

BECCA BALDWIN

Rosies are Red



Rosies are Read

Becca Baldwin

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Some of the places within this story have been changed, omitted, or created for storytelling purposes.

This novel may contain information that some may find sensitive or triggering. Please read with caution.

I have taken liberties with U.S. property law. Some of the laws have been omitted, added, or changed strictly for the content of this book. These changes do not affect the law as it is currently written.

While Thomas Bansome is a completely fictional character, as is his painting featured in my novel, he is inspired by the artist John Singer Sargent and his works.

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Before You Go ...

Also By

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About the Author

The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly on the Plain

Rosie

“HELLO! WELCOME TO ROSIES are Read Books,” I cheered as the front door bell tinkled. I looked up from my inventory to see a grim-faced man hovering in the doorway. Seeing an opportunity to turn that frown upside down, I carried on. “My name’s Rosie Cooper, proprietress and expert on all things books. How may I help you with your reading needs today?” I walked over to the gentleman, my hand held out in welcome.

“Miss Cooper.” The man stepped inside and blatantly ignored my outstretched greeting. The door closed with a loud bang behind him, startling the older woman currently sampling the erotica section in the back. “My name is Henry Higgins.”

“The rain in Spain stays mainly on the plain!”

“Excuse me?” Mr. Higgins made a face, clearly not getting the reference.

“You know? My Fair Lady? Rex Harrington? His character’s name was Henry Higgins.”

Who wouldn’t get that reference? I mean, really? The movie was a classic. Still, Mr. Higgins remained unmoved or unaware. Maybe both.

“Okay, I guess. I’m not sure what that is.” He glanced away before continuing. “As I said, my name is Henry Higgins and I’m here on a business matter. I’m here to notify you that the Harrington Investment Group is now the proud owner of the building where your *quaint* little store is located.”

This I knew. All the tenants knew. We’d been sent letters notifying us of the change in ownership. No biggie. Life would carry on. Well, as long as they didn’t raise the rent astronomically.

“The reason I’m here today was to bring you this.” He handed me a Manilla envelope.

“What is it?” I eyeballed the envelope, wondering what was so important that it took *this* guy to deliver it.

“A letter explaining that The Harrington Investments has decided to tear the building down. It’s scheduled to be demolished in twelve weeks and that you, along with the other tenants, will need to find new locations since the new building will not be providing *any room* for establishments like *yours*.”

WHAT?

My eyes nearly bulged out of my head. What did that condescending asswipe just say? Did he just belittle everything I'd worked my entire life for while telling me my bookstore was soon to be homeless?

Yes. Yes, he did and oh, was he going to regret it.

First he had the *audacity* to call my store *quaint* in that smug, condescending manner. He'd had the gall to say it as if me and the other business owners were shit smeared across the bottom of his shoe. Now he had the nerve to say *yours* as if my shop or any of the others were beneath him. Anger swirled in my veins. I was just about to open my mouth to let him have it, but for once, my common sense prevailed.

"They're tearing the building down?" I asked incredulously, surprised I sounded so even and calm. Mr. Higgins nodded, confirming it was. "Why weren't we notified? Don't you legally have to send written notice about such things?" Every attempt I made to remain calm failed and I came out sounding like a screeching harpy ready to flay Mr. Higgins to pieces with my talons.

"You were sent notice earlier via the postal service, but my client also felt it would be pertinent to hand deliver them as well. It's entirely possible the original hasn't been delivered yet."

You think? I thought as I stared unblinking at him. An eviction notice was something I would have remembered.

I stared down at the envelope in my hands. Sweat broke out across my body as I realized that the one thing I'd wanted my entire life, ownership of my own bookstore, was suddenly on life support and Harrington Investments had their hand on the plug.

I couldn't believe this. The letter they'd sent me previously said nothing about kicking us out. We'd all assumed they'd negotiate new lease terms. Agnes Culpepper, the florist next door, stated that she smelled a rat and was lawyering up. Agnes was positive that Harrington Investments was up to no good. She was also positive they had no right to knock this big, beautiful building down.

Agnes had heard through the grapevine that this building was erected in 1888, and once housed the studio of a world-renowned photographer famous for the photos he shot while in the midst of battle during World War I. Her lawyer had instructed us tenants to do nothing for the time being while he and his team looked into the matter. That was the last I'd heard, and now I felt like an idiot for not getting a lawyer for myself.

"You can't do that!" I shouted as the dam of my patience burst. Ten seconds was long enough for my calmer side to have her turn. This man had no idea the level of pissed off I could operate at, but he was about to find out.

"If you read the letter you've been given, you will see that we are well within our rights to do so, Miss Collins."

“Screw your letter, you asshole! You know,” I felt the sting of unshed tears burn my eyes despite my bravado. “I worked my ass off to open this place up. And now you have the *audacity* to come in here and tell me that I have to move? I don’t flippin’ think so, Mr. Higgins! I’m going to fight this and so will the rest of the tenants here. You can take your slimy ass back to the goo-covered rock it crawled out under and tell whoever sent you that they can kiss my ass!”

Mr. Higgins stared at me as if I’d grown two heads. “Miss Cooper, I think we may have gotten off on the wrong foot.”

“First you come in here acting all high and mighty and have the audacity to insult my bookstore! Next, you have the nerve to ramble out some bullshit about us having to vacate and do it while sounding like some soulless corporate zombie! Oh, and you’re right! We *definitely* got off on the wrong foot, you jerk. Fortunately, that leaves one free to kick your ass!”

“Now, now, Ms. Cooper.” Higgins put his hands up as if surrendering. “There’s no need for hostilities.”

“No need for hostilities?” I yelled incredulously. “Did you just say there was no need for hostilities when you were the one that started all this?” I stepped out from behind the counter and charged at him. Higgins took a step back, ready to run out the door at any moment.

“I simply came here on a business matter—”

“Not only did you insult me, but you insulted everything I’ve worked for! Do you know how long it took me to save the money to open this place? Do you know how hard I had to

work canvassing this city, wearing myself to the bone to market this place just so I had enough to eat?” I panted heavily and I wasn’t done. “What about all the nights I had to sleep on a cot in the back because I didn’t have enough to pay for an apartment? You corporate dupes don’t give a shit about people like me! All you care about is dollar signs and putting up a slew of soulless high-rises that will sit empty for months until you sell it off to cut your losses.”

My shouting drew the attention of passersby, including several regulars who’d stopped in their tracks to come in to check on me.

“Rosie?” My longtime customer and avid erotica aficionado, Mrs. H. popped inside. Based on her stoic, corporate appearance, one would think her cold and calculating, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. Mrs. H. was the sweetest woman I’d ever known. I’d often dreamed that my mother or even my grandmother, who’d died before I was born, was a lot like her.

“Rosie dear, is everything okay?”

My eyes flicked over to where she stood in the doorway. Mrs. H. glanced between me and the Henry Higgins imposter.

“No, everything’s not okay,” I said honestly, seeing no reason to lie to her. This woman had been my very first patron three years ago and had been a regular since. “I just received some upsetting news and this asshole is to blame.”

Higgins’ eyes flashed at my name-calling. I wasn’t someone who insulted people easily, but for him, my unease made an

exception.

“I think you should leave,” Mrs. H. demanded of my unwelcome guest. Higgins sighed. Without further argument, he left, but not before saying that he was sorry to have intruded upon my day.

The door hadn't even closed when Mrs. H. pulled me into her arms and whispered that whatever happened, it would be okay. I wept against her shoulder as I tried not to let my frustration and rising anger get the best of me.

Coffee Solves Everything

Rosie

“YOU TOLD HIM WHAT?” My best friend, Ivy Granger, busted out laughing as I repeated what I’d said to that asshat Henry Higgins.

“I told him that yeah, we got off on the wrong foot and it left one free to kick his ass.” Ivy burst out laughing again. She bent at the waist and nearly spilled her coffee.

“And not only was he way rude, but he ruined *My Fair Lady*, too!”

“I’m sorry I missed it. I’d have killed to see his reaction when you said that. What else did you say?”

“Nothing really. I was ripping him a new one when Mrs. H. came in and made him leave.”

“He didn’t argue?”

“With her? Nope. Just tossed out a half-assed apology as he headed out the door.”

“He probably kept quiet because he knew you both could kick his ass.”

“It’s the least he deserves for insulting my bookstore and talking to me like I’m an idiot.”

“Thus, giving you a reason to ask me to meet you here.” She held up her grande caramel macchiato while I took a pull off of my much needed vanilla frap.

“I was in desperate need of coffee-slash-best friend therapy after Mrs. H. left.”

“You made the right decision, Rose Marigold Cooper.” Ivy raised her cup in toast. I clinked mine against it. Leaving the subject of Henry “the Asshole” Higgins behind, we spent the next twenty minutes filling each other in about our days. By the time we were out of coffee, it was time to head back to our prospective jobs. After being blackballed across the city by her former boss, a man she made the mistake of sleeping with, Ivy had just started at a large real estate firm in their accounting department. My best friend was as good as numbers as she was cheering me up. And she *excelled* at cheering me up. I only hoped that those in power at RH Realty knew what a treasure they had on their hands and that my best friend wouldn’t repeat her past mistakes and fall head over heels for their company’s CEO.

“Call me when you get off?” Ivy demanded as we chucked our cups into the recycling bin and headed outside. “We can

talk more about how you're getting screwed over. Maybe we can grab dinner at that Tex-Mex place you love?"

"Refuse *El Mejor Lugar*?" I scoffed through my nose. "Not on your life! Since you get off work before me, why don't you go ahead get us a table and I'll meet you there?"

"It's a date." Ivy hugged me before heading off back to work. I had just reached the intersection to cross when the craving for another vanilla frap hit me. Even though I watched my sugar intake religiously, I gave myself permission to go back to Bean There and Gone to quench my craving. After all, it had been an absolute shit day and drinking frappuccinos was better than alcohol, right?

