I love the weight of you on top of me.”

“Mmm.” I massage her breasts, lapping at her nipples and delighting in watching them pucker and tighten for me. I reach downward, finding slick heat in stark contrast to the firm points on her chest. Sam’s mouth drops open and her head falls back as I stroke her, as I reach inside and find her soft and warm and wanting.

“Sam,” I whisper, kissing her navel. “Do you want to use a condom?” I lick a line back up to her breast before adding, “I’ve had a physical recently...”

She blows out a breath as I twirl my finger inside her. “I’m...oooh, that’s good. I’m good. On pill. Ahhh!” I tap on her clit as I think about what we’ve just decided, that I’m about to slide my naked cock inside her body with no barrier. Just the two of us, as close as it’s possible to be, gliding together toward shared pleasure.

“I want you so much,” I tell her. “I’ve always wanted you. From the first moment I saw you.”

Sam lifts up so she’s resting on her elbows, staring at me. “I’ve been hot for teacher since day one. But can we talk about that later?” She juts her hips up from the bed to emphasize her point. “We’re celebrating 16 million shares here, remember?”

“Damn right,” I say, pressing a thumb into her clit and loving the view as she arches back, groaning at my touch. I circle her pleasure zone a few times until I feel her starting to clench around the finger sliding in and out of her body. I adjust my weight, redouble my efforts, and add in a tongue circling her right nipple until I feel Samantha give me what I want: her release.

“AJ!” She shrieks my name as her hips jerk beneath me. Her arousal fills my nostrils and I can’t take it anymore. I have to be inside her, to feel her throbbing and pulsing. And so I take what she’s offering. I use one hand to line up the tip of my cock and I slide into paradise.

Both of us groan at the smooth fit, at the feel of us coming together. “I’m so full of you,” Sam pants, rolling her hips and lifting to grind against me as the final waves of her orgasm subside. “I love it,” she purrs. “Oh, I love this.”

“So good,” I groan, and then I bark out a laugh when she tugs on my chest hair before digging her nails into my ass. I love this about being with her—she surprises me every moment. Nothing about her is what I expect and...that’s the beauty of being with her. She drags me right outside my comfort zone and then lights my comfort zone on fire. “I can’t get enough.”

Letting go of my ass, Samantha grabs my head and kisses me. I taste the cinnamon whiskey on her tongue. I taste her success and her pain, and I want to be here for all of it, standing by her side, wrapping her in my furry limbs, doing what I can to support her. “Samantha.” Her name is a prayer as I move inside her.

“Adriel!” I hear the desperation in her voice and I know she’s close. I know we’re about to topple over the edge together. She wraps her legs around my hips, pulling me deeper, closer, locking us tighter together. This is where I want to stay, always. If she’ll have me.

“I need you,” she moans. “Please! Please!” I don’t know how to give her what she wants, not consciously. But as I study her face and read the roll of her body beneath me, I respond with my touch. One thrust, one stroke, one pinch, and she clamps around my cock. “Yes. Yes, just like that,” Sam moans, a contented smile on her face as she comes. And then I’m chasing right behind her, firing inside her with a force that leaves me breathless.

Catching my breath, I collapse in her arms, resting my head on the pillow beside hers. I look into her eyes, feeling perfectly happy. So safe, so content.

“Now that’s a good grovel,” she whispers, tracing her nails along my spine.

“Thank you,” I murmur. “Happy to oblige.”

CHAPTER 36

SAMANTHA

I'M SO LATE. Inexcusably late. "AJ?" I holler into the cavernous bunker he calls an apartment. No answer. "Adriel? Mr. T?" Shit. Did he really leave without me? I set my floppy hat on his kitchen counter and reach for my phone. I'm supposed to walk over to Blue Slide Park with him to meet up with his students. We installed a new chimney swift tower with some help from the high school wood shop students, and the local bird experts think some swifts will roost in it tonight.

But things ran late at work today.

When I check my phone, I don't see any missed messages from him. I bite my lip, not sure if I should call him or just head over to Beechwood Blvd on my own. Just as I decide to lace up my hiking boots myself, I hear the jingle of keys in his front door. "Sam!" His voice is frantic and he rushes in the door, yanking off his tie and sweater vest. "Oh, good, you're still here. I'm so late."

I stare at him in disbelief. "Adriel Trachtenberg, you're never late. Are you...disheveled right now?" He waves a hand and streaks past me, stripping off his teacher clothes and leaving them in heaps on the floor. I am deeply aroused.

Seconds later, he dashes out of his room wearing cargo pants and a Franklin Middle School t-shirt. I swallow a thick knot and close my eyes. Now is not the time to sink to my knees and run my fingers through his leg hair. He looks at me strangely as he grabs his clipboard from his couch. “Why do you look weird? Come on.” He gestures a head toward the door and I plunk my hat back on my head and trot after him.

He hurries down the steps to the ground floor and extends his hand behind him, fingers curling as they wait to clasp mine. I link my hand in his and rush to catch up. He frowns at the red light and looks both ways. “I think we can dash across,” he says. I nod solemnly at Adriel Trachtenberg weighing the greater evil between jaywalking and showing up late for an extracurricular event he’s leading.

As we hustle down Beechwood toward the playground entrance, I ask, “So what held you up today?”

“You first,” he says, nearly tripping on the uneven sidewalk in his haste.

“Well I was on time,” I assert and burst into laughter when he turns to grin at me mischievously. “Okay, I was also late. But we made the offer and Lyra accepted. She’s going to start in two weeks.”

“Nice!” AJ’s smile is genuine and he gives my hand a squeeze. “Things didn’t work out with Chloe’s husband? Teddy?”

I wave a hand dismissively. “I’m sure he’d be fine, but it just felt like too much of a conflict to hire my friend’s spouse.”

“Hm,” AJ growls. “How did he take the rejection?”

“Well, Mr. T, I’m not entirely sure.” We pause at the corner and look both ways before darting across one final intersection before the park. I sigh. It took a lot of discussion and three rounds of interviews before I finally accepted that Chloe’s husband is not right candidate to replace me as CEO at Vinea. But Lyra definitely is. And I hope Chloe understands that. Not gonna lie, I don’t love how my friend Chloe feels a lot of the time in her marriage. But I’ve got my own relationship to focus on these days, and I’m learning more about how much work goes into a two-way partnership.

After a month of sessions with my new coach, I learned a lot about what I really want from my job. It literally never occurred to me that I could hire someone else to be CEO of Vinea, but now I know all about the differences between a Chief Technology Officer and a Chief Executive Officer.

As soon as I ironed all that out, I took a proposal to the board and we launched a search for someone who knows about business performance and management and all that jazz. Logan is beside herself. She won’t have to explain any lingo or jargon to Lyra, Shane and Audrey can schedule meetings about meetings, and I get to focus on my true passion: our software and our tech team.

I squeeze AJ’s hand again. “Now you, boo. How was your session?”

AJ smiles, a small gesture that shows me he’s thinking about how to answer. “We did a lot of breath work this time.” AJ has been seeing a therapist, talking a lot about how he

snaps to anger so quickly, how frightened he's been of getting left again. "And then I told Naomi you're worth risking my heart."

I pull him to a stop by the wooden sign marking the park entrance, where the red leaves are floating down to the ground in the dusky pink sky. "AJ," I whisper, clutching my heart with the hand not squeezing his. "Thank you for telling me that." I press a palm to his cheek. "And I'm not going anywhere."

He nods. "I think I know that now." He leans in to kiss me, but we are interrupted by whoops and whistles. I peek over his shoulder to see a cluster of seventh graders, some of whom are filming us with their cellphones.

"Yo, Mr. T, this will be great footage for our YouTube channel. Slip her some tongue."

AJ frowns and shakes his head. "Jayden, you know I'll never approve that sort of content on our school channel."

Jayden winks and slips his phone in his pocket. "Just playin, Mr. T. But you and Ms. Vine better hurry. The bird guy says we can go count owl hoots as soon as the sun sets." He and AJ's students wander down the path toward the wooden tower, where they've laid out a few blankets and milk crates. A Citiparks employee gives us a wave and gestures toward the sky.

As AJ tugs me onto his lap on a plaid blanket, a murmur of delight goes up from the crowd of teens and onlookers. The chimney swifts swirl through the sunset in a spiral and AJ traces a matching pattern on my back with his finger. I hear Maya and Dante counting the birds and filming the

synchronized swoops and dips from the flock, but it's hard for me to concentrate on anything other than the soft tickle of AJ's breath against my ear.

"I'm so thankful you stalked me," he whispers. I turn to face him, narrowing my eyes at his interpretation of our meet cute. He shrugs.

I flick his nose. "It would have been easier if your voicemail message wasn't so weird."

He grins and presses his forehead against mine. "I was going for intrigue," he says, kissing me briefly and then remembering that we're surrounded by children. Technically the Citiparks ranger is in charge tonight, but we still shouldn't be making out in front of kids with video cameras. "I think my vocal stylings landed me a pretty hot babe."

I sigh and lean back against his chest. "I will accept your hot babe assessment."

"Good," he whispers. We watch as the sun sets, the birds roost and the program shifts to one of quiet listening as the ranger models the calls of different owls living in the park. A haunting cry emerges from a nearby tree and AJ's hands squeeze me as he communicates that he hears it, too.

We listen for a bit longer and the students record their observations before dashing off to meet their rides or catch their buses. Soon, it's just us, alone under the stars in the crisp autumn air.

I turn in AJ's arms so I can see his eyes in the moonlight, and I feel a little swoony with the romance of it all. "You

brought me on a data observation session,” I tell him.

He nods and kisses my hand. “And *you* enjoy learning about science with my students.”

I nod and kiss him on the mouth. “You should take me home and do other things I enjoy.”

I move to stand but he tugs me back onto his lap. He holds my gaze. “I meant what I said earlier, Samantha. You’re worth every risk. You’re worth everything to me.” He swallows. “I need to tell you I love you.”

I have to check to see if the sun rose already or if the burning glow I feel is coming from inside my chest. “You love me?”

He nods. “I really do.” For so long, I thought love wasn’t an option for me, that I chose my work and I felt okay about that because I could make an impact that way. But here, in this park with this man who fights with me and knows what makes me tick, here under the starlight I realize it’s not an either-or situation. I can rock my career and there’s still enough of me leftover to matter to someone else. Someone who matters to me.

Tears well up in my eyes as I lean into the sincerity and vulnerability AJ showed me today. “I love you, too.” And the two of us smile, settling in to this new reality. But it’s not new, not really. This connection has been building between us for months. We both just needed to open our eyes and acknowledge it.

“Let’s go inside,” AJ says, shivering a bit in the cold.

I run my hands along his legs where they're bent on either side of my hips. "Yes, let's," I tell him. But neither of us moves. We sit in the park, with the owls hooting around us, savoring the first day we were each brave enough to admit we were in love.

EPILOGUE: SAMANTHA

Foof is out in force this week because Chloe is about to release another book, Piper is thinking of changing jobs, and Orla is considering having a third baby. There's a *lot* to talk about, even for women who know how to keep things snappy. "I can only stay for a bit today," I tell them. "I feel bad."

Esther pulls back the drink she was about to hand me and shakes her head. "No booze until you tell us why you have to leave."

I grin. "You all know damn well it's AJ's family's Hanukkah party tonight." I tuck my hair behind my ears as my friends burst into a chorus of *awww*. "They said I can light the candle." I was able to sneak away from work for the beginning of the Foof meeting today. Sneak is the wrong word. I could leave at the end of the business day because in my new role, I don't spend my evenings sifting through paperwork I hate. These days, I strategize about new tech, fine-tune our existing tech, and sometimes sit alongside our developers to troubleshoot bugs in our products. And I freaking love it.

"Orla, do you need me to go through some of our research data to assess parental stress levels when families have more

than two babies? You know I could get you a report in minutes, sweetie.” She shakes her head. “It was more of a passing idea than a real thing I want to try,” she says, bouncing Nicole’s baby on her hip. “Besides, with this one, I can cuddle him and hand him right on back to his mama.”

Nicole shakes her head, happy to have help with her infant. Seeing the Brady family ladies reminds me of my own family obligations for the evening, so I excuse myself and bundle up for the drive to AJ’s parents’ house. He’s meeting me there after work, since his students are finishing up a research project and staying late with him at the middle school.

I arrive before he does, and Avi tugs me in the door in a big hug. “Sam! We’re so glad to have you here tonight.” I peek over her shoulder to see AJ’s parents and Bubbie grinning and munching on cheese and crackers. AJ’s grandmother sees me and claps her hands. I swear, they like me better than they do AJ, and I don’t mind it a bit.

Avi takes my coat and hands me a glass of wine, and when AJ arrives a few minutes later, I laugh because he has to hang his own coat and pour his own drink. He snuggles up to my side, pressing a cold kiss to my neck. “You smell like snow,” I whisper to him. “Does that smell have a name, too?”

He scrunches up his face. “I’m not actually sure. I’ll report back later.” He taps my nose. “You ready for this?”

AJ’s dad clears his throat. “I think everyone is here now. Right? Nobody else?” AJ’s mom shakes her head. “Right, then. Time to get lit!”

AJ rolls his eyes. “Every year, Dad.” His father shrugs as we all walk over to the picture window in the living room, where the menorah is set on the sill. “Okay,” my boyfriend stands behind me. “Do you remember what to do?”

I look around at his family and nod. “We light the helper candle first and then use it to spread the light.” AJ nods. My hand shakes as I try and fail to light the match and he stands behind me, pressed close as he helps me strike the match. “Want me to do it with you?” His words are soft in my ear and I nod. Together, we touch the flame to the wick and I smile as the glow fills the room.

AJ’s family begins singing the prayer, and AJ’s voice is low beside me, singing along as I shake out the match and then pick up the candle, using it to light the menorah. It’s such a lovely moment, full of gratitude and happiness. We all stand together in silence for a bit and AJ wraps his arms around my waist, softly kissing my head.

“All right,” his mother’s voice breaks the stillness. “Latke time.” Avi rubs her palms together and rushes to the table.

AJ guides me into a seat beside him and says, “Okay. So I didn’t prepare you for this because it really is a moment of truth. A rite of passage.” Avi leans her elbows on the table. I hear Bubbie and AJ’s mom stop clattering in the kitchen and they bend their heads around the door frame. AJ’s dad looks anxious. “Samantha Vine, when we hand you a latke, will you top it with applesauce or sour cream?” I blink at him in confusion. He pats my leg. “Don’t feel like you need to answer

right away. Think about it, because your answer will determine your future with the Trachtenberg family.”

Everyone laughs, including me, but I don't need to think very long. Crispy potatoes and onions? “No contest. Sour cream,” I say, and then I gasp as his family groans.

AJ closes his eyes and shakes his head, pressing his hands to his heart. “Samantha,” he says. “You've disappointed me deeply.”

Bubbie makes a “tsk” sound and serves me a few sizzling latkes. “Adriel don't be dramatic. Some people like sour cream. Every now and again, someone likes sour cream.”

“Those people are wrong, though.” Avi scoops applesauce onto her plate from a serving dish on the table.

I bite my lip and stare at the Trachtenberg family. “You know, I could pop open a data collection module, chart some nationwide or even global latke topping preferences?”

AJ leans forward and kisses me on the forehead. “I love you, Samantha.”

“I love you, too. Do you want me to run a program? It won't take long...”

AJ shakes his head. “I love you, but it's not necessary to run a model.”

“Well why not? Surely you'd want to know if your family's firm belief is based in fact?” I take a bite of the latke. “Bubbie, this is amazing. Do I taste rosemary?”

She nods. “Just a pinch.”

AJ continues shaking his head. “It doesn’t need to be fact. It just is.”

“I don’t accept that answer,” I tell him, wiping a dab of sour cream on his nose and laughing at his frown.

He growls and snaps his teeth at me. “Mother, you’re going to have to excuse Samantha. The sour cream probably impacted her ability to think straight.”

They tease me about my “faulty” preference for sour cream and joke that they’re not going to buy me enough to last all eight nights. I lean against AJ and soak it all in, the bickering, the meal, the spark and glow between us.

AJ and I have done so much work over the past few months—both of us are feeling the impact our coach and therapist are having on our happiness at work and with family. I’m not flying to Virginia this year for Christmas, in fact. I’m joining my boyfriend for a day of volunteering with his synagogue right here in Pittsburgh. And then he’s moving in to my townhouse on New Year’s when his lease expires. He feels ready, after working to unpack his feelings...and since he spends most nights at my place anyway.

After the meal, AJ’s father gets out their dreidel and AJ and his sister squabble some more over the rules of the game while I munch on the chocolate coins. I fiddle with the gold foil wrappers from the candy as AJ gets heated over one of his spins, jumping in the air and pumping his fist, knocking a tray of cookies off the edge of the table. He and I both dive for them together, scooping them up off the floor.

Laughing, AJ piles the cookies back on the tray and grins at me. “These are perfectly good,” he says.

I nod. “It would be a shame to waste them.” He kisses me, tasting of chocolate. Leaning in closer, he whispers, “I should probably take you home, though, so we can eat the floor cookies in private.”

I grin and clutch at his hand under the tablecloth. “I like how you think.”

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“This book made me feel a lot of things. I laughed. I cried. I rooted for this couple. Hard.”

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Want to see what happens next for AJ and Samantha? [Click here for a steamy bonus epilogue](#)

FOUNDATION

A GROUCHY GEEK ROMANCE

CHAPTER 1

NICOLE

MY ASSISTANT, Mark, stands outside my office door, timidly fidgeting with a crisp piece of paper. “I’m supposed to give you a message from the boss.”

“I thought *I* was the boss, Mark.” I don’t look up from my spreadsheet. Of course I know he’s referring to the company owner, Tim Stag, but I suspect Tim and his wife, Alice, are going to ask me to babysit again while they go out with my best friend and her husband. Who happens to be Tim’s brother.

I can hear Mark breathing rapidly, and I glance up. He’s holding a cream colored hand-written note. The fancy letterhead means Alice helped write it, and that usually signifies a big ask. If Tim wanted a profit and loss report, he’d just send a text.

Or shout from his office.

Mark rubs his fingers along the paper and shifts his weight, trying to melt into the door frame. I sigh. “I’m not going to watch his baby again if that’s what he’s asking. I told you to tell him no to that shit.”

“It’s something different this time,” Mark says, and walks into my office. He presents the paper to me.

“Aw hell no. Definitely not. Tell him no.”

Mark flushes. “Donna said I was to tell you this is not negotiable.”

Donna is Tim’s executive assistant and is generally the final say in all matters of actual importance.

“Hm.” I read it again.

Nicole—you will join the Stag Law marathon relay team, to compete in the Pittsburgh Marathon on Sunday, May 2. We will produce a faster collective time than Beltane Engineering. Alice will be adjusting meals accordingly. Participation is not optional.

—TS

“Well, shit,” I mutter. “Where do I even start with this?” I say that last bit louder, hoping for an answer, but Mark has already backed out of the office.

Tim is an avid runner and, thanks to his perky wife yanking him out of a funk, he’s an avid joiner. If there’s a golf outing or boat rowing or softball opportunity to schmooze with other businesses here in Pittsburgh, Tim is on it.

He just usually knows better than to include me in this nonsense.

Tim never tires of bitching to his family that Beltane has an unfair advantage in the corporate relay challenge. All the big firms bet money on the outcome, which they donate to

charities. So of course the charities get in on it until the pressure is pretty high for corporate fitness bragging rights.

It drives Tim bananas that his staff at a sports law firm is not fitter and faster than a squad of gangly math nerds. While the Stag Law senior staffers are out perfecting their golf game to woo clients, the engi-nerds all seem to be distance runners.

I give zero shits about any of this, but my boss repeatedly reminds me that our law firm represents a lot of athletes. It's good for our image to appear competitively athletic. Then he reminds me that, as his director of strategy, I'm the one who said that last bit about our image.

Both of Tim's brothers are huge runners, too, so Tim keeps trying to sneak them on the payroll so they count for our corporate teams. I point out that there's no way to cook the books to include a retired pro hockey player or a world renowned glass artist on a law firm's roster.

I look down at my legs. Thick and solid, they will absolutely catch my cell phone if I drop it while I'm sitting on the toilet. But running?

Do I have a treadmill desk in my office? Sure. But that's mostly so I can angry-pace while I'm on the phone. I am not what you might call a runner. I am also not what you might call a person who exercises.

I think back to all the times my mother insisted I go to the gym or go running to "slim down," and how violently I had refused to do anything of the kind. There's a war inside me, where one side is raging against my mother's body shaming,

and the other side is recoiling from anyone—including my sub-conscience—telling me I can't do something.

I bite my lip. I consider the options. I remind myself that Tim is not my mother, and that his request here is fully related to his own dumb pride and has nothing to do with him wanting me to fit into any sort of mold of what anyone says a woman should look like.

I sigh and weigh my options, deciding I need to call my best friend to figure out why in the hell Tim thought I'd do this.

I look at the time and figure it's late enough in the morning that I can call my best friend without pulling her out of some sort of baby nap. Emma is married to Tim's brother Thatcher, and the whole damn herd of Stags is about as fertile as a pack of rabbits. She and Thatcher just had their second bunny in as many years.

Since my family are a bunch of assholes and I'm not giving up any of my precious time with Emma, I've become an honorary Stag family member. Tim is still my boss, though. We do work to keep each other at a bit of a distance—him because he has control issues and me because he reminds me of my hyper-controlling parents.

It's different with Emma, though. I pretend to be a grouch about her babies, but I know how many health struggles she overcame to get them here. Hell, I helped her find the right doctors for her epilepsy when we lived together in college.

Emma's phone rings and rings. I'm about to hang up in frustration when she picks up on the tenth ring. "Nik," she

whisper yells. “I got them both to sleep! At the same time!”

“If I pretend to be excited for you, can we skip ahead to my drama?” I *am* excited for Emma. I know how important sleep is for her, and how rarely her kids succumb to this state. She knows I’m just fucking with her. I have an image to maintain, after all.

“Spill,” she says, louder now, and I can hear her walking down the hall of her house. I fill her in on Tim’s memo, and she laughs loudly. “He was just over here complaining about the marathon again yesterday. You know how he gets about not-winning.”

“I do, but how did he determine that **I** am the great, curvaceous hope for Stag Law? I mean, isn’t his wife the next logical step?”

Each of the corporate teams is supposed to include at least one person who identifies as female. We don’t exactly have a ton of women working here at Stag Law, something I’ve been working on ever since I arrived a year ago. Tim’s wife is the corporate chef here and I know she at least exercises occasionally. I’ve seen her in actual running clothes in the past.

“Well,” Emma says with her mouth full of something. She must be trying to cram in a meal before her fawns wake up. “If I tell you, you can’t tell them you know.”

“Fuck a duck, is she pregnant *again*? What’s that—four for them? Five?”

Emma laughs. “Three, Nicole. Tim and Alice will have 3 kids. She’s angling for 4 and he wants to stop at 3, if you care about the family debates.” I do not care about this debate. Like I said—I’m keeping *some* distance.

“Is there anyone else at work who can do this,” I mutter, as if Emma would know the answer. I mentally scroll through the other female employees, and can see why Tim sent me this invite. The rest are all knocking on retirement’s door or pregnant. I sigh.

“Will you come with me to buy some workout clothes? That seems like the sort of thing I have to try on in person.”

“Ooh, a trip to the mall is a great idea. I need bath fizzies for once I’m allowed to submerge again. Pick me up at 6?”

I make plans to go shopping with Emma, promising that I’ll be nice to the baby when I pick them up. I’m not actually a monster—I am glad my friend found her perfect life partner and have admitted that the two of them owe it to humanity to reproduce their sexy genes. I just don’t know anything about kids and they make me nervous, like I might break them or fuck them up as much as my parents did me.

I look up the details of the race online. I’ll have to run five miles. In a row. I don’t know if I can do that. That’s more than three times the distance from my house to my office, and I don’t even walk that far each day. *Can people really run that far without stopping?*

“Mark!” I shout for him to come back. He pops his head around the doorframe again. “Can you get me a coach or

something? What's it even called when someone shows you how to run?"

Mark's face breaks into a relieved grin. "That's the good news," he gleams. "Mr. Stag also forwarded me a schedule for training events. He has a whole series of memos about team building and workplace morale and cardiovascu—"

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. Shit, Mark. Do you know how my ass is going to look at a team jog? Don't answer that." He backs out of the office again.

Mark emails me the schedule and training information for the relay team. Is Tim serious with this bullshit? The training program starts this month. In January. It's not like we have an empire to run or anything—we all have plenty of time for speed work and zone dieting, whatever the hell that is. The good news about all of this is that the city finally finished work on that recreation path along the river.

My townhouse in Lawrenceville is at least walking distance from the running path so I don't have to run along the sidewalk while all the hipsters stand in line for ramen and barbecue.

Still, though. Running in the snow translates to Tim Stag giving me another raise. I pull up the company calendar app and pencil myself in for a meeting with the CEO.

CHAPTER 2

ZACK

IT'S cold and there's a crowd here for the group training run. I hate crowds. My brother Liam leans a sneakered foot up on the tailgate of my truck, stretching his hamstring in the parking lot while the sky figures out if it's going to snow or just look foreboding all day. "Tell me again why we're doing this?"

Liam just growls, and I join him in the stretch.

Our father jogs up in an electric blue track suit he probably bought in Cuba when it wasn't legal for Americans to travel there. "Hope you drank your protein shakes, boys," he says, slapping Liam on the ass. "Corporate team training starts right here, right now. Gotta maintain that Beltane legacy."

I roll my eyes, not bothering to point out that I have no intention of competing for the company relay team in this year's marathon. We have this discussion every year, and every year I am bullied into running with my extended family. Meanwhile, I've never even gotten to run the full marathon in my hometown. The relay takes place at the same time, with the long distance runners blending in with relayers who switch out every five miles or so.

I always feel like an asshole on the fourth or fifth section, starting on fresh legs while the runners around me have been pounding the pavement for 20 miles.

I feel like I want to explain to all of them that I'm actually a full marathoner. I just have to drive to other cities and run their marathons to feel their masochistic, amazing pain.

Dad catches my scowl, and he says, "To sweeten the pot, I'll cover the New York marathon registration fee, since a relay leg isn't nearly challenging enough for my Brady boys."

My cousin Orla coughs and glares at my dad. "Right. Brady *FAMILY*," he says, clapping her on the shoulder. "Well it hardly counts as a challenge for you, dear. It's not like I can kick you off the relay team for dragging ass."

"Just what I always wanted," she says, rolling her eyes. "To be the token female in a herd of men performing feats of strength." My brothers and cousin start in on each other, slinging foul comebacks, when the event organizer jumps up on a boulder with a megaphone.

"Good morning, titans of industry!" he shouts, grinning. I groan. "Who's excited to be here for our kickoff run?" I tune out his chipper voice and look around, seeing the regular crew. There's the corporate bankers, the out of shape CPA firm, the doctors, and the academics. And then I do a double take, fixated on a mop of chestnut hair swirling in the gray light.

I cannot stop staring at the woman shivering off to the side with a group of scrawny lawyers from Stag Law. I see their boss stretching his quads, wearing headphones, ready to gallop down the path as soon as the whistle blows. I feel one of my

brothers punch my shoulder. “Ouch!” I glare at him. “What was that for?”

“Were you even listening? Seasoned runners are supposed to pair up with someone new, to help them pace and work their breath and all that shit.”

“What’s your point? I’m not doing that.” It’s one thing to be here. They can’t make me be coach to an amateur.

The guy with the megaphone jumps down from the boulder and picks up two orange buckets from the ground. Climbing back onto his perch, he shouts, “Your group leaders have taken the liberty of identifying team members who are beginners, and those with a bit more experience and wisdom to share today.” He starts reaching into the buckets and calling out names, pairing people at random. “This is what it’s all about!” he says.

I feel my blood pounding in my ears. I watch as people awkwardly team up and start off jogging or stretching. A small voice inside wants me to get stuck with the woman over there, with all the hair. That voice is coming straight from my dick, who keeps reminding me how nice it would be to run right behind her, staring at that round ass moving down the path. “Shut up,” I mutter to my junk, as if it had actually said those things out loud.

Some of the pairs are doing secret handshake moves and laughing. This is like a nightmare for me. But then I hear the organizer say, “Zack Brady, you’re going to be helping to coach your new best friend...Nicole Kennedy!”

Nicole Kennedy does indeed turn out to be the woman with out of control hair and ice green eyes. She's short and curvy and looks like she's never run a day in her life. My family members all flip me the bird as they tear off down the trail—apparently there were way more experts than beginners needing a coach.

Dad gives me a grin, and then Nicole and I are in a standoff, waiting to see who will approach whom first. She stands with her legs spread wide, arms crossed, eyes seeming to say *I do not make the first move in these situations.*

I roll my eyes and approach her. “Isaac Brady,” I say. “Zack.” I offer her my hand, and she raises an eyebrow, keeping both hands on her rounded hips. God, I love when women wear tight leggings to go running. Jesus, the ass on this woman. *What the fuck am I doing here?* “So...we're doing this I guess,” I say. “What's your typical pace?”

She cocks a brow at me. “If I knew what typical pace meant, I wouldn't be in the beginner group, would I?” So that's how this is going to go, I guess.

“Ok,” I say, gesturing down the trail. “Today's run is 2 miles, and the plan is to do a steady pace. So why don't you start running at a pace where you feel comfortable talking.”

“Talking? How will I know if it's a comfortable talking pace?”

This is going to be harder than I thought. “You’re going to have to talk to me to test it out.” This gets, if not exactly a smile, at least an amused expression. I get a definite no-nonsense, don’t-fuck-with-me vibe from Ms. Nicole Kennedy. I like it. I don’t want to be fucked with, either.

We start running, faster than I thought we’d go. Everything she’s wearing looks brand new, like she went out shopping for this experience. Certain she’s going to burn out, I test the waters and talk to her. “Tell me how you wound up here today.”

She falls into step beside me and snaps that her boss is making her be here. “What are the consequences if you refuse?”

She keeps her eyes straight ahead when she tells me, “He’d be a miserable asshole and a bear to work with. Which I’m now re-evaluating, since my alternative is apparently training with you.”

She’s sparring with me, and I am shocked to discover I like it. A lot. I don’t spend a lot of time with women, apart from my cousin. There aren’t a ton of women in geotechnical engineering, and I spend all my free time trail running.

The women I do encounter aren’t like this one. She... sizzles.

I’m not sure what comes over me, but I nudge her with my elbow. I’m never playful with women. I’m not even interested in being playful with *this* woman. Am I? But then she turns and smiles, a real smile. I feel my heart change course, which makes me feel ridiculous. Is it possible to have a stroke in

response to a beautiful woman smiling? I speed up a bit to course correct, just to see if she can keep up. “Still able to talk?”

“Fuck. This. Shit,” she huffs, her breath coming out in white puffs of condensation. “Happy?”

I grin. I am happy. She might be complaining about a January run—who wouldn’t? But she’s not quitting. She’s not slowing. She’s just grouchy about it.

I hear her breath coming a little faster, but we’re a mile in at this point. “We’re almost at the turn around,” I say, and sure enough, we start to see runners headed back from their training loop. “Oh shit,” I mutter, noticing my brothers.

“Hey now!” Cal says, stopping on the path and causing Liam to crash into him.

Orla runs on ahead like she doesn’t know any of us, my dad hot on her tail. “Don’t fall behind, Cal. You know better than this,” Dad says.

“Who’s your new training buddy?” Cal pivots on the path and starts running next to Nicole, who is starting to sweat. I try not to stare at the sheen on her upper lip, despite the frigid air outside. She is probably wearing too many layers. Shit, now I’m thinking about peeling her out of her layers. I can’t stop picturing her round ass and thick thighs melting out of those leggings. I start wondering how heavy her breasts would feel in my hands when I zipped her out of her fleece.

“Nicole Kennedy,” she says, offering a hand to Cal. It’s good to hear she can still talk. “Reluctant relay runner in

training.”

“Well we’ve got that in common,” Cal says, falling into step beside her. I can see him turning up the charm and while the logical response would be for me to embrace this, take the attention from myself, I can feel rage simmering in my stomach at the thought of Cal putting the moves on Nicole.

“You don’t seem too reluctant, considering you’re running extra along with us,” Nicole says. Interesting how her voice is softer with him. Friendly. I don’t like that, either.

“My brothers would rather be training for the full marathon, but our father makes us do the relay corporate challenge.” I shove him when he tries to swerve in closer to Nicole.

“Don’t act like you wouldn’t rather do the full, too, man.” He shoves me back and I stumble. I reach a hand for Nicole to steady myself before I face plant on the trail, and I gasp at the electric current I feel when my skin connects with her waist.

I feel a seismic tremor roll through my body as she turns around to look at me. I’m in serious trouble.

CHAPTER 3

NICOLE

I'M DYING. I feel like my lungs are burning. I'll be damned if I let the Brady brothers notice, though. Of course my broody, sexy-as-sin new running partner would have a huge family. Of course they're all lithe and interested in running. They probably go jogging with my boss Tim and his brothers.

I noticed Isaac speed up a half mile ago and I'm working my ovaries off trying to keep the new pace and pretend like I'm actually able to talk. Really, I am desperate to wheeze, to gasp in gulps of air. But Isaac said I should be comfortable enough to talk at this pace, and I'll be damned if I let myself seem like a weak link. Who decided people should converse while they're running? This feels like torture. Of course these two Brady boys are able to chitchat.

My mind drifts and I start thinking about Isaac's thighs in those tapered running pants. I fantasize about poking his long muscles. Just jabbing one of my cold fingers into the side of his leg. God, I bet they're firm as marble. *Halfway done with this run*, I think as we turn around and head back the way we came. This won't be terrible. Will it? *Just focus on the thighs*, I tell myself.

“Whoah,” I feel a hand on my hip and I look down to see the sweaty paw of Isaac Brady clutching at my fleece as he stumbles on the gravel.

“Sorry,” he mutters quickly, regaining his footing. “My dickhead brother shoved me into you.”

“My bad, Nicky.” Cal runs ahead of us and turns around, jogging backwards and giving a high five to the passing group leader with the megaphone.

“Do not call me Nicky,” I tell Cal, gritting my teeth so I don’t wheeze. I can’t wait to at least cough so I can draw enough wind to keep going.

“My bad again,” Cal says, and then he looks between me and Isaac, and back again. He seems confused for a second and he says, “Well, I’m going to hurry ahead before all the free bagels are gone,” and he dashes down the path.

“What was all that about?” I have to focus all my oxygen to make the sentence sound normal. I cannot let him know I’m struggling. I refuse.

“All what?”

I turn my head to stare at Isaac, incredulous. “Your brother just scurried away when I yelled at him about calling me Nicky.”

Isaac actually laughs at this, and I feel my insides respond to the low rumble of sound he makes as he runs. “Maybe he doesn’t like to be yelled at.”

I snort. “He’d better not spend time with me, then. I yell at everyone.”

“Noted,” Isaac says, and he grins again. I like that I made him grin. It seems like something difficult to do, and I like being good at things. Which is partly why this running situation is making me act like such an asshole. I’m way out of my element here. Hell, I can’t even breathe.

We run in silence for a bit after that. The bagels at the parking lot are sounding better and better. Isaac’s shoe crunches over some litter on the trail, and I brave a proper wheeze and puff of wind as the sound of him kicking the plastic away masks the noises of me dying. But it doesn’t work.

“Is this pace too fast?”

“I’m fine.” It takes all my control again to keep my voice even, natural sounding. Maybe the flames I feel inside aren’t related to my attraction to him at all. More likely, I’m dying of asphyxiation. Oxygen deprivation. I’ll have to ask Emma to look up whether that’s a real thing.

“Hey, why don’t you unzip your pullover a little, or even lose a layer.” His voice sounds a little far off, even though I can see that he’s right by my side. Isn’t he?

“You’re not getting me out of my clothes that easy,” I spit out. And then, to my horror, I get dizzy and I think I black out for a second, because the next thing I know I’m tumbling into the hedge along the path.

When I open my eyes, I realize my body is being cradled by something warm and firm. I’m disoriented, but comfortable.

Mmm, maybe it's one of those massage chairs I've been telling Mark to install in my office. This is fantastic. So warm, gently moving.

Fuck. I open my eyes all the way and stare into the concerned face of Isaac Brady. "What happened," I ask, struggling to sit up.

"Hey, easy," he says, setting a hand on my shoulder. "You just passed out."

I wriggle away from his touch before his heat burns through to my bones. My heart is pounding in my ears and my chest is heaving. I guess the jig is up, and I feel myself recoiling at the idea that he's seen me in a weak spot. What the hell is he doing to me? I should know better than to let someone else take up rent-free space in my head. There is no reason I should care about this guy at all. "It's fine," I tell him. "I am just not used to running like this, like I said."

"You were pushing yourself too hard. It's too cold to be doing that—"

I cut him off by wheezing and hacking like my lungs are on fire. Seriously, it feels like knives are slicing through my chest. "It's called kilo cough," Isaac says, resting a hand on my back. "You pushed yourself too hard, *like I said.*" I don't have enough air to yell at him for spitting my words back at me.

"My lungs hurt worse than my legs," I wail in between bouts of painful coughs.

He just nods and helps me to my feet. “You put in what? Two miles of max effort just to prove to me that you didn’t need to breathe hard or slow down?” He raises an eyebrow and looks smug.

Who the fuck is this guy? I want to punch him in the dick, but thinking that causes me to look down at said body part and seeing the bulge inside his track pants makes me lick my lips in between coughs.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” I tell him. “I’m only pushing myself because my boss is expecting our team to beat your fucking firm in the marathon.”

This gets a laugh out of him. “Stag Law wants to beat Beltane? That’ll be the day.” He hooks a hand under my upper arm and guides me down the path. We’re close enough to the parking lot now that I can see one of his siblings running along toward us. Is it the same one as before? I can’t tell them apart when I’m hacking up a lung. Meanwhile, Isaac starts to list the different endurance events he and his family participate in as a group. All the -thons, apparently.

“You all right there, Ms. Kennedy?” The same brother as before holds out a cup of water and I snatch it from him greedily. As I slurp down the icy liquid he laughs and says, “See? I learn from my mistakes and I come bearing peace offerings. What happened?”

I open my mouth to tell him I’m dying from this ridiculous training exercise, but Isaac growls, “She’s fine. We’re good here, Cal.”

I look at Issac. This is interesting. Isaac clearly doesn't want his brother hanging around us.

However, "Don't speak for me, Isaac. Don't ever speak *for* me." I turn to face Cal again. "I'm great. Never been better. You said there were bagels?"

CHAPTER 4

ZACK

Tranquil Trail Monday. 6am!

I CHECK the text from my brother Liam before my fingers freeze and I can't use my phone anymore. I'm in the right place at the right time. My jagoff brothers are just fucking late. I should have known they'd do this. It's not even light out yet and I feel like an asshole with my headlamp on for our morning run.

I'm about to get back in my truck and head home when I hear them rolling up. My shoulders relax a bit when I see the two men crammed inside Cal's ancient vehicle. We're all here, I guess. I work to stuff down the twinge of jealousy I always feel when I'm reminded how close they are. We have different mothers, but Cal and Liam would never suggest I was any less their brother.

It's all my own head that twists my thoughts.

"Let's go, before my balls snap off." Liam springs from the car and takes off down the trailhead without waiting for the rest of us. He's dreaming if he thinks we won't catch him. This

isn't like yesterday—that was equal parts full family activity and work requirement.

We all work for my dad and my uncle—two brothers who started an engineering firm over 30 years ago when nobody else was really doing that.

None of us particularly liked running at first, but just like studying engineering in college, we weren't given a choice about it. In our father's house, we run five miles a day at minimum, and we bleed, sweat, and dream engineering principles. It's just part of our DNA. Not sure where Orla puts her miles in. She never comes running with us, but she clocks decent times in the races we run, whether she likes it or not.

Uncle Kellen doesn't compete. He says his leisurely run into work each morning is enough for him. I wish I had the nerve to buck against the family expectations like that. Maybe someday if I've lived through what Uncle Kellen has, I'll let go of all my fucks, too.

Liam's pace is too slow, even given the steep trail as we descend down into Frick Park. When I shoulder past him and he growls, I grin. At least we can keep it interesting if we're going to push each other.

Soon the three of us are jostling for the lead on the narrow path, laughing and shoving each other as we run through the park. It's hard not to feel like a little kid, running with my brothers in the woods. Damn, I'm glad we did this after all, even if I did have to get up before dawn.

It's not yet 7 by the time we finish, so we end up waiting a few minutes outside for the Frick Cafe to open. Another

tradition, we always grab breakfast here after our park runs.

Like some sort of unspoken competition, none of us wants to be the first to complain about the cold, so we alternate grunts. I see the wait staff through the painted windows and raise my eyebrows at one of our favorite servers. She takes pity on us and opens the door a few minutes early, nodding her head toward our typical booth in the back.

“Bring on the protein special, Em. You know the drill,” Cal says, sending a wink, earning himself an elbow to the ribs from Liam. “Eventually she’ll come home with me for a shower,” Cal says, sliding into his seat and spreading across the entire bench.

I kick his thigh to make room and slide next to him. Crossing my arms, I take a minute to appreciate the warmth in the cafe. Liam’s voice pulls me out of my daze.

“Did Uncle Kellen decide about the dam project yet?” The server brings out steaming plates of turkey sausage and eggs and protein pancakes, but Liam holds my gaze until I answer him.

“He didn’t. Wants to think about it another week.” Beltane Engineering is bidding on a major dam restoration project, and the sudden retirement of our geotechnical team leader has left me scrambling to prove myself ready to fill his shoes.

When Kenny Hudson collapsed on the job from a heart attack, my dad responded typically: he visited Kenny at the hospital, insisted he retire and enjoy his dotage, and then called each of his sons to lecture us about our health. Again, not sure if Orla got a lecture. She keeps to herself.

You'd think being the boss's son with an engineering degree from MIT would give me an edge for a promotion, but if you thought that, you never spent much time with Mick and Kellen Brady. Two brothers—the yin to the other's yang—they never seem to agree on anything except that nothing their kids do is ever quite good enough.

My uncle won't say so, but he's pitting me against the new guy from Texas and waiting to see which of us can solve another client's sinkhole problem first before assigning us the lead role on the dam.

“No pressure, right Zack?” Cal talks with his mouth full and nudges Liam, waiting for him to laugh. “Get it? Pressure? Geotechnical? Nobody?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, I get it.”

“Want to run the sinkhole plan by us, see if anything sticks?” Liam always wants to collaborate, even though as a structural engineer he doesn't have much overlap in my work. I start to map out my idea to him, talking about back filling the space under our client's access road, maybe utilizing a plastic bubble technique to displace some of the shifting that's been causing sinkholes at a manufacturing site outside the city. “We'd replace some of the dirt fill with these plastic bubbles. The sphere shape makes them very structurally sound,” I tell him, and he nods.

“We use those in concrete flooring sometimes for less weight at the same strength,” he says.

By the time we leave breakfast, I'm actually feeling ready to present at our meeting later today. “Hey, thanks, brother.”

Liam nods. “See you all at the office?” The two of them live in an industrial loft space our dad picked up on a whim. It’s like a college dorm at their place, complete with nosy landlord, but what I lack in companionship at my house, I make up for in calling all my own shots. Cal flips me off as they pile back in his SUV and head home, most likely to wrestle for who gets first shower.

I’m the first Brady to arrive at the office, and I take advantage of the quiet to organize my plans. By the time my uncle rolls in with Texas Ted at his side, I’m feeling confident. I even allow myself a slight smile when our office admin announces it’s time for all the civil engineers to gather for the weekly planning meeting. As soon as we settle this sinkhole issue, our top priority at Beltane Engineering will be to make headway on winning this dam project.

I can smell the opportunity when I see that someone from the sales team is joining us this morning. Uncle Kellen wouldn’t call them in if it weren’t time to coordinate our pitch. I’m grateful I got an opportunity to talk through the pitch with Liam this morning. Everything feels fresh. From here on out, I plan to be neck deep in soil calculations and talus slopes.

I grit my teeth when my dad sticks his head into the meeting. “Zack, good. You’re here.”

“I’ve been here for an hour, Dad.”

He ignores my snide comment. “Kellen, I need to borrow my kid for a minute.” My uncle nods and gestures for me to hand him my notes on the sinkholes. I feel my guts collapsing in on themselves like the soil beneath our client’s dump trucks.

My blood runs cold as I realize my father is pulling me away from my opportunity to advance at this company, in this career he insisted I pursue. White hot rage nearly blinds me as I follow him into the elevator.

“Can you push 6 for me, kiddo? We’re going up into my office.” I don’t say a word, don’t tell him to push his own fucking elevator button instead of clutching his Yerba mate with two hands. Slowly, deliberately, I extend a finger and jab as the doors slide shut, along with everything I’ve planned for the past year.

CHAPTER 5

NICOLE

MORNINGS ARE my favorite time of day. I don't spend much time at my house these days, but when I am there, I like to be out on my sun porch with a cup of hot coffee. I chose this house because the gently sloping backyard looks out on the Allegheny River. I'm close enough to walk to work downtown—not that I ever would do such a thing in heels—and I live close to anything I would want to buy, if I were the sort of person who regularly went shopping in real life.

My sunroom is divine, no matter who's asking. And the fact that I rebuilt it myself makes it even better. Everything I see around me is mine, down to the studs. I remodeled this place one inch at a time over the years since I bought it.

I sink into the papasan chair on my porch, just enjoying my house. I had an early night after hanging out with Emma. Her younger baby got really fussy and I could tell she wanted to be alone with him, so I just went home and got a normal night's sleep for once.

Not before tossing and turning for a long while, thinking about my reluctant running coach and how he had scooped me into his arms when my lungs stubbornly refused to breathe

properly on our training run. The experience really showed me how much I'm going to need to work to get ready for this thing.

Fucking Tim. He's probably sitting at home smugly telling Alice how he'll make an athlete out of me yet. Gag.

Rather than take a practice run this morning, I slid into my "workout" leggings and curled up in my sunroom, waiting for dawn to strike the barges slowly floating past on the river.

As the sun comes up, I squint into my back yard and notice a long line of mud that definitely was not there the day before. Staring, I stand and walk to the glass wall of my sun room. The line is too big to have been dug by some asshole's dog in search of a bone. I notice that it extends into my neighbor's yard. A ridge in the grass.

I frown at it. My neighbor, Valerie, is a crotchety old busybody who thinks I stole her hedge. We've been in a fight about it since I bought this place. It was planted on my fucking side of the property line, and it was ugly as fuck, so I had it removed and now I can enjoy my view of the river. She's still not over it, though, and I imagine this new trench is her doing.

She's probably planning some new landscaping nightmare, I decide, and make a mental note to call and fight with her later.

I finish my coffee, and get ready for work. We're launching some major new strategic initiatives this year, partnering with other industry experts to help our athlete clients create charitable foundations. I spend the entire day pulling together comparison plans about competitor firms in

other cities, ignoring everyone except Mark, and I only talk to him when he brings Pad Thai for lunch. I'm still pissed off about the coerced marathon gang.

I practically died this weekend training for that nonsense... is what I told Tim in a series of angry text messages. He knows I'm pouting. He probably also knows me well enough to understand that I hate doing things I'm not awesome at. I'd much prefer to be coerced into this next year when I've had time to get good at it first.

I get home from work and reach for my mail, where I notice a neon pink note card sticking out among my bills and Bust magazine. When I get inside, I drop my stuff on the little table I selected for just this purpose, and I read the note.

Scratched in hurried handwriting, it reads "we need to discuss your latest work in the backyard." It's from Valerie, which makes me frown, because I assumed that ridge was her doing.

Unless it still is and she wants to fill me in on whatever nonsense she's scheming. I reach for my phone to pull up a copy of our property survey for her perusal, when she starts banging on my front door.

"Nicole, I know you're there. Open up."

"Um, hi, Valerie." I step back a foot and she bursts into my house, stomping her feet on my mat and shivering like she just

walked here from Ohio instead of next door. “What’s going on?”

Valerie pulls a packet of rolled up paper from her back pocket. “The yard is basically sliding into the river,” she says, gesturing toward the sun room. “That ridge of dirt is just unsightly today, but mark my words. In a week we’re going to have a crater back there.”

I raise an eyebrow at her. I have no idea what she did for a living before she retired, but I doubt it’s related to yard slides. “And how do you know this exactly?”

I gesture for the papers Valerie offers and begin reading skeptically. “Rotational landslide,” I say. “This looks like a page from a high school textbook.”

“Precisely,” Valerie says, tapping the pages. When I don’t respond, she says, “As you know, I retired after a long career teaching high school science.”

I glance at the diagrams. “I actually didn’t know that, Valerie. We only ever talk about landscaping.” We don’t chat about her career path, but I do sometimes hand her a glass of wine to drink while we bicker from our back patios.

As two single, female homeowners, we mostly communicate about the shared wall of our townhouses and the shared yards suffering from our opposite aesthetics.

Her papers all seem to relate more to giant hillsides than urban backyards. Valerie believes, because she’s been walking her cat back there apparently, that the yard has been slowly shifting and basically making its way into the river.

I walk away from Valerie and open a bottle of wine. She follows and, when I raise a brow at her, she sidles up to my counter. I guess she thinks we're going to sit down and talk about this together.

I sigh.

“Look. I've had a really long day at work. My boss is making me run a marathon. I just don't have the energy left for a landslide tonight.”

Valerie laughs maniacally, like I'm the one who's being ridiculous here, and explains that this will all unfold over the course of the next few weeks. I maintain the right to stare at her like she's an idiot and I start to tune her out, thinking instead of the new branding plan I want Tim to greenlight at work. Valerie coughs eventually, and I realize I'm supposed to respond.

“Can you say that again?” I ask. “This is all just a lot to digest.” *Nice recovery, Nik. You're such an asshole.* Valerie suggests we each tap into our respective networks for advice and regroup in a few days to make a plan to save the yard.

By the time I shoo her out of my house, I have almost forgotten about the entire thing. I have filed the yard ridge away as a nuisance to deal with later. After work settles down.

I definitely push it into the back of my mind as I lie in my tub with a joint, searching the Internet for all the ways I could die training for a marathon relay. Seems like there are actually a lot of ways I could drop over dead, if I'm to trust all these horror stories online.

This is doing nothing to help me calm down. Taking another puff of my doobie, I decide there's only one thing to be done if I'm going to salvage this day.

I need to get off.

I reach for my shelf of tub toys, selecting my most trustworthy vibrator, and close my eyes. But my clit doesn't seem to be working. "What the hell?" I shout into the cavernous bathroom, my words echoing off the tile.

I try another toy, but I can't even get so much as a tingle. I twist over the edge of my tub and grab my phone, pulling up some of my favorite tasteful porn. I crank the vibrator into high gear. Nothing.

Enraged, I decide this inability to orgasm is also related to being strong-armed into marathon participation. I throw the vibrator across the room and stare at my ceiling. Something is definitely off in my life.

In the morning, I wake up still angry, still convinced this marathon business is the root cause of my stress and my pussy problem. I decide that the only way through is through. And when Nicole Kennedy goes through something, she does it to kick ass and take names.

My to-do list today includes, apart from my work for work, hunting down a proper sports bra. This morning, I tried another little running attempt and my unrestrained knockers almost hit me in the teeth.

“Mark!” I lean over his office and then wince when I see his eyes widen in fear. I take my tone down a notch. “Do you work out?”

He nearly spits out his coffee. “Um, I’m gay and I’m single and I don’t have kids. Yes. The answer is yes.”

“Do you know where I can get a good sports bra?”

Mark looks at me, squints, turns his head to the side. “Did you hear the part where I said I’m gay? I mean, I can look it up for you on the internet...”

I scoff. “Forget it. Hold my calls. I’m going to find Alice.”

Alice Stag is puttering around the office kitchen space. She cooks from scratch and serves breakfast and a sit-down lunch here every day. It’s been a great opportunity to get staff members talking to each other. We’ve seen a lot of really interesting collaborations grow out of these mealtime conversations.

Today, I’m hoping I can ask her about her rack without insulting her. “Hey, Alice,” I say, leaning in to get a muffin from the stainless steel counter.

She breaks into a smile. “Nicole! You never join us for breakfast. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I feel a twinge of guilt at always sending Mark to fetch me a smoothie rather than come in here and say hello to her. She’s so perky, and she has hair with the same texture as mine, so she always has good advice about products. I sigh. “I, um, need your advice about bras.”

Alice's face lights up. "Oh, I have a place for you! Yes. This is great." She rattles on and on about how her boobs change size and shape so much since she started having babies. "They're, like, a J cup one day and back down to a D the next. I swear! But this woman is a bra whisperer."

Alice tells me about a fancy store north of the city, where all the big chested women go to find supportive bras that are actually pretty.

"I don't need pretty. I need something that will strap down these boulders."

Alice nods. "You'll be in good hands."

I'm skeptical. "There had better not be anything beige," I tell her.

"Trust me! You'll leave there with like ten bras. I mean, I don't actually know what color the sports bras are...but probably not beige."

I text Emma to see if she can go with me after work, and she immediately video chats me back. "Holy shit, Nik. Alice has been bugging me to go there since I got pregnant with Ricky! Yes."

"I had no idea bras were such a big thing."

She makes a face. "Um, yes you did. You're always bitching about your back hurting." She has a point. This all feels like more support for why I shouldn't be a runner. Emma continues feeding me my dose of reality. "You keep avoiding dealing with this because of your mom," she says, hitting me where it hurts. My mother finds everything about my body to

be distasteful, and I swear she used to only buy me beige old-lady bras as an incentive to diet and slim down into a more acceptable size for her country club crowd.

“They sell the prettiest pink lace at the department store, Nicole,” she’d say with a fake smile. “Your sister has the loveliest B cups.”

I groan. “So anyway!” Emma’s face lights up. “I’m looking and they have wine night tonight. Let’s make it a whole thing. Can you give a ride to my friend Maddie, too?”

“Maddie from college?” Emma nods. “Yeah, sure. I haven’t seen her in ages.”

After work, I open my trunk and grab the carseat I bought to make things easier when I go places with Emma. She can’t drive because of her epilepsy, and I’m not going to just stand around while her husband wrestles with car seat straps each time Emma and I want to go out.

Tim personally taught me how to install the thing, and he’s as fastidious about safety as he is about, well, everything. I place one knee in the seat and tug on the belt, securing it, before I drive to grab my friend and her baby.

Once Emma and Maddie and baby Ricky pile in, we head to the boob store while I listen to the two of them talk shop about work. Emma eventually looks at me and tilts her head to the side. “You’re awfully quiet. It’s weird.”

I shrug. “Things are weird,” I say, nodding. Emma squints and Maddie leans forward, studying me. I hear the baby fart in

the back seat. I sigh. “I couldn’t come last night. My pussy is broken,” I tell them, blurting it out in the open.

“Ok, this is important,” Emma says. “Tell us everything.”

I talk about the race I’m being coerced into, the feelings it dredges up about my mom, how it necessitates me buying this new bra “and now I’m hauling all your asses to some boob-tique. The timing is just a lot with our new foundation initiative. Oh, and there’s a trench forming in my back yard and my neighbor is being super annoying about it.”

Maddie whistles. “That’s a whole lot. I actually remember your mom visiting one time in college,” she says. “She was an ice cold snob about our dorm, remember?”

I nod. “Indeed. Can we not talk about her?”

Maddie moves to talking about her new fling, adjusting her bust and saying she hopes to find something lacy to wear for him. Emma actually pulls out her boob to show me how the clasp of a nursing bra works and I almost have to pull over.

“Why does your nipple look like that?” I hiss.

She shrugs. “It’s been in someone’s mouth nonstop for a few months. He stretched it out.” Emma laughs and I shake my head.

When we finally get to the shop, laid out elegantly in shades of purple with cushioned benches all over for people to sit and chat, Emma and Maddie shove me forward and explain to the store owner that I need sports bras *and* sexy bras.

Judy The Boob Whisperer beams and hustles me into a fitting room, where she somehow finds 13 things that are

comfortable, beautiful, and hold my tits in place all at once. “Jesus, Emma, you weren’t kidding,” I shout over the curtain.

“Told you,” she sings, clinking her wine glass with Maddie while they wait their turn for the magic bra lady.

The whole experience reminds me how glad I am that I adopted Emma as my family. She and Maddie and Boobie-Judy all gush about how sexy I look in the bras, and they’re right, damn it. I’ve worked hard for decades to silence the voices inside telling me what my body is supposed to look like, and what it means that it does not meet that standard.

Sometimes, I guess, I just need this outside reinforcement. I buy a dozen different bras and drink a glass of wine while Emma takes her turn in the fitting room. I try not to gag when Judy hands her a sexy nursing bra, explaining that it comes with a risk. “You might wind up pregnant again if you get that one,” she says, grinning.

CHAPTER 6

NICOLE

THE NEXT MORNING, I'm fully decked out in my new boulder-holder and enough layers that I feel confident I can run two miles on my own before the public humiliation of the next group run this weekend. I remember that Isaac Brady will be there again—I refuse to call him Zack, because that's just not the right nickname for Isaac and he's a smug jerk who hasn't earned a nickname from me yet.

This entire week at work, Tim hasn't shut the hell up about the relay team. He's "Tim Stag Excited," which involves micromanagement and 100 texts per day about stretching and lactic acid. I will never, ever reveal to him that I did wind up doing some of his leg stretches and they did actually feel really good.

I only tried them because I was curious, damn it.

The only slightly redeeming factor is that the other guys from work are all also receiving these hyper-detailed info dumps. At least Tim's not assuming I'm clueless because I'm female.

I lace up my new sneakers, pull on a knitted hat with a puff ball on top, and walk out back through my sun room door. I

decide I'm going to stretch while the sun rises, because that feels poetic or something. Only as I make my way through the frosty grass out back, I notice the ridge isn't so much a ridge as a trench.

"Mother fucker," I screech as I walk closer. Valerie was absolutely right about this thing. The bottom half of our back yard is a foot lower than the part where I sit to drink beer in the summer evenings. So much for my test run. I consider banging on my neighbor's door, but I remember it's six in the morning.

"Emma," I mutter. "Emma will be awake." I dial my girl, who picks up almost as soon as it starts ringing.

"Nik! You're up early. Well, you don't sleep, do you?"

"I sleep *and* I'm up early. Ems—there's a fucking trench in my back yard."

"What do you mean?" I hear rustling on her end, like she's sitting up in bed.

"I don't know. My stupid neighbor says we're having a landslide. What the fuck do I even do with a landslide?"

"Hmm." I can hear Emma shifting around and something makes a gurgling sound.

"Are you holding a baby right now?"

"I am! Ricky is going to keep on nursing while Mama does some phone research. Aren't you? Aren't you, precious? Yes!" I tune her out while I walk back inside and start making coffee. Emma used to be a reporter. I know she's probably

simultaneously searching her special databases while she coos all that nonsense to her kid.

I hear Thatcher start murmuring to her in the background and I nearly gag. He's so freaking smitten with her. He even makes glass sculptures of her and the kids to display in his gallery along with his other glass art. I shouldn't be so bitchy about that. Emma's in a good place. But I also don't need to hear her husband waking up in the morning. It feels too intimate, and reminds me that I'll never have anything like that.

“You want me to give you a call in a bit?”

“No! Nik, stay on the phone. If we end the call I will get too deep in baby work and forget all this has ever happened. I'm pulling something up about urban landslides. You need to call a...geotechnical engineer.”

“A what now?” She repeats herself. “Huh. I had absolutely no idea there was a specific person you could call about this.”

“Well,” she says, chewing. Thatcher must have brought her some food. I approve of this. “I don't think they just work with landslides. Like, they are the people to call about fracking and earthquakes and stuff.”

“Fracking?”

“I mean, and other stuff, too...”

I sigh. “Thanks, Emma. I appreciate your help.”

“I'm glad we connected! I miss your angry voice!”

“We just hung out.”

“Well, and I had to end it early because Ricky was a mess...”

“I love you and I’m hanging up now because I have to go to work and get Mark to make me an appointment with one of these fracking guys.”

“Are you wearing the new bras?”

I smile at this. “As a matter of fact I am.” We hang up and I change for work, sliding into a navy blue lacy bra that lifts my boobs so high and cinches them in so tight in front that I look like the prow of a ship. I swear, my clothes fit differently when I wear this thing.

Even without the run, I feel much more centered as I head for the office in my killer outfit. I decide stressing about the yard trench must be as much of a workout as actually running. Or maybe having a good friend to lean on builds as many endorphins as a workout. Either way, I feel great.

At work, I stop in the kitchen to get my breakfast from Alice in person.

She smiles at me and wolf whistles. “I see you met with Judy,” she says.

“Is it that obvious?” I grab a muffin, skeptically.

Alice nods. “Oh yeah. You’re walking differently today. You look amazing.”

“Well I will accept the compliment, Mrs. Stag. Thank you.” I grin. She waves and gives me a thumbs up as I head out.

By the time I sit down at my desk, I actually ask Mark for help in a nice voice, which leads him to burst into my office and place the back of his hand on my forehead.

“What the hell are you doing?” I crumple a muffin wrapper and throw it at him.

“Oh thank god,” he says, brushing crumbs off his shoulder. “When you used the word ‘please’ I worried you were dying.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, whenever you get a chance, I need to call one of those engineer bobbies.”

“Oh, please, god, let his name be Bobby. In tight jeans... maybe a hard hat.”

“Mark, we have a ton to do for the foundation meeting.” I tap my pen on the edge of my desk, trying not to let my thoughts drift to Isaac Brady in a hard hat and faded jeans. I am absolutely not picturing him in a tool belt. Nope. My running coach is nowhere near my thoughts at all as I busy myself to launch a new arm of the company.

I cross and uncross my legs, eventually deciding I need the treadmill desk. I pace out my nervous energy until Mark sends a text confirming an appointment with a geotechnical engineer.

CHAPTER 7

ZACK

“HAVE A SEAT, SON,” my father gestures toward the mismatched “furniture” in his office. I’ve got my pick between an Argentinian saddle and a low stool from Ethiopia. He always brings this stuff back from his travels, which is fine I guess, but then he expects his clients to sit on it. And he’s still got a Rolodex full of Fortune-ranked contacts.

I opt for the saddle, wishing I could ride my ass on out of here instead. He starts slurping his mate and for the thousandth time offers me a sip of the foul green brew.

“I don’t want any MATE, Dad.” I pronounce it wrong because I’m irritated with him.

“Zack, you know it’s mah-tay,” he chides, shaking his head.

“Dad, I was going to present about the sink hole to Uncle Kellen...can we speed this up?”

“You and your brothers are always in such a damn hurry,” he says, setting down his gourd cup.

“Yeah, because you always force us to go running and be efficient.”

“Don’t be a smart ass. We’re building rapport here. But don’t think for a second I won’t smoke your ass on the running trail.”

I hold my hands up in surrender. Dad can still blaze. I do hope I inherited his longevity. He takes a sip of his drink and tells me, “You know, this mate is from Paraguay. I went there about a year ago. Met with their Presidente, even.”

Dad tells these stories that journey around and around the subject at hand. He’s not an engineer—just wanted to work with his brother and thought he could help Kellen sell engineering services in an era when nobody else was doing that, but industrial facilities were starting to wear out. Dad ropes in the clients, telling them stories about hair dye mishaps or broken shoes or, apparently, gourds and tea. Uncle Kellen swoops in and points out the rust spots on their bridges and the cracks in their dams.

Dad tells me how he sat down for tea with the president of Paraguay after they ran into one another at a shop near the airport.

Dad asked El Presidente for advice and has been chugging Yerba every day since. “The Presidente told me they’ve been having unusually wet weather, and I’ve been keeping my eye on the news.” Dad continues, telling me how there have been floods in Peru, mudslides in Ecuador, and widespread landslides in Paraguay. “Those mountains are the home of that Yerba plant,” he says, chugging the last of his bitter tea.

He leans back in his chair and stares out the window at the city coming to life. “I got a call from a friend today. Someone

from Stag Law needs a geotechnical engineer at her house. I'd like you to handle this for me."

"You want me to handle a residential project??" I'm so fucking insulted I can barely spit the words out. It barely registers that he's talking about Stag Law, the competition in the damn corporate marathon relay. I can't get past the idea that I would ever go consult on a residential project.

I've been clawing my way up toward major industrial projects for years. I'm not about to go talk about swimming pools or some shit with some golf buddy of my dad's. "I thought you only pursue repeat business. What the hell is the point of a residential one-off?"

"Tim Stag is a valuable person to know," Dad says. "He and I sit on the board of the hospital together and *his* clients have very, very deep pockets if they can manage not to blow it all on hookers and booze. When his executive assistant calls me personally, I tell her I will have my own son investigate the situation, because Beltane Engineering values our relationship with Stag Law."

I swallow. My dad always makes me feel like an asshole. He could have just led off by telling me someone important needed something done. He could have offered some fucking context about why he's sending me out on a landscaping project. I don't even know Tim Stag apart from seeing him at runs. I'm the guy with his hands in the dirt, not some schmoozer. I sigh. "Tell me what I need to know."

I'm in my office gathering up my field supplies when my brothers stick their head in the door. Liam folds his arms and leans against the door frame. "Heard Texas Ted talking about sink hole detail."

"I'm sure you did," I grunt, shoving my hard hat in my bag. I still have no real idea what to expect on this job site. "Dad's sending me out to inspect a mysterious trench because he wants to make nice with Tim Stag."

Cal perks up at this. "Tim Stag? Like Tyrion Stag's brother?" I shrug.

"Zack. Come on, dude, the hockey player? His brother's firm represents like, every pro athlete in PA. You're going to get bowl game tickets out of this."

Liam strokes his chin. "That chick from the running group works at Stag Law. Isn't that what she said?"

I grunt again and hoist up my bag. "I'll be in Lawrenceville," I tell them. "Uncertain if I'll be back after."

Cal nods. "We can all go for ramen after work. You know, if you make it back alive."

"Very funny, Callum. You're buying."

Dad gives me an address to a remodeled townhouse in a gentrified area of Lawrenceville. Of course, the hot shot client lives here. These houses are flipped with no character. Faux marble counters. All the internal walls are ripped out and it's

all meant to look like old factory floors. I shudder, thinking about going inside—I should have my brother Liam look up the plans to make sure nothing load bearing has been dismantled before I sit whoever it is down to discuss whatever the fuck is going on with her back yard.

I circle the block looking for parking, imagining this homeowner as a prissy, high maintenance sorority girl. I finally find a spot down the road and parallel park my truck, muttering under my breath with annoyance that this woman I haven't met is ruining basically everything about my month.

Of course, I know that rationally, I'm actually angry about the assignment I didn't get. I'm angry that Ted's presentation was chosen for the sink holes. I'm angry that I don't even know if my uncle showed my ideas to the team. I imagine them all talking about me while I wasn't in there.

Poor old Zack. Sent off on a grunt project for his dad.

I sigh. I need to nip these thoughts, get them under control. I crunch through the frozen turf around back of her house, and then I whistle through my teeth.

This is not good.

What I see before me is the beginning of the end of a major landslide. The two townhouses unfortunate enough to be on the property look like they're the last bastions of the old neighborhood before the house flippers and condo developers moved in.

