

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

SALLY THORNE

USA Today bestselling author of
The Hating Game

Posie and the

DREAMBOAT

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*Rosie
and the*
DREAMBOAT

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*For my mother, Sue, who is the best at
brainstorming.*



Whenever my sister, Bree, and I are sitting in a waiting room, I fill the silence with the same thing. I've done it since we were teenagers. We look at each other now, and I know she's waiting for me to be predictable.

Happy to oblige.

"Maybe I'll meet my husband today."

For someone who loves me, Bree makes a face like she hates me a *lot*. I grin back at her.

She gestures around at the room. "Sure, Rosie. Why not? He's around here somewhere."

The waiting room of Kintsugi Day Spa features stark white furniture, lit candles, and magazines. There are several bouquets of red roses in vases, and heart-shaped chocolates are scattered on the coffee table.

I will make her laugh if it kills me. "Come out, come out, wherever you are! How romantic, meeting him on Valentine's Day."

"Doing a pricey couple's day spa with your sister is a bit less romantic."

I shell the pink foil off a chocolate as efficiently as a parrot. "I see a good deal and I take it. With our matching last names, will they think we're a married couple?" I put the chocolate into her mouth. "And yes, it was very pricey. But you deserve it."

"I really do deserve it," she agrees through the mouthful. "My promotion reward." She begins to snort in amusement, and I know what she'll zing me with next. "As if we could be a couple. I'm so far out of your league."

"You really are. Fancy lawyer lady." I give her a nudge. "But I'm a catch, too, you know. Retail hasn't broken my spirit, so I'm clearly made of strong stuff."

A new look is on her face. “This must have totally cleaned you out.”

She’s not wrong, but I won’t let her dwell on it. “I want you to know, I booked this before you got the promotion. I was that damn sure you’d get it.”

“You saw me reading about this place in the in-flight magazine on the way back from Thanksgiving, didn’t you? I’ve got to get better at not giving you ideas about . . . expensive stuff. I can afford it on my new salary, but you’re a little plant girl. I’ll transfer my half.”

I do my stubborn bottom lip. “No. Let me.”

“Thank you, Rosie. This means a lot. Your future husband needs to worship the ground you walk on, okay?” Bree links her fingers into mine and squeezes.

I squeeze her back. “Worshipping is optional. I just hope he’s willing to hold my hand everywhere. I fell into a bucket at work last Monday.”

“I’ll hold it until he turns up, my sweet little hot mess. What will he look like? That?”

We break into juvenile titters at a black-and-white portrait hanging on the wall of a man’s naked back. It is inconceivably muscular and is covered in glittering water droplets. Does it allude to the spa’s waxing services?

Bree strikes a thoughtful art gallery pose, hand to chin. She may spend most of her week in a suit, but she’s as ridiculous as ever. “Will Rosie’s Husband look like a slippery sea otter, gliding through the waves?”

My favorite game. “Rosie’s Husband will be a dolphin with legs and a blowhole under his tuxedo jacket.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “He’ll be a muscular, headless torso, floating down the river.”

“If he looks like that, I’ll fish him out of the water myself.”

If any of the spa staff ever emerge, they’ll find us both red and crying with mirth.

I blot my eyes. “I’ll meet him in the bed next to mine in the nursing home. At this point, I don’t even care who he is or what he looks like. He’s entertained us for years.”

“I blame Grammy. It was a ridiculous notion to put into your romantic rose-petal brain.”

I quote our dearly departed Grammy now. “I’ll recognize him the moment I see him.”

“Let’s hope so. It’s been roughly ten years, and you’ve nearly recognized him fifty thousand times by now. I am so very weary. Hurry up, Rosie’s Husband.” Bree leans forward with a groan to pick up a brochure. “What’s on the menu for us today, again? All I know is we are getting into water at some point.”

The wet portrait threatens to undo us again.

We are saved by an elegant woman in a medical-white suit.

“Good morning. Welcome to Kintsugi Day Spa, and happy Valentine’s Day.” She flicks her eyes down to the two iPads she’s holding, then our joined hands, and then back up with a beaming smile. “Mrs. and Mrs. Whittaker, you are so very welcome to enjoy this romantic day with us.”

“We’re sisters,” we say in unison and let go of each other.

It seems to disappoint her, but she rallies. “Oh! My apologies. Well, it’s Galentine’s Day, then. You’re in for a fantastic day of perfect bliss, and the package you’ve booked will take you on quite a journey. I’m Dionne, and I am the manager here. My team is ready to pamper you.”

“I can’t even remember what we’re doing,” Bree says as we are given the iPads to fill out our new-client-information forms. It’s administrative opulence, given that there’s a cup of pens on the counter. “I hope there’s a massage. My shoulders feel like they’re broken.”

“We’ll fix that,” Dionne assures her. “I’ll run you through your itinerary.”

I've got problems of my own. Am I being recruited for the beauty army? "My vitamin and supplement regime? My retinol percentage? What day of my cycle?" I blink up at Dionne. "What's a Fitzpatrick skin type?"

"Just do your best," Dionne advises in a kind way that somehow also hurts my feelings. I tug my cardigan around myself and find that I'm missing a button.

I write "N/A" or put a question mark against almost everything. My perfect, organized sister is able to document her grown-adult level of self-care, and her pink tweed blazer is Button Central. I'm starting to feel like I'm five years old, here with my elegant mommy.

"There are eight treatments." Dionne counts them off on her fingers after we complete our check-in. "Infrared sauna. Vichy shower. Flotation tank. Mud body wrap. Our signature hot-oil stone massage. An oxygen facial, LED lights, and finishing off with mani-pedis. You're going to be different people when you leave here."

"I hope so," I say, and they both look at me.

Dionne's probably thinking that they're not miracle workers here. I need a haircut, and my nail polish is more like graffiti. It's impossible to stay manicured when you work in an indoor plant store. Imagine if they scraped out dirt from under my nails. I file the joke away to tell Bree, even as I wonder, *Can I leave here different? Will I be a polished, refreshed lady—a little more like my sister?*

We are led deep into the bowels of the day spa, and I grapple with the sudden, deep certainty that I'm shabby. But I've paid good money, and I have every right to this space. Anyway, who cares about me? This is all about Bree.

Our first stop is the infrared sauna. Dionne turns to us with a new thought dawning on her. "This package has been designed to be a romantic experience, so there were some assumptions made on our part. This sauna is for two people. Do you mind sharing together?"

We reply together, "It's fine."

After our introduction to the controls, we are left alone and strip off back-to-back. “I’m wearing my bikini already,” Bree says to me. “I figure with the shower thingy and the float tank, I’ll just stay in it.”

Needless to say, she looks fantastic in it. “I didn’t bring anything.”

“Rosie the Nudist, Rosie the Nudist!”

I have to wear a towel the size of a bath mat that won’t stay closed on my hip. I deserve the indignity of nudity for being so disorganized. We spend the entire thirty-five-minute sauna laughing and sweating and being absolute menaces to each other.