The Instagrammer vs. Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man

Rosie

“UGH, I CAN’T BELIEVE the line is soooo long!” A tall, lithe blonde whined from the spot directly in front of me. During the brief time I’d left Bean There and Gone, the line had exploded. It was at least ten people deep and the baristas were barely managing to keep up. Still wanting my fix, I joined the crowd and prepared to wait. This woman, however, was not prepared to do the same.

“I mean, come on people! Some of us lead busy lives. We can’t just stand around *waiting* for you to get your shit together! I’ve got stuff to blog about!”

The woman, who I assumed was an influencer based upon the way she kept looking at herself and doing those stupid

duck lips in her phone's camera, stomped her foot before releasing a frustrated growl. After sitting through more than a few minutes of her childish and totally unnecessary temper tantrum, I'd finally had enough.

"You know—" I started to say just as someone spoke over me.

"If you don't like how 'slow' the service is, why don't you take your whiny self somewhere else?"

I looked up just in time to see the hottest man I'd ever laid eyes on step up to put the entitled brat in her place.

Holy Hannah, was he hot! If sex were a person, this man would be it.

One second, I was a little uncomfortable, teetering on the chilly side due to the gale-force A/C blowing. The next, my body blazed with an inferno and it was all due to him. Standing at well over six feet with impossibly wide shoulders, the russet-haired stranger was unknowingly doing things to me that I'd never felt before. Things that were currently making my lady business dance the cha-cha.

"Excuse me?" Snobby McBlonde sneered as I snapped back to reality. I looked at her again as she tried to intimidate Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man into submission. I could tell she was the type of chick who was used to getting her way. Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man seemed more than happy to see that she didn't.

“There’s no excuse for how rude you’re being,” he clapped back. “Everyone here is tired of listening to you bitch and moan about having to wait. Newsflash! Everyone has had to wait because that’s what happens when a place gets slammed.”

Blondie glared at the tall, lickable stranger with the arresting silvery blue eyes. I, however, gawked awkwardly like I’d never seen an attractive man before.

“Is it a crime to want to just get my coffee and go?” She rolled her eyes and tossed a long blonde lock over her shoulder. A lock that nearly hit me in the face. “My *fiancé* is waiting for me and I don’t want to make him wait any longer than necessary.”

“No, it’s not a crime, and no one gives a shit about your fiancé. However, it is bad manners to bitch so loudly about something that can’t be helped. If you were in such a hurry, why didn’t you order ahead through the app?” The stranger pointed to where a hipster with purple hair and several facial piercings picked up his drink and thanked the crew before leaving.

“Whatever, dude. Why don’t you mind your business and leave me to mine?” She tossed a hand into the air and promptly pulled her phone back out before hitting the record button.

“Soooo, I’m at this really *lame* place ...” The blonde started to drone on before the sex-on-a-stick stranger piped up.

“Ah, I think I know what’s going on here.” The stranger’s eyes narrowed as he took a step closer to the offending ‘angel’.

“This is all staged, isn’t it?” His eyes flicked to the device in her hand and the recording symbol flashing on the screen.

“You saw the crowd and decided this would be a great opportunity to create an ‘incident’ in order to try to milk some free shit out of the coffee shop, didn’t you?”

To her credit, Influencer Barbie didn’t immediately deny it. She didn’t say yes either. Instead, she hit stop and without another word stormed out the door. Several people clapped as the door swung shut and she disappeared from sight.

“You totally called that. She *was* totally trying to cause a scene,” I blurted out before slapping my hand over my mouth. I hadn’t meant to speak. My words were only supposed to come out in thought-form. Not in actual spoken words.

Typical Rosie.

“I know the type,” Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man blew out a frustrated breath.

“Oh?” My eyebrows raised curiously. “What type is that?”

“Manipulative, obnoxious, self-centered bimbos who crave attention and are forever in search of a rich man to foot the bill.”

A laugh bubbled up from my throat. The guy was spot-on in his assessment. His cheeks reddened as our laughter wrapped together in a flirty dance.

“Met a few in your life, have you?”

The hot guy laughed again and shook his head. “Weekly. My brother has a weakness for them. He’s constantly bringing

some stuck-up princess to dinner to meet the family.”

I must have cringed because suddenly the guy was backtracking as if he'd said something wrong.

“I'm sorry,” he blurted out. “Sometimes my mouth runs away before my brain has a chance to catch up. I shouldn't have said that. I'm sorry if I've insulted you.”

I heaved out an amused laugh. “I'm not offended.” I brushed his concerns away. “I can assure you my expression wasn't one of offense, but rather horror that you have to go through that.”

“In that case, the apology is greatly appreciated.” The corner of his mouth tipped up, revealing the most delicious dimple in the history of dimples. I stood staring at it, wondering how something so simple could be so perfect and so sexy. And if he'd be offended if I traced it with my tongue.

“Soooo, do you come here often?” he said, making me realize a quiet lull had fallen between us.

“Oh! Um, I—Yeah! I do. I actually wo—” I started before the sudden blast of an airhorn blasted through the air.

“Sorry,” my sudden companion said as he reached into his pocket with an apologetic smile. “I've got to take this. Work.” He pointed to his device just as the line shifted forward. The barista manning the register shot me a polite, yet tired smile as she motioned me up to order.

I'd like to say that after placing my order for my much needed sugar fix, Mr. Sexy Stranger and I had a nice afternoon

rendezvous. If I did, I'd be a liar. Unfortunately, his call forced him to leave the cafe, thus leaving me without the chance to catch his name or tell him that I was a frequent flier here. I didn't allow myself to dwell on it though. Once I was back at my bookstore, the place was soon packed with would-be readers, including Mrs. H.. Even with the setbacks, I remained grateful that for now I still had my business, I had loyal, dependable clientele, and I got to talk to a hot guy. So, you see, my day started off crappy, but I decided to focus on the silver linings instead of the impending storm.

That was until I received a call from my mother.

The Leech

Rosie

“MEOW.” A WHITE, FURRY paw reached out, trying to snatch a shrimp from off my fork.

“No, Mr. Darcy,” I admonished my four-legged companion. “This is spicy. You don’t like spicy food, remember?”

I shook my head at my foolish cat. No matter what I ate, he always insisted on having some too. And then took it out on me when I denied him the things I knew weren’t good for him.

Why was I eating spicy shrimp instead of gorging myself on tacos and margaritas? Because a pipe burst in the apartment above Ivy’s and she had to cancel to go do damage control. With my dinner plans now postponed, I headed home to spend time with my main man.

Mr. Darcy reached out again, trying to steal my shrimp once more. Tired of his constant attempts at theft, I took my food into my small kitchenette. “*Mrrrt?*” My cat glared at me for having the nerve to move.

“I told you, you don’t like spicy food,” I argued back and immediately felt like an idiot for arguing with a cat. Mr. Darcy suddenly jumped from the couch to the bar where I was currently perched to claim what he believed to be his. Knowing he wasn’t going to give up, I set my food out of reach, got down, and went to the refrigerator in search of a distraction.

“Here.” I offered him a pair of boiled shrimps that I kept just for him. I might not be able to eat well all the time, but that didn’t mean my boy would ever suffer. While my bookstore was profitable, I still had to live modestly. Any extra money I had either went back into the store or went to my meager savings account. I’d learned early the importance of having a safety net. It was the only thing my so-called parent taught me. Growing up and having to basically raise myself also taught me that the only person I could truly rely on was me. I added Ivy to that short list when we were in kindergarten. I’d been the only child there without anything for lunch and Ivy graciously offered to share hers with me while declaring from then on out, we were going to be the best of friends. My dear, thoughtful friend also told her mother about my missing lunch and from that point on, Madeline, her mother, always sent Ivy to school with two lunches.

Mr. Darcy finished his two shrimp in no time. Seeing that I no longer had anything of value to offer him, he jumped down from the counter and planted himself on his cat tree next to the window that looked out over the city street below. I remained in place and finished my food, staring into space and allowing myself to think back to the hunky dish I'd met at the coffee shop.

Images from earlier flicked through my mind. His smile. The way his blue eyes shone under the store's lighting. The confident way in which he spoke. The gentleness I felt radiate off him. All of it ran like the highlight reel at the end of a winning ball game. Only, it hadn't been a game, I wasn't the winner, and he definitely wasn't the prize. Even though we'd shared a lovely handful of minutes together, I highly doubted I'd ever see him again. Men like that didn't usually hang out in my neck of the woods. They spent most of their time in fancier places, hobnobbing with women just as powerful as they were. Despite his telling off that would-be influencer, I knew in my gut that women like her would have more of a shot with him than I would.

After putting the leftovers away, I cleaned up my mess and plopped down onto my couch to watch some TV. A night spent watching reruns of Gilmore Girls was just the ticket since tequilas and tacos were no longer on my itinerary. I'd just hit play to restart the first season when my phone buzzed from where it lay on my coffee table. My skin broke out in a rash of gooseflesh. Dread settled in my belly as I recognized the ringtone I'd assigned to the number calling. The sound of a

warning siren could only mean one thing and no part of it was good.

“What do you want?” I answered, not bothering to say hello.

“Is that how you speak to your mother?” The woman who’d given birth to me screeched on the other end of the line. A loud uproar sounded behind her, letting me know she was out somewhere. Probably her favorite bar, but I didn’t care.

“It is when you only call when you’re broke and want money.” I saw no reason to make nice with her. My so-called-mother had spent my entire life chasing the last drop of the bottle and only remembered that she had a child when she needed something. Something like money.

“You know, after all I’ve done for you, one would think you’d be a little more grateful.”

I swallowed my urge to laugh. “You’ve done nothing for me, Gladys. Nothing except give birth to me and I’m sure you would have found a way out of that if you could.”

My mother scoffed as if I’d offended her. “Anyway.” She dragged out the last vowel longer than necessary. “I’m calling because I’m in a bit of a pinch. I need some money.”