There's a tidy back yard with two patios and the one that matches the address Dad gave me has a killer sun room, with

views of the river. I inhale, telling myself this is at least a tastefully renovated property. The mystery owner has built back a small amount of credibility, despite having a yard that's about the crumble into the Allegheny River. I take some time carefully navigating the fissure, testing the ground to see if the landslide will hold my weight before I crouch to take measurements. I'm not sure how long I spend studying the situation when I hear a voice say, "Are you the fracking guy?"

I look up over my shoulder and see a woman silhouetted by the sun. She is short and curvy and not dressed appropriately to be walking around a landslide in the freezing cold. "Get back," I shout, gruffly.

I stand up and approach her, and then halt in my tracks because *fuck me sideways*. It's Nicole. Standing in the crisp air, cheeks pink, this woman is as beautiful as she is angry.

"Excuse me?" she puts her hands on her hips and plants her heel-clad feet. "Nobody tells me what to do on my own property."

I stalk up close to her, closer than I intend, but I'm shaken by my response to her pale skin and seemingly endless supply of hair, that blows around in the frigid breeze off the river. "You've got a rotational landslide here, and this entire area is unsafe. Especially dressed like that."

She huffs and a piece of chestnut brown hair sticks to her cheek. I have to fight off every urge to reach out and brush it aside so I can see her green eyes flash at me. "Listen, Isaac, I'm about to pay you thousands of dollars to fix whatever's going on back here. This shit was a lump in the grass

yesterday. Are you going to fix it or should I call someone who knows what they're doing?"

"Let's make one thing very clear here," I tell her, urging her back toward solid ground. "There is nobody—NOBODY—in this city or any other in the tri-state area who knows this soil better than I do. So when I tell you to get back, that means haul your fancy shoes and your pretty skirt back to the curb where it's safe." My nostrils flare. She had to go and suggest I am an inferior engineer on the same day as this bullshit with my dad at work.

"You're being ridiculous," she says. "This is basically a sink hole. We get those around here all the time because the sewer system is collapsing, or some such nonsense."

Sink hole. I shake my head and gesture along the line in her yard. "You see this—what did you call it? A trench? Tomorrow this is going to shift six feet further down toward the river. The day after that, you'll be able to repel here, it'll be so far gone. I'm probably going to have to have the city condemn your house."

She gasps. That got her attention I guess. I wasn't totally serious about that, but if the fault line moves like I predict it will, it's going to be a close call as to whether she can stay here. Plus she pissed me off.

"You've got to be kidding me," she says.

"Do I look like I'm kidding?" I shove my calculator into my back pocket and start walking around front of her property. "Look, I'm freezing my balls off out here and I'm sick of

arguing with you while your hair's blowing in my mouth. I'll have my office send you the information at your office."

She snorts. "Are you being huffy because of our lack of rapport as running partners?"

I glare at her. "I'm being 'huffy' because I'm supposed to be addressing an impactful industrial project, not a domestic landscaping issue."

"So it's not that big a deal then?" Her voice cracks a little and I ease up. I did just tell her she might lose her home.

When I look up at her, I see her pink tongue running along those red fucking lips and I have to grit my teeth to stop a moan escaping my mouth. *Client*, I mutter. *She's a client. Dad sent you here. Think of Dad. Think of Dad.*

"I'll run some numbers, ok? I'll get you the information." I spin on my heel and start walking down the street back toward my truck, hoping I can catch my breath out of sight of her piercing green eyes. I reach my truck and climb inside, not turning around to look as she starts to shout something down the street after me. Her people know how to reach my people.

Shit. I didn't want this fucking job when I thought it was about mulch and landscaping. Now it's a fucking landslide inside city limits with a high-maintenance, high-heeled, she-devil for a client.

All the work of a major industrial project, ten times the bureaucratic hassle, and I still won't get the promotion I've fucking earned over the past five years. And I have to fucking teach her how to go running on Sunday.

I need to think. My head is swimming with how rapidly my day changed from a nice run with my brothers before work...into a hellscape. A literal landslide of silt is pouring into my career right now. I storm back into my office and slam the door. Our offices are tiny—the ancient building has long hallways with door after door. Dad renovated a bit to make a space for cubicles, but at nearly 30, I had at least managed to work my way up to my own office.

The heavy door bounces back open again a minute later and my cousin Orla bursts into the room.

She pulls the door shut and leans against it, raising her eyebrows at me, waiting for me to speak.

Orla and my Uncle Kellen lived with us after her mother died. Where my father cycled through women like laundry, Uncle Kel was deeply devoted to my departed aunt. I'm not sure he'll ever get over losing her. Since Dad was between wives when Aunt Helen died, Kellen and Orla just moved in to the big house for the few years left until Orla left for college.

Uncle Kellen has, for a long time, been the keeper of the feelings in our big Brady family. He's always the one who can tell when something's wrong, and he's the one to come and figure out how to make things right again.

I'm sure he told Orla, hence her visit here now.

I sigh. "Dad sent me on a pet project."

"So I heard. And?"

I explain about the landslide. "Honestly? I'm not even sure how we go about fixing that in city limits. Right on the bank

of the river like that. It's going to be a god damned disaster. And for what? Because Dad wants to make nice with this broad's boss? I don't get it."

Orla strides across the room and looks at my desk, where I've still got the sticky note from my dad with Nicole Kennedy's address scribbled on it. She pulls out her phone and taps around for awhile. She whistles. "She's not too bad to look at," Orla says. "Even if she can't run for shit." I snort. "Says she's the strategy director for Stag Law. They specialize in representing athletes, but *she* specializes in optimizing staff performance and..." she pauses to read. "Fostering relationships with stakeholders, developing solutions, et cetera, et cetera. Sounds like exactly the kind of shit your dad does here."

I scowl at her. "What's your point?"

"You think Uncle Mick's trying to poach her? I mean why else would he give a fuck about a residential project."

"This is why I don't like you, Orla. Because you say shit like that and it makes total fucking sense, and now I'm panicking about the big picture instead of just being angry that I lost a project to Texas Ted."

She punches me in the shoulder. "Come," she says. "Let's have an off-site meeting and I'll buy you a drink."

CHAPTER 8

NICOLE

I'M SEETHING when I stomp back into the Stag Law offices. I can't tell if I'm more annoyed that Valerie was right or that I have to deal with my running coach and his hot, broody face. That I saw looming above me when I passed the fuck out on my first run.

I cannot have him coming to my house. I just cannot.

"Donna," I let myself into her office and rap my fingers on the door frame. She looks up at me, questioningly. "I hear you're the one who found me the geotechnical engineer to fix the trench?"

She blushes. *What the hell?* "Did Mick Brady come to look at your yard personally? Don't be insulted by him, dear. He's just like that."

"No." This reaction is so unexpected I slump against her door frame. "He sent his son Isaac." I think back to the lanky guy in the tight-but-worn jeans, hard hat, tool belt. I make a mental note to focus on that image later. Alone in my shower. The fucking tool belt ought to be enough to break through the strike my clit has been on lately.

Donna smiles. “Mick has three nice young sons. Just like our Mr. Stag is one of three boys! I only had the one son—“

“Donna, I’m sorry. I’m freaking out here. He says I have a rotational landslide, and I looked that shit up on the drive back here and it’s going to cost a quarter million dollars to repair my fucking back yard.”

She pales. “Oh, I’m sure the Bradys won’t charge you the regular rate! Goodness. Nobody could afford that.”

No shit, I think. Her phone rings, and her face lights up again. “This is Beltane Engineering,” she says to me. “Should I just transfer to you directly?”

“Is it Isaac??” Oh, god, I cannot be just talking to him on the phone right now. I need to work out a strategy for coming back from passing out.

Donna shakes her head. She mouths “admin.”

I nod and walk back toward my office. As promised, Isaac had “his people” call with information. Some teenager on the phone is prattling on about something called a “headscarp” and confirms my worst fears: a conservative estimate for the repair is a quarter million dollars for the concrete, soil and heavy machinery. Not even including the labor.

I try my best to thank him politely and retreat into my office couch to regroup. Even if I split the cost with Valerie, I don’t have that kind of money just lying around. Even though I got my townhouse for a few thousand bucks, I took out a home equity loan when I restored it.

And let's be honest. I'm doing ok in the salary department, but not too many people have a quarter million dollars liquid just lying around.

I pull up an internet search for Isaac Brady and learn that he's apparently some genius when it comes to soil and weight loads. He's won awards from the environmental protection people for repairing dams and coal mines. I sigh. If this guy, moody fucker though he may be, tells me this headscarf thing is going on in my yard, it's unlikely that he's wrong.

I try not to fixate on his suggestion that the city was going to condemn my house. My fucking house! The minute I signed that deed, I felt like I was finally free from my parents' expectations and all the ways I failed to meet them. I didn't even know how to use a lawn mower when I got that house, let alone how to refinish floors and hang sheetrock.

Every online tutorial I watched, every contractor I brought in just as a consultant, I felt like I was coming into my self. It paid off at work, too. If I could use a belt sander by myself, I sure as shit could present my ideas to a room full of men set on overlooking me.

I really feel like I'm going to cry, and this is very, very unusual for me. I call Emma, crossing my fingers that she can answer the phone. If one or more of her kids is asleep, she can only ever text. "Hey," she whispers.

"Ems," I start, and then I burst into tears. Actual boo-hoo sobs out loud.

"Woah, Nicole, what's wrong, love?"

I tell her about the landslide, that it's so expensive to fix it might as well cost ten million dollars. "I might lose my house," I sob.

"Ok. So do you want solutions or comfort?"

I consider this. I grew up in a house without comfort. My mother has had too much botox to emote. My sister is her protege. Refined girls do not cry, they do not smear their makeup, and they most certainly do not grow curves and curls like I sprouted and refused to rein in. "Solutions," I tell Emma, and take a deep breath.

I hear Emma walking down a hallway, presumably where she can talk louder. "Ok, so first you need to call your homeowners insurance and see if this is covered, although I doubt it will be or Zack would have mentioned that."

"Isaac," I correct her.

"I thought you said he goes by Zack?"

"Exactly. And that's a stupid fucking nickname for Isaac," I snap at my friend. "I'm sorry," I say immediately.

"Ok, so we're going to calm down and do some comfort before we keep going with the solutions."

I take a deep breath. She's right. I'm spiraling. "You're resourceful," I hear Emma say. "You're a bad ass bitch who takes no shit. Not from wolves on Wall Street and certainly not from a damn crack in the ground. Right?"

I nod. Which she can't see, because she keeps prodding. "Right?"

“Yes,” I tell her. “I’m going to defeat this. Just like all the other challenges.”

“Exactly!” She shouts. “So step one, call the insurance. Step two, you need to talk to my sister-in-law.”

“Which one?” Since I work for Stag Law, I realize she must be talking about Juniper Jones, Tyrion Stag’s wife. Juniper was a lawyer here for a long time, but is now a judge of...something.

Emma’s going on about how Juniper is constantly settling property dispute cases and knows all the jargon. “Juniper can help you figure out who to sue,” Emma says.

“Sue?” Jesus, I do not have time for a lawsuit. I don’t have time for a landslide. I’m supposed to be training for this damn marathon and, oh I don’t know, directing the strategy for a major law firm looking to expand operations.

“Nik, my love, there’s got to be a reason the earth opened up and swallowed your yard. You need to find the reason, and sue to make the culprit pay for the restoration.”

It had not occurred to me that there might be a culprit here. “I literally thought I had just pissed off the gods,” I tell her. She’s one thousand per cent right, of course. It all just sounds like so much work. I flop over my desk and rest my cheek on the wood and close my eyes as Emma continues. “Does Zack really think the city will condemn your house?”

“I think he was just saying that to be a smart-ass.” But I’m not sure. I hear Emma telling me I can come stay with her and

Thatcher any time and I thank her, hang up the phone, and head back home.

I'm useless to anyone where work is concerned. I draw a bath and slide into the tub, trying to forget my stress about the house. I'm not sure what is happening this week, but my entire world has been turned upside-down.

I'm desperate to relax. It feels like there's a geyser waiting to erupt in my guts. I wonder if masturbating will help, even though it hasn't been going very well the past few times I've tried. I close my eyes and pull up my handyman fantasy images of Isaac in his jeans, squatting in my yard, and my fingers go to town on my clit.

But nothing happens. I growl in frustration and turn the water back on, adjusting myself so the flow runs over my crotch. Nothing. "What in the fucking hell is this?"

I start to wonder if running has broken my clit or something. I kick at the faucet in a rage and head downstairs. I pull the cork out of yesterday's wine bottle with my teeth and start drinking straight from the bottle.

As I chug the wine, I try porn. I try online pictures I find of Isaac and his brothers running different races. I try everything I can think of short of zapping my clit with my taser, but nothing works. Eventually, I'm too drunk to care about my inability to come and I pass out on my couch.

CHAPTER 9

ZACK

WHEN I GET to work in the morning, my dad's secretary tells me to reassign all projects and only prioritize the Kennedy Landslide. "Seriously?" She nods. This is an unprecedented, inefficient use of my time.

I blow out a breath and get to work on the notes I took yesterday. I have an email from Nicole's homeowner's insurance, and I grimace, knowing I have to explain to them exactly what I found.

This earth movement is a textbook case of a slump landslide, I type. I send them some numbers, estimate that the headscarp will shift rapidly and that the foundation of the house will likely be at risk. I'm fairly certain the insurance will refuse to cover Nicole's property, and I'm also pretty sure the city is going to need to condemn the house.

I make notes about the names of the property owners nearby whose land might be affected. I take some time looking up nearby construction projects and making lists of the different utilities that might be impacted. The last thing I want is a backhoe to blow through a gas line in Nicole's back yard.

And then I sit and stare at the plans for the lot, noting how close her house is to the river. There's basically no way I'm going to be able to do anything without rigging a barge on the water. I rake a hand through my hair and decide to drive over there.

I find a parking spot right next to Nicole's house and strap on my tool belt, grab my tablet and head out to survey the ground. It looks like there's been even more of a shift since I was last here, and I squat down to take some more measurements.

I'm bent over with my tape measure in the fissure when I feel something nudge me in the ass. "Hey," a voice growls at me. "Hey!"

I whip my head around to find an old woman staring at me, hands on her hips. "Did you just kick me?"

"I did. You want to tell me what you're doing back here? This is still private property last I checked." I glance around, not sure what I'm looking for. People usually don't question why I'm at a job site, especially when I'm wearing a hard hat, but then again, this is my first domestic project.

I clear my throat. "I'm Zack Brady with Beltane Engineering. Ms. Kennedy has hired me to assess your landslide situation."

Her face lights up. "Aha! So she admits I was right!" She crosses her arms. "What sort of engineer are you?"

She proceeds to question my alma mater, to ask me about my advanced geotechnical licensure, to ask what the hell I'm

doing handling a private property landslide if I'm really as experienced as all that. I sigh. "You got me, ma'am," I tell her. "But I'm here. And you should step back and be careful. Try not to come into the back yard."

She pulls out a lawn chair and sits on her patio with her arms crossed, watching as I measure and take notes. I study the yard and am halfway through creating a 3-d model on my tablet when Nicole appears out of her back door, her hair whipping in the winter wind. She's so fucking sexy, even frowning at me in constant disapproval.

I give a small wave in acknowledgement that I saw her and return to my model as the wind from the river picks up. I hear the old lady yelling over to Nicole. "So I see you decided to take me seriously?"

"Yes, Valerie," Nicole spits back. "The growing crater in the yard was a good clue." Then, her voice softer, Nicole asks, "Did your homeowners refuse to cover?" They shout back and forth for a bit about the cost of the repair. I try to study the plans of the condo complex a few properties down, but the wind is freezing and making it hard for me to open any of my folders of paper printouts.

"Hey," I shout as Nicole is starting a string of curse words about bureaucracy. "Mind if I look at these in your house? Out of the wind?"

Nicole raises a brow at me but shrugs and gestures toward the house. When Valerie moves to follow, Nicole shakes her head. "Not today, Val. I can't handle you today." I hear the woman scoff as Nicole slams the glass door shut behind me.

“She drives me fucking insane,” Nicole says as she hangs up her coat and slips out of her heels.

I look down at my dirty boots and swallow. I’m used to trailers on work sites. I’ll have to remember to get some shoe covers or something if I’m going to spend any significant time here. I sigh and bend over to loosen my laces and when I look up, Nicole is staring at me.

I wiggle my toes in my socks and take in my surroundings. I see immediately that I was very, very wrong in my initial assumption of this place as a quick flip for a trendy hipster. That might be the trend in the neighborhood, but this is a fucking historic restoration of artisan proportions.

“You own this place,” I ask, looking at the original oak floors that gleam under an oil finish. Nicole has exposed brick in the kitchen off the sun porch. Marble counters gleam around stainless appliances, and it looks like she consulted an actual lighting engineer when she chose the fixtures. The entire space is bathed in warm light, with no dim patches or dark corners.

“Yes, Isaac. I own my house.” She starts banging around the kitchen. “Do you need water?”

I nod. “I’m sorry. I just was expecting it to look...less nice in here. I’ve been inside some of the remodels in this neighborhood...” My voice drifts off and I study her face. When she rolls her eyes, I know that she, too, is familiar with the rapid gentrification happening in her part of the city. Ten years ago, you almost had to pay people to buy houses here. Now, this place would go for over a million. Well, before the

back yard fell apart. I clear my throat. “Who was your contractor?”

She sneers and slides the water across the counter. “Listen, Brady,” she says, rapping her nails against the counter. “I rebuilt this fucking place myself, fueled by the power of my rage at society. Otherwise I wouldn’t give a shit about the yard falling off. So make yourself comfortable at the counter I polished and get to fixing my land.”

She storms out of the room before I can respond, and I feel my dick twitch in my pants. I look around again at the meticulously tiled back splash with perfectly matched grout. I sip the water she gave me and remind myself the curvaceous woman who passed out after running two miles is a client. Moreover, she’s someone my dad is interested in for the business, which makes her twenty levels of off limits.

I spread my work out on her counter and lose myself in construction blueprints and court hearing notices. Inspection reports for nearby construction. Eventually, I hear the doorbell ring. I ignore it, because this isn’t my house and I’m trying to concentrate, but Nicole doesn’t come downstairs. It rings again and whoever it is starts knocking.

I sigh and head toward the front of the house, glancing up the carpeted stairs to see if she will emerge, but there’s nothing. When I open the turquoise door a delivery guy thrusts a box into my arms. “Can you sign?” He holds out his digital signature pad and my brows shoot up.

“Um, I don’t live here.”

“Look, pal, can you just sign? I got a quota to meet and I’m double parked.” I look over his shoulder and see there’s already a line of cars sitting behind the delivery van, frustrated, on Nicole’s street. I scribble my name and he scurries away.

When I look down at the box, I almost drop it when I see the label under the EXPEDITED DELIVERY sticker. “Babe Rocket,” I mutter, as I look at the picture. Nicole Kennedy overnighted herself a huge purple vibrator with rotating parts and, according to the package, a satisfaction guarantee.

The thought of Nicole being satisfied turns me on so fast, so overwhelmingly that I rush to the kitchen and gather my things. I have to get the hell out of here and jerk off. There’s no question of me doing anything else. My blood pounds in my temples as I set the box on the counter and storm out of the house without letting her know that I’m leaving.

The delivery confirms that this wild woman, who apparently gets dirty with construction projects, spends her nights making herself come and I know that I will actually explode if I don’t do something about how much that turns me on.

I barely breathe until I’m at home, where I rip open my pants like a teenager. I squeeze my eyes shut in my kitchen, leaning against the sink, and imagine Nicole in those running leggings, biting her lip while her frizzy hair swirls around her body. I angrily pound at my cock, my knuckles grinding against the teeth of my zipper.

As I stroke myself faster and faster, I imagine her face transformed by pleasure. Only it's not the purple vibrator I picture as she screams her release. In my fantasy she moans for my cock, my name on her plump lips as she rolls those thick hips, and I come into my sink. My dick throbs in my hand and the salty semen stings the abrasions on my knuckles. I slump over, my breath ragged, as I try to regain my composure.

"Fuck," I mutter. This is going to be a problem.

CHAPTER 10

NICOLE

“HE TOOK his shoes off when he came inside,” I explain to Tim during our meeting the next day. “Is that weird?”

Tim shrugs. “It seems polite. What’s he doing today while you’re not home?”

It’s actually snowing out today, even though it’s supposed to go back up to 40 by the end of the week. I hadn’t considered that Isaac would be standing around outside all day in the snow at my house. “Hm. Doesn’t he go into his office to do... math or whatever?”

Tim scowls, thinking. “I don’t know. Want me to call my contact at Beltane and ask what’s typical?” I open my mouth to protest, but Tim already has his phone out. “Mick! Yeah, hey. Tim Stag. Yes, I know you know. I’m fine. Yep, kids are fine. Having a third soon!” I tune him out while they get through the small talk portion of their conversation.

I called this meeting to map out our strategy in advance of our first in-house foundation project. Our client Augusto Cruz, a baseball player, is coming in with his publicity team to listen to our pitch about the foundation he wants to set up to benefit his home country of Paraguay.

We still haven't decided the direction he should go. Tim thinks he should start youth baseball programs. Augusto wants to just "help the country," but hasn't provided more direction than that. It's my job to think about the big picture—Augusto setting up a successful foundation means more of our clients will look to us for guidance when they do the same. With several pro sports organizations holding their drafts in the coming months, we're about to have a bunch of first-year star athletes looking for ways to spend their millions.

I pore over the background files about Augusto's upbringing and I hear Tim mention the man to Mick Brady. "I know," Tim shouts, jovially. "I've never been to Paraguay before. I have no idea what we're stepping into down there." Tim is quiet for a bit, then he grins. "You know," he says, "I would love it if you joined us. Yeah, I'm serious, too."

My eyes bulge at Tim. *Did he just invite Mick Brady on our company trip?* Tim's not supposed to make these kinds of decisions for the company without consulting me, his director of strategy. The last thing I need is some smarmy golf buddy of Tim's joining us on a fact-finding trip just as our firm decides how we're going to branch out into philanthropic legal support for our clients.

"Hey, Mick, thanks for all the info. Have your admin get in touch with Donna so we can find a time for us to grab lunch." Tim hangs up and rocks back in his chair. "Mick says Zack is fine in the snow. But! It also turns out Mick's met the president of Paraguay. I invited him to come with us when we go there. Mick Brady. Not the president of Paraguay. He'll

already be there. Anyway, it never hurts to know someone who can grease wheels.”

I want to punch my boss in the face right now, so I try to focus on Isaac doing math out in the snow in my back yard. I wince. But back to the matter of strategy. “I heard you invite him,” I tell Tim. “Want to tell me what we’re supposed to do with an engineer on our information gathering trip for Augusto Cruz’s foundation?”

Tim laughs. “Oh, Mick’s not an engineer. His brother handles all the engineering in their company. Mick’s a sociologist.” Tim flips open his folder, signaling that he’s getting ready to start our meeting in earnest. “He studies people and lands them clients. Pretty sure he just met the prez while playing golf.”

Tim pivots to our upcoming meeting, noting a few different ideas from the publicity people at the baseball team HQ. Most people seem to want Augusto to focus his charitable giving on building baseball opportunities in a country where there really isn’t much baseball. I am leaning that direction, too. I sort of tune Tim out worrying about Isaac freezing his fingers in the snow while he measures my yard.

Yesterday, he looked really fucking hot squatting in those jeans and peering into the trench. I squirm a bit in my seat, remembering how I’d come downstairs to find him gone, the package for the vibrator I ordered sitting on the counter. He must have signed for the delivery, and I’ve already called the company to ream them out for their indiscrete packaging. At least I didn’t have the thing shipped to me at work!

Isaac knows I ordered a vibrator, I think as Tim talks about legal mumbo jumbo. Isaac doesn't know I think about him while I use it. Or that it doesn't help.

When we wrap up our meeting, I head into my office and look up Isaac's phone number, wondering if his business card number will ring his cell or his desk phone. His deep voice answers, "Zack Brady," and I get so irritated again by his nickname that I forget I'm calling to be nice to him.

"Why in the hell do you go by Zack when your name is Isaac?"

I hear him exhale. "I assume this is my favorite client calling?"

"Yes!" I shriek, and then I have to get control of myself. I fire up the treadmill under my desk and start pacing, feeling instantly better as I start moving my legs. "But really. Your nickname is ridiculous."

"If you must know, my oldest brother couldn't say my full name when I was a baby and I've gone by Zack ever since."

"You're saying a baby could pronounce ZACK but somehow not EYE-ZACK?" I start walking faster. I have no idea why I'm so focused on his nickname. It's just that he's such an Isaac. Dark and sexy and grouchy. Zacks are outgoing and perky.

He sighs. "Did you have questions related to your rotational landslide or did you just call to criticize me?"

Smug little shit, I think. But secretly I love that he's not intimidated by my smart mouth. "I was calling about your

work environment,” I tell him. “I’m going to set up a contractor lock on my house so you can get in to get warm and, I don’t know, pee. And stuff.”

“You want me to pee in your house?”

“Well I don’t want you to whip it out and piss in the river!” And now I’m thinking about Isaac Brady whipping out his dick and I have to turn up the speed on my treadmill so I can calm down by walking even faster. I hear him rustling some papers around.

He clears his throat. “I have been going back and forth with your homeowners insurance—“

“Yes,” I interrupt him. “I know those fuckers are refusing to pay anything. My friend Emma says I need to figure out who to sue for your fee.”

“Well, yes, that’s what I wanted to talk with you about—“

“I have an appointment with Juniper Jones,” I tell him, starting to huff a bit. I kick off my heels and feel my calf muscles relax while the treadmill keeps cranking under my desk. My mother would be absolutely horrified to learn I have a treadmill under my desk so I can pace when I get irritated, but everything I do horrifies my mother. The fact that I get irritated. The fact that I work in a non-secretarial career. I shake my head and concentrate on what Isaac is saying.

“Juniper is a magisterial judge,” he says. “I’ve testified in cases before her in the past.”

“You have?”

“Well of course I have,” he says. “I told you. I usually handle industrial or large corporate projects. So when a coal mine is forced to meet government regulations, I need to testify—“

“Ok, ok, I get it. You’re very smart and important. I just thought Juniper could recommend a lawyer.”

“Well,” I can hear him rapping on his desk in the background. He sighs. “Beltane has several attorneys on retainer. I can get someone on the case to help out.”

Wow. This is so unexpected that I hop off the treadmill and stand on the carpet in my tights. “You can do that?”

“It’s literally what you’re paying me for.” He pauses and laughs. “Or, it will be once I make sure someone can actually pay my fee.”

“Very funny.”

“That’s why I laughed.”

Who is this guy? “Ok, well, I’ll text you the code for the contractor lock and you can let yourself in and out whenever you need.” We hang up and I close my eyes, maybe wishing he wasn’t the son of the man evidently trying to infiltrate my new strategic initiative at work. In other circumstances, I might tackle Isaac Brady to the ground and jump his bones. I sigh, reminding myself that I can’t get involved with this guy, even if his banter is hot as fuck.

CHAPTER 11

ZACK

I RATION my visits into Nicole's house. I let myself go in there to use her bathroom and only pause in the kitchen to get warm for five minutes. Anything past that, and I start fantasizing about her. The sight of her running shoes by the back door gets me hard.

Her briefcase propped against the end table by the front door gets me hard.

Every single thing in this house either reminds me of her smart-ass mouth or her incredible competence at everything apart from running. The other day, I was inside and overheard her completely dismantle a reporter over the phone. There I was, mid-piss, watching my dick spring to life at the thought of her yelling.

Today I'm meeting our property lawyer, Justin, at the house. I stop by the hardware store to buy a few sets of shoe covers. Ordinarily, we'd just be hanging out in a portable trailer to discuss this stuff, but I want to make sure we don't trash Nicole's floors.

And there I go again, thinking of her refinishing them herself. I close my eyes, trying to chase away the image of her

in cutoffs, kneeling as she uses the drum sander, her tits shaking with the vibration of the power tools. My dick is pretty chapped from the daily, frantic masturbation sessions I'm scheduling each morning when I wake up. "Fuck," I mutter.

I sit in my truck and pull out some of the zoning notes I got for nearby construction projects. Something seems off about the condo project a few properties down, but I can't figure out what just yet. I'm deep in thought about it when Justin raps on my window. I jump.

"You ok in there, big guy?" Justin calls my brothers and me "big guy" when he's in a good mood, as if we aren't all lanky. I hop out of the truck and gesture toward Nicole's front door.

"Good to see you," I say as I type in the code on the lock box. His brows shoot up as I hand him the shoe covers. I shrug. "It's a residential gig," I tell him. "Don't want to wreck the client's floors."

"The client," he says, and then whistles as he looks around Nicole's house.

"She did all this herself," I tell him, not sure why I'm bragging about Nicole's obvious artisinal skill at hands-on remodeling. He runs his hand along the mantle that has to be original to the house, the intricate carvings in the wood gleaming under the soft glow of the recessed overhead lights. I again admire the finish on the hardwood floors, thinking about her squatting over them spreading the oil. *Is it normal that this turns me on so much?*

Justin and I spread out at Nicole's dining room table—an amazing piece, made of reclaimed wood, that suits the room absolutely perfectly. It actually has me reconsidering the dumpster-dive furniture I've had in my place since I first bought it after grad school.

Justin shows me all the research he's done on previous urban landslides. "It's always due to water," he says, like I don't know this already. But Pittsburgh hasn't had any torrential rains recently and the previous summer wasn't even all that wet, considering.

"There's no natural reason this particular piece of property should be sliding into the Allegheny River," I tell him, gesturing at Nicole and her neighbor's back yard.

Justin's eyes gleam. "I know. No natural reason. So we need to figure out which of these developers didn't do their diligence with their rainwater management," he jabs his thumb at the neighborhood plans showing new construction projects.

"Oh, no big deal," I tell him. "We just need to inspect the plumbing and sewer systems for tens of thousands of square feet of multi-unit residential housing."

Justin rocks back in his chair, and I kick him with my blue-booty-covered foot. I might murder him if he scuffs Nicole's floors. He rolls his eyes. "One of these guys has got to be draining their roof water into the soil. That was what happened with that Glaston landslide, remember?"

A few years ago, a new manufacturing plant was just pumping their rainwater into the hill behind their facility, and the hill slid down onto the highway. That was the first project

my dad and uncle let me take the lead on mitigating. When I discovered the rainwater situation and partnered with Justin so the state could sue the Glaston company, my dad gave me a bonus check that paid for my truck.

Justin and I study the plans for a bit and make notes. I decide I'll head out to take readings tomorrow at first light so I can see what's happening with nearby buildings. If I'm honest, I'm pretty excited to test some of the new equipment we got to check stability and soil composition. I'm midway through explaining our new pneumatic shear machine when I see Justin perk up and stare at something behind my head.

Turning around, I see Nicole, and the first thing to fall out of my mouth is, "Oh. It's you."

"Yes, shocking for me to be in my own home, I know," she throws her stuff down on the table. She's dressed impeccably again, as she always seems to be for work. This woman is so complex. The contrast of her refined businesswear with my image of her mudding drywall is almost too much for my dick to handle in my jeans. "Will you all be staying for dinner since you've made yourselves so comfortable?"

Justin laughs and stands, introducing himself. I catch him scanning her body and resist the urge to growl out loud. His eyes dart over to me and he coughs. "I'm going to head out, Brady," he says. "Call me as soon as you've tracked those numbers."

He makes his way out the door while Nicole leans into her fridge so that all I can see is her ass in the pencil skirt she wore

to work today. I breathe slowly through my nose, trying like hell to not walk over there and smack it.

When Nicole emerges from the fridge with a cheese stick, she seems confused to see me still sitting at her table in my shoe covers. “I wasn’t actually inviting you to dinner,” she says.

“Don’t you want to hear about what we did today?”

“Have you located the person who will pay to fix my fucking yard?” She raises an eyebrow at me, but I can barely tell because her curly hair covers half her face from when she was bent over in the fridge. My eyes dip to the tailored blouse that nips in at her waist below her stunning cleavage.

I shake my head, biting my tongue, and stare up at her ceiling. As I’m admiring the lighting, a thought occurs to me. “Did you do all the electrical work yourself, too?” My body clenches as I wait for her response. There’s “good at renovations,” and then there’s fucking around with electrical stuff.

She bites her cheese stick and frowns at me. “I pulled out all the knob and tube wiring myself and hired someone to rewire once I had all the fixtures mapped out,” she says.

I relax. “My cousin will be relieved to hear it.”

“Not sure why you’d tell her.” Nicole reaches for a banana and leans against the counter, just staring at me and chewing. I feel my heart racing and I need to say something to her, but I also feel a strange urge to bust her balls the way she does mine.

“Want to go for a run?” As soon as I say the words, I’m shaking my head. First of all, I already put in six miles today and my legs are feeling it. Second, what kind of idiot question is that?

Nicole tilts her head to the side and blows a puff of air at the hair falling over her face. “Don’t you usually trot around with your brothers?”

“They’re with their mom tonight,” I say, and clench my body again. I have no idea why I said that. Why I invited personal discussion, especially after she made it clear I shouldn’t be talking about her house with Orla.

She bites the banana, a move so phallic I have to believe she’s doing it on purpose. “You have a different mom than your brothers?” She stares at me as she chews.

I just nod. “My dad collects wives.” I’m definitely not interested in going into more specifics, and I’m both relieved and terrified when Nicole sighs, shrugs, and says, “Ok, but is it safe to run at night? It’s pitch black dark outside.”

I grin. “I’ll protect you.”

That gets a laugh. “You gonna run in those bootie things?” She points at my shoe covers. I grin.

“I’ve got my running stuff in my truck,” I tell her. “Give me five minutes.”

CHAPTER 12

NICOLE

I CAN'T BEGIN to understand why I agreed to go for a run with Isaac Brady. I mean, an additional run. We're supposed to meet again for a group run this weekend, but this feels unnecessary. Except...this skinny bastard looked so fucking cute in those blue shoe covers and my cold, dead heart melted a little when he explained that he didn't want to mess up my floors.

He comes out of my bathroom wearing black running pants that aren't skin tight exactly, but definitely show me which side his junk hangs toward. I nod, approvingly. I also had gone upstairs to change while he ran out for his stuff.

"So what all do we take with us for a night run?" I look around, as if I've got fancy flashlights or something.

Isaac gestures outside. "This is a city, Nicole. There are street lights."

"We're just going to run on Butler Street?" I'm horrified. I hadn't considered that we'd run on the main road, where people are out eating at trendy, cute restaurants or waiting in line to get tattoos or some shit.

I pick up my keys and thread them between my fingers to stab potential abductors, wondering if I've lost my mind.

Isaac takes my keys from me and clunks the massive network of keychains on the counter. "We can use the contractor code to get back in," he says gently. I slide my cell into the pocket on my leggings as he watches.

We head outside and I draw in a shaky breath. It's cold out here.

"We'll go slow," he says. "You'll warm up soon, I promise." He lets me set the pace and we run for a few blocks up to the main road, where he's right. It's bright as day out here between the neon lights from the shops and the street lights.

I've been practicing and I can already tell I'm getting fitter. Or maybe less bad at running. Either way, I'm going faster than last time.

"Remember, talking pace," he says. His deep voice sounds patronizing, and I fucking hate that I passed out the last time we exercised together because I was too damn stubborn to let him see me struggling to catch my breath.

"Don't tell me what to do," I spit at him.

"See? You're talking just fine." I can tell by the way he moves that he's holding back, and I hate him for being fitter than me. "Now what are you going to talk about?"

We come to a red light and Isaac pulls to a stop. I realize we'll probably be doing this a lot, given how short the blocks are. "This is nice—getting breaks," I tell him, and I mean it.

By the time the light changes, I'm ready to start running again, and I actually smile, enjoying myself as we weave in between some people coming out of a bar.

"You doing ok," he asks, swerving a bit around some construction tape where they've got half the sidewalk torn up.

I nod and when we get to the next red light, I put my hands on my hips, drawing in deep breaths, letting him see how hard I've been working even at this snail pace, but oddly not caring so much. He points toward the river and says, "My brothers and I run on that trail sometimes. Cal always manages to find rail ties. He makes them into shit. Bottle openers and stuff."

I'm pretty sure that's the most words I've ever heard him string together. "It must be nice to get along with your siblings," I respond, puffing along. The next light is green when we get there. "My sister and my mother don't really approve of me. At all."

"Hm," he says. "Guess we have that in common."

"You don't go take your mom out to dinner?"

He makes a sound that's halfway between a laugh and a cry. He looks over at me and I brush my hair back from my face to meet his eye. He frowns. "She walked out on my dad and me when I was a baby," he says. "Haven't heard from her since."

"Shit," I say. The next light is green again, so we keep going. This has to have been at least a mile. "Well," I spit out, feeling like I need to have some sort of comeback to that, but not sure this is the time for black humor. "I can't say I'd prefer

that to weekly lectures about my fat ass and my ‘alternative lifestyle.’” I make air quotes as I realize I’m not struggling to breathe or make jokes.

Huh, I think. I’m really getting better at this.

I can see The Abbey ahead. I love that place. It used to be a funeral home, and they totally redid it to make a kick-ass bar-restaurant-coffee shop combo. It’s sort of ridiculous, and the food is amazing, and I love to sit there and work sometimes, alternating a glass of wine with an iced coffee just because I can.

Isaac sees where my eyes land and he raises a brow at me. “Want to stop to hydrate?”

“Holy shit, yes,” I say. I grab his arm and run faster until I’m tugging open the door to the bar. I’m not even out of breath. The hostess looks at us and makes a face, and only then do I remember that we’re wearing running clothes and, frankly, Isaac smells like his were worn already.

He doesn’t seem phased that we’re in a trendy place looking like we just finished jazzercise. “We’re just here for drinks,” he says, placing his hand on my back and guiding me over toward the bar. I stare at his arm, stunned by how good it feels on my back. I don’t typically go out with men who take charge like this. I definitely don’t go out with guys who wear workout gear to a trendy bar. Not that I’m “out” with Isaac. We just happen to be getting a drink after a training run for some corporate nonsense our bosses are forcing us into.

There’s only one stool open at the bar and Isaac gestures toward it. “What,” I say. “You think I’m so feeble after the run

that I need to sit? Like I'm going to collapse? Maybe *you* need to sit so you don't pass out from the stink fumes from those skanky running clothes."

"Fair enough," he says, giving his shirt a sniff and smiling. "I did already run this morning. Don't mind if I do sit."

He makes a big show of sinking into the stool and stretching out his long legs. He puts his arms up on the bar, grinning. "Maybe you can give me laundry advice. That setup you've got on the first floor is pretty sweet."

I lean against the bar next to him, regretting giving up the stool. My lower back starts to hurt as my heart rate slows down. I shiver, realizing I worked up a sweat getting here and it must be evaporating and making me cold. *Oh god, do I stink as much as Isaac?*

I try to catch a whiff of myself and the smug fucker catches me. He leans toward me, smiling, and takes an exaggerated sniff. "Don't worry," he says. "You don't smell any worse than me."

CHAPTER 13

ZACK

“THIS IS PROBABLY GOING to come out wrong,” I start, “but how did you get interested in home renovations? You’re a refined businesswoman...” She snorts. “I mean by appearances. Nobody would call your personality refined.”

She nods, tapping her fingers on the bar and looking impatient. “I bought a shit hole house in a shit hole neighborhood to spite my parents and I made it nice to prove that I could.”

I nod. “I, too, bought a shit hole house. But I haven’t put in the time to fix it up much.”

She looks at me, considering. “I did most of the work when I was right out of college,” she says. “I was lower on the ladder at work and had more time.”

I finally manage to flag down the bartender and order us each a light beer. There’s no way I’ll make it back to Nicole’s house on foot if I drink anything heavier.

“What’s with Beltane,” she asks, chewing on a plastic drink stirrer.

“Beltane?”

“Yeah,” she says. “The name of your family’s company? It’s a sun festival right? Like a Celtic pagan sort of thing?”

I shrug. “My grandma emigrated here from Ireland. My family’s kind of into all that stuff. Dad believes in a *Lion King* sort of approach to business.”

She starts twirling a stray lock of hair around one finger, and I have to exercise all my self-control not to lean over and join in, entwining my fingers with hers in those messy locks. “Lion King approach?”

I crack a smile. “Yeah. You know. ‘Everything the light touches is our kingdom.’” I do my best James Earl Jones impression and Nicole bursts out laughing. I decide I’ll give up all my independence and my entire reputation as a hard-ass if I can hear her make that sound again.

We talk about her first job as a project manager at a tech company, and it turns out she knows my college roommate, Rayland. “You lived with Ray-Ray?” Her eyes go wide. “No, actually that makes sense. He’s some brooding genius.” The bartender comes back with our beers and she continues. “He was actually a dream to work with because I never had to hound him for anything. He always met deadlines and entered everything on our project spreadsheets. When he left for grad school, the idiot who replaced him was a nightmare.”

I laugh. “You’d love working with engineers,” I tell her. “Brooding cyborg describes just about all of us except maybe my brother Cal.”

I reach for my wallet to pay and Nicole actually growls at me. “You’re not buying my damn drink,” she says.

“You’re about to be a quarter million dollars in the red, Ms. Kennedy,” I remind her. “You should accept the beer.”

“How many times do I have to tell you to stop telling me what to do?” Her face turns red. I love driving her wild like this. I make a mental note to tell her what to do every time I see her, and another mental note to *imagine* telling her what to do while naked...later when I’m home alone, that is. I already beat off once today thinking about Nicole, but after this I’m going to have to go again when I get home.

I’m not proud of it, but looking at her now, all sweaty in her tight running stuff, I’m not sorry about it either. The bartender takes my card and looks between me and Nicole. “Both beers on the one card,” I tell him, not taking my eyes off Nicole.

She glares at me, picks up her drink, and chugs it down in about three seconds. She just opens her throat and pours the liquid down like it’s water, and slams the glass down on the bar before I even can get mine raised to my lips.

“There,” she says. “We hydrated. I’m heading back.”

“Shit,” I mutter as she makes her way through the crowd toward the door. *She’s actually serious.* I knock back a few swigs of my drink and quickly sign the credit card receipt and take off after her. The second she gets outside, she starts running, but I know she can’t hold that pace for long, so I go slow and steady. She runs along in good form, lasting much longer than I expect.

I decide right there in the cold, chasing her, that I don’t give a shit anymore that she’s a client. That line I didn’t want

to cross has slid right into the river with her yard. I have to catch her, and I have to touch her. When she steps aside to bend over, hands on her thighs, breathing heavy, I come up behind her and place my hand on her back, the heat of her body radiating through the cold and into my palms.

Christ, she feels good. As she breathes heavily, I lean down so my mouth is right near her ear. “I had no idea you could open your throat like that,” I whisper. “You should show me again.”

She whips her head over at me and growls as she stands up straight. I watch her decide to let go of her restraint. She shoves me toward the alley, planting two hands right on my chest and pressing hard. My back hits the bricks and I grin at her, heaving and glaring.

I press off the wall and box her in against the opposite wall, her face in the shadows of the alley, her breath puffing out in a cold white cloud in the night air. “Why’d you run out of there?”

She shrugs. “You pissed me off.”

I lean in closer, rocking my hips into her and her eyes drop to my crotch when she feels how hard I am. “Maybe I like when you’re pissed off.” My voice is low, mouth right by her ear.

“What are you doing,” she says, but her eyes tell me she knows exactly what I’m doing.

“Waiting for you to tell me to stop,” I say, leaning in closer, closer as my heart pounds in my ears. I can see her own

pulse ticking in her neck. She doesn't tell me to stop, and I don't, crushing my mouth against hers.

Her plump lips are cold against mine, and she tastes like light beer. She moans into my mouth and I thrust my hips against hers, pinning her against the wall. My dick is so hard I can feel it straining against the seams of my running pants. I don't dare take my hands off the brick wall beside her head, though. Once I lay my hands on her again, I'm not going to be able to stop, and I'm not quite so far gone that I'm going to fuck her in an alley.

Unless she asks for that.

She digs her hands into my shoulders as she tries to pull my head closer into hers, her tongue sliding into my mouth and tangling with mine. And then she pulls back just as suddenly. "Well what the fuck do we do now," she spits out, looking around, as if a warm bed will suddenly appear in the winter night.

I laugh, half at her and half at the ridiculous predicament. "Now we run back to your house so I can fuck you," I say, knowing it's a bad idea and utterly powerless to stop.

She takes a deep breath and ducks out from under my arm. She starts running, faster than before. "Easy," I tell her, falling into stride beside her. "If you pass out, I won't be able to bend you over that counter of yours."

"You wish," she says, puffing but not sounding winded. "When we do this, I'm on top." She puffs again, but speeds up. We get to a red light and I laugh as she looks both ways for

cars and runs through the intersection without stopping to catch her breath.

I admit, I'm pretty pleased with the thought of her riding me, those tits bobbing near my face as she finds her rhythm. But I can't bring myself to just let her get her way. Everything about tonight feels like a challenge, and after the time I've had at work lately, I'm in the mood to win.

I dismiss the thought that fucking her is not going to make anything at work any easier.

I lean down toward her ear again as we weave through a crowd of people. "No," I say. "I'm going to strip you out of those tights and bend you over so your ass is in the air. I'm going to smack it until your cold skin turns pink while I shove my cock into you from behind, and you're going to come so hard your screams will shake a little more of your back yard into the river."

She stops abruptly and I almost trip over her. She turns to look at me. "Do not joke about my landslide, Isaac," she says. There's something about the sound of my full name on her lips that has my cock jolting in my pants again. Nobody calls me that except her.

"Don't tell me what to do, Ms. Kennedy," I say, starting to run again. We pick up the pace until we're sprinting toward her townhouse. The old lady next door sticks her head out and tries to talk to Nicole but she mutters something to her and punches at the numbers on the key pad.

The door opens and she grabs me by the shirt, hauling me inside. She actually tries to shove me to the floor and climb on

top of me, but I reach for her arm and pull her in toward my chest. We stay like this for a few beats, both of us catching our breath from the run, from the adrenaline. She licks her lip and her eyes flash, and I lose control.

“Turn around,” I tell her, spinning her in my arms and frog walking her through to the kitchen. When we get to the counter, I take each of her hands in mine and place them against the dark marble. “Hold on,” I growl.

CHAPTER 14

NICOLE

NOBODY TALKS to me this way, I think, as Isaac Brady does exactly what he said he would and yanks down my pants. Nobody has ever talked to me this way, and nobody has made me feel this fucking excited before, either.

I love sex, and I love it on my terms, which means me on top grinding just so against my date's pubic bone until I detonate my lady rocket. I don't do relationships. I don't really even do second dates. I have no room in my life for that. Sex is for release, animalistic and sweaty. Then I go home and sleep in my own damn bed by myself as God intended.

So when I feel the crack of Isaac's palm on the cold skin of my ass, I shriek. In that instant, I realize I've been going about this very, very wrong. He rubs his hand on my ass cheek a few times and then brings his hand down on the other cheek. I gasp as his cold finger tips massage their way between my legs, finding me wet and hot and wanting.

He slides one long finger inside me. It's cold and smooth, the contrast to my own sizzling heat making me pant. "Fuck, Isaac," I mutter, biting my lip and looking over my shoulder. I see him standing there, wild eyed, with one hand palming his

dick above the waistband of his pulled-down pants while the other hand thrusts in and out of my pussy.

He looks dark and fierce and very, very sexy. “What are you waiting for,” I say.

He pulls his hand out of me and wraps it in my hair, giving it a tug and bending my head back. “I’m clean,” he growls, “and I don’t have a condom. I want to fuck you bare.”

“Oh shit,” I pant as he tugs again on my hair, the tingles on my scalp in contrast to the slow, aching pulse of my core. “Yes,” I breathe. This isn’t a thing I do, not with the men who are happy enough to let me take charge of our carefully choreographed encounters. Isaac Brady isn’t satisfied and his long arms feel powerful. At home on my body.

“Please,” I beg. I actually fucking beg him to take me raw. He grunts as he slides inside me, spearing me on his cock in one swift thrust that makes both of us groan.

The angle of my hips somehow makes his cock feel like it’s brushing against every nerve ending in my body. As he thrusts inside me, harder and faster, I feel my orgasm building on its own. Like he’s scraping it out of me. I refuse to tell him it feels good, and I have just enough brain capacity to realize that’s ridiculous.

“Come for me, Nicole,” he grunts, giving my hair another tug.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I spit back at him, thrusting my hips back to meet his as we crash together. He’s got one hand on my hip for leverage and I hear the sound of our bodies

slapping together. Both of us have our pants around our ankles, fully dressed on top as his bare cock slides in and out. I'm so wet, I can feel my slick arousal coating my upper thighs the harder he fucks me. Jesus, I had no idea it feels so good to get totally pounded like this.

"You feel so fucking good," he says, growling. I can feel his sack bumping against my crotch, and I like that, too.

"I love feeling your balls," I groan, leaning forward more, my hands sliding across the counter as my palms start to sweat.

Isaac redoubles his efforts, thrusting impossibly fast. I close my eyes. *Can I really come this way*, I wonder, and I pick up one hand to reach between my legs, desperate for the friction. He roars and pulls my hand away, pinning it down on the counter with the hand that had been in my hair, which is now flying all over the place as my body jolts with his thrusts.

He smacks my ass again, and I just...let go. I stop thinking and my body takes over until I'm coming. I come so long and so hard that my forehead drops against the counter. I cry with relief that my clit isn't broken, and then I come some more. I feel my moans practically shaking the windows in their panes and I know I'm screaming his name, screaming for him to keep going. "Fill me up, Isaac," I shriek. "Jesus, fuck, this feels so good. I want your come."

And he gives it to me. With two more slamming thrusts that bounce my hip bones off the cabinets, I feel his balls slap against me again and then I feel him swell inside me, thrusting

and spurting as he bites my shoulder and breathes against my ear.

“Nicole,” he moans, still spasming. Finally, he stills, and he leans against my back. I slump over the counter, my chest heaving.

Soon, my legs start cramping, whether from running or being fucked in this position I’m not sure. I grimace and try to move out from under him, but this makes him slide out from my body and I feel...empty once his cock leaves me, even though I can still feel it right there, wet and sticky against my ass cheek.

I wriggle out of his long arms and grab for a water glass in the sink, not caring if it’s dirty. I start chugging water and I realize he’s staring at me. And no wonder. I’ve got my pants around my ankles, my ass is probably red from being slapped, and I’m downing water like I’m in a boat race at kegger.

I finish the water and groan in gratitude. And then my baggage starts taking over my thought patterns. I just fucked my engineer in my kitchen, and I really fucking liked it, and I can’t handle that right now.

“You can head on out now,” I tell him, flipping my hair back out of my eyes. “We’ve both got work tomorrow and I’m sure you’re hungry.”

“What?”

I gesture toward the door. “You don’t have to stay. You don’t have to cuddle me or anything like that.”

Isaac stands staring at me, his mouth working up and down. I've stunned him, and that surprises me. I thought we were on the same page here. I like that I can see so much of myself in him. No nonsense. Nothing emotional. We just had a fucking great time, and now we can each go on home to bed and get on with our evening.

"You're serious right now?" Isaac's eyebrows are so far up his forehead I almost can't see them behind his messed up sex hair.

"Yes, Isaac. I'm kicking you the hell out so I can go wash your spunk from my vag and go to bed."

He laughs as he squats down to pull up his pants, shaking his head. Then he keeps laughing. "What?" I stand with my hands on my hips, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing me bend over to pull up the pants he probably ripped pulling them down over my birthing hips.

That's what my mother calls my wide ass. Birthing hips.

"Tell me something," he says, reaching for his keys where he left them on my counter with his gym bag.

"What?" I repeat, my voice getting shrill and high. I start tapping my nails against the counter.

"Was I better than the purple Babe Rocket?"

I feel the flush start at my knees and rise to the top of my ears. I thought we were both going to silently agree not to discuss that he'd signed for delivery of the vibrator I drunk-ordered last week. I haven't even managed to get off with the thing yet, and am probably going to send it back for a refund.

Although something tells me I can conjure up memories of this kitchen tryst and it'll work just fine. "Get out, Isaac," I finally spit out at him. "Just go home."

And then he does something truly surprising. He laughs, slings his gym bag over his shoulder, and leans in to kiss my cheek, pausing to rest his forehead against mine. "I'll see you tomorrow," he says.

Then he's gone.

CHAPTER 15

NICOLE

I WRIGGLE UNCOMFORTABLY on the stoop at Emma's house on Saturday after ringing the bell to their loft. Stag family dinner is usually at Tim and Alice's house, and it's usually on Sunday, but Emma and Thatcher are hosting a birthday party for their oldest kid, Wesley.

I can never decide if I'm supposed to just go up or wait to be greeted. If this were a normal day at Emma and Thatcher's house, I'd let myself in and help myself to her cheese drawer. But her parents are probably up there, and my boss. Years of growing up in Madeline Kennedy's household, with her cold, rigid manners, are hard to shake.

Sometimes I think I'm extra crass on purpose just as an added 'fuck you' to my prim mother. I shake my shoulders and shove the door open, adjusting my grip on the gift bag I'm carrying, and wincing a little as I climb the steps. I'm not sure if it was the run or the rough sex that's left me tender, but I'm not looking forward to the group run tomorrow if this keeps up.

At least I know my clit's not broken.

I hear the Stag family before I even slide open the door to the remodeled loft space. Emma's husband designed this place and did most of the work with his brothers. Which of course means that I helped with a lot of the work, too, because I knew how to do all this stuff. I smile, remembering those late nights with the Brothers Stag and Emma, giving each other shit and working together toward a common goal. As far as I'm concerned, those are my family memories. The ones that make me feel good.

I met Emma in college, at the very beginning of my quest to shed my family. She was also working to overcome her family's restrictive treatment of her epilepsy, and I really feel like the two of us grew up together, becoming confident women who make our own decisions. My mom used to complain when her friends achieved something, would hiss about how they probably cheated some system. When Emma got her book published and started winning awards, I was the first person in line with a paperback copy for an autograph.

When she got pregnant unexpectedly and wasn't sure what she wanted to do, I helped her make a fucking spreadsheet so she could come to her own conclusions.

I catch myself smiling at the sight inside. Emma's husband and their two kids, his brothers and all their zillion kids are building a tower from magnetic blocks. Tim's oldest kid, Petey, keeps kicking the tower over. "Little jerk," I mutter, adding my gift bag to the heap.

Emma catches sight of me and runs over, pulling me in for a hug like it's been months since we've seen each other. She's

the only person who ever embraces me like this, really folds into the hug. *Ladies don't squeeze, darling*, my mother used to say when I'd try to hug her if I was upset.

"I'm so glad you're here," Emma says. "I know these big family dinners aren't your favorite."

I shrug. "They're growing on me," I tell her, honestly. Emma still has hold of my hands and cocks her head to the side, pondering something.

"Were you limping just now? Walking?"

"Ugh." I roll my eyes. "I've been training for that marathon thing Tim is making me run." At the sound of his name, my boss extracts himself from the heap of children and heads toward me.

"Nicole! Did I hear you mention the marathon?" Tim and his brothers have probably run ten miles this morning before the party. That thought leads me to think about Isaac running with his brothers, and then my mind wanders back to my kitchen last night and I realize I shouldn't be at a kids' party with my filthy brain.

"I'm working up to the four mile training run tomorrow," I tell him, gratefully accepting the cocktail Emma hands me. One reason I tolerate the Stags so well is they offer cocktails, even at baby parties. Tim frowns at the drink.

"It's very important that we beat Beltane," he says, gesturing at my drink. "I can have Tyrion send you the meal plan he made for us when my brothers and I were training for the full marathon."

I glare daggers at Tim and gulp down the drink. “Look, boss, I know your brother is a professional athlete and his wife is an olympian, but that’s not me.” I reach for one of the pastries sitting on the counter and bite into it. “I’m going to give this my best, but I’m not eating kale.”

“Well then, you’re not giving it your best, are you?” He crosses his arms. I can tell Tim and I are about to launch into a scold-a-thon, but we’re interrupted by Emma’s parents floating over to us.

Her parents and mine have gotten along swimmingly since Emma and I met in the dorms, which shows what I think of her parents. To be fair, Emma and her mom have been really working on their relationship since she got with Thatcher. I clench my entire body as her mom leans in for cheek kisses. “Nicole, you look radiant,” she says.

“Thank you, Mrs. Cheswick. You look like the very definition of a glamorous grandma.” She pinches her lips as Senator Cheswick chuckles.

He reaches out for a handshake and then frowns. “Say,” he says, “what’s this I hear about trouble with your property?”

“I’m not sure this is the place for—“ Emma’s mom starts to interrupt. But given the choice between talking about running with my boss, talking about babies with my best friend, or bitching about my yard with her dad...

“Ugh, Mr. Cheswick, I’m going to need another drink if I’m going to talk about the landslide.” He laughs again, like I’m not serious, and I remember that Emma also comes from a house where real emotions were discouraged. “I’ve been

stressed as fuck about my yard, frankly,” I say, watching Mrs. Cheswick’s eyes bulge out of her head.

Running with Isaac and banging Isaac were the two moments in over a week where I wasn’t on the brink of hyperventilating that my yard was going to slide into the river and cost me two lifetimes worth of savings to get back.

I raise my eyebrows and take a sip of my drink, and give him the bare details of my situation. He scratches his chin. “You got an engineer on the job? I probably know a guy...”

“Let me guess,” I tell him, sucking on an ice cube. “You know the folks from Beltane Engineering?”

He nods, grinning. “Mick and I go way back,” he says. I remember what Isaac told me about his father collecting wives and I frown.

“Well, Mick’s youngest son, Isaac, is handling the repair for me and I guess for my neighbor, even though I can’t stand the old bat.”

Emma’s dad frowns and fiddles with his tie. “Landslides... gosh, Nicole, that’s going to be expensive to repair.”

I crunch down on the ice and nod. “Can I be really honest right now,” I tell him, knowing I’m only going to be half honest because the real me would give his wife a heart attack. “I don’t want to talk about money at my best friend’s son’s birthday party.”

I excuse myself, and they look relieved, as I make my way back to the living room to watch a sticky toddler open his birthday presents. I nod toward Maddie, who mouths *nice rack*

to me, and I laugh. I try to tamp down the feelings of fear that Isaac and his lawyer won't be able to find someone responsible for the landslide costs, that the city will condemn my house and I'll be tossed out on the street.

Maddie's right about my rack. I try to focus on how good I feel in another one of the fancy bras while I watch the little Stag open his gifts.

Wesley makes his way to my bag, and I allow myself a smug moment of happiness when he squeals about the plain red playground ball I brought him. "Wish we could roll it around in my back yard, kid," I mutter.

CHAPTER 16

ZACK

CAL AND LIAM meet me by the running trail early on Sunday morning. The two of them aren't saddled with a beginner for the group run, but all of us are used to running way more than the four miles scheduled for today's group run. We can get in at least six miles before the crowds arrive, if we hurry.

I park next to Cal and interrupt him and Liam arguing about their living arrangements.

"I don't get why you don't want to move in with Granny," Cal says, smacking Liam's ass when he bends to stretch his hamstrings. "She'll feed us and she won't hear you coming in with your special company."

Liam kicks Cal in the ankle, making him hop on one foot in pain. "First of all, she won't feed us because she doesn't cook anymore, which you'd know if you visited more often." They're talking about our dad's Irish mother, who lives alone in Dad's childhood home that he refuses to sell. Granny is almost 90, grouchy as Liam, and neither dad nor Uncle Kellen can convince her to downgrade to a senior living arrangement.

Callum has been pushing Liam to end the lease on their bachelor pad so they can move in with our grandmother and

maybe get some contractors in there to at least keep the squirrels out of the chimney.

Liam continues, saying, “and you’re nuts if you think I’d be bringing special company into that drafty old house with my grandmother home.”

I grunt my agreement with Liam. Cal is the ladies’ man among us. I sniff and adjust my shirt, hoping my mannerisms don’t give away the fact that I’ve had my own special company this week. Normally, I view my runs with my brothers as a time to escape the frustrations of work, but all of us view engineering as part of us. Our brains are just wired to think methodically and find solutions to problems. So I break code a bit to talk about the landslide project with them.

“I could use your advice if the two of you are done fighting over Granny.” They look at me, eyes wide.

Liam snorts. “Yeah, because we’re such model citizens. We’re great at advice, Zack.” We start running west on the path, toward the old prison by the Ohio River.

“I meant engineering advice. We all know Uncle Kellen is the only Brady worth giving out life advice.” This gets a few grunts of approval and we run three abreast up the path, hopping around small patches of black ice. Nobody else is out this way, and the group runs will head the opposite direction on the recreational trail.

I tell my brothers about the landslide and my conversation with Jared. “I’ve combed through blueprints for the major construction projects nearby,” I say, “but nothing seems off.”

“Yeah, because the plans are made by engineers,” Liam spits out. “Who did the actual construction on each of the sites?”

Liam is a structural engineer. While he works mostly on bridge projects throughout the city and with industrial clients in the region, he knows a lot about the local construction firms and the ones who cross their t’s and dot their i’s.

I try to picture the list of projects near Nicole’s house. “I think Kellinger did a few. Rothermel definitely did one. I’d have to look.”

“If any of them are Meyer, you should send one of my inspectors out to look at the work,” he says, explaining that he recently found a number of potentially deadly errors on a bridge repair work that the Meyer company had completed. “Without my guys checking, we could have had a 20-ton crane collapse, spilling god knows what chemicals. God. I hate sloppy work.” He spits off to the side of the path in frustration, then unzips his top layer.

As the sun comes out from behind a cloud, I can tell it’s going to be warm by the time our group run finishes. I wish I had layered up like Liam. “I’ll take a look. Thanks, brother.”

They return to bickering about what to do about our grandmother, wondering why she won’t just go move in with Uncle Kellen, since he lives alone in a much smaller house in a nearby neighborhood.

By the time we reach the prison, turn around, and run back to where we started, the corporate teams for the group run have begun to gather. Orla flips me the bird when she sees us.

“Thanks a lot, assholes,” she says, gesturing toward our dad. “I’ve had to listen to at least six of his long stories so far. Why didn’t you tell me you were pre-gaming?”

I’m about to apologize for leaving her out, when my dad catches my eye and gestures for me to come over to him. “Zack, great. I want you to come meet someone.”

He starts pulling me over toward the Stag Law crew. Nicole is pouting by her boss and some other guys I assume work with them at the law firm. Her eyes widen as she sees me coming toward them with my dad. “Tim, Ms. Kennedy, I want you to meet my youngest son. Zack’s going to come with us when we head to Paraguay.”

Nicole and I both whip our heads toward Dad. “What?” We say at once. Dad laughs. “Trust me,” he says. “This is a good idea. I want to tell you some of the ideas I had about our meeting with El Presidente.”

Tim looks like he’s not quite sure what to say to this new information and he frowns, considering. I don’t blame him. From what I understand, this trip is a big opportunity for his firm to help establish a charitable foundation with one of their baseball player clients. Dad doesn’t miss a beat, though. He claps Tim on the back.

“Why don’t the four of us grab some brunch after this run and we can talk it over.”

Nicole crosses her arms over her chest as the run leader picks up the bullhorn and starts his cheery welcome speech. “Tim, don’t you have family dinner on Sunday afternoons? With your pregnant wife?”

He considers this as we start following the crowd toward the starting place for the run. “Hm,” Tim says. “It’s true, Mick. I’ve got some family obligations today. But you know what, I trust Nicole to run point on this. Plus she knows Zack already! You three go talk it out and brief me later.” Tim claps Nicole on the back. “For now, though,” he says, grinning, “I’ve got to pound out some miles to make sure Old Man Brady eats my dust in the relay.”

Dad and Tim laugh and take off at a quick pace, talking about who knows what. Nicole looks at me like this is somehow my fault. “You’re absolutely not coming along on my business trip,” she says. “For one thing, you’ve got to fix my damn yard.”

“Now who’s telling who what to do,” I tease. The fact that she doesn’t want me to come along makes me decide I’m going to Paraguay now no matter what.

“It’s whom,” she says, not looking at me as she takes off toward the 16th Street Bridge. I guess we’re not going to talk about Friday night.

CHAPTER 17

NICOLE

I RUN the entire four miles without stopping, and I want to celebrate that fact with Isaac, but I'm too pissed off about him and his father sabotaging my trip to Paraguay. Tim Stag hired me to strategize the future of his law firm, and I can't do that when he's looping in golf buddies behind my back and having them bring their damn kids along on my information gathering trips for our clients.

Throughout the entirety of the run, my thoughts alternated between remembering Friday night and the way I feel strangled by Tim lately. He's not listening to me at work and, worse, he's making decisions without consulting me at all. I realize my miles were achieved in part thanks to my anger, and marvel that my head is feeling a bit clearer by the time we reach the turn-around point.

Isaac seemed as surprised by his father's antics as me, so at least there's that. I can hear him keeping pace right behind me throughout our run, and it drives me bananas that he doesn't say anything to me. I want him to pick a fight, say something annoying, drag me by the ponytail off into the bushes and fuck me again.

Ok, where did that last part come from? My thighs are burning as I speed up for the final stretch of our run, trying and failing to forget how it felt to spend time with him on Friday, to wrestle with his long, firm body in my kitchen until he had me screaming and panting for more.

Isaac's dad stands in the parking lot clapping his hands and cracking gum as we run up to him. "Is my son talking to you about your stride, Nicole? I know you're the competition and all, but he's also supposed to be coaching you here on these group runs."

"My stride?" I look over at Zack, confused.

He stares daggers at his father. "We just got past breath work, Dad. I'm not going to dump everything on her at once."

"What the hell is wrong with my stride?" Does he mean the way I'm moving my legs? God, are there things to change about that? Who are these people that they think they can stand there and watch me run and talk about my legs moving?

Mick Brady squints at his son, thinks for a minute, and shakes his head. "Zack's right, honey. I'm sure you'll get to talking about footwork eventually."

"I'm not your honey," I huff at him. And then I remember that he's a friend of my boss and I suck a breath in through my teeth. I ought to be using that 'in through the nose and out through the mouth' breathing method Isaac talks about when we're working hard. "I prefer Nicole or Ms. Kennedy."

Mick nods. "My bad, my bad. Let's head over to Mulligan's. We can walk. They've got great eggs." He starts

off toward a dingy looking diner near the 16th Street bridge, and I'm surprised. He seems like the kind of man who'd hire a driver to take us to the William Penn or something more glamorous. Something serving alcohol at least.

When we get inside, Mick greets the hostess familiarly and Isaac stews, silently. We sit, the two of them opposite me at a small booth, and Mick orders rounds of orange juice for the table. "We all need the sugar after a long run," he says. "You get your miles in before the group run, son?"

My eyes widen as Isaac nods. They chat, apparently having all run about 10 miles today altogether. Here I was feeling so proud to run four without stopping to rest. And here I was feeling proud that I didn't pass out this time. Apparently I'm in over my head in both athletics and business lately.