We emerge and commence the next leg of this elegant obstacle course.

It’s something called a Vichy shower. I envy Bree’s strategic practicality with her bikini. I explain to the staff that we’re not a couple and am provided with a disposable brief resembling a surgical mask. I hold it up on one finger to my sister, and she turns red and cries, laughing.

We lie face down on treatment benches, and it turns into a car-wash situation, *fast*. As I’m pummeled by the relentless jets of water, hot then cold, I beg myself to enjoy this expensive pain. If Bree loves this day, and it becomes a memory of us together, it’s all that matters.

When it’s all over, I’m missing an earring. The staff tell me it is probably gone forever.

“A tribute to the Vichy gods,” Bree observes, her pretty face sympathetic. “I’ll buy you a new pair.”

“It’s always me,” I grouch.

“Have either of you been in a flotation tank?” Dionne asks us as we stand, dripping, in our robes. Bree looks like a nineties supermodel with her wet hair scraped back. I’m in my sea otter era. We shake our heads, and she takes us into a room with two enormous, open clamshells in it. “These are brand new to the salon. The install last night was a rush so they’d be ready for Valentine’s Day. They’re absolutely

top-of-the-line, all the way from Japan. You are the first clients to use them. Even I haven't had the chance."

"Nice clean water, then," Bree says in satisfaction.

"They look like big toilets," I say in wonder, and they both pretend to not hear me.

Dionne's got a different iPad now. "Everything is controlled via an app, so we'll create your settings first. Next time you visit, all these will be uploaded automatically."

I choose the default settings, because I will never afford a return visit. Bree curates a sunset-sunrise lighting sequence, with twinkling stars and ocean sounds. Dionne's deeply impressed by the concept.

I see how everyone looks at Bree. When I say my sister is the entire package, I mean it. Looks, brains, career, humor, taste level. Our parents say she's the daughter they've never worried about. She's never fallen into a bucket. All my almost-husbands out in the wild have met my gaze, then looked over at her. I would, too.

I take a packet of earplugs from Dionne. "Do these work against intrusive thoughts?" My sister can always be counted on to laugh.

"You can't get stuck in these, can you?" Bree asks, her eyes bright on mine, and I manage to conceal the twist in my gut with an Academy Award level of skill. I have been somewhere tight, in the dark once. It is a memory I sidestep with uncharacteristic grace whenever it pops up.

Dionne takes the question seriously. "Let me assure you, they are perfectly safe. If you have any reason to get out, there's a manual handle on the inside. But would you prefer to leave it open a few inches?" She hovers her finger over the iPad. "If you have claustrophobia, that is perfectly okay. You can also choose to opt out, and we can get you some herbal tea."

But my sister is looking at me with a daring half smile. "Are you scared?"

“I’m okay.” I would like to leave the entire lid wide open, but I’m Rosie the Nudist. With my luck, a window washer would appear on cue.

“This is hilarious. Thank you so much for doing this with me. Best day ever,” Bree says after we are left alone and she sinks into the water. As her lid lowers, she calls out, “Goodbye forever.”

“Goodbye forever,” I echo with less conviction, and when she’s sealed inside, I climb in nude and close my lid, too. It doesn’t sound exactly like a car trunk closing, but then again, it kind of does.

I’m in absolute darkness. I didn’t select any music. Why didn’t I curate a sunrise sequence, too? The water is the silkiest, slimiest, milkiest, saltiest brew imaginable. I try to get comfortable, but there’s nothing I can do to adjust. Twisting myself this way and that only causes splashes, and a rippling tide that bobs me all the way to the top side of the tank. I bump my head. “Ow!”

I absolutely hate this.

“Enjoy this,” I order myself, and my grim tone resonates. It’s a crime to waste this valuable, unusual experience. I try again. “This is relaxing and fun.”

This is nothing like that *other time*, the one I’ve never even told Bree about. My heart is pulsing uncomfortably in my ears, dulled only a touch by the earplugs. I paddle my hands in the warm water.

I’m safe, and I’m not a joke.

And because I have no other option, I close my eyes and will myself unconscious.

I jolt and splash at the sound of knocking above. I hear Bree’s muffled singsong, “Rosie, wake up.”

“I’m awake.” I am quite indignant for someone who was just asleep. I put my hands all around myself, lid, sides,

the base. The blackness in here is surreal. I don't feel like I have eyes anymore.

“Wasn't it amazing? I had an epiphany. I thought of a project I can put forward at tomorrow's team meeting.”

I open my mouth, and eight-year-old Rosie lies: “I had an epiphany, too.”

“Sure you did, sleepyhead. Come on, hop out. I've got your robe here. Let's go be two pigs in a muddy pigsty. Then it's the massage.”

“Press the thingy for me.” I wait for a few seconds and pat around on the wall. “Bree, press the thingy. I'm in the dark.”

“I can't find a thingy. Oh, here's Dionne. Rosie's timer hasn't gone off. She's also not wearing anything, so avert your eyes.”

Dionne says with bright professional humor, “No problem.” Pause. “I'm just releasing the lid now.”

“Thank goodness,” I say in the dark. “Please tell me you've got my robe ready.”

Nothing happens.

“Just one moment,” Dionne assures me. My sister cackles.

“What's so funny?” Hurt tightens my throat. I need to get out of this thing, because the bad memory is becoming harder to sidestep. It's forming a huge, black pothole in the path before me, and I'm going to fall into it if I'm not careful. “Ha ha, Bree. Let me out.”

“It's just so ... Rosie.”

Dionne repeats more firmly, “Just one moment. I'm restarting the app. Technology. Doesn't it drive you crazy sometimes?”

“It does. Especially when my sister's locked in a big white toilet.”

“Locked?” I feel all the way down the left-hand side. “I’m just going to use the manual lever, okay?”

I don’t think they hear me. I can’t find anything that feels like a lever. I try the other side, in case I’ve forgotten my left and right. I try the roof. I feel around near my feet. There’s nothing that seems pullable. There are two handrails, which I tug hard, but nothing happens. My earplugs fall out. My breathing’s picking up. There’s no space to sit upright. My legs splash and slosh.

“Uh, I don’t like it in here anymore.”

“I’m just redownloading the app,” Dionne says, and I don’t hear from her for another two minutes.

“It’s okay, Rosie,” Bree says, but her tone is different now. “Just lie there and close your eyes and count to a hundred. Out loud, so I can hear.”

I obey, and I count. Then she tells me to count to two hundred. I hear the voices of other staff. Dionne shrieks, “I don’t fucking know what firmware is, do I, Gina? It’s brand new!”

“I’ll google the error code that’s showing up here,” Bree says with courtroom competence, down near my feet. “Oh. Japanese. I’ll try Google Translate. *Hmmm*. Not a good translation. I wonder what a Base-Level Latchet is? What’s a latchet? Or a washlet? Is that a real word? Oh, I don’t know. Keep counting, Rosie. Let me hear you count.”