I rolled my eyes because I knew it. I freaking knew it.

“So, do you think you could send me a couple hundred bucks or what?”

“No.” My statement was firm and I wasn’t about to budge. Just like all the other times she’d called and I’d refused.

“What do you mean ‘no?’”

“Just that. No.”

“Quit joking around, Rosalind.”

“One, I’m not joking. And two, my *name* is Rosie. As in Rose. You know, the name you and my sperm donor put on my birth certificate.”

“I named you Rose?” My mother stated as if she didn’t know. “I thought I named you Rosalind. I bet that stupid nurse that took care of you after you were born changed it behind my back.”

I rolled my eyes.

Jesus Christ on a Motorbike, this woman!

“No, she didn’t, and really, it doesn’t matter. I’m not giving you any money.”

“Come on, Rosie. I know you’ve got it. You own your own store, after all. You can’t tell me that it doesn’t make any money?”

The worst thing I ever did was tell my mother about opening my own bookstore. It happened in one of those rare moments when I still thought that some way, somehow, she’d be proud of me. Instead, I created a monster. A monster who constantly wanted me to bankroll her drinking and drug habit. Something I absolutely would not do.

“Whether my store is profitable or not is none of your business,” I snapped, tired of the same old back and forth. This

constant take, take, take and never any give. “I am not giving you money. Not now, not ever.”

“Fine, ungrateful bitch.” She hung up abruptly, leaving me clutching my phone. My body shook from the rage coursing through my veins. My eyes burned from unshed tears. Breathing in through my nose and exhaling through my mouth, I tried—and failed—to calm down. Every time she called I ended up like this, furious, hurt, and feeling guilty.

That’s right.

Guilty.

Guilty because I *should* want to help the woman who gave me life. I *should* want to help the only mother I’d ever known, but I knew if I did, I’d be opening Pandora’s box. I’d fall into a trap I’d never be able to get myself out of. The fact I was choosing myself over her filled me with guilt. Even though I know it shouldn’t.

My phone rang again.

I jumped, startled by the sudden sound. I half-expected my mother to call back to continue her guilt-tripping and begging. Instead, the upbeat tune of “Walking on Sunshine” filled my ear. Relieved, I answered.

“Hey.”

“Uh oh. I don’t like that tone. What’s the matter? What happened?” Ivy asked, immediately sensing something was definitely up.

“Who do you think?” It was all I needed to say.

“Oh god, Gladys-zilla called asking for money again, didn’t she?”

The tears that I thought were gone now coursed down my face. “She did. She was horrible as ever.”

“Oh, sweetie! I’m so sorry. Are you okay?”

I nodded even though my best friend couldn’t see me. “I— Not really, but I will be. It’s not like this is new.”

“No, it’s not, but you shouldn’t have to go through this over and over again. You shouldn’t have to constantly deal with her shit.”

“I know. That’s why I’ll continue to tell her no, but I really wish she’d just forget I existed. Just like she did when I was growing up.” I paused. My throat tightened with unsaid emotions. “Why did I get stuck with a mom I can’t trust?”

“Oh, honey,” Ivy said sympathetically. “I can’t answer that, but you *definitely* don’t deserve Gladys. And she definitely doesn’t deserve to have you as her daughter.” A beat of silence fell before Ivy added, “Do you need me to come over? I can pick up some Ben and Jerry’s and a bottle of wine?”

“Thank you, but no. I’m just going to go to bed. I love you for offering though.” I was grateful to have Ivy Granger on my side.

“Anytime, babe. And I love you too. You know I’ve always got your back.”

“I know you do, and I’ve always got yours.”

“Ever since the first day of first grade. Through every terrible play I’m a part of. It’s been you and me versus the world.”

My best friend continued to try to cheer me up, but my night was ruined. After letting her go, I turned everything off and headed into my room. Not bothering to change into my pajamas, I climbed into bed wearing my old high school t-shirt and a pair of basketball shorts that had seen better days. I turned off the light and snuggled into the blankets, willing sleep to come sooner rather than later. It was only when Mr. Darcy decided to join me, that I relaxed enough that I fell asleep and escaped the demon that plagued me for a little bit.

Making Battle Plans

Rosie

“THIS IS RIDICULOUS!”

“What am I supposed to do? I’m too old to start over.”

“My grandfather started that dry cleaners! I’ll be damned if some corporate dupe is going to shut it down.”

All the other store owners and myself had gathered in the back room of Chomsky’s Dry Cleaners. I’d been met by Madame Melinda, the owner of the mystic store a few spaces down just as I arrived to open my bookstore for the day. She’d quickly filled me in that the other owners wanted to get together and discuss what was happening and that we were all meeting at six.

I walked into a chorus of shouts. No one was shouting at each other. More like frustrated, angry, and worried people

voicing everything plaguing their mind. I listened as I moved towards the center of the room and took the empty folding chair next to Agnes Culpepper, the glorified matriarch amongst our small group. Agnes nodded as I sat down and was immediately absorbed into the flow.

“This is bullshit, and they know it!” Chuck Harper, the baker located at the corner, spat, red-faced and angry.

“I swear, we need to sue. They can’t do this to us.”

“They can, they will, and they are.”

“I—I just don’t know what we’re going to do.”

Everyone’s voices rose higher. All angry, all ready to throw down the gauntlet against the big, bad Harrington Group monster. Either out of patience or tired of the back and forth, Agnes slapped her thighs and stood up. A towering figure at six-foot -three, Agnes stood over everyone in attendance. Her coloring came from her Mexican father. Her height from her Norwegian mother. Agnes’ genetics commanded attention.

“We’re not going to get anywhere by bickering,” she said wisely. The room instantly went silent. All eyes focused on our fierce and honorary leader. “If we’re going to save our stores and our community, we’re going to have to fight and my lawyer is ready to take on Harrington.”

“What about us? Most of us don’t have lawyers. Most of us can’t afford lawyers,” Angus cried.

“My lawyer’s doing this pro-bono. Hates these big business types, even though he works for a huge law firm. He’s willing

to take on everyone as a client. In fact, he's asked if we will all come speak to him soon because he believes we have a much better chance as a united front rather than just one or two of us."

"I heard something about the building being a historical monument or something?" Antonio the hot dog vendor piped up. While he wasn't technically a tenant of our building, his stand was located at the corner and had never seen a lag in business since the day he first set up shop. Agnes listened carefully as a few more people tossed in their few cents.

"If Melinda's nephew is right, a world-renowned painter named Thomas Banmore once lived in this building back when it was still a warehouse. Supposedly he painted the murals that are up on the top floor."

The top floor was the space the former owner used as storage but had never made it off limits to any of us. Every one of us at one time or another stored our wares up there. When the former owner was still in charge, he often bragged about the beautiful murals and encouraged us to see them.

"Do you think that's enough to save this place?" I heard myself asking with hope.

"If we can prove that's Banemore's work, it is. Have any of you ever been to the Met recently?" All heads shook no while I nodded. Seeing them, Agnes turned her focus towards the rest of our group. "If you had, you'd have seen this huge piece on display there. This guy was known for capturing scenes from World War I. The government hired him to help create a

propaganda campaign and well, let's just say the guy took it to the extreme.”

“What do you mean ‘extreme?’”

“The guy wanted to show what war was truly like. Not a glamorized version that we often see in movies and in books and such.” Agnes went on to fill everyone in about Banemore’s “Blinded Color,” a scene he drew and later painted featuring hundreds of dead and wounded men all suffering from the effects of mustard gas.

Everyone flinched. While none of us were unfortunate to have lived through that tumultuous time, we’d all heard the stories in history classes growing up.

“So, you think we’ve got a good shot at keeping this thing alive and staying in business?” Eddie Schumach, the notary and tax man whose space was squeezed between Agnes and Madame Melinda, asked, conveying the same hope that was currently blooming inside me.

“I think we’ve got more than a decent shot,” Agnes said confidently. “But why don’t you wait and let *our* lawyer talk you through everything.” Her wording did the trick. Almost immediately everyone signed on to speak to the man we now called *our* lawyer. A man who, according to Agnes, was just as emotionally invested in this as we were. A man who was promising a miracle.

The meeting adjourned and we all slowly made our way outside. Twilight was settling in and an unseasonably

refreshing wind blew in from the north. I stood for a moment just taking it all in, allowing myself to have a little hope.

“You on your way home?” Agnes asked as she suddenly appeared at my side.

“Yeah, I gotta get home to my boy. I’m sure he’s in a mood because I’m late giving him his shrimp.”

Agnes laughed heartily. “I miss having a cat,” she admitted. “But Roseen is allergic and well, I love her, so sacrifices have to be made.”

“You’re a good woman, Agnes.”

“So are you, Rosie, and I promise we’re going to fight this thing to the end.”

Feeling reassured by her faith, I thanked her for all she had done so far and followed it with a hug before saying goodbye. As I’d predicted, Mr. Darcy was *definitely* in a mood when I got home. The door wasn’t even open all the way before he let out a meow, voicing his displeasure.

“I know, I know. I’m late getting home and getting you your treat.” I held my hands up in surrender before dropping my bag to the floor and shutting and locking the door. “But you’re going to have to give me some slack. Mom was at a meeting trying to save our livelihood. That means my ability to keep buying you shrimps.”

Mr. Darcy continued to eye me as if my reason was a poor excuse for him not getting his daily intake of seafood. Knowing there’d be no peace otherwise, I quickly went to the

fridge, fished out the container of shrimp, and plopped a couple into his dish. My otherwise sweet kitty cat devoured both and thanked me with a head boop before disappearing to take what must have been his twentieth nap of the day.

I spent the remainder of the evening chowing down on a frozen pizza I heated up and thinking back and forth about our plan to save the building and the blue-eyed stranger I'd hoped beyond hoped to see again when Ivy and I visited the coffee shop earlier. Even though I knew it was a lost cause, I allowed myself to hope that maybe, just maybe luck was on my side and come tomorrow, or the next day, he'd show up either at the coffeehouse or my shop and the rest would be history.