We order our breakfasts, and Mick chastises his son for getting extra sausage, facing toward me and saying, "My boys never listen to me about healthy foods. The older two at least have their mother to influence them a bit. This one thinks I'm full of shit."

Isaac points a fork at his father and retorts, "First of all, you are full of shit, and second, I can eat sausage once a week. I'm not going to clog my arteries."

I frown, focusing back on what Mick said about Cal and Liam's mom. I remember what Zack said, about not seeing his mom since he was a baby. My own mother would have fainted if she saw me order an omelet with the yolks in it, let alone a side of bacon. In front of men, no less.

Mick leans back and presses his lips together. “Hmm,” he says. “Guess he probably didn’t tell you about his mother when he was surveying your rotational landslide.” I open my mouth to correct him, but Mick charges on ahead. “Thing is, Ms. Kennedy, I make better decisions about engineering than I do about my personal life.”

“Dad, we don’t need to talk about this.”

Mick waves a hand at his son and tries to bat away the toast Isaac is buttering. “It’s white bread, son. This stuff will kill you! Look at your grandfather.” Mick turns toward me. “Zack’s mother thought having a baby would help our relationship. She...she wasn’t cut out to be anyone’s parent.” Zack looks like he’s going to snap his butter knife in half, slathering the butter and smashing the bread to pieces in the process. “She skipped town not too long after Zack was born. He grew up coming to work with me most of the time. That’s what gave him such an edge as an engineer, I think.”

Mick talks about Isaac’s early aptitude for math, describing earth dams he’d build in the puddles on work sites and the ways he’d put on a tiny hard hat to join his uncle inspecting mine shafts. “I think my boy here can feel the earth move beneath his hands,” Mick says. “That’s why I want him to come with us to Paraguay.”

The food arrives and I dig in to my omelet, catching Isaac’s eye as he just looks at me, smoldering and sweaty. When I lick my lip, I taste salt on my skin, reminding me of how he tasted the other night in my kitchen. Mick keeps

talking. “You know, we’re going in late February, right at the tail end of their rainy season. Did you know that?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t read much about the country...” I pretty much only read up on Augusto Cruz and his immediate family.

Mick nods and winks. “That entire region has terrible landslides. Just devastating. They don’t have a lot of infrastructure to start with, I mean compared to here. And what they do have gets washed away in these monsoons. Your Mr. Cruz would know all about it, especially if he managed to make a name for himself as a ball player despite all this.”

“Hm.” I start to feel a bit foolish that I don’t already know more about the region we’re visiting, and make a note to start skimming the news sections and reading up on Paraguay and surrounding nations.

“I ask you,” Mick continues, pausing to eat some fruit. “What do you think is important to this flashy baseball player? These other guys, they start foundations, it buys what? Shoes and gloves for kids in Puerto Rico? Batting helmets? Those things aren’t going to do a sniff of good to kids who can’t walk to school because the road washed out.”

“Dad, I don’t think Nicole wants to hear about landslides while she’s eating.”

“Of course she does,” Mick counters. “Her client is creating a foundation. That foundation could service the foundation of his homeland. Reinforce the roads so they don’t wash into the sea.” This is starting to sound more and more interesting, and I can see why Tim likes spending time with

this guy. I would never have thought to care about how the rainy season somewhere might impact how its celebrity athletes share their wealth. But I'm also not convinced it's relevant to a foundation that Augusto Cruz will create.

"This is really fascinating," I say, and I swear I can see Isaac's neck muscles spasm. I pull out my phone and tap in a few notes to remind myself what Mick is saying. "Flood relief," I say. "That could have appeal to donors. And people in Pittsburgh can relate to that, especially fans who live along the Mon River."

I'm not fully convinced what I'm saying is true.

Mick nods. "Now, do you know what flood relief means?"

"Oh, Jesus. Here we go." Isaac throws down his napkin, crosses his arms, and leans back. I shake my head.

"We're not talking about boxes of Red Cross rations or sand bags to hold back the river. Flood relief, real relief, means someone with geotechnical knowledge proposing sustainable, affordable solutions. To repair roads, restore power. Secure the foundations of the homes built on the hillsides before they slide into the roads that just got repaired. Getting the nation functioning again at full capacity. That's flood relief."

"I have never thought about that at all," I tell him, truthfully. I chase my orange juice with a glass of water and try to process everything Mick is saying. "So where do you and Isaac come in to all of that?"

Mick grins. Isaac shakes his head. “Well, Augusto Cruz’s foundation could help the government of Paraguay finance these infrastructure improvements. Pay the right experts to develop plans, supervise and execute the repair work for the nation.” He claps Isaac on the back and rubs his shoulder. “Imagine if my son leads off his small talk with the president of Paraguay, talking about how he saved your house from falling into the Allegheny River?”

Now it’s my turn to squint and cross my arms. I’m feeling really manipulated here, and I don’t like it at all. Mick points a long finger at me. “This could be a very mutually beneficial trip for our companies, Ms. Kennedy. If we play our cards right.”

CHAPTER 18

ZACK

I SPEND the next few days in a black mood. My dad always does shit like this, steam rolling everyone in his path. Sure, his idea is sound. Probably even good. But he should have tipped me off to this plan from the beginning. He wants me to be all grateful to him that he saw this long term vision when he sent me to Nicole's back yard initially, rather than give me the promotion I've been working toward for years.

And I hate how Nicole looked steamrolled about the whole plan. I could tell that's not what she was going for at all, but also that she was in a hard spot between my dad and her boss leaping at Dad's ideas.

He wants me to be thankful that he's bothering to bring me by his side on this grand humanitarian mission. "Pah." I growl at the dirt in Nicole's yard. Blowing out a long breath, I note that the ground has sunk at least another foot since I was here last. It doesn't seem to be moving more horizontally, but I know I'm going to have to involve the city inspector soon if the slide doesn't settle. Nicole is going to murder me if her house gets condemned.

“But I’m going to tell her this is happening so she’s well informed. Because I fucking respect her and nobody likes this sort of surprise,” I mutter to myself, letting my tape measure snap back in with an angry snick.

I hate how I’m a sidekick for my father. All that shit about him fostering my love of the earth, as if his twisted version of childcare, dragging me to construction sites, was a positive thing.

“Yoo hoo!” I look over to see Nicole’s neighbor waving her arms at me from her patio. “Can I talk to you?”

I start muttering under my breath while I extract myself from the trench in Nicole’s half of the yard. It’s deep enough that I had to toss a ladder down there today. I sigh, brushing the mud off my knees as I make my way toward Valerie. “What can I do for you, ma’am?”

“Have you read about the alligators? In the river?”

I squint my eyes at her and sniff to see if she’s been drinking. “Alligators?”

She starts waving a newspaper in my face. “We’ve got alligators in the damn rivers! Some crack pot was keeping them at home and let them loose. Now they’re mating or coming after us or I don’t even know.”

“Ma’am, I’m wondering if maybe you have me confused for someone else. I’m just an engineer—“

“What I want to know is whether my yard will become a ramp for these reptiles. Are they going to bite my ass while I’m pruning my hedge?”

I look out at her half of the yard, severed in half by the jagged trench formed by the landslide. On the far side of her property, her small raised garden beds sit untouched by the trauma. The trench running perpendicular to the shared property line is filled with the remains of what was surely once a fine hedge. “I don’t think you need to be pruning your hedge any time soon.”

“Don’t be a smart ass. I see why she likes you,” Valerie says, bonking me with the rolled up newspaper. “Are the gators going to climb onto my porch?”

I sigh. “I really don’t think your yard is at any additional or different risk for alligators than any of your neighbors,” I tell her. “But you’d have to call animal control to be certain.”

I hear the patio door open on Nicole’s half of the property and she sticks her head out. “Valerie, leave him alone. I hired him first,” she says, but I can tell she’s only half trying to sound mean.

“Have to pay me to hire me,” I mutter, but neither of them hears me. Valerie crosses her arms over her chest and stares.

“You know, I’m on a fixed income,” she says, softer now. I nod.

Nicole’s face softens. “Val, I told you, I’m on top of this, ok? We’ll rise or fall together on this. Isaac has a lawyer looking into it for us, ok?”

The three of us stand there for a few beats until Valerie nods and spins around, heading back into her house. “You

wanna come in,” Nicole asks, squinting at me as I make my way back to her trench to grab my ladder.

I want to. I want to take out all my frustrations and smack her ass again until the skin turns pink. I want to bite her neck and have her bite me back. But it’s a bad idea. “Can’t today,” I say, not looking up at her. I walk out of her yard carrying the ladder before I have a chance to let my dick change my mind.

I don’t go home after work, though. I drive over to my uncle’s house, and smile when I see my cousin Orla’s car in the driveway. That means there will be homemade dinner today.

I knock on the door. Orla throws it open and points at my feet. “Boots off,” she says, pointing next at the black plastic tray inside the door. My uncle hasn’t visited a job site in a decade, but his door is always open to Orla and me and my brothers...which means he’s always ready to intercept our filth before we bombard his tidy home.

“Like I was gonna drag mud through the house,” I mutter. Orla heads back into the kitchen and starts pouring me a glass of wine. My uncle stands at the stove, stirring something that smells amazing.

Kellen is as tall and slender as my father, and the pair of them are fit and fast, despite being in their 50’s. But where my father always has an angle, Kellen is pure kindness. And so I frequently drive over to his place and pour my heart out to him, most often when I’m pissed at my dad. Like right now.

I scowl at the white wine Orla poured and when my uncle catches sight of my face, he gestures at me to sit, and reaches

for his bottle of Irish whiskey that he keeps by the stove. Pouring me a few fingers, he wags a wooden spoon at me and says, “Spill, kid.”

Orla makes herself scarce, mumbling something about her laundry.

Grateful, I sputter out the whole story from the diner, backtrack to the day I didn’t get to present about the big dam project. “If he had this long-term vision, why didn’t he tip me off? He made me look like an asshole in front of Nicole.”

“Nicole, is it?” Kellen’s brows shoot up as he leans on the counter. “That the woman with the rotational landslide in her back yard?”

I nod and sip my drink, swirling the liquid in the glass and smelling it like I’d been taught, letting it slide into my mouth and down my throat. My father and uncle both agree that it’s a sin to slam back the holy water of our motherland.

We used to go to Ireland together once a year to see Granny and Grandad’s cousins. There’s no real drinking age over there, and the Brady kids came of age drinking whiskey on the banks of the Duff River. Even as a teen, tipsy, I was interested in the land around the river, how the soil changed as the river charged closer to the ocean.

A timer beeps, and Kellen stoops to pull a pan from the oven. “Lucky for you, I always make extra if Orla’s coming over,” he says. “Unlucky for her, she won’t have leftovers for her lunch tomorrow.” We share a laugh at that.

“Need help setting the table?” The question is a courtesy. When we eat here, we fix our plates by the stove and generally stand or sit around the counter on tall stools. By the time Uncle Kellen felt ready to move out on his own with Orla, we were all teenagers, off to track meets and math olympics and robotics clubs.

Engineers to our souls, we made the most of efficient conversations over hearty food at this counter. Tonight would be no different. “Orla,” Kellen shouts down the hall. “Chicken’s out.” He looks at me and sighs. “Your father should have given you some preparation before he sprung all that on the client. He gets so wrapped up in his long-term visions, he can’t ever figure out the details of the moment.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah, that’s where you’ve always come in. I know it. But you didn’t have to stand there while Tim Stag and Nicole Kennedy looked like they weren’t sure who to trust anymore.”

“I’ll talk to my brother about his plans for the Paraguay project,” Kellen says, turning off the burners under the sauce and the vegetables. Orla saunters back into the room with a basket of clean, folded clothes, which she drops on the floor by the back door.

“Meanwhile,” he says, scooping out a plate of food and handing it to me, “want to tell me about your progress with *Nicole*.”

Orla snorts, and I know neither of them is thinking about the project in her back yard. That just sends my mood back

further into the dark side. I wanted Nicole to be my private business, a delicious secret just for me.

In a world with two older brothers, no mother, and a distracted father obsessed with work, I never had very many indulgences. Giving in to my lust for that woman was decadent and intoxicating, and it can never happen again.

She's too much. Too wild, too smart, too capable. The kind of woman I could let myself relax around. And, evidently, part of my dad's business schemes. That makes her off limits for my own emotional safety. Keeping my guard up around people was always the one thing keeping me afloat. It was too easy for people I cared about to walk out of my life otherwise.

My cousin and my uncle stare at me and I realize they're expecting an answer. "Project is coming along," I say. "I've got the plans drawn up to secure the yard. Gonna have to build a retaining wall. I'm going there tomorrow to walk the property line again with the plans for the nearby residential construction."

The two of them share a glance and a smile, and I know I haven't done a good job at all of hiding my extracurricular feelings for this particular client. Kellen chews a bit, thinking. "I wasn't asking about the work, kiddo."

I swallow and shake my head. "There can't be anything other than the work," I tell him. "Not with her wrapped up in Dad's business interests." Kellen frowns, makes eyes with Orla, and nods. I don't add the part where there can't be anything more because I can already tell that Nicole Kennedy has the power to eviscerate me. If I let her in, it'll crush me

when she decides to hit the road. It's better that she kicked me out with my pants around my ankles. Just sex. Just that once.

We finish our meal in silence.

CHAPTER 19

NICOLE

MADDIE PICKS UP EMMA, who says she has two hours to chill before she has to go home and feed Ricky, so the two of them come to my house to ogle the trench in the yard. We stand in the sun room drinking wine and staring at it.

Maddie taps on the glass and frowns. “If only there were a bra for your yard,” she says, adjusting her own fine rack. We nod, sighing.

Emma squints. “So any movement with getting the insurance to pay? Or finding someone to sue?” I shake my head.

“And what about your orgasm situation,” Maddie asks.

I pound my forehead against the glass, muttering, “at least that’s been partially solved.”

“Partially?” Emma and Maddie raise their brows in unison while I nod.

“I might have boned the nerdy engineer.”

Maddie claps her hands. “Ooh, this is excellent information. Where’s the rest of the wine?”

They pester me until I explain that I came for him, hard, and Emma starts jumping up and down. She knows my whole deal with sex, that I only like it specific ways and under specific terms. But somehow it feels inappropriate to elaborate on the religious experience I had with him in my kitchen. I decide to pivot and tell them how I'm feeling sabotaged at work.

“Want me to have Thatcher talk to Tim?” Emma starts patting my back.

“Absolutely fucking not, Emma Stag. This is my career and I'm going to solve it. I just wanted to vent about it.”

Maddie nods furiously. “Yes. I'm here for you. Vent away, because that's some bullshit.” She starts to explain how things aren't going so hot for her at work, either. There are some layoffs coming up at the newspaper and she's feeling concerned. Emma actually hasn't been replaced since she left to be a full time author, and Maddie and the other writers were already pulling double duty before the layoffs.

“Work is shitty,” I say. “Just all around.”

“Yeah,” they say, nodding.

“But also I love what I do,” I tell them. I open a box of crackers and we pass that around, still staring at the trench. “I really love my fucking job.”

We all sigh and munch our snacks a bit longer in silence before Emma says she has to go before her boobs burst. I'm actually sort of curious to see what that looks like, but I trust her to know her body. I walk the girls out to Maddie's car with

hugs and promises to call with updates about the work situation.

“And the orgasms. Keep us posted about those,” Emma says, looking serious enough that I laugh. I haven’t been able to coax any more from my body manually yet, but the day is young. The sky looks slightly ominous as Maddie pulls out of her parking spot.

I head inside and decide I could map out some plans for work or I could try out the Babe Rocket one more time. Babe Rocket wins out, and I rummage under my bed trying to find it from where it rolled around on the floor the last time I threw it across the room.

I’m just about to settle back on my sheets and crank it up when I’m startled by the onset of a sudden rainstorm. Squinting out the window, I see a man standing in the back yard. *Isaac.*

What the hell is he doing standing out there in the rain?

CHAPTER 20

ZACK

I SPEND the morning drawing up the plan of attack for Nicole's yard. Nobody has contacted me with any more details about traveling to Paraguay, so I do nothing else regarding the research for that project. We haven't figured out funding for Nicole's project yet—I know she doesn't have a quarter million dollars. She can't even put her house up for a loan at this point.

So until I find a culprit for her insurance to sue, we're stuck spinning our wheels planning a restoration, rather than executing.

The sun peeks out around three in the afternoon, so I decide to head over to her place. I've got the plans in my truck for the apartment complexes nearby, and after studying them a bit, I stand in her yard, just staring. These are new, trendy construction projects, with roof gardens and shit.

One of the condo buildings even has a damn labyrinth in the back courtyard. I scoff, imagining people walking laps back there, trying to find inner peace. Hell, my dad will probably crash their labyrinth party and walk out of there with

six new contracts to engineer meditation chambers in everyone's office.

I kick a beer can that's rolling along the sidewalk, wondering why I can't see what it is that led to Nicole's yard just falling off the back of her property. Yes, this is Pittsburgh and these things happen. But it's always after an unseasonal torrential rain.

And then, as if I conjured the weather by thinking it, the sky rips open and it begins to pour. "Fuck," I shout, but I don't head for my truck.

I stand with my hands on my hips staring at the neighboring building, with its rain garden and its rain barrels. I stand there, getting soaked to the skin, hoping above hope that a solution presents itself to me, that I can find something. But all I'm feeling is wet.

"Isaac! Isaac Brady!" Nobody calls me Isaac, except Nicole, and I love the sound of my full name on her lips. I turn to find her standing on her patio, waving her arms at me to come toward her. And of course I do. "What in the hell are you doing out here in this weather?" She looks at me like I've lost my mind.

I shrug. "Engineers frequently work outside in all sorts of weather," I tell her, trying to sound nonchalant, but my teeth start chattering and the jig is up.

"Well, come inside and get warm at least," she says, heading in through the sliding door.

“You finally gonna give me that laundry tutorial?” I stop right inside the door, not really sure what to do. I can’t very well walk through her house and streak mud everywhere, drip streams of water on her oil finished hardwood floors. I take off my hard hat and set my phone on the little table inside the door.

She just stares at me, considering.

I’m considering, too. What am I doing inside her house? Can I handle it if I’m inside her again and then she tosses me out? Nicole bites the side of her lip and crosses her arms over her chest, and I realize that not fucking her is impossible right now.

She sighs, pretending to be exasperated. “Well I can’t very well give you a tutorial if you’re still wearing the wet, muddy clothes.” She raises a brow at me and I’m done.

I unzip and peel off my sopping wet fleece jacket and toss that down on the mat inside the door and, not taking my eyes off hers, I start to slowly unbutton my shirt. It’s a terrible idea being in here with her. It’s terrible for me to give in to my feelings for this woman, because I don’t just lust after her.

I crave her smart mouth and the way she cares about her elderly neighbor, even if she acts like Valerie is a pain in the ass. I crave her attention to detail, the way she’s carefully set up her home so that everything has a place.

I know I will come to regret this, because I can’t let myself get attached to anyone who might leave me. My own mother didn’t want me. I’ve got my siblings and my cousin, and that’s

enough for me. Women have always just been a diversion for me. I end relationships before they get serious.

But I don't care about any of that as Nicole stands in the hall, beckoning for me. I brush my hair out of my eyes and walk toward her, ignoring the gnawing fear that Nicole will become one more woman in my life who walks out on me just as I succumb to needing her.

I finish unbuttoning my shirt. I want those detail-oriented fingers on my skin.

Nicole stands, considering me, watching as I strip in her kitchen. I pull the belt from my jeans and toss it next to my fleece and I unfasten my pants, letting them pool at my ankles. Wearing just my boxers, I bend over to untie my work boots. I hear Nicole's breath increase in speed as she watches me.

And then my teeth start chattering again and she approaches me. "Come with me," she says, stooping to pick up my stuff. I follow her down the hall, close enough that I know my breath tickles her neck as she shoves my clothes in her washer. "Do you have anything else in your pockets that shouldn't get wet?" She sets my wallet and keys on the counter in her laundry room.

I shake my head and press myself against her back, craving her heat and her nearness in equal degrees. Cranking the dial to start the machine, Nicole sighs and turns around. Her green eyes meet mine and we stare at each other, our breath matching pace.

"You going to stare at me all night while I shiver in your laundry room?" I feel like giving her shit because I want to see

how she responds. Her mouth curls up in a grin.

“I considered it,” she says. She reaches out a hand and traces my dick through my boxers, and even though I’m chilled through, it springs to life at her touch. “As you saw, I’ve got some pretty good hardware to service my own needs.”

“I shouldn’t have signed for it,” I say, snaking a hand through her messy curls. “I should have turned them away and walked directly upstairs and shown you what a real cock can —“ Her mouth crashes into mine, cutting off my comeback.

I back her up against the washer as her tongue probes my mouth. Her teeth close on my lip and we moan together. As she drags her short nails along my shoulders, I shudder again and she pulls her head back. “Bed,” she says. “It’s warmer there.”

Grabbing my hand, she starts striding through the narrow house and up the stairs. I notice that the hardwood doesn’t even creak beneath our feet, and my mind starts drifting to the work she must have done installing a sub-floor, before I shake my head and focus on the woman in front of me.

CHAPTER 21

NICOLE

I WASN'T GOING to invite him inside. I really wasn't. But when I saw him standing there in the rain, just staring at the apartment building a few doors down, the water streaking off his coat, rolling off his hard hat...well, it made me want him to bend me over the counter again.

Now that I've got him inside and mostly naked, he's not bending me over the counter, so much as trailing behind me, drooling and shivering. I shove him into my bed and pull the covers up from the foot of the bed, where they're still bunched from when I climbed out this morning.

My bedroom is the only messy place in my house. In my universe, really. I keep everything else strategically, painstakingly organized. But this room? Nobody is ever in here. My housekeeper doesn't even come in here. This king-sized bed is mine to thrash around in, and I've got mismatched blankets chosen not for looks, but for comfort.

The flannel sheets I've got on there right now? They feel like...well they feel like really nice flannel fucking sheets, and I shove Isaac onto them with a grunt, shirking out of my clothes as I climb in on top of him.

He props himself half up on his elbows, a move that shows off the ridges of his stomach muscles. I guess that's what ten miles a day will do for a body. "Damn, Brady," I say, straddling him and shoving him all the way back down to the sheets. "I didn't even get to see you naked last time."

The smug fucker laces his fingers together behind his head and grins at me. "You can stare at me naked all you want, Ms. Kennedy." I like the way he says my name like that, deep and slow, teasing but still holding a hint of danger that reminds me of the feral way he plowed into me the last time we tried this.

"This is a terrible idea," I mutter, reaching behind my back to unclasp my bra. I hadn't planned on seeing him today, on him seeing me, but I'm grateful for the deep red, satiny bra that hoists my breasts inward and upward. I can see his dick twitch in his boxers as I peel away the bra.

"Just awful," he mutters, his rough palms reaching up to my breasts. He cups the sensitive skin there, weighing my tits in his hands before rolling the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. "You're so fucking beautiful," he says, and there's a serious look in his eyes that I don't like.

It's a look that says this is more than just chemistry, more than just two people whose pheromones attract. I ease out of his grasp and kneel on the bed, sliding his boxers down his legs as he lifts his hips to help.

"Oh shit. Oh god. Nicole," he starts muttering as I lick my way down his firm legs and squeeze his cock, jutting out of the dark tangle of pubic hair that stands out in stark contrast to his pale, muscled skin.

I take my time studying this unfamiliar terrain with the tip of my tongue and one careful fingertip. “Is this ok?” When I look up to his eyes again, they’re screwed tight and I see he’s biting his lip.

“Fuck, yes, Nicole. Do not stop. Please. Oh god.” One of his hands twists into my hair while the other smacks the headboard as I start to circle his cock head with my tongue.

My hand slides down his shaft, his foreskin bunching in my hand and making a sort of cushion while I stroke him. No wonder this felt so good inside me. His dick is magnificent, long and hard and smooth. A perfect cock. I slide my mouth over him, bobbing my head up and down a few times before releasing him with a pop. “You ready to talk about laundry now? Feeling warmer?”

When his eyes meet mine this time, I swear he growls at me as he sits up and lifts me from under my armpits. He rolls us around so he’s on top of me then, and his mouth drops to my nipple. He laves his tongue along the hard nub and, pushing my tits together with his hands, switches over to the other side as he rocks his cock along my wet underwear.

“The only laundry I care about right now are these dirty panties,” he says, and he moves to start sliding them down my legs. And then he brings them to his face and fucking sniffs my panties, moaning before dipping a hand right to my center.

Jesus, he’s filthy and crass and I fucking love it. “Obscene,” I murmur, rocking my hips to encourage his hand closer to my pulsing core. I gasp as he slides a thick finger

inside of me. Apparently Isaac Brady is fantastic at fucking me frantically in the kitchen, and leisurely in my bed.

“You’re as wet as my clothes,” he murmurs, sliding his finger deeper, deeper still, before crooking it toward him in a move that sends waves of pleasure right through me.

This is where I should explain to him that I have to be on top in order to come, that guys have been trying for years to get me off in various other layouts and it just doesn’t work unless I’m the one controlling the friction, controlling the pace. The last time was a fluke, and my clit has been broken. But before I can tell him, he pulls his hand out from inside me and smacks my clit sharply.

“Eyes up here, Nicole,” he says, and my mouth drops open. He pinches my clit, then rubs it, then slides his finger back inside me and I splinter to pieces as my eyes lock on his. I swear I can feel the lightning bolt travel between us. He urges me on with just the fire of his gaze, and he sends me the orgasm through his flaming pupils.

Staring into his face, I come undone. “Isaac,” I wail, a guttural noise seeping from my body as I moan and thrash around on the covers. “Isaac!”

I come so long, so hard, I swear I’m going to come out of my skin, but his hand is on my shoulder, holding me flat and grounding me. “You look so fucking sexy when you come,” he says. He withdraws his hand from my throbbing channel and strokes my upper thigh, staring at me like I’m the most amazing thing he’s ever seen.

And then he actually says, “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen,” and I gasp.

“I need you inside me,” I tell him, my fingers fumbling on the slick skin of his shoulders, trying to pull him closer. I could drown in his eyes in this moment, the way he’s looking at me like I’m everything to him.

“Hm,” he says, not moving. He stares at my bedside table like he’s looking for a condom, but we already discussed this last time.

“Ugh, it’s fine. I’ve got a shot in my arm. I won’t get pregnant.” I don’t make a habit of fucking men without protection. In fact, I never do that. But I was so carried away and he felt so god damned good, the way he took charge of me like that, made me come. Literally MADE me come. I shudder.

I press a finger against his swollen lips. “Now fuck me.”

He bites the tip of my finger as he thrusts inside. My eyes roll up in my head at the pleasure of feeling stretched by him. His cock is everywhere as he grinds and thrusts. He’s pounding into me until my tits shake, and he stares down at them from his position propped up on his elbows.

“Fuck yeah,” he says, grinning. He thrusts a few more times and then abruptly pulls out and rolls me on my stomach. “On your knees, Nicole.”

I’m too overcome to consider not following his instructions. I rest my weight on my forearms and lift my ass, and he slams into me as his palms press down on my

shoulders. I love it. “Jesus, Isaac. This is amazing,” I grunt out as he presses me down while filling me up.

The angle of this sends pleasure rippling through my entire body. I can feel him stroking every nerve inside my pussy. “Where do you come from?” I roar and moan and just succumb to him pounding through me, bare and so hard compared to my swollen softness.

He growls again and stiffens and I feel him swell inside me. And then, abruptly, he pulls out and I feel the hot splatter of his release spray across my back. I look over my shoulder to see him holding his dick, staring as it spurts.

It’s the dirtiest thing anyone has ever done to me, and I love it so intensely I’m not sure what to do. While Isaac’s dick twitches, he reaches between my legs and rubs slow circles above my cleft until I come again, shuddering and writhing beneath him and both of us heave, out of breath and exhausted.

CHAPTER 22

NICOLE

“YOU GOING to kick me out again?” Isaac mops at my back with a tissue until he cleans up most of his hot mess. He rolls up on his side and brushes the matted curls off my sweaty forehead, then flicks my nose.

I frown at him. “Not just yet. You hungry?” He nods. I climb out of bed and reach for my pajamas—I’ve got a ratty college t-shirt and mesh shorts stationed near my bed—when I remember that all his clothes are in my washer.

“I don’t think I have anything that’ll fit you,” I say, frowning. He climbs out of bed naked and presses up behind me. I can feel his half-hard cock against my ass in the mesh shorts.

“Why should I get dressed? Aren’t you going to strip me again soon enough?”

I turn toward him as I start to gather my hair into a loose ponytail. “What makes you think you’ll get lucky again?”

When he smiles, I think it’s the first time I’ve seen him truly do that. His whole face lights up. The glow of it warms my heart a little, which makes me nervous. “I’ve got plans for

you and that exposed brick downstairs,” he says, stooping to grab his damp boxers and sliding them up his legs.

I stare at his long quads, so firm and defined. I really should go running with him more often. We walk downstairs and he starts going on and on, admiring the mortar I repointed inside, rubbing his hand along the drywall and complimenting the smooth finish.

When we pass the laundry room, I shove him right up against the washer and peel out of my pajamas. “You’re just using me for my home renovation skills,” I tease, loving every one of his keen observations about the work I’ve done on my house. I watch as he quickly gets hard and my eyes water as he pulls out his dick. He lifts me and sits me on the edge of the washer, then spears into me as if we didn’t finish fucking ten minutes before.

We fuck, frantically this time, as I mutter that I’m so happy I can’t even see straight. I’ve been so fucked in the head between work and my fear that I might lose my house. I can feel the stress shaking loose from my bones as I give in to the pleasure I’m drawing from Isaac.

After, I pull a pizza from my freezer and we eat naked in my kitchen, not giving a shit who sees us through my glass patio doors. He reaches out to wipe a dab of sauce from my lip and sucks it off his finger, and I decide I’m in trouble, because I want to fuck him again.

“I don’t really do relationships,” I tell him, reaching to take a sip from the beer we’re sharing, since I only had one in

my fridge. I have to defuse the energy between us before I get used to the way I feel around him.

His eyebrows shoot up. “Is that what this is? I don’t do relationships, either,” he says. Then he grins. “I thought I was just here to learn about laundry.”

He takes the beer back and downs a big swig of it. He wipes his mouth with his wrist, which should be gross, but neither of us has plates or napkins as we eat from the tray, leaning on my counter. “Seriously, though,” he says. “You heard about me and my mom. That pretty much fucked me up for relationships.” I don’t say anything, just look at him. What’s to say?

“My parents didn’t exactly foster attachment,” I tell him with a sigh.

“Well don’t hold back on me, Nicole. Seems fair I should know about your shit since you know why I’ll be holding you at a distance emotionally.”

I snort out a laugh. “Did you ever watch the Gilmore Girls?” He shakes his head. “It’s this show about mothers and daughters...the grandma character is a filthy rich country club lady with pearls and sensible pumps, and no real tolerance for behavior outside the expected.” I sigh, reaching for my hair.

“This was never refined enough for my mother. And she resented my smart mouth and the way I always insisted on being given credit for being right—I’m always right, Isaac Brady. Let’s just clear that up right now.”

“We’ll see,” he says, finishing off the beer.

I nod my head toward a framed picture of Emma and me on our college campus in the Oakland neighborhood of the city. In the picture, we're beaming, arms around each other in our caps and gowns, standing beneath one of the pink cherry trees on campus on graduation day. Both of us have wild hair—hers red, mine brown—and both of us have mothers who never quite understood us. “My parents refused to help me pay for college because I chose a partial scholarship at a state school instead of a posh, all-female college they felt was more appropriate.”

Isaac squints. “I take it withholding the tuition wasn't due to hardship?”

I shake my head. “They thought they could punish or shame me into my role as an obedient daughter en route to being an obedient wife to one of the sons of their club buddies.” I don't like remembering these rejections, and I sigh.

“They wouldn't even co-sign my loans,” I tell him, explaining how I attended part-time that first year until I could work things out to stop being on their tax forms and qualify for financial aid on my own.

He just stares at me for a bit and swallows.

Then, he reaches for a piece of pizza crust on the tray and snaps it in half, handing me one. “To shitty parents,” he says, clinking his crust against mine and then throwing it in the sink. “Let's dispose of their shitty example.” He turns on my garbage disposal and I smile.

“What comes next with my trench?”

Isaac frowns toward the back door. “I need to figure out who fucked up their drainage,” he tells me. “The storm today gave me an idea.” He tells me he’s going to come over the next time it rains, bring some equipment and really study the storm runoff from the big buildings around my condo. We talk for awhile about the process, but when I yawn, he raps his knuckles on the counter.

Isaac tells me he will see me at the group run this weekend and gets his clothes from my dryer. I stand by awkwardly as he gets dressed and ties his boots. I want to tell him to come inside when he’s done for the day tomorrow. I want to see what else he will come up with to surprise me in the bedroom. But that feels too much like a commitment and I already feel weird having shared personal shit with him about my fucked up family.

When he leaves, I pull up the files Mark prepared for me about Paraguay and South America. For the first time in ages, I’m not distracted by my anxiety about financing the trench in my yard. I’m not panicked about it all sliding into the river. I trust that Isaac will make sure my house is ok.

It was true what I told him—that I paid for school with loans and created paid internship opportunities for myself before such things were popular. My summer salaries with tech startups paid my rent and because Emma and I always lived in shithole apartments, I saved enough to buy this place in cash after graduation.

A sense of unease nags at me as I look out into the black night. In many ways, I’m relying on Isaac’s word that things

are going to be ok. Being beholden to people sets my teeth on edge. Takes me right back to those long fights with my parents about my education. The things they screamed at me about money and responsibility and decorum are forever burned in my brain as a betrayal.

I vowed then never again to depend on anyone. For anything. I look at the files from Mark. He had sent them to Tim as well, and I see Tim's comments in the shared online documents. I remind myself that Tim is family with my best friend, Tim is someone I trust, and Tim trusts the Brady family when it comes to engineering.

That meeting with Mick at the diner was weird, but the man's ideas had merit. I bury myself in my research, and try to silence the doubting voice inside my head.

CHAPTER 23

ZACK

“YOU’RE in a good mood for once.” Liam nudges my shoulder in the kitchen at work and holds up his coffee mug toward me. I pour the steaming liquid into his cup and clink glasses with him. We both take it black, like our father.

Sometimes I hate having anything in common with the batty old asshole, but it’s hard to begrudge someone their coffee preference.

“Missed you on the run this morning,” he says as we sip our drinks, leaning against the wall.

I shrug. I was too sore this morning to even think about the additional chaffing involved in my daily run. Tomorrow, I’ll regret skipping the workout, but this morning I actually slept until seven.

“Hey,” I say to my brother. He raises his eyebrows, and I am about to ask him if he thinks we will ever have a chance at being normal in a relationship. If he thinks a woman will ever stick with us for the long haul.

But asking him that will of course lead to questions, and I’m not ready to think about the questions I know he’s going to

ask about Nicole. I blow on my coffee and stall, trying to think of how I can change the subject to something safer.

Something work related.

“You remember my roommate from MIT? Ray?”

Liam nods. “Good dude. Heard he moved to Pittsburgh awhile back.”

“Yeah,” I say. “He was at a tech startup for awhile but he’s in grad school now for machine learning.” The two of us talk about what we think that means, whether Ray builds robots or autonomous vehicles or something totally different.

“What makes you bring him up?” Liam asks the question casually, and of course he’d wonder. And of course I can’t tell him Nicole used to work with Ray, and the reason I know that is because I’m fucking her brains out every opportunity I get. I’m not sure how to talk to my brother about Nicole.

I scowl until I think of a response. “I think I’m going to call him to see if he has any ideas about Nicole’s landslide. Maybe a robot can help figure out where the water’s coming from or something.”

Liam shakes his head and chuckles. “Or,” he says, rinsing his empty mug in the sink, “you could go stand out there in the rain and see for yourself.”

He starts to walk out of the kitchen and I shout after him that I did just that yesterday, but he’s already gone.

I look up Ray and dial the number for his lab on campus, figuring he’s probably in there. He answers with a grunt on the second ring. “Hey, man,” I say. “It’s Zack Brady.”

“Zack? Holy shit! I keep meaning to call you.”

We meet for lunch near campus, since it's easier for me to get around the city than it is for him to leave his robots unattended. I watch in fascination as he orders the same bland food he's always survived on, while I coat my sandwich with several different types of hot sauce. Ray tells me that machine learning basically means he writes computer programs that help computers make predictions, put pieces of information together and “learn” what to expect next.

He talks with his mouth full of buttered noodles. “You still doing stuff with geotechnical engineering?”

I nod, and tell him a little bit about some of the dam restorations I've done. His eyes glaze over until I say, “I actually am working right now on a landslide project for someone you know. Nicole Kennedy?”

Ray's eyes bulge out of his head. “The medusa?”

“What's that mean?”

He gestures toward his head and mimics a spiral motion with his finger. “Curly hair looks like snakes, eyes will turn you to stone if you piss her off? I never met anyone else who could make a bunch of programmers fall in line and keep to a schedule.” He reminds me that programmers usually work late into the night and sleep all day, and apparently, Nicole managed to get them to flip their schedules to regular business

hours so they could actually meet with developers and investors when she was at the tech company with Ray.

“So she’s got a landslide problem? Where?”

An hour and two bowls of buttered noodles later, Ray has explained to me that his thesis project is actually related to landslides. And he asks me to consult with him on his research. He’s building special cameras and a computer program that will analyze the images to predict where the earth might slide away.

He’s using some of the hillier streets in Pittsburgh to start this project, but aims to branch out to bigger applications. “There’s more money in industry,” he tells me, shrugging like I don’t already know that industry is the bread and butter of engineering companies like Beltane. “If I can help prevent one coal mine from collapsing, it’ll fund program development to aid foreign governments and shit whose entire road systems are washing away every spring.”

Our conversation is such a contrast to the way things happen at work, where I’m always feeling blindsided or like my reports aren’t being read.

I leave the meeting with Ray feeling electrified, energized about my work for the first time since before I got sent to Nicole’s yard. I squeeze in a few hours of measurements and studying blue prints for her problem, but then I hole up in my office and really dive into the work Ray asked me to look over.

He rides his bike to my office and pulls up an external hard drive with hours of video footage of different hillsides around the region. “It would take a human hours to watch all this film,

right?” I nod, rolling my eyes. Ray clicks around and explains that his program is teaching the computer to watch the footage and pull out anything forbidding.

“That’s where you come in,” he says, looking around. “Hey, Nicole’s not here is she? She’s not going to come in here and yell at me?”

“No, man, I told you this landslide thing is in her back yard. She’s at her house.”

He seems relieved. “Ok, well I need you to help me tell the program what to look for.”

And just like I’d done with Nicole, just like I was doing for my own documentation, I explain to Ray some of the signs of an impending landslide. But this time, I’m using formulas and quantifying soil disruption. I’m in full geek mode, talking numbers with my former roommate, who’s lapping it all up excitedly, typing furiously while I talk.

“This is so great, Zack,” he says, leaning back in a relaxed posture I’m not used to seeing him in. We break for the evening and I toss his bike in the back of my truck, giving him a ride back to his apartment.

“I thought Nicole said she didn’t yell at you too much,” I say at a red light. “She mentioned that you always had your shit together.”

I can see his eyes bulge wide in the dark. “She is the most intimidating woman I’ve ever met,” he says slowly, swallowing.

“Hm, can’t argue with that,” I tell him. Except I don’t find Nicole intimidating. I find her exhilarating. I admire how she is in charge in every environment, and how she tries to intimidate me in the bedroom, but then seems to love it when I take back control.

I can’t tell any of this to Ray, so I drop him off and promise to call him soon with my input.

I should probably clear this side hustle consulting gig with my dad or my uncle, but I decide not to say anything about that, either. It feels important to me to keep these things to myself. Delicious secrets that are just for my enjoyment, nothing I have to share with my family and nothing any of them can yank away from me.

Dad has finally filled Uncle Kellen in on his Paraguay scheme, so in the morning, we have a team meeting about it first thing. And by team, I mean me, my dad, and my uncle, all trying to make sense of what my dad *isn’t* saying in between his observations and stories.

My dad, as usual, is not paying attention and is instead cracking open pistachios. I know he’s listening, and that this is just the way his mind works. I know that he has raging ADHD and came of age long before there was any medication for that. I know all this, and still I take it personally when he doesn’t pause to acknowledge my part in this arm of our business.

This is just the same as always. Dad will be way past thinking about Paraguay before we even get there, and we haven’t even really planned out what is going to happen on that trip...which isn’t our company’s trip.

I tug at my hair and scrub a hand along my chin. My uncle wants me to put together some bullet points about the landslide-related projects Beltane has completed, and I fight my urge to point out that this seems more appropriate for the head of the department to prepare. In fact, the head of the department should be the one going on the trip with my dad. Kellen moves on to talk about my brothers' work and ends the meeting to move on to the electrical department.

I smile as he leaves, thinking about how Orla will be giving a presentation during the meeting and will probably get promoted soon. It won't be because her dad is in charge. She really knows her shit. I realize that Nicole actually reminds me a lot of Orla. Neither of them take an ounce of crap from anyone, and both of them are the smartest person in a lot of rooms.

Suddenly, I get angry at myself for having these feelings about Nicole, and angry that I'm not standing up to my dad. Nicole's stirring up a sense of yearning I work so hard to keep buried. I know my mom has fucked me up when it comes to relationships and yes, I fucking know I have issues with my dad and constantly seeking his approval.

I can't even bring myself to press the issue of my promotion with my father or tell him about my consulting gig, but I also can't bring myself to quit Beltane and go work somewhere I'm not just going to be known as Mick Brady's kid.

This is why I don't do relationships with women.

I'm too fucked up. I can't let myself yearn for anything resembling intimacy with a woman, because I have nothing like that to give in return. I leave the conference room and know that I need to get out of here. I need something to distract me, to help me stuff my problems back down where I can manage them. I need to avoid the swirling feelings I have about work, about Nicole.

I drive toward her house anyway, hoping I can drown myself in numbers and data.

CHAPTER 24

NICOLE

I'VE DECIDED we need to do some focus groups. It feels inappropriate for me to go into any more meetings with Augusto or to travel to Paraguay without polling donors and potential donors. We need to find out where and how people are likely to spend their philanthropic dollars.

When I bring this up to Tim during our one on one meeting, he tunes me out and latches on to discussing infrastructure projects in South America.

“Tim,” I interrupt. He looks up at me, surprised. “You’re not listening to me.” He squints and frowns. “What do you even care about infrastructure? You’re a lawyer. You work with rich, athletic clients about their contracts.”

I blow out a breath and sink back into my chair. He just stares at me, but starts nodding. “Ok, wow.” There’s a long pause.

“I’m sorry I interrupted you and I’m sorry I shouted, but I’m feeling a little steam rolled with this initiative, Tim. I feel like you’re not letting me do what you hired me for, which is to direct our company strategy.”

“I can see how you feel that way,” he says, speaking slowly. “But I also feel like you’re being close minded about this approach. It’s a sound idea.”

We glare at each other and I close my eyes. I rub my temples and try to refrain from pounding on the table. I’m not sure if part of me wants to see him crash and burn spectacularly at this or what exactly is happening. I just know I’m off my game. “You know what, Tim, you’re right.”

I stand up and gather my things. “I’m going to work from home and get you some numbers and Mark will write something up about our approach for the meetings in Paraguay.”

I storm out of the office before he can say anything else that might cause me to yell something I’ll later regret.

I tell Mark I’m going to work from home for the rest of the day and that I’ll call him later, but I know I need to calm down before I can even think of doing anything else work related.

I change into my running things and I fully intend to bang out a really respectable three miles and get back to my game plan for work, until I see Isaac in the trench in my back yard.

He’s staring at neighboring buildings again, frowning, seated at the edge of the crack with his legs dangling down into the abyss where I sort of dreamed of once building a fire ring.

I approach him cautiously, fighting the urge to nudge him with my sneaker because I don’t want him to fall in the pit. “Isaac?”

He looks up and puts a hand over his eyes against the glare. “Nicole. I didn’t think you’d be home so early. I was just...” He waves his hands around vaguely.

“Come for a run with me?” I try to keep my tone light, but the truth is I’m excited to go for a run with Isaac. I’m glad to see his dark hair and think about his ass with that tool belt slung around his hips. He’s the first person today who hasn’t irritated me.

Isaac grins. “Let me go grab my stuff.”

I follow him out to the truck and he reaches into his passenger seat for his duffel bag. “Is it already-used sweaty running stuff?” Another grin.

“You know it.” He takes off his muddy boots and tosses them into the truck, walking to my front door in his socks, and I follow him again, not sure what’s driving me to do it.

I could just wait for him outside, but I want to be around him in case I think of something I want to tell him. He cocks a brow at me when I stand in front of the bathroom. “You’re going to watch me change? Into sweaty tights?”

I purse my lips, trying to decide. “No,” I say. “I guess not. But I think I’m going to peel them off you after.”

“We’d better get going, then.” He growls and grabs my hand, tossing his phone on my counter and pulling the door shut behind us as we take off toward the trail. Only a few other runners are out in the middle of this wintery day. February in Pittsburgh is mostly gray. The temperature can fluctuate

between zero and sixty degrees, depending on the day, and today is one of the cold, damp-air yucky ones.

I don't mind it when I'm running with Isaac, though. I actually feel my head clearing and am beginning to see why it could be valuable to expand my friend circle beyond just Emma and her relatives.

Isaac and I chat about the unpredictability of the weather as we run, both of us noticing that unpredictability is upsetting to us. He tells me that his friend Ray calls me Medusa, and I snort with laughter, remembering the startled expressions on all those guys' faces when I led meetings.

"I had to be rough with them," I explain to Isaac. "Nobody there would listen to me if I was anything other than intimidating. I had to choose between being liked and being effective."

Isaac looks over at me, his expression unreadable, and after awhile he says, "I think you're effective *and* I like you."

I stumble over a crack in the pathway when he says that, caught off guard by his earnest admission. "Well, I like you, I guess," I retort.

I'm filled with lust for him, and the chemistry between us is great, but as I run by his side, setting the pace and venting to him about my frustrations at work, I realize that I really am coming to enjoy Isaac Brady as a..."what are we exactly?" I blurt.

"What are we?" He stops running and stares at me, hands on his hips.

I nod. “Yes, I mean I know I’m your client and you’re my running coach and your dad is strangely entwined with my boss. But what are *we*?” He doesn’t answer, his eyes wide. “Are we fuck buddies? Are we dating?”

Isaac scratches at his chin, considering. “Do we have to decide?” he asks. “I’ve been enjoying the spontaneity of... whatever this is.”

I start running again, thinking about what he asked. “I think I might feel better about it all if there was a time limit or parameters.” I pick up the pace a tiny bit and find I’m still able to talk as I run. I’m getting pretty good at this. “How fast are we running right now?”

He checks his watch. “About ten minute miles. That’s a massive improvement from a month ago, Nicole!”

He gives me a high five and then says, “Hmmm. Parameters.”

I’m about to tell him we should wrap up our adventures by the time he breaks ground on my yard, or something, so we can both avoid catching feelings and getting ensnared in each other’s bullshit. But then, the heavens open and it starts pouring buckets.

I curse, but the change in the weather seems to delight Isaac for some reason. “Are you insane?” He turns for my house and starts sprinting to get back. I’m able to almost keep up with him for a bit, until he turns to face me and slows. I’m breathing heavy in front of him and not even embarrassed, and that just starts to worry me as well.

“I’ve been waiting for it to rain again,” he shouts above the crashing water sounds. “I want to go and stare at the apartment complexes and see about their stormwater runoff.” He starts explaining technical terms to me about the dirt and the water and I don’t understand a word of it.

I focus instead on the way his shirt clings to him in the rain and the way it looks when he brushes the curtain of dark hair back from his eyes with his forearm. *Sexy as sin.*

When we get near my house, he runs around back and makes a beeline for the building next door, and stares. He squints. And then he picks me up and starts to spin me around in the rain, kissing me. It takes my breath away, the cold, salty feel of his lips against mine in the downpour.

I gasp when he sets me down and points at the hip condo building that’s only partially inhabited. “Look at the downspouts,” he says. “Do you have your phone on you? Can I make a video?”

Wide eyed, I pull my phone from my leggings and hand it to him. He struggles to pull up the camera icon with the wet screen, but gets it to work and narrates while he records. “Despite trendy stormwater mitigation systems written into the building plans, the downspouts are overrun,” he says. I watch over his shoulder to see what he’s filming, to see from his perspective. Storm water is gushing from the eaves of the building, pouring from the roof.

“It’s all flowing directly into the soil of your and Valerie’s yard,” he says, turning and recording the water. “Son of a bitch,” he mutters. “This is it!”

CHAPTER 25

ZACK

JUST AS MY BROTHER PREDICTED, the work done by the Meyer construction crew is subpar. Who even knows how many thousand gallons of rainwater are dislodging the soil in Nicole's yard? Jesus, she's lucky her whole house didn't slide into the river.

I hand her back her phone and grab her hand, sprinting toward her house. My clothes are soaked and heavy, and I'm fucking elated.

Nicole's fingers shake as she tries to type the code on the keypad at her house, and I kiss her neck, guiding her fingers with my hand. As soon as we get inside, I start stripping her, peeling off the wet layers. I was going to fuck her after our run anyway, and now I find I can't wait to get her naked.

"I want to celebrate this," I say, nipping at the sensitive skin below her ear. I love that I know she gets goosebumps when I do that.

"The torrent?" She asks, moaning softly as I pull the wet bra up and over her cold rack. Her nipples stand painfully erect, so tight and perky as she shivers.

“Yes. The torrent of water. It’s so bad for them.” I move on to stripping off my own clothes, but I notice that she’s really shivering. “Hot shower?”

“God, yes, please,” she shouts, and then squeals when I toss her over one shoulder and bound up her stairs.

I head into the bathroom and turn on her shower full blast while she digs some towels out from the linen closet. The white tile gleams under the heat lamp in the ceiling. “This room is amazing,” I mutter, as always imagining her on her hands and knees doing the work of restoring it. “Did you do the tile?”

I turn to see her answer, but she’s already stepped into the spray. I stare as she rubs the hot water along her skin, trying to chase out the cold. “Isaac,” she says, pinching her nipples in the steam. “I don’t want to talk about tile or torrents right now.”

After, in her bed, limbs tangled with mine around the damp mess of her sheets, she says, “Explain it now. About the water and my trench.”

“It’s a headscarp,” I correct, tracing my finger along the curve of her hip. I love how soft she is, how warm and present. “And anyway, that condo building has been slowly eroding your soil foundation since that roof went up.”

She chews her lip and twirls a finger through my chest hair. “Sooo this means...”

I smack her butt and cup the flesh in my palm, squeezing. “We’re going to sue the fuck out of them and you won’t have to pay me out of pocket.”

I feel her limbs relax, melt into mine a little more. “What comes next?” She breathes.

I grin again. “Next comes my favorite part. I let Jason do his thing to get the funds in line and I start engineering the solution to your problem. You’re not going to see much of me for awhile because I’ll be in my happy place.”

“Where’s that? Buried in a bunch of computer monitors?” She squints at me in the fading light. I shake my head.

“Nah. I’ll be standing in the mud in your yard using my favorite tools to do calculations.” She smiles, content. I like this. I like that I’ve made her happy. I like that I’ve solved a geotechnical mystery. Most of all, I like that the rain bought me more time with her.

She stretches and stares at me, considering something. “I have shit to do, Isaac.”

“Oh.” I can’t mask my disappointment. I know by now that she’s not a cuddler, and neither am I normally. But I wasn’t expecting her to kick me out of her bed again so soon.

I feel her fingers curl around my arm and I look down at her hand. “You can stay,” she says, “and do your math here. But I’ve got to do some work. Is what I’m saying.”

This seems like a pretty big deal, especially considering we hadn’t gotten around to talking about her parameters before

the rain storm. But I'm not going to argue with her and I'm sure as shit not going to leave if she's letting me stay.

She tosses on a ratty old bathrobe and I cram myself into an old pair of her mesh shorts to go downstairs and grab my bag and change. When I come out of the bathroom, I find her curled up on her couch with her laptop open, biting her lip as she types furiously and mutters to herself.

I set myself up at the kitchen counter where I don't think I'll disturb her, and call up my brother Liam on video chat. He answers with a confused look. "Aren't you down the hall from me in your office right now?"

"Nope." I spin around, showing him my surroundings, before stopping to consider the questions this might inspire. "I made headway in Nicole Kennedy's landslide situation," I tell Liam once I realize he's staring at me and waiting.

"Oh yeah?"

I nod. "Meyer," I tell him. His eyes go wide. "They were the contractor on the condo building next to Nicole and Valerie's property—Valerie is the old lady who owns the other half of Nicole's duplex."

Liam gives me a 'yeah, yeah,' gesture, and I tell him about the video. "I was out there taking some calculations, looking over the building design compared with the construction sketches, when it started to rain."

He snorts. "I was caught out in that, too, on my way to lunch with Granny."

I email him the video. “Take a look at the fine craftsmanship on their roof garden.” Liam’s eyes bulge as he watches the streams of water pouring off the roof, running along the ground toward Nicole’s property.

“Holy shit!” He says, leaning in to stare. “I guess you got them. Hell, even I know that amount of water runoff can’t be good for the soil integrity.”

I grin and thank my brother again for his insight that led me to this discovery. “I need to call Jared so he can work his lawyer magic.”

“Not so fast,” Liam starts to protest. “We need to talk about why you’re not wearing a shirt and whose house you’re sitting in right now.”

“What’s that?” I stall. “Bad connection, bro. Sorry. Talk to you later.”

I hang up abruptly and get together an email for Jared. Lawyers have a special gift for taking something cut and dry and making it take an entire day to document and spin into paperwork for an insurance claim and lawsuit.

I keep thinking about Nicole, how she’d smiled when I told her the news. I keep thinking about lying in her bedroom, where the original beams are exposed in her ceiling and I know she stripped off generations of paint to salvage the trim and repair the transoms above the windows.

I look over at her, still working away happily. I don’t want to interrupt her, so I send her a text from where I sit.

Jared the lawyer is going to send you enough paperwork to fill in your yard.

When her phone bings she looks over at it, and then over at me. I wave. She laughs, but picks her computer back up. “You gonna leave me hanging?” I wad up a napkin from the holder on the counter and toss it toward her, but it doesn’t quite make it.

Like a loon, I grin at her until she picks up her phone and starts tapping.

After what seems like forever, she writes

Just make sure you clear that with Valerie first or else she’ll accuse me of burning her plant roots. Again.

The rest of the day is all calculations and paperwork, seething phone calls from the crew at Meyer Construction, vowing to never work with Beltane ever again. Good riddance, I say. I know I have nothing to do with that aspect of the business, but my uncle does.

My stomach rumbles, and I decide I’ve had enough work for one day. I start opening cabinets noisily, looking for something I can slap together and call it a meal, but Nicole basically has no food here.

“What are you doing out there?” She shouts from the living room, where she doesn’t look up from her laptop.

“Well I was going to make you dinner, but you don’t have any food in this house.”

“Accurate,” she says, finally closing the lid and looking at me. “We can’t go out with you looking like that.”

I run my hands over my chest, dancing, “what, like this? You can’t handle all this?” I feel light and facetious. Is this, maybe, happiness creeping in on me? I run over to where she’s sitting and dive onto her on the couch, making her squeal. “Don’t worry,” I murmur into her ear, tickling her and loving when she laughs. “It can be a private show.”

We place an order for delivery and miss the doorbell when the food arrives, but I’m too wrapped up in her to care.

CHAPTER 26

NICOLE

A FEW DAYS LATER, I come in to work to discover Mark looking smug. He's smirking at me when I reach for the coffee he's pretending to hold out of my reach. "What in the hell do you know?" I chide him. "Spill."

"Two things," he says, settling in to the chair opposite my desk and crossing his ankle up onto the opposite knee so I can see his brightly colored socks.

"Mark, we're not in tech anymore. You can wear normal socks to work," I tell him, dying to know what he knows.

"I like the fun ones," he says, spreading out his papers and pulling out his fancy gel pen. "So, first, your mother called to remind you that her birthday party is coming soon. Don't roll your eyes at me. I also talked to Alice in the kitchen, and she mentioned how Emma has been practicing saying no to everyone and everything. Something about being swamped with revisions for her new novel and also having to take care of the babies."

I groan. Emma is always my date to my mother's fancy birthday brunch. This year, the entire thing has more gravitas because Mom is turning 50. In reality, she's turning 52, but

she's been lying about her age for decades and would rather people think she had me as a teenager than admit she's getting older.

“So why does that make you smirk like a smug asshole?”

Mark grins. “Because now you have to find an actual date or else tell Mama she should change the headcount because you don't have a plus one.”

“It's really cruel that you revel so much in my mother's nonsense.” I chug the coffee. Mark knows exactly what color I like it—just a splash of milk to cut the bitterness. He also knows I'm mostly full of shit, because his own parents treat him like garbage, too. I was glad to bring him with me when Tim recruited me to Stag Law, and glad to give him enough of a raise that Mark doesn't have to worry about asking his parents for money ever again.

“So, thing two is that we had a call from Beltane Engineering this morning.”

I arch a brow. I haven't seen Isaac in a few days, but I see traces of him in the yard. Marks from him placing a ladder. Spray painted lines on the ground. Sometimes I go out there before work, hoping I'll catch him, but I always have to leave before he gets there and he's gone by the time I get home.

Mark looks over his notes. “Seems like the asshole contractor is going to settle. It's possible Zack Brady mentioned that you work with high profile professional athletes with lots of media connections. I guess that building has been struggling to sell condo units? Anyway! Everything is coming up roses for you in the back yard department.”

“Hm.” I tap my nails on the desk. This feels too easy. Like the threat was too great for the amount of work involved in the solution. Something isn’t right, but I can’t place what it might be. “Was it Isaac who called?”

I try very hard to keep the anticipation out of my voice and control my facial features. I don’t think Mark is buying it, though, because he grins. “It was indeed. Which reminded me how much time you two are spending together training for the run. I might have suggested you’d be stopping by Beltane in person to thank him.”

“Jesus, Mark. You’re impossible.”

“No, honey, *you’re* impossible to work with when you’re not getting laid. And it’s been a long ass time since you’ve had me block off any evenings or arrange for any dry cleaning that wasn’t work appropriate.” He looks me up and down, frowning.

I’m not about to let him know I’ve been getting plenty of penis. “Can we transition from personal updates to actual work yet?”

Mark snorts. “He’s going along to Paraguay, right? This is work. So you’re going over there with this briefing after you and I hash out the itinerary and strategy for your meetings with Augusto’s contacts.”

And so, two hours later, I find myself calling a car service to drive me to the Beltane Engineering building, with a thick file of meeting strategies I feel uncomfortable about. Despite the focus groups and the information I pulled together about other foundations, Tim is fully convinced we need to create a

charity dedicated to landslide mitigation...for a pro baseball player who can't even say the word mitigation.

Tim has fully drunk Mick Brady's kool-aid and is dead set on us diving into the infrastructure approach to Augusto's foundation.

I'm so conflicted, because helping to improve roads and access to school buildings feels like a cause that's fascinating and obviously meaningful to Augusto personally, but all of our numbers and market research indicates that donors just aren't enthused about their tax write-off going toward construction projects...unless it's constructing sports facilities.

The whole situation makes me wish I hadn't pushed Tim to delve into foundation work at all.

I enter the lobby of Beltane, admiring the original woodwork and exquisite tile patterns on the floors. Someone had taken great care to restore this space, honoring its original splendor. "Hey, I know you!" Mick Brady himself emerges from a side door before I can approach the receptionist. "Not honey, right?" My nostrils flare at him, but he smiles. "Ms. Kennedy, what brings you down here?"

"Just coming by to finalize some things with my landslide situation," I tell him with a shrug. I don't really feel like delving into trip details with him and trust that Isaac will pass along the pertinent information. I also suspect Mick won't read it anyway.

Mick smiles and leans on the reception desk. "Emily," he says. "Ms. Kennedy here is a very important person. Can you

make sure she gets the good coffee? I'm going to walk her up to Zack myself."

"Oh, you don't have to do that," Emily and I both say at once, causing us both to smile. But Mick waves us off and gestures toward another door. I'm surprised that we're taking the stairs, but then I remember that the Bradys are a family who run ten miles a day. Mick doesn't even hesitate as he hops up two flights. Something tells me he doesn't mask his age like my mother does, but then again, Isaac said he dates women closer to my age than his own.

"Here you are, dear," Mick says, pointing down a poorly lit hallway flanked by rows of cubicles. The door at the end of the hall says Zack Brady, and an entire army of young engineers looks up at me as I make my way down the aisle with the company CEO.

"Zack!" Mick hollers, startling the few employees who hadn't yet looked up to gaze at us. I hear rustling sounds and the door cracks open. "Your girlfriend is here."

CHAPTER 27

ZACK

MY FATHER just referred to Nicole Kennedy as my girlfriend. In front of an entire room of my colleagues. If I could just control the muscles of my face, this would be fine, because my dad makes these kinds of inappropriate jokes about most women.

But she doesn't know this, and we never bring clients up to the offices, so the whole thing just throws me so hard, I just stand there with my mouth hanging open while Nicole glares at my father.

"Mr. Brady," she says. "Mick, let's not get ahead of ourselves."

He winks at her. "I know how it is," he says. "You're saving yourself for my brother."

"Jesus Christ, Dad." I feel myself blushing. I vow to leave the company and go work somewhere else, somewhere the management controls their impulses and gives employees promotions without sending them jumping through deranged hoops.

"Aw, come on, son. You're always so damn serious! I ran into Nicole in the lobby. She says she's here to talk about the

hole in her yard.” Dad winks again and takes off, stopping to greet some of the people in cubicles as he goes.

I stand frozen in shock and horror until Nicole clears her throat and raises her brows. “Can we talk?”

Shaking myself back to consciousness, I nod and gesture into my office. It’s kind of a mess and I don’t really have space in here for visitors. I try to clear some tools off the folding chair so she can sit, but she makes a face at the dirt that crumples off the measurement devices I’d used at her property yesterday.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I would have met you in the conference room if…” I drift off. “I don’t want you to think I said anything to my father about us,” I say, my eyes no doubt conveying the panic I feel about her reaction to all of this. “I know we didn’t talk about parameters yet.”

“He seems like the wrong person to confide a secret to,” she says. Then she leans toward me. “Is that what I am, Isaac? Your dirty secret?”

Fuck. Me. That mouth on her… I exhale slowly, letting my cheeks puff out as I adjust my flannel shirt. “You’re not a secret,” I tell her. *Liar.* “Unless you want to be?”

“I haven’t figured out what to do with you, to be honest,” she says. She tosses a folder on my desk. “So ostensibly, I came to thank you for your work on my yard. Is what Mark said true? Is it really just… handled?”

I scratch at the stubble on my chin. “Yeah, seems like it,” I tell her. “My brother Liam has worked with that company

before. They're always taking shortcuts, and then the developers have to call us in to fix shit after the inspections fail." I shrug. "Jared mentioned that you work closely with half the pro athletes in the city, and that just happens to be the target market they're trying to sell condos to."

Another professional link in the chain between our companies. Another reason it's a bad idea for me to be involved with her. Yet here I am, half hard and longing to kiss her.

I reach for a folder of my own and slide it toward her. "These are the plans to fix your yard," I tell her. "If you're comfortable with all of this, I can break ground next week."

"Next week?" Her eyes are wide as she thumbs through the 3D renderings I printed for her to see what I think we can do to restore the yard. "I guess I have to consult with Valerie. Who knows what she wants for her half."

I nod. "I mean, the landscaping and patio work is obviously decorative. My work pretty much ends when we've got the dirt level. That was just to help you visualize what it will look like." Nicole and Valerie will lose about two feet of yard, and their property will end with a tiered retaining wall, rather than dropping straight off like a sheer cliff by the river bank.

She looks dazed. I want to reach for her, rub her shoulder, tell her to take her time. Instead I sit down and pull open the file she brought. "Am I really coming along to all these meetings in Paraguay?"

She rolls her eyes. “Well, we can’t very well leave you sitting in the car,” she says. “Tim is totally stoked to have your father coming along with us. You don’t have to talk at the meetings. Ideally, you’ll say nothing,” she says, pointedly.

And of course I have no business speaking up at strategy meetings for a professional baseball star to start his charity foundation, and I would never dream of opening my mouth at those meetings, but the way she tells me what to do...it ignites something primal in me as much as her vulnerability a minute before awoke some unfamiliar urge to offer comfort. “You telling me what to do, Kennedy?”

I stand back up from my chair and she draws in her breath. I can see the pulse tick at her throat above the prim blouse she’s wearing today along with loose trousers that hide the luscious curves I’ve been dreaming of touching again. She swallows. “I’m not the one who has trouble keeping quiet, if I recall.” I run a thumb along her jaw, restraining myself from grabbing her hair and pulling her in for a claiming kiss.

“About that,” she says, and closes her eyes. “Would you consider being my date for a party this weekend? We’d have to miss the group run.”

“Your date?” She nods. “In public? Should I wear sweaty workout gear again?”

“Oh, god no.” She shudders. “It’s for my mother’s birthday party, and you have to wear a suit. A nice suit.” She looks me up and down.

“You’re making this sound so appealing. Missing a run, wearing an uncomfortable suit...tell me more.”

She blushes. “Well, I’ve told you about my mother...and I usually take Emma to Mom’s birthday brunches, but Emma is unavailable.”

“Aha. So I’m a consolation date. Excellent.” I’m loving messing with her, watching her fidget with the papers and squirm. Obviously I can’t wait to go out with her, and I’m relieved she even still wants to be around me after my dad called her my girlfriend and set off her fight or flight response.

“I’ll make it worth your while,” she says, standing and coming closer, chewing that bottom lip of hers. I’m practically sweating, I want her so badly right now.

“Tell me more about that,” I say, sliding my hands in my jeans pockets so I don’t reach out and cup her ass or pull her against my hard-on.

She grins. “I’ll buy us *each* our own beer to share in my kitchen. Naked.” She places her hands on my chest, just resting them there, transferring her heat into me. I’m sure she can feel me trembling, aching for her. She stretches up on her tip-toes and slowly brings her mouth to mine, kissing me softly, briefly, before pulling back and looking up at me. Her brown eyes are huge, searching, hoping I’ll say yes. This feels dangerous, but it’s useless to refuse her.

“Deal,” I whisper, and I lean in and kiss her back. I work her mouth gently, slipping my tongue inside to caress hers briefly before I pull back with great difficulty, clear my throat again, and open my office door. “Text me the details?”

She nods and, gathering her things, retreats from my office, leaving behind a cloud of desire so thick I have to

unbutton my collar so I can breathe.

CHAPTER 28

NICOLE

ISAAC PICKS me up Sunday morning ten minutes early, carrying coffee. I'm so impressed by the sight of him in his suit that I can't even think of something snarky to say to him, so I stand in my doorway staring at his dark, mussed hair, his dark scruff, and the fitted suit that makes him look like sex on legs.