I count to five hundred. Six hundred. Seven hundred. Then I take a break to have a good cathartic wail. “Please. Please. *Pleaaaaase!*”

“We’re trying,” Bree promises. “It’s just some silly thing, Rosie. It’ll be fixed in a second. Stay calm.”

The lid of the tank is dripping salt water on my face, running like stinging tears down my cheeks. Everyone outside has gone huffy-whispery. Or are they laughing?

Bree holds her phone against the side of the tank so I can listen to a true crime podcast. A monotonous voice narrates: *It was early February, and snow was still on the*

ground in Salem, Massachusetts. Gabrielle Dillinger tightened her scarf against the biting cold and set out on the ten-minute walk to her job at a car dealership. I listen for so long, I hear the entire court case, including the sentencing.

During the end credits, we are interrupted by a man entering the room. “What the hell is this thing?” He sounds delighted. “It looks just like a big toilet!”

“Is there an echo in here?” Bree asks. I can just picture her wry expression.

“It’s a flotation tank.” Dionne sounds like her perfect hairstyle is unraveling. “It’s for relaxation. We’re glad you’re here.”

“I love when people say that to me. Hey.” There’s a knock on my lid. “You relaxed in there?”

I wrap my arms across my boobs and groin. “I’m fine. I don’t suppose you’ve brought a can opener?”

He roars, laughing. “Oh, we got a live one in here!”

I am absolutely electrified, despite my predicament, and beam back at him in the pitch black.

A second, older man’s voice says, “Well, Romeo, work your magic. I’m going down to the truck to see what we could use.”

“I’ll go,” the first guy offers. “I really want a chance to get my hands on that new kit.”

“You know what your job is, pretty boy.” Boots clomp off.

“Hey, pearl in the clamshell.” The man’s voice sounds like he’s lower now. Maybe he’s kneeling beside me. Maybe his colleague just hurt his feelings. “We’re from the fire department. We’ll have you out soon.”

Dionne speaks. “I must reiterate that the salon does not consent to any damage done to the tank. It’s not itemized on our insurance yet, and I haven’t registered the warranty. That was on my to-do list, for after Valentine’s Day.” She sounds utterly wretched.

“Admin’s a bitch,” the fireman agrees. “But it doesn’t change the fact that we need her out.”

“I’m on hold with the customer support line, but it’s after hours now in Tokyo.”

The voice beside me replies, with some steel in his tone, “Yeah, yeah, remember our deal. Twenty minutes, or we’re using the Jaws of Life. Any suggestions from you, clamshell girl? Can you pull the manual lever?”

“There’s nothing to pull.”

He says, voice fainter from across the room, “Well, this one has a lever. It’ll be here.” He comes back and taps the side, to my left. “Look over. It’s here.”

“I can feel a smooth square panel with my hand.”

“Sounds like they didn’t put it in. Wait. It’s dark in there?” This realization has put velvet empathy in his voice now. “You’re being real brave, sweetie.”

In a baby voice, I ask, “Is my sister still there?”

“I’m here,” Bree says, but her voice is different. She’s excited. She’s as bright as my cardigan’s missing button, in fact. Firemen do that to a girl. “I’m going to go to my next treatment. The staff want to keep the fuss to a minimum.”

“Ha ha. Very funny.” I wait for her laugh. Silence. “You’re serious?”

“Rosie, listen to me.” She is on the other side of the tank, speaking into the sealed crack. “I want you to trust me. This is all going to work out. Trust me. Trust me. TRUST ME.”

“Okay. You’re right. We don’t want to ruin both of our days. Have fun.” The effort it took me to sound so upbeat leaves me sinking down into the water, completely submerged, with just my nose poking out.

This will be the moment the funny fireman persuades her into staying. But incredibly, he says, “Off you go, traitor. I’ve got her from here.”

“See you later, Rosie,” Bree says, sounding like she’s already halfway out of the room.

“She really left?”

“Your heartless sister’s gone, Miss Rosie Clamshell. It’s you and me now, kid. Frank is just our third wheel.”

“Shuck me out of this thing. I’m begging you.”

His helpless, barking belly laugh is an absolute dopamine hit. “Are we shuck buddies? My God, Frank, whoever is in this fancy water coffin is cracking me up.”

Frank replies, “You’re supposed to be working your magic, Romeo, not saying words like ‘coffin.’ God’s sake, boy, you’re our PR department. Hoooo-ey, look at these hinges. Day-spa lady is gonna have to accept the inevitable.” Then he says something faintly, and I think I make it out: “The things people waste their money on.”

If he knew what some people pay for a fiddle-leaf fig tree, he’d faint.

“She said this thing is worth eighty-five thousand dollars,” my funny guy—Romeo?—says with awe in his tone. “Hear that, Rosie Clamshell? You’re in something *very* expensive. You’re one lucky lady.”

“I’m truly blessed.” I’ve got a new occupation now: making him laugh. “I’m actually on a sun lounger in the Maldives.”

“You are?” His big smile is in his voice. “I coulda sworn you were sleeping on a couch in Buckingham Palace. Yeah,” he says to someone. “She’s fine. Brave little Rosie Clamshell.”

I’m touched that he’s taken on this role of looking after me. “Well, it’s nice to meet you, Romeo.”

“Nah. This fuckin’ asshole calls me Romeo to annoy me. I’m Leo.”

Frank booms in his big voice, “We call him Romeo because he’s a dreamy fucking dreamboat.”

“Yeah, yeah, fuck right off, Frank, you day-old hot dog. But he’s right, Rosie. I’m a dreamboat. Picture it in your mind, how dreamy I am.”

All I can picture is the waiting room’s headless torso portrait. “I am in sensory deprivation right now. My ears are full of water. You’re nothing but a voice.”

“A *dreamy* voice.” Leo’s laugh has a color. It’s all the colors, actually. They’re rainbow and melting, filling my pitch-black world like opalescent soap bubbles. He warns Frank, “Day-spa lady doesn’t want you disturbing all the clients. Go check and see whether she got through to customer service.”

There’s silence, and then Leo says, “How you doing in there, Rosie?”

“I’ve got a problem I should probably tell you about, if my sister didn’t already.”

“Shoot.”

“Uh . . .” I put my hands on my cheeks. They feel warm. “I’m like, sort of . . .”

“Yeeees . . .”

“I’m naked, so when we get this thing open . . .”

“I will blindfold everybody, including myself, and we’ll get you a towel.”

“I can’t believe she left me.” Even through an inch of Japanese steel, anyone could hear my desolation.

“You let her off the hook too easy. But we don’t need her. It’s you and me. I am going nowhere until you’re out. I can promise you that. I’m just glad you weren’t about to tell me you need to use the bathroom.”

“Give it time. This thing doesn’t flush, I guess.”

He’s smiling again, I know it. “I like you, Rosie Clamshell. Half the people I rescue in a day seem to be naked. Why’s everybody so goddamn nude all the time?”