La-La Land

Alex

“YOOHOO! EARTH TO ALEX.” My younger brother boomed from where he stood in the doorway of my office, waving his hand in the air.

“What do you want?” I snapped, suddenly irritated that he’d pulled me out of my daydreams about the coffee shop girl and back to the present with him.

“Do you think you can leave La-La Land for a moment? I’ve been standing here for at least five minutes while you looked like you were off somewhere else.”

I ignored his comment and glanced down at my watch.
“What are you still doing here?”

“It’s only two o’clock, asshole. I don’t leave for another two hours.” Roman strode into my office as if he owned the place

and plopped down in the chair across from me. Since his dad, my adopted dad, owned the place, I guess he did. Or rather, *we* did.

“Yeah, but don’t you usually go over to your new real estate office around this time?”

“I’ve got everything covered over there, so no. I’m here for the rest of the day.”

“Great,” I muttered under my breath, less than thrilled he was here and that he was bugging me.

“Say, why did you have that faraway dreamy look on your face just now? Did you fall in love or something while my back was turned?”

I eyed my brother again. I was annoyed that not only had he barged in here without knocking, but he’d also disturbed the small fantasy I was having about the auburn-haired beauty I’d met a few days ago at my new favorite coffee shop. The second I set eyes on her, that was it. I was done. I’d never seen a more beautiful woman in all my life. She was, in a word, exquisite. A combination of everything I found attractive in the opposite sex and more.

She couldn’t have been more than five feet tall because my six-two frame loomed over her. Yet, it was her hair I noticed first. Thick and wavy auburn locks hung down to the middle of her back. I’d never seen hair like that. The dark, almost fiery color wasn’t like the normal reds I’d seen on other women. It was like her hair had been forged from fire. Hair I wanted to bury my hands before moving downward to slowly

trace the lines of her curvy body. I was just about to introduce myself when the wannabe influencer stopped me in my tracks. The only good thing about all that was when I got to look that little rosebud in the eye.

I'd never been one to believe in destiny or just 'knowing' there was something special about one particular person. That was until I looked into the bluest eyes I've ever seen.

Holy shit.

One look and my world was *rocked*. I knew with just one glance that the sexy little rosebud had been placed in my path for a reason. What that reason was, I'll never know because the asshole now sitting in front of me had to go and ruin it with a phone call.

"Why are you here?" I grumped, wanting him gone because I still hadn't forgiven him for interrupting my little coffee-inspired mental rendezvous.

"Um, we have a meeting in about ten minutes? Dad wants an update on that building we're knocking down. The one where he plans to build those high-rise apartments." Roman glanced down at his watch before looking back at me. I must have looked dumbstruck because Roman puffed out a disbelieving huff before planting his hands upon his hips. "Don't tell me that you forgot?"

"No, I didn't forget! Henry Higgins is handling all that, remember? Dad's the one who put him in charge." I gritted out because yes, I actually *had* forgotten, but I wasn't about to tell him that. I couldn't help it. Since I saw that crackin' little

rosebud, I could think of nothing else. Every time I closed my eyes or had a moment to think, there she was filling my mind with images that were definitely not safe for work or that I'd share with anyone else. Especially my brother.

“Tell that to someone who believes you.” My shithead brother smirked, silently telling me that I'd been busted. “Who is she?” he asked because if there was anything that Roman knew, it was women.

“Just . . . Just someone I saw in a coffee shop. It's no biggie.” I tried to play it off as having my world shook at its foundation was nothing, but again, my brother saw right through it.

“She must be someone pretty spectacular if she's the reason behind that dreamy look you had on your face and that you forgot our meeting with dad.”

I heaved out a sigh, seeing no reason to lie. “She *was* spectacular, Roman.” I closed my eyes and instantly saw those stunning blue eyes smiling at me. “But it's not like it matters. I'll probably never see her again.”

Roman got up from his seat, still wearing that smug, know-it-all smile that I hated. “You never know dude. Maybe you'll run into her again. Who knows? Maybe she's *the one*.”

“Maybe, but I'm not going to hold my breath.”

Together, Roman and I made our way to the conference room where we were to meet with our father. Whatever this meeting was about, I knew it was important and I tried, I swear, I tried to focus on the details, but all I could do was

picture that fiery hair, those blue eyes, and the softest, most kissable lips ever created. By the time we reached the boardroom, I knew I was screwed. There was no getting her out of my mind for the foreseeable future. At least until someone came along to distract me from her. Sadly, I wasn't interested in anyone else.

Like I said, I was so screwed.

This Meeting Could Have Been Lunch

Alex

“GOOD TO SEE YOU, boys,” Malcolm Harrington, our father, greeted us as soon as we stepped inside the meeting room located just down the hall from his office. “I’m glad you could make it.”

No one else was in the room save him. Odd and a bit surprising. Roman’s eyebrows shot up as he glanced at me from out of the corner of his eye.

“I thought we were having a meeting?” My brother asked as our father motioned to two empty chairs on each side of him.

“We are, but there’s no need for the others to be here. They’ve all been sent what they need to know about the Harper Avenue project.”

“Then why do we need to be here?” I asked, my words coming out stronger than I intended them to be.

The man who raised me, the only father I’d ever known, looked at me with his characteristic kindness. “Because I wanted to check in. I wanted to see how you boys were doing. We’re all so busy we rarely have time to catch up with just the three of us.”

My shoulders, which had been tense from dreading this face-to-face, immediately relaxed. “You think we don’t spend enough time together?” I clarified.

“We don’t and before you mention it, Sunday dinner with your mother isn’t enough. You’re my sons. I want to know what’s going on in your lives. I feel we should be closer than what we are.”

“That’s the thing, dad,” Roman said. “We *are*. Way closer than any other families that are in business together.”

“I know, but I feel we could be closer. That’s why I wanted us all to work on the Harper Avenue project together. That’s why it’s been so important to me.” Dad sat back in his seat and let out a long, slow sigh. Roman and I did the same. To be honest, I had no idea why my father had pushed so hard for this project to be done. If I’d known from the beginning why, I wouldn’t have been so blasé about it.

“I know I wasn’t around much when you were growing up,” our father pointed out as if sensing what I was thinking.

“You were building an empire—” I argued but my father’s raised hand cut me off.

“Yes, I was building an empire. A legacy I’m proud to have you a part of, but that doesn’t stop me from feeling like I’ve wasted time.”

“You haven’t wasted time, dad,” Roman tried to appease him.

“Yes, I have, but I thank you for trying to convince me otherwise.”

“What brought all this about? What’s going on, Dad? Is there something we should know about?” The question sat at the front of my mind. Dad had been somber and introspective for some time now, despite how zealous he’d been about this project.

“So many of my friends are dying, and I’m not getting any younger. With them all dying off, I’ve come to learn that what they’ve left behind has been absolute chaos. I don’t want that for you two and your mother. I don’t want to see our family get ripped apart over such trivial issues like who’s getting a larger chunk of the inheritance. I want to do everything I can to ensure that doesn’t happen to us.”

I had no idea my father had been struggling with this. Yes, many men he’d known during his rise to power, men who were equally powerful and successful as he was, had been dropping like flies, but that didn’t mean he would. My mother wouldn’t allow it. She did her absolute best to keep him healthy, happy, and most of all, active.

“You could have just asked us to lunch,” Roman said after we’d all fallen silent for a moment. I shot my clueless brother a scathing look across the table.

“No, at least one of you would have rescheduled.” Before either of us could argue, our father continued. “I’ve tried that in the past and I can’t count how many times I wound up eating alone because ‘something’ came up with one or the both of you. I called this meeting and made it mandatory because I knew I’d get your butts in those seats and that we’d finally get a chance to talk.”

I couldn’t argue because our dad was right. Over the past few months, there had been several times where we’d all planned to go out to lunch but business had gotten in the way. Roman sat silent too as he, no doubt, realized the same thing.

“I’m sorry, dad.” I was the first to apologize. “I didn’t realize you were so concerned.”

“Yeah, me too,” Roman seconded. “If I’d known you felt like this, I would have made more of an effort.”

“None of us is perfect, but now that we’ve cleared the air, let’s have a chat. Oh, and some food. I ordered from that quaint little Italian place your mother took me to long ago.” Without missing a beat, dad shot off a text to his assistant who appeared seconds later, carrying a handful of white paper bags brimming with the unmistakable and mouth-watering scent of tomatoes, olive oil, roasted garlic, and basil.

The three of us spent the next couple hours talking, laughing, and reminiscing about the past without mentioning work. I

didn't mention the sexy little minx I'd seen, even though my brother hinted at it more than once. I felt any mention of her was inappropriate because this time was about us and us alone. A father and his two sons, spending quality time together. By the time the work day was over, Dad wasn't ready to let us go. Instead of us each going our separate ways, he invited us out to dinner with our mother. An invitation Roman and I happily accepted.

Getting Peed on While Under a Balcony

Rosie

“IT COULDN’T HAVE BEEN *that* bad? I mean, the guy’s got a job, a car, and owns his own place. That’s *rare* nowadays. Are you sure he’s a loser? How bad could it be?” Ivy tried to list out all the essential elements one could want in a prospective first date. I could tell by the look on her face she was certain I was making this out to be worse than it was. Trust me, I wasn’t. My best friend had set me up on another blind date and just like all the others, it had been a disaster. So much so, I shot her an “*I can’t believe you*” glare.

“Bad, bad. Bad like when we were in New Orleans for Marci Gras.” I recalled the worst vacation I’d ever been on. Ivy’s parents had treated us to celebrate us graduating college. We’d

gone to the Big Easy and found it anything but. It was one disaster after another.

“Remember when I thought it started raining, but it turned out to be some drunk peeing on me from the balcony overhead?” Ivy grimaced and wrinkled her nose, no doubt remembering all-too well the stench of dehydrated, asparagus-scented pee that had soaked me to the skin.