I pretend I'm blowing off the coffee while I regain control of my mouth, making a mental note of how he looks leaning against my door frame, sipping coffee. I fully intend to recall this image while I use my purple toy. Ever since he assured me my finances are in order, it's like the floodgates reopened between my legs. I suppose it doesn't hurt that I'm also recalling his handiwork down there when I try to rub one out.

"You gonna stare at me all day or should we go celebrate your beloved mother?" Isaac casually sips his coffee, but I see a smile pull at the corner of his eyes.

"I might stare a bit longer," I tell him, but I back up from the door to grab my bag and my heels. It doesn't matter what I wear—my mother will have something terrible to say about it, so I went with what I like. My spike heels are at least two

inches taller than Mom would consider decent, but I've got a tea-length wrap dress and pearls. It just so happens that the dress has a deep vee neck and the long pearls nestle in between my pushed up breasts.

For the millionth time, I feel grateful Emma and Maddie made me buy so many of the amazing bras at that shop. I can barely handle how good my tits look in this dress, and I'm glad, considering who I'll have on my arm today. Man. Candy.

"I really owe you for this," I tell Isaac as I hop on one foot, fastening the buckle on my right shoe. Suddenly I feel his firm grip on my arm, steadying me so I can put on my shoe. "I guess I could have sat down to do this."

"But then I'd miss an opportunity to look down your top," he says, doing just that. He's seen me naked multiple times before, but something about his words makes me blush. I feel the heat circulating between us, and I know we have to leave now or we're going to be late because I'm going to destroy his sharply pressed suit.

"You got your running stuff for later?" Isaac looked up a trail near the country club south of the city so we can still get in our training run, even if we're missing the group run with our colleagues. I nod, hoisting up the bag I've stuffed with layers and multiple choices for workout wear. The weather today could pull one of its most volatile mood swings, and I'd be set.

I settle into his truck, trying not to spontaneously orgasm as he drops an arm over the back of my seat when he puts the truck in reverse to back out of his parking spot. I want to

nestle into his armpit and inhale his aftershave. I let myself enjoy a deep sniff before he brings his arm back to the gear shift and gets us going toward the bridge.

I watch his phone buzz repeatedly in the console as he drives and stare at him, puzzled. I'd have been checking my messages at red lights and impatiently yelling at whoever kept messaging me. But then I realize Isaac needs both hands to drive a stick shift. "Hm," I say. "Want me to see who's trying to get ahold of you?"

He shakes his head, shifting gears and driving south toward the Fort Pitt Tunnel. "It's my brothers. They don't believe me that I'm with you—they think I'm just skipping out on a family run."

I pick up his phone, raising my brow in question. He doesn't respond, so I read his screen. Cal and Liam have sent a series of profanity and emojis, and Orla wrote in all caps

PICS OR IT DIDN'T HAPPEN!

I bite my lip and look at him again as he merges. The entrance to the tunnel involves multiple lane changes over a short period of time, so I know Isaac is deep in concentration. I click the camera icon on his lock screen and snap a selfie of us in the cab of his truck. His phone doesn't seem to be password protected, and it lets me send the pic to his family group text thread that he's labeled Meddling Assholes.

Once we're safely in the tunnel, Isaac looks over at me. "What did you just do?"

“I sent them proof that you’re not home in bed.” I shrug. “Your dad already thinks I’m your girlfriend...”

I have no idea what I’m doing here. It feels like I’m playing with fire, but everything is so comfortable with Isaac. The phone starts buzzing again as his family alternately sends exploding head emojis, curse words, and GIFs of crackling flames. “I’ll just assume the hot references are for me,” I tell him.

He laughs. We spend the rest of the drive talking about how we love to hate the people who hound us. His siblings and cousin, my best friend and her vast extended family of Stags. Emma added me to the Stag family group chat a few years ago when she eloped with Thatcher at my boss’s house on Christmas Eve. I feel a hell of a lot more comfortable with Stag banter than I do headed into this morning’s stiff world of gin and frown lines.

Isaac tosses his keys to the valet and drapes an arm over my shoulders as we walk through the doors. “Am I a ‘make out with you during a toast’ date today or just ‘insinuate that I’ve seen you naked’ when we’re talking to your dad?”

I’m sorry, I’m drunk on the scent of you and can’t concentrate right now. “Um, maybe neither of those?” We really need to set the parameters of whatever it is we’re doing. We just keep getting interrupted.

Isaac snorts and I can see him rearing up for a comeback, but my sister comes rushing over to me. “Nicky, what on *earth* are you wearing? Who in the holy hell is this?” Naomi, two years older than me, is pregnant with her third child.

The first two are sitting primly at a table with their hands on their laps, causing me to wonder if my sister has given them drugs. When I go to Stag family functions, the children run around like electrocuted insects. I believe Emma when she tells me that children just come out that way. Kennedy children, by contrast, have the joy wrung out of them via stern looks and shaming threats.

I plaster on a fake smile for my sister.

“Good to see you, Naomi. This is my...” I hesitate before I say the words, the lie feeling strange in my mouth. “This is my boyfriend, Isaac Brady.”

“Glad to meet you,” he says, offering his hand for a shake. My sister presents him with a limp wrist, and Isaac seems unsure what to do. He makes a face at me before placing a kiss on my sister’s knuckles, which makes me laugh into my fist.

Naomi pulls her hand back, making a face. “Mother is by the bar, greeting guests with mimosas,” she says, gesturing vaguely. “I’m sure you two need to clean up after driving so far and from such a...difficult neighborhood.”

This time Isaac can’t even hide the shock on his face, but pulls his arm tightly around my waist. “We don’t want to keep your mother waiting, babe.” He steers me toward her and I grit my teeth, desperate to dismantle every one of my sister’s layered insults. But before I can catch my breath, I hear my mother hissing similar sentiments about my appearance.

“I thought you were dieting, dear,” she says, her face immobile and prim. Isaac’s eyes fly wide and he opens his mouth.

I pinch his leg and grin at my mother. “I said I’d started running, Mom. Isaac is helping me train for the marathon relay.”

“Hmm,” she says. “And this is your trainer?”

I clench all my muscles. “Isaac is my boyfriend. As I said in my email.”

“A boyfriend would come around to dinner and meet your father.” Mom doesn’t offer him a hand, so he keeps his arm around me and leans in to grab two flutes of mimosas with the other hand. His long fingers handle the glass stems delicately and he hands one to me with a smile.

“A pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Kennedy. Should we drink to timeless beauty?” She looks medium flattered and starts smoothing her skirt. “I’m sorry I haven’t come around to meet you and Nicole’s father. I’ll have to correct that as soon as possible.”

His thumb starts stroking my arm as he keeps a firm-yet-relaxed grip around my shoulder. I like how it feels, having him with me while I talk to her. Emma usually just hides behind a giant glass of alcohol and steels herself to listen to me vent later.

“And what do you *do*, Isaac?” Mom purses her lips and stares him up and down. I take a smug satisfaction that I know she’s searching for something to disapprove of about how he looks, and is coming up short. He’s a god damned fox and I can’t wait to fuck him later.

I bite my cheek, realizing how much I'm enjoying my time with him, how much he seems to be enjoying his time with me here in the lion's den. It feels unsafe, this comfort I feel around him. I can't make sense of it. I realize Isaac is talking about work, about my yard.

"Did I hear someone say Brady?" My dad wanders over and snags a mimosa of his own. "Travis Kennedy," he says, holding out a hand toward Isaac.

"Zack Brady," he says, removing his arm from around me to shake hands with my father. "I'm pleased to meet you finally. Nicole has said so much about you."

"Zack? I thought you just said his name was Isaac?" My mother clutches at her necklace again, looking confused, but Dad barrels on with questions for my arm candy.

"You Mick Brady's son or Kellen's? No, wait. Kellen just has the one daughter. Your dad and I go way back." Of course my father knows Isaac's father. They probably grease palms together and smoke cigars in places where their female colleagues are still not invited.

I smile while Isaac talks about working with his father and uncle and feel relieved when he puts his arm back around my shoulders. He's actually anchoring me to the earth, and realizing that sets me on edge again.

"Well it's good you have this man to depend on, sweetie," my father says, jolting me back to the conversation.

"What?"

“Saving your house. Teaching you how to run.” Dad winks. “Seems like this is a good one to keep around longer than a week.”

My mother scoffs. “Honestly, Travis. Do not encourage her abominable behavior. It’s indecent.”

“Isaac isn’t some casual fling,” I spit out, realizing that it’s already true. “We’ve been together for nearly two months.”

Dad smiles. “Two months and you already can’t live without him. You and your dad should give me a call, son,” Dad says. I don’t hear him as he invites Isaac golfing, can’t pay attention as we take our seats for toasts and plated brunch.

My parents keep emphasizing how dependent I am on Isaac. And they’re right. My life has been falling to shit the past few months. I’m not asserting myself at work. The strategy of our project with Augusto isn’t mine so much as it’s Isaac’s father’s.

I’m fully dependent on Isaac to save my home and keep me from bankruptcy. I’m not even in charge of my own weekends anymore since my boss strong-armed me into an athletic activity I hate. And my dad isn’t even aware of the strange entanglement between Isaac’s family and my career trajectory right now.

Somehow, when I was too distracted by getting fucked in my kitchen, I let go of everything that makes me *me*. Everything I’ve become, I did to escape this life I’m surrounded by at the country club. I took my own direction with school, took charge of my career, and took charge of my own living environment.

And now what is happening to me? I'm becoming a woman who swoons over a man, someone who depends on his problem solving skills and hell, I'm even depending on his dick to bring back my lost orgasms. The second my mother sets down her fork, signaling that she's finished eating, I turn to Isaac. "We need to go," I tell him, my breath coming fast and shallow. "Now."

CHAPTER 29

ZACK

I REALLY THOUGHT Nicole and I would spend the afternoon defiling her parents' country club under the guise of going running, but something shifted in her mood after talking with her mother. I can tell she is upset because she doesn't say a word as I drive back to the city.

Not concentrating, driving on instinct, I realize I drove toward my house. I am almost ready to turn onto my street when I notice, and I pull over abruptly. "Hey, I wasn't paying attention. This is my neighborhood." I run a hand through my hair and look at her, expecting her to lash out and call me an idiot.

"That's fine," she says, looking out the window. "We can run in the park, right?"

"Sure," I tell her, pulling out again as she stares at my hand on the gear shift. "You can change at my place."

I had gradually loosened my tie and unbuttoned my shirt along the route home, and it's a small hit to my pride when she doesn't even stare at me. I chose this outfit carefully, wanting her to like how I look when I'm dressed up. Now, she's so affected by whatever happened at the country club, she's not

yelling or even talking. “Can I do anything,” I say, feeling an urge to make things right somehow.

She sighs. “Take me running and don’t baby me about our pace.”

Well that I can do. I take mental stock of the condition of my house—I wasn’t expecting anyone. But things are generally pretty tidy in there unless I’ve had my family over. It’s been awhile since the four of us Brady kids hung out.

“The bathroom is at the top of the stairs,” I tell her, gesturing for her to enter the front door ahead of me. Nicole sort of mopes her way up there, and I follow to go change in my bedroom.

I shed my suit quickly and toss on running shorts with a tech shirt. It’s probably 45 degrees but I know I’ll be sweating between staring at Nicole’s ass and running a few miles. Stepping into the hall, I gasp, realizing that Nicole hasn’t shut the bathroom door all the way.

My house is one of the old ones, built around 1920, and half my doors don’t shut at all in the humid summers and none of them latch the rest of the year. So the bathroom door is cracked a full inch, just enough for me to see the swell of her breasts as she wrestles into her sports bra. She’s already wearing her running tights.

If this were another day, I’d kick the door open and tackle her into my shower.

I close my eyes and remind myself this woman is upset. Not wanting me to invade her space and bend her over my

bathroom counter. But fuck, do I want to. It's worse that she's upset. Sex, I can deliver. Emotional comfort? I have no idea what that even looks like.

I head downstairs to check my phone, noticing about ten thousand texts from my family.

CAL:

Can I bring a date to the wedding?

LIAM:

Cal, don't be an asshole. Of course Zack's family gets a plus-one.

ORLA:

I want to know what she did to get you into your best suit. You usually only dress that nice for court.

And on and on.

I hate all of you.

Call responds immediately.

Ooh, he's done with brunch. Probably sat with Nicole's Mom and Dad in a super comfortable conversation.

Before I can decide on a witty retort, I hear Nicole making her way downstairs. “Can you show me the route we’ll take?” She gestures outside toward the park. I had been planning to just play it by ear and weave through Frick Park, but Nicole seems interested in something more structured.

Parameters for everything, I think.

I flip over my tablet on the counter and pull up one of my running apps. “You feeling like hills or flat course?” I raise a brow at her. I know she’s had a hard morning, but I still don’t know if that makes her more likely to pound out a challenge or if she feels so mentally drained she can only go for a flat run on street level.

“Show me the hills,” she says, and I feel myself fall for her a little bit more. *Careful*, my inner voice warns. I go over the map of the Tranquil Trail, a stretch of park I run with my brothers. It’s kind of a brutal path, despite the name. It changes elevation, winds along Fern Hollow Creek and eventually spits you out in Homewood Cemetery, intersecting with other trails whose names reference the ravines and hollows that contribute to Pittsburgh’s reputation for hilly terrain.

“I can’t believe all this is right in the city,” she says, staring.

“You don’t ever wander around Frick Park?”

She shakes her head. “I’m not really an outdoorsy person.” She shrugs. “Let’s get out there.”

We head out from my house and down the wooden stairs into the woods. I let her set the pace, and it feels faster than her usual. “Don’t blow your wad on the downhill,” I try to warn her.

“I asked you to push me,” she snips back at me. “I’ve been practicing.”

It has been over a month since we started this, but that’s not really enough time for her to build enough endurance to go from passing out to what I estimate is an 8-minute mile pace on steep hills. But, I figure, she’s feeling salty and she’ll probably just stop if it gets too hard. “You asked for it,” I tell her.

We make it a mile and a half before she spies a picnic table just off the path, makes a beeline for it, and collapses on top. She lies on her back, her chest heaving, arms spread wide beside her. I follow and lean over her. Once I make sure she’s ok, I nudge her with my sneaker. “Come on, Hoss. Want to be out here till dark?”

She raises a brow. “Did you call me Hoss? Like from Bonanza?”

“Your dad watch that show, too?”

She starts laughing, and I can feel some of her stress melt away. Her whole demeanor changes, and I’m glad I made the joke about the old western.

“Are you implying that I have ample girth?” Nicole sits up on the table, hugging her knees into her chest and compressing her tits. I stare and I don’t try to hide it.

“I’m implying that you’re falling behind.” I decide not to mention that I like her girth, and that she’s thick in all the best places. Maybe later when she’s in a better mood.

As we meander through the woods, Nicole comments on the way a lot of the land seems washed out, how some of the paths seem likely to crumble down into the ravines. “A lot of it is similar to what we’ll be talking about in Paraguay,” I tell her. “There’s actually some interesting research at the university about the landslides in the Pittsburgh region.” We run along while I tell her about the machine learning algorithms working to predict which hillsides will fail.

“You working on all that stuff with Ray-Ray?”

I nod. “He and his team are hooking cameras up to commuter buses to track hillside conditions. I’ve actually been consulting with them a little bit, to help analyze their images, from a soil composition standpoint. That was going to be something I focused on if my dad had given me the promotion.”

Shit. I hadn’t intended to air all this deep shit to Nicole. Hand’t wanted to whine to her about being passed over for the department head.

“I didn’t know you were up for a promotion.” She slows down some more and this pace seems sustainable. I can tell by her breathing that she can keep this up for a long time. I try to keep her talking.

“Yeah. I had big plans for some industrial projects. When the guy in charge of the geotechnical engineers retired, I really

thought I was a shoe-in. Not even because my dad owns the company.”

“Well what happened?”

I kick a stick out of the path and weigh my words. “My dad got a bug up his ass about Paraguay and sent me to your house. I still have no idea what his end goal is with all that.”

“Well I sure don’t know either, but my boss has a hard-on for that project, too.” She looks at me, her eyes serious. “I’m glad you’re on my side, about that whole thing feeling like an overreach.”

“Everything with my dad is an overreach,” I tell her. But I’m not able to articulate what feels off now that she’s said it. Was that a threat? Is she threatened by my family? I mean, probably. My dad is really fucking weird and bombarded her with personal drama basically as soon as he met her. I shake it off. “Except his claims about our running speed,” I say. “Team Brady is going to kick Team Stag’s ass in that race.”

I laugh and we finish out our run without any further incidents.

Back at my house, her mood is definitely lighter, but I’m not catching a sex vibe from her. I feel awkward again, wondering if I’m supposed to ask her again if she’s ok. I opt to make her a sandwich instead, and I love how her face transforms when she watches me squirt an N shape with the mustard on hers, and a Z on mine.

“Zack is still a stupid nickname for Isaac,” she says, softly. She turns my plate so it looks like the mustard is an N. “I’m

going to eat both of these.”

She starts to, her eyes sparkling as she takes a bite out of each sandwich, but eventually she hands mine to me and we eat standing in my kitchen, the way my family does. It feels so natural and so right to have her here, that I want to detain her when she says she needs to get going.

I try to drive Nicole home and, if I’m honest, try to convince her to let me come inside her house, but she insists on calling her friend Emma for a ride. “They’re all at family dinner on the east end anyway. It’s on their way to take me home after.”

Eventually, I figure she needs a chance to unload on her friend, work through whatever made her so upset at her mother’s birthday party. So I try to be a gentleman and kiss her cheek before she leaves. “Thank you for letting me be your date today,” I whisper, and I lean toward her. But Nicole stiffens and closes her eyes. My lips barely brush her cheek as she rushes toward Emma and Thatcher’s Audi SUV.

She climbs in the back and wedges herself between the two carseats and I furrow my brow, waving as they drive off, wondering if I fucked everything up before I even decided whether I was able to move forward.

CHAPTER 30

NICOLE

I HAVE no idea what to pack for a trip to Paraguay. All that talk with Mick about landslides left me thinking the country is covered in mud, but the internet shows me that the capital city is...well, a city. I sigh. I start filling my bag with things for both an expedition into a rainforest and a boardroom. I spy the purple Babe Rocket on the floor of my closet where I threw it the last time it didn't help me get off.

I bite my lip. I could tell Isaac wanted me yesterday. I sure as hell wanted him. My god, the way he looked in that suit. And then he made me a fucking sandwich and that was somehow even hotter than him in the suspenders and dress shirt with his tie loosened on the drive back.

I don't know why I had to get all weird. Isaac did absolutely nothing to indicate he even wanted anything more with me than casual fucking. We both have talked about how we're not cut out for long term relationships. He was mostly putting on an act for my parents because I'd asked him to.

Because I didn't want my mother to *think* I wasn't capable of hanging onto a man longterm, of getting married like my perfect sister. I sigh.

I pick up the vibrator, thinking I should at least rinse it off and find someplace to stash it. If I'm going to blow Isaac off, I'm going to need this until I find someone else to meet my needs. Hm, I don't love the idea of that. First of all, none of the other men can get me off the way he can.

The man is a magician. Like, how does he know exactly how to create friction on my clit when nobody else seems to be able to figure it out? It's not like I haven't tried with enough men. I scowl at the vibrator, then toss it in my suitcase.

My phone pings with a new text message and I feel my heart race. *Stop it*, I chide myself, angry that I'm hoping to hear from Isaac when I have no reason to hope he'd reach out. I didn't even let him drive me home from our date yesterday.

The message is from Emma.

So excited for your trip! Bring me back something interesting? Don't forget to pack chapstick.

I roll my eyes, but smile. It's going to be humid and 90 degrees in Paraguay.

The next day, on the flight, I sit next to Tim but glower at him the entire time. Augusto is of course flying down on a chartered flight that better suits his schedule. I can't put a finger on what specifically has been bugging me so much about this entire ordeal, so I chew on it along with the ice from my drink until we roll up to the hotel.

Tim checks in ahead of me and heads straight up to his room. With nobody else around, feeling a bit of a buzz from

the jet lag and long hours, combined with the bloody Marys I gulped on the plane, I lean in to ask the clerk, “Has Isaac Brady checked in yet?”

He squints at his monitor and nods. “Yes, ma’am. But unfortunately I am not at liberty to tell you which room he is in.” When I pout and sigh, starting to gather my bags, the clerk asks, “Can I deliver a message to Mr. Brady for you, perhaps?” His eyebrows shoot up.

I don’t know what I’m thinking. I have no earthly reason to reach out to Isaac...except that I enjoy spending time with him and looking at his abs. Ok, and I like the way he takes me apart from the inside and puts me back together again with orgasms as glue. The clerk slides me a pad and pen, and I write, “Call Nicole, room 687.”

Two minutes after I toss my purse on my hotel bed, the little phone on the nightstand starts buzzing. Suddenly I’m blushing like it’s middle school or something, and I chalk that up to the jet lag, too, before I stride over to the phone and clear my throat. “Hello?”

“You summoned me, madam?” I can hear the smile in his voice. Snarky prick. Whatever.

“Yes. Do you want to go for a run?”

We meet in the lobby and head out along the river trail. The hotel is nestled along the Paraguay River, with views of the mountains of Argentina in the distance. The humidity has burned off a bit by mid afternoon and the air starts to feel crisp.

Isaac runs in just a pair of shorts, with his t-shirt stuffed in one of the loose pockets. It's all I can do not to drool as I keep pace beside him. "You've got that Monica Gellar hair," he jokes, referencing my favorite episode of *Friends* when the gang goes to the Caribbean and the humidity makes Monica's hair go haywire.

He's not wrong—my curls are unruly on the best of days, and as I run, they fly into my mouth, stick to my shoulders, flap in the breeze. I don't mind it, though. It feels so good to be out here, pushing myself. I've come a long way since January, damn it. I'm not pounding out ten miles a day like Isaac, but according to him we are doing a 5k in about a half hour.

"We should do a half marathon together this summer," he says, and I stop in my tracks to stare at him.

"A half marathon? Are you kidding?"

His eyebrows shoot up into his head. "Would I ever joke with you?" When I smack his arm, he pretends to collapse in pain, and we wrestle around for a little, eventually coming to sit on a bench by a fountain. "Seriously, Nicole. You're becoming a bonafide runner." He nudges me with his shoulder. "You could hang with the Brady clan."

"A half marathon? Come on." I clutch at my elbows and lean back on the bench.

"Nicole, you're doing four miles regularly without much distress. If you can do four, you can do eight. If you can do eight, you can do 13. I'll help you."

I look at him, his face totally serious. Like he's suggesting I do this thing he enjoys, this difficult and inconceivable thing, just for fun. "You're nuts, Isaac Brady," I say, quietly. But I like that he thinks it's possible for me to run a half marathon. That he isn't suggesting it to help me burn calories or as a way to get glory for his business. He seems to genuinely enjoy running and wants to share that with me for some reason.

He stands and offers me his hand, pulling me up from the bench, and then blowing a raspberry against my forearm before running off ahead. So of course I chase him, smiling when I'm able to keep up with him without much effort.

We finish our loop and walk back into the hotel, the air conditioning feeling especially grand after running in the heat. Isaac leans over the water fountain in the lobby, and I stare at him openly, my tongue sweeping along my lips at the sight of him.

I drink my fill after he's done, closing my eyes in relief. Then I feel his hand on my back. The heat of his palm practically melts the shirt off my back. I forget why I was ever upset with him, why I felt off kilter earlier.

Fuck it, I think, straightening up from the water fountain. "Want to help me stretch my muscles? In my room?"

His brows fly up and he nods his head toward the elevator. He presses the button with his knuckle and when we get inside, he says, "Just to be clear, you were using a euphemism?"

I shake my head, laughing. "No. I need your help stretching my hamstrings." He starts to frown a bit and I dig

my key card out from the snug pocket of my leggings. “I always feel so loose after you bend me over and ram that big dick into me.”

He’s on me like a man starving, licking and sucking at my neck as we wrestle-walk down the hall to my room. I can feel his hard-on pressed against my back as I fiddle with the lock on the room door, and as soon as we’re inside, I’m in the air.

Isaac tosses me onto the bed and is on top of me an instant later, kicking my suitcase off the bed and sending the contents flying. As he starts peeling off my sneakers and workout clothes, something catches his eye and he pauses.

“Is that the package I signed for,” he asks, pointing with my shoe at the purple vibrator rolling across the tile floor of the hotel room.

I crawl up the bed and spread my legs, nodding, letting my hand dip down to roll my nipples between my fingers. I’m horny as fuck and he’s already mostly undressed. I start using my feet to pull down his shorts.

“I’m going to make you forget you even own that thing,” he growls, grabbing at my ankles. He tosses my legs up over his shoulders and I squeal as he slides his fingers along my damp seam.

“I brought it because I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” I confess, the last sentence I can eke out before he drives me insane plunging his tongue inside my pussy. “Fuck, Isaac.”

He growls again, the deep tenor vibrating against my lower lips, sending gentle waves through my clit. “I want to ruin

you,” he grunts, sliding two fingers inside me now.

“Oh god,” I pant, feeling the orgasm build. “I’m so close already.” How does he do this? How does he— “Fuck! Yes! Yes! Isaac, yes, holy shit. Right there!”

I come so hard I see stars and my body jerks violently in his grasp, my heels kicking into his back, my thighs smashing against his ears until I fear I might suffocate him. I feel so much wetness. So much warmth. When I open my eyes, I see Isaac kneeling between my legs, gently lowering my limbs to meet the mattress.

“That. Was. Hot,” he says, punctuating each word with a stroke of his index finger along the tops of my thighs, where my wetness is seeping, yearning for him. I just fucking squirted for Isaac Brady and I’m too stunned to move or do anything about it.

But then he’s sliding inside me, and I’m wrapping my legs around his waist as best I can. “Fuck me, Nicole, you feel so good. I’ve never felt anything so wet before. This pussy is so fucking perfect. Are you this wet for me?”

His dark eyes meet mine as he thrusts slowly, deep and long, pulling almost the entire way out each time before crashing back in. I sigh and I nod, but he puts a hand on my chin. “Say it.”

“I’m sopping wet for you, Isaac. I’m wet each time I think about you.”

And with those words, I unleash the wild demons inside him. He sets a brutal pace, and I pull him against me with all

four limbs, thrusting my hips up against his, meeting his every thrust until I feel him swell even larger.

Then he's coming, spurting inside me while he drops one hand to the apex of my thighs, gently rubbing my clit until I come a second time, right along with him.

He collapses on top of me and I feel like he's uncorked something inside me.

My thoughts are clear for the first time since he told me I wasn't losing my house. "I can see it now," I murmur into his neck.

"Ungh?" He slides off me to the side, but makes no effort to move or wipe up.

"I know why I'm mad at Tim," I tell him, and I wriggle a bit out beneath him to stretch and reach for the tissues.

"Wait," he says, grabbing my wrist before I dab between my legs. He props himself on one elbow and peers between my legs, staring.

"What are you doing?"

"Watching my seed drip out of you."

"Your fucking *seed*, Isaac? Gross."

He shrugs and I move my arm again to wipe myself up, but he holds my wrist. "Just let me look at it for a minute. Tell me why you're so pissed off."

"I'm not going to talk to you while you're staring at a pool of jizz seeping out of my twat."

He sighs and takes the tissue from me, dabbing reverently at the mess between my legs. “Better?”

I nod. “So anyway!” I toss a pillow at his head and he ducks, shooting the wadded up tissue for the small trashcan in the corner. “Tim’s been telling me what to do since he made me sign up for that damn race.”

“Isn’t he your boss?”

I roll my eyes. “I mean, that’s only sort of a technicality. He hired me to tell *him* what to do with his company. I’m the strategic mind behind Stag Law. At least I was.” Isaac flops back down on the bed and starts playing with my hair. It feels really fucking good and I try to remember if I’ve ever had anyone do this.

Emma used to braid my hair for me every now and then if I needed it to be tight and stay back for awhile. But this is meditative twirling and stroking. It’s putting me in a trance. “And then Tim has been obsessed with us beating you guys in the race, and listening to Mick’s ideas about this fucking foundation.”

I sit up. Isaac follows, asking, “What’s wrong?”

“I feel like a shitty person, but Augusto isn’t going to find the support he wants if his foundation mission is mitigating landslides in South America. It’s just...”

I drift off. Isaac lies back down on the bed, clasping his hands together behind his dark hair. “I ran focus groups. I pulled data from other foundations. I just never asserted myself about it.” I nestle into his armpit, noticing that he

smells of sweat and soap and sunscreen. And...me. I smell myself on him; I smell our sex session. I like it, and I can sort of see what appealed to him just now about staring between my legs. "People watch sports to escape," I whisper. "Our American audience isn't going to be ready to fund this project."

He nods. "I hear you."

I sigh, relieved he's not pissed off or rushing to defend his dad. Isaac swallows, and I stare at his Adam's apple moving along his throat. I reach out a finger to trace the path of his neck, feeling content.

"So, we still have those meetings with the President tomorrow," I tell him, tapping my fingers against the firm skin of his neck. "But I'm going to assert a new direction for the meeting. A more appropriate direction."

Isaac nods, his eyes closed like he's going to drift off. I'm not really ready to move on to sleepovers. How the hell do I get him out of here? Am I an asshole—stealing orgasms from him, making him listen to all my problems, and then tossing him out?

Probably.

He seems to notice my discomfort eventually, though, because he rolls onto his stomach and props his chin on my bicep. "You're putting up walls, Nicole." When I don't say anything, he nips at the side of my boob with his teeth. "I can tell because I do it, too."

He stands up, and I feel the chill immediately once his heat leaves my side. “Where you going?”

He bends and slips into his briefs and shorts, pulling the shirt from his pocket and sliding it over his head. He’s still got his ankle socks on from our run. I reach for the sheet and pull it over my nakedness, feeling goosebumps spring up all over my skin. “I have to prepare for our presentation,” he says, slipping into his sneakers.

“Right, but, like I said, I’m redirecting the meeting.” My voice drifts off. Why in the hell had I agreed to have him come to the meetings in the first place? There’s no earthly reason he should be here with us. It’s ridiculous, how off my game I’ve been. Ever since that damn crack in my yard. It’s like the earth opened up and swallowed all my good sense.

“Be that as it may,” he says, his voice growing cold and distant, “I’m also here with *my* boss, and I have to be ready to convince the president of Paraguay that nothing is more urgent than hiring Beltane to help mitigate the nation’s landslide problems.”

“Excuse me?”

“Excuse you what?” His eyes look sharp. “You think this...” he gestures around the room, “means that I’m not still looking to advance in my career? I’m sorry that you aren’t happy with what’s going on at work, but I still need to bring my A game.”

“This is some grade A bullshit, Isaac. What the fuck are you even talking about right now?” I feel like throwing pillows at his head. No, I feel like bashing his head off the

walls of the hotel room or maybe smashing a mirror over his head to show him how ridiculous he sounds. “I thought we both agreed that it’s inappropriate that your father brought you here. This isn’t a Beltane project.”

“And just what do you know about Beltane projects? You just said yourself you deal with entertainment superstars. Our company does life changing work, Nicole.” His nostrils flare. I’m not even sure where this is coming from, but all I know is that he needs to get the hell out of here or I’m going to slice his aorta.

“Get out,” I spit. “Get out and lose my number.”

“Already forgotten, Medusa.”

After he spits that out, he turns to walk out of the room. The vibrator is on the floor near the door, having stopped its roll. Isaac looks at it and kicks it toward the bed. He opens the door, steps into the hall, and closes it without another word.

CHAPTER 31

ZACK

I DON'T SLEEP. Between my shame at acting like such a petulant child with Nicole, and wanting to wring my dad's neck, I'm not sure what to do with my emotions. I recognize that it's a good thing that I ripped the bandage off with her before things got too serious.

I also don't shower because I can't bear to wash away the last lingering remnants of her scent on my hands, on my skin. Yes. I marinated in my own post-run, post-sex funk. So that's about the level of functioning I've reached.

My father asks to meet me for breakfast to prepare for our meeting, and I only agree because I feel the need to tear into him about how badly he has ruined my life so far this spring. I know he wants to go for a run, so I still don't shower, because what's another layer of salt when I'm already wounded and sweaty?

I know damn well my father won't sit down to eat until we run ten miles together.

"There's my boy," he says, jovially, not showing the slightest sign of jet lag or weariness. I can keep up on our run, but just barely. He's decades older and waves a chipper hello

to every person we pass out along the riverbank. I often wonder if there's an actual fuse lit inside him.

When we do sit down, Dad orders a Yerba mate and pulls out his own gourd cup from his fanny pack, to the delight of our server. "You should really get your own gourd while you're here," Dad says, ordering a cup of the foul brew for me, too.

I listen while he and the server talk about the magic properties of the tea, and then I wish I could melt into the floor when they pivot to discussing its effects on bowel health. "Jesus, dad," I growl as the server pops off to the back to get us bread and cheese. "You always do this shit."

He sips his drink and frowns at me. "And what is it that I do?"

I scoff. "Please. You know damn well that you're always buttering everyone up—everyone but your kids—and using everything to your own gain." He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms, letting me rant. So I do. "You're using me as a fucking puppet here to get Beltane some damn government contract we aren't equipped to service, and it's not even the direction Stag Law wants to be going with their foundation work."

"Anything else?" He keeps sipping from his damn gourd. I rub my hands along my thighs, shaking my head back and forth.

"Jesus." I pull at my hair by the roots. "I earned that fucking promotion, Dad. And you pulled me out of the

meeting like some child to come to your office and run off for a domestic project.”

“That domestic project brought us to this opportunity today, son. We’ve been over this.”

“No, *you’ve* been over this. You have this whole twisted vision swirling around in your gourd head and you only let us peons in on your ideas at the last second so we look like idiots with no time to prepare.”

I read half the night, fighting jet lag and trying to make sense of all the notes, all the papers Kellen put together. I still couldn’t make heads or tails of what we are even supposed to be saying later, what my role is in this circus.

I exhale and chug down my water. I am sure the mate drink is probably amazing for my insides, but I’m too angry at my dad to consider tasting it. His face reveals nothing when he asks, “So you’re angry that you’re not leading the division at work?”

“Fuck. Yes. That’s what I’m saying. Instead I’m following you around sipping tea on the off chance one of your random connections pays off.”

The server comes back with our food and my dad thanks her, asks after her family in fluent Spanish. She beams and hands him the sugar bowl, saying something back to him that I can’t understand. When she’s gone, he looks at me for a long while without speaking, which is unusual for him because he doesn’t often shut the fuck up.

“Son, I don’t want you to lead a damned division in the office.” I throw my napkin down on the table and stand up, sick of this shit and ready to bail. “Sit down,” he snaps, and I don’t. But I stand, staring at him. “I want you to run the entire company,” he says. “You and your brothers—you’re going to run the company someday. I’m not going to be around forever, you know.”

I roll my eyes and sit back down. “Dad, you’re in your fifties and healthier than most people my age.” He waves a hand. “Even if it were true that you wanted me to take a leadership role, don’t you think leading a division is the next logical step in that trajectory?”

I don’t tell him that I have no desire to run the organization, to worry about profit and loss sheets and board members. If my father can’t see that I need my hands in the dirt, that my mind needs to be crunching actual calculations...

“What do you dream about at night, son?”

Nicole, screaming my name, naked. I shrug, not sure where he’s going with this.

“Your uncle and I dreamed very different things when we were young, but all the roads led us together at Beltane. He lives and breathes engineering and numbers and order. I see how all the wheels turn at the other organizations who need engineers.” Dad picks the cheese off the bread and takes small bites, washing it down with his tea. “Your brothers are like Kellen.” He points a fork at me. “But you’ve got ideas.”

“First of all, my brothers have amazing ideas.” Dad rolls his own eyes at me, and I shove a wad of cheese in my mouth.

He challenges me again to tell him what I dream about at night, and I sigh. “You know, my buddy from MIT is at the university back in Pittsburgh working on machine learning.”

“Robots?”

I shrug. “I guess. Anyway I know they’re working on landslide prediction stuff, and they’ve got contacts with the state, and they’re looking to form a startup when he’s done with his Ph.D.”

Dad’s brows raise. “See, son, this is what I’m talking about. You’ve got ideas. This is really relevant for today’s meeting. Why didn’t you bring this up sooner?”

The mention of today’s meetings sours my stomach. “Dad, you didn’t fucking brief me on this trip or these meetings. You pulled me along like an idiot after sending me to work on someone’s yard.”

He waves a hand at me. “You thinking of leaving your family to go work for this robot guy?”

I shrug. I’ve thought about it. A lot more recently, since Ray has started having conversations with investors. But I’ve also heard the line my dad gives to engineers when they get better offers. *I might not be able to pay you as well as them, but my work is steady. Beltane builds long-term, repeat business. Our competitors shoot the moon and dry up every few years.* He’s not wrong.

Dad leans back in his seat. “You really don’t want to come along today and meet the president of Paraguay?”

I shake my head. “I do not want to do that, no.”

“Tell me more about landslide prediction. What’s that got to do with engineering?”

I explain how Ray’s software films hills over time and computer programs analyze any changes, shooting out alerts when things seem unstable. In a city like Pittsburgh, where the rivers slowly carved the land from the hills over the eons, our major roadways snake through rocky ledges and shaky valleys. The earth is slippery when it rains, which is almost all the time.

“Increasingly, the state is having to spend millions repairing rail lines and state highways buried after a brutal storm.” Dad nods. I know he knows this, because Beltane inspects a lot of the factories cranking out the concrete and asphalt for the repair work. “Ray had the idea to put his special cameras on city buses.”

Dad scratches his chin at that. “They’re doing the same routes every day, passing the same hills and whatnot.” I nod. “Bring Ray in for a meeting. Let’s poach him from those tech assholes.”

I crack a grin at that. “What tech assholes do you know?”

He waves a hand. “All those assholes Cal spends time with.” Dad pulls a pen out of his shirt pocket and starts writing things down on his napkin. We talk about how machine learning can be useful in a lot of areas at Beltane. I tell him what’s been nagging at me. “A guy like that Ray...he can help our inspection program, probably. Figure out what elements need to be replaced in the dams and power plants, really help us help our clients improve their efficiency.”

Dad squints off into the distance and drinks the last of his tea. “This could be a really bold new direction for us, Zacky. Really make an impact.”

I resist the urge to remind him we could have had this conversation a month ago if he’d open a door for such things, or, you know, ask me questions before mapping out a grand design. He pats my hand. “You’re more like your uncle in some ways. You need to open your mouth more if you see people burning the wrong fire.”

“You want me to call you out on your bullshit?”

“Well sure! What am I paying you for?” He laughs. “Seriously, kid. I’ve always been like this.”

“I’m well aware.” I spent a lot of time trailing after his whims, especially when my brothers were at their mom’s house. I always begged to go along with them, until I was old enough to understand why that couldn’t be.

Dad lets his hand linger on mine. “You and this company...you’re the things I’ve fought for, son.”

I don’t respond, because I have no idea what he’s talking about. I wouldn’t describe his absentee style of parenting “fighting” so much as “too busy or too unskilled to realize his preschooler soiled his pants on a job site he shouldn’t have been visiting.”

“I’m a lousy husband,” Dad says. “I know that. I’ve given up marrying them, son. You probably noticed. But your mother, she wasn’t ready for you.” He swallows. “I know she got pregnant to try and keep me...try to get me to be faithful to

her.” He shrugs. “Not sure why she thought I’d be true to her after I left Liam and Cal’s mother for her.”

“Come on, Dad.”

“I’ve never been any good at being a husband, and I’m probably a crap father, but damn it, I fought for you. Once you were born, your mother wanted alimony. She wanted full custody, but I wasn’t going to let you go. God, Isaac, it killed me when your brothers went to their mother’s house. I know I had no idea what to do with the three of you when you were home destroying our house, but it was too quiet without you there. I wasn’t letting you go.”

“So what are you saying? You stripped mom of all custody with some shark lawyer?”

He eyes flash at me. “Absolutely not. No. Son, she saw she wasn’t getting the money from me she wanted, and she wasn’t winning me back and she...well, she left. She left both of us. You know that.”

I sit for a few minutes and absorb the idea that my mother had at one point claimed to want me, even if it was for the child support payments she thought she’d get from my father. I’m not sure how to feel about that, whether it makes me feel better or worse or, I don’t know. Just more complete in the knowledge that I was thoroughly unloved.

Dad leans back in his chair and closes his eyes. “It probably didn’t seem like it, Zack, but I treasured those one on one days we had together. You were what got me through the long weeks your brothers were gone. They didn’t get to come to work with me like you did.” He shrugs. “I don’t know. I

guess I wanted you to see me where I was most comfortable. In the one environment where I never seem to lose interest.” He sighs, shrugs again. “I wanted you to love what I love.”

We stare at each other until I reach for the plate and start gnawing off pieces of the bread. Dad says, “Look, if you don’t want to come to the meeting, why don’t you go back to Pittsburgh and reach out to Ray. Get him in the office for a meeting, and get me a briefing.”

“If I do this, you’re not going to go off on some unexpected tangent? This is my friend and I’ve been consulting with him as he builds his software. I’m already invested in this, Dad.”

“I’m not going to—“

“If I prepare a briefing for you, we’re going to have a meeting about it *before* the meeting and you and I are going to talk about the strategy of the meeting and the ask from Ray *together*.”

“Sure, son. Of course.”

“Don’t say ‘of course’ like this is normal for you. If you want me to really take over for you, to love this thing that you love, then you’re going to have to start include me in whatever is going on in that head of yours.”

“Point taken.”

As I walk away from him, I hear him muttering that I sound like his brother, and it’s probably the greatest compliment my father has ever handed out.

I throw my things together in my bag and head for the airport, feeling guilty that I'm not saying goodbye to Nicole, until I remember how we ended things yesterday. Or, rather, how I ended things between us. For good. I sink into my business class seat on the flight, and play back everything my father had said over breakfast this morning.

He didn't say anything surprising or new, really. Except for the part about having to fight for custody of me. That was new information. But it was just the cavalier way he said he's no good with women. A terrible partner. Like he's just accepted that his brother and his business are enough for him.

I can't stop seeing myself in his words. Because who am I? A grouchy fucker who defines himself by what's going well at work, who channels college relationships into work...hell, my dad even said I'm like him. I know he meant somehow that I'm the ideas guy in the operation, but it's there.

"Lone wolf," I mutter, thinking back to Nicole tossing me out of bed each time I've been in there with her. She must be able to see it, too.

I pull out my tablet and have to close out of all the apps I have open for calculations on her property. I try typing up some notes about the briefing for my father, about all the work I've been doing with Ray related to teaching the computer to predict landslides. It blows my mind, how someone like me can teach a computer to know about the pressures and properties of soil. But here we are.

There's no way I'm going to be able to oversee Nicole's yard work and get my shit together to meet with Ray.

I sigh. It's probably best if I don't go back over there, anyway. I can't concentrate around her, and she hates me. Because I was a shit to her. But of course, now I'm thinking about being with her. I think constantly about her hair blowing into my mouth, or listening to her on the phone with clients calming them down, or stirring them up as the case may be.

She doesn't need me, and she sure as shit doesn't need me distracted while I'm making critical plans to repair the yard behind the house she renovated with her bare hands.

I start an email to one of the junior engineers in the geotechnical division at Beltane. I can have Lisa take over the work and I can supervise, make sure everything seems kosher before we get the heavy machinery in there. It's probably best this way. Clean break. Outsource the interactions to Lisa, focus on the meeting with Ray.

"Eye on the prize, Zack," I mutter to myself on the plane. Only problem is, I keep losing track of what the real prize might be.

CHAPTER 32

NICOLE

“PERHAPS I COULD DRAW your attention back to the matter at hand?”

The room falls silent as I click the slide presentation forward on the screen. Almost as soon as we filed in, Tim had dropped an arm around Augusto’s shoulders and started in on a speech about how this young man would help restore the nation of Paraguay to splendor.

There was a lot of cross talk, with Mick Brady trying to use the weather as a transition to talking about landslides, and Augusto’s agent frowning in response to the president tapping his pen, looking frustrated. I don’t know where the fuck Isaac is, but he hasn’t been present for any of the tours or meetings this morning and he’s not here now.

Amidst the din, I stood, cleared my throat, and dimmed the lights, a trick I learned when I was trying to get dude bro coders to shut up and listen to my words.

I pull up some images I put together after our focus group data, of smiling kids running around, of a smiling young Augusto sitting on a ledge, his feet dangling off the edge in threadbare shoes. “Mr. Cruz is so proud of his heritage and

would like to craft his charitable foundation in such a way that it supports the people of his homeland.”

Augusto smiles. The president’s frown lessens slightly.

I flick ahead through a series of press photos of Augusto from training camp, the rookie draft, and some random footage of him walking to and from the baseball field. “Augusto has come a long way from the skinny guy who loved American baseball so much he formed a park league with his friends from school.” I click again.

The screen flashes a shot of him sitting on the roof of the dugout, smiling, legs dangling over the edge in a pose that echoes the childhood picture from earlier. He grins and sits a little higher in his seat. I continue. “Turns out, the one thing Augusto loves almost as much as Paraguay is sneakers.”

Tim frowns and shoots me a glare. Mick Brady has a fake smile plastered on his face and his knee shakes nervously.

I pull up some numbers and a bar graph. “I’ve surveyed known philanthropic foundations and high profile donors. I’ve done focus group studies with likely donors. As you can see here, we asked them about their propensity to contribute toward various types of causes.”

I listed infrastructure projects, clean water, improved education, and sports facilities. And, of course, I asked them how they felt about supporting a company that gets necessities like shoes and athletic clothing to young kids who can’t afford such things.

“Based on some similar models from other companies, and considering the high likability of Mr. Cruz as a famous role model, these are the predictions for the first year of Cruzwear—a line of fashion sneakers, athletic shorts, and baseball gloves.”

I advance to a slide with a lot of zeroes on it and I wink at Augusto’s manager. A number of late night calls and last-minute cramming in my hotel room led to this pitch. This is the strategy that’s going to work, and it might be shitty that I left Tim out of the planning loop for it, but I’m not sorry about it.

“We’re going to do a buy-one, give-one model,” I explain. “Regular customers who purchase a pair of Augusto’s high end fashion sneakers will be providing a pair for a school child in Paraguay who doesn’t have access to athletic footwear. These aren’t just sub-par shoes, but high performance athletic apparel that’s built to last. Cruzwear will let kids run and play on rough terrain, in mud, in the rain.”

Augusto looks like he’s going to cry with happiness. Even Mick Brady has an enthralled expression by this point. “The foundation arm of the business will establish the production factory here, in Paraguay, and train and hire local people to manufacture the line. The foundation will thus support the local economy, while providing young children with the tools they need to chase after their own athletic dreams.”

An hour later, I'm seated at the bar with Augusto's agent, Dennis. We're knocking back South American wine and feeling damn excited about what is sure to be an insanely busy year ahead. The paperwork and logistics in establishing all of this are going to drive somebody bananas. It won't be me. I'll either be fired, or hard at work mapping out a strategy for the next Stag Law client who wants support with their charitable giving.

Augusto comes up to us, grinning. "Hey, Ms. Kennedy," he says, eyes sparkling. "You know I love this! I was starting to get a little worried about all that monsoon talk earlier in the day."

"Worried?"

He shakes his head. "You know...fixing roads here? Construction? Sometimes it's not so above ground..."

I frown, not sure what he means. Dennis coughs into his fist, saying, "corruption," and I understand. Augusto is worried about getting involved at the government level.

"In fact," he continues. "I do not even know if it's such a good idea to build a factory here."

"Oh," I say, chewing the inside of my cheek. "Well we can work all those details out. The important part is the shoes, right?"

Augusto beams and holds up his foot, clad in a vibrant orange high-top shoe that brightly contrasts his slick dark suit.

Tim, Mick, and the president's chief of staff emerge from a cigar room just then, and I stiffen. Augusto and Dennis take

off to celebrate with Augusto's home town crowd, but I remain seated, raising a brow at Tim and waiting for him to come over.

When he sits next to me, he leans his forearms on the bar and inhales and slowly exhales through his nose. "I hate the smell of cigar smoke," he says, frowning and signaling for the bartender.

Once he orders a water, he drinks it slowly before turning to look at me, where I continue to sip my wine. "That meeting was very different from what we discussed back in Pittsburgh," he says slowly.

"Indeed it was." I don't shy away from his gaze and I'm not afraid of his anger. I know my friendship with Emma will survive even if my time with Stag Law has come to an end. I'd rather go out having stood up for myself and my ideas, having stood my ground about the parameters of my role as strategy director.

Tim inhales again and sets the water glass down on the bar. "Augusto is thrilled with your idea," he says, and I nod. *Duh*, I think, but I know better than to say so out loud. He clears his throat. "I wasn't aware the focus group numbers were so striking," he says, gesturing a hand. "I admit I got caught up in the idea of a humanitarian infrastructure project."

"Well maybe you should go work for the peace corps," I snap, before I can catch myself. Tim chuckles.

"Maybe in a former life." He raps his knuckles on the bar. "I owe you an apology for the way I've behaved leading up to this trip."

My mouth drops open in a wide O. I really thought he was coming over here to yell at me. He runs a hand through his hair. “I’ve been really stressed out since Alice got pregnant this third time,” he says. “And you know, things with my father are...strained. Anyway, he’s not someone I go to for advice.” Tim sighs. “Can I be really honest?” I nod. “Sometimes I get...Mick always seems like everyone’s dad, you know? I think I got wrapped up in Mick Brady’s enthusiasm.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure Mick really thought his idea was mutually beneficial,” I tell him. “It’s not the worst idea in the world. It’s just...it’s not Augusto and it’s not the right model for a business for a star athlete.”

Tim nods. “You’ve learned a lot about the industry since I brought you on board,” he says, the side of his mouth turning up in a grin.

“Maybe you should pay me more,” I tell him, nudging him with my shoulder. But I rest my hand on his. “You’re a great dad, Tim. I know Thatcher looks to you as role model and all that shit.”

He chuckles, and the sides of his mouth turn up into a small smile. He holds his glass toward me in a toast. “Things are about to get really intense for you at work, Nicole Kennedy. I hope this doesn’t impact your marathon training.”

CHAPTER 33

NICOLE

ISAAC DOESN'T CALL. *Forget my number*, I'd told him. And he chose then to start doing what I tell him. I feel like some sort of psychopath, thinking about him all the fucking time. But it's hard not to when so much about my life centers around him. The trench in my yard. The group training runs he's apparently skipping now. The orgasms that have gone missing again since I threw him out of my hotel room.

Maddie and Emma are on their way over to my house to see the work in the back yard. I got an emailed set of finalized plans from someone at Beltane Engineering and signed them digitally from the plane on the way back. I would have loved to see the look on my own face when I realized I was being passed off to an underling.

Now, this Lisa person is at my house every day with a clipboard, every bit as serious and earnest as Isaac as she measures shit and bosses around a set of contractors.

Lisa says the money has come in for the remediation, and she's got a barge sailing up the Allegheny River with digging equipment.

I hear a whistle behind me and turn to see my friends standing in my yard. Maddie carries a six pack of beer and Emma hands me a bag of chips. “This is...” Maddie shakes her head and gestures at the boat sailing up laden with dirt. They’re bringing it in by water, which I guess is good so the dump trucks don’t have to trash the grass on my front yard to get it back here.

The three of us set up some chairs on the patio and watch the chaos for awhile, the roar of the machinery robbing them of any opportunity to ask me uncomfortable questions. When the crew takes a break, the quiet feels loud and Emma clears her throat. “So,” she says. “I don’t see Zack over there...”

Hearing the name Zack, Lisa looks over and shouts. “Mr. Brady has put me in charge of the project,” she says. “Once again, I assure you I’ve passed all my exams and am highly qualified to supervise the remediation.”

“No worries, Lisa,” I say. “We’re just not interested in staring at your ass when you bend over.”

She flushes. “Oh.” She looks back at her clipboard and tries to hide a laugh.

Emma shakes her head at me. “Thatcher and his brothers went for a run yesterday,” she says. The three of them often do that, and more often than not they wind up having a fist fight as they “help” each other figure out solutions to their emotional drama.

“Who has a black eye,” I ask before I shove a handful of chips into my mouth, glad we’re pivoting to work talk already. Maddie snorts.

Emma just laughs. “Thatcher came home stunned into silence because Tim was talking about how he was wrong and should have trusted you more.”

I just continue eating chips and shrug. “Show me the lie,” I say. Emma swats at my shoulder.

“He’s lucky to have you,” she says. “You know trusting people is Tim’s major weakness.”

“Yeah, well, mine, too. Apart from you, obviously,” I say. But I had forgotten that Tim and I have that in common—our sense that we are the only ones we can rely on in the world. Tim’s been pretty actively working on it. I’ve just been leaning in to my role as a control freak.

Just then, Valerie walks over toward us with a lawn chair. “Not in the mood, Valerie,” I say, but Maddie hands her a beer, twisting off the top of the bottle before she hands it to my neighbor.

“Got your note about the lawsuit,” Valerie says, gesturing at the barge. “I notice you didn’t seek my approval before the work began.”

“Well, that’s true.”

“Good thing that Lisa person came over for a signature,” Valerie huffs as she settles into her chair. She points a knuckle at a shaggy-haired guy in a flannel with the sleeves cut off. “You gals all staring at the looker over there operating the excavator?”

“Duh,” Maddie says with a snort. We all share a laugh.

“Just don’t get used to sitting over here with us,” I tell Val. “I’ll put up a fence, I swear to god, and block all the sun from your hedges.”

“Oh, like I enjoy putting up with your snappy bullshit,” Val retorts with a grin. She reaches for the bag of chips and I hand it to her, glad we seem to be speaking the same language for once.

“Now,” she says, staring at me. “Why don’t you tell me why that gal is running the show now instead of the broody drink of water you’ve been canoodling?”

I whip my head around and glare at Valerie. “Because Isaac Brady is an arrogant piece of toilet paper and I’m done wiping my ass with him.”

The women around me swallow, wide-eyed. It’s a good thing the excavator fires its engine back up, because that’s about all I can handle saying about him. My insides churn. I’m feeling something I recognize as emotional pain, and I practice deep breathing to shove it all back down inside, where I store all my responses to the things my parents have said to me over the years.

Emma stands up and wraps her arms around me. “What are you doing,” I shout over the machinery. Maddie stands up and smashes me into a hug from the other side. Thankfully, Valerie stays where she is, but the second she leans forward and begins patting my leg, I lose control.

I look down at my shirt and see wet splotches, realizing my eyes are crying.

“Just let it out, babe,” Emma says. And I do. I let it all out. All the years of rejection from the people who were supposed to love me. All my stress at the prospect of losing a home I had literally crafted for myself with my bare hands. All my rage that my boss had reneged on our arrangement until I stood up and yanked back control over the meetings I was supposed to be orchestrating.

And finally, I cry—yes, ok, it’s me crying. Not just my eyes—I cry for Isaac, who seemed like he was worthy of peeling back my fortress walls. Just a little. Not a lot. But as soon as I did, he stomped all over everything. I cry on my friends until I’m all dried up inside.

Emma sits back down and smiles at me. “Don’t you feel better?” She asks. “Like, you think you’d feel totally empty after gushing out all the heavy shit, but I find, after a big cry, I feel renewed. Remember when Thatcher and I were on the outs and you helped me cry?”

I nod. She’s right. She’s always right. That’s why I love her. She’s both right *and* good, has her priorities in the right place. And she listens to me when I call her out on her bullshit. Which is the only reason I consider listening to her when she says, “Now, I think you should call Isaac tomorrow.”

CHAPTER 34

ZACK

ORLA, Liam and Cal stand on my front porch pounding so hard on my front window, I worry they'll shatter the glass. I crack one eye open to make sure I'm not imagining them out there, and then try to go back to sleep on my couch, where I've fallen asleep with my laptop on my chest.

Eventually, one of them locates the key they each have to get in my house and soon, all of them are standing above me, smelling like sweat and Brady rage.

"Dude. You stink." Cal waves at the air, pulling his t-shirt up over his nose and mouth. I groan. It's been three days since I got home from South America, and I've only slept a handful of hours. I've been here in my living room the entire time, working with Ray on his research and typing up plans to bring him in to speak with my dad and Uncle Kellen.

"Like you guys smell so good," I mutter, trying to hide my head under a throw pillow, but Liam yanks it away and tosses it across the room. He stands above me with his hands on his hips, glowering.

"You've missed several family runs, and at least two group runs for the corporate relay," he says, disapproving. He pauses,

and adds, “Your girlfriend wasn’t there today, either, so we came to make sure you were—“

“Jesus, Liam, that’s not why we’re here.” Orla cuts him off and I struggle to sit up at the mention of Nicole. Thoughts of her sting my breastbone, like when I run too fast on a frigid day, even though I’m working really hard on ghosting her until she forgets my name.

“We’re actually worried about Zack’s health and safety,” Orla continues. “Uncle Mick didn’t seem worried when you didn’t come back to work after Paraguay, but—and I’m not trying to imply anything negative here—but that really isn’t super informative. If Mick’s not worried, I mean.”

“It’s not like your dad was worried,” Cal interjects, helping himself to the bag of corn chips I have by my feet on the couch. “Uncle Kellen just sort of mumbled and grunted when we asked him if he’d heard anything.”

The room falls silent as they all find someplace to sit, and then I become aware that they’re waiting for me to say something. “Dude,” Cal says, bouncing a chip off my forehead. “You have to tell us what’s going on.”

I sigh and drape a forearm over my face. “Well the big thing is that I finally had it out with Dad.”

“Had it out how? Like...you told him to fuck off about the relay team?”

I shake my head and struggle to sit up. Liam hands me his water bottle and I squirt a bunch into my mouth. “I mean, we were talking about when my mom left.”

Liam nods. “That’s a significant conversation. Did he have his gourd tea?”

“Oh man,” Cal makes a fart sound with his mouth. “Dad and that fucking tea. Am I right?” He looks around and Orla glares daggers at him. “Sorry, sorry. Zack, please. Continue.”

I sigh and tell them about my fight with Dad. “It wasn’t a fight in the end, I guess. But anyway, he heard what I had to say about my friend Ray and his machine learning research and...well, I’m pitching him and Kellen later this week.”

I tell them about the landslide work, how I’m imagining we can apply Ray’s machine learning interests to a bunch of aspects of our work at Beltane. By the time I’m done talking through it all, I’m actually feeling really good because I realize I’ve internalized a lot of the material I’ve been writing out for the past few days. I grin and rub my hands through my hair, trying to smooth it out.

“It’s good you don’t work from home much,” Orla says, frowning. “You look like shit.”

I grin at her. “Thanks, cuz. Seriously, I like it that you always tell it to me straight.”

She sniffs, and seems to regret it, between the post-run funk of my brothers and my unshowered odor. “I thought that’s what you like about Nicole.”

God, please don’t make me talk about Nicole, I think. But I’m not lucky enough to avoid that land mine. “One minute you’re suited up taking her on a date and the next...you’re grunting like a cave man when I say her name.” Orla is giving

me her very best bossy face, like she's gearing up to twist my earlobe until I talk to her.

I clench my thighs together in case she gets any ideas about punching me in the junk like she used to do when we were much younger. "Look," I tell them. "Things were getting intense with Nicole. Neither of us can handle that right now. We've got work shit."

Liam says, "hmmm" like he knows something. "I overheard Lisa talking about the project at her house. Since when do you outsource a job midway through?"

Since I'm terrified to see her and face the reality that I'm catching feelings for her. Since my dad told me she totally dismantled that meeting in Paraguay and somehow Beltane still got a consulting contract. Since I made her think I doubted her ability to bad ass her way out of that situation so that everyone wins.

I shrug. "Like I said, when I fought with Dad I told him how I felt about being passed over for that department head position. This presentation with Ray is top priority for me and in my opinion, a top priority for the future of the company. Lisa is more than capable of taking the lead at this stage."

My siblings and Orla share a silent conversation with each other and then grunt at me a few times before standing. "Ok," Cal says.

But Orla coughs into her hand, saying "bullshit." And I roll my eyes at her.

“Well,” Cal continues, “we’re all going to the cafe because we’ve earned some greasy diner food. You’re not invited unless you promise to shower and come to work tomorrow.”

I throw a couch cushion at them as they file out of my house.

CHAPTER 35

ZACK

“WELCOME ABOARD, RAYLAND,” Uncle Kellen says, shaking hands with my friend the following week. Beltane wasn’t able to offer Ray a dazzling salary for when he finishes his PhD, but we can offer him total creative control over his machine learning projects, absolute freedom over the types of projects he selects and, of course, the responsibility to lead his division and begin creating software to help all the different divisions of Beltane serve their clients more efficiently.

It’s been a few decades since we added a new division to the Beltane Engineering portfolio. This is the most exciting thing to happen since Cal talked Dad into getting some drones. Already, Cal and Ray are deep in conversation about who will manage the drone projects meant to make our inspection safer. I hear Ray say something about programming unmanned robots to scope through pipes, and soon my entire family is calling for whiskey and walking toward a nearby bar.

“This is a fine day for Beltane Engineering,” my father says, pulling me in for a side hug. He means it, too. He didn’t have to fake enthusiasm for any of my or Ray’s ideas, and he

actually suggested a sweet bonus for me as a finder's fee for getting Ray on board.

Professionally, my life is a dream. I've got everything I set out to achieve, really. Autonomy over the projects I'm working on. The opportunity to put my hands in the dirt. Ray and I are actually working with three neighboring counties to monitor landslides all around Pittsburgh and every day I spend helping the programmers with their data points is like the Olympics for a guy obsessed with math and pressure and soil composition.

The only problem is, despite my own insistence that I need to be a lone wolf, that the love and acceptance of my family is enough to fulfill me personally, I can't shake the ache in my chest when I think about Nicole.

I keep reminding myself we weren't actually together. We never set parameters, let alone made declarations of monogamy or said anything about feelings. I just...need her. And as I stare at the drink in my hand, I know that the reason she's not here is because I shoved her away.

She would have left anyway, I think, swirling the whiskey in my glass. It would've fizzled out and she'd leave.

If all these things are true, why does it feel like such shit when Lisa tugs on my sleeve and asks me to sign off on some new permits for the project with Nicole's yard?

"Give us a minute, Lisa," my uncle says, tugging on my sleeve and pulling me over to a table where he and Orla are sitting with some snacks. I say nothing, but reach for a soft pretzel bite and dip it into the warm cheese. Kellen looks at me

and rests a hand on my shoulder. “Can’t help but notice you’re a bit glum, kiddo,” he says.

“Only you would say a word like ‘glum,’” I mutter.

Kellen sighs. “My Orla tells me you’re skipping family runs lately.” He waits for me to crack and start talking to him, but he might as well not hold his breath. I eat another pretzel. It might be the first food I’ve had today, which explains a lot about how my guts are churning.

Eventually, I look over at him and Orla, blinking at me like two Irish owls, and say, “I’m a lone wolf.” As I say it, I recognize that I’m probably drunk.

“Hmm,” Kellen says, sizing me up. “Lone wolf? Tell me what you mean by that.” I can tell he doesn’t actually want me to respond, so I don’t. He continues. “Were you alone when your brother Liam helped you figure out who should be financially responsible for your client’s rotational landslide? Were you perhaps alone when your college roommate brought a new direction and energy into the family business?” He leans forward, his voice dropping. “Were you alone at the country club with Bitchy Bitsy Kennedy denigrating her daughter where everyone could hear? Don’t look at me like that. I talk to people.”

Kellen yanks the bowl of soft pretzel bites away from me and sets his hand on mine. “We’re engineers, son. Precision is important to us, so let me explain to you why you are not a lone wolf. The etymology of that expression refers to a female wolf, one who has been driven out of the pack. If anyone is a lone wolf in this scenario, it’s your mother.”

I open my mouth to interject something, but nothing comes to mind, so I close it and he continues. “Nobody is saying she needed to put up with your father’s philandering. But anyone who’s going to use a tiny baby as a pawn for financial gain is going to get the cold shoulder from this family.” He snorts. “You are not a lone wolf. You are very much an integral part of the pack here, Isaac. You and I both know that large ungulates are easier to bring down when you’ve got help.”

With that, he stands, kisses Orla on the cheek, and glides away from the table before I have a chance to work out who is the ungulate and who is my helper-wolf in his metaphor. Sensing my distress, Orla says, “He means you need to call Nicole and eat crow for whatever asshole things you said and did to her.”

“What do you know about it,” I scoff, trying to reach for the soft pretzels again.

“I know your head hasn’t been in the game since your trip, and your split times are suffering.” She shrugs. “Your run tracker posts are still set to public, by the way. You need to adjust the notifications in your app.”

CHAPTER 36

NICOLE

I HAVEN'T TAKEN Emma's advice about calling Isaac, and the longer he doesn't call me, either, the angrier I get at both of them. Why would she suggest I grovel to him when he was the one who was rude? I don't have time for rude.

I also miss him like crazy. I miss his beard scruff on my thighs and his snarky text messages. I miss sitting at my house and working next to him, yet not feeling suffocated by him.

Ever since we set our course with Augusto, work has been like a high-speed boat race, and I'm loving getting splashed with the sea foam. Everything is thrilling, from deciding which designers to hire to mapping out production schedules. It might be possible I'm fast tracking everything so that I'm working around the clock and not taking time to dwell on my confusing feelings.

Augusto has already approved a shoe design, in fact, and some local university students have somehow stitched up a few pairs in the maker space, whatever that entails. So yeah. Work is amazing. Lisa says I'm about a week away from being able to plant grass in my back yard, and I'm feeling beyond ready for the relay run.

I haven't told Tim anything about my budding enjoyment of running as stress relief. He doesn't need to know he had a good idea, and he doesn't need to know I've started actually using my treadmill desk for sprint drills in the middle of the day. I looked up a speed program online.

I'm determined to finish my portion of the relay in under 45 minutes. Emma and Maddie said my calves are starting to look cut, and I'll go ahead and accept the compliment in time for tea-length dresses and pedal pusher pants.

Mark interrupts me as I'm flexing my calves, staring at the subtle way my body has changed. That feels too passive—my body hasn't changed. I fucking chiseled myself a new shape. I'm going to phrase it that way.

"Nicole? Nicole!" He taps his loafered foot impatiently when I don't answer.

I sigh. "What am I late for now?"

He sits down and spreads out a stack of papers. "We're finalizing guest lists for Augusto's launch party. You've already approved media outlets and foundation heads, athletes, the fabulously wealthy..."

"I trust your judgement, Mark," I tell him, patting his hand. "That's why I promoted you to run point on this event."

He rolls his eyes. "Ok, well, like I said I'm getting Alice to vet the caterers and suggest drink pairings for the signature cocktails, oh! And I'm choosing the band. Augusto said 'anything South American sounding,' so I've got a drum corps coming and—"

“Mark, babe, I’m working on the notes for the investor meeting that happens prior to the party.”

He practically snorts at me before leaning forward. “Are you bringing a date?”

I snort out a puff of laughter at that. “Mark, I will have absolutely zero time to entertain a stupid date. Besides, I don’t need to network or look good for the boss. I’m already basically related to the boss.”

“Nicole.” His voice is firm and there’s something new behind his tone. “You work on a team, you know.”