“We’re heathens.”

“Heathens! Am I wasting my life, going around fully clothed?”

What is possibly a trickle of sweat runs down from my brow. “Depends. That uniform is pretty nice. Is that what you’re wearing now?”

“Oh, she’s getting flirty! What am I wearing?” He laughs and laughs, and his palm slaps the lid above me, like he’s helpless. It rains condensation droplets onto me. “I’m wearing a skintight fireman stripper outfit, made of flammable material.”

I remember his momentarily subdued tone when his colleague put him in his place. “I just objectified you. Sorry.”

He replies fondly, “You are not. Everybody does it. It’s my cross to bear. So, why’re you in this thing, anyway? You needed some really expensive relaxin’?”

“My sister got a promotion, so I treated her to this day of pampering. But this has gone very much par for the course for me.”

“Ohhhh. Am I speaking with a hot mess?” He seems to sense my nod. “I’m a professional hot mess wrangler, so don’t even sweat it. This isn’t even the weirdest thing I’ve seen this week.”

“Really? I’m so embarrassed.”

“The salon can be embarrassed. This isn’t your fault.”

His absolute authority does make me feel better. But I can’t help sighing.

“It’s just typical. I’ve lost a button and an earring already. There’s two tanks, but Bree didn’t get into this one. She’s the clever, competent sister, after all. We probably should have tried harder to make her stay.” I fall silent, and when he doesn’t reply, my heart bumps in my chest. “Are you still there?”

“I’m still here. Frank texted; he says they’re getting the salon owner on the phone.” A faint notification chimes,

followed by an impressed whistle. “Earthquake at a bakery? That wasn’t on my bingo card. My group chat is the gift that keeps on giving.”

“Have you already posted a picture of this flotation tank?”

“Say cheese!”

“Ha ha. Please keep distracting me.” I reach my hands up to touch the lid, and it releases a shower of stinging salt condensation droplets onto my face. “Ugh, the salt is brutal. Can you estimate if it will be much longer?”

“Not much longer at all,” he lies cheerfully.

I remember Frank’s words. “Your job is to work your magic and keep us poor naked dopes calm. He said you’re the PR department.”

“It’s my superpower. I can talk paint off a wall. Ask my ma—she’ll tell ya.” He falls silent, then says, “PR department. I have a bad feeling it means ‘Pretty Romeo.’ When I snap and strangle them all, I want you as my character witness. Tell them all how close I was to cracking.”

“That makes two of us. Any updates?” My voice is thin with nerves.

“I’ll check.” He has a phone conversation that goes like this: “Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Bye.” He hangs up. “Well. *Frank* says that *Dionne* says that the *salon owner* says they will sue the fire department if we so much as put a scratch on this fucking contraption. But someone from the clamshell company who speaks English is going to call back any minute.”

I think of how *Dionne*’s eyes slid over me in the waiting room. I’m not worth as much as this thing. “They don’t seem to be concerned about me suing.”

“They’re hoping you’re a little sweetie who won’t make a fuss. But lawyer up, baby. I’ll be your witness. We can go to the Maldives after it’s all done.”

“How did we become each other’s courtroom witness so fast?”

His tone is rich with amusement. “I really have no idea. Maybe we could represent each other, too.”

“No need. My sister’s a lawyer. She’s single, by the way.”

There’s no other word for it: he *scoffs*. “Are you trying to set me up with her? Because I saw her true colors. Nothing could drag me from your side, Rosie Clamshell.”

“You’re paid to do this,” I remind him, laughing. “And I’m glad my Valentine’s Day couple’s retreat isn’t completely wasted.”

“Ohhhh! It’s Valentine’s Day? It all makes sense now.”

“What does?”

“Some woman gave me a single rose and her number, down on the street this morning. The boys ragged me so much.”

I’m surprised by a hot, dark streak of emotion. I’m frowning. “How positively delightful for you.”

“Oh, wait! It was a clue! Rosie, the rose! The perfect girl to be my midday rescue.”

Distracted by the image, I mutter, “I’m nobody’s perfect girl, believe me. Just leave me in here. It’s for the best.”

“Room for me in there?” There’s a scuffing slide. He’s leaning up against my tank to get comfortable. “The horrors of dating, huh? Even for a dreamboat firefighter, it’s just unworkable. Hinge? More like ‘Unhinged.’ Why does my account keep getting reported?”

“If you’re as dreamy as Frank says you are, they probably think you’re a bot.”

He laughs until it’s a wheeze. “I thought using apps would get my personality across first. But instead, I find out that I’m just a bot.”

“You’re my isolation-tank hallucination.”

“It all makes sense now. That’s why I can’t take the lead on any rescues. I’m not real. Or maybe I just need a vacation.”

“Our trip to the Maldives is coming up.”

“I cannot wait. So tell me about yourself.” There’s a soft groan. He sounds like he’s stretching. “Maybe we’re inventing a new type of speed dating, right now.”

“So does the woman have to be immobilized and in sensory deprivation for it to work?”

“Sounds like heaven. I’ll take a turn in there. It does limit first impressions somewhat, I guess.”

I consider that. “Not really. You have a nice voice, and you’re hilarious.”

“I was thinking the same thing about you.” Frank must have reentered the room because Leo adds, “What’s the latest? We cracking it open yet? I’ve gotta take this girl to the Maldives.”

“Rein it in, Romeo. How you doing in there, Rosie?”

“I’m okay. I’m getting thirsty, though. And I dread the moment I need to pee. But Leo says I’m being very brave.” Why would I say that, like a little kid? Because I know how Leo will respond, exactly as he does now, warm and fond and sweet.

“She’s my bravest little clamshell trooper this side of the city.”

His generous kindness makes my eyes fill with unexpected tears, and they run down into this cursed brine I’ve been pickling in. How many countless people has he made feel just like this? Like they’re not just an object to be extracted?

“You’re the best, Leo,” I tell him.

He’s surely beaming and triumphant now. “Hear that, Frank?”

“Yeah, yeah. Don’t get his ego going any more than it already is. I’ve had enough of this; they can just sue us. I’m calling the chief, getting the all clear.”

“If he says yes, I’ll have the first try,” Leo offers.

“Nah, kid. Just keep sitting there, keep her calm . . .” Frank’s voice fades out of the room.

“They don’t let you do your job,” I accuse in the blackness.

“It’s my own fault. I’m hard to take seriously.”

Am I flirting with a work-experience kid? “How old are you?”

“Oh, good, on to the speed-dating round. Twenty-seven. You?”

I blow out a relieved breath. “Twenty-five. What’s your favorite indoor plant?”

He seems to be thinking. “Dusty plastic. What’s yours?”

“I’ll never admit it, outside of involuntary confinement.”

“I’m leaning closer . . . my ear’s on the seal . . . I simply must know . . .”

“I love peace lilies.”

“I can’t believe you admitted that. Rosie, good *lord*. My perception of you has changed.”

“Really?”