“Yeah, that was gross, but it *can't* be as bad as that.”

“Okay, maybe not, but it was still *bad*. Nothing that guy said was true. Turns out, he doesn't actually have a job. He all but admitted that he has chosen not to seek consistent employment for the past six months because he's 'looking to find himself.'” I snorted thinking back to how he'd 'bragged' about how his dream was to go study under some guru in India, and was patiently waiting to find a woman who'd foot the bill.

“He definitely doesn't own his own house. He lives in a one-room apartment. With three other people. And the car? It belongs to his mother. But that's not the best part. The best part was when he told me losing my business was a good thing because then I could take whatever money I had left over to fly us to India!”

Ivy cringed. I continued to glare.

“And to top it all off, I didn't get a chance to ask that hot guy at the coffee shop his name or give him my phone number!” I buried my face in my hands and fought the urge to cry as I remembered the pivotal moment from two days ago. The one

where I literally saw and briefly spoke to the man of my dreams before he proverbially vanished into thin air.

Since setting eyes on Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man, I couldn't stop thinking about him. I'd replayed our interaction over and over, each time fantasizing that it had gone differently. Like me bent over a table differently. Or me in the bathroom with him on his knees, face buried between my thighs differently, or vice versa. However, it was not meant to be. Seeing no point in dreaming or staying mad, I walked towards the door. I flipped the front door sign from open to closed and looked forward to seeing everyone tomorrow. Ivy was still leaning against the counter when I turned back around.

"Rosie, I'm so sorry." Her words brought the fire of embarrassment back to my cheeks. In the few seconds I'd gone quiet, Ivy apparently had accepted that her matchmaking skills weren't as great as she thought them to be.

"Not as sorry as I am." I heaved out a dejected sigh as I walked back over to her and began the process of closing the shop for the night. "I mean, what the hell? I see the man of my dreams and he *actually* stops to talk to me. Then before I could ask him his name, his bloody phone rang."

"But at least he apologized and explained it was an emergency. I don't know any guy who'd do that. Royce certainly didn't. The fucking asshole." Ivy blasted out bitterly as she referred to her deplorable ex.

My best friend had recently had to switch jobs. She'd made the colossal blunder of all business office etiquette: she'd slept

with her boss. We're not talking about a mere dalliance or a one night stand. No, Ivy and Royce Frasier had gone at it hot and heavy. For weeks. The prick had led her to believe that they were in a relationship with the way he mooned over her. Flowers delivered to her desk. Wining and dining her at all the hotspots in the city. Trips on his private jet. Dropping off trinkets and small gifts all the time. Kisses that were practically indecent. Everyone they worked with believed they were an item until one day Ivy walked in after having lunch with me to find Royce standing in the middle of her floor, announcing his engagement to some woman named Melissa Haught, an Instagram influencer.

Ivy quit on the spot.

Embarrassed and feeling used, Ivy stormed up to Royce and slapped the taste out of his mouth before telling him to fuck off. She topped it off by grabbing the picture of us from her desk before she powerwalked her way out of the building to a loud, resounding round of applause. Her triumph was short-lived however. Ivy discovered Royce had blackballed her with every corporate office in the city. All except one. Somehow, a newly established real estate business hadn't caught wind of Royce's evil plan and hired my accountant friend, saving her from having to move back to Brooklyn to live with her parents.

"More like I was so uninteresting he texted some chick while we were still at the table to schedule a booty call after I told him nothing was going to happen with us." I let out a frustrated growl.

“Why can’t nice things ever happen to me? First there’s all this shit with my shop and then missing out on the hottest man in existence? It’s like I’m destined for rotten things to happen to me.”

“Don’t say that.” My best friend chided me as I went through the last of my closing checklist. “Nice things happen to you.”

“Really? When? I can’t remember the last time I had something nice come my way.”

That was what hurt most. I couldn’t remember the last time I had something really go my way. With the exception of my bookstore, I had the worst luck. After a bad childhood where I’d had no choice but to raise myself, to an equally sucky existence in college, I swore that soon my day would come. Based on what I was currently dealing with, I was going to have to continue to wait. I know I should be grateful. I *was* luckier than most people my age, but no part of it had come easily. I’d worked, scrimped, and saved my entire adult life to realize my dream of owning my own bookstore. Now that my store had finally started to gain some attention, not to mention was now pulling in a healthy daily income, the shithead former building owner decided to sell and the new owner was going to knock it down to make way for soulless, unoriginal luxury condos. I couldn’t win for trying.

“We’ll find you a new place. Ooh! And I can fix you up with that hot guy from my play. He’s asked about you, you know. Plus, I know for a fact he’s got a job and has a car.” My friend tried to cheer me up, but it was no use. I couldn’t be cheered

up. In a matter of weeks, everything I'd worked for, everything I held dear, would be gone.

“Mr. Darcy is *not* going to be happy if I end up having to move. He'll start pulling out his fur again and I'll be known as the lady with the balding, neurotic Himalayan.” I ignored her offer as I thought of the only stable man in my life who, no doubt, was probably sleeping on his cat tree, cozy in the fading evening light.

I found Mr. Darcy during my first day of business when I went to toss out the trash. It had been pouring down rain and somehow the then mangy, grizzled-looking lump of soggy fur had gotten himself trapped inside the dumpster in the alleyway outback. Not one to let anyone or anything suffer, I'd risked my health and hygiene fishing him out. One look at his half-drowned self and I knew he was meant to be mine. Mr. Darcy had been with me ever since. I occasionally brought him to work with me. The customers loved him and he loved being worshiped. Yet my boy wasn't a big fan of change and the thought of him having to go through all the stress of moving again left me feeling sick.

“Mr. Darcy will survive. He's a tough old coot.” Ivy tried to offer me comfort again but failed. There was no comfort to be found in my current situation. There was only dread and despondency. Everything I cared for was about to be knocked to the ground so some rich asswipe with a complete disregard for the importance of community could put up an ugly eyesore filled with people who wouldn't stoop to learn their neighbor's name, let alone the doorman's.

“Yeah, but the question is, am I?”

“You know what you need?”

“Do not say another date.” I shook my head. Another blind date with one of the guys she was always fixing me up with was definitely *not* what I needed right now. What I really needed was to go home to Mr. Darcy and spend the rest of the night watching rom-coms and eating ice cream.

“I’m not going to say spend the night in, hanging with your cat, either.” Ivy knew me too well. “I was going to suggest we go get a drink. The bar at the end of your block has half-price drink specials tonight.”

A night of cutting loose and sharing a few drinks with my best friend *did* sound inviting. “What time does the special start?” I asked just as Ivy’s mouth curled into a triumphant smile.

“The second we leave this joint.”

By the time I crawled home that night, half in the bag and not sure I wouldn’t have a hangover in the morning, I had all but forgotten my woes for the time being. I’d given myself a small reprieve before they came back to haunt me in the morning.

Back With a Vengeance

Rosie

THOSE WOES I'D FOUGHT so valiantly? Well, just like I predicted, they were back with a vengeance. Could it be from seeing that wanker Henry Higgins as he tried—and failed—to speak to Mr. Kundemueller, the dry cleaner owner located two storefronts down?

Yes.

Absolutely yes.

Seeing him reminded me that my store was on borrowed time and if I didn't come up with something quick, I would be out of a job and therefore, royally screwed.

All day I'd tried to distract myself. I tried over and over to focus on my work. To take care of my customers' needs and grasp my inner Churchill meme to keep calm and move on.

Yet despite my attempts, I found myself doing the opposite. All I could focus on was my impending eviction. What the hell was I going to do if I couldn't find a comparable space? Closing permanently wasn't an option. I'd worked too hard to build my dedicated client base and I would be damned if I was going to let it go. Deciding I'd think better with a shot of caffeine flowing through my system, I flipped the sign over to let any potential customers know I'd be back in fifteen minutes.

The rich, savory scent of brewed coffee hit my nose the second I stepped foot inside of Bean There and Gone. The blend of arabica beans combined with sweet vanilla and coconut almost brought me to my knees. I needed my fix and unlike most things in my life, coffee was always there for me. Well, Coffee and Ivy. Without fail, they were *always* there when I needed them. I could probably count Mr. Darcy into that category too, but seeing he was a cat and aloof by nature, that was questionable.

"It's you!" A delighted shiver ran down my spine as I instantly spun on my heel and found the sexy stranger from the other day grinning at me. I was instantly dazzled by the bluest eyes ever created.

"Hi," I said back, feeling my cheeks grow warm as he gazed my way.

"Hi, yourself." My mystery man stepped closer to me as we both headed towards the already forming line. "I was hoping I'd run into you." My cheeks warmed under his gaze.

“Me too.”

“Really?” His eyebrows rose as if surprised.

I nodded. “Really. I’ve thought about you since that day we met.”

I was normally *not* this forward, nor could I ever be accused of being flirty. Yet with this guy, I couldn’t help it. It was like those parts of me, the ones I thought didn’t exist, came to life.

Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man flashed another dazzling smile my way and I swear I would have melted if I hadn’t been made of flesh and blood. I stared back, taking in his beauty and wondering how I got so lucky to run into him again.

“What are you getting?” We were in line and apparently, we were next to order, judging by the barista’s impatient scowl.

“What?”

“What are you getting?” He cleared his throat as his eyes darted to the service counter before settling back onto me.

“To drink?”

“Yeah, to drink.”

“Oh!” I giggled. “I usually get some type of frappe in the afternoon. Usually vanilla with a shot of espresso. I like the milkshake-iness of them, but I also need something that packs a punch.”

My handsome stranger laughed again. “I take it you like caffeine,” he chuckled more.

“As much as I love—” I was all set to use this moment to tell him my name and point out my bookstore across the street when something caught my eye. Something that looked like that miserable prig Henry Higgins peering into my store and slapping his hand against the glass.