“Yes, Mark, I’m well aware of all the valuable contributions of my coll—“

“Babe. You’re working us all to the bone and we’re tired. The team has sent me to tell you we need a night off. So if you can please approve all these invoices, expenses, and seating charts, I can deliver a little relaxation.” His nostrils flare a bit as he stands, glowering at me.

“Oh,” I tell him. I sink lower into my chair, feeling defeated. I’ve been selfish. “I wish you’d told me this a week ago, Mark. Shit.”

He sighs. “It’s ok. Now. Sign these papers so I can go the fuck home and swing some kettlebells and maybe get laid this weekend.”

I snort. “What must that be like.” I start signing the papers and reading over everything he’s prepared. It’s all in order. The vendors, the venue, the presentation plans for the event.

Mark even has someone writing prepared remarks for Tim and me to deliver.

Eventually I realize Mark is staring at me, and I look up at him, confused. “What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me! You know exactly what it feels like to get predictably laid and you’re being too damn stubborn to make it happen for yourself.”

“Oh, christ, not you, too.”

“Yeah, yeah, he was an asshole in Paraguay. Jet lagged, tired from running, under pressure from his family. The man said some fucked up shit. Nicole, you also said he encouraged you and seemed to actually care about the things that interest you. Namely spackle.”

I bite my lip. It’s true, Isaac seemed worth my time for awhile. But I’m not sure if I can deal with someone who cracks like that under pressure.

Seeming to read my mind, Mark raises a brow at me. “He stood out in the rain in your yard in February. In Pittsburgh. Trying to make sure you could save your house.”

“He was trying to make sure he could get paid for the work,” I counter, shoving the pile of completed paperwork toward Mark.

He gathers them up and shakes his head. “I don’t believe that, and neither do you.” But then he smiles and gives me a salute. “Don’t call me this weekend. I’m busy. But I’ll see you Monday.”

And with that, he bustles away and I realize there's no more work for the weekend, nothing pressing to attend to. In freeing up the staff, I've also sentenced myself to two entire days of myself.

When I get home, I change and go for a run. I concentrate on the rhythm of my feet on the pavement, on timing my breath with my steps. I run along the trail that I never use, realizing when I get close to my office that I've got a lot of steam left.

I manage to tune out all the nagging thoughts of my parents and my job and Isaac Brady. I'm just running, feeling my lungs open up. Sweating. I start laughing, because it feels so damn good. By the time I get home, I've gone six entire miles. *If you can run four, you can run eight.*

It feels strange to realize that such a thing is entirely possible. I never stopped to consider that I might be able to run at all, but then I suppose I never thought I could take a sledge hammer to a wall to expose the original brick fireplace. "And look at me now," I mutter aloud.

I wander around back to find Valerie sitting outside, staring at the yard. The landscape folks are coming next week to level everything off and plant grass. She and I are supposed to discuss whether we're doing sod or seeds or...whatever.

The fervor with which I want to avoid being alone with my thoughts is so intense that I feel my arm waving at Valerie. "Hey," I shout, cringing on the inside. "You have a second to talk about the landscape stuff?"

She looks at me in shock, which is fair because I always am super crabby when I talk to her. It's not that she's completely annoying. It just bothers me to think that maybe I'm on the same life path as her. No spouse. No kids. Living alone, retired, with nobody but a bitchy neighbor to yell at as our neighborhood gentrifies around us.

She pats the chair next to her on her patio and I sink into it. "You thinking of the sod?"

Valerie shakes her head. "Hard pass. We should do perennial ryegrass now, and after the heat of summer, have them come back and lay Kentucky bluegrass."

"Wow," I say, impressed. "You've really put some thought into this."

"What the hell else have I got to do," she says, and then laughs. "I'm just messing with you. My friend teaches at that Penn State extension program. Do you know they have an entire major in turf grass there?"

"I did not know this, Valerie."

She nods. "Yes! Kids can go to college and study grass. A few of my students have done that, over the years."

"I had no idea." And it's true, and it's also true that I'm interested in the idea of this, the way she talks about how it's important to study biology and even meteorology.

"I bet Zack knows turf grass specialists," she says. "His line of work, especially if he's helping rejuvenate the land after strip mining...yes, I bet he knows plenty about turf management."

“I don’t really want to talk about Zack, Val, if that’s ok.”

She sighs. “Welp,” she says, pointing at the yard. “Perennial ryegrass, then. You let me handle this part, huh? Seeing as you got everything going with the foundation beneath us.”

I smile. “Just no ugly hedges.”

“For the last god damn time, Nicole, I was going to trim it and shape it. You just never let me over on your side!”

CHAPTER 37

ZACK

IT'S BEEN A MONTH. A month in which I have hardly slept, have ingested more than I think I need to know about machine learning, and have thought of Nicole Kennedy no less than seven thousand times per minute.

The longer I don't call her to apologize, the more I feel like I shouldn't bother. *She's probably moved on by now*, I think, and the image of her with another man turns my blood to ice.

Orla says I need to grovel, do something epic. I have no idea what that means. I'm not an epic guy, and she seems to really dislike having attention brought to her in crowds anyway. There are literally zero examples from my life of people using good communication skills to navigate a problem in a healthy way.

I'm pulled from my thoughts when Em, the admin for our building, raps on my office door. "You got a minute, Zack?"

"Sure," I tell her, tossing my pen across the desk. "What's up?"

Em pushes the door open wider to reveal Valerie, the woman who lives next to Nicole, standing in the hall. "She

says she's here to talk turf..."

I chuckle. "Come on in, Val. What can I do for you?" Em smiles and backs out, closing the door behind her as Val sinks into the folding chair. I really have to do more with the furniture in here.

"I'm not actually here to talk about landscaping," she says, scowling at me a bit.

"Well, is there a problem with the project? Should I call Lisa to join us?" I reach for my phone but she swats at my arm.

"No! I'm here to talk about what an idiot you are."

Stunned, I widen my eyes. "Okaaaay. Care to elaborate?"

She crosses her arms over her chest and huffs. "Do you know that tonight, Nicole Kennedy is going to a fancy sneaker party with no date?"

"I did not, but I really don't see—"

"And, further, did you know that she cries in her sun room? And stomps around the back yard kicking dirt and muttering about what an idiot you are? I hear her out there, on the phone with her friend, and then they hang up and Nicole *cries*. She didn't even cry when her yard crumpled into the sea."

I open my mouth to explain that while the Allegheny River eventually reaches the Chesapeake Bay, her yard actually was sliding into the river. But Valerie presses on. "She's rude and abrasive on the outside, but I think we both know that she's

very vulnerable beneath that shell. She's like...tectonic plates sliding around over liquid magma."

"Tectonic plates?"

She waves a hand. "Don't tell me you've got a masters degree in geotechnical engineering and you don't know about plate tectonics."

"Well, of course I know how earthquakes happen. But what does this have to do with Nicole?"

Valerie plants both hands on the desk. "I called that assistant of hers and told him I want you to be her sneaker date at the fancy party." She reaches into her bag and pulls out an index card with neat handwriting. "He says to wear dark jeans and sneakers, obviously."

"Valerie, I can't just show up at her work function. It would make her upset."

"She's upset all the damn time! Haven't you been listening?"

My heart lurched when Valerie said Nicole has been crying. She can't have been crying about me, can she? Surely it was related to work pressure or something else with the house. Something she loves and cares about. "Boy," Valerie says, continuing to shake her head. "It's no wonder I never got into a relationship myself. Men are completely clueless."

I'm not about to disagree with her. She taps at the note card on the desk and says, "Tonight. Don't mess this up." And she flounces out of the office without another word.

Sneaker party. Famous athletes. Nicole giving speech. Dark jeans and rolled up sleeves—makes her hot and bothered.

I have to laugh at the thought of Valerie taking notes from Nicole's assistant about what turns her on. This all feels a bit ridiculous. Showing up at her work event into a room where half the people probably think I'm a dick for ruining whatever we had simmering together.

The Nicole I know wouldn't have told a lot of them, though. She keeps everything so tight to the vest. *I wonder if she likes vests*, I think, watching as my subconscious plans my outfit for tonight even as my conscious, rational mind rejects the idea of swooping in to catch her off guard.

I sigh and look around the office. I gather my things and head home, wondering if I even have any sneakers apart from my running shoes. I look at the note card again, consider the past month and how even though things have been going exactly as I'd hoped professionally, I still feel like shit most of the time because my personal life is, frankly, ruined. And that's my own damn fault.

Lots of people have now told me to do something about this. The only thing standing in my way here is me being an idiot. I go up one flight of stairs to my brother Cal's office. "Hey," I say. "I need you to help me pick out something to wear."

The party is being held in a new gallery space on the north shore of the river, near the sports stadiums. I hand my keys to the valet out front and smooth my hands over my outfit. Cal lent me a pair of dark rinse jeans that feel entirely too tight, but he says they look perfect with the bright orange high-tops and blue dress shirt he had me wear untucked, sleeves rolled as per instructions from Mark.

I feel like I swallowed a Lego brick, knowing she's in there and is likely to reject me and kick me out of her life forever for showing up here like this after what I said in the hotel and then just not calling her for so long.

“Name?” There's a girl in overalls at the door, a beanie slouched over her head and very expensive diamond earrings glinting in the light shining behind her.

“Um, Zack Brady. I'm not sure if I'm on the list...”

She smiles. “You are. Welcome. Enjoy a peach crostini as you enter.”

A peach crostini. A server appears and hands me a square little plate made from bamboo. I pop the appetizer into my mouth while I scan the room, and then I see her. My mouth dries out and my blood surges when I look at her, laughing and talking with her boss and Augusto Cruz.

She seems so comfortable, so confident. Her wild curls are down and just springing everywhere. Her green eyes flash above a black sheath dress with a boxy sort of neckline that shows the swell of her cleavage. I feel an uncontrollable urge to run across the room and tackle her to the ground, massaging

her ass and kissing her, trying to make up for the past month where I've just wallowed in my own stupidity.

I stare as a staff member in a headset pulls her aside and waves her up on stage. Nicole kicks off the speaking portion of the program, introducing herself as the director of strategy for Stag Law. The room erupts into cheers as she smiles a 1,000 watt smile, talking about this new foundation that Augusto wanted to create.

She is electric on stage, talking without notes, smoothly and confidently. She introduces her boss, and makes to exit the stage, ceding the limelight to the guy with his name on the business. Someone hands me a drink and I clutch it, swallowing as I watch Tim Stag ask Nicole to stick around for additional recognition for her vision and leadership.

“You know,” Tim says, draping an arm around her shoulders. “My big idea was to bring you all here to talk about landslides. Obviously I'm not the visionary around here. Let's put our hands together for Cruz Wear. Are these shoes comfortable or what?” Tim holds up a foot and Nicole laughs. The staff are all wearing black and gold high tops with a C across the toe. Cruz, I guess.

Augusto takes the mic and starts introducing the board of directors for the foundation and I take a deep breath. This is my moment. Either I swoop in and win back Nicole, or I should leave now and never darken her door again.

The decision is made for me, though, because I watch her notice me standing there. Her head snaps my direction and her eyes flare. She stalks toward me, and I have the hugest grin on

my face because I'm so happy to see her, even if she looks mad as hell.

"What the hell are you doing here," she hiss-whispers.

"I missed you," I tell her, truthfully. "I came to grovel."

"Yes, but how in the fuck did you get in? This is an invitation-only event for wealthy people." She crosses her arms and taps the toe of one sneaker-clad foot. I notice that her calf muscles are looking tight. I smile wider, proud of her for working so hard on her running.

Realizing she expects an answer, I cough. "Mark basically sent me," I say. "He and Valerie conspired."

She rolls her eyes so hard I worry she will get vertigo. "Those fucking assholes," she mutters, tossing her curls over one shoulder so she can see me better to glare at me. "Well." And I'm worried she's going to call security. Get them to toss me out. But she raises a brow. "You said there'd be groveling?"

I look over my shoulders. "Can we maybe go somewhere? To talk?"

"Nope." She puts her hands on her hips. "Grovel."

"You were so incredible up there," I tell her. I reach for her hand, wanting to touch her. Needing to feel connected to her. She shakes her head. I sigh. "I loved watching you in your element, watching your boss acknowledge how brilliant you are," I tell her. She tilts her head, expectantly. I sigh again. "I'm so fucking sorry, Nicole. I know I don't deserve for you to hear me groveling. I push people away," I tell her. "But you

do, too. Because we've both been shit on by people who are supposed to love us and, well, I lost my temper in Paraguay."

I watch her demeanor shift a little. Just the slightest hint that she's on board with what I'm saying, so I push on. "That entire trip was the culmination of a lifetime of me not standing up to my father, of me not standing up for my ideas, whether that's at work or in my personal life." I reach for her hand again, drawn to her, and this time she lets me. When my fingers touch the soft, smooth skin of her wrist, I feel strength radiating through me. Just being near her, I feel more whole. I plow ahead.

"I had a huge fight with my dad that next day, Nicole, and I came out of it in a totally new direction at work, in a totally new place. And as hard as it was to have that discussion with him, it feels one thousand times harder to open up to you and let you know how I feel."

"And how exactly do you feel, Isaac?" Her voice is softer now, though. Less irate.

"Well, I'm crazy about you. I think about you as I'm falling asleep at night. I find myself thinking of annoying things to text you and imagining what your face would look like if I did. And then I remember that I fucked everything up with you and I just have to add the witty texts to my note file."

"You have a note file? Of jokes?" She's trying not to smile, biting her bottom lip, leaving delicious indentations in the plump skin and driving me mad with want.

"I have a file of jokes I want to share with *you*," I clarify. I reach my other hand for her waist and pull her close. She lets

me, and I feel like I exhale fully for the first time since I left her hotel room. “I don’t know how to be a boyfriend. And I don’t know how to open up to people, but I want to try with you, Nicole. And I swear to everything holy, I will never walk away from a fight like that again.” I meet her eye to find hers shining and wet, like she’s welling up with tears maybe.

“Oh, Nik, don’t cry. Not for me. I can’t bear to know I’m hurting you again.”

She shakes her head. “I’m not hurt this time, you asshole. I’m happy.”

“Oh. Well, good,” I say. I let my fingers dance up and down her arms, not wanting to lose this physical connection I’ve craved so deeply for so long. “How am I doing with the groveling?”

“I give it a six,” she says.

Smart ass, I think, grinning. “On what scale?”

“One to eight,” she says, resting her head on my shoulder.

“I can work with that,” I tell her, winding my fingers through her hair and tugging her head back. Before she can say anything else, I lean in to kiss her, deeply and slowly. I use my mouth to tell her all the things I still can’t figure out how to put into words. I let my body communicate to her how deeply I’ve missed her, how badly I need her. How much I want her to give me another chance.

“Be with me,” I whisper into her mouth, a plea and a promise.

“I’ll think about it,” she says, and then she grabs me by both cheeks and pulls me back in for another kiss.

CHAPTER 38

ZACK

“BABE, YOU NEED TO STAND STILL,” I tell her as she wriggles with impatience. We’re standing in our hotel room in Delaware, getting ready to walk over to the start line of the half marathon along the beach.

“It’s hard to stand still when my boyfriend is about to stab me with fucking safety pins,” she growls, wriggling again and snatching them from my hand. “I’ll do it myself.”

“Suit yourself,” I say, shaking my head and getting to work pinning my own race bib over my Pittsburgh Marathon Relay shirt. I assured Nicole that it’s a newbie move to wear the shirt for the actual race while competing in that race.

She wanted us to wear our matching Pittsburgh shirts, which I told her was totally fine since we ran that race last month. Beltane smoked Stag Law, of course. All of us are marathoners. Nicole might like running now, but she’s not Usain Bolt. I kept pace with her through most of our portion of the event until she started yelling at me for being anticompetitive and not sticking with the pace she knew I was capable of.

I'm glad I was at the relay exchange ahead of her, after all, because I got to see her face when she charged into the check point to slap hands with Tim. She was so god damned proud of herself, and I was proud of her, too. She wore that race medal afterward and wouldn't even take it off for sex. It kept slapping me in the face as she rode me in her bedroom later that afternoon.

"What are you grinning about," she huffs around a mouthful of pins.

"Just remembering how you tried to give me a concussion with your race medal after the relay," I tell her, taking one of the pins from her and carefully pinning down the last corner of her race number.

"Oh," she says, and then smiles. "I'll probably do that today, too."

"Maybe our medals can clink together while I fuck you in the shower," I tell her, pulling her in for a kiss. I smack her ass and reach for my ball cap on the table. "Come on. We have to get to the start."

Nicole squeezes my hand as she walks beside me. I rub her wrist with my thumb and assure her this is going to be great.

"I've never run more than ten miles," she tells me, her voice quiet as we make our way through the throngs of people.

"Ten is the typical big training run before a half marathon," I assure her. "You've trained your ass off, Nicole. Why would this make you nervous, but you can stand on a

stage and ask a room full of billionaires to part with their moldy money?”

She shrugs. “It just never occurred to me that I couldn’t convince the billionaires to part with their money.”

I pause and turn, putting my hands on her shoulders and leaning my forehead against hers. “Nicole Kennedy, there is nothing you cannot do,” I tell her. “Except beat my brother Liam at Scrabble. We have established that you are terrible at that.”

She swats at my shoulder. “Dickface.”

“I’m going to put my dick in your face in a few hours.”

I tease and poke at her until the start gun, and then she’s all business. She doesn’t chat for the first few miles as we run along the boardwalk. The course wends its way into the state park and, once we grab a sports drink at the six mile mark, she finally says, “I feel great.”

“You look great,” I tell her, grinning.

“You’re not bored senseless running with me? This slow?”

“Nicole, we’re not going that slow. And I’m not here to compete against you this time.”

“Well, what are you here for, then?”

Easy question. “I’m here to look at your ass in spandex.” That gets a laugh from her and in what feels like no time, my girlfriend is shrieking in delight as she crosses the finish line for her first half marathon.

“We are so doing that again,” she says, cramming a banana into her mouth at the finish line. “That was amazing.”

“Next we do the full distance,” I tell her. And before I can catch myself, I say, “If you’re going to join the Brady family, you’re going to need to work up to the full.”

Her face doesn’t crumple when I say that. She doesn’t slap me or kick me in the shin. She takes a long swig of water and wipes her mouth with her wrist. “Sounds like a good long-term goal,” she says, and stretches up on her tip-toes to plant a kiss on my cheek. “You taste salty,” she says.

“So do you,” I counter, and I lick her forehead, immediately regretting it when I get a mouth full of sunscreen.

Nicole laughs, though, and takes my hand in hers. “Let’s go and shower with our medals on,” she tells me, practically skipping back to the hotel. “Does this get old? This feeling when you finish a race?”

I shake my head. It doesn’t. But that’s not entirely why I feel as giddy as she does today. “Seeing you reach this goal feels amazing, Nicole,” I tell her, a wash of emotion charging through me as the adrenaline from the race subsides.

“Aw, Zacky,” she teases, using my father’s nickname for me as she walks backward, grinning. “Glad to help you feel good.”

But she does make me feel good. Every day I’m lucky enough to spend with her, I feel good. I feel like my same self, but somehow more. I realized that sparring with her electrifies me. Running with her brings new life to the sport I’ve

competed in for as long as I have memories. Taking Nicole to breakfast in the mornings with my family, and watching them give each other shit like long-lost siblings makes me feel more content than I ever felt possible.

“I love you,” I blurt out to her, realizing the truth of that statement with a fierce conviction. I bend down to scoop her into my arms and kiss her, spinning around on the sidewalk as people point and cheer.

Nicole, catching her breath, looks into my eyes for a long beat before she says, “I love you, too, Isaac.”

And then, smiling, sweaty, satiated, we rush back into our hotel room and seal our confession with our bodies. We join together, fierce and slick and fast, and I chant, “I love you,” as I drive into her, wanting her cells to hear the words, to know the truth of them.

After, she curls against me like a comma, tapping her race medal against mine. “I’d say you deserve a medal for that performance, but you’re already wearing one,” she teases. I smile, pulling at one of her curls and watching it spring back. “I want to frame these,” she says then, her face serious as she looks up into my eyes. “I never want to forget the day I achieved this fantastic thing.”

“Babe, I always knew you could do this,” I tell her. But she places a finger over my lips and shakes her head.

“Not the race,” she says. “No, Isaac Brady, today I swallowed my fear and told a man I love him.”

“Who is this man? Do I need to have him killed?” I kiss the finger she puts over my lips again.

She closes her eyes. “Nicole?”

“Hm?”

“I’m not ever going to let you forget who said it first.”

EPILOGUE: NICOLE

A WHILE LATER...

“CAN YOU REPEAT THAT?” Isaac looks at me like I’m bananas, which might be true. I waited until I sucked him off to break the news to him, so he was all calm and post-orgasmic and more likely to listen to me without arguing.

“I need you to move out of your house,” I tell him. “Mine is better, anyway, and I’m sick of you not being around on the daily.”

He closes his eyes and grins. He thinks I’m just being romantic. I sigh. “Seriously, Isaac, I need your house.”

“You need my house?” Isaac cracks one eye open and looks at me, puzzled. “Like, for storage?”

I sigh. This is going to be harder than I thought. Normally, Isaac and I get away with not sharing deep feelings too often. Like once a week we each squeak out something deep and then we fuck after until it feels safe to look at each other again.

I swear I’d been meaning to bring up the idea of us living together. This external crisis just sort of exacerbated the issue. “So,” I say, trailing a fingernail down his chest and loving watching the goosebumps rise on the flat skin of his stomach as I do. “You know my friend Maddie...”

He nods. “That feels good.” I twist my wrist so all four of my fingers are tickling his stomach skin. He groans.

“Well, Maddie needs a place to stay sort of urgently. And I want you to give her your house.”

His groan changes tone and he rolls onto one side, propping his head up on his hand. “I need to talk to you about that, then.”

“What?” He looks serious and grabs my hand, kissing the fingers that had just been tickling his skin.

“Well, you’ve been hinting about moving in together lately.” He looks at me like he’s stalling.

“Out with it, Brady. What did you do?”

He closes his eyes and spits his words out rapidly. “I put my house on the market and got an offer right away and accepted it and I close in a few weeks.”

I sit up, crossing my hands over my chest. “Well, that’s fucking amazing for us. We’re going to fucking live together and it’s going to be amazing.”

“Why does it look like you’re pissed off, then?” He raises one brow.

I roll my eyes. “Because of Maddie, asshole. We need to help her.”

He wraps his long arms around me and I curl my head against his shoulder. He feels safe, like always. Solid. Terrifying. Exhilarating. “Let me think about it. My dad owns a bunch of rental properties,” he murmurs. “Let’s try, like,

telling each other about these big things and brainstorming together.”

I shake my head against his skin. “That sounds like a terrible idea.”

“Just awful,” he says, biting my ear lobe. I feel him getting hard again, his length rising up against my side as he cradles me in his lap. “This is going to be our bed,” he says. I nod. “I want to fuck you in it.”

“Yes, please,” I tell him, trying to wriggle out of his arms. He pulls them tighter around me, holding me still and using his nose to nudge my face up toward his. He plants a kiss on my lips and we just sit there for what feels like an eternity, kissing and holding each other. I feel vulnerable this way, but also supported.

Neither of us has a strong foundation in healthy relationships or communication. Neither of us is good at emotions. But ever since we took the leap and committed to sticking by each other, we’ve been learning. Together. And my god, there are benefits to learning to love with Isaac Brady.

He slowly lowers me back toward the sheets, his lips dancing kisses down my skin, his hands skating toward my thighs, where I’m slick with need. “I owe you some pleasure,” he growls, “after you blew my mind just now.”

Feeling good is new to me. But I’m getting used to it. Every day with Isaac is a new opportunity to figure out what I want, what I need, and to plan out how I’ll get there. He’s always supportive, offering snarky comments for the good

ideas and serious-yet-constructive responses when I suggest something harebrained.

I settle back on the sheets, my hands tracing his ears, his hair as he crawls down my body. “That blowie was just to lull you into agreeing to give up your house,” I tell him. I suck in a breath as his lips press against my clit and he starts working his fingers inside me. “But that backfired.”

“Poor Nicole,” he whispers, lapping at me with his tongue. “Always thinking of others, always getting shafted.”

He licks and sucks while his fingers pump in and out of me, my hips jerking up to meet him. “I want to get shafted, Isaac,” I yell, tugging at his hair. “Right now, please.”

He pulls back from me with a grin on his face. “Whatever you say, boss,” he says, and buries himself inside me in a single thrust that sends my eyes rolling back in my head.

“Oh god, yes, Isaac. Yes.” He drives into me, the angle of his pelvis providing the perfect friction I need. After his tongue primed me for liftoff, it takes only a few thrusts before I’m tumbling over the edge. “I love you I love you I love you,” I shriek, coming hard around his cock. I feel my muscles pulsing around him.

He meets my eyes, breathing heavy, and pants, “I get so turned on watching you come, babe. Fuck, you feel so good.”

“You, too, Isaac,” I moan. “Come with me,” I plead. And he does. His eyes boring into mine, I feel his body stiffen as he chases his own pleasure and tumbles over the edge with me. Together.

The Brady Family story continues with Liam and Maddie's book, [Suspension: An Opposites Attract Romance](#).

“engaging, emotionally deep, witty, heart-tugging, with phenomenal character growth, and is guaranteed to pull you in from the first page.”

[One-click Maddie and Liam's book now!](#)

Want to read a bonus epilogue where Isaac builds Nicole a backyard pool?

[Click here for the steam!](#)

THE NERD AND THE
NEIGHBOR

CHAPTER 1

HUNTER

INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION

I SHOULD FEEL EXCITED TODAY. I know this. I'll be going back home, where I can piss with ease and eat food that tastes and feels like food. Hell, I can sleep without being tethered to the wall. But all I can focus on is my unfinished work. I'm so close to finding answers. If I had another 6 months I think I could change everything...but I failed to find the answers in the time allotted.

I only get six months up here. I have to just trust the science and believe whoever they're sending to replace me will do the work. Trust is not my strong suit. Neither is handing off my work to another scientist.

Digger floats by as I'm packing up my belongings. I don't have much. Just some plant samples I want to bring back in the capsule. He asks, "What are you gonna eat first, Crawdad?"

"You know I hate being called that," I tell him, ignoring the question. I definitely will not miss being forced into repeated social interactions with this same group of people. At least everyone up here has a firm grasp of the scientific method and an interest in math. Digger—everyone has a

stupid nickname, too—glares at me, though, so I appease him. He's got three months remaining, after all.

“Strawberries,” I tell him. “Maybe a pineapple, if they can find one.” Digger's mouth waters as he helps me and one of the Russian scientists get situated inside the capsule that will take us home. The two of us will be crammed in there for hours until we touch down on the ground. The actual ground! It's funny. Our float back to Earth will take less time than my eventual plane ride back to Texas. A little over three hours to drift from the International Space Station back to the life I'm supposed to feel excited to re-embrace.

The truth is, I have no idea where the Space Agency will send me next. My research, at this point, belongs to them, and so I belong to them. The thought makes me uneasy, but who else has the right resources to support tissue research in a zero-gravity environment?

The Russian and I are silent as we plummet downward, anticipating the first impact. I've done this before. I don't think he has, though. My siblings would probably talk to him and offer comfort. I can't bring myself to do it. I'm waiting for the hit.

The first parachute opens and it's like a car crash. I feel my bones shake in their sockets, and I embrace it because it's the first time I've sensed gravity in half a year. Each time, I forget. I forget what it's like to feel the weight of my frame, to feel my blood moving inside my veins.

The soft landing jets ignite just before we crash into the steppe of Kazakstan. Only then does it occur to me that I

haven't heard from my wife. My mother emailed repeatedly, wanting up-to-the-minute information. My wife should have reached out, right? Should I have contacted her? We only get to use the satellite phone once a week, but we have unlimited access to our email. All my brothers and my sister sent good luck messages, and all of them made some dumb joke about how I don't believe in luck. Heather should have at least emailed. The realization that I can't remember the last time I communicated with my wife washes over me like an uncomfortable haze. I can feel the weight of that, too.

This is my second mission since we were married. That would take a toll on any marriage. All the separation. She's likely having a difficult time. I should miss her, probably. The way I miss fresh fruit and sunshine. Don't people miss their spouse when they're separated?

The capsule skids to a halt and someone opens the lid. Smells wash over me. I forgot that, too. I haven't smelled anything or felt the earth beneath me. Haven't felt heat like this. Seen daylight bathing the earth. We're immobile in our landing suits, so we have to be extracted from the capsule like babies being pulled from a car seat. I tolerate this because I know as soon as they set me down, they're going to hand me a plate of fruit and the satellite phone.

My mother tried to pull strings to be here at the landing site, but the best she could do was book a room in the village nearby. Very few people say no to Rose Mitchell, and I can envision the argument with the director of the space program. I try to laugh out loud at that image, but my mouth feels like it's stuffed with cotton. I realize I'm parched.

The thirst is immense and I can feel my lips cracking in the sun while I wait for someone to unfasten my suit and let me use my hands again. I'm aware of the media, cameras in my face, reporters firing questions at me and the Russian guy. I start to panic, actually, even though I know this isn't rational. I know all my bodily systems are being monitored. Nobody would let anything happen to me. My mind seems disconnected from my central nervous system, though, and the panicked thoughts begin to rush over me. I think again about Heather, wondering why she wouldn't reach out when her husband was floating through the universe in a damn tin can.

I'm on the verge of blackness when I'm handed the phone. I see myself reach out to accept it, as if from far away, and I bring the phone to my ear. I hear it ring. Again. Again. Then my wife's voice comes over the voicemail. *This is strange*, I think, as I drift out of consciousness. *She should answer*.

When I open my eyes, I'm surrounded by bright, white light, and then I see the form of my mother. My senses seem to re-engage one at a time. I smell disinfectant and saline fluid, a slight tinge of bleach. I take stock of my body and realize I'm lying down in a bed, hospital sheets scratching my bare skin. The light weight of the sheets against my limbs...I smile as I notice the feeling of it all. Then comes my sense of hearing, and Rose Mitchell is giving someone a lecture. "How you could allow my son to become dehydrated is well beyond me," she snarls. "You haven't figured out a better methodology for

transporting these heroes back to Earth? They're up there for months doing research in the name of our nation and you drop them like an egg in a shoe box. Plop! Back to the ground. No water. You should be ashamed."

"Ma," I croak. It's good to see her. I don't make it home to Oak Creek often, even when I'm on this planet.

"Oh *there* you are, Hunter. Sweetheart, shouldn't you be advising your colleagues about dehydration? You have heat stroke, Hunter Crawford. How on *earth* does someone contract heat stroke when they're being so closely monitored? When did you last have a drink of water?"

I gesture toward the IV in my arm. "Ma," I try again. "Where's Heather?"

She sighs. "Oh, sweetheart."

I really am the only one to blame for this. I know that. I don't communicate well. This has always been a challenge for me—expressing my feelings. Thinking about Heather's feelings. When she's not yelling at me, she's often explaining that I don't value her. Which isn't true, but I understand that what she means is I do not make *her* feel that she's a priority for me.

I look around our empty condo. She took everything except my equipment and my clothes. All the furniture. The toothpaste. She left a note taped to my microscope telling me her lawyer would reach out with paperwork. I assess the moments leading up to my arrival back in Houston. The media

is camped outside my building, frothing at the mouth to get the scoop on the scorned astronaut.

I can ignore them with ease. I just walk past them. That first day home, alone, I opened the door and my primary concern was for my frozen plant samples, followed by concern for my microscope. I really didn't feel very strongly about the absence of my wife.

Heather is right. She is not a priority to me. She was... comfortable. Marrying her made sense. Or it did at the time.

Had I ever made real space for her? We met when I was in graduate school the first time. Heather dictated all the terms of our relationship, told me when to show up for dinner, how to dress for the occasion. I thrived under that treatment. No fuss. No work for me to do outside my research. Once we moved in together, she did the shopping and planned our free time together. I liked that, too. She made things very simple for me. I see it now.

I hear my phone ring and stoop to pick it up from the hardwood floor. "This is Hunter Crawford."

The low, rumbling voice of my supervisor comes through the line, inquiring about my health, making the type of small talk we both detest. I'm seconds away from curtly asking him what he wants, when he sighs and says, "Crawford, they cut your funding."

"Excuse me?"

"The agency no longer wants to prioritize the study of microgravity on human tissues."

“Burt, that’s irresponsible. What the hell are you talking about?”

I hear him telling me there’s no further funding for studying the ways human bodies change during space flight. I know he’s talking about administration cuts, and I’m aware of him suggesting I might find a position in academia. Academia! We both know I’m not meant to teach.

But as he’s talking, I don’t think. I climb into my car and drive to the research lab even as I’m hanging up with Burt. As if I’m watching a movie, I see myself kick open the door to the building and stomp past the receptionist.

I watch myself pound my fist on the director’s door and I note the concerned look in his eyes as I barge in and demand that he reinstate my program. This work I do is vital to the future of the space program. “You have all insisted that space exploration is the key to the survival of our species, Alan!”

There’s an edge to my voice I’m not familiar with. I can tell I sound unstable. This is unlike me. “How can you send astronauts past the stratosphere without researching what it will do to their bodies??”

“Hunter, I’d hoped you and Burt could discuss this calmly. I know you’re newly back and you’re still a little jet-lagged.”

“Jet lag? Are you fucking kidding me? You’re closing my research program! What about the fucking tissue samples I left in the Space Station? This is decades of my life, Alan! I want my work.”

I don't register what he says to me next. I think about my empty apartment, my absent wife. I think about the carefully arranged notes I left by the slides, the tissue chips I built to mimic the functions of various organs. All I have ever wanted is to understand the way cells function, to unlock the secrets of life.

Of all life.

Like a fiend, I have pursued this research since I was a teenager, begging to assist in the labs at the college where my mother now serves as president.

Alan places a hand on my shoulder and tries to nudge me toward the door. I look down at his hand on my body, and I watch myself grab his arm, twisting and clenching. I see the fear in his eyes as I squeeze his bones together. My life flashes before me until I'm a kid again, wrestling with my brothers by the creek.

I was always smaller, even if I was the oldest, so I had to understand physics and leverage. Like a frantic child, I snarl as I wrench Alan's arm from my shoulder and shove him away from me until he stumbles into the wall.

Panting, my chest heaving, I look up to see security officers shouting into their radios as they flock in to haul me off the property.

CHAPTER 2

ABIGAIL

GREENFIELD, OHIO

AS I PULL into my driveway, I realize I'm dreading going inside. *That's not good*, I think. Things have definitely been... stagnant. I sigh and look down at my polo and khakis. Working at my dad's construction firm was never part of my plan. Not that I had a plan exactly, but Baker and Sons just isn't a destination for me. This was supposed to be a part-time job while I finished school.

I look at Jack's truck in the driveway. I can tell he hasn't moved it from yesterday, which means he's been home the whole time. Again. Layoffs happen to everyone. He's taken it so personally, retreating deeper and deeper inside himself the longer he goes without work.

As I go through the mental checklist of "get a job" items I think he should do, I realize Jack is most of the reason I'm biting my lip right now, lingering in the driveway. Things just haven't been good. He wasn't supposed to be a destination, either, I remind myself.

Jack was someone I dated in school. Then I just never got around to breaking up with him, I guess. I moved into the house he bought, and gradually took on more of the roles he

thought I should, and more of myself slipped away each passing month.

I exhale and grab my lunch bag, steeling myself to go inside. The hinges on the side door squeak as I nudge it open with my hip, juggling my lunch bag and the mail. “Hey, Babe,” I call out. The air smells stale in here. Jack grunts from the couch. He’s watching one of those judge shows on tv, and starts berating the defendant. “Babe, I don’t want to hear about those people’s bad choices, if that’s ok, it’s been a long—”

“Well *excuse* me,” he sneers. “So sorry if my ‘low brow’ entertainment offends you.” He throws an empty soda can across the room. I cringe, thinking about the splatters of sticky liquid that will surely dribble onto the carpet. We’re going to get ants.

He stomps past me into the bedroom and slams the door. I sigh and stoop to clean up the soda, absent-mindedly scrubbing the rug.

This would actually be a great scene, I think. Late at night, once Jack is asleep—passed out if I’m honest—I’ve been trying something new. Something I always wanted to do. I started writing a novel.

I get a thrill just thinking about it, saved inside my laptop in a locked folder.

I know I shouldn’t feel the need to password protect something on my own laptop in the house where I’m supposed to live as an equal. But things with Jack have been so strained. He’s not the same person he was three months ago. He was fine as a boyfriend. Attentive, kind, generous. I think getting

laid off triggered a depression in him, shook his sense of himself as a man.

And I'm just not ready to share this fiction whim with him yet.

I've been carrying the mortgage, but I don't mind. He wasn't asking me for any rent or anything before. I've been living here basically free for a year. Sure, I chipped in for groceries when he lets me whip my card out first, but I think Jack liked supporting me. I glance toward the bedroom, where I hear him moving around, making noises. Angry.

My stomach growls, and I feel a sense of sadness that I turned down a dinner invite with my family. Again. One of these days, I ought to just go over there without Jack and enjoy myself. Lately, he's said no to my dad's "charity" every time they invite us over for supper, like they've done once a week since I moved out. I see my dad and brothers every day at the office, but I haven't seen my mother in weeks. I miss talking to her in person.

I fire off a quick text to her, saying I am sorry again for missing tonight. *Jack is feeling really down*, I write, wondering if she can read between the lines. Probably not. My mom seems pretty set in her belief that I need to settle down with a "good man who can take care of us."

As I slide the phone back in my pocket, I shriek because the bedroom door flies open abruptly.

"Abby! What the fuck is this?" Jack has my laptop in one hand. His eyes are wild, angry.

“You scared me,” I tell him, bringing my hand to my chest. I’m still squatting on the carpet where I’d been cleaning up the spilled soda. I start to rise to my feet, but Jack stomps over to me.

I actually feel afraid, and I don’t like it. This isn’t ok.

I shouldn’t feel afraid in my house, of the man who is supposed to love me.

“You have locked files on here? What? Are you keeping shit from me? In my own house?” Small flecks of spit fly from his mouth as he screams in my face, and I know that I have to leave this house.

Immediately.

I scan the room, noting my keys on the peg by the side door. But Jack is standing in my face, his chest heaving.

“You need to calm down, Jack. This isn’t ok.”

“Calm down? Fuck you, Abigail! Calm down?” And then he shoves me backwards—places a hand on my shoulder and pushes with all the strength of his six-foot frame. I stumble back a few steps before catching my balance.

I’m so startled that he touched me in anger that I can’t think of what to say or do. I bite my lower lip and try to walk past him, toward my keys. I yelp as a searing pain rips through my head. Jack has hold of my ear, painfully twisting my head and pulling me across the room to the couch.

“Unlock it,” he whisper-yells, still holding my ear. “Open the folder. I want to see what you’re fucking typing about me in there.”

“Jack, you’re hurting me!”

“Open the mother fucking folder!”

I start to cry as he tugs my head over toward the laptop now propped on his knee. I can’t explain why I don’t just do as he says and show him the contents of the folder, but for some reason I just do not want him to see my novel. It feels private. Sacred.

My secret is mine. Whatever the cost.

Jack snarls again and releases my ear, shoving me back against the couch. He meets my eye, and I see that any resemblance to the pleasant young man I met is gone.

All that remains is clouded in anger.

Hot fury twists his face until I barely recognize him. Jack cracks the laptop screen backwards over his knee, the metal grinding and splintering. I scream as the screen shatters. He throws the useless computer across the room.

A sense of calm washes over me then, as I rise from the couch. Wordlessly, I stoop to pick up my broken laptop. Without a glance back, I walk toward the door, snag my keys, and start to drive.

A few minutes later, the adrenaline leaves me and I notice my head is throbbing. I assess my ear at a stoplight. I don’t think I need medical care. Just some ice and sleep somewhere safe. I

consider driving to my parents' house, but the thought of explaining all this feels like too much. I just keep driving.

Soon, I cross from Ohio into Pennsylvania, and I pull off the highway near Pittsburgh. One of the chain hotels boasts free dinner on Tuesdays, and a hot tub, which both sound perfect until I realize I'll have to sit in public with my swollen ear and I didn't pack any clothes, let alone a bathing suit.

I chew my lip again and look around the parking lot, spotting a drive through fast food chain. Five minutes later, I'm checked into a room with a bag of greasy fries and a milk shake. I press a baggie of ice against my head with one hand and dial my father's office phone.

I don't want to disappear without a trace, but I also can't stand the thought of talking to my family tonight. Dad's voicemail message begins, his singsong voice announcing "Baker and Sons Construction—finest work in Greenwood. Leave a message and one of the Bakers will call you back. You have my word about that!"

"Dad, it's Abby," I say, my voice wavering more than I intended. "I'm sorry for the short notice, but I won't be in the office tomorrow. Or the rest of this week, actually. I need to get away for awhile. Nothing's wrong. I don't want you and Mom to worry." I sigh. Of course they'll worry. "I just needed a change of scenery. Sorry again."

A few minutes later, I toss my empty cup in the trash by my bed and snap off the light. I drift off into a dreamless, exhausted sleep, not knowing what the future holds.

CHAPTER 3

HUNTER

I STARE out the window of my brother Archer's truck, watching the scenery blur past. My car, along with the meager pile of my other possessions, is in a shipping container en route to Oak Creek. Part of the discharge package from the Space Agency.

That's what they're calling it, anyway. Despite news of my breakdown leaking all over the place, the official word is that I resigned after my mission.

They didn't even have the balls to go public with the information that the research program is being canceled. I assessed the financials, and I still don't have enough to move forward with my tissue research on my own, not even with my severance.

And so, with no wife, no furniture, and no prospects, I am headed home to Oak Creek. I know I've been the main focus of the gossip mill there, but I never can find it in me to care about those things. Heather indicated my aloofness was part of the problem. I don't care enough about anything when it comes to other people, apparently.

I didn't call my brother to come fetch me. I'm pretty sure my mother sent him. He showed up as the movers were packing my lab equipment and told me to get in the truck, and so here I am.

We cross into Kentucky and Archer starts singing along with the country music on the radio.

"I hate this type of music," I state without looking at him.

"Tough shit, Hunter," Archer says during an instrumental lick. "You find a place to stay yet?"

I shake my head. I thought I'd stay at our parents' house, which seems a fitting place for a man whose wife left and career exploded.

Archer taps out the rhythm on the steering wheel and says, "I know you haven't been home in awhile. Dad turned each of our rooms into a different sort of theme. That's what he calls it. They bring in international students to stay in, like, The Meadow Room and The Observatory Room. It's like fucking Clue with kids from Thailand and Saudi Arabia sitting down for tea with Dad."

I grunt noncommittally. He grins. "Wanna crash at my place?"

I shrug. "I can buy someplace as soon as that can be arranged." At the next rest stop, Archer pulls out his phone and makes a call while I'm ordering our lunch. He tells me he found out about a duplex for sale right in town and will get me set up with a realtor. My kid brother is the only accountant in Oak Creek. He knows everyone, knows their business, and

manages to remember every single birthday of every Oak Creek resident.

Mom likes to joke that he got all my social skills that I left behind in her womb. I can barely manage to figure out when people are joking.

Today I feel even less like working on it, and Archer shakes his head as I reserve our hotel room using single syllables.

It feels good to drive a car on the vast expanse of highway after spending so long cooped up in a tube with no gravity. Even if I hate the lack of fuel economy in my brother's beast of a truck, I appreciate the feel of my body in the deep leather seats. He props his feet on the dash while I take my turn, navigating toward eastern Pennsylvania on instinct. Archer looks at me for a long time before saying, "Jesus, Hunter. I've been waiting for you to say something."

I shrug without taking my eyes off the road. "Should have let me know, then. What were you hoping I'd say?"

"I don't know, man. Small talk! Fuck, dude, what must it have been like for those other space nerds to be up there with you for six whole months."

"It was fruitful in terms of research outcomes," I say, then I grit my teeth. "Though not as fruitful as I would have liked."

He laughs at me. "You going to take Ma up on the job offer?"

I see the exit for our next highway and put on my turn signal, ignoring my brother. Teaching undergraduate biology at Oak Creek College sounds less attractive than bankruptcy. Even if my mother calls me a Distinguished Guest Professor, it still feels very much like what it is: a charity offer for a man who has been blackballed throughout the bioresearch community.

Archer continues to stare at me, and I figure out that he's still waiting for a response.

“I told her I'd try for a semester,” I say, accelerating onto four-lane road toward home. “Just until I finish a proposal for investors.”

CHAPTER 4

ABIGAIL

IN THE MORNING, the side of my head still throbs, and a wave of emotion threatens to keep me in the uncomfortable, unfamiliar bed. I feel a rush of guilt at leaving my father and co-workers while I figure out whatever the hell it is I'm doing. I feel anger at Jack for betraying my trust. Most of all, I feel anger at myself for staying with him long enough for things to get so bad.

I should have noticed things weren't ok when he stopped wanting me to go see my parents. As my body and mind wake fully, a thousand memories rush through my mind until my entire relationship feels like a series of mistakes I made. I don't even know how to see what's healthy, apparently, until things get dangerous.

I decide to go to the free breakfast downstairs, and I pass a Business Center where nobody is using the ancient desktop computer or printer. While I wait for my waffle batter to cook in the griddle, I weigh my options. If I head back to Greenwood, I could maybe stay with my parents, but I'd have to tell them everything. Then they'd want to know why this is

the first they're hearing about Jack sinking deeper into depression the longer he was unemployed.

Unless I went back right now, they might not even believe me that he laid his hands on me last night. He always put on such a big show of trying to impress my dad.

If they did believe me, I can also imagine my parents scolding me for staying with a loser who was out of work for so long. I sigh. My father viewed Jack as another son, since the moment I first brought him home. As soon as I started dating an HVAC guy, my contractor dad stopped asking me about school. They all stopped asking about my studies. Everything became about my boyfriend and whether he was doing well.

I had great grades in high school and kept a 4.0 all through community college. My parents didn't even know I managed to get a minor in professional communication as I completed my degree in business at a branch campus of the state university.

Slathering my waffle with as much syrup as I'd like, nobody to tell me I'm being wasteful, I try to remember what made me say yes to the quiet man finishing his HVAC certification in the same building as I took my first creative writing class.

I think, at the time, I was flattered to be noticed. Jack came up to me in the commons, where I was engrossed in my writing. He said I looked beautiful then, inspired. By the time I noticed that my family liked Jack more than I did, we were already planning to move in together.

That first semester when we got together, we'd go for long walks, and I'd talk to Jack about what I was writing. He didn't tell me that was the stuff of dreams and nonsense like my pragmatic parents did. Jack listened to my stories, said he'd like to read a book like that. He kissed me and asked me to tell him all my grand ideas.

And then eventually, he stopped asking.

After I eat, I look over at the business center again. I think about the smashed laptop in the trunk of my car, and walk over to the computer. I pull up the web browser and type WRITING JOBS. I scroll through a few pages of sales jobs. I scroll right on past a few newspaper positions I don't even feel qualified to apply for. But then I see something interesting.

SPEECH WRITER AND COMMUNICATOR NEEDED!

Busy college president needs a writer ASAP to help prepare speeches, remarks, correspondence. The college is exploring new partnerships. Candidate should begin immediately. Send samples and cover letter to Oak Creek College.

There's no name listed with the posting, no contact information. *They really do need help with communication, I*

think. Oak Creek College. I think I've heard of that before—a small liberal arts school in Eastern PA. I search for it online and am charmed by the photographs. Long walkways lined with trees, old brick buildings. The town looks cute, too. I see a bunch of ads for little festivals and shops that sell everything from baked goods to tarot cards.

I chew on my bottom lip, feeling guilty. Could I walk away from my job at my dad's office? It's a good job, after all. I earn a nice wage, and he offers benefits.

But I never left Greenwood much. Not for college. Surely there are other “good jobs” out there in the world that feel more like...me.

I search the Oak Creek College website for the directory and see a phone number for the president's office. I only hesitate a moment before typing the number into my cell, and am startled when a very loud voice answers, “Hello! This is Rose!”

“Um...hi. I was calling about the writing job I saw—”

“When can you get here? Do you have experience?”

Woah. Okay. “Well, I have a minor in professional communication from the University of Ohio at—”

“That'll do. Just come in. Can you be here today? We're meeting with the computer engineers tomorrow.”

I look at the time. It's around 8am and Oak Creek is five hours' drive from here. “It will take me until 1:30 to clear my schedule,” I say.

I hear the woman sigh. “Fine. What’s your name again? My secretary is out today. Tell the desk you’re here to write remarks for Rose.” By the time I open my mouth to say thank you for the opportunity, she’s hung up the phone.

What a strange person...unless...I look around, thinking maybe someone is playing a prank. There is, of course, nobody nearby. I stand up, realizing I have nothing with me. Nothing to pack. Nothing to prepare. Nothing to wear other than these day-old khakis and my work polo from my father’s company. Talk about starting out fresh. I wince as my ear throbs when I try to tuck my hair behind my ear.

I check out of the hotel and ask where the closest clothing store is that would be open this early. I hit the highway within the hour, wearing a respectable-if-cheap suit, feeling excitement in my belly rather than dread.

CHAPTER 5

HUNTER

I'LL NEVER KNOW how Ed Hastings found out I was coming home. I'm sure my brother wouldn't tell the small-town rag editor on purpose, but the old coot probably was eavesdropping outside Arch's office when he said he was coming to pick me up.

At any rate, the ancient editor of the *Oak Creek Gazette* is waiting when we roll up to my parents' house that night. "Ed Hastings, *Oak Creek Gazette*," he says, shoving a recorder in my face as if I haven't known him since I was born. "Care to answer a few questions about your alleged fall from grace?"

"Now's not the time, Ed," my brother tells him, resting a hand on the old man's shoulder. I just grunt and walk toward my parents' house.

Undeterred, Ed shouts, "Our readers are going to want answers! Will Space Agency officials be coming to town for any alleged legal proceedings? What about your reported alimony payments to the estranged Mrs. Crawford?"

My father emerges from the house and the smile melts off his face at the sight of the reporter badgering me. "Ed, enough!" Dad doesn't shout often. The sound of him raising

his voice is as unusual to me as it is effective for Ed, who backs down the walk and disappears around the corner. Dad turns to me, a smile lighting his eyes. “Good to have you back, son.”

He shuffles us inside, where the aroma of his cooking wafts over me. It’s been ages since I’ve eaten something fresh and home cooked. All our meals in the space station were calibrated, dehydrated, and tasteless, and I haven’t been able to prepare anything since I got back. “Heather took all the cookware,” I tell him, a non sequitur that doesn’t faze him.

“Your mother told me all about it,” he says, handing me a chunk of cheese. I don’t typically like to eat dairy. Human bodies aren’t meant to digest the milk of other mammals. My research into lactose intolerance confirms this. But the sharp cheddar hits my tastebuds and I know whatever negative reaction I’ll experience is worth the cost of this.

I relax into a stool at the counter while Archer tells Dad about his latest video chat with our brother Fletcher. Fletch decided to hang out in France for awhile after filming the Tour de France. “He and Ma met up for some sort of wine tour,” Archer gushes. Nobody expects me to say much, so I don’t, settling into the platter of olives and cheeses. My sister Diana arrives and kisses my cheek.

Her physical affection catches me off guard, and I stiffen at her touch. I don’t particularly enjoy being touched, but I tolerate it from my family. Assessing my response to physical contact is on my list of research goals for someday.

“Hunter! Dude, I’m talking to you.” Diana throws an olive at me.

“Sorry. I was...I wasn’t paying attention.”

“We can tell,” she says, slugging down a gulp of white wine. “Anyway I was saying I’d love to get your input on my plant samples. When you get a chance.”

Diana runs the Houseplant Haven here in Oak Creek. Her back office is a greenhouse where she’s made it clear she conducts horticulture research, but won’t tell us the details of her experiments. I raise a brow at her, curious about this sudden invitation into her lair. “You want me to see what you’re working on?”

She shakes her head. “Nice try, bro. You’re not going into my lab. But I want to show you one plant. I have a theory about light and soil composition, and I think I read your colleague was studying something similar in the space station.”

Dad and Archer groan as Diana and I begin to discuss biology. My sister also has a PhD in biology, from Princeton, but never entered academia. She returned to Oak Creek soon after graduate school and opened the tiny shop, watering people’s philodendrons when they go on vacation and keeping her actual source of income a mystery from the rest of us.

Archer sets the table and tries to steer the conversation away from our research. “I was telling Hunter there’s no room here at the house because you and Ma are taking in stragglers,” he says as he folds napkins and places the white

china plates. I try and fail to remember the last time I ate food from a real plate with real silverware.

“I don’t mind,” I say, “although I’m hopeful the movers can park my storage pod here until I’m able to purchase the property Archer identified for me.”

Just then, my mother bursts in the door. She brings with her a flurry of energy, always a whirlwind. “I’m home, my darlings,” she says, kissing everyone once, but pulling me into her tiny body and squeezing me like a tube of toothpaste. “Mmmm, Hunter, I’m so excited you’re coming in to work with me!”

“I don’t know yet, Ma.”

She waves her hand and tosses her suit jacket on the stool. “Nonsense. You’re coming in with me tomorrow. I’m meeting with potential investors.”

Diana and I stare at one another. I blink a few times and try to gather my thoughts about this announcement. “Since when does Oak Creek attract big-name corporate partners?”

Ma launches into an overview of her outreach this past year while I’ve been in space. She’s really been drawing a lot of philanthropy into the college, and attracting students who go on to earn prestigious fellowships. One of her recent grads won a Pulitzer Prize and another earned a Field Medal. I start allowing myself to think a stint teaching with my mother won’t be so pitiful after all. Ma has that affect on people—allows them to feel excited, even if they’re determined to wallow in discontent. Ma knows how to interact with people. It makes sense they’d want to give her money.

When Dad serves the roasted chicken and risotto, I focus on the tender meat, the rich gravy, and the texture of the delicious food. The whole experience of eating overwhelms me. My mother is telling my siblings how she hired a new writer to help her prepare to meet these big potential donors, but I tune her out as I focus on the herbs and pepper exploding in my mouth. I don't feel concerned about the meeting my mother wants me to attend tomorrow.

I'm no stranger to corporate goals in funding research, and these sorts of meetings are nothing new for me after a decade of high level experiments. I savor the last grain of rice on my fork, closing my eyes to let the flavor linger on my tongue. "Garlic and sage," I mutter, identifying these earthy flavors of home.

When I open my eyes, I see the wrinkled face of Ed Hastings staring at us through my parents' kitchen window. I fly upward out of my seat, startling my sister. Ed snaps a picture with his giant camera as I stomp over toward the door.

"Hunter," my father's voice is stern. "Please don't expose yourself to additional scrutiny." He wipes his mouth with a napkin and cracks open the window. "Ed," he says, his voice calm and stern, as if he's refereeing a fight amongst his children rather than addressing an old busybody he already told to leave. "I'm going to need you to leave my property. I'll see you tomorrow at Tai Chi."

Ed scowls again and snaps another picture through the window as he disappears into the Oak Creek twilight. I can only imagine what nonsense he will print.

CHAPTER 6

ABIGAIL

MY “INTERVIEW” with Rose Mitchell is the strangest thing. She hands me a contract to sign and offers me a salary much higher than my father was paying. “Wow,” I say, whipping out a pen to sign.

“Abigail!” She scolds and I freeze. “Never accept the first offer without negotiating. Ask me for more money.”

I hesitate. I have never met a person like this before. I’m not sure what to do, but I blurt out a number that feels obscene to me. She smiles. “I’ll meet you in the middle,” she says, writing in the new number and initialling beside it. Once I sign, Rose asks me to help her draw up bullet points and ideas for how to approach her meeting the next day.

I know nothing about drug research or plants or, really, science, but I’ve certainly helped my father convince large clients to hire his firm. “You want to gain their trust,” I tell her, making a list of a few ideas. Despite the whirlwind of upheaval and travel, ideas come to me quickly. I begin to feel like this job was sitting here waiting for me, and I just needed to build up the bravery to come get it.

A few hours later, Rose looks at the clock and says she has to go. “I can fill in the details to flesh out these talking points.” She smiles. “Yes, this is going to be fantastic.” She starts sliding papers into her bag and looks at me. I’m not really sure what to do. I have nowhere to go... Rose frowns. “Where are you staying, Abigail, dear?”

I shrug, worried for a minute she will drag me home with her. She mutters something about her long-lost son coming home for dinner and says, “Sit tight. I’ll send someone to help you.” And then she rolls out of the office in a burst of excitement. I stare after her, wondering how I’ll ever learn to keep up, but feeling exhilarated at the prospect of trying.

Unsure what to do next, I wander around the office. I’ve been assigned a cubicle outside Rose’s office, with a window behind my seat. It overlooks the lawn, and I’m staring happily out at the golden afternoon light when a sing-song voice echoes through the office. “Yoo hoo!”

Hesitantly, I turn around. “I said ‘yoo hoo!’”

The voice belongs to a tiny woman with dark curls and a smile that lights her entire face. “I’m Indigo! Rose said you need me.”

I don’t even have time to answer before Indigo tells me, in one giant breath, that she runs the Oak Creek Inn, where I’ll be staying until I find a more permanent rental. “Come on, Sweetheart,” she says, dragging me by the hand. “We’ll walk over together and get you situated.”

I typically hate pet names. I cringe when men or older women call me Honey or Sugar, but Indigo seems so genuine,

like she really believes I have a sweet heart.

Apparently everyone here moves fast, skips over the guarded portion of a relationship and dives right in to sharing their true selves.

I love how Indigo describes the town as we cross under the train tracks to the Main Street that circles the library. “Isn’t it just wonderful that the library is the heart of our town?”

I nod, seeing a group of men in sweats doing Tai Chi in the amphitheater next to the library. Indigo tugs me past a tiny market and into a small park flanked by lamp posts that would feel right at home in Narnia.

“And there’s the Inn!” She coos. “Isn’t that just the perfect spot for an inn? Don’t worry.” She grabs my arm again. “We have parking out back. You don’t have to haul all your bags from the street. I don’t tell this to the overnight guests, though. Who needs more than one bag for an overnight?”

The remodeled Victorian house is painted a vibrant indigo and has solar panels clinging to each layer of the slate roof. The charming wrap around porch is lined with white rocking chairs and hanging baskets spilling with bright flowers.

“Indigo,” I hesitate, seeing how fancy this place is. “I can’t really afford—”

“Nope,” Indigo cuts me off. “Rose said your stay should be part of your relocation package to start work at the college. It’s covered, girl!”

Relocation package. It sounds too professional for me, like I skipped a few career steps or something.

We walk inside the Inn and Indigo hands me an old brass key. “Room number 8,” she tells me. “For luck, although it sounds like you’ve already got some of that!”

I follow her into the dining room and she slides a plate of muffins toward me, sitting down at the table covered with a crisp linen tablecloth. “So,” she says, biting into her muffin and talking with her mouth full. “Tell me everything about you. Rose says you’re a writer?”

A writer. As she says it, I allow myself to feel how badly I want it to be true. And maybe it is? If I just signed paperwork for a job with that in the title? I smile, sinking my teeth into the lemon poppyseed muffin. “Well,” I say, smoothing my hair so it covers my still-swollen ear. “I’m from Ohio. And I just moved here today.” We both laugh at this.

Indigo sits back in her chair and squints at me, sizing me up as if she can see right through me, and maybe she can, because she says, “Tell me about him. We can burn sage later and scrub him right out of your system. You’re safe here with me.”

I feel the muffin catch in my throat and I reach for the sweet tea Indigo pours as I cough. I’ve never really had girlfriends before. Growing up, I had my brothers and I’m sort of close with my mother, but she and I sure don’t talk about our relationships. There aren’t really any women working in Baker and Sons. I’m not used to getting to talk about this kind of stuff. I sigh. “He started out all right,” I tell her.

Indigo scoffs at this. “They all do, Sweetheart. They all do.” She twirls a wedding ring on her left hand. Seeing me

notice it, she smiles and says, “took me awhile to realize I wasn’t waiting for Prince Charming so much as *Queen Charming*.” Indigo points to a photograph on the wall, where she beams in a white dress in the arms of a woman with short, spiky hair. “My wife, Sara.”

They seem so happy in the picture. My eyes well up with tears, thinking that Jack never looked at me that way, especially not toward the end. Especially not that last night. I start to cry and Indigo shifts around the table. “Oh,” she says, “It’s ok, Abigail. We’re going to take good care of you here. You’re safe,” she asserts again. For a moment, wrapped in her warm hug, I believe it’s true.

“I don’t even know how things got to be so bad,” I tell her, tucking back my hair to show her my ear. I haven’t looked at it since I pulled into the parking spot near Rose’s office, but it had nearly returned to normal. I was hoping the fear would fade into the background as my body returned to its normal shape, but I still feel myself looking toward each of the doorways, like I’m expecting him to stomp in the room. “The further I drove away from Greenwood, the more I realized how long I’ve been holding my breath.”

Indigo holds my hand and, for an hour, I tell her everything. How I felt like my life was being written by another author, how my family meant well but let their practicality get in the way of listening to my hopes and dreams. I haven’t turned my phone on since this morning, but I’m sure I will have missed a

dozen calls from my parents, not concerned but calling instead to scold me for not showing up at the office.

When we reach a pause in conversation, Indigo stands and places her hands on her hips. “You know what you need?” I shake my head. “Underpants,” she says.

A laugh explodes from my chest, unexpectedly. She’s right, of course. I need socks and pants and work shirts. All of it.

“Come on,” she says, grabbing her purse and mine. “I’m going to buy you organic drawers from the co-op and then you tell me how much you can spend at the second hand store. We’ll get you enough clothes for your first week with Wild Rose.”

We walk back through the park and along Main Street. The Tai Chi has given way to marching band practice for the local high school students, whose drums compete with a lone bag piper standing on the hill facing into the sun.

The co-op Indigo mentioned is unlike anything I’ve seen before. We don’t have scarves made from hemp in Greenwood, Ohio, and we don’t have multiple types of kale or kombucha, either. I follow Indigo as she sizes me up, shoving a pack of Medium undies my way. “Will they feel...scratchy?” I don’t know if I’ve even touched hemp before.

“Oh! Girl, no. These will feel amazing. You’ll probably be ruined for life, even if they look like granny panties.” She sees me sniffing the shampoo and grabs a few bottles. She says she needs to restock the inn bathrooms, but I know she’s only

buying them to be nice. I vow to repay her when I get myself situated.

At the checkout, Indigo introduces me to the cashier. “Mary Pat,” she says, “This is ABIGAIL.” She emphasizes my name like I’m some sort of celebrity. Apparently, as a newcomer in a small town, I am. “She’s going to be working with Rose at the college.”

Mary Pat’s eyebrows shoot up. “Good luck to you, then,” she says as she tucks our purchases into the cloth bags Indigo pulls from her purse. “And did you hear who else will be at the college this fall?”

Indigo leans forward on her elbows. “No!” She gushes. “Tell me everything.”

Mary Pat looks around the store, where shoppers are stuffing baskets and cloth bags with vegetables I’ve never heard of and pies made from foods I never knew could form dessert. She leans in and whispers, “Hunter Crawford. His wife left him while he was in the space station, and I heard he lost his mind and got fired.”

“No! Hunter?” Indigo snorts. “His wife was a stick in the mud anyway. He’ll get over it.” Indigo hands me an avocado “fudge” sample, but doesn’t elaborate any more on who this scorned astronaut is.

As we walk back to her place carrying my new undies, I already feel right at home.

“Don’t you worry about a thing, Abi-girl,” Indigo says, wrinkling her nose at the fake fudge. “We’re going to get you

sorted out.”

CHAPTER 7

HUNTER

“NOT A BAD DAY, BROTHER.” Archer crushes a beer can in his hand and tosses it into the recycling bin across the room. His house is tidier than I expected. Growing up, his room was always a cluttered pit. It made me uncomfortable. Now, he has a housekeeper, and I can stand to be in his space without sweating. “You going to drink that?” He gestures toward my untouched IPA.

I sigh and take a sip. I don’t drink much, but I guess being back here I break a lot of my own rules. “First the dairy and now the alcohol,” I mutter, thinking about how the very first thing I want to do tomorrow is buy workout equipment for my new home.

“You sure you don’t want to camp out at your new place?” Archer laughs. He managed to arrange a short sale on a duplex while I helped Ma land funding from the computer engineering company today. Archer prattles on about how skillful he is at negotiating loans and deals, but my thoughts linger on the woman I saw in Ma’s office.

There aren’t many new people in Oak Creek. Even though I’ve been gone for years, I still feel quite certain I know almost

everyone. This woman, though. I keep circling back to the idea that I must feel intrigued by her because she's new. It's unusual to see someone new, even moreso when I've been living in a tin can in outer space for half a year.

Still. This new woman is objectively, biologically perfect. When Archer snaps his hands in front of my face to ask if I'm listening, I tell him no and go back to cataloguing her features. Wide hips and a round backside...

"Dude, Hunter, you have to either tell me what you're thinking about or else get the fuck out of my house." Archer snatches my beer from me.

"I was thinking about breasts," I tell him, not expecting him to laugh at that. "What?"

"Nothing, dude. I just didn't think you thought about that stuff. I think about breasts all the damn time." Archer scowls. "I'm really sorry about Heather, man."

"Hmph." I snatch the beer back again.

"She...not that I was looking in that way. But Heather had no breasts to speak of."

I tip the beer in his direction. "That's accurate." I take a long sip.

"So you weren't thinking about your wife, then?"

"I was not." Hm. Diana is getting good at making beer. "She wasn't something I thought much about, actually," I admit. I find myself explaining to Archer that Heather made sense. She seemed so tolerant of me in ways I hadn't experienced since moving out from my childhood home. But I

have to agree with her assessment that I was a bad spouse. And so was she. If the paperwork from her lawyer means anything, Heather *tolerated* me just long enough to cash in on an investment.

“I don’t mind paying her something,” I tell him. “Just not *that* much.” Heather’s alimony request amounts to most of everything I’ve ever earned, and she even had the gall to ask for a percentage of future patents.

My family recommended a lawyer, Sara Garrett, who helped Indigo with her divorce...and then married her afterward. My expectations aren’t high for a small-town lawyer, but Sara seems to be intelligent. “Sara has a plan,” I tell Archer. “She also found me a tenant. Said something about serendipitous timing.”

I told Sara I’d pay her whatever she wanted to take care of everything for me. Contracts and leases and legal papers. I want someone to manage all these complicated details. I just don’t ever have the headspace for that stuff, especially if I’m deep in my research. I should have hired an assistant years ago, rather than marrying Heather. It wasn’t fair of me to take advantage of her planning and organizing like that. All I ever want to do is my work.

Thinking of my research reminds me how badly I’m itching to get my lab equipment set up on campus. This, in turn, brings my thoughts back to the new woman in town.

And her biological features. Apparently I still have urges after all. I had briefly felt concerned that my libido had vanished along with Heather.

So this is a positive turn, health wise. Archer and I finish our drinks and I call it an early evening. If I get my act together quickly, I can start my day early tomorrow, set up my stuff in my new house and then spend the afternoon setting up my lab. Soon I'll have everything just how I want it.