Oh. Is this why he’s being so friendly-flirty? If he’s seen Bree, he’ll be disappointed by her understudy. I’m going to crawl out of this tank in a towel looking like the girl from *The Ring*. I already know that he’ll chortle when I do.

I’m pretty sure he has a great smile.

He interrupts the thought. “I have no idea what a peace lily is, but I’m googling it. Okay. What’s so embarrassing about that?”

“They’re the Basic Bitch of indoor plants, but I just like the way they’re so dramatic. You’ll walk by one, and it’s drooping flat. You’ll think it’s just about dead. Run over by a truck, surely. Then you soak it in a sink for an hour, and suddenly it’s upright, saying, *I’m fine, I’m fine, I can live.* Until the next time it’s nearly dead. They’re the fainting Victorian ladies of the plant world.”

“Your tank’s lit up like a light bulb, so I’m guessing plants are your passion.”

“That’s where I work. A boutique plant store. Nothing as noble as being a first responder. Or a lawyer, or any of the other ‘real careers’ my parents have dreamed up for me.”

“Hey, we have keeping things alive in common. I must have been a peace lily in my past life.”

“Why?”

“As Ma would say, I have my moods. Some days, I really need to be soaked in a sink for a while.”

I can’t believe he’s letting me have this punch line. “It’s highly overrated.”

The metal is a conduit, allowing his electric laugh to pass through into the water, my skin, and my bones. There are those colors again—swirling and oozing, iridescent in the dark.

“I love your laugh,” I tell him before I can censor myself. “It’s got a color to it.”

“What color is it?”

“Milky pastel rainbow.”

“Sensory deprivation has truly kicked in, huh?” More to himself, he adds, “Never had a compliment on my laugh before. Milky pastel rainbow. What’s it like in there?”

“May I complain?”

“Permission well and truly granted. That’s why I’m sitting here. Vent at me.”

“The water in here is so slimy, it’s like lying inside a slug’s stomach.”

He splutters, “Good LORD.”

“The salt stings in the cracks of my lips. Please don’t slap the lid again, because it drips from the lid into my eyes. I keep hitting the walls with my elbows. My bladder is coming online, and the waiver I signed said that if I pee in this thing, it’s a thousand-dollar tank-cleaning fee.”

“Just before we get it open, empty yourself in that thing like a squid releasing her ink.” Surely, he’s raising a clenched fist, because he used a Viking voice. “A slug’s stomach? Rosie, your mind. Goddamn, your mind.”

“My mind? Your mind!” I start laughing.

“I wasn’t aware I had a mind until about one minute ago. What else? Any other grievances? Don’t have to be tank related.”

“My parents, and all my potential soulmates, look at my sister, rather than me. But that’s okay, she’s the full package. My stomach is growling like crazy. That’s about it. All my petty grievances are officially aired.”

“I’ve logged each and every one. Hang in there. They’re gonna get you out.”

“Can I make a special request?” I think he nods. “I want you to get me out. Not them.”

“Forget it, sweetie. Practically nothing in that truck has my fingerprints on it.” He sighs, and says, all melancholy, “Uh-oh. I’m drooping. Ma always says, super sarcastically, ‘Won’t somebody think of the sad, handsome boy?’”

“You just need some TLC. Lucky for you, I’m an expert in peace lilies. Here.” I lift a hand and noisily trickle water for a little bit, picturing green leaves. “Better?”

“Much.”

“If your colleagues weren’t being dismissive of you constantly, would you feel any better? Is it a really hard job?”

He seems to need a few moments to think, so I paddle my legs around in the water.

“I cope with the job great, I think. I love the guys, the schedule, no two days the same, all the cool, naked weirdos I get to talk through their weird situations.”

I smile and touch the side of the tank where he’s sitting. “Present company included?”

“Of course. I do get a lot of purpose from my work. It’s just that when off shift, and there’s empty days racked up ahead of me, I just don’t know what to do with myself. I droop after about a day. I chose this job to be useful. That’s a catchphrase in my family. ‘Make yourself useful.’ But I can’t even do that.”

“You’re being more useful to me than any of your crew.”

“I want to put some of my training into practice, but I just don’t get the opportunity.” A long pause follows, and then, “I think we’ve just nailed why I’ve been feeling like shit lately. What do I owe you for the therapy session? I can slide my credit card through the seal.”

I hear the vulnerability in his joke. “What do you do to keep busy outside of work?”

“Gym. Iron my flammable stripper uniform. Go past Ma’s place and open a pickle jar for her. Eat them all while spiraling. Get told to make myself useful.”

“You like pickles? You’d love me right about now.”

“My mouth’s watering, Rosie Clamshell,” he says, all sexy-playful, and now I just have to confront the thought that’s been floating around me.

This guy is so hot.

Then I remember a point I really need to reiterate. “I’m not gorgeous like my sister.”

“Was she? Is she?” He doesn’t sound very interested. “All I seem to recall is she was an abandoner of my poor Rosie.”

This guy is so sweet.

“Well, compared to her, I’m a late bloomer.”

“I hear some roses are.”

This guy is so witty. He’s in a fireman uniform.

He’s the entire package.

Just like my sister.

He muses, “I really can’t believe I was given a rose before.”

I’m aggravated again by this unseen woman, shooting her shot, probably checking her phone right now to see if he’s messaged her. Here in the dark, in a world of no sight, touch, or clarity, I can’t ignore this new bloodred emotion. I want to take that rose of his and snap the head off it. I want to destroy that pretty, flirtatious gesture under the heel of my nine-dollar ballet flats.

“What’s up?” he asks me. Can he feel my emotions? I’ll be honest. I don’t care anymore.

“Just irrationally jealous of the red-rose woman.”

“Aw. She ain’t got nothing on you.”

“She gave you that rose without even knowing you’re funny and silly. That’s the absolute worst part.”

He sounds amazed. “You love me for my sparkling personality? Even though I’m just the clamshell’s AI?”

“That’s the only explanation for you being so freakin’ charming.” I can’t see a thing, but I picture him now, smiling up at the ceiling, stretching in pleasure. “Maybe you need a hobby. A pet?”

“Ma says a wife would be the best solution. They don’t grow on trees.”

That’s a strange thing to put a shiver in my stomach. I hurry past it. “Start small. I could recommend an indoor plant for your home space.”

Groan. “Here comes the upsell. You live in a jungle, I presume?”

“I’ve got a four-poster bed, and I’ve got ivy growing all over it.”

“Okay, that sounds amazing. Can you recommend any good local indoor plant stores with hilarious employees?”

My heart flips over in my chest. “I’ll try to think of one.”

“You’re stuck in a pod on Valentine’s Day. Isn’t that a busy day for a plant shop?”

“Most people shop at florists, but we do have a strong day today. My boss was okay with me taking the day. No one in the world knows where I am, except Bree. I wonder if she’s in the semifinals of the Pampering Olympics by now?”

“She’s on my shit list,” Leo says darkly.