“I’m so sorry. I’ve got to go—” I blurted out and was headed for the crosswalk before I could say anything further. As I stood tapping my foot impatiently waiting for the light to change, I wanted to kick my own ass for not just dodging across traffic and committing the crime of jaywalking, but this was New York City and if I dared to so much as I try, one of two things would have happened. One, I would have gotten a ticket by that cop that likes to hang out at the corner. Or worse. I’d get hit by a car, therefore solving all my problems about my future because there would no longer *be* a future to worry about. I had no doubt that Ivy would take Mr. Darcy if anything ever happened to me, but as much as I loved my boy and my store, I just couldn’t do it. Instead, I waited like everyone else until the sign changed and I hoofed it over to where the asshat lawyer still stood, slapping the glass and shouting my name.

“Ms. Cooper!” Henry Higgins shouted as I approached him.
“Ms. Cooper, I know you’re in there.”

“Actually, I’m not.” The door slapper jumped at the sound of my voice. His eyes went wide with surprise.

“Where were you? I wanted to speak to you.”

“Even though that is none of your business, I left to go run an errand. One I *didn't* get to finish, thanks to you.”

“Oh,” Higgins mumbled. “I thought you were inside hiding from me.”

“I am not the type of woman that hides from anyone, especially you,” I growled out. “Care to explain why you’re slapping down my door?”

Henry straightened himself up, adjusted his tie, and gave me what barely passed as a smile. “My boss asked if I’d stop by —”

My hand shot up, effectively silencing him. “I don’t care what your boss asked you to do. I still have a few months before you monsters kick me out. So, save whatever it is you were going to say because I don’t want to hear it. Now, do me a favor and leave before I call the cops and tell them that you’re harassing me.”

“That’s ridiculous. No cop would honestly believe that.” Higgins scoffed as if my threat were absolutely ridiculous.

“I can guarantee you they would.” I smiled a slow smile. Little did this douche know, I had an ace up my sleeve. The cop on the corner. “You see, several of the cops that walk this beat have wives who frequent my store. As in they are *regular* customers. When I told them what you and your scummy boss are doing, let’s just say those ladies and their husbands aren’t too happy. All of us are tired of big corps coming in and gutting the soul of our neighborhoods. We’re sick of you replacing them with bland, flat, lifeless buildings and filling

them with greedy, bottom-feeding, heartless yuppies. So, unless you want to deal with the fuzz, I suggest you leave me alone!”

Seeing that we were at an impasse, Higgins stormed off but not before bidding me a good day. I glared at his back, shaking my head at his audacity. How dare he show up and ruin the precious few free minutes I had? Not only had he wasted my time, but I was also sans any type of coffee-flavored drink in my hand to help soothe my overwrought nerves. Let’s not forget how I’d left Mr. Sexy Coffee shop Man behind. With another shake of my head, I cursed the day Henry Higgins was born and reopened my store. Twenty minutes later, several people roamed the aisles, browsing the shelves after the skies opened up and dumped buckets of rain upon the city.

By the time I closed up, I was still upset but knowing that my kitty cat, my favorite Netflix series, some of that orange chicken from the Chinese restaurant around the corner would be waiting offered me an outlet to ignore my problems until the morning came and I was forced to face them again. Oh, and let’s not forget my fantasies about my handsome stranger. Yeah, those fantasies were a *great* distraction too.

Toads and Rosebuds

Alex

THE NEXT DAY

“And who said that?” I sat behind my desk, eying the toad that was Henry Higgins as he gave me a status report. It wasn’t lost on me how he looked like a younger, shorter, darker version of Rex Harrison. Frankly, I didn’t like the man. I found him to be weasel-y, condescending, and downright rude. I’d been forced to work with him though because my stepfather had hired him and thought the man shit out nothing but golden eggs.

“That Collins woman!” Higgins glanced down at his notes to make sure he had the right name. “She ripped me a new asshole and threatened to call the cops if I didn’t leave. Oh, I almost forgot about the part where she went on and on about gutting the soul of the neighborhood and replacing it with bottom-feeding, heartless yuppies.”

I tried not to wince at the harsh words flying from his mouth. Whoever this Miss Cooper person was, she sounded like

trouble. Just like that florist. From what Henry had said, the florist woman was a nightmare. Inevitably when I brought a building down, there was at least one in the bunch that just had to be an asshole about it. Unfortunately for me, I now had two and was sure there would be more. That irritating florist and an irascible bookshop owner. I suspected more were to come.

“Mr. Hastings?” Henry Higgins cleared his throat before repeating my name. Apparently I’d zoned out and missed what he’d said.

“Yes?”

“Do you want me to do something about this?” Higgins asked as if he *could* actually do something about this major pain in our ass.

“No,” I said, giving him a shake of my head before looking him in the eye. “She’s asked us to leave us alone and has threatened to call the cops if we don’t. I say we just let it be for now. Give it a few weeks before we try to approach her again to make sure everything is running smoothly. Oh, and find out if she’s got a lawyer. In fact, find out if any of the tenants have lawyers. We’re going to need to stay on top of this.”

To his credit, Higgins looked relieved. “That sounds like a solid plan,” the man added before gathering up his stuff and excusing himself. Letting out a harsh breath of my own, I ran my hand down my face as my mind once again filled with visions of the stunning auburn-haired beauty who I just couldn’t stop thinking about. I was just reliving our brief

encounter from earlier when my phone beeped. Waking the screen up, I saw a missed text from my brother.

Roman: We still on for lunch? Might be a few minutes late because this meeting just won't end. Thompson keeps asking questions. The dickhead.

Me: I think I'm just going to call it an early day and grab something on the way home.

I went on to explain that I just wasn't feeling myself. Roman was quick to respond, telling me that he hoped I felt better and if all else failed, the bottle of Macallan he bought me for Christmas had yet to be opened. Like my stepfather, Roman believed whiskey solved everything. For him, I guess it did. For me, not so much. Bad things happened when I imbibed too much. Poor decisions would be made and I no longer had the stomach to put myself through that. Instead, I chose to remain sober. I was also going to stop by that cute little coffeehouse on the way home and test my luck.



Bean There and Gone had been bustling for the past hour and a half. I knew as the moment I stepped inside I wasn't heading home any time soon. Instead, I ordered myself a coffee, sat down at a table with a good view and waited. Something pinged inside my bones, telling me that this was

the right thing to do. That my little rosebud would show up and life as we knew it would change for the better.

The only regret I had was not being honest with my brother. Since I could remember, we'd been close, despite our five year age difference. Before my mom married Roman's dad, I thought I would never be happy again. Then Arthur married Mom. Then came Roman and I have never been happier.

You see, my biological father was a complete shithead that had a penchant for alcohol and wrapped himself around a telephone pole while his newly-wedded, heavily pregnant wife was at home going into labor. Fate intervened later to give me not only a real dad, despite us not being biologically related, but it also gave me the greatest gift in the world. My brother. The one person who knew me better than anyone else. Even though he irritated me. Frequently.

Roman and I told each other everything. And I mean everything. That's why it didn't make sense that I'd kept my sweet little flame-haired dream girl a secret. Was it because I thought he'd poach her from me? Absolutely not. Roman and I never crossed swords when it came to women. If he even had an inkling that I liked her, he'd look the other way. As I sat sipping my cafe Americano, I came to realize the answer. I didn't want to jinx this. I wanted to get to know that stunning, blue-eyed sweetie before I introduced her to my brother. Hell, I needed to learn her name first.

“Rosie, I'm telling you, you should have called the cops.” A short, sassy brunette stated firmly as the front door opened.

My breath hitched in my lungs at the vision that followed closely upon the brunette's heels.

My rosebud.

Rosie.

Her name was Rosie.

How fitting, I thought as I tried and failed to hold back a smile. My sweet, sexy rose shared a name with one of the most beautiful flowers ever created.

"I know, Ivy, but I had a shop I had to tend to," my fiery urban flower shot back. "I didn't have time to waste standing out on the sidewalk while I waited for the police. Besides, the warning was enough to make that shithead leave."

"Just hope he doesn't come back when I'm there." The woman named Ivy linked her arm through Rosie's and pulled her to the order counter. I watched as they placed their orders, giggling and sharing what I could only assume were inside jokes. Once they were done, they shifted over to the pick-up counter and waited. I continued to watch as they kept talking and as Ivy kept nudging Rosie in the side.

"Here you go, *Rosie*," the barista that had assisted them suddenly said as he set Ivy's brew down but held Rosie's out to her.

"Oh! Thank you, Seth," my rosebud replied with a kind smile.

"No, thank you. It's my pleasure." The ponytailed douchebag openly flirted with my crush. "After all, if you

hadn't come in, I wouldn't have gotten to see you today. And seeing you *always* makes my day." The fucker then had the audacity to wink. At *my* Rosie! Ivy chuckled loudly while Rosie froze as if she didn't know how to respond. I watched with my hands clenched into fists and my nails digging into the skin of my palms. It was all I could do to not storm over and punch him in his pierced nose.

"Uh ... okay, Seth," Ivy laughed. "Way to make it obvious, but we'll see you tomorrow, okay? Maybe that will give you some time to think of a better pickup line." Leaving the embarrassed barista behind, the two women left the coffeehouse. I was up and out of my seat before the door had time to close.

"Have a great day!" the same barista shouted just as I headed out the door. I resisted the urge to shoot him the bird and followed Rosie and her friend. Instead of rushing up on them and introducing myself, I kept a good distance away. When they stopped at the light to wait to cross to the other side, I held back, blending in with the crowd so that neither of them could spot me. When the light changed and foot traffic started moving, I remained distant, my eyes never once leaving the most magnificent creature I'd ever set eyes on.

This was it. The time had come to officially meet the woman I would never forget even if I lived a thousand lifetimes. Rosie was just that stunning and that amazing. In the few moments I'd had the privilege to spend with her, I knew she was unique. That I could search the world and never find anyone quite like

her. That's why I had to do this. I couldn't let this remarkable woman slip through my fingers again.