Everything except my funding and my career.

CHAPTER 8

ABIGAIL

HELPING Rose prepare for that meeting was intoxicating. I've never gotten to do anything like that before. She included me in the conversation, too. I had no idea my voice was going to matter. At my dad's company I'm never allowed to do anything different from how it's always been done. File the invoices. Answer the phones. Lots of general office stuff I was happy enough to do, sure. But I just have always wanted to try more, try something different. And, it turns out, Rose asked lots of questions of me about my own college experience to help emphasize the importance of supporting small schools.

I never knew how badly I wanted to get to contribute to something until I got here and started doing it! Rose said the money we landed is called an endowment. I have so much to learn and I feel giddy to get learning it.

I practically skip back to the inn at the end of the day, buzzing with the promise and excitement the future holds for me. I feel called by this place. It's no accident that I stumbled upon this job while I was fleeing a flaming mess back home. I still haven't turned on my phone. I know I need to; my mom

must be worried sick to not even hear from me. At least I hope she's more worried than angry.

I stop at the co-op to pick up a snack I can share with Indigo and Sara. I met Indigo's wife at dinner last night. She's as tough as Indigo is warm, but both of them are so kind and welcoming. I feel like I've known them for months, rather than just a day. Has it only been 2 days since I left home?

"Help you find something?" Mary Pat, the cashier I met yesterday, looks up at me from the checkout a few feet away. I've been wandering the aisles daydreaming, running my fingers along the shelves of unfamiliar ingredients.

I chew on my lip and look at her, hopefully. Indigo seemed to trust her the other day, so I blurt out, "I was just looking for something nice to share with Indigo and Sara. I had a good day at work and—"

Mary Pat claps her hands. "Did Rose manage to woo those computer bastards? How many million dollars are they giving her?" She walks out from around the counter and snags a box of gluten-free crackers with flax and sea salt. Stuffing it in my arms, she drags me to the cooler and starts muttering at the cheese selection. "Ah! Here. Come on."

As we walk up to the register, Mary Pat claps another customer on the back. "Matthew!" The tall man with a blond ponytail smiles at Mary Pat as he stuffs packages of jerky in his basket. "This is Abigail! She's new. Working with Rose to woo donations at the college."

I feel like I've been dragged onto an amusement park ride, the way I'm bounced around. Matthew smiles at me, his blue

eyes looking friendly as he shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you, Abigail.” He leans in and says, “We should talk sometime. I’ve been trying to get Rose to consider solar panels on some of those south-facing buildings.”

Mary Pat clucks her tongue and starts ringing me out. “You get an address yet, honey?”

“Well, I’m still at the Inn.”

“Matthew!” She beckons him over. “Let Abigail use your member card. She’ll join up when she finds a place to live.”

As he hands me the card, he and Mary Pat banter about the changes they’d like to see—solar power at the college *and* more of the buildings around Main Street, different financial donors at the college. Alcohol for sale in town. By the time I leave with cheese and crackers, I’ve got an invitation to tour Matthew’s solar shop and a standing offer to join Mary Pat’s book club, which Matthew tells me I can’t decline or it’ll mean social death for me here in Oak Creek.

He walks with me halfway to the Inn, promising me I can help operate the crane if I come with him to install solar panels sometime. I marvel again at how quickly this town has enveloped me, like I dropped from the sky to fill a need. But really they’re offering me everything I need, too.

Indigo has left a note that she’s out running errands, so I stash the snacks in the kitchen and close the door to my room. I can’t avoid calling my parents any longer. Sinking into the bed

with a glass of water, I turn on my cell phone. Lots of voicemail and text messages. The ones from my father range from “Where on earth are you?” To “what in the hell do you think you’re doing?”

My brothers chip in similar sentiments, and my mother leaves long, rambling messages wanting to make sure I’ve thought things through, brought clean underwear, and considered the consequences of my actions.

I try to erase everything from Jack. There is no concern or regret in his messages. Only rage. He calls me “bitch” and “sneaking liar” in his texts and drunken, slurred voicemail messages. I down the rest of my water and decide to start my calls with my mother.

She picks up immediately. “Abigail! We’ve been out of our minds with worry.”

“Hey, Mom. I’m really sorry I kept my phone off...I...” I drift off.

She picks right up where I stopped, though. “What could you have been thinking? Running off like this without a word? Jack is beside himself.”

“He called you?”

“Well of course he called. He came over, actually. Then called the next day when we still hadn’t heard a word from you.”

“I left Dad a message that I had to get away,” I tell her. She spends awhile explaining how much overtime everyone has had to work, picking up my slack around the office. I don’t

mention that she could have come in to help cover. Mom has been a stay at home spouse since Dad's business got big enough for him to hire outside help. That doesn't excuse me leaving them all short handed, and I apologize for that aspect repeatedly.

"But Mom!" I interrupt her. How do I explain what's been happening with Jack? How he insisted we avoid seeing them and their "charity." He threatened all sorts of things that seemed subtle at the time, but now make my stomach turn. He'd tell me he'd hide my keys if I went to their house, or else slash my shoes with a box cutter. I kept telling myself he was just that embarrassed to be out of work, but I know I should have left long before. I know I'm lucky to get away with just a hurt ear. "Mom, I had to get away from Jack. I just..."

She sighs. "It's not fair to kick a man while he's down, sweetheart."

"This isn't that," I tell her, but she cuts me off again. What must he have told them when he went over there? Whatever it was, he got his chance to make the first impression, and my mother believes I've wronged Jack. Based on what she says, he must have been reflecting his own darkness back to my parents, but placing the blame all on me. If he hadn't been such a monster that night I left, I'd almost feel bad for him.

"When are you coming back? Jack is very anxious for you to come home," she says with a huff. In the background, I hear my father approach, his voice heated as he asks if it's me on the phone.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” I say. I curl my hands into fists, balling up the quilt on my bed as I muster the strength to just tell my family what I already know to be true. “I’d like to stay here for awhile. I need a change.”

“What?” My father roars into the phone. “Abigail Baker, you get your ass back here right now so we can discuss this face to face. Where did you go? Geneva?”

“I’m in Pennsylvania,” I spit out. I’d rather not tell them exactly where I went, I realize, feeling the safety of this small town cocoon around me, like it’s Brigadoon or something and I’ve fallen into a sheltered glen.

“I’m not going to hold your job for you,” Dad says. “You’ve already used up your personal time these past few days and—”

“I got a job here, actually,” I interrupt. I hear the sharp intake of breath.

“Doing what exactly?”

“I’m the communications strategist at a small liberal arts college,” I tell them, testing out the title Indigo and Sara had suggested for my business cards.

Rose said I shouldn’t just call myself a speech writer, since I’d be helping her with much more than speeches. She also said she didn’t care what I called myself, as long as I helped her land the big bucks.

“What in the hell does that mean? You have a degree in office management from a branch campus.” I know my father doesn’t intend to demean my education, but I’ve had about

enough of this conversation. Every day I spend away from Greenwood, I see how much I've let them shelter me, how many of my life decisions were made without my input.

"I actually eked out a minor in professional communication, and today I helped the college president fund an endowment." It feels so empowering to use the phrase Mary Pat slung around the co-op.

"Sweetheart, look," my mother chimes in, using her keep-the-peace tone. "Why don't you tell us where you are and we can drive down and pick you up. We can talk this all out on the drive back to Greenwood."

I hear Indigo burst into the Inn downstairs with her now-familiar "Yoo-hoo!" This phone call has reached the limit of what I can handle and I'm eager to tell Indigo about my day, celebrate with cheese and odd crackers. "Mom, Dad, like I said, I'm very sorry to leave you without notice and to head out so abruptly. But I'm going to stick around here and see where this job takes me."

I hear them both inhale to start another tirade, but I decide to cut them off. "I hear someone calling for me, so I have to go. I'll touch base in a few days."

When I make my way into the dining room, Indigo starts telling me all about her errands before she even looks up. "That you, Abigail? Gosh, but I found a steal on these gourds and fall decorations. I know it's still August... We just love

fall, Sara and I both. Wanna give me a hand with this garland? I know it's early still and—oh!” She sees my face and drops the bag of decorations, pulling me into a hug. “Come on. Let's go sit and you tell me about it. We need to talk about the place Sara found for you to rent, anyway.”

CHAPTER 9

ABIGAIL

“I’M JUST NOT sure about this,” I mutter again as Sara and Indigo toss the last of the housewares in the back of Sara’s truck. I can’t get past the guilt that I’m taking so much charity from these women, who have already been so kind to me. They barely know me and they’re loaning me half the furniture stacked in the basement of the Inn.

Indigo insists it’s all been sitting around gathering dust, waiting until she redecorates or has to replace something. “Hush now,” she huffs, adding a basket of soy candles and homemade soaps. “Besides, Sara will divorce me if I keep accumulating all these frou-frou smelling things.”

Sara nods and ushers me into the cab of the pickup. “She’s one hundred per cent correct about that, Abigail. Nobody needs that much jasmine.”

Having loaded up my meager and borrowed possessions, we start the short drive around the corner to my new beginning: Sara found a cute little duplex for rent and says the landlord keeps to himself.

I fiddle the shiny set of keys in my lap while we drive, marveling that I’ve never lived alone before. The truth is I *do*

want all those jasmine candles and a dish of pretty soap in the restroom. I want the sage colored hand towels and crisp white linens. I want everything Indigo offered me because I get to arrange it however I want, keep it as clean as I'd like. Or not!

Indigo smiles and hops out of the truck. The duplex is a tidy brick two-story with street parking. Each entry has its own stoop, and I begin to immediately fantasize about putting potted ferns out there. And a welcome mat! I unlock the door and step inside, the smell of fresh paint wafting over me along with the morning sunshine from the front picture window.

“Did you decide which room is the office?” Sara grunts under the weight of the desk she's bringing inside. I get down to business planning out the move. We very quickly bring most of the furniture inside and a few of the clothing bags. I was stunned by how much I could afford from the second-hand store outside town. Indigo knew of a thrift shop where she said all the wealthy college students dump their wardrobes when they graduate and move to more glamorous locales.

As Indigo and Sara heft a mattress upstairs, I walk outside and notice a man peering into Sara's truck. I clear my throat, unsure what to do. Everyone knows each other here, but I don't like the way he's leaning into the truck, running his hands along my borrowed headboard. “Can I help you with anything?” I decide to be friendly in case he's here to lend a hand or something.

I'm not prepared for what happens next. The dark-haired man whips his head up to look at me, brown eyes sharp. “What are you doing with this furniture?” His deep voice is

level, measured. He's not angry, I don't think, but he's sure not friendly, either. He looks familiar, but I just can't place him. I've met so many people in the past few days.

"Well..." I don't know how to answer him. His stubbled jaw is set tight and I see him grinding his teeth. Long, lean muscles stand out in his forearms and I watch him grip the wood, lifting it. "I'm moving in," I stammer.

He pulls the headboard up to his face, squints, and says, "Where did you get this?" There's something a bit sad about the way he caresses the wood. He doesn't look up at me as he says, "this is mine."

"Oh." I lean closer to where he's pointing. Someone carved their name into the wood long ago. *Hunter*. Indigo had the headboard in her pile of things she said she'd refinish someday. She talked about etching a stag over the graffiti, neatening up the handwriting. "My friend gave it to me, so I just assumed she—"

"You should never assume." He lifts the headboard fully from the truck and begins to walk toward the house just as Indigo and Sara burst out the front door, laughing.

"Oh! Hunter! Good. You met Abigail." Indigo leans into the cab to snatch the last bag of linens from behind the bench seat. "Glad to see you decided to help with the very last bit of heavy furniture." She swats his arm playfully.

Hunter—I assume that's his name—grunts noncommittally and turns toward the other door of the duplex. Indigo hollers, "Now just a minute, sir. Wrong house!"

“This is a stolen piece of furniture,” he says, setting it on the walk. “It’s my headboard.”

“No, it’s Abigail’s headboard,” Indigo retorts. “Your parents cleaned out that house months ago and I have half the Crawford boys’ furniture in my basement. I paid for it fair and square, and I’m giving it to her. Now be a sport and help us carry it inside.”

Hunter looks a bit powerless as Indigo pushes him over toward my half of the building and Sara says, “This is the tenant I found for you, dude. Be nice and carry her stuff upstairs for her and maybe she’ll water your plants the next time you leave town.”

Pausing in the living room, he points his chin toward the coffee table and makes an incredulous noise. “My father made that, too.”

Indigo beams. “Well now you can come visit it if you’re nice to Abigail. I’ll make sure she uses a coaster so she doesn’t add any more ring stains to the wood.”

He begrudgingly carries the headboard up to my new bedroom and I blush, thinking about sleeping in what was clearly his childhood bed, which he’s now seen in a room with my personal belongings scattered around. My landlord, the brooding furniture connoisseur. I get a good peek at the muscular back side of him as he lifts the heavy oak piece into place where Sara has assembled the bed frame. I blush again. I definitely cannot be having these sorts of thoughts about my landlord, especially not in a small town.

The headboard locked securely against the bed frame, Hunter rises, brushes his hands off. He looks at me long and hard, like he's trying to see the cells inside my skin. His expression is utterly unreadable, but he abruptly nods at Sara and Indigo and walks out of the house without a word.

"Don't mind him," Indigo says, pecking me on the cheek. But I didn't mind Hunter. I can't stop thinking about him, actually. Not just that he looked damn good, but he seemed so intense. Like there's so much going on beneath the surface. Indigo backs up to the front door. "We'll get out of your hair and let you get settled in."

I start to protest but Sara claps me on the back. "I don't want to hear another thank you. We are happy to do it."

I twirl a lock of my hair around my finger. I'm still wearing it down even though I think everything looks normal and healthy again. "I just don't know how to repay you," I say, quietly.

Sara pulls Indigo tightly against her side. She gives her wife a squeeze and looks over to me in my own living room of my very own home. "I'll tell you what," she says. "Invite us over for dinner sometime soon and we will call it even."

Tears well in my eyes as they drive off. I'm not accustomed to such genuine warmth and kindness. It'll take me as long to get used to their sunshine as it will to keep up with Rose.

CHAPTER 10

HUNTER

I CAN HEAR Abigail singing in the shower. Abigail Baker.

I looked at the lease Sara emailed me so I could be sure of her name, which is how I also learned that she works at the college. For my mother.

I lie in bed staring at the ceiling, listening to Abigail singing show tunes through the thin walls of the duplex, and take stock of my situation.

My lab, if you can call it that, is up and running. My students start classes today and it's going to take all my energy to be patient with them, constantly reminding myself that they are teenagers eager to learn rather than world calibre scientists with multiple graduate degrees. It all sounds exhausting.

Abigail flubs a high note and I groan, rising from bed to start my day.

I still revel in the readily available fresh fruits and vegetables. After half a year of dehydrated mush, I inhale apples and bell peppers. The crunch and splash of the juice... the pure joy of it overpowers my discomfort at Abigail's off-key singing, which has moved down to her kitchen on the other side of mine.

Eventually I hear her leave her house and, noting the time, I grab my bag and walk to my first lecture of the day. Diana helped me prepare my syllabus and she suggested I start by telling the students about my research in the space station to build rapport. Diana predicted they'd ask me about using the toilet and shaving and sleeping in zero gravity, and I'm stunned to discover that she's right.

It always confuses me to learn that people understand other people, can predict what they will do or say or feel. Other people are such a mystery to me. I am far more comfortable analyzing tissue and vessels. When a student asks the purpose of my research, I light up. This I can do.

“The hope is to develop more effective medications,” I explain. “The majority of potential candidates in clinical trials actually fail because the new drugs do not have the intended effect in their body. The more we can study aging tissues, the more accurately we can predict their interaction with chemicals...medications.”

The students all seem nervous. *They're worried this class will be very difficult*, I remember Diana had told me. *You intimidate people*. I hold my hands out palms up, a gesture of peace, or so I'm told. “In this class, we will start with cells and once we understand those, we will build up slowly. Maybe we will talk about bones by the end of term.” They laugh a bit and I feel relief that I've made a connection.

Maybe this won't be so bad.

My second class goes down in much the same fashion and then, after a few hours in the lab, I walk home eager to work

out. We had such limited access to exercise equipment in the space station, and between all the drama with Heather and my job I didn't really get to do much when I got back. A few runs here and there...my body is literally aching to lift weights.

I spent almost all of my personal time in the space station planning out a year's worth of workouts and meals. Digger said it's odd to fantasize about exercise and food while everyone else played cards or read. I realize my meticulous notes about caloric intake versus output are impractical, but I like to aim high.

I made the dining room into my home gym. I don't plan to have guests over to eat and I'm fine eating my meals at the counter or, more likely, sitting at my computer desk, which takes up much of the living room. I tried to explain to my brother that it's my house and I'm going to set it up to meet my needs. Heather always had cushions and decorations all over the place. I never felt comfortable in my house, always worried I'd move something and forget exactly where it was.

I have no desire to use the workout facilities on campus, to wait in line for equipment or overhear undergraduates discussing their conquests while they bulk up their biceps doing preacher curls.

My home gym is my kingdom. I bought everything I need to get a full workout right there. I like to work out without music, to focus on my body and what it's saying to me as I move. I've put in a lot of time studying my biology, figuring out the most appropriate routine for optimum results. I covered the wood floor with thick mats in case I drop a barbell and I

hung a pull-up bar on the wall opposite Abigail's half of the house, so it won't make noise. I think I did a pretty good job considering my tenant and her right to peace and quiet.

I arrive home, feeling the warmth of anticipation. Finally—a grueling workout. A chance to burn away everything that happened in Texas, start fresh.

I strip down to my bare feet and mesh shorts so I can concentrate on my form and feel the earth beneath me as I lift the weights. I feel a little warm, so I open the back door to let in the late summer breeze. Soon, I am lost to the beautiful ache of my workout, pushing myself hard.

I am aware that I grunt as I move between exercises, dropping the bar and moving to sets of pull-ups. All my concerns melt away: the worry over my legal situation with Heather. The confusion about what questions my students might ask. Anxiety about how I will find investors to continue my research. All of that is gone—there is only my body and this metal and how fast I can move it.

By the time I'm halfway through a set of pull-ups on the rings, I realize I should have consulted my father about hanging anything from the ceiling. I hear the hardware start to groan as I pull myself up, and then several things happen simultaneously: I curse my failure to plan properly in my excitement, I fall to the ground as the rings give way, and I smack my face on the edge of my weight bench.

CHAPTER 11

ABIGAIL

I NEVER HAD free time in Ohio. If I wasn't at work, I was taking care of Jack or the house...or else hanging out with my mom while she took care of Dad and their house. So when my work day ends here in Oak Creek, I find I've got long chunks of time that are just mine! And I'm still not sure how to fill them.

I decide to do a makeshift spa day at home. I strip down to my undies and a t-shirt to shave my legs, taking my time to hit every crevice and use some of those products Indigo bought me at the co-op. All the different oils in the skin creams feel so nice on my skin.

I move on to a deep conditioning treatment for my hair, leaning over the amazingly deep sink in the vanity in my bathroom. I massage the jojoba oil into my scalp slowly, wondering why I never took time to do this before. I finish the whole thing off with a glorious Turkish cotton towel from Indigo. My god! This towel makes me feel like a princess. Never in my life have I felt anything so luxurious. I make a mental note to buy a set as soon as I can afford it.

I walk to the kitchen looking for a snack, still rocking my turban and hemp undies, and hear something puzzling.

I know the walls are thin. I heard Hunter slamming some cupboards in his kitchen earlier and I flush, remembering my solo concert and realizing he must have heard me belting out the sound track to *Chicago*. But I can't seem to identify the sounds I'm hearing from his side now.

I press my ear to the wall in the kitchen, feeling sheepish, but then I hear a groan followed by a clang. I bite my lip. *Could he be cooking?* Toward the end with Jack, I'd often come home to him slamming the oven, clanging pots around on a wild search for something he never seemed to find. Through the wall, I hear the same sounds of impatience, only with growing desperation.

I start to pace, wondering what to do, if I should call Indigo. *Should I call the police?* I jump when I hear a loud clang, followed by a roar. That just doesn't sound safe.

Then I hear repeated cursing through the walls. "Fuck! Shit. Gaaaaaah!" Convinced Hunter is in danger, I grab the cast iron skillet Indigo gave me and rush out the back door. Hunter's door is open, and my heart races as I step closer. I don't take time to think, just act. I enter his dining room and drop the skillet.

Instead of a dining table and chairs, he's set up weightlifting equipment. Hunter lies on his back, rolling on the ground and clutching his face. I see blood streaming between his fingers, and I run over to him. He looks over at me, eyes

wild, and his body stills. I dive into action mode, squatting next to him and trying to nudge his hands away from his face.

“Are you injured?” I peer closer, and see that his nose is bleeding. I jump up and run to his kitchen, in search of towels. Finding nothing, I pull the towel off my head and jog back over to Hunter, who has pulled himself into a sitting position.

I press the towel into his hands and help pinch his nose. “Here, I think you just need to—”

“I know how to stop a nose bleed,” he says, curtly.

“Oooh kay then.” I rock back on my heels and take stock of the room. There are two holes in the ceiling where it looks like he pulled chunks of the drywall down. There are two ropes coiled on the floor. I can’t even think what he was doing when he obviously fell down.

“You’re not dressed,” he says, not meeting my eyes.

I flush, trying to tug down my t-shirt and cover myself. I look him over and say, “Well...neither are you.” He is all lean lines, shining with sweat. His face twists in confusion as he pulls the towel away. The bleeding has stopped, but my towel seems ruined. I wait for him to say something, and when he doesn’t, I stand up. My cheeks are steaming hot, and I know I’ve blushed from my hair down to my toes. Which Hunter is staring at.

“So it looks like you’re ok I guess? Do you have any bleach for the towel? I haven’t stocked up yet and I’m borrowing it—”

“I will clean the towel and return it to you.”

“Thanks.” I bite my lip, feeling like this is the strangest first-aid situation I’ve ever seen, and that’s saying something for a girl with 3 brothers and a dad who owns a construction business. To top it all off, I can’t stop staring at him. I feel a mix of emotions, ranging from lust to a strong urge to hug this wounded man and make him feel better.

I shrug and bend to pick up the skillet I brought with me. “I’ll just let you get back to it I guess.” I wish he would say something. He’s so intense, the way he trains his gaze on my face without blinking, but doesn’t speak. I can feel my heart beat throbbing in my ears under the heat of his gaze. “Bye,” I say, backing out into the yard.

As I start to walk home, I catch sight of him bending to pick up the ropes. His muscles strain as he hurls the rope and rings across the room, and I can’t help but stare again. He seems carved from stone. My brothers all used to lift weights together. They are all strong as oxen, but thicker. And their muscles are all hidden under a softer layer of cheap beer and Mom’s cooking.

Back on my side of the duplex, I decide I have to call Indigo and tell her what happened or else I’ll burst with embarrassment.

I try to invite her to go out for a drink, but since she’s got a full Inn, she and Sara insist I walk over to their place. “We’ve got box wine today,” I hear Sara yelling.

They both laugh hysterically when I tell them about my foiled attempts at a skillet rescue. At least they don’t seem angry about the bloody towel. Indigo pats me on the back and

says, “The thing about Hunter is that he takes *everything* seriously. I wouldn’t worry about this. He’s just...serious is all.”

“Who’s serious?” A woman shuffles into the dining room, grunting a bit under the weight of a heavy box, which she plunks on the table.

Indigo smiles, obviously happy to see this person. “Your brother, that’s who.”

The woman snorts. “You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Sara opens the box and starts pulling out plain brown bottles that I assume are filled with homemade beer. “I don’t really think anyone would accuse Archer or Fletcher of being serious,” she says. “Abigail here is Hunter’s new tenant and she walked in on him with a bloody nose.”

“Hmm,” the woman sits down and twists off the cap of one of the bottles. “He ok?”

Sara nods and says, to me, “This is Diana Crawford. She makes her own beer and thinks her family doesn’t know she grows pot in her office at work.”

I reach out for a handshake, and laugh when Diana thrusts a bottle in my hand instead. I use my shirt sleeve to twist off the beer cap, drawing an eye roll from Sara. Diana waits expectantly as I take a sip. The beer is delicious. It’s fruity and light, a little hoppy. “Wow,” I say. “This is fantastic.”

Diana grins. “It’s my new IPA recipe,” she says, taking a long swig from her bottle. “So tell me how my brother

managed to come back from outer space in tact and get a nosebleed in his townhouse.”

Indigo pours her beer into a glass and slides coasters toward the rest of us. She fills Diana in on Hunter’s “small tantrum” when he saw me taking in the Crawford furniture stash, and I add in that he has no furniture and seems to have pulled down half his ceiling.

“He’s probably just angry that his bitchy wife took all their furniture when she left him.” Diana shakes her head. “I still don’t get why he married her to begin with.”

I think about Hunter sitting on the floor, shirtless, muscled, bewildered. I don’t like hearing Diana talk about him having a wife. *Huh, I think. What’s that about?*

“Anyway,” she says, “I’ll call up Archer to look in on him. Sounds like he needs some Crawford support.”

For the rest of the night, we talk about Diana’s hops and how Indigo convinced her to get solar panels to power her grow house. “Sar got solar panels at the law office and has an energy surplus,” Indigo brags. “Matthew is giddy about it.” I settle into my chair, loving the friendly support these women all have for each other, the easy conversation and immediate acceptance they offer me.

Much later than I intended, I wander home and fall into bed, my embarrassment from earlier replaced with deep contentment.

CHAPTER 12

HUNTER

“HUNTER,” Archer shouts from outside. “I know you’re in there, dude. Come on and let me inside before I scare your neighbor.”

I sigh and put down the bag of frozen peas, unlocking the door and returning to my computer desk before my brother makes it inside.

“What the fuck, dude?” He looks around the apartment. I still haven’t gotten around to cleaning up the dust and drywall. I’ve been sucking down ibuprofen and icing my face with frozen vegetables because I don’t yet have an ice cube tray.

“I mean...I knew you were living that bachelor life, but this is...what happened to the ceiling?” Archer gestures around the room.

“Gravity,” I grunt, plunking the peas back on my nose. “I’m not used to it anymore.”

I don’t have any other furniture, so Archer sits on my weight bench. He shakes his head. “Do you even have a broom? Of course not. Come on, man. We’re going to the co-op. You need to stock up your house.”

I sigh and toss down the peas. Archer and I climb into his truck and drive the short distance to the store, with Archer insisting we will need to buy more than two armloads of household stuff. He gives Mary Pat a salute as we walk into the store and grab a cardboard box.

I follow along behind my brother as he tosses things into the box, plucking up a broom from housewares. “Is this made from found materials?”

Mary Pat, hearing me from up front, pipes in, “You’re damn right, Hunter! The Acorns have been spending their afternoons making brooms. They go walk the banks of the creek. Real nice craftsmanship, don’t you think?”

I grunt in response. The Acorns are a group of Oak Creek senior citizens who never mind their own business.

When Archer seems satisfied, he plunks our purchases on the checkout counter. He grabs the membership application and shoves it my way. “I’m just here temporarily, Archer,” I say, frowning.

Mary Pat rolls her eyes and starts laying into me about how the membership discount will pay for itself in just a few weeks of me buying the fancy protein powders she sold me earlier. I can’t argue with her math.

I start filling out the form and she leans forward on her elbows. “Ya know,” she says, watching as I write in my address. “Technically a duplex is one household. If you catch my meaning.”

I pause to ponder what she's just said and I look up at her. "I do not catch your meaning, Mary Pat."

"You really don't know your head from a hole in the ground! I'm saying you pay the membership fee for your household and get a card for your tenant, too. Abigail." She crosses her arms. "It'd be a real nice gesture, is all I'm saying."

Archer laughs. "Yeah, Hunter is the king of nice gestures."

I frown at my brother, but fill out a card for Abigail. Mary Pat is probably just a few years away from her Acorn initiation. I hand her my credit card for all the Castile soap and tea tree bathroom cleaner. I remember the bloody towel and ask, "Do you have something here to remove blood from fabric?"

As we unload our stuff, my brother starts asking me too many questions. He wants to know about my students and my workout. He starts asking about my divorce and, in an attempt to silence him, I blurt, "I saw Abigail without her pants on."

Archer stands up from where he'd been cleaning up plaster dust. "All right. Now we're talking. Spill it."

I explain how I'd failed to test the weight load for the studs where I hung the rings and he throws his water bottle at me. "I don't give a shit about the calculations—though Dad is going to be super disappointed in you. Tell me about your neighbor's panties."

“Well.” I’m unsure how to explain what happened. “She heard me fall and I suppose she rushed over to help. She had a towel on her head.” I hold up the bloody towel that I’d left on the counter.

“And what did you say? When she rushed in half naked to save you?”

“I observed that she was not dressed.”

“Oh my God, Hunter. I cannot with you.” He gathers his things and makes his way toward the front door. “Jesus, Hunter. A half naked woman ran into your house. This is such a fucking missed opportunity.”

As I sift through the products from the co-op, preparing to soak the blood from Abigail’s towel, I think about what Archer said. Missed opportunity. Was he implying I should have... what? How would Archer have gotten Abigail all the way naked? Capitalized on that incident for sex? Could he really be disappointed that I didn’t do such a thing? He knows I don’t understand women or people at all, really.

I’d like to understand Abigail, though. Every inch of her exposed flesh is burned into my memory. What are the chances she’d ever show it to me again? Leaving the towel soaking in the sink, I head off to bed, wondering how disrespectful it is to dream about my tenant’s bare thighs.

I wake up, as usual, to the sound of Abigail singing. I toss her clean towel in the dryer before showering. I estimate that she will head out to work in about 20 minutes, if her routine today is the same as before. Dressing and quickly eating my oatmeal, I grab my bag and the warm towel just as I hear Abigail fussing with her lock next door.

I walk up behind her on her stoop and she startles, yelping as she turns and finds me standing so close to her. “Here,” I say, thrusting the bundle toward her. “I cleaned the towel. I’ve also included a co-op member card for you.”

Her jaw drops and I can tell, once again, that I’ve broken social rules I didn’t know about. Studying me, Abigail takes the bundle and quickly unlocks her door. She tosses the towel inside, where it lands on a small table she’s set up inside the door. I think about how it would be a nice place to stack mail or set down keys. Abigail seems to be able to plan her house layout for how she lives her life. *Fascinating.*

I realize I’m staring when she coughs and gestures for me to walk on ahead down the porch steps. “So,” she says, sipping coffee from her travel mug. It smells strong, and I like the familiar scent. It reminds me of my house growing up, where my parents always seem to be brewing fresh coffee, day or night. “Is your nose ok?”

“What?” I move my hand to my face. “Oh. Yes. It’s fine.”

I continue walking, and my stride is much longer than hers, so I’m soon well ahead of her on the sidewalk. I hear her yell, “Ok, well I guess I’ll see you later?” Her voice goes up at

the end, like a question, and I walk into my office wondering how many mistakes Archer would say I made this morning.

CHAPTER 13

ABIGAIL

“ABIGAIL!” Rose has taken to bellowing from her office when she has a question. The other women who sit near me all smile. There’s a group of staff members who work on the alumni magazine, create all the admissions graphics, and manage the college’s website. I love sitting with the creative team, tossing in my ideas when someone wants to talk about the look and feel of a new brochure.

They mostly think Rose is eccentric. I’ve learned by now to speak my mind with her—she can always tell if I’m holding back. It feels like I’ve lived here for ages since she’s given me so many large projects in just a few weeks. Anna mutters at me to get a move on before Rose really starts yelling, so I grab a notebook and walk down the hall.

“Abigail,” Rose says again. She taps a manicured nail against her computer monitor where I see the talking points I sent over for her meeting with a famous author considering a donation. “This is perfection. How much am I paying you?”

“Oh. Thank you. We decided on—”

“Christa!” Rose interrupts with a roar. I hear the office manager approach quickly, heels clacking on the hardwood

floor in the hall. “Christa, give Abigail a bonus. She’s going to turn this meeting into a funded professorship.”

Christa looks back and forth between Rose and me and nods, clacking back down to her office. Rose smiles. “Now,” she says, leaning back and pressing her fingertips together. “Tell me how you put together this plan.”

“Well, first I read Ms. Bluestein’s book and made some notes about her protagonist.” I explain how I imagined the author was making meaning of her own experience at Oak Creek College, how it must have been a very formative experience for her. Rose’s smile widens as I talk, so I continue. “It really seems like she would want to share that experience with other hopeful writers, and the best way to do that is to make sure they have really good professors.”

“We were initially earmarking this donation as scholarship money for summer study.”

I nod. “I think we can get that, too, from other sources. But a Bluestein Professorship will touch hundreds of students, offer lasting impact for Oak Creek.” I pause. I didn’t ask permission to change the gameplan and I worry that people will think I stepped out of my lane. But Rose stands and slaps the desk.

“Come on,” she says, slipping off her cardigan. “We’re walking into town. This calls for celebratory baked goods.”

We step out into the hot afternoon sun and make our way across the bridge over the train tracks that will bring in Ms. Bluestein tomorrow. The rail line parallel to the creek separates the college from the town, and a sweet footbridge

connects them. The leaves above the tree-lined walks are starting to yellow. It all feels surreal, magical.

“Where did you grow up, Abigail,” Rose asks as we descend the steps onto Main Street.

“Middle of nowhere, Ohio,” I say with a smile.

“And you moved here when you saw the job posting?”

I shrug. “It was good timing. I needed a change.”

Rose pushes open the door to the Insomnia Bakery and pauses to inhale. Eyes closed, she enjoys the scent of buttery pastry, chocolate delights. A young man with dreads and bags under his brown eyes greets us. “Hey, Rose,” he says, slinging a tea towel over one shoulder.

“Abigail, this is Stu. He’s got twin sons at home, bless his soul. Is it really insomnia, Stu, if you know it’s kids keeping you awake?” She laughs.

Stu shrugs and leans forward. “My wife, Jess, and I sleep in shifts. And work here in the bakery in shifts. And wrangle the boys...you get how it is.”

I smile as he pulls up his phone, showing a blurry picture of two little guys running toward the camera, eyes gleaming. “They look like they’ve got a lot of ideas,” I tell him.

“Never fear, Stu,” Rose says, tapping her chin. “You’ll blink your eyes and they’ll be off in outer space or galavanting in France.” She gestures at the counter display. “We’ll have 2 chocolate croissants, please.” Rose grasps my arm, cooing, “There’s nothing like a well-made croissant when you’re feeling particularly jubilant.”

We wave goodbye to Stu and sit at one of the picnic tables in the middle of the town square, eating as the seniors dance their Tai Chi silently. Library patrons weave among them on their way in and out of the building. I've already become accustomed to the way this town just does what it will, follows its heart.

Rose dabs at her lips with a napkin and says, "You're making a difference here, Abigail. I hope you feel appreciated for that." She smiles.

"Oh, I do," I nod, brushing the pastry crumbs from my hand. "I was worried I was overstepping with the Bluestein notes..."

"Nonsense! I told you 1,000 times already. I hired you for your ideas." She stands, tossing the paper from her croissant into one of the nearby public compost bins. "I want you to take the afternoon off. Tomorrow we start preparing for the research symposium and it's going to take all your energy to get the scientists to translate their ideas into something regular people can understand."

She waves, walking back toward campus, and I fight the small moment of panic at the thought of an open afternoon. I remember that Diana said I should drop by the Houseplant Haven any time. I decide to brave a visit, arguing I could buy a houseplant for my new place if Diana doesn't seem like she wants to be social.

A small bell tinkles above the door as I push it open to reveal a store front filled with light and wooden shelves overflowing with all manner of green plants. "I'll be right with

you,” a voice shouts from the back, so I take a moment to walk around, sniffing the buds and admiring the leaves.

“Abigail! Good to see you.” Diana emerges, wiping her hands on an apron and tucking a spade into her pocket. We walk around and she shows me her hops garden, the source of her delicious beer. “Can you keep a secret?” I nod, puzzled, and she says, “I don’t show many people my real babies.” She beckons for me to follow her into the back of the shop, where an overpowering scent transports me to my brothers’ apartment on summer nights.

“Wow,” I say, as my eyes adjust to the lights illuminating row upon row of marijuana plants. “What is all this?”

“This is my life’s work,” she says, explaining that she’s in the final stages of securing a license to grow medical marijuana. “I’ve been working on this strain since graduate school,” she says, telling me how she once partnered with neurological researchers in her PhD program.

“Are all the Crawfords biology PhDs?”

She laughs. “No. Just me and Hunter, who does not approve of this work because it’s still not legal federally.” Diana explains how she meets with hydroponics experts and has a system of koi fish for fertilizer. She shows me some notes about her plants and what they theoretically do differently from other types of marijuana.

I don’t understand any of it, but I nod along, easily picking up on her confidence that this is important, to her and the rest of us. I smile, remembering the same passion from Hunter when he speaks up about the biology department at the

college. I know he lost his job with the space agency, but he doesn't seem to be wallowing in depression about it. He's moving on, making things happen. Passion seems to run in their family.

Diana asks, "Is it true what Archer says? That Hunter doesn't even have any furniture?"

"Oh." I'm not sure if I should get involved in Hunter's family business, but it doesn't seem too out of bounds to tell Diana that he has a weight room in the dining room and nothing but a computer desk. "And when I saw him, he had had some sort of accident where part of the ceiling fell."

She frowns. "I love him and he's brilliant, but he's totally myopic. Mind if I walk to your place with you so I can check on him?"

"Please do!"

She locks up and we head off down the street. It's nice to walk in step with a Crawford. I giggle, noticing that she doesn't rush on ahead just because her stride is longer.

I enjoy walking with Diana, listening to her talk about her plants, her beer making, her assurances that she's finished with men and all their bullshit. She's so outgoing I start to wonder how she came from the same family as Hunter, who still doesn't smile or talk much.

I follow along as Diana climbs his steps and rings the doorbell. I don't tell Diana that by this time of day, Hunter is usually grunting through an exercise routine. After a few moments of him not answering she leans and peers in his front

window. He doesn't have curtains up yet, so we can both see him in the dining room doing squats.

“Oh for Christ's sake.” Diana rolls her eyes. “Can you let me in your place so I can go around back and smack him?”

I nod and let her in. She walks through my house muttering about useless men. She bangs out the back door and I see her barge into Hunter's half. I figure they have family things to discuss, so I go upstairs to change into my new post work uniform of leggings and a tank. I'm startled to hear Diana's voice shout up to me.

“Abigail!” I lean out the bedroom window to where she stands in the back yard. Hunter leans against the porch rail, arms crossed over his bare chest. “Wanna come work out with me and my brother?”

I think about how his grunts and clangs have become my sound track while I make dinner, making me feel like I've procured my food from the jungle rather than the Pioneer Woman cookbook.

“Well,” I start. “I've never really lifted weights before...” I don't really know if I can be in the same room as him, shirtless, without staring or feeling embarrassed that he saw me in my underwear.

“Come on,” Diana shouts. “We'll show you how.”

I make my way over there, nervous but not wanting to turn down Diana and risk her thinking I'm rejecting our new friendship. I don't want her to think I'm afraid...of the weights or of Hunter.

Diana grabs a jump rope from a hook and heads out back. She starts jumping rope on the porch and I stand awkwardly in Hunter's dining room, looking around.

He scowls. "You haven't done this before?" I can't get a read on him, but I shake my head. He sighs and hands me a broom.

"Here," he says. "Put this on your shoulders and I'll show you how to squat."

"A broom?"

He nods. "It's best to learn without weight. To make sure you get the motions correct."

I swallow and try to finagle the broom handle so it's resting on my shoulders, but it feels awkward and the wood snags on my tank top.

I feel Hunter's hand on my shoulder, pushing on the broom and trying to bend my body. Every nerve I've got starts to fire, directing wave after wave of sparks through my body. I feel myself break out in goosebumps. I hear him start talking, explaining what to do very calmly.

He's passionate about weight lifting, like he's passionate about everything. His low voice gently talks me through the steps of how to move safely, and I feel mesmerized. He's not a bit impatient, seemingly content to help me get it right. And he keeps his hand pressed against me. I try to focus on his words, but I'm distracted by the heat of his body.

And then, without warning, the weight of his hand on my back takes me back to that night with Jack. I'm transported to

the last time a man this close to me, put his hands on my body. My blood runs cold and I spin around.

Too late, I realize I whacked Hunter with the broom stick.

He lets out an “oof” as I drop it. My hands shoot to my face in horror. *Why did my body respond that way?* I look around, seeing Diana’s face etched with concern while Hunter mutters and picks up the broom.

“I’m sorry,” I say. I walk toward my house. “I can’t do this.”

“Abigail, wait,” Diana says, starting to follow me, but I shake my head.

“I need to go. I’ll talk to you later, Diana.” I close the back door and turn the lock, sinking to the ground on the other side of the door. I’m so ashamed and embarrassed.

Diana shouts my name a few times, but then she stops and I hear the crack of the jump rope, the clangs and grunts as Hunter continues exercising. I start to cry softly, worried I wrecked my chance at making friends here. I keep making a fool of myself with this family. I spend the night worried my time in Oak Creek so far has been too good to be true, and maybe my landlord will kick me out for hitting him with a broom.

CHAPTER 14

HUNTER

MY COLLEAGUES ARE MOSTLY a group of pompous windbags. None of them have research experience I consider noteworthy. Which I guess is to be expected at a small liberal arts college. The problem is I really need guidance to get started applying for funding. I don't even know which direction to begin—should I be looking to stay at this school and fund research here? Should I be exploring venture capitalists to invest in my research to later sell to industry? I went straight from my PhD program to the space program when they recruited me. Everything I did there was paid for by the agency.

I know that the solution to my problem lies in reaching out to others, but the thought of asking for help just pisses me off. I hate that I have to do this, that all my plans were thwarted. My stomach growls as I leave my second lecture, and I realize I forgot to pack my food today. “Damn,” I mutter, changing course and walking to the cafeteria.

I fill my tray with a passable salad and bland chicken. I'm about to carry it all back to my office to eat alone when someone yells, “Oy! Crawford!”

I turn to see Andy Moorley waving at me. I raise my eyebrows, and he shouts, “Come sit, mate. I want to pick your brain.” Moorley is a transplant from the UK, head of the computer science department. He once had a hot job with a famous tech company, but my mother seemed to indicate he, too, has fallen from grace.

I sit across the table from him and nod. “Moorley.”

“The prodigal son returns,” he says, talking with his mouth full. I grunt in reply. I regret sitting here. “But really, I wanted to talk to you about a computational biology course this spring.”

“That’s unexpected.” I set down my fork. “Do we do computational biology here?” My masters in that specialty was part of what helped me stand out to the space agency. I suppose it was bound to become more common, but it was cutting edge when I was in my first graduate program.

He shakes his head. “Not yet we don’t. But I also know your mum has been bringing in some big name industries lately. With deep pockets.” Moorley goes on to tell me about his vision of partnering with big pharma or maybe the military to support his computer science research here and increase funding at the college. I find him to be crass, but I am actually glad I am having this conversation with him.

Until I see Abigail Baker with another man.

They enter the cafeteria together and sit, leaning close together over some documents. I recognize Mark as a high-up employee in the provost office. This meeting is most likely something to do with Abigail’s professional work, but I feel

my pulse racing and my stomach starts to churn at the sight of them together. *This is a working lunch, that's all*, I tell myself. But I can't look away. She is intently focused on her work, studying the documents and gesturing as she talks.

The longer I stare, the more certain I become that Mark is thinking more about Abigail's biologically perfect features than her words. I grimace as I see him notice her breasts in the conservative blouse she's chosen for work today.

Moorely punches me in the shoulder lightly, and I realize he must have been continuing his conversation about computational biology. "I apologize," I mutter. "Please forgive me."

He turns to look over his shoulder, following my gaze. "Ah," he says. "Mate, do you fancy the bird in the blue blouse?"

"She's my neighbor," I offer, hoping we can return to our discussion. Mark lets his hand linger on Abigail's as they shuffle the documents on their table and I feel an unfamiliar sensation in my chest. What is this feeling? Abigail smiles at Mark, and I decide that she is breathtakingly beautiful, her brown hair the perfect complement to her dark eyes and peach-toned skin. She is also smiling at another man, and I realize the burning sensation in my lungs must be jealousy.

Moorely laughs. "You better make a move with your neighbor soon, then, or someone else is going to."

My eyes snap to Moorely's. "You see it, too? He is attracted to Abigail?"

He laughs at me, causing me to growl in frustration. “Crawford,” he says. “Every bloke in this room is attracted to her.”

I stand up, abruptly, unsure what to do, but feeling drawn over to Abigail. I walk across the room to where she is sitting and, standing next to their table, I clear my throat.

Mark looks up at me with disdain, but I ignore him. I can see only Abigail, whose face breaks into a smile. She’s pleased to see me. The smile reaches her eyes, and I feel warmth spread through me.

“Hunter,” she says, still smiling. “I’m glad to see you. I wanted to apologize again about the broom...”

“Oh,” I say, shaking my head. “Please don’t worry about that.” And then I run out of ideas for what to say. It seems like I should not tell her not to get involved with Mark. It seems like a poor idea for me to bring up seeing her in her underwear. Instead I just stand there, studying her face. Trying to learn the lines of her, to see how each facial element shifts with her emotions.

“Maybe we could try again sometime,” she says, her voice once again tilting up, questioning.

I start to sweat, and I look over at Moorely, who gives me a thumbs up, staring intently.

“Yes,” I say. And then, again, I don’t know what to say. So I rap my knuckles on the table.

I note the time and excuse myself, needing to get away and think about what has happened. This is all very uncomfortable

and unfamiliar.

I meet with several students panicking about their midterm exam that I haven't even written yet, let alone scheduled, and close my door in relief at the end of the day. I'm off my diet, I've had to interact with new people, I've had confusing feelings about Abigail, and I'm exhausted from all of it.

My office phone rings, and before I finish saying hello, my mother takes off at full clip.

“Hunter, I'm glad I finally got through. Your phone goes right to voicemail. I hope that means you were with students. I'm glad you give your students your full attention, sweetheart.”

“Ma,” I interject. “Was there something you needed?”

“Yes! Of course!” She sighs. “Your father is grilling tonight. He harvested the whole garden, he told me to say, and everyone is coming to dinner. It's not optional. I'll see you at 6.”

Mom hangs up before I can protest. I look up to see it's almost 5. No workout for me today, either, apparently.

I walk directly to my parents' house from work, thinking about my day. Nothing seems to make any sense since I left the space station. I find I crave the routine of each day up there, the predictable schedule and limited social interactions. Here, everything is a challenge. And not the exciting challenge of my research.

I'm deep in thought when I open the back door and am taken aback to see Abigail sitting on a stool at the counter, chatting with my mother.

"Abigail," I say, frowning. "Why are you here?"

She laughs uncomfortably. "I'm having dinner with my boss...why are *you* here?"

My family stares at us in silence. I spit out, "this is my family's house. Didn't you know Rose Mitchell is my mother?"

My parents laugh and apologize for not mapping it all out for Abigail, and my father immediately returns to his explanation of his harvest. "Diana's been helping me with fertilizer," he says, holding up a zucchini the size of my forearm.

I had thought I'd just be among my family, who doesn't ask me to say much and doesn't drain my energy as much as outsiders. With my family, I don't get unexpected reactions to my observations or comments. I certainly don't feel jealousy like I did earlier today when Abigail was merely sitting with a colleague.

My family tells me directly if I've damaged their feelings or said something unkind. Now, with Abigail present, I'll have to think about my words and study everyone's facial expressions to get a read on everyone's mood.

I sigh and step closer to the stool beside her and catch a whiff of her scent. Floating over the basil my father just picked is the very specific essence of Abigail. She smells like

the September afternoon. Like fabric softener and the bell peppers she munches.

I decide I don't mind so much if I have to work harder to make conversation with Abigail. I find her...intriguing. This is new.

"Ma kept her name when she married my father," I say. Abigail turns to look at me. "Dad is Daniel Crawford." I point at him and he smiles.

She grins. "This town is so quirky. Now I know to ask who all is related."

Archer and Diana enter through the back door holding a bucket of corn, arguing over something while they sit down to shuck it.

My mother dances across the kitchen to the music on the stereo, and swoops over when she sees them. "Oh good," she shouts. "Everyone is here for the harvest. Diana, did you see the tomato plants? Your father said you helped him keep away all the weevils this year."

Diana waves a beer at me, and I accept it while Archer looks at me suspiciously. I surmise that he's unhappy with me for some reason.

Diana snatches the shucked corn from him and drops it in the giant blue pot beside her. "Arch, did you know Abigail smacked Hunter in the nuts with a broom stick the other day?"

"That is not remotely what happened, Diana." I glare at her, trying to work out whether she's joking. I don't want her

to make Abigail feel bad. “The broom bumped my stomach. No harm done.”

Diana snorts. “Unlike when you fell and pulled down half the ceiling.” She ignores my point and puts a hand over my mouth. “Ma, Dad, did you know your son has no furniture?”

CHAPTER 15

ABIGAIL

DINNER with my boss's family is so unlike what I expected. Rose is the exact same person at home—bossy and loud, talkative—but her family is just so vibrant. I'm used to my brothers being so competitive, even unkind to each other. Archer seems to tease Hunter a bit, but I can tell all of them are glad to have him back home and eager to help him figure out how to move on from his past.

The Crawfords all praise their father for his amazing yield. He has utilized almost every inch of their back yard to grow something, and we all dig into the potatoes, tomatoes, corn, and even peaches until I feel like I might burst.

Daniel explains that the olive oil he uses on everything is a special order from the co-op and makes me write it down to ask Mary Pat for some.

“I just want to thank you all for including me at your meal,” I tell them. “I love having people to talk to over dinner. I'm not used to living alone.” I blush then, and bite my lip.

I don't want to share too much or leave a bad impression. One hand instinctively moves to my ear and, catching myself, I tuck back the loose strands of hair.

Rose waves a hand at Hunter. “You don’t live alone,” she says. “You live next to Mr. Conversation.” Everyone laughs but Hunter, who seems surprised and confused. “I’m sure Abigail can come to you if she needs an ear. Hunter?”

“What?” He looks at his mother, perplexed.

“Well, haven’t you and Abigail become friendly, sharing a wall and what-not?”

I think of the half-naked rescue and then about hitting him with the broomstick, and I flush. “Oh, well, I don’t want to be a bother,” I say.

But then he looks at me, and his eyes bore into mine, and I feel transfixed, frozen by his gaze. I feel warmth creep up my neck. He doesn’t blink, but says, “You don’t bother me, Abigail.”

The room is silent while I let his words sink in. I feel myself melting, hypnotized by those dark eyes.

Diana laughs uncomfortably, but Archer stares at his brother. “Hunter,” he says. “Have you asked Abigail about helping Ma secure funding?”

“Oh, I don’t think he wants to—” Hunter whips his gaze back toward mine so fast I stop speaking mid-sentence. I watch his face transform into hopeful excitement.

“Of course! You’re a writer.” He stands. I stare at him, confused. “Abigail, I’d like to discuss my research with you and solicit your advice for my funding proposal.”

When I don’t say anything, his family looks at me. There is so much nonverbal communication happening, and I just

wish someone would explain what's going on. Hunter looks back and forth between his mother and me. "I'd compensate you for your expertise, of course. Is that why you hesitated?"

"I...wasn't expecting you to ask me that," I tell him. "You need help with a grant? I don't know."

"Hunter," his mother pats his arm. "It's late. Abigail needs her rest to work for *me* tomorrow. Why don't you walk her on home? At her pace!"

Before I can process what has happened I find myself hustled out the door with Hunter, my arms laden with leftovers wrapped in beeswax cloth. Daniel shouts after me to wash the cloth by hand in soapy water and reuse it "instead of that awful foil that everyone just throws in the landfill!"

Hunter and I walk in silence, watching as all the shop keepers around the square close up for the evening. Many of them wave and address us by name. Ed Hastings tips his hat at us as he locks the door of the *Oak Creek Gazette* office, a tiny slip of a room between Diana's plant shop and the dry cleaner. I can't help but love the old editor of the local paper, especially after Rose explained that he feels slighted she didn't ask him to help before she offered the job to me.

I watch as Ed studies us walking together, tapping his chin. Hunter greets Ed with a low growl, and Ed turns toward his old car parked nearby.

"So," I say to break the silence as we walk. "Your family is so welcoming. I really appreciate that. It's hard being the new person in town."

Hunter doesn't respond for awhile, but finally says, "I'm not good at interpersonal interaction."

"Oh. Well..."

"People think I'm angry. I rarely am. I just don't understand what other people are thinking."

"Oh. Ok, well..."

We stop at an intersection and he looks both ways, which I find endearing because there's not a soul or a vehicle in sight. He continues, saying, "I'd appreciate it if you could tell me what you are thinking when we are with one another. Please don't assume I know."

I nod. "Ok. I was thinking that you seemed excited when Archer asked about my work."

"Yes," he says, his voice taking an animated turn. "Very much so. I need—would you mind coming in so I can show you something on my computer?"

"That's fine," I say, setting my leftovers on my stoop before following him in his front door. I notice that he doesn't look behind him to make sure I've come with him. He's already seated at his computer, pulling up files.

"These are my research notes," he says. "They only make sense to me, and I don't know how to do proposal writing. I'm told it's a different skill? My work is about my data...I need someone to help me *sell* my ideas. To a buyer," he adds, which makes me smile. "I can't tell if you are smiling because you are happy about this idea or if you are mocking me."

I look around for somewhere to sit, but finding no other furniture I just lean back against the bare wall. “I was smiling because I can tell this is important to you, and I find it refreshing that you are so blunt about what you need help with, even though you are, like, a brilliant astronaut. And also, that you think I can help, because I’m just some girl from Greenwood, Ohio.”

“I don’t think your geographic origins affect your communication skills,” Hunter says.

“Well, my father would tend to disagree.” The last time I’d spoken to my parents, after they finished pleading with me to come to my senses, my dad began to holler that the fancy college people don’t give a shit about the words anyone from Greenwood has to say or write.

I wish so badly I had the strength to defend myself to him, to use my words with my parents and help them see why I had to leave. Maybe I’ll never get strong enough to say those things. But maybe I can become another kind of strong—strong enough to fight off any man who lays his hands on me in anger.

I look around Hunter’s weight room and think about him working out every day over here. I pull myself back to standing and put my hands on my hips. “I want to learn more about your project. We can work out a barter.”

Hunter scans his downstairs, barren save for the free weights and his computer gear. “Barter for what?”

“I’d love it if you teach me how to get strong.”

CHAPTER 16

HUNTER

ABIGAIL IS SUPPOSED to come over after work to start our barter. I promised to teach her some basic weightlifting techniques and she's going to help me sort out some funding applications. She did mention that it's up to me to make the contacts and set up meetings, which gives me pause. My brother Archer says I need to find a hustler if I want to branch out on my own.

Abigail thinks I can land research funding to stay at Oak Creek College, and maybe even stop teaching. Just work there as a researcher professor.

I'm very eager to begin our trade. I'm not sure whether we should work out first or get started talking about my project. I feel a buzzing energy at the thought of moving forward with my work, an equally present fear that I won't be able to communicate my needs clearly enough to interest an investor.

I see Abigail approach the back door and open it as she raises a hand to knock. I have to remind myself to focus on her eyes and not to stare at her luscious body. I can't help but notice the rounded curves made visible by her tight workout gear. It occurs to me that she will get sweaty, and I hadn't

realized the thought of a sweaty woman would be so alluring. *Focus on her eyes*, I remind myself before my thoughts get away from me.

“Hey,” Abigail says, smiling. “I brought a chair.” I brave a quick look down to see she’s holding a camping chair. It looks new, and I feel a wash of guilt that I hadn’t thought to go buy a chair, since I knew I’d be having guests.

“I’ll reimburse you for the cost,” I say, but she laughs.

“Your mom gave me a bonus. Besides,” she plunks the chair over by my desk. “Now I have somewhere to sit for the Autumn Apple fireworks.” Abigail places a water bottle on the counter and asks if we can start with our workout. “I think it will help me focus on all your big science lingo if we exercise first.”

With a nod, I reach for the broom stick. “It’s important to learn how to safely move through the exercises before you add weight,” I tell her.

“And safely hit you in the guts with the stick?” Her eyes twinkle a bit when she asks this, so I feel certain she is making a joke about our last encounter. I just nod.

I show her how to thread the dowel across her shoulders and grip the handle. “Now,” I say, “the most important thing is to arch your back as you bend your knees.” I see her watching me intently as I demonstrate the motions. I like having her eyes on me like this and I realize I’m feeling comfortable around her. That in itself is unusual. “You look like you’d like to ask a question,” I say, putting down the broom.

“How come you are always barefoot when you’re working out?”

“Oh.” We both look down at my feet. I wiggle my toes. “It helps me balance and make sure I’m distributing my weight evenly when I move.”

Abigail nods and stoops, beginning to untie her shoes. My breath catches as I see the line of her cleavage at the neck of her tank top. Her breasts are magnificent. She tosses her shoes to the side and extends a hand for the broom. Our fingers brush together as she takes it from me, and I feel as though she’s rubbed a raw nerve. The contact pulses through my body, catching me totally off guard.

Prior to this, I had only read about such things. I never experienced a physical yearning like this. *How remarkable*, I think, wanting to touch her again to see if the zap returns.

I stand back as Abigail adjusts the broom stick across her shoulders and arches her back. “Like this?” She asks. I nod, watching. It feels strange to be invited to observe her so closely, and I have to remind myself I’m supposed to watch her form, to keep her safe so she doesn’t strain or injure a muscle when she adds weight. As Abigail bends her knees, I see her spine curve and I extend my hand to make a correction.

“Abigail,” I clear my throat. “Would it be all right if I put my hand on your back so you can feel how to move?”

“Oh.” She swallows. “Yes. Thank you for asking first.” I stretch open my fingers and place my palm on her back. I can feel the heat radiating through her shirt, and am relieved,

thrilled by the tingle that climbs up my arm upon contact. Her body molds to my touch as she bends, her form perfect.

“That’s excellent,” I whisper. I hadn’t intended to whisper, but I find that I cannot concentrate when I am touching Abigail’s body. “Do you feel the difference?”

She seems breathless and nods, continuing to move through the exercise until I withdraw my hand. Abigail swallows. I can feel my heart pounding as if I had been working out, and I tell myself it’s because I’m working so hard on my social interactions. It’s always an exertion for me to be near people, especially new people. “Do you think I can add weights?” She looks at me hopefully. “I want to get strong as quickly as I can.”

“The only bar I have weighs 45 pounds. We could try that and see if it’s too much.” I help Abigail position the bar across her shoulders, feeling small zaps and jolts as my knuckles graze against her skin around the tank top. Evidence suggests I am physically attracted to Abigail, and I’m not sure what to do about that.

“Ok,” I say. “I’m going to put my hand on your back at first while you’ve got the weight on.”

“Got it.” Abigail bends her knees slowly until her thighs are parallel with the ground and she grunts a bit as she starts to rise back to standing. She laughs. “Oh man,” she says, leaning into my palm a bit. I feel her ribs expanding and contracting as she breathes. “Now I see why you make so much noise when you do this.”

I smile, even though she hasn't said something amusing. I feel a deep yearning to touch her more, but also to watch her move, to see her delight in achieving something difficult.

I coach Abigail through a few more sets of squats and then show her a basic deadlift. She has a harder time with the proper form for a deadlift, even after watching me and feeling my hand on her back. "Could you take a picture of me so I can see what you're talking about?" Her question makes me feel foolish. If we were in a gym, we'd have mirrors to use as a tool so she could see her form.

"That's a good idea," I tell her, reaching for my phone on the counter. I set up the camera and tell her to try again, snapping a few shots as she moves. "Hey," I say as she executes a perfect lift. "You did it! Here, look." She puts the bar down and we lean over my screen. "See how your back looks different on this last one?" Abigail nods, smiling.

She fans herself and looks away from the photos. I'm relieved when she asks if we can call it a day. Somewhere along the way, I developed a raging erection from watching her move.

CHAPTER 17

ABIGAIL

I LIMP over to the bag chair and collapse into it. I shouldn't be this tired after just a few exercises with light weight, but my body is screaming at me. I lean my head back against the wall, breathing heavy, but then I feel Hunter staring at me again and open my eyes. "What?"

"You didn't stretch," he says. "Your body will build up lactic acid and you'll be sore if you don't stretch."

"Won't I be sore anyway?"

He ponders this a minute before replying. "Yes. That's likely if you have no experience lifting weights. I must recommend that you stretch, though."

"Hunter, I'm not going to move from this chair for a bit. If you want to stretch, suit yourself." As he bends and twists his body, I enjoy the view. He doesn't have a spare ounce of flab. I think about my own soft stomach, the way my thighs slide together while I walk. Maybe lifting weights will change all of that. I think about Hunter touching my back, how my skin seemed to ripple beneath his fingers.

It's just been awhile since I've been with a man, I convince myself.

I don't want to get involved in a relationship, especially not with my landlord. My boss's son. That's not why I came here. *Better change the subject*, I think.

"Tell me about your project," I say, turning to look out the window as Hunter bends to touch his toes.

He grabs a glass of brown liquid and sits next to me at his computer desk. "I took human tissue samples with me to the space station," he says, pulling up some images on his computer. "I am doing my best to explain this in lay terms. I practiced last night." He looks at me as if he's frightened I might run away.

"I promise I'll interrupt you if I don't understand," I say and he nods.

"My research was funded jointly by the institutes for health and the advancement of science. I was using my computational background to study and understand how gravity, or the lack of it, affects the tissue. The goal is to see what that means for disease and human health."

"Wow. It's so amazing to me that you're my landlord and you've just, like, been to outer space."

He blinks and scowls. "Should you be taking notes?"

"I'm good. Tell me more." Hunter shows me how his tissue samples changed quickly in space and how he believes this is a model for how disease might slowly affect people's tissues on earth. I have to interrupt him a few times when he starts explaining how vessels in bones behave differently from those in organs. "It sounds like your research requires you to

be away from gravity,” I say, hopeful that I’m understanding him. “Can that be done without being in space?”

Hunter frowns. He’s quiet for a long time, and I’m worried he’s angry that I don’t understand what he’s talking about, but then he says, “that’s the crux of it, Abigail. We weren’t finished studying the samples yet, and they canceled the program.”

“So what are you trying to do? Build another space station and try again on your own?”

He frowns. “I just need someone to fund a mission back to the existing space station,” he says.

I pull out my phone and tap into the web browser. “So... you need 58 million dollars?”

“Approximately.”

I sigh. “Do you have anything to drink? I feel like I need one of Diana’s beers.”

Indigo calls a while later, when I’ve limped home and collapsed on the couch. “Ungh,” I groan by way of greeting. “I think my legs are on fire.”

“What on earth have you been up to over there?”

I tell her how I decided to start lifting weights and she cuts me off. “Get your ass over here. This sounds like an in-person kind of story.”

It takes much longer than it should to hobble slowly to the Inn, where Sara and Indigo are helping an elderly couple out to their car. “You all simply *must* come back this spring for the May Day festival,” Indigo coos, tossing a suitcase into the back seat. “I’ll save room number 6 just for you.” The woman pats Indigo’s hand while her husband fires up the engine of their ancient Cadillac. Sara drapes an arm loosely over her wife’s shoulders as I make my way toward them.

“Eesh,” Sara says, frowning. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Exercise,” I moan, hobbling up their porch steps. We walk back to the living room, and Sara pulls out a tennis ball.

“Here,” she says. “Lie down with this under your back and wriggle around. It’ll help, I promise.”

Indigo runs off for a tray of snacks as I roll around on their carpet.

“I brought cucumber water for us,” Indigo says, scooting up closer to her wife on the couch. I force my aching body to get up and into a chair opposite them and chug the water.

“I should have listened to Hunter and stretched,” I moan.

“Wait,” Sara stops mid-sip of her chilled cucumber water. “You were lifting weights with *Hunter*? Like, socially?”

Indigo passes me another mason jar of water when she sees I’ve finished mine. “Abigail here was about to spill her guts,” she says, pulling up a basket of popcorn. “I always like snacks for a good story. Now. How did you wind up lifting weights with Hunter Crawford?”

Sara rolls her eyes, but helps herself to a handful of the popcorn. I tell them about dinner and our barter. Then I bite my lip and reveal, “and he lifts weights with no shirt on.”

“Ooh, this is juicy,” Indigo says. “So you’re working out to shape up for a good shag?”

I explain that I can’t explain why I want to learn to work out. Sara interjects, “Well a half naked man will help. If you’re into that.”

I throw a piece of popcorn at her, but admit that shirtless, intense Hunter is definitely a perk. “He’s like an iceberg,” I tell them. “I think there’s a lot of interesting stuff going on beneath the surface.” By the time they each tell me what they know about him—not much, considering they’ve known him for years—I’m too sore to walk home and they put me up in one of the guest rooms for the night.

I walk into work the next day feeling lighter and stronger. I dive into writing remarks for Rose to host a fancy pants investor looking to help the undergrads form their own startup companies. Oak Creek College is a short train ride away from New York City and Philadelphia, and our students are filled with all sorts of interesting ideas for tech companies and smarter mass transit.

They’ve got ideas for apps and robots and all sorts of things.

I text Hunter to tell him about this one visiting investor, Asa Wexler. He seems like the kind of guy Hunter should meet, and he’s coming to town later this semester to meet with

Rose about funding some chemistry initiatives. *Come check out this guy's investment portfolio when you get a chance.*

I feel pretty proud that I retained everything Hunter told me about his work and located an investor prospect from this list. Asa's interested in pharmaceutical research. Based on what Hunter has said, I have a feeling this will be a good connection for him.

I'm jolted out of my thoughts when I hear a chorus of laughter erupt from Christa's cubicle. All the women from my floor are gathered around her computer howling, dabbing at their eyes. I must have been deeply engrossed in my work to miss what got them to this state. "What on earth is going on over there?"

Christa beckons me over. "Ignore the illustrations," she says, pointing at an article on her monitor. "Or don't. Your mileage may vary."

I squint and lean in to see they're all cackling about an article proclaiming there's a new technique for going down on a woman.

"Guaranteed to deliver orgasm in under three minutes." I feel a flush begin in my chest and spread upward to the tips of my ears. As Christa and Anne gush about how their boyfriends do just fine without this new technique, I can't help but remember how reluctant Jack was to try anything adventurous.

I'd had other partners before him, but in the years between high school and Jack, nobody was doing anything mind blowing. With a sigh, I read along about this so-called Kivin method until I hear a voice over my shoulder.

“Biological approach to stimulation of the vulva.
Fascinating.”

CHAPTER 18

HUNTER

MY ARRIVAL SEEMS to have startled Abigail. I make note that I should announce my arrival before approaching behind her. The women seemed very engrossed in the article on the screen, and upon reading, I can understand why.

When Abigail turns to face me abruptly, I explain, “There’s long been discussion of the male climax as a biological response to stimulation, while the human female climax is thought to be equal parts physical and psychological. This article suggests a method of a biological female orgasm. Purely a result of proper stimulation technique. Fascinating.”