“I’m glad she left. You’d be talking to her instead.”

She’d be sitting across from him, with her damp hair crinkling attractively, and her lovely straight teeth and naturally long eyelashes. I’ll never find my theoretical husband with her around. I hear how disloyal I must sound. “She’d be teasing me relentlessly. She’s more hilarious than me.”

“I don’t think I’d let her tease you.” He sounds . . . flat? No, wait. He’s protective of me.

I’m losing touch with the world outside his voice. What life was like with light and sound and the weight of my own body. Will I ever be dry again? And why does my heart feel like a baby bird in my chest?

I scrape my tattered fingertips on the side of the tank. “I am a bit sad about missing the other treatments. They were going to paint my nails a pretty color.”

“Sweetie, they owe you big for this. You’re getting free manicures for life if I get my way.”

“Do you always get your way?”

“From now on, I do. Man, I’m so impressed by how you’re handling this. You’re made of strong stuff.”

The phrase echoes back through my memory until I pin it down. “Hey, I said that to Bree in the waiting room at about nine this morning. I’m made of strong stuff.”

“I’m glad you know it.”

“I’ve still needed rescuing several times. Where were you?”

“I’ve been completely slacking off,” he agrees. I have never heard a voice as warm and friendly as his. “When’s another time I should have been there to rescue you?”

That memory pops into my head. The bad one. “Uhhh . . .” I stretch to my full length, touching my toes to one end and my fingertips to the other. I have to feel *something*. I scrape my entire memory for another example, but nothing comes to me.

He sounds playfully frustrated. “You can’t just say *uhhh*, all intriguing, and then go silent. Is it worse than this?”

“This one time, in my first year of college. I could have really used you then.”

He’s heard the change in my voice, and with doom in his, he asks, “What happened?”

“I got locked in the trunk of a car.”

He’s amazed. “How the hell did you manage that?”

“Someone put me in there.”

I have never wanted to take something back more in my life. I pray he’s distracted. Please be on a call. No such luck.

“Who did that to you?”

“I was sort of bullied by this group of guys. Everywhere I went, I saw them. Bottom of every stairwell I needed to go

down. In the parking lot. The main guy just had it in for me.”

“Why?” Leo hisses out a breath. “Sorry. It couldn’t have been anything you’d done.”

“I don’t know why. He was a jerk. He knew where I was all the time, and they’d just kinda . . . be there. Just standing there, blocking my way, laughing at me. Campus security couldn’t exactly do anything about people standing around. I can’t explain it, but I couldn’t get past them, and my anxiety levels were through the roof. I was in a class with the main guy, and he’d just stare at me, unblinking, like he wanted me dead.”

“May I have his full name and date of birth?” Leo asks sweetly. “Social security, too, if possible? I need to commit a murder, please.”

“It all culminated in me digging around in my car trunk for something one afternoon. Broad daylight. Next thing I know, I felt a tap on the back of my knee, and I went in face-first. They bundled my legs in, closed the trunk, and sat on it, laughing and smoking. My cell phone was on the passenger seat. I . . . haven’t thought about this in a long time.”

“This probably isn’t the best time to revisit it. I’m not doing my job very well, am I?”

I shake my head. I’m determined to work it out now, even as my heart rate begins to increase. “Was it a frat thing? Why was I such a joke? From a guy’s perspective, why?”

“Most likely scenario is he wanted your attention, or your fear, and went about it like a knuckle-dragging psychopath.” Leo sounds like he’s very concerned. “Hey. I can hear you breathing too fast in there.”

“I can’t help it. This feels too similar.” The smooth metal above me, not giving, no matter how I push against it

“But it’s me out here. Not them. And I won’t let anything bad happen. Breathe.”

And just like that, I exhale and lie still again. I find myself needing to end the story.

“I kind of dropped out of college after that. I couldn’t handle the stress, and I was too ashamed to tell my parents.”

“Those guys were escalating. Predators always do. You got yourself out of there. And that’s real smart.”

“The main guy is now a Wall Street trader, and I work in an indoor plant store. Plants are . . . safe.” I try to rub my face, but the salt is unbearable. “I haven’t even told Bree that story. It’d be a cross-examination.”

“She’ll find out soon, because I’ll be on death row for killing that guy.” He sounds like he crowds even closer to the side of the tank. “I’ll say it again. Are you listening to me? You’re being really, really brave right now, and it turns out, you’ve always been brave.”

“Sure. I should have recorded it all. I should have made a police report, filed for a protection order—”

He sounds commanding now. “Stop. You did the best you could, just like now. You didn’t let it ruin you. You stayed funny and smart and kind. You survived. A lot of people don’t. Take my word for it.”

I can only imagine the strain this job must have on him. And yet he bounces into every room with a smile. I know that much about him.

His phone ringtone blares “Disco Inferno.”

“Frank? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Fuck, dude, I’m about to wrench the top off this like a sardine can. She can’t stay in there much longer. Yup. Bring it up, then, and if you ever call me Romeo again, I’m gonna insert it into your ass. Love you, bye.”

There’s the faint beep of a phone call being disconnected.

“We’re going to start. That lady Dionne’s going to kick up one hell of a fuss. And then she’s gonna watch us wreck eighty-five thousand dollars. Now, I want you to get yourself ready. It’s gonna be noisy. There’ll be lots of men’s voices above you. But you’re not in a trunk. You’re here, with me, and I’ll get you out like I wish I could have back then.”

“I know it. Thank you for helping me realize I’m a survivor.”

“Good job, Rosie.”

I am proud of myself, too. “I suppose this has all been a big adventure, hasn’t it?”

“Think of the amazing story you’ll have to tell one day.” He pauses for a moment. “Last time I told a woman that, it was this horrible old duck who’d somehow gotten her bare foot stuck through a sewer grate. She told me she was going to complain to the Fire Brigade Grand Chief Commissioner about my rudeness and my inability to be serious in a serious situation.”

“If such a person even existed, that could be a problem for you.”

Laugh. Electric. Rainbow. I sizzle in my stew.

I can hear boots coming and the sound of Dionne’s voice. “Hey, Leo,” I say to him. “Nobody could ever accuse you of being serious, but you’re not unprofessional. You’ve managed to keep my mind off the fact that I’m buried alive in water. You’re killing it. And you’re more than a pretty face.”

“You always know what to say.” Sounding immensely cheered up, he must be getting to his feet, because when he speaks next his voice is higher above. It’s his firefighter voice now. “It’s been long enough, so I don’t want to hear it.”

“No, you’re right,” Dionne says, her voice heavy with defeat. “Are you all right in there, Rosie? Managed to relax

a little? The benefits of this float will be with you for days. It's incredible for chronic pain—”

Leo cuts her off. “I'm going to have to ask you to quit sugarcoating this.”

“I'm sorry. Rosie, in advance, I appreciate your patience and understanding. It seems that if there's no manual lever inside—”

“There's no lever,” Leo cuts in. “She'd have found it by now. It's faulty, admit it.”