With a deep breath, I walked in, bold as brass only to be hit by a wall. The very wind was knocked from my lungs as I looked up and my Aphrodite with those gorgeous blue eyes locked on mine.

"Welcome to Rosies are Read Books," my rose chimed melodically as I recovered enough to take another step. "I'm Rosie Collins, proprietress and expert on all things books. How can I help you today?"

I'd love to say I said something charming, something clever. Nope. Instead my mouth refused to cooperate as the rush of my blood pulsing through my ears deafened me. Everything hit me like a wrecking ball. Her beauty. The smell of her perfume. The startling realization of where I was. This was my building and the enchantress behind the counter was none other than Rose Collins. The woman who gave my lawyer hell. The woman I couldn't stop thinking of. Most importantly, the woman whose future I was responsible for destroying.

Chickens Can't Tuck Their Tails Between Their Legs

Alex

FEAR UNLIKE I'D NEVER felt before sickened my belly. The project I'd risked everything for, one little storefront located between several others that I'd thoughtlessly assumed were nothing in the great scheme of things, was going to be its downfall.

How could I look myself in the mirror knowing that Rosie was losing her dream and her livelihood and I was to blame? How could I go back there and look her in the eye? All the while knowing that *I* was the big bad corporate wolf who was going to blow her bookstore down and replace it with— what was it that she said? Oh yeah, soulless yuppies. Or was it heartless yuppies? I couldn't remember but really, that was irrelevant right now.

“So, you didn't say anything?” My best friend, Evan, asked after I spent the last hour filling him in on what I'd discovered. He'd met me here shortly after I bolted out of Rose's

bookstore without saying a fucking word like a chump before I ran to the corner where I shot off a text asking him to meet me at our favorite hangout. We'd been discussing what I'd done—professionally speaking—but Evan being Evan, suspected there was more. It barely took any prodding for me to fill him in on how she and I'd run into one another a few times.

“I did.” I groaned as my head flopped forward and landed upon my crossed arms lying upon the tabletop. “I just stood there, stared at her like an idiot, and ran like chicken with my tail tucked between my legs.”

“Technically, chickens can't tuck their tails between their legs,” my asshole friend roared at his own joke before sobering for a second. “Wait. Do they technically *have* tails?” he pondered while I contemplated dumping my whiskey over his head.

“Not the point, Evan!” I barked.

“I can't help it. I'm curious like a cat.” He grinned before raising his hand and catching our server's attention. The busty blonde immediately jogged over to us and leaned onto the table, putting her ample cleavage on display. Evan's eyes immediately went to her tits while I looked away in disgust. I hated forward women. I especially hated ones who used their bodies to get attention. I mean, I wasn't one to hate if it's what made them feel good and confident, but this woman was not that type. She was the type that Roman used like a roll of toilet paper after taco night. The type desperate for a paycheck she

barely had to work for. I had no taste for that type of desperation.

That's because you've got a taste for a certain rose-flavored candy, my stupid brain thought as I listened to Evan and our server agree to meet up after her shift ended.

“I'll be right back with your whiskey, baby, and water for your friend.” With that, our server was gone and I had Evan's attention once again.

“Now, as you were saying ...” He looked at me as if the whole past five minutes hadn't happened.

“As I was saying,” my voice was rough but I didn't give a crap. “I don't know what I'm going to do.” I ran my hand through my hair for what seemed like the thousandth time. Evan sat watching me, taking me in as his mind worked.

“I think you just need to be honest,” he said, rather unhelpfully. “Tell her who you are and see where it goes.”

“Oh sure!” I barked out a hard laugh. “I can see it now. Me waltzing into her bookstore and saying, *'Hi! I'm that guy from the coffee shop. I'd love to take you out sometime. Oh, by the way, I'm also the guy who's selling the building where your bookstore is located, but I don't see that getting in our way.'*”

Evan eyeballed me and shook his head.

“That's not what I meant, and you know it.” My best friend was known for his tone in the courtroom. The authoritative, forceful power he harnessed had left him with a track record for winning. In fact, the man had never technically lost a

divorce case. The only time he technically didn't win was when the two parties decided they'd made a mistake and decided to stay together.

“Don't use that tone with me! I'm not one of your slutty divorcées that thank you for your services by getting down on their knees.”

“I'll have you know that each one of those women do that willingly. They don't repay me, thank you very much. Blowies never come as a part of the settlement package.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you're a pig?”

“Just every goddamned day of my life. I'm also great with giving advice. You obviously know that or you wouldn't be here asking me what to do about your little rose-colored problem.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I blew out a raspberry and knocked back the last of the one whiskey I allowed myself. Our server chose that moment to return, effectively cutting off any further conversation between me and my best friend for the next few minutes.

“I'm serious, Alex,” Evan said once his booty call had sauntered away. “If you're serious about this girl, you've got to be upfront and honest with her. You said she seems like a reasonable girl, so yeah, she'll be a little miffed, but I don't see her slamming the door in your face or kicking you in the nuts. I'd bet she'd give you a chance to explain yourself first.”

“I’m just not certain that that’s what will happen, though. I mean, what if she tells me to get out and never speaks to me again?”

“That’s just the risk you’re going to have to take.” Evan took a sip of his drink before looking me squarely in the eye. “After all, it’s you who’s always saying to take that risk.”

Leave it to this dickhead to throw my own words back at me. After mumbling that he was right, we switched topics to his latest case and how the woman he defended immediately started acting like they were dating. Needless to say, Evan cut off all contact and passed any future dealings off onto one of the associates who worked for his firm. A female associate.

When I got home that night and fell into bed, I expected to fall right to sleep but couldn’t. Visions of my lovely Rosie filled my head while apprehension about what I had to do left my nerves raw and my skin scratchy. I knew what I had to do. I needed to go back to that bookstore, apologize for running away, and then lay everything out on the table. And I would. Tomorrow, I’d leave work early and head over there and do just that. Or so I thought.

Here I Go Again

Alex

HERE WE GO AGAIN.

One more chance at success.

I stood at the door to Rosies are Read Books wracked with nerves. I know I looked like a creep, staring through the glass, watching my brilliant rosebud as she interacted with her customers. I couldn't help it. I'd never seen anything more beautiful and I doubted I ever would. There was just something about her. Something I felt in my gut. A type of knowing that I'd never experienced before. The type of knowing I'd assumed you felt when they found *The One*.

That's right.

I'm not ashamed to admit that I believed wholeheartedly that I found *my One*. Sure, I'd dated women in the past. I'd found countless numbers attractive but this ... I never had felt like this before. Never had I been so wrapped up in one single person that everything else fell by the wayside. That's why this

moment was so crucial. The first step towards my life changing forever. Steeling myself, I headed inside. The door chimed with a bell hanging overhead. Rosie was at the counter finishing up a sale when she looked up.

“Welcome to Rosies are Read Books! I’m Rosie Coo—Oh!” Her brilliant blues immediately lit up like a sunny day as they met mine. I instantly released the breath I’d been holding.

“Hi,” I waved shyly.

“Hello, yourself.” Her sweet voice called out as she tucked a few things under her counter before coming around to stand directly in front of me. “I didn’t think you’d be back.”

“Sorry about that.” I resisted the urge to run my hand through my hair. Something I did when I was nervous.

“You ran out of here so fast the other day. I hope everything is okay.”

Everything was more than okay. Truthfully, I expected Rosie to be mad about the two seconds I’d graced her doorstep. I wholly expected her to tell me to get out and never come back, but I was quickly learning that was not who my little rosebud was.

“Everything’s great, actually,” I replied. “Sorry about all that again. I don’t know what came over me. It was like I didn’t know what I was doing.” Well, that and panic if I was being honest.

“I know what that’s like. I feel that way every time it’s my turn to order at the deli a few blocks down. There’s also so

much to choose from and my mind goes blank so I end up standing there like a clueless idiot.”

“No part of you could ever be idiotic.”

Rosie’s cheeks flushed to match her hair.

“Aren’t you sweet? Thank you for that.”

“Speaking of, I know this is out of the blue and maybe a bit strange, seeing how I acted last time I saw you, but would you—I mean, would you have lunch with me?” I took a chance and hoped it hit pay dirt.

“I would *love* to have lunch with you.” My rosebud grinned and it was so blinding it was like looking into the Sun. “But there’s one thing I need to ask you first.”

“You can ask me anything you like.”

“I’d like to know your name so I don’t have to keep calling you what my friend Ivy calls you?”

“Oh? And what is that?” I was intrigued. *Very* intrigued.

“Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man.”

It was me who was wearing a shit-eating grin. “Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man, huh? I think I like the sound of that rather than plain old Alex.”

“Alex.” Rosie heaved out a pleased sigh.

“Alex Harrington.” I offered my hand. She didn’t hesitate to take it. “And you’re Rosie.”

“That I am.”

“Well, Rosie, are you still interested in lunch?”

“You bet I am, Alex. There’s nothing more that I’d love right now than to have lunch with you.”

Yep. I was in love.

How is that possible? How can one fall in love almost instantly?

Easy.

They’d never met Rosie Cooper.

All it took to flip head over heels was spending an hour with the most divine creature in existence. The most enchanting woman I’d ever met. The most brilliant, funny, sexy, sweetest lady ever placed upon this planet. The one who gave me a knee-melting kiss when we said goodbye outside her bookstore and left me hard as stone. So, yep. I was smack dab in the middle, crazy in love with her. And had no regrets even though I should.

Isn’t it a bit early, I could hear my brother asking from the recesses of my mind. The jerk always had to question everything.

Dad was next. *Are you one to talk, Roman? We’ve seen the women you’re constantly bringing home.*

Oh, shut up, Roman! I knew I loved your father two seconds after I served him and that horrible woman their plates, Mom

tossed in.