“Is this guy for real?” Abigail’s co-worker addresses her question toward the group at large. I frown, realizing I must have committed a social mistake, verbalizing my thoughts on the article.

Abigail stands and introduces me, saying, “This is Dr. Crawford from the biology department. He takes a professional interest in how tissues react to stimuli.”

I feel an odd sense of warmth and delight at hearing Abigail summarize my thoughts in a way that seems pleasing to the other women. They smile genuinely and return to their

work areas. I follow Abigail to her desk, where she pulls out a folder about the investor she mentioned. “I wanted you to check out his other investment interests,” she says. “He’s coming to campus anyway, so we may as well try to set up a meeting for you.”

“This does seem promising,” I tell her, noting the list of start-up companies he’s nurtured, then sold to larger corporations for a hefty profit. Asa Wexler must be a billionaire. “He invested in the new Lyme vaccine,” I say, impressed.

Abigail smiles up at me, and again I feel the warm sensation of pleasure course through my body. She seems about to say something when I hear my mother shout for Abigail to come to her office. “We can talk about it after work,” Abigail says, rising and smoothing the sides of her skirt.

I watch her walk down the hall, noting the beautiful shape of her backside, and remembering how her bare legs looked in my house. I have to remind myself that I’m just having a natural, evolutionary response to her. Pair this with a discussion of orgasm, and it makes sense that I have another throbbing erection.

All afternoon, I try to focus on my lecture and my students, but I am distracted alternately by memories of the magazine article and of Abigail, translating my thoughts into phrases other people enjoyed. *Does she understand me?* She seems to.

Nothing seems to shake me from my distraction, not even poring over my microscope or diving into my statistical

software. I go home early to get a good workout in before helping Abigail work slowly through her repetitions.

Her deadlift and squat technique has improved dramatically, and she has been able to add more weight to the bar than I would have thought.

Her skin shines with sweat as she finishes a set of ten lifts and then she walks over to add more weight. Watching to see that she attaches it safely to the bar, I see that her nipples have hardened visibly. *That's a normal side effect of exertion, I think, coughing and adjusting my shorts. This doesn't mean my tenant is aroused.*

“How long until my muscles are as defined as yours?” Abigail pokes at her legs. I know from the few times I've placed my hands on her body to correct her form that Abigail is primarily a soft person. Warm and smooth, her body often quivers beneath my touch, as if I could drown inside her curves.

“I have slow twitch muscle fibers, with a great deal of adenosine triphosphate production,” I tell her, unable to look away from her nipples.

“Adenosine? Can you dumb it down for me a little?”

“I estimate that your body is composed of fast twitch muscle fibers,” I tell her. “I think you have the ability to get very strong and produce a great deal of force, but might not be predisposed to long duration endurance activities.”

“Hm.” Abigail frowns and pauses in preparing her exercise. She’s quiet as she carries out her repetitions, which is uncommon for her.

“Did my assessment upset you? I frequently upset people inadvertently. I assure you, I placed no value judgement on either muscle type...”

She offers a slight smile, her face unreadable to me unless I study. Are her pupils contracting? Is her breath increasing? The pulse points in her throat? I can never answer anyone quickly, because it takes me a good deal of time to study their biological markers and calculate which emotion they are likely experiencing.

“I see that you are flustered,” Abigail says. She shakes her head. “You didn’t upset me talking about my body.” She grins. “I know I’m a thick gal.”

Grunting, Abigail lifts the bar and then pulls it up to chest height. She lowers the weights to the ground and says, “No. I was feeling a little homesick I think. My brothers all lift weights together. Not that they ever invited me...”

“Diana didn’t allow us to exclude her from our activities,” I observe. We both share a small laugh about that, and she finishes her workout. Abigail leaves her camping chair in my apartment, so it’s all set up for her to sink into it when we’re done. She continues to refuse to stretch after our workout. “I don’t understand why you would choose not to take care of your muscles properly after exercise,” I scold, handing her a glass of chocolate milk.

We've developed a routine where I talk about my work and she types notes into my computer, emailing them to herself to make sense of when she has time to ponder them. I hate having someone else touch my computer and it's frustrating to have these limitations. My patience for teaching her to exercise seems endless, but I do not approve of her process at all for putting this proposal together.

As Abigail struggles to type her password into the dual-authentication system I set up for her cloud storage, I can't take it anymore. I snap, "We cannot continue in this manner, Abigail. When will you get your own computer?"

Even I can read her frustration as she looks over at me. "I had a laptop and my asshole ex boyfriend broke it. I'll get a new one when I can afford it, Hunter." Her tone is harsh, but I'm distracted by her use of the word broke. Not disabled or erased or corrupted.

"Define broken," I say, crossing my arms and leaning back in my office chair.

"He smashed it...like bent it backwards the wrong way..." her voice is soft. This man sounds decidedly unpleasant and I don't like that Abigail was romantically involved with someone who would do such a thing.

I think of my conversations with Moorely. We often brainstorm as he tinkers with various hardware he has rescued. His students are always coming to office hours with odd bits and pieces of computers and they cobble together machinery capable of fantastic computational speeds. "Do you still have this laptop?"

Abigail invites me to follow her into her side of the duplex while she fetches the broken computer. As per usual, I forget social conventions and follow her upstairs as she retreats to her bedroom closet. She starts as she realizes I'm still behind her when she stoops to pull a box from the closet. She places a palm to her chest. "Hunter, you move so quietly. I didn't know you'd followed me."

"Bedrooms are a private space." I recite some of the social rules my father used to tell me I needed to memorize whether or not I understood their purpose. "I apologize for violating a custom."

"Next time I'll make sure I clarify. Hey, do you want to visit your old headboard?" Abigail's laugh seems to be the nervous type of laugh. I glance over to her bed, which she's decorated with blue checked sheets and a white puffy duvet. The dark wood stands out in contrast to the walls she's painted a soft blue. This seems like a pleasant space to sleep and wake up each morning.

Then I look into her arms, where she's holding a cracked laptop case. "May I ask what inspired you to keep this if you were certain it was irreparably damaged? From Indigo's description, you brought little else with you from Ohio."

Abigail bites her lip and tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. The gesture is alluring to me. I like standing close enough to watch her chest rise and fall with her breath. "I don't want to lose my novel," she says. She sinks onto her bed, sitting at the edge with the broken laptop in her hands. She tells me how she began working on a creative writing early in her college career

and had a working draft of a novel nearly complete when her ex-lover destroyed her computer during an argument.

Even though I haven't been invited to sit, I do, holding out my hands for her to pass over the laptop. Upon brief inspection in the fading light, it would appear the portion of the laptop containing the hard drive is intact. "Abigail," I meet her gaze. "I might be able to extract the information from his hard drive."

Her eyes well up with tears. I develop a stress response and wonder what I said to make her cry. I run through a checklist. I was kind. I hadn't commented upon her appearance...*what are all the reasons women cry?*

"Oh, Hunter! I can't believe you would do something so kind for me." A single tear rolls down her cheek, captivating me. When I look closer, I see that Abigail's pupils have dilated. She has leaned closer to my body.

"It stands to reason that your novel was of high quality," I tell her. "My mother describes your writing as excellent and I have seen evidence that you have strong communication skills." My words seem to reassure her and she lowers her head, flushing.

"Thank you," she whispers. Her scent fills the room. I can smell the fresh, soapy, rosemary essence of her permeating the sheets. It's an intoxicating aroma, even with the edge of sweat from her workout. I acknowledge that I am very aroused by Abigail. This is all very new. I hadn't been thinking about women...had only focused on my failings as a scientist since returning from space.

It has been many years since I entered a relationship with a new person and Heather took the initiative when we began dating. Abigail and I have become friendly, exchanging jokes and talking comfortably in my house most days. It is not out of the question that she might share an attraction to me. I run through the biological signals someone might use to make their attraction evident. Flushed skin, rapid breathing, dilated pupils. Abigail leans closer to me and I nod, swallowing. *Yes. I decide. She would like me to kiss her.*

Shifting my weight to my right hand, I lean closer to her and raise my left, bringing it to her cheek. I want to repeat her gesture of tucking her loose hair back and out of the way, and I'd like to stroke her cheek. She breathes through her nose, meeting my gaze as the pads of my fingers make contact with the sensitive skin near her ear. In slow motion, gently, I begin to tuck her stray lock behind her ear, but Abigail stiffens and pulls back.

CHAPTER 19

ABIGAIL

DAMN MY TRAITOROUS BODY! Damn Jack to hell for making me scared, question my instincts. Just as Hunter leaned in for a kiss, I froze and recoiled from his gentle touch.

He leaps from the bed, snapping to attention. “I apologize, Abigail. I misinterpreted your biophysical signals.”

Hunter turns abruptly to leave and rushes down the stairs.

“Hunter! Wait, please let me explain!”

He pauses midway down the stairs, but doesn’t turn to face me. I cling to the bannister above him. “You didn’t misinterpret. I wanted you to kiss me. I just don’t know if I can.”

He slowly turns to face me, frowning. “I don’t understand.”

“I just...I might be broken.”

He shakes his head, but ascends the stairs to stand closer to me. “I don’t believe you could be broken, Abigail. You seem very functional to me.”

I exhale slowly, my cheeks puffing out as the breath leaves me. “Will you have dinner with me? Let me tell you what

happened before I came to Oak Creek.”

“I’m following a careful diet regimen.”

“So you don’t want to keep talking to me?”

He shakes his head and runs his hands through his hair. “That’s not what I mean. No. I mean yes—I want to talk to you.”

After some nudging, Hunter explains that he’s worried his pre-planned food will spoil if he doesn’t eat it today. He brings his food over to my house, and sits while I make my own fresh dinner.

I can’t help but smile at how fastidiously he pays attention to what he eats. He’s so careful about everything. It must have taken a lot of courage for him to lean in for a kiss. I feel terrible that he must have been running calculations, trying to decide whether I’d welcome his touch, only to have me jerk back as he delivered a gentle caress that should have warmed me to my bones.

We sit in companionable silence, eating, until he says, “Judging by the trauma to your computer and the haste with which you departed Ohio, I have deduced that this Jack person harmed you physically.” When he looks at me, his dark eyes have a hard edge. I’ve never seen him look like this. “If this is accurate, it will take some time for me to manage my anger.”

I nod. I summarize my relationship with Jack, how his layoff was a catalyst for his descent into anger and deeper depression. “Not like you, Hunter. I admire how you don’t let anything get in the way of you pursuing your passion.”

When I talk about the night I left, I see Hunter swallow and grit his teeth. “Abigail,” he says, his voice rasping. “I both want to hug you and harm Jack. May I hug you?”

“Oh, Hunter. Yes, please.” I lower my hand into his on the table, squeezing. He catches me off guard when he stands and tugs me gently to my feet, enveloping me in his long, muscular arms. He pulls me close against his body until I can feel him inhale and exhale, feel the gentle throb of his heart. He hugs me without ulterior motive. Just wraps his arms around me and rests his chin on my head. His large hands splay wide across my back and press me against his body.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been held. This is an extended embrace, a spoken desire to comfort me, from a man who doesn’t speak much about his emotions. I start to cry, and let myself weep out all my frustrations while Hunter just holds me and breathes with me. I cry for all the time I’ve missed with my family and cry from the ache of them not coming to my aide. “I feel so many conflicting emotions,” I murmur against Hunter’s t-shirt.

“I often feel emotions are conflicting,” he says, which makes me laugh.

I pull back and start cleaning up the supper dishes, startled to see Hunter helping me. Growing up, my brothers always left the table straight away to help my father with some household chore or another. Cleaning out the gutters. Mowing the grass. Tinkering with the boiler in the winter. Dishes and kitchen work were the realm of my mother and me, and so it

went when I lived with Jack. I never felt resentful of it. After all, I had no desire to mend the alternator on the lawn mower.

There is something so heartfelt about Hunter loading my dishwasher, just automatically helping me tidy my kitchen. I feel a rush of desire overtake my body so rapidly I have to grip the counter to catch my breath. “I wish my parents had noticed I was floundering,” I tell him, trying to take my mind off the way it felt when he held me. I can’t stop the flood of thoughts I’m having now, staring at how his mesh shorts drape from his ass.

He seems to consider my words and tells me, “My parents notice everything. Regardless, they did nothing to prevent me from marrying a person who would try to take my intellectual property.” He pours the powdered soap into the tray in the dishwasher and presses start. “My father says that children need to be allowed to make mistakes and learn from the consequences of their actions.”

This makes me sigh. “I still get the sense your parents took all your wants and needs into consideration when guiding you through your life choices.”

“That’s an accurate assessment,” he says. He looks up at the clock above the sink and coughs. “I need to be going now. I believe it’s customary for me to ask if there’s anything additional I can do for you.”

Kiss me, I think. Press me up against the fridge and kiss me until my lips are swollen. But I don’t say that. I just shake my head and thank him for being a good listener. He grabs the shattered laptop and walks out the back door, reminding me to

lock behind him and ensure the security system is activated.
When I climb in bed later, I dream of Hunter Crawford's arms
around me, strong and silent.

CHAPTER 20

HUNTER

“MOORELY, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Whatcha got, Crawford?” He sits back in his office chair, arms crossed, eyebrow raised. I deposit the remains of Abigail’s laptop on his desk with little fanfare. He squints and picks up the pieces. “What the hell happened here?”

“Are you able to extract the files from the hard drive? I would be grateful.” I wait while he examines the pieces for a few moments. He sits up and raps his fingers on his desk, gazing at me with an unreadable expression.

“This is no problem,” he says and I relax a bit. Abigail will be extremely happy if I can give her back access to her novel. Making her happy feels like an enticing objective.

“Well, thank you.” I start to walk out of his office, assuming he will contact me once he has achieved his goal.

“Well, now, hang on a minute, mate. It’ll cost you.”

“I thought you just said it would be no problem?”

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to do it for nothing! I need you to come with me to play cards this Friday.”

I spin around in the doorway to study his face and determine whether he's joking. I see no signs of a smile, no indications around his eyes that he might be teasing. "You play cards?"

"Crawford," he sighs. "I play cards about as well as you tell jokes."

"Surely you are able to just assess the numerical probability of each outcome and bet accordingly?"

He shakes his head. "I don't know. I'm just not good at it. I'll trade you this hard drive excavation for a night of poker and booze."

"Is the alcohol mandatory? I'm balancing my caloric intake now that I've re-established a routine here—"

"Jesus, man. You don't have to take a drink." He sends me a calendar invite to his card game and tells me to bring my brothers if they're in town. As we walk to lunch he elaborates, explaining that he's lost quite a bit at this particular card game over the past few months. When I look at the invite, I note that the list includes a group of retired academics and local business owners.

"Moorely," I begin. "Have you been playing cards with the Acorns?"

A flush creeps up his pale cheeks and he hangs his head. "Crawford, mate, I don't know what the hell happened."

"But Moorely..." I shake my head and take a bite of bell pepper with hummus. "They're senior citizens. They spend their days making brooms from found twigs."

“Aw, sod off, Crawford. They’re all still quite sharp. Hell, half of them used to have our jobs teaching here at the college. You know what they’re making me do? Foot rubs. Bunion massage. Don’t send me in there alone!”

I groan at the thought of spending time with diabetic senior feet. But a bargain is a bargain. If I want my funding proposal to move forward at a realistic pace, I need Abigail to have the proper equipment to help me without her interfering with the settings on my wireless mouse. “Fine. How long to retrieve the file?”

He seems to melt with relief. “Oh, hell. I can get you the information on a flash drive in a few hours. I just need to teach my intro course first.”

I return to my office and find myself with free time, as no students have chosen to take advantage of open hours. My thoughts wander back to that article Abigail and her co-workers were reading, and then to her crying softly in my arms last night. If people have always been a mystery to me in general, women have been a whole different level of confusing. The widely-accepted view that they are driven by emotion makes them feel unreachable to me.

Clearly, Heather was not reachable, not for the long term. I had barely considered her while I was in the space station. She was right to leave, I think. Although perhaps she could have chosen a different method of departure.

It seems like common courtesy to give someone advance warning if one plans to dissolve a marriage contract. My mother has said that women don’t respond well to being

ignored. I find this confusing as well. I go months without speaking to my sister, for instance, and she's still very happy to share her beer in exchange for my input on flavor and consistency. But do we share intimacy, my family and I? Or just history?

After Heather left, I realized I am not capable of partnership because I am not capable of emotional intimacy. I thought maybe I was making headway with Abigail. She seemed grateful for my hug...but not my kiss.

The file of information about Asa Wexler sits on the corner of my desk, reminding me of the growing close connection I have with my tenant. I felt compelled to hug her last night, which is unusual for me. After she told me about her struggles with her former lover, I felt so angry. I enjoy Abigail—she understands me and has such strong communication skills. She is helping me realize my career goals and all she asked in return was help lifting weights. Which I enjoy anyway!

But this article about oral pleasure—it suggests a way to give a woman an orgasm without first connecting to her emotionally. The more I think about it, the more I want to try this with Abigail. I want to make her climax, to see what that looks like.

My pulse has increased rapidly by the time my phone rings. I am grateful for the distraction from my thought spiral. Sara calls to let me know she's made headway negotiating with Heather's attorneys. "Headway is not victory, though, Hunter."

“As I said, I am more than happy to pay her a sum of money. I am not willing to continue a contractual relationship with her that includes future earnings.”

“I know, dude. Give me time and patience, ok?”

“I feel no sense of urgency here.” Wait. Perhaps that is false. I am still legally married until this is resolved, and suddenly that seems wrong. “Actually, Sara?”

“Yep.”

“I don’t want to be married to Heather any longer. I am feeling anxious to end that.”

“I know, Hunter. She did you dirty, buddy. I’m working on it. Hey, how are things as a landlord? Everything working out ok with Abigail as a tenant?”

“Abigail painted her bedroom. I hadn’t considered that the tenant might change the wall colors.”

Sara pauses on the other end of the line. “Well, do you want me to add that into the lease for next year? Did she ruin the carpets or something?”

“No.” I am not sure why I mentioned the wall color. “She is a very excellent tenant. I think the color she chose in the bedroom is more appropriate for the space.”

“Ok, then. Glad that’s working out.”

“I am fond of Abigail.” I am uncertain why I am sharing this information with Sara. I think, actually, that she and her wife Indigo are friendly with Abigail. They helped her move in and lent her the furniture from my father, after all.

“Hunter...I’m glad you like Abigail. She’s been through some rough times. I feel like I need to say that Indigo and I are ready to fuck up the next man who hurts her.”

“I, too, would want to get violent if someone harms Abigail.”

Sara actually laughs, which I’m not sure I’ve ever heard her do before. “I don’t just mean physical harm, Hunter. Anyway, I have a client coming in. I’ll talk to you soon.” She hangs up before she can elaborate and I’m left to my racing thoughts of Abigail, her emotions, and my strong desire to attempt the Kivin technique to bring her pleasure.

CHAPTER 21

ABIGAIL

DIANA AND INDIGO strong-armed me into joining them on the Autumn Apple planning committee. At first I felt like I was back at home—with everyone telling me what to do—but then I realized there’s a huge difference between my parents insisting I join the family business and my friends asking for my communication skills for social media and other marketing for the town festival.

And, after all, I do owe Indigo a solid for lending me all the furniture. I keep trying to give it back to her a bit at a time, but she pretends she can’t hear me when I offer. So I help her proofread the advertisements she puts in the tourist newsletters when she promotes the Inn.

The main issue in planning the Autumn Apple festival seems to be alcohol. Most everyone wants there to be some, but the people who don’t...really don’t want there to be alcohol. My outsider perspective is that this town seemed really relieved by Prohibition, and the residents opposed to alcohol sales have had family living in Oak Creek ever since.

I don’t think my parents would agree to live in a town where they couldn’t buy beer for football games. Where my

brothers didn't have easy access to a hockey bar. I snort, momentarily giddy that the town's dry status might act as a barrier keeping my family out of my business for awhile.

Between lifting weights with Hunter, drafting up a funding proposal for Hunter, and Autumn Apple planning sessions with my friends, I haven't had much time to miss my family... or respond to their phone calls.

The girls and I all meet after work at the Inn, where Indigo has a full house and spends our meeting baking scones. She keeps stopping between batches to draw maps directing her guests to Oak Creek's various craft or antique shops.

Diana yanks the pocket door closed to keep people out of the kitchen and plunks a file on the counter, sending up a poof of flour while Indigo rolls out her next batch of baked goods.

"You see, Abigail," Diana says, "Oak Creek is a dry town. The college campus is dry. But the Apple fest simply must include hard apple cider or the people will revolt."

She points to a map of the town limits, a giant red line with angry hash marks drawn around the boundaries where nobody can sell alcohol. Some enterprising businesswoman built a bar directly across the street from the no-booze line, and I've spent a few nights with my friends drinking pints at the Nobler Experiment. "Tessy has a good thing going at her bar, and she will absolutely come at you with a shotgun if you try to sell hooch anywhere near her establishment. And the problem is that she is the county council woman in charge of festival permits."

"So how are you going to sell hard cider?"

Indigo smiles so intently I wonder whether she's heard us or just tasted one of her scones. She says, beaming, "Sara figured it all out! Didn't you, babe? We aren't going to SELL the cider. We're going to *donate* the cider to people who buy apples."

She dances around the kitchen table to kiss Sara on the forehead while Diana talks me through the logistics of what we need.

"The flyers and info for the festival will have to be *very* clear and very specific," she says. "No donations for anyone under 21, etc., etc. Maybe we shouldn't even sell apples to anyone under 21...how will we get that past Hastings?"

"The newspaper guy?"

"He's dryer than an old raisin," Diana says, snatching a warm scone from Indigo's tray. "Fuck, this is amazing. Did you use my rosemary?" Indigo nods as Diana continues. "Hastings runs a smut rag paper of half truths, and yet, he's the leading force for keeping this town dry! He somehow has clout with all the Acorns, even though he's not retired like them, and Ed gets the votes he needs every single time this comes up for discussion."

"Acorns?"

"They're like...mafia is the wrong word. Let's just focus on the newspaper ad for the cider booth and we can talk Acorns over hard liquor sometime."

The next day, I'm too overwhelmed with work and Autumn Apple stuff to even think about lifting weights. I text Hunter from work that I'll come over a bit later to show him what I've got so far on his proposal. He was showing me around his lab last week, all the different tissue samples he wants to study. He comes alive when he talks about science. Instead of the sharp edge and short sentences, he's animated and excited. I can almost feel him vibrating when he talks about the potential that can come from understanding the aging process on human flesh. I'd probably be grossed out if he weren't so excited about it all.

But Hunter is far from gross. He hasn't tried to kiss me again, and every day that I'm sitting in a bag chair in his house, leaning close to him, I get so distracted thinking about his lips.

He makes me feel like helping him write a proposal will help to save the world, like my work with him and with the university really matters for society. I never thought about it that way before, that my ideas about communication can make a real difference for people. Hunter reminds me that my work here is important, not just for the people of this small town, but for all the students who come through the school and all the brilliant ideas they'll think of while they're studying here.

Of course, Hunter doesn't phrase it that way. He uses phrases like "maximum impact" and "fundamental changes to research infrastructure," but I know what he means. And I appreciate him reminding me.

It's nice hanging out with people who are so driven. I guess my dad was driven to create a business. My brothers all seemed just...content to join him.

I want *more*. Everyone in my life seemed to be floating along until I came to Oak Creek. Now I see what "more" could really look like. Rose is away in eastern Europe somewhere having dinner with foreign alumni from the college, asking them to make donations to the endowment to go toward financial aide for students. She's determined to come back with \$50 million in pledges. Just from this one dinner!

And Hunter—he literally wants to go past the moon. Talk about motivated. I try not to let myself get too excited about his promise to rescue my novel from my laptop, but just thinking about everyone I've come to know here gets me so excited to work on it again. What if I can really finish it someday? What if, like Hunter, *my* ideas can move people?

My head is still in the clouds later when I wander into Hunter's townhouse. I freeze in my tracks when I notice that he has a real chair at his desk, next to his ergonomic Star Trek chair. "Woah," I say. "You bought furniture?"

Hunter looks up from his monitor and glances at the chair. "Oh." The new addition is a dark red wooden captains chair. "Yes. I'm told it's high quality craftsmanship."

"I can see that," I say. "But what made you double the amount of furniture in your house?"

He shrugs. "It seemed prudent to get you someplace to sit. You should be comfortable while we sit together." He looks at me in that intense way of his, without blinking.

“You bought it just for me?”

He seems to consider this. “You inspired me to purchase it, but I will also invite my family to sit in it if they decide to visit.”

It’s hard to explain how much it means to me that this specific man did something kind, with me in mind. I can tell it means a lot that he thought of me this way. I sink into the chair, running my hands up and down the smooth arms. “I love it.”

I lean over to pat his arm and shiver at the now-familiar electric spark as our skin connects. He doesn’t break our gaze, and stares at me with liquid brown eyes. His face is so unreadable. He says, “I have your data.”

I blink. “What?”

“Your data. My colleague was able to pull your data from your hard drive.”

My heart stops beating for a few minutes and I just stare, open-mouthed. I hadn’t really wanted to fully hope that would be possible. I held onto a tiny sliver of maybe, but was steeling myself that my work was gone forever, along with my life in Ohio.

I almost don’t know what to make of this news. In the few seconds between heartbeats, my thoughts zoom through possibilities. I can go sit in the coffee shop and work on my novel. *My novel*. “You have it?”

Hunter leans to the side and lifts up a sleek, silver laptop. He hands it to me. “What’s this?” I see him grit his teeth as if

he's trying to decide what to say. "I mean, I know it's a laptop, Hunter. Is it yours?"

"I bought it for you," he says. He licks his lower lip and I focus on the way it moves above the dark stubble growing in. He must have forgotten to shave today, which means he was really distracted. Upon realizing that I know his habits so well, I gasp. I can't do this. I'm not ready for any kind of relationship. I can't be memorizing a man's grooming habits.

"Hunter, I can't accept this."

"The expense is insignificant for me," he says. "Well, provided my divorce settlement goes as well as Sara predicts."

I snort out a brief laugh. "Did you just make a joke?"

He rubs a palm across his chin, thinking. "I suppose I did," he says.

"Hunter, this laptop...it's too much."

"I could have lied and said it was a refurbishment from the college, but I felt it was important to be truthful," he says.

"Thank you, Hunter. It's just that...things are...I can't get romantically involved with anyone right now."

Another long pause from him. I remind myself that Hunter takes longer than many people to respond, especially if the conversation is about emotions and feelings. I try not to rush him as I wait for him to say something.

Eventually, after an agonizingly long ten seconds, he says, "I can't identify whether I have romantic feelings for you, Abigail. But I am certainly fond of you. And I feel invested in

helping you feel happy. I have observed that writing makes you happy.”

“You’ve observed that?”

He nods. “I can see your pulse quicken—the side of your neck ticks when you’re writing. And the rise and fall of your chest slows as you think about a sentence, and then I’ve seen you smile as you type the sentence.”

“You noticed all that?”

“Yes.” He leans back a bit in his chair, seeming more at ease now. Now it’s my turn to pause before I answer him, but he doesn’t seem outwardly bothered by a silent gap in our conversation.

I’ve never met anyone like Hunter before. He’s very self-aware, and always totally honest. There’s no filter here, and it’s refreshing to know exactly where I stand with someone, even if it’s agonizing to know that he’s been studying me intently to determine whether I’m happy. “I feel a little overwhelmed,” I tell him.

I see him swallow. “Have I made a social error again?”

“No, Hunter. I’m just not used to people seeing me.”

CHAPTER 22

HUNTER

ABIGAIL BEGRUDGINGLY AGREES to accept the laptop after I assure her that I've come to think of our time together lifting weights as social time. Her work on my proposal, then, is not being fairly compensated. Hence the laptop.

I enjoy watching her open the new computer. She takes delight in setting up a password, and when I hand her the thumb drive with her file on it, she cradles it as if it were epithelial tissue, so delicate.

I take time to memorize the expression on her face as she opens the file containing the draft of her novel. I try to scan her entire body, observing her response—I already knew her pulse was elevated and her cheeks were flushed—I contain my desire to wonder aloud what an MRI would show of her brain activity at that moment.

She immediately clutches the computer to her chest and asks if we can go work on my proposal somewhere in public. “Like the bakery or even the library!”

I shake my head. “The library isn't acceptable. I can hear the bag piper from inside the library, and Mary Pat's book club meets at the coffee shop in the afternoons.”

Abigail bites her lip. “I keep forgetting to join Mary Pat for that. But, Hunter, I really want to go out somewhere now that I have the ability to be portable.”

She grabs my hand and tugs me out the door, nearly running, explaining that she’s going to buy me a beer at the Nobler Experiment and we’re going to plot there like real business executives. “Doesn’t all the magic happen at happy hour? Isn’t that a saying?”

“I had not heard this saying before, Abigail.”

It doesn’t take us long to walk outside town to the entrance of the pub. The atmosphere is crowded and I take a minute in the doorway to asses. It seems like the level of conversation is loud enough to feel like white noise, without an overpowering juke box or performer competing for my attention. “Yes,” I say. “We can get work done here.”

Abigail has not let go of my hand since she pulled me from my living room, and I take a moment to appreciate how natural, how nice it feels to be touching her affectionately. Tessy stares down at our entwined fingers and Abigail drops my hand to clutch the edge of the bar while she studies the specials. “What’s good, Tessy?”

I note that Tessy appears pleased to see Abigail, that people at the bar recognize her and greet her warmly. I can’t recall getting this sort of reception going out with Heather. Even Heather’s friends always seemed firm lipped and stiff. Like nobody was ever at ease.

I enjoy the warm closeness of Abigail when she slides in next to me in the booth, making sure our pint glasses are

placed far from her new computer. “I think I feel ready to bang out the project narrative, Hunter,” she says. I watch as her fingers fly over the keyboard. I marvel at how Abigail gives shape to the importance of my research. She puts into words exactly why I believe someone should take a chance and fund this work. I can only watch her in awe.

“You’ve unlocked my ideas,” I say.

She grins, and I love thinking I put that smile on her face. “I just listened really hard to what you weren’t saying,” she says.

The day after we complete a rough draft of the proposal, Abigail tells me she’s too busy with my mother and with Autumn Apple work to come over and work out.

I find that my afternoons feel emptier without her, without the anticipation of sitting beside her to talk. Loneliness is not a familiar experience for me.

I’m not entirely sure that’s what I’m experiencing, but I find I am unable to sit alone at home anymore. I walk through town toward my brother’s office. Is this restlessness?

Archer works as a CPA, but is generally accepted as the mayor of Oak Creek. Our town holds no such office—we are governed by a town council, and Archer is certainly not part of that group, but even the council comes to him for advice.

Perhaps he should have considered a degree in psychology like our mother. Or perhaps he’s content the way things are.

When I arrive at his office he's blaring country music, leaning close to his work station where he has spreadsheets up on two large computer monitors.

I wait for him to notice me, and when he doesn't, I walk around his desk and set my hand on his shoulder. My father has always said it's polite to cough as a way to announce your presence in a room, but with the music so loud I felt I needed another approach. My touch seems to startle Archer, who leaps from his chair and punches me in the shoulder.

Not expecting that, I fall backward, with him on top of me. "Jesus Christ, Hunter," he shouts. He climbs off me and turns off the music at his desk. "You scared the shit out of me."

"You really should lock your office door if you're going to play music *and* become deeply engrossed in your work," I say, rising to my feet.

He shakes his head. "What are you doing here in the middle of the day?"

I look at my watch to confirm and remind him that it's after 4pm. "Shit," he says, saving his work. He looks around his office at the afternoon light coming through the window. "What's up?"

"I had come to ask a favor, but now I feel that you owe me something to make up for punching me."

"How about we're even since I drove to fucking Texas to get you and let you stay at my house."

"You said that was a kindness I didn't need to repay."

Archer rolls his eyes at me. "What do you need, Hunter?"

I can't tell if he's actually frustrated or just exasperated, but I press on. "I would like you to come play cards with me and a colleague Friday night."

"That's the favor? Hanging out with you?"

I consider leaving out the rest of the pertinent information, but decide it's better to be fully honest. "And the Acorns as well."

"Aw, shit, Hunter. Those fucking guys. They're going to make you talk about Heather, you know."

"I'm prepared for that," I tell him. I put my hands in my pockets and wait for his response. He often tries to use silence as a tactic to get people to relent in an argument, but I am unbothered by silence.

He sighs. "Fine. I'll drive. Pick you up at 7?"

I shake my head. "They start early. Best to make it 6."

The rest of the week, it takes all of my concentration to interact with my students. As we approach mid-term exams, they all begin to exhibit stress responses, despite my explanations and suggestions for study techniques. I even tried to play a guided meditation on calm in class one day, but this just resulted in giggles and fidgeting sounds. My mother sternly reminded me that I cannot raise my voice to the students, even when exasperated. So I spend an entire class period on Friday tediously reviewing all the parts of the cell and each of their functions.

By the time I've re-explained mitochondria a third time, I run my fingers through my hair, tell them, falsely, that they've made progress, and dismiss class early. This level of frustration is unusual for me.

On Friday, my restlessness persists even after an intense workout with added jump rope sessions. My brother is due to arrive in an hour, and I feel as though a chemical reaction is detonating inside my body. I make myself a glass of chocolate milk and sit at my computer, which only reminds me that Abigail is not sitting in her new chair as she should be. *Abigail.*

Bringing up her name causes a pulse in whatever emotion simmers beneath the surface of my skin. I don't like this sensation, and I like it even less when I realize I've gotten another erection. I stare down at my cock as if it were a foreign body part. Then I start to think about how long it's been since I've *used* my dick for anything. How many months has it been? Perhaps the answer to the buzzing sensation filling my body is release.

I waste no time pulling my shaft from my athletic shorts. I sit back in my desk chair, stroking myself, and my thoughts shift immediately to Abigail. I feel better already, and decide this is just what I need to calm the vibrations in my veins.

I envision the pulse in her neck ticking just above the heaving swell of her bosom. I imagine what it would look like if she were lying on the ground beneath me. I stroke myself

faster as I think about the shape of her ass when I stand behind her, the feel of her soft skin when I touch her back.

If I close my eyes, I can smell her scent wafting over me the time I sat on her bed. I remember that I have photographs of her in my phone.

Fumbling around, I pull up the image of her bent over, gripping the barbell. *Yes, there.* I can see her nipples pebbled through her tank top.

I can tell I am close to erupting as I stare at her. She bites her lip in the photo and I image what she would look like if her hand was gripped around my cock instead of the barbell.

I imagine what it would feel like to gently rub my thumbs across those thick nubs of nipple, to feel them rise at my touch. I remember the soft groans she makes when she's straining herself lifting weights and pretend that it's me causing those sounds. That it's me bringing her pleasure.

I groan and reach for the towel I had thrown on my desk after my workout. My wrist flicks up and down my cock quickly now, and I know I'm on the verge. Just as I'm about to explode, I see the back door open, and there she is.

There is Abigail herself standing in my doorway.

The sight of her sends me over the edge and with one final flick, I am emptying myself into the towel, pulsing into my fist, moaning in complete ecstasy.

CHAPTER 23

ABIGAIL

I KNOW I shouldn't have accepted the laptop from Hunter, but it's already improved my life dramatically. I had been sketching out ideas by hand for Sara and Indigo to type up for marketing materials for Autumn Apple. Now that I can type my own thoughts at my own pace, I've completed absolutely everything on our checklist and even set up a website for the event.

Every evening, I've been teaching myself to use content management software, which is so thrilling because now I can also help Rose with updates to the college website and share her fundraising successes more quickly. It's funny how one little thing like a laptop can make such a difference, but I guess it's not just the laptop. I have the freedom to use my skills, to stretch my ideas. I have people here who get excited about change.

Well. Some changes. Ed Hastings tapped me on the shoulder when I was working at the coffee shop the other day, wanting to "make sure" I wasn't planning to skirt the rules about alcohol in his dry town. I bought him a muffin, and that seemed to appease him for a bit. Mary Pat told me he's

planning to write a big story about how I refuse to cooperate with town rules. I got Ed to tell me about his background as a journalist and it seemed to make him happy to hear that I aspire to be a great writer like him.

Rose told me to go ahead and work from home this week, since she's going to Panama to speak at some conference, and I've been finishing up my work day by 3, using the afternoons to chip away at my novel. Has it only been a week since Hunter gave me this computer? My whole life has changed again, it seems like.

Friday, I decide to hang around the house, doing laundry and sipping tea in the kitchen while I write from a stool at the counter instead of the coffee shop or the library.

When I hear the familiar sound of Hunter grunting and groaning, I realize it's been days since I've made time to exercise.

Then I feel guilty, because I haven't been working with him on his proposal, either. Life has been such a whirlwind. If I'm really honest, I've been avoiding him a bit until I figure out my feelings since he bought me the chair and the laptop. There's no denying each of those gifts bring up intense emotions. We had such a nice time working together at the pub, even held hands walking there. I don't know what to make of it all. I'm definitely attracted to him, but I'm in no position to start a relationship when I can't even figure out what my life plan should be.

Things just feel so right with Hunter, though. He's brutally honest, up front, and completely earnest at all times. He's

passionate about his work and even though he lost his job, he maintained his staunch belief that his research matters. He refuses to stop doing the work, even if he's no longer being paid for it. I find that passion so...sexy. I find it sexy.

Everything about Hunter Crawford is sexy, from his intense stares to his taut ass to the way he touched my face when he tried to kiss me in my bedroom. And then my stupid body reacted and he left my house thinking I didn't want him.

So when I hear Hunter grunt again through the thin walls of the kitchen, I decide to go on over and join him. It'll feel good to lift weights with him. To be near him.

Only, when I open the back door to his place, he's not lifting weights.

I freeze in my tracks inside his doorway as I see his hand flying at his crotch and realize I have, once again, made a terrible assumption about the noises coming from Hunter Crawford's house.

"I'm so, so sorry," I say, backing up as he moans. "Oh my god, I'm leaving. I'm so sorry."

"Abigail, wait." His voice is oddly calm, and his body seems relaxed in a way I've not seen before.

"I...should let you have privacy," I say, but I don't leave. I'm transfixed, staring at his crotch as he tucks his cock back in his shorts.

“I was thinking about you,” he says, his voice like liquid sex. “And then you appeared.”

I bite my lip, unsure what to make of this. Was he really thinking of me while he did *that*?

“Do you remember that article you were reading with your colleagues?” Hunter tosses a towel on the floor and stands, walking over to me. His hair is disheveled and I see his athletic shorts bulge. He’s still at least semi hard, even after he came.

I nod. Of course I remember that article. I keep dreaming about it at night and waking up when I realize it’s Hunter crouched beside my body, worshipping me in my dreams.

He stands so close to me, but doesn’t touch me. I breathe through my nose, trying to calm my racing thoughts, my soaring pulse. This feels too real, too big, and then he speaks again. “I’d like to kiss you if that’s all right.”

I nod, barely, but then I’m lost because he has pulled me against his body, devouring my mouth, claiming me with his tongue. He moans into my mouth and I’m ruined for all other kisses.

I can feel his heart beat against my chest as I open for him. My hands sink into his dark hair, slide to his sweaty shoulders. I inhale the salty, musky scent of him, so raw, so feral, and I groan. I want him, very badly.

“Abigail,” he whispers against my lips. “This is exactly what I imagined it would be like,” he says as he licks the delicate skin of my throat. I drop my head back and he nips at

my flesh. I love this side of him, crazed with passion. My blood boils in my veins as his hands travel up and down my sides, as his fingers squeeze into my ass.

“Hunter,” I breathe. “Yes.” I suck on his bottom lip, pressing my body against his, rocking my hips against his cock, desperate for friction. Desperate for release.

“I want to pleasure you, Abigail,” he says, and when I nod, I feel him yank down my leggings and panties in one strong tug. With my pants halfway to my knees I wobble, and Hunter lowers us both to the padded mat he has covering the floor in his dining room, next to the weight bench. And I don’t even care that I’m going at it on the floor. All I can feel are his hands on my skin, traveling up and down my legs as he removes my leggings, leaving me bare.

He licks my thighs as he settles beside me, just like the illustration in the article. Just like in my dream. He raises his dark head to make eye contact with me and gently nudges my legs apart with his hands. I place a hand on his neck, breathing heavily. “Yes, Hunter. Please.”

When his strong hands make contact with my clit, I scream. He parts my delicate folds with the fingers of one hand, stroking my slit with the other, then sliding a fingertip inside my body. “Abigail. You. Are. So. Wet.” He punctuates each word with a stroke of his long, hot fingers and my hips buck against his body. My heels dig into the floor and my knees fall open even farther.

Then he dips his head and begins to lick. I can hear myself moaning, feel myself thrashing on the ground. This is unlike

anything I have ever felt before. Hunter Crawford has unlocked the secret to my body and swallowed the key along with every drop of my excitement. “Oooh, yes. Hunter, fuck. Yes. God, just like that.”

His tongue laps sideways across my clit as he kneels to the right of my body. His left hand parts my folds and works at my clit, and then his right hand begins to massage me inside and out. He slips a long finger gently along my opening, gently working toward my ass.

“Hmmm,” he moans against my body, and then sucks my clit between his teeth.

All conscious thought leaves me as I detonate. I feel his finger thrust inside my center and my body pulses, contracts, spasming. I feel my limbs thrashing as I scream his name, coming so hard I see stars and gasp for breath.

Never have I come to orgasm so quickly with a partner, but then, never have I been with someone who pays such careful attention. As I return to earth and open my eyes, I find Hunter staring at me, smiling, caressing me so gently. Aftershocks of my orgasm jolt through me, and Hunter keeps his hands on me, smiling at me, until the spasms stop. I feel completely safe and content. Boneless, utterly at peace.

This feeling vanishes when I hear the front door open and a man’s voice curse. “Aw Jesus fuck, Hunter. Shit. I’ll wait in the car.”

CHAPTER 24

HUNTER

ARCHER SHOWED up at my house seventeen minutes early. I don't understand why he would do this.

After he closes the front door I look down at Abigail, spread open before me on the ground. Her creamy white skin is fully exposed, just for me. It takes all my effort not to dive back in and continue to ravish her, perhaps switch sides to see if I can make her climax again from the opposite direction. What would it be like, I wonder, to use my dominant hand at her clit while my left moved in and out of her body?

I shake these thoughts away. Much as I'd like to, I cannot spend the evening massaging the beautiful skin of Abigail Baker. I made a commitment to play cards with Moorely and my brother. I cough. "Abigail," I say, reaching for her clothes. "I apologize for the intrusion. I have an appointment with my brother this evening."

She sits up, and her demeanor seems guarded. Her body seems closed to me, suddenly. "Oh," she says.

"I have 16 minutes to shower and change before I have to meet Archer in the driveway," I tell her. I begin to lift her to her feet. When she seems a bit unsteady, I help her step into

her leggings. I can sense that I am making an error in etiquette, but I also know it's wrong to cancel plans with my brother. This interlude with Abigail was, after all, unplanned.

“Ok,” she says. And then the silence between us feels... heated. Different than usual. Something is off.

She bites her lip. I see tears well up in her eyes. This isn't good. “I very much enjoyed our experience together,” I tell her. She nods. “I made a prior commitment with my brother, not knowing you and I would try the Kivin method of oral sex.”

“Yes,” she says, tugging up her pants. “Of course. I should have called before I came over.” And she walks out of the house without a further word.

When she leaves, I can tell that she's not being fully honest. She is unsettled. But I don't have time to figure out what to do about that because my brother is waiting.

I hurry through my shower and step outside into Archer's truck with one minute to spare. “You were early,” I say by way of greeting.

He shakes his head and starts driving. “When were you going to tell me you're fucking Abigail?”

When I don't answer right away he punches me in the thigh. “Ouch! I was thinking, Archer. I was trying to decide if oral sex counts as ‘fucking,’ in which case the answer is that I've only been fucking her for approximately 20 minutes.”

He pulls the truck over to the side of the road abruptly. “Wait. I walked in on your first time with her and you just left

with me?”

“Yes.” This is seeming less and less like the appropriate course of action, which is upsetting and confusing because Archer and I have a commitment with Moorely.

“Hunter, Jesus. You have to call her.”

“Hmm.” I look at my phone in the console of Archer’s truck.

“You gotta text her at least. *Sweet dreams, I’ll be dreaming of you. Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.* That sort of thing. This is serious, Hunter. Don’t fuck this up.”

“Those are uncharacteristic things for me to say.”

Archer starts driving again and almost hits me, but retracts his hand. “Do you like this woman?”

“I am quite fond Abigail. Absolutely.”

“Ok, then plan out what you’re going to write and do not hit send until I say it’s ok.”

We pull into the parking lot of the Acorns’ club house before I can come up with anything that seems appropriate to send to my next-door neighbor who caught me masturbating and then let me massage her vulva. “I can’t think of anything apart from ‘I’d very much like to do that again soon.’”

“Oh my god, Hunter.” Archer kicks open the door and Moorely, who looks sweaty already, stands up from the table and rushes over to us.

“Good on you, mate. Thank you, truly, for helping me out here.”

“Moorely, this is my brother Archer.”

“Cheers,” he says, while Archer simultaneously says, “You wanna hear what my dumbass brother just did?”

To my horror, the 3 of us sit down at a table full of senior citizens as Archer talks about my personal life. The cards seem forgotten, hearing aids are adjusted. They all listen to my brother, rapt, as he describes my Pandora’s box. I cover my face with my hands when Archer tells them he thinks I am the world’s biggest moron. And then they collectively try to work out how I should proceed with Abigail.

Don, who taught in the OCC creative writing department for 30 years, suggests I send her a link to a love poem.

Lamar, whom I think I replaced in biology, suggests having Diana drop off flowers immediately.

Christian the retired anthropologist just laughs, until Archer gives more details on what he saw.

I am not embarrassed—that’s not an emotion I typically experience—but I am defensive that Archer would share these details. I want to keep my experience with Abigail private. Something just for us. Something that’s mine alone.

The men are fascinated, though, and the discussion quickly shifts to the difficulty of successful oral sex and the elusive female orgasm. Moorely even pulls up the article on his phone and reads it aloud.

Soon, they all begin asking me for pointers until I feel my skin crawling with discomfort. Lamar slaps the table and declares, “I’m goin’ home to try this out with Mary Pat,”

which draws peals of laughter from everyone else. I start to relax a bit, certain the Acorns will be less strict if they're in a good mood. They tend to insist we ante up with non-cash items like help with yard work or rides to the podiatrist. Before my last trip to the space station, I came home to Oak Creek for a visit and found myself giving insulin injections to some of the Acorns while they watched *The Price is Right*.

Thankfully, Moorely redirects everyone to the card game while I tap out a message to Abigail.

I'm very glad I finally kissed you. I think about you frequently. I hope we will see each other tomorrow.

When Archer drops me off after cards, I see that Abigail's lights are still on downstairs. I don't want to frighten her and try to peek around the curtains, but I have to see her again. Immediately. I can almost still taste her, the heady and powerful taste of her arousal. For *me*.

After I sent the text, I had imagined she would come over to my house tomorrow evening like usual. I planned to swoop in and kiss her again then, but now that I realize she is still awake, sitting this close to me, I find I cannot move my thoughts from her. I can almost smell the rosemary in her hair and lavender on her skin.

I tap softly on her front door.

Soon after, I see her eye appear by the curtain, pupil contracted in concern. Then I feel relief when her face softens

and she cracks the door open.

“Abigail,” I say softly, not entirely certain why I’m whispering. “May I come in?”

She doesn’t say anything but opens the door, so I step into her house. I have always had a sensitivity to smell. New places overwhelm me. I could only stand the space station because it smelled so sterile, so constantly of motor oil and cleaning solution.

But Abigail’s house smells like a meadow, like sunshine and wild plants. She stands leaning against the wall, hands in the pockets of her sweatpants, biting her lip. “I wasn’t sure what to make of...what happened,” she says. She never did respond to my text.

“I feel very conflicted about my departure, Abigail. I made a commitment to my brother, and I— well I have a lot of experience overlooking my commitments to people when I get engrossed in my work. It’s not something I’m proud of.” I start rambling to her, telling her all the things Heather used to scream at me in the night when I’d stagger in from the lab, feeling triumphant, only to find her crying and throwing wasted theater tickets in my face or dumping ruined food in the garbage.

I sigh. “So, I hope you can understand that it felt important to me to—”

And then Abigail’s arms are around my neck and she’s kissing me. I quickly scan my body to verify I’m not hallucinating. I feel her soft curves pressing against me, my

thickening erection pulsing against her stomach. I moan against her mouth and I feel her smile.

“I like it when you come unhinged,” she says. “I think about you frequently, too.”

She startles me by shoving me back against the opposite wall of the hallway. “Thank you for telling me why it mattered so much that you keep your promise to your brother,” she says, punctuating her words with small kisses against my jawline.

“Abigail, this is all very unexpected.”

She sucks on the skin at the base of my neck, drawing out another involuntary groan. She pulls back and asks, “unexpected is not unwanted, right?”

“Oh, Abigail.” I grip her shoulders and meet her eyes. “Make no mistake. I want you.”

CHAPTER 25

ABIGAIL

I LOVE SEEING this side of Hunter, this raw, passionate, wild energy, all of it still laser-focused on me. I definitely felt rejected when he took off earlier, but knowing how hard he works just on talking to people, I feel really grateful for his explanation of why it was important to keep his plans with his brother.

And holy wow. This payoff is worth it. Hunter stalks me like prey, nipping his teeth into me, massaging me everywhere I didn't know I needed it. He seems concentrated on bringing me pleasure as he lifts me off the ground and thrusts his hips against my center. I feel friction where I need it most and I moan into his mouth as I wrap my legs around his back.

Hunter pulls back and looks around, as if he's considering tossing me on the ground again. "Take me upstairs," I tell him. I want this experience to last longer than this afternoon, and my hardwood floors aren't comfortable.

He grunts in response, digging his fingers into my thighs as he carries me upstairs. I try to fumble for the lights as he walks past the switch, but I miss and I don't want to stop trying to remove his shirt.

Fumbling in the dark by memory, he trips on my shoes and we both land on the edge of my bed. I can just stretch and reach the lamp. Hunter slides to his knees on the carpet in front of me and begins to strip me again, only this time he focuses on my top half. I sit on the edge of the mattress while he lifts off my shirt and then palms my breasts.

He ducks his dark head to first one, then the other nipple. He sucks each one slowly, hard, swirling his tongue around each peak until I cry out while his fingers work magic on the other breast. Each time he rasps his flat tongue over one of my nipples, I feel the jolt straight through my body, as if he's found a chord connecting his mouth to the pleasure center of my brain.

He moans again as I finally wrestle his shirt over his head, breaking his connection with my skin just long enough to toss the cotton across the room. I pull his hot, naked torso against mine, reveling in the hard strength of him against me. "Hunter," I breathe. "I want you to lie on top of me."

I want to feel the long weight of him pressing against my whole body, to sink beneath him in the mattress while he does more magical things to my body with his tongue. It's as if all the years studying the behavior of cells taught him exactly how to service mine, and as Hunter slides my pajama pants down I quiver with anticipation.

I can still feel echoes of his earlier work, my clit throbbing with need as his hands massage my legs. He murmurs against my skin, dotting kisses along my legs while he talks about —"Wait, what did you say?"

He raises his head, rests his chin against my thigh as he strokes my leg. “I said I want to study your vasculature.”

I don’t mean to laugh when he’s looking at me so intently, but I can’t help it. “Nobody has ever said anything like that to me during sex,” I say, running my fingers through his hair.

By way of response, he rises to his knees and slides his jeans and boxers down his slim hips. My eyes are drawn to the dark thatch of hair beneath the hard lines of his abs, and then to the thick length of his shaft. Hunter begins to stroke himself, still staring at me. “I have a condom in my wallet,” he says.

“Good,” I tell him, breathless.

Finding his jeans, he starts to fumble in the back pocket, procuring a shiny foil packet. I bite my lip in anticipation, anxious. At last, Hunter sets the packet on the pillow and eases me up higher on the bed. Naked, we lie together and the room is so quiet I can hear both of us breathing. He says, “if we lie still together long enough, our heart rates would synchronize.”

“I don’t want to lie still,” I pant into his ear, thrusting my hips up against him. I love the warm heat of his cock pressed against my body. I nudge my thighs wider and he settles between my legs.

I meet his eyes then and I sense that he feels worried, too. “What’s up?” I ask.

“I...haven’t done this for some time.”

“Oh. Well. Me neither.”

“I’m still technically married. I feel it’s important for me to clarify that in case—”

“Hunter, it’s ok.” I reach between us and he hisses as I wrap my hand around him. “Is this ok?”

“Oh, Abigail. Yes.” Hunter closes his eyes, moaning. His hips begin to move as I stroke him. “You feel so good,” he says, sucking on the skin on my neck, moving lower to lap at my nipples again.

Squirming a bit to free my arm from our tangle of limbs, I reach for the condom as Hunter begins to rub my clit with his thumb. Again, he has found the perfect rhythm to drive me quickly toward the cliff of release. I can feel my body contracting, pulsing beneath him. I open my eyes to find him staring intently at my face.

I let go of his cock to open the wrapper, drawing another groan from Hunter. He adjusts his weight as I slide the condom on and then he cups my chin, his thumb stroking my jaw delicately. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. Definitely.”

And then he slides inside me. I’m so slick with wanting him, it almost eliminates the sting I feel. My body is out of practice. I shudder and Hunter stills. “Abigail,” he whispers. “Show me what you need.”

I nod, catching my breath, adjusting to the feel of him. Remembering how eager he’s been to bring me pleasure, I slowly rock my body against his. My hips tilt and soon I’m controlling the pace. Hunter balances his weight on his

forearms, lets me lead, seeming to study me as I slide up and down his cock from beneath.

I realize I have never been the one to set the pace, lead the movement. The power of this control makes me giddy and I start moving faster, harder. I sink my hands into the firm globes of Hunter's ass, bury my tongue in his mouth and begin to thrust with all my power. "I want to be on top," I tell him, and we start to roll.

Seated on top of him, I place my hands on his chest. I swirl my hips and he moans, his eyes beginning to roll up into his head. Hunter reaches up to cup my swaying breasts as I move faster. "Jesus, Hunter, this feels fucking amazing."

For a minute, or maybe it's an hour, I ride him, faster, harder, until his breath comes in grunts and moans. I feel his cock swell inside me. I see him straining his neck, and I know he's close. I want to come together with him, but I just can't—"Touch me," I groan. "Fuck, yes. Hunter, touch me just like that."

His hand is back, sliding between our joined bodies, circling outside my clit, rubbing, then flicking it until we both gasp. I feel the swell of my orgasm build sharply and then I'm crashing down on to him, collapsing on his chest as my body contorts, riding out the waves while he cries my name and buries his fingers in my hair.

Sated, exhausted, panting, I roll off him and curl up against his side. He drops an arm around my shoulder briefly, playing his fingers up and down my arm, but then he suddenly stands. He starts to walk across the room.

My thoughts crash back to earlier when his brother interrupted us, and he just left. Ushered me out the back door, as if making me come was an item on his research checklist and, having completed it, he was immediately on to the next task. Damned if I'm going to let him do that twice in one day.

“What the fuck, Hunter?”

CHAPTER 26

HUNTER

I FREEZE in my tracks as Abigail curses at me. I turn slowly, in the process of removing the condom. She stares at the mess in my hand and I sense that once again I have made a foible.

“Are you fucking leaving?” she seems very clear that I should not, so I sit back down on the bed.

“I had planned to go into the bathroom and wipe off,” I tell her. “But I can wait if it makes you more comfortable.”

Her face softens. “Oh.” I see tears well up in her eyes and I grind my teeth, searching my memories for a comparable situation and the proper response.

“I should have told you that’s where I was going,” I say. “I realize now you are still upset about how I abruptly left earlier this evening.”

I see her shoulders sink a bit in relief and know that I’m on the right track with this line of honesty. “I would reach out for you and comfort you,” I say, “except that I have semen on my hands from removing the condom.”

Abigail snorts in laughter. I feel better, like I can perhaps salvage this evening successfully. “Go on and wash up,” she

says. “And then come back to me.”

After I wash my hands and return to the bedroom, I see she’s crawled beneath the covers, folded down one side. I hesitate. *Are we going to sleep? Are we going to rest and then have sex again?* I clear my throat and announce, “Archer only put one condom in my wallet.”

“I don’t want to talk about your brother, Hunter. Come and hold me, would you?”

I slide into bed beside Abigail, reveling in the strangeness of her wanting to press her body close to mine. And my enjoying this sensation. “To clarify,” I start, “would you like me to stay here all night?”

“I would, yes.” Abigail takes my hand and rubs her thumb along my knuckles. It feels so nice. So intimate.

She reaches to turn off the light and soon, her breathing slows. I drape my arm over her side and, given this unhindered access and express permission to touch her, I study her in the moonlight. I let my fingers learn the rise and fall of her chest with her breath, the shape of her curves.

I think back on our experience together, how I seemed driven by instinct I did not know I possessed. Everything we did tonight was foreign to me, and yet it felt so familiar. As if I were somehow constructed just to please Abigail.

“I can hear you thinking,” she says, rolling over to face me in the bed.

“You can?”

Abigail smiles. I like when she smiles—I don't feel as though she is making fun of me, but rather that she is delighted by the things I say. "I can't actually hear your thoughts, Hunter, but I can sense that your mind is working overtime."

"How can you sense it? What are the signs?"

"I know you want to analyze this stuff and store it away in that brain of yours to use as a datapoint for future human interactions," she says, tracing a finger around my chest in a way that brings attention directly to my hardening cock. "But Hunter, I'm in a post-orgasmic coma right now and I just can't."

"Hmm," I decide to run my fingers through her hair. It's long and dark and full, and it always smells like hair. I'm used to women who pile on products until the layers of scent overpower my thoughts. "I was thinking," I tell her. "It seemed like I was able to...please you..."

"Definitely."

"Well I could feel it. I could feel your body responding to me." She opens her eyes to meet mine as I lift her hand and kiss her knuckles. I had no idea the knuckle had so many nerve endings until Abigail started stroking mine earlier. "I've been lying here thinking about how easily I interpreted your cues. And how good that felt."

"You made me feel so damn good, Hunter."

A long time passes as my mind continues to race. "I wasn't a very good husband, Abigail. But I would very much like to be a good partner for you. If you are interested in that."

I wake up ready to have sex again, but we still don't have another condom. My instinct is to get out of bed and walk to the drug store to get some, but I realize if Abigail wakes while I'm gone or in the process of leaving she will not know how to interpret those actions. I decide to just stare at her while she's sleeping, her face caught in a light smile.

I feel like I've waited my entire life to figure out what it means to desire someone like this, to feel the connection that my parents speak of. When Abigail and I were together last night, I felt like I was pouring a bit of my soul into her along with my release. I am a different person today than yesterday, if that seems possible. I never had this with Heather. I see now that I should not have married her, that comfort and familiarity are no replacement for real connection with another person.

At the same time, I realize that Heather could not have felt real connection with me, either. Knowing she stayed with me for convenience...or profit or fame...eases the sting of regret that has been growing the more I realize I was not a good husband to her.

"Your thoughts are busy again." Abigail wakes and kisses me softly.

"I was trying to decide how to go to the drug store without upsetting you."

"Maybe we should go on our way back from the coffee shop." Abigail's words drift off as I rock my hips against her

involuntarily. My blood races as we kiss for a few minutes before Abigail pulls back. “We better go before things get desperate.”

She climbs out of bed and begins to dress, bending to get a pair of pants from her bottom drawer. “Abigail, I need to inform you that things will always be desperate, as you say, when it comes to you.”

She looks at me over her shoulder, still bent over, and I can feel my erection pulsing against my stomach. “Really?”

I nod. “I’ve been having impure thoughts about your backside. And your breasts.” She laughs and throws my jeans at me.

Walking through town with her feels nice. Familiar and not overwhelming. I don’t need down time to rest after spending so much time around her, because I don’t seem to need to work as hard to figure out how to interact with her. As long as I verbalize my thoughts, Abigail seems very content, even to enjoy spending time with me.

I find I don’t want to keep my hands off of her, and I let my fingers trail up and down her back, stroke through her hair while we wait in line for coffee for Abigail. The barista’s gaze lingers on us, and I know there will soon be an article about us in the *Oak Creek Gazette*, but I don’t mind. Let them speculate. Let the newspaper brag that Hunter Crawford is romantically involved with Abigail Baker.

We spend the morning together making use of our drug store purchases until my body feels chafed and exhausted. I confess to feeling some relief when she tells me she has to meet with the Autumn Apple committee and I retreat to my lab on campus. Alone with my slides and my computational algorithms, I lose myself to the closest thing I've ever found to meditation. I experience utter clarity and laser focus. A series of orgasms has certainly relieved any buzzing restlessness I was experiencing. By the time I emerge from my data, it's growing dark.

CHAPTER 27

ABIGAIL

INDIGO, Sara and Diana have spread out on the dining room table of the Inn while some of the guests gather around looking over their shoulders. A retired couple I recognize from before is holding one of the flyers, munching on Indigo's homemade biscuits and commenting that they'll have to book a return visit for the festival.

I trip over someone's duffel bag as I enter the room and everyone turns their head to identify the noise. Kicking the bag to the side, I make my way to the table and they're all still staring at me. "What?" I start smoothing my hair, wondering if I have something on my face.

Diana raises an eyebrow and points her pen at me. "You got fucked last night."

The retired couple titters with laughter and the wife claps me on the back. "That's what I was thinking, too, dear. Looks like you had a good time. George, look at her blush."

Indigo squeals and claps her hands. "This all can wait. I want details. First thing: what was your orgasm tally? This is very important."

Sara rolls her eyes and my jaw works up and down as I try to figure out what to say.

“Oh, lord. You slept with my brother.” Diana reaches for a biscuit and, tilting her head, asks, “Was it awful?”

Sara shakes her head. “She doesn’t look like it was awful.”

“Well good day to all of you,” I say, sinking into a chair and wishing it would fall into the abyss. I close my eyes for a minute and then say to each of them, “the tally is 5; it was your brother; it was amazing.”

Indigo shoves the pile of papers into a folder as the retired couple leans front on their elbows. “I think we can go ahead and green light all this, Sar,” she says. “We’ve got more important things to discuss.”

I finish answering their questions as briefly as they’ll allow, and Mabel and George weigh in that it sounds like I’ve got a good thing going here. I like the sound of that.

“You’re glowing, babe,” Indigo says, draping an arm around Sara’s shoulders. “This is great. Who knew Hunter had it in him?”

Diana pulls up the oral sex article from Cosmo and squints while she starts to read it aloud. “This is kind of amazing,” she says. “Sara, come see how this article uses really inclusive language. It’s not heteronormative at all. I’m going to try really hard not to think about my brother doing this shit and be happy that you—my friend and a person with a clitoris—got someone to do this for you.”

George makes eyes at Mabel and asks Indigo how much time they have before checkout.

Eager to change the topic, I ask Indigo what comes next for the festival. We are two weeks out and I feel like I have no idea what will happen. “Oh, don’t worry about that,” she says. “The hard part was finishing all this signage. Everyone will just show up next Friday to do their same old job. Did Rose say you could take off Friday to help set up?”

I frown. Rose has a lot going on right now, meeting with alumni like George and Mabel to hit them up for cash. As soon as she got back from Panama, she got some foreign alum staying at their house in the Meadow room, which evidently used to be Fletcher’s. “As long as I can get talking points on her desk by that Thursday I think we will be good.”

Autumn Apple always gets a lot of involvement from the college students, apparently, looking for something different to do on a weekend. Oak Creek College might excel in academics, but the small town setting doesn’t offer much in the way of entertainment. Sara fills me in on all the telltale signs to watch for with the students trying to pass off fake IDs to get hard cider.

The four of us spend the entire day sorting volunteer packets for next weekend and talking about Sara and Indigo’s plans to maybe have a baby, which is a whole production apparently for same-sex couples.

Diana’s dad calls mid-afternoon to insist she come over for dinner, and I hear him holler through the phone, “Are you there with Hunter’s lady-friend? Tell Abigail to come, too.”

“I guess you’re coming home with me for Dinner with Daniel,” she says.

We walk to the Crawford house, where I can smell garlic from half a block away. “Come on inside,” Rose sings from the kitchen. She’s dancing around with a glass of wine as Daniel bastes a roasting chicken. “The alumni have taken a bus tour to New York City. It’s just us tonight. Oh, Abigail, there you are, dear. Listen, next time I really would prefer if you and Hunter can tip us off before we read about your personal activities in the *Gazette*.” Rose slides me a glass of wine along with today’s “special edition” newspaper.

GROUCHY SCIENTIST WOOS SPEECHWRITER, the headline screams.

“Drink your wine before you read, dear,” Rose says. “It’ll help.”

“Diana, have you heard from your brothers?” Daniel starts rapidly chopping herbs for a sauce that smells amazing.

She shakes her head and stage whispers to me, “This is a family strategy meeting, if you couldn’t tell.”

Archer strides into the kitchen and kisses his mother on the cheek. “What’s up? I got the SOS text.”

I start reading the article, which makes it sound like Hunter and I were caught having sex in the middle of Main Street. “Are drug store employees allowed to share information about what people buy??”

“The wine, Abigail,” Rose says. “Drink the wine. Archer, I’m sure you’ve heard by now. We need to decide how we will

respond.”

“He knew,” I blurt to Rose, chugging the wine as she refills my glass. “Archer knew last night!”

“Aw, come on, Abigail. I thought we were friends.”

Rose starts scolding him, swatting his upper arm as she yells at him for not giving her and Daniel a heads up that Hunter had a lady-friend. I continue reading about so-called public displays of affection—“Hunter gave me *one* peck on the cheek at the coffee shop!”—but then the article takes a nasty turn I wasn’t expecting.

I don’t know much about the details of Hunter’s separation with his wife, just that she left him and is asking for a lot of money in their divorce. This article suggests that Hunter is somehow creating this relationship with me publicly to manipulate public opinion about his divorce. “We have to wonder what the estranged Mrs. Crawford thinks about another woman glowing with satisfaction from a night spent making love with her spacey spouse.” I almost can’t get the words out. “What is this, Rose? Does Hunter still talk to Heather?”

Hunter arrives then, seemingly unaware of what’s been going on. Diana hands him a beer and nudges him to sit next to me. I slide him the paper and watch his face, trying to gauge his reaction. I feel relief when I see him frown and grit his teeth as he gets toward the end of the article. He throws the paper on the table and turns toward me. “Abigail,” he says. “There is no reason for you to think Heather is a consideration

for me at all. Please tell me you are not swayed by this inflammatory tirade?”

I shake my head, but the truth is I'm rattled by the article. There are small grains of truth in Ed Hastings' suggestion that I ran out on my old life and haven't looked back. He says I am burying myself into this town's traditions and this town's men, apparently, to escape my demons. Why shouldn't it be a little true that Hunter is just using me strategically? Divorcing Heather will cost him millions at this point.

Daniel plunks a laptop on the table and I look up to see a video chat with a man who looks like Hunter but Rose's blue eyes. He's seated outside somewhere with palm trees in the background. “What's all this about?” the face squints around the room.