“I got a hold of the American distributor, and they'll be sending a repairman to look at what has occurred here.”

“It occurred because it's a piece of crap. Here they come,” Leo responds politely, and then the chaos he foretold begins. “Remember what I told you, Rosie.”

Men are piling in now, more than just Leo and Frank, and they're all talking at once.

“I'm just—”

“If you hold—”

“Into this—”

“No, the smaller—”

“Don't tell me how to do my—”

“Well, do it right!”

“Save it, before I—”

The tank begins to move, they all laugh, and I let out a whimper.

“I'm here, Rosie Clamshell.”

“Get the grinder.”

“Lady, tell your staff it's not a show—”

“Carlie says if I forget her Valentine's flowers I'm—”

“I'll buy Carlie flowers any day, don't you worry—”

“What’s this fucking thing made of? Pure lead? I can’t —”

“Gotta hand it to the Japanese, they can sure—”

Leo, only Leo: “Breathe, Rosie. Keep breathing for me.”

“She’s not running out of air, is she? Fuck—”

The noise ceases.

Leo snarls back, “If she was, I would have mentioned it by now, don’t you think? She’s gotta be scared as hell. We’re just working out the best way, Rosie, all right? What did I tell you to remember?”

Someone interrupts before I can answer. “That you’re a dreamboat?”

The room erupts in screams of laughter. “Romeo! Romeo! Wherefore art thou, Romeo?”

“Enough!” Leo roars it. “That does it! This is me officially snapping! Rosie as my witness. Give me that little crowbar. I’m getting her out myself.”

“Might as well use those biceps for something,” an old guy ribs. There’s a pause, and I’m guessing he was given a ferocious look. “Sorry, kid. We’re just joshin’ ya.”

I can feel the sensation of Leo physically wrenching on the pod. The water’s slopping. How much does this tank weigh, with the water and me? At this rate it’ll flip, sending me sliding, nude and fetus-like, across the floor to rest on the toes of his boots.

“Don’t just fling it open,” I cry into the dark.

My mind twirls a kaleidoscope of biceps and rainbows and dreamboats and crowbars. “I’m right here,” he tells me again, and through the first crack, light pierces my eyeball like a white wire.

I cover my boobs.

“Now we’re getting somewhere,” Leo crows, a touch louder than before. “The seal’s broken, I think. Oh, oh, oh,

I'm getting the pearl out of this fucker, I swear to—”

The light gets a little more blindingly painful.

“Get her, Romeo.” The guys are cheering him on. “Romeo! Romeo!”

“Stop calling me that! My name is fucking Leo—” Another crack interrupts the tirade of insults and jokes and breathless labor. “My shift’s technically over, so I don’t have to take any of your shit. After I get this girl out, I’m going for a beer, and I’m eating an entire pizza, and I’m ignoring all the Valentine’s Day lovey-dovey crap, because against all odds, I’m single, despite being a solid-gold certified dream—”

Crack.

“Get her a bottle of water and a straw. Poke it through. What? No straws? Not the fucking environment!” Leo ends on a howl. He’s practically overwrought. “I’m nearly there, I can feel it.”

“Don’t hurt yourself,” Frank’s voice says, worried. “We’ll try the jaws again. You’ve done good. No, Don. Let the kid do it. He’s earned it. And you in there, Rosie. Great job, girlie. We’re almost there. One big pop and you’re out.”

“She’s not wearing anything,” Leo tells him in a protective growl.

“We’ll make sure—”

“We’ll slide in a towel—”

“It’s okay, Leo, relax—”

The Jaws of Life finish what Leo could not. Two prongs are forced in, and the light begins pouring in, faster than water. It’s open about a foot now. I’m being submerged in white, agonizing light, and I shield my eyes and press myself into the wall of the tank.

I hear Bree’s horrified voice. “Oh my God, Rosie!”

“Stop.” Leo’s fireman voice. “Let her sister in. Get that robe. Here.”

I have fabric over me now, and it's getting soaked in the poisonous salt sludge. I have no strength in my muscles. The relaxation promised by Dionne has taken me too far in the wrong direction.

I feel a familiar soft hand on my face. "Bree! Leo got me out."

She hums in concern, stroking a finger over my closed eyes. "Well, almost. This entire room of dudes should probably leave. Thank you so much. Great job, everyone." There's the sound of metal equipment and shuffling boots. Frank says goodbye to me. Bree is pulling my hair back, squeezing out water. My eyes can't open.

"Are you still here?" I ask the room. I get my arms into the robe.

"I'm still here," Leo says. "With my back turned and my eyes closed. But I'm not leaving till you're out."

Bree says to him, "Okay, she's decent. Can you help me lift her?"

The new hand that wraps under my upper arm is big and warm. Bree's cheerful as they physically extract me. "All things considered, you don't look like a drowned rat." She puts a towel on my head.

I press it on my eyes. "You're just saying that."

"Bring her through here to the shower," Dionne says. "We have your clothes here, and I've put water bottles in there. Just rinse thoroughly, shampoo, condition. Would you like to proceed with your hot-oil stone massage, Rosie?"

"No, thank you. I'm absolutely pickled."

"Rinse out your eyes," Leo advises. "I'm going to have a paramedic up here in a second to just check you. Meet you after that. And hey, she's right." His voice drops half an octave. "You're not a drowned rat." The scent of his body hits me in a heady swirl.

"Smooth, ain't he?" Bree chortles, and I think my stomach is still back in that float tank, bobbing around,

rippling on the current. “Come through, I’ll fix you up.”

I have an endless pee, then take a shower, lathering, rinsing. My dry clothes feel like ancient artifacts. When I reappear from the shower into the tasteful dressing room and remove the towel from my hair, I manage to crack open my eyes. “What time is it?”

Bree checks. “Way after lunch. Are you hungry?”

I can see now that my sister looks thoroughly well tended to. Her skin is glowing, her hands have red nails, and the tiredness has melted away. “You look beautiful. You’ve had a better day than me.”

“I know you’re mad at me. But I can explain it all in a minute.” She opens the door and says out of the room, “I’m just drying her hair. It’ll take a bit. She’s waterlogged.”

Leo replies, “Sure, I’m off shift. I can wait.”

“The minerals in the float have made you positively radiant,” Bree says encouragingly, and while it sounds like utter bullshit, the dresser mirror reveals the truth as she stands behind me, blow-drying my hair into attractive, scrunched waves.

I do look . . . lovely. “How’s it possible that I look so good right now?” For the first time, as I compare myself to her, I don’t see a messy version of her. We’re different, that’s all. And that’s okay. Maybe I’m just blooming now. I put my hand to my ear. “Oh, dang it. I’ve lost my other earring.”

“Please never change,” Bree replies. “I’ll just add a little here, and there . . .” She’s got her makeup bag open, and she’s putting some touches of color onto me like a canvas. “Trust me. Trust me.”

“You keep saying that. I need to say thank you to Leo.”