“Fletcher, we have a situation,” Daniel says, clearing his throat and sitting at the head of the table. “We need to get Heather to settle immediately so your brother can finalize his divorce.”

CHAPTER 28

HUNTER

AFTER A TUMULTUOUS DINNER AT MY PARENTS' house, I'm feeling restless again. It seems I don't even get to enjoy a few hours of bliss in my newfound relationship with Abigail.

I take Abigail's hand and lead her out of the house into the back yard while Diana and Archer help clean up. Long ago, my father carved a wooden bench and placed it under the willow tree at the back of the garden. Their property borders the creek, and the running water makes for a pleasant backdrop. I used to love to sit here alone and gather my thoughts, to study the shifting leaves throughout the seasons and observe the changes in my father's garden based on the weather cycles.

"I used to collect acorns from the oaks along the creek," I tell Abigail. "I'd bring them back here, take them apart, and study the differences between the burr oak and the water oak acorn. And my father was always here to listen to my discoveries." I pull Abigail's hand into mine, lacing my fingers between hers and tugging her close against me on the bench. The autumn night is chilly, but I don't want to go back inside. "I used to think my parents' marriage was convenient like

mine and Heather's. Dad stayed home with us and mom worked. They each seemed to have separate roles in our family and they seem very content with their division of labor."

Abigail nods.

"I have since realized they share something much deeper," I tell her. "My parents understand each other, help to bring out the things the other person most needs. They fit together, like cytosine and guanine."

"I don't know what those words mean, Hunter."

I sigh. "They just...complement each other. They're partners."

We both look in the window, where my father drops a kiss on my mother's forehead and changes the song on the stereo. They talk softly together while they both work to scour the roasting pan from the chicken. "Heather and I didn't have a partnership, though," I continue. "We had separate lives and...tolerated each other."

Abigail sighs. "I think I can relate to that," she says, telling me a bit about the beginnings of her relationship with Jack. In some ways, our lives were parallel before she came to Oak Creek. It's hard for me to understand her parents wanting her to sacrifice her own ambitions, her own skills, for the family business, but I also see that my father left his career for the sake of Rose Mitchell's ambition.

"But Hunter," she says, "Your father seems like he made that choice willingly. And your siblings have been independent

for a long enough time that Daniel could have returned to some sort of career if he felt inclined.”

She shivers, and I rise, tugging her to her feet. “Let’s go home,” I suggest. I rap my knuckles on the kitchen window and wave to my parents. We walk together to my house, with Abigail tucked under my arm.

“Will you stay with me again tonight,” she asks, her voice filled with hopefulness even I can identify. I nod and, as we climb the steps to her room, I contemplate the logistics of carving a doorway between our houses on the second floor.

Being in a relationship with Abigail is so much easier than simply desiring Abigail. I feel regret at not telling her about my feelings sooner. She seems to wake up each morning ravenous for sex, and I find that beginning my day with this type of release makes me a much more pleasant instructor at the college. My students seem less tense, even with the mid-term exam approaching.

I explained to Abigail that it’s hard for me to see her wearing tight clothing and bending to lift weights without overpowering lust. She alternates between wanting to have sex immediately after work, before we exercise, or else teasing me and forcing me to watch her deadlift in spandex before letting me devour her on the floor. I love letting her dictate the when and where and how of our sex life, and having this control seems to make her feel even better. It’s a cycle that just builds until I get to see her come multiple times a day.

I'm so caught up in Abigail that I forget to plan my caloric intake. We eat our dinners together on her couch, our legs entwined as she tells me about her favorite television programs. We play a game where we try to predict the answer to the final question on *Jeopardy* before Alex reveals the clue, and I feel delighted when Abigail correctly guesses the Panama Canal.

Each evening, we lie in her beautiful bed with our laptops. The draft she created of my research proposal is so well-argued, so persuasive. I swell with pride at the idea that this woman is my partner, this brilliant communication strategist. In the few months she's been in town, she has helped reform my mother's fundraising for the college, prepared me to present my work to an investor, and apparently helped set up a way for my sister to sell alcohol during the Autumn Apple festival this weekend.

"I already cannot imagine life without you, Abigail," I tell her one night after she turns off the light. I had just achieved a personal objective to bring her to orgasm three times in one lovemaking session and I revel in the sight of her limp-limbed bliss. She smiles lazily and runs a hand through my hair. She drifts off to sleep in my arms and I am happily bewildered by how content I feel to be here with her. How lucky I am that fortune brought her to Oak Creek.

CHAPTER 29

ABIGAIL

HUNTER TURNS out to be a fantastic boyfriend. As long as I am meticulously clear about what I need and want and expect. Sometimes I feel frustrated that he doesn't take it for granted he should tell me if he's going to play cards with his brother after work...I also have to remember things are moving pretty quickly with him.

I'm not sure if it's a blessing or a curse that we live on opposite sides of a duplex. I've now combed over Hunter's entire half of our building, and between the mattress on the floor in his room and the increasingly smelly weight lifting equipment in the dining room, I'm pretty insistent that we spend most of our time on my half.

I know we've only been together a short time, but I can already see how he gets engrossed in his work. I try not to take it personally or smother him. But I also decide that it's perfectly acceptable for his girlfriend to come visit him in his lair while he's busy being the mad scientist.

Not that he would ever dream of conflating romance with his lab space. His microscope is sacred to him. Regardless, I can't contain my excitement when I finally pin down a date

with Asa Wexler, the investor, so I duck into Hunter's lab late one afternoon to share the news in person.

My breath catches when I see him bent over his microscope. He's so focused, moving his samples around delicately, muttering to himself while he takes notes on what he sees. I don't want to startle him, so I slide up behind him and say his name gently.

"Hunter."

He spins slowly on his stool and smiles. I step toward him, standing in between his legs. This is pretty hot. I put my hands on his shoulders and fiddle with his collar. "What brings you in here, Abigail?"

In lieu of answering, I start to hitch up my skirt. "What's happening?" He asks, eyes wide.

"Well," I tell him, slowly unbuttoning his shirt. I like how he looks, all tucked in and put together. I can't wait to make him come apart. "I have news."

"Is the news related to or separate from the sexual things you are doing right now?" He honks my breasts and looks up at me, hopefully.

"We have a date that Mr. Wexler is coming to campus—December 7—and I managed to schedule you a lunch with him. Just the two of you."

"Just us? You won't be there?"

This makes me pause. "You want me there for your big pitch? I don't even know anything about cellular biology..."

Hunter places his hands on my shoulders. “Neither does Wexler. That’s the whole point. I need someone else who knows how to talk to people.”

I pull his hand up to my face and kiss his palm. “I know this is very important to you, Hunter.”

“Exceedingly important.”

“If you want me to come with you, I’ll be there. We’re a team, right?”

He nods. “Thank you, Abigail. I don’t know how to thank you enough.”

Shirking out of my top and tossing off my bra, I inch closer to his chest. “I can think of a few ways,” I tell him, drawing his strong hands back to my skin, sighing as he moves immediately to perform magic on my nipples.

“I never imagined bringing a woman into the lab before,” he says, eyes focused on my stiffening peaks. He looks up to see me licking my lips. I’m already practically panting.

“Dr. Crawford,” I say. “I’m going to need you to fuck me here.”

He yanks me onto his lap, the seams of my skirt straining as my legs spread wide to wrap around his waist on the stool. He nips at my neck as my head drops back. I’m fully exposed for him except for the skirt bunched up at my waist. “I need to put my slides back before we continue,” he says, turning in the stool, not moving me from his lap. I can feel his cock bulging hard between us, pulling at his khaki pants.

Hunter keeps one arm around my waist to steady me and gently removes the slide from the microscope. He pulls open a drawer and I feel a rush of cold air. “The samples are cryogenically frozen,” he says, licking at my shoulder and throat while he files his samples. “There.” He nudges the drawer shut with his knee. “Now you’re my only specimen.”

I squeak as Hunter lifts me up and places me on the table. “It’s so cold,” I say, shivering as he lowers me back.

“I can help,” Hunter says, snapping on a pair of gloves. I wasn’t sure what direction we were headed, but I’m definitely into it as Hunter slides his hands up my legs, tugs down my panties and tosses them across the room. “I’ve been wanting to study you, Abigail. I want to see everything about you.”

I feel something cold and I look down to see Hunter dabbing a slide against my pulsing center. He kisses me as he presses the glass lid onto the slide, and then he wheels over to his microscope and looks into the eyepiece. “I knew it,” he breathes. “You’re alive for me, Abigail. Vibrant, flowing with life. Beautiful.”

When he looks back at me, his eyes are wild, heady with lust. He moves to take off his gloves, but I grab his wrist. “Leave them on,” I pant, grinning, and Hunter nods, returning his fingers to the spot I need them most. “Yes, Dr. Crawford,” I moan as he slips a sheathed finger inside. “Just like that.”

By the time Hunter whips me into white-hot ecstasy on the table, I can’t really focus on my surroundings any longer. Eventually, he stands and nudges me to the edge of the table. Standing between my legs, he unzips his pants and pulls out

his cock. I see it twitching, weeping with the same excitement I feel. He looks around the room, pausing. “I don’t have a condom here,” he says, continuing to stroke himself.

“I have an IUD!” There’s no way I’m leaving this room without Hunter fucking me.

He nods, considering. “I had extensive medical testing before going into space,” he says.

“Jesus Christ, Hunter, please fuck me.”

He grins, then, and places a gloved hand on my thigh. “Abigail,” he scolds. “In this room, I prefer to be called Dr. Crawford.” And then I gasp as he crashes into me. Gone is the gentle lover from my bedroom. This is like wild Hunter on the dining room floor, ramped up to one thousand. He starts to sweat and I can feel his heart race as he pounds into me on the table. He leans over me, fondling my breasts while he hammers his hips. I love every rough thrust.

“Abigail,” he pants. “You drive me mad. You’re so slick and tight.”

My fists claw mindlessly at his chest, seeking purchase in his shirt as I feel another orgasm building. Just as Hunter begins to swell inside me, his rock-hard shaft growing bigger, I topple over the edge, shouting his name, not caring who hears.

“Yes,” he growls. “Gaahh!” And then I feel his release pulsing, spurting inside me. It seems endless, the powerful rush of all that he has, emptying into me alongside his whispers of devotion and adoration.

Later, after we've both put ourselves back together and I declined Hunter's offered alcohol wipes for my nether regions, I ask him what he saw on the slide he made during our table session. "Lactobacillus bacteria, mostly," he says. "But it was *your* lactobacillus bacteria, with your unique blend of amino acids and proteins." He kisses my knuckles. "I can't wait to learn about every cell of your being, Abigail."

And, odd as that seems, I recognize this as Hunter Crawford's highest sign of devotion.

CHAPTER 30

HUNTER

FRIDAY, I whistle absentmindedly as I pass out the midterm exams to my students. Just about everything in my life is going right at the moment.

I've had two blissful weeks with Abigail.

Last night, we walked outside together at midnight to watch the lunar eclipse. The moon, full and low in the sky, turned red as it crossed orbital paths with the Earth. I felt inspired to share with her some of the observations I made from the space station when I wasn't engrossed in my lab work. I held Abigail close and told her what it was like to see the Earth from outside it, how small and insignificant I felt and had to remind myself that I was up there to make an impact.

"You've impacted my life," she told me, and kissed my neck.

Abigail sent along more information about Asa Wexler's impending visit to campus. He's meeting with my mother to discuss a partnership with the computer science department. They're developing some sort of artificial intelligence technology he's interested in, but most of his investments are related to pharmaceuticals and healthcare. I think he could be a

great fit to fund my tissue research, and he agreed. He seems eager for our lunch this winter.

I celebrate by setting an exam that's much more rigorous than I would have written otherwise. I already know the students are terrified. But if they want to make a difference in the world, they simply must develop a strong foundation. They cannot be impactful biologists without this level of rigor, and I tell them so.

The students groan, reading the essay question I created for them. "Oh, come now," I tell them. "You all should know by now how cell cycles are dependent on one another. And Khalil, don't look at me like that. I know you know about energy conversion in Eukaryotic cells."

I pull out my phone to set it on airplane mode while they take their exam and then I gaze at photographs of Abigail. My favorite is the picture of her asleep, her dark hair falling off the side of the bed, her plump lips turned up in a smile.

Despite Ed Hastings' attempt to derail our relationship, Abigail and I are on a strong trajectory toward happiness. Even Diana seems to approve.

Eventually, my timer goes off and the students groan. They bring their papers to the front as I assure them everything will be fine. One bad exam in a biology class isn't going to damage their future, statistically speaking. "Besides," I tell them. "I had a 4.0 and I still managed to get fired from the Space Agency."

This doesn't quite elicit the laugh I had been going for. Abigail says I still need to work on my deliberate jokes.

I spend the next hour grading exams, fighting off the nagging sense that I'm supposed to be doing something else, but then Moorely raps on the doorway and asks me to have a drink with him. Considering my excitement at my upcoming meeting with Wexler, I actually do feel like having a beer with Moorely. He's familiar with these sorts of meetings, and I feel more confident after running some of my ideas past him at the Nobler Experiment.

A few hours later, it occurs to me that I haven't touched base with Abigail. When I pull out my phone to call her, I see that it's still on airplane mode. I hadn't wanted it to ring or vibrate during my students' exam.

"Oh no. Oh. No, oh no oh no." I was supposed to spend the afternoon helping with Autumn Apple. I look around the bar, which is nearly empty save for us. And no wonder—half the town is out with my family, working to set up the festival booths. How could I have forgotten this commitment?

Even Moorely picks up on my distress when I turn the phone back on and see the stream of missed calls and messages. "What did you forget to do, mate?"

I exhale slowly through my nose. "I was supposed to help Abigail set up for the festival," I tell him. She's been expecting me for at least four hours, and I've been grading papers and drinking with Moorely. I feel a wave of shame at how quickly I slipped back into old habits, at how much I dislike this aspect of my personality. "What am I going to do, Moorely?"

This is going to take some work to atone for.

CHAPTER 31

ABIGAIL

FRIDAY MORNING DAWNS bright and crisp. The perfect weather to set up the Autumn Apple festival. The small town has already been transformed. Main Street is lined with hay bales and gourd displays. Each small business, from the Houseplant Haven to the animal clinic to even the co-op, has a wooden booth set up on the sidewalk.

The festival includes apple bobbing, apple artwork, apple-themed crafts for sale. The tai chi group has developed a routine in honor of the apple harvest. Some of the elderly women in town embroidered apple blossoms on beautiful silk pillowcases. I make a mental note to buy a set, imagining how they'll feel against my cheek while I'm rolling around in my bed with Hunter.

Despite our nose dive into the insatiable phase of our relationship, I feel comfortable in my life with him. Which is not to say I feel like I'm settling.

I spoke with my parents earlier in the week. They admitted that things have been fine in the business—they hired someone else to work in the office, and she's doing a fine job. They still seem to think I'm going to come home and patch things up

with Jack, who is evidently now working nights as a security guard at the bank.

I asked them not to call me again for awhile. I need some time to figure out how to mend a relationship with a family who simply will not see that I've made a positive change in my life. That seems to be the beauty of Oak Creek. People are supported in their desires to change...unless it involves archaic alcohol laws.

Looking around the festival, at all the volunteers looking to me for direction and helping to fold the brochures and festival programs that I created, I feel pride in what I've accomplished and sadness that my own family won't know or see that I can do big things.

Our staging ground for setup is at Sara's law office, which is in the same building as Archer Crawford's CPA office. The parking lot is crawling with Crawfords hauling crates of apples, boxes of wrist bands. I hear Indigo explaining sperm donation to a fascinated Archer. "It's gonna come in a giant tank," Indigo says. "They ship it on dry ice. Sara's going to squirt it in me at our house."

"Now how does that work," he says, counting out a stack of aprons for the different shifts of Autumn Apple staffers. "Is it really a turkey baster situation?"

Indigo laughs. "More like a syringe, silly." I clear my throat. "Abigail! Yay! Now we can really get going." Indigo rushes over to me with marching orders. Soon all thoughts of my family drama slip away and I work up a sweat as we all set up the booths.

After lunch I start checking my watch, counting down the minutes until Hunter gets here to help. I'm eager for his assistance, but mostly I just miss him. It feels strange since we share a roof and have been spending all our time together.

But he's so supportive and, when he remembers to say his thoughts out loud, he says the most wonderful, earnest things about what he enjoys about my brain, my body, and the way I massage his balls.

I smile, flushing, as I remember his intense stare this morning, when he said, "Abigail, I never knew how good it would feel for someone to pinch my epididymus."

My smile gives way to growing anxiety when Hunter is not here by 4. I know his students finished their midterm exam an hour before, and he was meant to help hoist the heavy kegs of hard cider from the delivery truck.

"Where's my damn brother," Diana hollers, grunting under the weight of one of the kegs.

"He's not answering his phone," I admit, adding embarrassment to my list of emotions simmering to the surface the longer he goes without contacting us. The sting of spoiled expectations blends with my concern for where he could be. I hate this feeling of not knowing, of wondering whether I should worry or be irritated that he just forgot.

"Fuck it," Diana says. She strips off her sweater and powers through the unloading on her own. Her muscles flex as she rage-lifts enough alcohol for an entire town for tomorrow's festival. I try to help her, but even after months working out

with Hunter, I'm not strong enough to do more than topple a keg to its side. "Don't roll it, Abigail. It'll explode."

I sink onto a hay bale feeling dejected while Diana finishes. "Listen," she says, guzzling the water bottle I hand her. It's after dark by now and my teeth chatter, but Diana stands in the glow of the twinkle lights, sweating. "My brother always does this shit. He gets focused on his microscope and the rest of the world melts away. I don't think it's on purpose, but I also don't think he's going to change." She tosses the empty bottle in the recycling bin by the front of the booth and pats me on the shoulder. "I'm going home to shower. Get some rest. We're going to sling a lot of apples tomorrow, girl."

After Diana leaves, I'm alone at the cider booth. The rest of the crew mills around nearby, and every now and then Sara gestures thumbs up, thumbs down, questioning whether I'm ok over here. I flash her a thumb sideways and sit down to consult my checklist. I think we got everything ready. I should feel proud of the work I did, of the way this small town embraced me into the fold and we all collaborated to make something that looks like a storybook. Everything is sparkling with twinkle lights. The scents of cinnamon and cloves permeate the air from the pie booths and slow cookers full of fresh apple cider, set to simmer overnight for the morning crowd.

Tomorrow is going to be amazing. *Despite Hunter Crawford*, I think, angrily.

No longer able to process my disappointment in public, I start toward home, letting the tears well up and looking forward to locking myself inside to sob.

Diana is right—I knew this about him. And yet, here I am, deeply upset and rattled by something my new boyfriend did. Or didn't do. I can't even concentrate at this point.

I should never have gotten so intimate with Hunter so quickly. I should have worked harder to take things slowly, kept it light so I wasn't this gutted when he stood me up. Then I remind myself that he stood up the whole town and his family. Diana said he does this all the time. Maybe accepting Hunter as a flake is part of accepting him.

Just as I'm wrestling with all these thoughts, I see Hunter and his friend Moorely approaching. And they're each carrying a chicken.

Moorely seems out of breath and flustered, holding his chicken upside-down by its feet as it flaps and squawks. "Abigail," he huffs. "Here." He thrusts the bird into my arms and storms off toward Archer, shouting, "Oy! Other-Crawford! Tell me you've got something over in that dunk tank to scrub chicken shit off my trainers."

I look down at the bird in my arms, who has calmed down now that I'm holding her more like a baby, cradled in one arm. She looks up at me as if she's confused, too.

When I meet Hunter's eyes, I can't help myself. I start crying, whether from relief or anger or confusion, I can't tell. "I'm really angry at you, Hunter!" I sniff, unable to wipe away my tears while I'm holding the bird.

“Abigail, I owe you an apology,” he says, petting the bird tucked under his arm. Both chickens are speckled, with soft black and white feathers and a bright red comb. Hunter nods his chin in the direction of my hen. “I brought these as a symbol of my commitment to do better.”

“I don’t understand, Hunter. Where did you get chickens?”

“Well, I took them from my father,” he says, shifting his weight and passing the chicken to the other side. “Look, can we walk home and I promise to explain?”

Only because I am so taken aback by the presence of a pair of chickens do I let him convince me to walk with him along the creek.

When we reach a muddy patch on the bank he stoops and puts his bird down, gesturing that I should do so, too. The girls begin pecking around in the mud, extracting plump worms and happily slurping them down in the moonlight. “I tend to do things like this,” Hunter says. “I get absorbed in my work and then I let people down.”

“So I see.” I nudge a pebble with my toe until one of the hens comes and pecks at it, evidently thinking it’s a beetle. “I don’t want to be someone’s second priority, Hunter. I mean, you didn’t even call.”

“Tonight I had actually finished my work when Moorely showed up for a drink, and because I’m not in the practice of acting like part of a team, I went with him.” I open my mouth to interject something angry, but he continues. “But I want to do better, Abigail. That’s the difference you’ve made in my

life. You make me want to improve this aspect of myself. I am committing to do better. This is my vow.”

“Hunter, I’m sorry, but I just don’t see what stealing your father’s chickens has to do with a commitment to anything.” I feel myself growing more angry the more he talks about chatting with his British buddy while Diana single-handedly unloaded a truck of heavy kegs.

“I’m getting there.” He sighs. “This is new to me—expressing my feelings and...caring whether another person understands my motivations.” I see him swallow, illuminated by the moon. “I thought having a pet could help me. If there’s always a living being at home who requires my care, I can’t let my own work overpower my thoughts. And I thought of a chicken because, well, you have to be there every day to collect the eggs or they get broody.”

Hunter steps closer to me. “Broody?”

He nods. “These are my chickens, Abigail. I don’t want you to think I’ll just get absent-minded and leave you with additional work. This is my commitment to begin living a life that considers others.” He raises his eyebrows as he extends his arms, asking silent permission to touch me. I step into his embrace and he pulls me tight, whispering into my ear that he wants to gather eggs for me every morning, and be present to make sure the birds have water each night before bed.

“My dad told me it was ok to take them,” he murmurs. “He has plenty.”

CHAPTER 32

HUNTER

I HADN'T PLANNED my chicken gesture very carefully. I don't have a coop or anything to keep the girls safe from raccoons, and so I decide to put them in my house since I don't really have anything downstairs.

Abigail suggests I move my computer equipment upstairs so the birds don't shit on my keyboard. I'm reminded again how wonderful it is to have someone at my side who can think of these details. I need to work as hard as it takes to keep her.

I've managed to earn her forgiveness this time, and I don't intend to have to try again. With the chickens clucking happily around a bowl of corn, Abigail and I head to bed, where she seems very pleased at my offer of a shoulder massage.

As a gesture of my commitment, I attend the Autumn Apple festival with her bright and early the next morning. I do not voice my dislike of crowds or other humans and consciously work to overcome those feelings. I try to focus on Abigail and how much she is enjoying her Autumn Apple debut.

I stay by her side the entire day as she cheerily sells apples to all the townspeople, who introduce themselves to her as

they chug hard cider in front of the library. The Acorns start on the cider early, and by the time they begin their special Tai Chi demonstration, they're all teetering a bit. Abigail raises her eyebrows at me when some of the Acorns stop by the apple cider booth to thank me for the Kivin method.

"It was a good article worth sharing," I tell her, nodding to Mary Pat when she ducks out of the co-op for more "donations" from Abigail's cider keg.

Soon, half the town is gathered around Abigail, staring at us. I keep my arm securely around her, massaging her arm while she flushes, and assure them all that the *Gazette* article got almost everything wrong.

"But you really did buy the jumbo pack of condoms?" Enid, the constable, stares wide-eyed in fascination at the thought that someone could have enough sex to warrant purchasing the large box from Oak Creek Drug.

Mary Pat slings an arm around Enid's shoulders and points at me with her cider cup. "Of course he needed the jumbo pack. Dr. Crawford is who got Lamar to go downtown." She waggles her eyebrows drunkenly, and I begin to seriously consider whether I should start a lecture series at the college about the anatomy of the vulva.

My mother comes floating by the cider booth a few hours later, escorting the foreign alumni she's got staying in my brother's old bedroom. "Hiiiiii!" She says, waving at us merrily. "Bruno, Angelica, this is my oldest son, Hunter, and my senior communications strategist, Abigail. We have her to

thank for almost everything smart I say.” Ma’s guests laugh and Abigail hands them cider after verifying they’re over 21.

Abigail accepts approximately 15 offers to have dinner or coffee with various locals, turns away scores of undergraduate students, including half of mine, and beams with delight as Archer hauls away a third crate of cash to the safe he’s got in his office for all the festival funds.

“What are we earning money for anyway? I never asked...”

I shrug. “I always just thought it paid for the fireworks,” I tell her.

As darkness falls, my father comes over to the cider booth holding a plaid blanket. He drapes it over Abigail’s shoulders and tells her the entire town thinks she’s the best thing to come to Oak Creek since sliced gluten-free bread arrived at the co-op.

“Hey, Dad,” I ask as he prepares to take over for Abigail so she and I can wander around the festival. “Can you help me build a coop for the chickens tomorrow?”

“Son,” he says, grinning. “There’s nothing I’d enjoy more.” Abigail and I start to walk off, holding hands—something I’ve never particularly desired before but suddenly don’t want to stop. Dad hollers to stop us, saying, “Oh, Hunter, Sara said she wanted to talk with you.”

Abigail and I roam the Autumn Apple festival, planning to see Sara before the fireworks. Abigail stops for a funnel cake, and I bite back the urge to explain how awful such foods are for her metabolism and cardiovascular health. Sometimes a treat just tastes good, I decide, and take a nibble of the fatty, sugary dough. Abigail pulls me down for a kiss, licking powdered sugar from the corner of my mouth and sending me into a state of arousal that has me looking for the nearest dark alley where we can retreat.

Resisting the carnal urge and wanting to hear Sara's news, I stop by the apple bobbing stand near the Inn. I promise Abigail to bob with her in the bin filled with other people's saliva, just as soon as I talk with Sara. Abigail rolls her eyes and joins an intoxicated Mary Pat at the galvanized tub of bacteria water, leaving me to chat with my lawyer.

"Hunter!" Sara grins. She holds up her phone. "We got them." Sara tells me that Heather's legal team has reached an agreement—a payout that seems extremely reasonable. No further claims on my future patents. No ongoing alimony. A lump sum and I can move on with my life.

I clear my throat and try to temper the swell of emotion I feel at finally being able to finalize my divorce. "Sara," I say. "I just...thank you."

"Ah, come here, you dumb genius," Sara says, rising to her feet. She pulls me in to a bear hug, pounding me on the back. I glance over to Abigail, and gesture for her to join the hug until the three of us are spinning around the fading glow of the Autumn Apple festival.

“Good news?” she asks.

“Definitely satisfactory,” I say, planting a kiss on her forehead and inhaling the sunshine and cinnamon scents lingering around her.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Ed Hastings’ voice comes over the megaphone and the tittering crowd slowly quiets. “It is now time for the annual Autumn Apple Harvest Fireworks. Please enjoy this year’s display, and remember. Open containers of alcohol are absolutely prohibited in Oak Creek. Our constable may be incapacitated at the moment, but our laws are still in force!”

I guide Abigail over to a nearby hay bale and pull her against me to watch the display. I’ve always enjoyed fireworks. Chemistry wasn’t my preferred science, but I have always appreciated the beautiful reactions when the barium chloride and strontium carbonate light up green and red. “You know,” I whisper to Abigail in between launches, “I was in the Space Station over the 4th of July. A lot of the astronauts watched the fireworks on the Internet, but I didn’t want to leave the lab. There’s not a great sense of time passing up there anyway.”

“That sounds sad, Hunter,” she says.

“Well,” I tell her, slipping her another kiss as one of the starburst fireworks sizzles, “I was up in the galley very late, and we happened to be orbiting over the US at the time. It was a clear night, so when I stood at the window, I really thought I saw the faint glow of fireworks over the southwest, where

there's no other light pollution. It was a really nice moment of connection. Made me think of being home, just like this.”

Only then, I didn't know that home could feel this way. As it turns out, that would have been right when my wife was leaving me, turning my life upside down. Really, though, she was just adjusting my trajectory toward home. I had no way of knowing then that I could have a woman by my side who wanted to be there. Who I wanted desperately to stay in my orbit.

As the finale begins, I tug Abigail to her feet, gesturing my head toward home. I feel a desperate urge to make love to her. I can't even speak as I pull her in the front door and carry her up the stairs. I try to let my kisses express the words I cannot summon, gently pressing my lips against hers, softly caressing her tongue with my own.

“Oh, Hunter,” she sighs, and I love hearing my name on her lips. I undress her quickly and kick off my clothes. Abigail lies on her back and crawls up the bed, beckoning me to lie on top of her. As I settle in between her legs, I hear the final crack of the fireworks, followed by a crack of thunder. I briefly look up from my lady to see the flash of lightning out the window, but I like how the gentle rain forms background music for the symphony I want to create in here with Abigail.

She rocks her hips beneath me, urging me to enter her, and I exhale as I slide home. Abigail is always so wet and ready for me, so eager to pull me inside deeper, deeper, and deeper again. “More,” she whispers into my ear, and the feel of her breath against my skin sends shivers through me. Abigail

wraps her arms around me, holding me tight against her naked chest.

This moment is so intense. I feel absolutely vulnerable and yet totally powerful all at once. In another flash of lightning I see Abigail's face melting in delight, feeling pleasure that I am bringing to her, that she says is due to me being with her. "Abigail, I am yours," I groan, feeling her body contract against me as she comes, moaning my name.

The pulsing, tight warmth of her body sends me soaring into my own ecstasy, and I come, gushing inside her, wanting to stay connected to her always. Afterward, I don't rush out of bed to clean up. I don't even want to do that. I roll gently to Abigail's side and pull her against my body, raining kisses on her as she catches her breath.

CHAPTER 33

ABIGAIL

“I’LL GIVE you my entire next paycheck if I don’t have to come clean up wet hay,” I moan into my phone when Indigo calls in the morning. I was too busy making love all night to worry about what cleanup would be like in the morning.

“All part of the planning committee,” she chides. “Besides, I’ll take you to the salt cave after.”

One of the shops along Main Street, Oak Clarity Crystals, has a salt cave in the back. It’s really just a room in her store building, but Melody’s lined the walls and ceiling with Himalayan pink salt, creating a “healing cave.” Indigo has been trying to get me to go sit in there with her, to boost my immune system and revitalize my skin.

Hunter says he has to deal with some paperwork and meet his father this morning anyway, so I begrudgingly put on my rattiest clothes to go help take down the Autumn Apple festival. I smile, tying my hair up in a bun, thinking about how he lay on top of me as we listened to the rain, sliding inside me so gently, moving along with the surges of the cloud bursts.

I suspect I won’t see him for awhile today, since he didn’t check on his tissue samples at all yesterday. He left in a hurry,

and I realize I never got a chance to ask him the details of what happened with Sara and his legal situation.

As it turns out, a large number of Oak Creekers have shown up to gather the hay bales and decorative gourds for the animal rescue. Diana has a composting operation set up for anything damaged by the storm to feed to the rescued rabbits or line the cat cages. The Acorns, spry and miraculously not hungover, have already taken down the wooden booths and hauled them back to the storage shed at the edge of town. It's barely ten AM and already, it looks like the festival never happened.

Mary Pat got emergency approval from the co-op board to pass out sprouted wheat muffins and fresh carrot juice to all the volunteers, and by lunchtime, I find myself tilted back in a zero-gravity chair beside Indigo, basking in the pink glow of the salt cave.

“How long do we stay in here,” I ask her, slurping the rest of my juice. I'm pretty sure Mary Pat added tequila to mine, because I feel woozy, but I roll with it, letting my body relax after an exhausting few days.

Indigo shrugs and stretches her hands above her head. “I think like a half hour? I want to come every day to get my body ready for pregnancy,” she says, grinning. “Now that the festival's over we don't have anything big to plan until Operation Kringle in December.” She pauses. “I guess that's only a month. But anyway! I'm going to make time to sit in this cave, dang it.”

“Should I ask about Operation Kringle?”

“Probably not.”

Relaxed and salted, I make my way home by way of the co-op, where I pick up grilled chicken strips and fresh veggies to make Hunter a salad. I think about how nice it felt to go with him at dawn and visit the chickens, find where they'd laid their eggs on his computer chair. The birds really are a nice gesture, I decide.

And, even though they're supposed to be his responsibility to take care of, I really want to visit them. They're interesting and friendly. He hasn't called at all today, so I assume he's pretty involved in whatever he's working on with his dad.

I stop in my half of the duplex to put away the groceries and grab some apples that have gone past their prime. I figure the chickens won't mind, and I walk through the yard to tug open Hunter's back door.

I freeze in my tracks when I see a woman standing at his counter, writing something. She looks up at me, one sculpted eyebrow raised derisively. “And just who are you?” she asks, coldly.

I'm so stunned I almost answer her, and then I realize there's no one who should be standing in Hunter's house. “I should be asking you that question,” I retort.

One of the chickens squawks and flaps her wings, and I stoop to give her one of the apples. “Here you go, girl,” I say,

patting the industrious chicken while the stranger stands, legs spread, stilettoed toe tapping the mat near a pile of chicken shit.

“I see Hunter hasn’t picked up any more housekeeping skills since I left,” she says, running her finger along a small pile of feathers on the counter. “You can see how much he needs me. It’s good that I’m back.” The birds flap and she backs up. “We’ll find someplace befitting a scientist of his calibre.” She smiles an icy smile, and I realize this is Hunter’s ex-wife.

“Wait,” I say, dropping the rest of the apples to the chickens. “You’re supposed to be signing divorce papers.”

She tilts her head to the side, pouting mockingly. “Is that what they told you? Aw, sorry.” She walks closer to me. She’s at least six inches taller than me, so she’s literally looking down her nose at me as she says, “Don’t think I don’t know about Hunter’s little *diversion* here in Oak Creek. But I can assure you, we are very much still married.” She flashes her left hand in my face and I see a gaudy, giant diamond ring on her manicured finger.

None of this makes sense. “I think I’d better call Hunter,” I say, reaching for my phone.

Heather snorts. “Go ahead. Call my husband back to this *dump* so we can get out of here faster. We’re both eager to get reacquainted after our little misunderstanding.”

She stalks back to the counter where she begins gathering the papers she’d been writing on when I arrived. “Oh, and by the way,” she says. “I hear tell I have you to thank for teaching

Hunter some new tricks.” She winks and I want to simultaneously claw her eyes out and vomit on the floor with the chicken shit. “Our reunion is shaping up to be sensational.”

I glance behind Heather toward the living room area and see a few black suitcases packed by the door. My head is pounding and my thoughts are racing. Could Hunter have truly gotten back together with his wife in the few hours since we were last together? He seemed so open last night, so committed to me. But then I remember the article Ed Hastings wrote, where he implied Hunter would do anything to avoid a huge divorce payout. *Surely that didn't include taking back the woman who left him while he was on a mission in outer space?*

I know Heather had been really trying to rake him over the coals in the divorce, and that he wasn't objecting to paying her—I can see now she's the kind of woman who requires a lot of money for her upkeep—but I heard she was also trying to make sure she got money from his future research patents. The thought of her trying to profit from his research, trying to steal his brilliant passion...it pisses me off.

“Look, Heather—”

“No, you look.” She whips her head around. “I put up with his bullshit for years. I cleaned for him. Arranged his calendar. I did everything, everything so that he could pursue his research. So he could stretch that brilliant mind of his into the universe and back. And I'll be damned if I put in all that work just so some skank in ripped leggings can reap the reward. So why don't you let yourself out the way you came in and leave

me here with my husband to work out the details of our reconciliation.”

I don't say a word, slamming the back door behind me as I rush into my apartment and collapse in angry sobs.

CHAPTER 34

HUNTER

I FEEL weightless as I walk to my parents' house from Sara's office. Signing those papers feels like lifting the last bit of gravity dragging my past along with me.

I never said I was a good husband. Hell, I was probably a lousy human being to Heather, and I don't mind giving her a payout. My townhouse here is fully paid for and I have Abigail's rent coming in each month on top of my teaching salary. I'll be just fine.

Thanks to Sara, my future intellectual property is mine alone. Heather has no further ties to me. None.

The world seems bright and filled with possibilities as my father and I get to work building a small coop for the chickens. I meant what I said to Abigail, that I want to make sure I have multiple reminders not to let myself get buried in my work again. I don't want to go back to being that person, who selfishly pursues my own obsessions about science at the expense of my relationships with other people. I even have been enjoying spending time with Moorely, now that I understand his humor a bit more.

“Son, I want you to know I think Abigail is a really good match for you.” Dad talks without making eye contact as he makes measurements and marks the wood with a pencil. “Your mom and I are so glad to see you happy.”

“You can tell that I’m happy?” I look around as if I have a mark on my clothes somehow.

Dad chuckles and looks up. “I can, Hunter. And not just because you’re smiling all the time now. You’re also grumbling less and I haven’t even seen you pacing in months.”

“Hm.” I do those things, it’s true—grumble to myself and pace. I don’t know that I considered those were markers of unhappiness. Restlessness. “You’d make a good researcher, Dad.”

He flips down his safety glasses and lines a plank up by the circular saw. “Been there, Hunter. Tried that.” He looks at me for a minute, considering. “Then you came along, and your mother and I were caught off guard. It seemed a more important and worthwhile challenge to stay home and figure out how to help you become...well, just become.”

My parents don’t talk a lot about my dad’s decision to stay home with us 32 years ago. He often says he likes redirecting his analytical energy into making a home for 4 kids and that studying our mother is a career unto itself.

I’m not sure what to make of this revelation that my arrival was the catalyst for his life changing, but then I remember all the catalysts that brought me and Abigail to where we are right now. Dad starts drilling planks together and I fall in step beside him. I said I didn’t want anything fancy or ornate, but

by the time Dad calls Archer to borrow his truck for the finished coop, we've made the chickens luxurious nesting boxes inside, with easy-access flaps at the bottom for egg retrieval. Dad decides it's prudent to add a light fixture, too, in case of extreme cold. I don't bother to tell him the chickens are currently in my dining room. I suppose it's not good practice to default to having the chickens inside the house.

Archer arrives and admires the coop, smacking me on the back and then hugging Dad. The three of us put the coop in Archer's truck bed and squeeze into the cab. When we pull up to my house, I see a familiar Lexus parked out front, and my chest tightens. "Wait here," I say to my dad and Archer, approaching the front door with trepidation.

If my ex-wife is in my house, I want to get her out of there as quickly as possible. Why the hell would she be in town? We signed the papers electronically via our respective lawyers. Heather shouldn't be anywhere near Oak Creek. I don't even want Abigail to see her on the property, let alone risk her coming across Heather in the back yard or something.

I curse myself for how quickly I returned to the small-town habit of leaving my doors unlocked. While it's convenient leaving the house with no keys, clearly the practice leaves much to be desired in terms of security.

I open the door slowly, and my fears are realized. "Heather," I say, frowning at both her and the bags she seems to have brought inside. "What is this?"

She snorts. “That’s the greeting I get? What’s it been—a year, Hunter?”

“Well,” I say, “we were supposed to see one another in Kazakhstan a few months ago. You decided not to come, as I recall. You were emptying out our condo.”

Neither of us speaks for awhile, and I remember how long stretches of silence make her uncomfortable. “What’s in the bags, Heather?”

“Oh, those?” She gestures over toward the pile of suitcases. “It’s all things I have no use for. Things I took from the condo.”

“Ok, well why are they here?”

“Well, don’t you want them back? All your special toothpastes and protein powders? I have no further use for them.”

“And yet they belong to you, according to the legal documents we both just signed. So I’ll ask you again, Heather. What are you doing here? I don’t want six-month-old toothpaste.”

“Maybe I wanted to give you one more shot to see what you’re missing,” she says, walking closer. While I never found Heather a turn-off, certainly, I also wouldn’t say she ever particularly aroused me, either.

Nothing about our relationship was related to lust, let alone love. Standing near her now, I realize that more than ever before.

“Heather,” I say, holding out my hands to ensure she maintains a distance between us. “I’ve apologized for my part in the destruction of our marriage. I treated you badly, and I am sorry for that. Honestly, I can say that your leaving me was one of the best things that ever happened to me.” Her face crumples into rage and I know I’ve made a mistake. “That came out wrong.”

“Fuck you, Hunter.” Her voice is cold, calculating. “You think you can just pay me off and I’ll fade into the background?”

I roll my eyes. “Yes, actually. And I’ve got a stack of paperwork indicating you agreed.” One of the chickens wanders into the room then and begins to peck at my sneaker. I stoop to pick her up, planting a kiss on her feathered head without thinking. “Look, now you can start fresh...”

Heather stares at me and the chicken, and for the first time, I think I can guess what she is thinking. Heather is upset that I never showed her affection, like I just did so casually with the chicken. She surprises me when she starts to cry quietly, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“I just don’t get it,” she says. “I came here to sign these papers and move on with my life. I was so sure you were incapable of loving *anyone*. While you were up in that lab, never calling, never contacting me for weeks on end, I assumed that you just don’t need human companionship. You were never going to need to be married to me. And so I left.”

Heather wipes at her cheek with her hand, sniffing. “But then I came to town to sign the papers. I was on my way to

Philadelphia anyway and figured I'd just sign in person, maybe shake your hand and part as friends. But of course everyone in town is talking all about that damn festival last night. Imagine my surprise to hear them whispering, laughing about Hunter Crawford lovesick, infatuated with his new girlfriend."

"Heather—"

"No, you let me finish!" Her voice is raw, barely contained emotion shaking out in her words. "How the hell do you think that makes me feel? Oh, wait. You have no idea, right? You don't understand human emotion. Well, Hunter, it feels like garbage to realize you're not actually a robot. You just didn't give a shit about *me*."

I am unsure what to do, so I just continue petting the chicken, who pecks at my shirt hopefully while we both wait for Heather to continue. "I loved you once, Hunter. Hunter Crawford, the most brilliant student to grace the halls of MIT in a generation! Paying attention to me in the library, responding to me when I suggested we should go see the Boston Philharmonic. I was *somebody* when I was with you, Hunter, until the person I was without you seemed to fade away. And then at least I convinced myself you needed me. That you'd be living with animals and chicken shit on the floor without me. And you *are* living that way and it doesn't even fucking bother you!"

"Heather, I'm sorry." I sigh and put down the chicken, holding my palms up in submission. "I should never have taken you for granted."

She sniffs, drawing in a jagged breath and wiping away one last line of tears. Her nostrils flare and she shakes her head. I watch her transform back into the cool, distant woman I'm accustomed to. "Well, I appreciate your apology. Please don't contact me. I can show myself out." She climbs over the luggage and the pair of chickens who have now roosted on the pile of bags. I see her taking in my surroundings. I know it looks sparse and pathetic, covered in feathers and animal droppings. But I don't care. The important stuff lies on the other side of the wall anyway.

Heather turns to look at me as she opens the door. She says, "Oh I do hope Abigail isn't too upset after our conversation earlier. The mouth on that girl!"

Before I can accost her and find out precisely what she said to my Abigail, she slams the door in my face and is clicking down the sidewalk. I trip over the stuff in the doorway in my haste to chase after her, and she's in her car driving away before I can get on my feet and out the front door.

Heather talked to Abigail, I think. Heather must have lied to Abigail. Something is wrong here.

I walk straight to Abigail's door and knock, but there's no answer. I pull out my phone to call her, frantically, but my call goes directly to voicemail. Her car is gone. The curtains are all drawn and I can't see inside.

"Dad," I shout, jogging around back where he and my brother have just finished setting up the coop.

"Hey, son. Was that Heather I saw leaving?"

“Dad, you have to help me find Abigail.”

CHAPTER 35

HUNTER

ABIGAIL IS MISSING, having encountered Heather, and we have no way of knowing what my ex-wife might have said to her. I predict the conversation centered around my past transgressions and poor behaviors as a spouse, and potentially the suggestion that I intended to rekindle my relationship with Heather rather than surrender my money.

I find my approach to this problem mirrors my work: I rush upstairs to my computer, still set up on the floor to avoid getting shit on by the chickens downstairs, and type out the variables, potential motives, possible solutions to various scenarios. I forget that my father and brother are here with me until I hear Archer talking loudly on his cell phone. I take note that I'm muttering and pacing—the very behaviors my father notices when I'm unhappy. My thoughts are spiraling, too.

“Ma hasn't heard from Abigail,” Archer shouts to the house at large. “But they have a meeting on Monday and Rose believes Abigail would not leave her hanging when she's about to meet the prime minister of Sri Lanka. They're setting up an exchange program.”

“Your mother is meeting with Sri Lanka? Shit,” my father curses and I hear him stomping around. “That means we are hosting. I have to get home, son. Hunter!” He yells upstairs.

“What, Dad? Come on!”

“Hunter, I’m sorry. If I have foreign dignitaries staying at the house I need to get ready. I’m sure you and your brother are more than capable of locating Abigail and correcting any misunderstanding. I have more chickens if you need another peace offering.”

And with that, my father takes off out the front door. “Archer,” I stare at my brother, desperate. “I can’t even map out an algorithm for this.”

“Ok, Hunter. Let’s think about this. Who do you know that has searching skills?”

“Searching skills?”

Archer shoves me away from the computer, toward the stairs. “Yeah, like surveillance skills or some ninja shit. Don’t you know astronauts?”

I ask Archer to summon Moorely and then I check the date on my watch. November 5. I do some mental calculations and realize Digger must be back home by now. His specialty is cyber security, so I’m certain the program has not canceled his research. I sigh deeply, and pull up his number on an old directory file, hoping he wouldn’t have changed his number due to notoriety or privacy or otherwise.

I dial the number nervously, and am greeted with, “Holy shit, Crawdad! Never thought I’d hear from your ass again!”

“How did you know it was me?”

“Who do you think you’re calling, dude? What’s up?”

Within a few hours, we determine that Abigail has left town, and likely several hours earlier. Her car was spotted at the gas station and Mary Pat told Enid who told the Acorns that Abigail had a lot of clothing in the back seat. Abigail arrived in Oak Creek after a falling out, so I hypothesize she has headed back, convinced that I am leaving her for my ex-wife. The difference this time is that I intend to find her and correct this misunderstanding.

Moorely has identified Abigail’s Ohio address and Digger has arranged to come get me in his helicopter. My brother points out the absurd cost of such a flight, but Digger insists he can work the adventure into one of his firewall checks and conduct some business in Ohio while I meet with the Bakers.

Archer takes one look at me, still in my coop-building clothes, and insists that I go shower and change if I’m hoping to win over my partner’s parents. I acknowledge the merits of this idea, and when I leave the shower, I see that my brother has procured flowers, chocolates, and a small box of eggs from the other chickens in our father’s flock. “I want you to be prepared to kiss a lot of ass, Hunter.” He pulls me in for a one-armed hug and then drives me over to the high school, where Digger is landing the helicopter on the lacrosse field.

“Crawdad! Come here, asshole!” Digger jumps out of the plane and ducks under the force of the still-slowng blades, running over to pull me into an awkward hug. Hugging is still something foreign to me, except when it comes to Abigail, but I do understand that others wish to embrace one another as I enjoy doing with her. So I allow Austin Digby to pull me into his sweaty body for a moment.

“Archer, Moorely, this is my former colleague, Digger,” I say when he releases me. “Digger, let’s go.” Digger shakes his head and cracks his gum, saluting my brother and friend as he lifts us off the ground.

It takes less than an hour to fly to Ohio, where Digger has evidently arranged to land on an air strip and called for a government car to retrieve us. He says he’s off to investigate cyber security on the water treatment center nearby, but offers to drop me at the Baker household. During the entire flight and car ride, I endure him updating me on everything he’s been excited about since returning to earth. Food, television, and sex, evidently. I do feel compelled to suggest the Kivin method to him, which seems to astonish and delight him when he looks it up on his phone. “You can make a woman come in 3 minutes this way? You’re going to have to debrief me on this later, dude.” The car pulls up to a small ranch house. “Thanks for the diversion this afternoon, Crawdad. Good luck!”

I climb out into the fading light of late afternoon and my friend rolls away, with instructions to meet him back at the high school in three hours. Not much time to calculate whether this town offers ride shares, but I can’t worry about that right

now. I steel myself to interact with angry parents and ring the bell.

A short woman who resembles Abigail answers the door. Her dark, graying hair is in a ponytail, and I can see how Abigail's face might fill out over the years, how she might develop graceful lines. How she might come to look wise. "May I help you?"

"Yes, hello. My name is Dr. Hunter Crawford. I've come to apologize to Abigail."

"Who's at the door, Mae?"

"Some man looking for Abigail."

A tall, thickly muscled man crosses his arms and frowns at me. "Better get in line, son."

"Is Abigail not here?"

Mae and the man who must be Abigail's father exchange a glance. "We haven't seen our daughter in months."

I run a hand across my chin. She didn't flee to her home after her encounter with Heather. This changes everything. "Sir, ma'am, may I come inside?"

I am reluctantly offered iced tea and a seat in the living room while a football game blares in the background. A trio of men

resembling Mr. Baker are crammed onto the couch, shouting at the television, where I see the Cleveland team is playing against the Philadelphia team. I'm reminded again how little enthusiasm I feel for these sorts of events, which would have been similar loud productions in my house growing up. Only it would have been my mother on the couch yelling at the officials and my father making chicken salad.

Mr. Baker plunks into his armchair and points at me. "So I'm thinking my daughter was maybe shackled up with you this whole time, God knows where, and you pissed her off and she ran off again?" Mr. Baker doesn't seem the type to mince words, which interestingly sets me more at ease.

"Well, as you say, I did inadvertently anger her and I'm not sure where she went."

"Can you tell us where our daughter has been?" Mae Baker sits beside her husband on the arm chair, wringing her hands. "We've been worried sick."

"I. Well..."

"She left a good job and a good man, with no warning," Mr. Baker interjects. "Jack's been nuts with worry."

"Jack? The man who harmed Abigail?" The mention of his name has me gritting my teeth. Anger blooms inside my chest at the realization Abigail's family is defending the man who caused Abigail to flee in fear.

"What are you talking about, son? Jack loves Abigail."

I make eye contact with Mae and try to delicately phrase my feelings about this perception of events. "He nearly ripped

her ear off in a rage and had been isolating her from you for months,” I say, steel in my voice, ice in my veins.

Abigail’s brothers all turn their head from the television. “Say what, now? Jack laid hands on Abby?”

I briefly summarize what I know of the events leading up to her departure while Abigail’s mother sobs and the Baker men start sweating and flexing their fists. Mr. Baker looks at his wife and then back to me. He sighs. “It seems there’s a lot our daughter hasn’t told us,” he says.

“Well. I know she feels you have expectations for her, and that you seemed set in your feelings about her former lover.”

“Not if he fucking laid a hand on my baby girl! Jesus Christ.” He stands up and begins pacing. “Well why in the hell are you here? We need to find her.”

Mae Baker cries again. “We owe her an apology!”

“I’d like to marry her,” I add, which then immediately seems like the wrong thing to say. I thrust the flowers and chocolate into her mother’s limp hands and hand her father the box of fresh eggs. “I mean eventually. Once we straighten all this out. I’m interested in working toward that eventuality with Abigail. If she’ll have me back. Right now I’d just like to speak with her.”

The Baker family exchanges glances until eventually, one of the brothers rises. “I’ll go gas up the Suburban, Dad. Go find Abby.”

CHAPTER 36

ABIGAIL

I GET ABOUT two miles in my car before I lose my nerve. Of course, Mary Pat and some of the Acorns are at the gas station when I pull in to fuel up. In my haste to get the hell out of Oak Creek, I grabbed two armloads of clothes and tossed them in my back seat. Now Mary Pat peers in the window as we both wait for our tanks to fill. She drives a hybrid, so it doesn't take her long to wander over to me and ask if I'm headed to the dry cleaner.

"Something like that," I say, but she frowns and nudges Lamar and Javier.

"We were just saying this was the best Autumn Apple we've had in years. Isn't that right, Jav? We sold out of natural hangover remedy at the co-op."

The graying former economics professor nods, massaging his temples. "MP and I were planning a trip out to Lancaster today to stock up on some tinctures with the Amish Apothecary we know out that way."

I nod, thinking that sounds like a nice way to spend a lazy Sunday, actually, wondering what Hunter would have to say about herbal remedies in the age of modern medicine.

Thinking about Hunter reminds me that he's probably having makeup sex with his bitchy wife by now to avoid having to pay her his entire life. I choke back a sob and force myself to smile at Mary Pat and the guys.

"I can't wait to see what you all bring back," I tell them. The pump clicks off and I squint toward the road out of Oak Creek. When I reach in my pocket to grab my credit card, I see my phone has a bunch of messages from Rose. She's got foreign dignitaries coming to town this week and I am really pleased with the research I did into foreign customs, the way I helped her craft talking points to emphasize how our Oak Creek strategic plan aligns with the Sri Lankan goals for raising well-rounded young citizens.

I'm not going to get to do this kind of work anywhere else. But I also know it'll kill me slowly to live beside Hunter and his wife, to hear them fucking through the thin walls of our duplex. Even if they move, I have no desire to run into him on campus, and Oak Creek is a small college.

I pay for my gas and wonder whether Rose would write me a reference to get a communications job somewhere else. Maybe back in Ohio...where my parents are furious with me for leaving and my ex boyfriend could go off the rails any time.

I decide to go to the bakery and make a plan. I indulge in a chocolate muffin. "Yes, Stu. One made with wheat flour. And butter. From cows."

The Oak Creek gossip tree doesn't take long to shake out some leaves, and Diana stomps in the door within a few bites

of my muffin. “What’s got you spooked, Baker?” She reaches for a chunk of muffin and I pull it back from her. “Oh, it’s like that, is it? Stu!” She yells for the tired baker to bring her something decadent and I start to tell her about what happened with Heather earlier this morning.

“What a frigid witch,” Diana says, chewing her croissant as Stu crosses his arms and looks pissed. “You know that’s bullshit, right?”

I shake my head. “She said Hunter changed his mind about the divorce when he learned that Heather would get long-term patent royalties.” I sniffle. “And she said he realized how much he needs her now that he’s living without furniture, with fowl flapping around his living room.”

Diana laughs. “Hunter never gave a shit about furniture. You know that by now, Abigail.”

I shake my head harder. “The day I met him, he was upset that I had his headboard from his childhood bedroom.”

She thinks about that. “I’m guessing that was more a ‘my dad made that’ thing than a nostalgic issue. Hunter only cares about tissue samples—”

“Exactly. He’s just going to live with Heather rather than let her get control of his research and ideas.” I start sobbing at the injustice of it all, wiping my nose in the wax paper that had been wrapped around my muffin.

Stu leans on the table and interjects. “Abigail, come on. You know Sara is a better lawyer than that. She’s a fucking

shark. Hunter gave Heather a payout this morning that won't even dip into his fancy protein powder funds."

"I don't know..."

"Look," Diana butts back in, "I know for a fact he was at Archer's office this morning signing papers, because he went to my parents' house to build a chicken coop afterward and my dad said he was actually whistling. Dad's back there now preparing a feast for the Sri Lankans. We can go ask him if you want?"

"Hunter was whistling?" I begin to wonder if Diana's words make sense. Surely if Hunter were being forced to choose a loveless marriage with his mean wife, he wouldn't be whistling about it.

I'm just so used to being denied the things that I find meaningful—the things I love. I let Diana guide me to the Crawford-Mitchell house, not quite wanting to cling to the hope that this could all be a misunderstanding calculated by a bitter woman.

As Diana and I walk through the back garden, we can smell heaven and hear chaos from inside the house. Daniel stands at the stove whisking madly, hollering to Rose in another room of the house.

I hear her dragging furniture, shouting about the Sri Lankan delegates and their preferred sleeping arrangements. "Would it kill you to give me more notice for these things?" He shouts. "Or better yet, house them at the Inn where Indigo is prepared for hospitality?"

“Daniel, I’ve told you a hundred times. When I succeed at these efforts, you get laid!”

Diana slams the door shut, interrupting her parents. She mimes gagging at me but pulls me further into the house. “Dad,” she said. “Stop stirring the roux and tell Abigail everything you know.”

“Oh, hello, dear,” Rose says, walking into the room. “Hunter thinks you’re in Ohio. He’s gone there with his astronaut friend.”

Archer, Diana, and I jog over to the high school when Archer gets a text that Hunter is on his way back. Archer confirms what Diana suggested, that Heather was trying to get Hunter back and didn’t succeed, so she lied to me, hoping to get in one final dig before leaving Hunter’s life for good.

My relief at hearing this is dwarfed by my sense of overwhelm that Hunter has gone to Ohio in search of me, gone to speak with my parents. What must they have thought of him, showing up out of the blue, with nobody to explain his brusque personality. “Oh, lord, Hunter interrupted football Sunday,” I say, looking at Diana tearfully. “Wait. Why are we at the high school?”

Diana points to the sky, where I can see a helicopter approaching. “My brother called in a favor with the outer space dorks,” she says, shouting above the noise. “These guys have fancy toys.”

I slam my hands over my ears as the aircraft sets down on the lacrosse field. The pilot kills the engine and the blades slowly stop whirring. I squint through the cloud of dust that's been kicked up, to see Hunter in the co-pilot seat and..."Mom? Dad?"

My parents tumble out of the plane and come jogging over to me. My mom pulls me into her arms, sobbing, and my dad starts screaming that he is going to kill Jack just as soon as he lays eyes on him. This is certainly not the reception I anticipated from my parents, and I can't control my emotions as tears well up in my eyes. I let them fall as I sink into my mother's arms. From the corner of my eye I see Hunter, standing with his hands in his pockets, looking at me hopefully.

Once the blades of the helicopter finally slow, the pilot wags his eyebrows toward Diana. "You Crowdad's sister? I'm Digger. He tell you about me?"

"Don't waste your breath," Diana scoffs. "Come on, guys. You're attracting a crowd."

CHAPTER 37

HUNTER

DIGGER FLIES off with a promise to come visit the campus soon as a guest lecturer, and I escort Abigail and her parents back to the duplex. I'm not sure whether or not to follow them inside Abigail's half, as she seems distraught and leans on her parents.

Her father beckons me inside, though, and with everyone seated around her table, she tells them all about the events leading up to her departure from Greenwood. I see her father work his hands into fists as she summarizes the evolution of her relationship in the months leading up to her departure.

"But I also wasn't happy in my job there, Dad." Abigail collects herself and sits up a bit straighter. "I had to keep my degree a secret from you. And I was working toward your dream there. Not mine."

"Hell, Abby, we just wanted to make sure you were comfortable. You know, your mother and I had a long road to get to where we could afford name brand cereal. I never wanted that for you kids."

Abigail's mother squeezes her hand. "And I certainly didn't mean to pressure you into staying with a man who

harms you, Abigail Baker! When I grew up, my only chance at being something was through your father. That's just how things were then. I only wanted to see you settled."

I begin to feel uncomfortable listening to the Bakers discuss their emotional journey, but then I hear my name on Abigail's lips. "Of course I appreciate the sacrifices you made to make sure I could go to college, Dad. But all that work is for nothing if I can't choose my own path once I get that opportunity. Fate led me here to Oak Creek," she says. "To Hunter, and Rose and this town that embraces me."

Abigail begins to tell them how she uses her skills to help my mother, how she helped organize the festival. Soon the three of them are crying, talking about a tour of the town square, and making plans to spend Thanksgiving here in Oak Creek. I'm still not sure how I fit into this, but I am desperate to speak with Abigail privately, to make sure she knows there is nothing left between me and Heather. That she, Abigail, is my priority.

"Mr. Baker, would you like to see my father's wood shop?" The three of them turn their heads toward me as I shift uncomfortably. "I just...know that a craftsman such as yourself would enjoy..."

"Sure, Crawford. Let's go."

Finally, with my father and Abigail's poring over the oak and maple boards in my father's shop, and my mother showing

Abigail's all around the themed rooms she set up for the Sri Lankans, I have a few moments alone with Abigail.

She sits beside me on the garden bench, staring at the creek in silence.

"I thought you left town," I begin.

"Well," she says. "I started to. But then I really wanted to keep my job, damn it. So I came back and your sister told me the truth."

"Abigail," I say, taking her hand. "I was blinded by ambition. From the moment I finished college, I set my sights on the space agency and for years, nothing and nobody were important to me. Only my work." I rub my thumb across her knuckles, needing her to understand the emotions I don't know if I have words to communicate. "And I still feel driven by my work. That won't change. But meeting you has shown me that there is room in my life, in my heart, for...well, for love, Abigail."

"Love?"

I nod. "I would love to explore that with you, if you'll let me and join me. I am a free man now, thanks to Sara, and I promise you that I will never let my work distract me from my commitment to you again."

"I don't know if I'm ready for love, Hunter. I'm a mess."

This is not the response I expected. I feel a vise squeeze around my ribs as my heart stops beating. "But...are you ready for me?"

CHAPTER 38

ABIGAIL

MY PARENTS DECIDE to stay in Oak Creek for a few days to see the town and learn more about the place I've told them I'm going to put down roots.

I get them checked into the Inn, and Indigo promises to take good care of them. Knowing Indigo, I suspect my parents might decide to just stay there forever. It's good to show them the people I've met, to let them see how the townspeople greet me warmly. I can tell my dad is comforted to see how nice my townhouse is and to know I can afford it on my own, with my salary from the job I love.

My oldest brother texted my mom to let her know Jack had an "accident" leaving the bar after the hockey game last night, and my dad grunts noncommittally at this news. He and Hunter make eye contact across the table at the coffee shop. My mother reads another message from my brother to her phone. "Oh dear. Jack somehow got his ear closed in his truck door. How does such a thing happen?"

My father clears his throat and leans forward. "Abigail, you picked a real nice town for yourself. I like how Rose appreciates you, honey."

I smile. This is strong praise from my father.

“But you know, you always have a home in Greenwood,” he continues. “That’s your home, baby girl. I’m just saying, if you want to come back, well...”

“Thanks, Dad,” I pat his hand. “I will come back.” Hunter gasps and I put my arm around his shoulder. “Just to *visit*. I’m happy here. I have a life here. There is still work I want to do here.”

My parents sip their coffee and Hunter stares at me, his gaze as intent as ever. “Son,” my father says to Hunter. “Is that friend of yours going to fly us back home or what? We’re sort of stranded here, and it’s almost game day...”

Hunter and I decide to drive my parents back to Ohio together. He and my brothers have made a plan to go retrieve my things from Jack’s house, and Hunter promises me that I don’t have to see him. I love how thoughtfully Hunter handles this situation, how he knows I feel uncomfortable at the thought of seeing Jack without my having to tell him.

In the days following the Heather fiasco, Hunter doubled down on his promise to be a good partner to me. He keeps a small notepad in his back pocket, and I see him writing things down, like “Abigail enjoys strawberries,” or “remind Abigail about socks at bedtime —>cold feet on my calves.”

I feel more seen, more carefully considered than I ever have in my life. I don’t know what will happen in the future, if

I'll feel content writing for Rose or if Oak Creek will call to me forever. But I know that this man by my side is here to support me, to appreciate me, and to bring me repeated, toe-curling orgasms.

Mom and I pack up the last of my things while Hunter and Dad check the oil in his car. She smiles out the window at the pair of them, Hunter gesturing at the synthetic oil and babbling about chemical residue, Dad listening skeptically. Hunter is nothing like any of us are used to, and I can tell my parents are ready and willing to learn to love his quirks.

Midway back from Ohio, we decide we don't feel like driving the entire way in one go, so Hunter checks us into a resort. "Hunter!" I gasp as he lifts me off the ground in the hotel. He tells me I can spend the entire next day in the spa if I want, "but first," he growls into my neck. "You have to spend the night on me."

People stare at us as he carries me bride-style to our room, but I forget to care about that as soon as he lowers me to the bed and starts peeling off my clothes. "I need you," I gasp, realizing how true this is as he sinks into me. His bare flesh against my wet heat feels like a homecoming, a joining of souls. I wrap my limbs around him and welcome Hunter deep inside, again and again, until we both forget what it meant to be apart.

EPILOGUE: HUNTER

CHRISTMAS EVE

DIGGER AGREES to pick Fletcher up at the airport on his way to Oak Creek. I am very uncomfortable at the idea of sharing my space with others again, and I truly wish my parents would stop bringing in foreign dignitaries to stay at their house. But Abigail insists it's not hospitable to make my friend and my brother stay at the Inn.

"Besides," she says in the morning on Christmas Eve, rubbing her bare, icy toes up my leg in bed. "They're on the other side of the duplex from us." Abigail insisted that I buy furniture for my half of the townhouse, outfitting the two bedrooms with a bed, a night stand, and a dresser so our guests could at least feel welcomed.

"Is Digger bringing Fletcher in a helicopter again?"

I shake my head and pull her closer. "He has some sort of high security vehicle from the agency."

Abigail sends me ahead to my parents' house to help prep the meal while she works on a round of revisions for her novel. After months of declining Mary Pat's book club, she finally agreed to join Enid's writing club instead and has

eagerly spent her free time pecking away at a draft she won't let me read.

I open my parents' back door and kick the snow off my boots as I hang my coat on the peg. "Ah! There's my Wexler Prof," my mother coos, sliding up and wrapping her arms around me. Ever since Asa Wexler agreed to support my research at Oak Creek College, funding a full-time research professorship in the biology department, my mother has been giddily notifying alumni around the world. Donations have apparently been flowing in as people want to congratulate *her* on attracting such prestigious faculty for the college.

I'm ok being a cash cow for my mother. It keeps me here, close to Abigail, and gives me total freedom to work on my computations.

"When do you go back to the tin can," Diana asks, lining up her latest batch of winter ales in the ice bucket.

I smile, pulling her in for an uncharacteristic hug. "January," I tell her. "So I need you to watch over Abigail for me while I'm gone."

My sister snorts and shoves me away. "You better watch her yourself, asshole. Use your video chat feature how 'bout it? I'm sure Digger can show you how it works."

Soon after, my brother Fletcher and Digger burst through the door. Fletcher carries a case of wine from Napa, where he's been on location most recently, and Digger brings a bag of chips he must have gotten at the gas station.

"Dr. M, Mr. C," he says. "Thanks for including me."

“Nonsense,” my dad yells from the oven. “Hunter promised you’d bring a laser to slice the roast.”

After dinner, when my family gathers in the living room to exchange gifts, I feel a sense of contentment I hadn’t known was missing from my life four months ago. All of my siblings are together, which rarely happens, and my mom actually gets teary when Digger suggests a family photo by the tree. He pulls out a very expensive camera to take the shot, and when Dad tugs Abigail into the photo, I slip my arms around her shoulders and squeeze her close.

I still have to work to interpret others’ emotions. I am still surprised at the ease with which Abigail can communicate nuanced ideas, and I’ve kept my promise to care for the chickens and, thus, *her* alongside my research. I don’t know what force in the universe caused the confluence of our lives, but I am grateful.

Digger shows me the photo, where I am gazing down at Abigail as the rest of my family smiles into the camera. “I love you,” I tell her, as my siblings bicker and demand a retake.

She grins and takes my hand in hers. “I love you, too.”

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