“He’s right out there, waiting.” She gives me a quizzical look. “Surely you’ve been wondering about him like crazy. Like the waiting room torso,” she adds on a whisper.

I raise my eyes to Bree. “That guy saved my sanity today. He’s fantastic.”

“I can hear you,” Leo says from the other side of the wall. “But say more about how fantastic I’ve been.”

“He was so kind,” I say louder for his benefit. “And he’s funny. He’s got a great smile, I just know it. And oh, Bree, his laugh. My lord. I’ve never heard a rainbow pastel laugh like that, and he laughs constantly, because he’s a sweet, foolish gentleman.”

He laughs and laughs outside the room, and I see my smile in the mirror.

“And I sold him a peace lily.”

“What else?” Bree cups my face in her hands. Whispering, she repeats, “Trust me. Trust me.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” I lean my cheek into her manicured hands. “I love you, Bree. Thank you for bailing on me, so I could tell my deepest secrets to that silly dreamboat.”

“Guys who talk themselves up like that are usually hideous. I don’t think you got a good look at him. You might want to brace yourself. Adjust your expectations.”

“Hey,” Leo exclaims, wounded. “I forgave you for bailing.”

“Teasing you is very entertaining. You ready, Rosie the Nudist?” She stands me up. “Really ready?”

I nod. “I’m going to hug the shit out of him.”

“I’m really ready, too,” Leo says outside the door. “Release the beast.”

The door is opened.

Light pierces my eyeballs in a fractured rainbow spectrum. I don’t see him at first—well, not exactly. Not his physical form. I still experience the vision I have of him in my head: the big white smile and the fluid, changing shifts

of his body as he laughs and teases, and the big hand I felt on me.

Before the image gets to my brain, sorted into a proper pattern, I am satisfied.

Everything's exactly right about him.

"I forgot to pee in the tank for you," I say, and the surrounding room begins to lock into place. There's a pink wall, a salt candle, and a man. He's tall, tanned, bicepped, and silly, with a delighted laugh already halfway up his throat, and he opens his arms.

"Rosie Clamshell!"

"Leo Some-guy!" I run at him, and he's got me. He's got me all the way, with his arms wrapped to the elbows around me. My arms are around his neck. "You got me out!"

"I did! And guess what? The mayor called, and they're making me the king of the firemen!"

"Congratulations! I never doubted you!" I am laughing like crazy. I have clean cotton on my cheek. "You smell better than a day-spa candle. And your flammable uniform is incredible on you!"

The hug is everything I've needed: it's dry, firm, there are so many points of contact, and I can hear more than my heartbeat. I can hear his laugh through the padded wall of his chest. We laugh and laugh. My feet aren't on the floor anymore.

"Triumph," he crows, shaking me from side to side. "Triumph is mine!"

"And mine!"

"Okay, weirdos," Bree says from the doorway behind us. "Calm down. People are trying to get muddled and massaged around here."

"Now, let's take a good look at you." Leo sets me down and studies me with increasing alarm. His eyes are the dark sapphire sparkle of my grammy's engagement ring. A

crease appears on his kissable forehead. “Holy shit. *You’re* a dreamboat, Rosie Clamshell. Why didn’t you warn me?”

“Must have been some miracle broth I’ve been marinating in. You weren’t lying, either. Is that the biggest pickle jar you’ve ever opened?”

He beams at me. His face matches his humor—the wit, the kindness, the cleverness—and I feel the magic ping-pong of energy between us. A weird feeling is settling in the center of my chest. It’s like the missing lever that I’ve been searching around for is in there, and it’s been pulled. The lid’s popped off something.

“I know you hear it all the time, but, Leo, you’re a dreamboat and a half!”

“I’d never lie about that.” He puts a thumb under my chin and lifts my face for further inspection. “Well, that does it. Got any more jars for me to open? I like to keep myself useful.”

“So many jars.”

Dionne approaches. She’s had quite the ordeal. “We wish to extend our deepest apologies to you, Rosie, for the disrupted service today.”

“It’s all right. It wasn’t your fault.”

Leo coos, “Kind Rosie, sweet Rosie. You’re suing them.”

“Hmmm,” my lawyer sister hums in agreement.

Dionne continues, “As a gesture of goodwill, the salon is pleased to offer you a gift certificate—”

I wince. “I’m sorry, but I can’t come back here.”

“A travel gift certificate.” She hands it to me. I stare at the figure printed on it. I know what my time is worth per hour. Kintsugi Day Spa is very sorry indeed.

“This will be fine. Apology accepted.”

Bree interrupts. “By accepting this goodwill gesture, Rosie does not waive her right to seek compensation for any

economic loss in circumstances resulting from ongoing injury, physical or psychological.”

I shrug at Leo as Dionne steps away to discuss this with her. “I told you. Bree’s the total package.”

His lovely eyes don’t leave mine, not even for one blink. “It’s probably too late to get a good Valentine’s Day deal for the Maldives. Maybe next year, huh?” Leo tidies my hair with his fingertips. “Did you already have lunch, while you were locked inside that dystopian-nightmare pod?”

“I did make a sandwich in there, but I could still eat.” I get Bree’s attention. “We’re going to go eat a whole pizza each. Coming?”

“Nah. I know when to leave you two alone.” She’s holding out my bag and scarf with a distinctly sulky look. “Have fun. I was hoping I’d be here when you noticed.”

“Why? Notice what?” I put on my scarf, and then I see.

Why she told me to *trust her, trust her, trust her.*

Sewn on his uniform is his last name. I read it out loud in awe.

“Husband. Leo Husband?”

He’s adorably self-conscious. “Please don’t give me shit for it. The guys calling me Romeo are bad enough. If I ever get married, I’m taking my wife’s name.”

“Whittaker,” Bree supplies.

“Leo Whittaker, now that’s got a nice ring to it.” He motions over a paramedic with a first aid kit. “Can you just restart this girl’s heart for me? I’ve given her quite a shock. And, uh, she was soaking in a float tank for almost three hours, so better check her blood pressure, too.”

As they begin to fuss over the paramedic’s kit, I find I’ve got no clever words left.

Luckily, I can rely on my sister.

“Mr. Husband,” Bree says to him with supreme satisfaction, “I can’t tell you how long we’ve been waiting for you to show up.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Sally Thorne is the *USA Today* bestselling author of *The Hating Game*. Her debut novel sold in over twenty-five countries and is now a major motion picture. *The Hating Game* was named in the top twenty romance novels of 2016 by the *Washington Post* and was a top ten finalist in the Goodreads Choice Awards romance category. Her following releases are *99 Percent Mine*, *Second First Impressions*, and *Angelika Frankenstein Makes Her Match*. Sally lives in Canberra, Australia, with her husband in a home filled with vintage toys, too many cushions, and a haunted dollhouse.

ALSO BY SALLY THORNE

The Hating Game

99 Percent Mine

Second First Impressions

Angelika Frankenstein Makes Her Match