My parents meet cute was still one of my favorite stories. Mom had been working as a server after my sperm donor wrapped himself around that tree. Left penniless and with no other options, Mom had to go to work. My stepfather had been dating some debutante at the time. Someone whose name I forget. Someone whose name *he* forgot the second Mom accidentally dumped ice water on his lap just after setting his plate down in front of him. That accident led to dad tracking her down, offering her a job at his company, and falling head over heels for the woman who refused to give him the time of day. That was until he wore her down and she agreed to date him, even though she had no sitter for her child. They married six months later and had been happy together ever since. It was knowing how fate brought them together that I wholeheartedly believed loving Rosie Cooper at first sight was entirely possible.

The sound of my phone ringing suddenly pulled me out of my inner thoughts. Pulling my device from out of my pocket, I glanced down to see my mother's name flashing across the screen.

"Hey, Mom," I greeted her sweetly.

"Hello, sweetheart. How are you?"

"Good. Great even."

"That's wonderful to hear, darling. I called because I spoke to your brother a few minutes ago. He said you ducked out of

work early. I wanted to check in to make sure you're not catching ill."

"No," I laughed, overly moved by her motherly concern. If there was one thing about our mother, it was that she knew how to be a mother. Tender, caring, and nurturing while fair and strict at the same time. My brother and I never had to doubt for a second that she loved us. She made it her mission to remind us. "I feel fine. In fact, I had lunch with a new colleague a few minutes ago."

"I hope it went well, dear." Mom sighed loudly on the other end.

"It did. I'd go so far to say that it was ... life changing."

While I listened to Mom tell me about how Margaret Carson constantly cheated during their bridge game and how Edith Langton's daughter was newly single, I couldn't help but think about my Rosie and how I'd openly and willingly handed her my heart to do with what she will. A heart that would always be hers no matter what happened between us.

Guess Who's Coming to Lunch

Rosie

“SO, YOU *are* dating Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man?” Ivy asked as we reached our destination. It was Saturday. We were at our favorite bistro for our weekly Saturday lunch date. As soon as Ivy showed up on my doorstep this morning to collect me, I blurted the past week's events out. This all happened, of course, after dodging another call from my mother.

Ugh.

“Yes, Ivy. I've already told you that. Alex and I are officially dating. We've been dating for a few weeks now.” I'd told her this, but for some reason my best friend was distracted now and had barely listened.

“Are you officially boyfriend and girlfriend yet?”

“No, but it's coming.”

“And he's kissed you?”

“No,” I gritted out an exasperated groan. “I kissed him first. He's kissed me a lot since then though.”

Ivy's head snapped towards me. "I thought you said he kissed you first."

"You know, if you weren't so distracted today, you'd remember me telling you that *I* kissed *him*."

And what a kiss it was.

After the best lunch date in the history of the world, Alex insisted on escorting me back to my bookstore. We slowly strolled back, neither of us in a hurry. My arm was looped through his, with me on the inside of the sidewalk and him on the outside. A true gentleman. We conversed each step of the way, learning all that we could about one another in such a short time we had together. It was by far the highlight of my day, week, month, and if I'm being honest, year.

When we reached my shop, I'd been thrilled to see no customers were waiting for me. Something I normally wouldn't be grateful for, but that day, it meant I didn't have to rush saying goodbye.

"*I had such a good time,*" I'd said honestly. "*Is it wrong to say that I really don't want it to end?*"

Alex's smile was so bright it was practically blinding. "*I was just thinking the same thing,*" he'd replied before brushing the backs of his knuckles down my cheek. "*What are you doing for dinner?*" Since we left the deli, I'd been hoping he'd ask but had been doing my best not to expect it.

"*Eating microwaved lasagna while watching Gilmore Girl reruns with my cat.*"

Alex's eyes were dazzling in this light. I couldn't help but gaze into them. I was that spellbound. "*Would you consider ditching the date with your cat and going out with me?*"

Inside, I'd been squealing. Squealing like an excited little girl at her first fancy dress up tea party. I wasn't just squealing. I'd been mentally dancing down the sidewalk. I'd been flying amongst the clouds. Mingling with the stars. I couldn't believe it. Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man, aka Alexander Michael Harrington, aka a guy I really, really, *really* liked, was asking me to dinner.

"Alex," I'd sighed happily. "*There's nothing that I'd love more. Although Mr. Darcy might be put out.*"

Before I'd had a chance to realize what I was doing, my lips were pressed to his. I felt Alex smile against my mouth just before his arms encircled my waist and pulled me into him so hard I felt just *how much* he liked me kissing him.

"*I'll come pick you up at closing.*" He suddenly broke our kiss, his dark blues gazing down into mine. Meanwhile, I'd been in danger of melting on the sidewalk. "*Once you're done with all you need to do, I'm going to take you out and then when I walk you home, I'm going to kiss you just like you kissed me just now.*" His eyes confirmed the promise his lips made.

"*Yes, please,*" I'd said a second before Alex captured my lips again and gave me a sample of what to expect later.

"You know, I knew he'd have a sexy name," Ivy stated, interrupting my flashback. I'd been operating on autopilot for

the past few moments and hadn't realized we'd reached the front door. Shooting me a knowing smile over her shoulder, my best friend motioned for me to go first before following me inside. A few seconds later, our hostess was showing us to our table. Ivy continued to talk about the guy I was hoping to call my boyfriend.

“Hot guys like that *always* have hot names—*Holy shit!*”

Caught off guard by her sudden outburst, I glanced at my friend who stood staring off towards a table in the back with her mouth hanging wide open.

“Ivy?” I laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder as I asked what was going on. “Ivy, what’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“Holy Heckin’ Hannah! It’s my boss.” Ivy’s eyes glazed over, utterly dumbstruck by the handsome man sitting at the faraway table. The man in question could have been Alex’s twin, only a few years younger. It was a half-second later that I noticed that Alex was sitting next to him.

“Alex,” I said, completely surprised as a smile graced my face. Even with the medium buzz of lunch conversations, Alex heard me. It took but a second for his eyes to meet mine. When they did, they flared happily and shone alongside the widest smile I’d ever seen. A smile I dreamed of nightly while I pretended my fingers were his as they brought me to climax.

Alex got up from his chair and quickly closed the distance between us. “What are you doing here?” he asked happily as he drew me in for a hug and brushed his lips over mine. I instantly melted against him. As I learned right after our first

lunch date, I loved being in Alex's arms. He made me feel safe, secure, and most of all, like I mattered.

“My weekly lunch with Ivy,” I explained before stepping back just enough to motion towards my still gape-mouthed best friend. Ivy hadn't moved, nor had she taken her eyes off Alex's lunch partner. The same went for him. Judging by the hungry way he eyed her, I'd swear he was considering her as his choice of entree.

“Holy shit, Rosie! Are you seeing what I'm seeing?” Ivy blurted out, completely oblivious to Alex standing right next to her. “My boss is Mr. Sexy Coffee Shop Man's twin.”

“Actually, I'm his brother,” the man answered while wearing a cheeky grin.

“Since you're here for lunch, would you like to join us?” Alex spoke over his brother. “We just got here and haven't had a chance to order yet.” He started to direct us towards a table assuming our answer would be yes.

“We don't want to impose—” I tried to be polite but Ivy decided that was the moment to come back to reality.

“We'd love to!” Ivy practically shouted as Alex escorted us over. My best friend immediately took the seat right next to Alex's brother. The two proceeded to stare at one another with barely disguised lust.

Oh, Ivy. Not again ...

“Roman, I'd like you to meet Rosie.” Alex introduced me as we reached the table. .

“Ah, the lovely Rosie.” Roman smiled sweetly. “It’s a pleasure to finally put a face to the name.”

“They’re going to be joining us.” Alex interrupted my inner thoughts as he gestured towards my best friend who was currently the color of an overripe tomato.

“Excellent. You know, I wasn’t really looking forward to this, but I think lunch just got a thousand times more interesting. What do you say, *Ivy*? Don’t you think lunch just got a lot more fascinating?” Roman winked. Ivy giggled like a teenager at a popular boy band concert.

“I’m really glad to see you,” Alex said sweetly after he helped me sit in my chair and promptly took the seat next to me. “I wasn’t expecting this, but what a lovely surprise.”

“I’m happy to see you too.” My cheeks warmed with a deep blush.

“You’re so cute when your cheeks get all pink.” Alex smiled as he leaned in and brushed a finger across my cheek. “I’ve missed seeing your blush.”

“You saw me just yesterday.”

“Too long if you ask me.” Alex leaned in and chastely brushed his lips over mine. “How is it we managed to end up at the same place today?” he asked just as our server dropped by to take our drink orders and to hand off a couple extra menus.

“Ivy and I come here every Saturday,” I explained as I cracked open my menu, although I really didn’t need to. I got

the same thing every time I came. The turkey club with the aioli mayo and extra avocado. Delicious.

“Funny,” Alex chuckled as he leaned in. Those stunning eyes of his observed my every move, drinking it in as if he’d never get his fill. Meanwhile, Ivy and Roman had moved on from their barely disguised flirting to whatever it was that came just before heavy petting became involved.

“What’s funny?”

“Roman and I are here almost every Saturday too. How is it I’ve never seen you here?”

“Maybe we’re coming at different times.”

“Maybe, but knowing that doesn’t make me happy.”

“Why?”

“I can’t help but think of all the times you and I missed our chance to meet.”

“But don’t you think that the Universe knew what it was doing? That it knew we were supposed to meet at the coffee shop?”

“I suppose so,” Alex sighed, resigned. “It’s just I really, *really* like you, Rosie, and it pisses me off that we might have lost out on time together.”

Cue the internal swooning again. How was this guy even real? I swear my inner self was ready to say to hell with the crowd and offer myself up as his lunch. I don’t know what I did to find this man and to be sitting next to him while he

stared at me like I was the only thing in this world that mattered, but I was going to appreciate every moment we got to spend together.

“I really like you, too.” My cheeks burned under his appreciative gaze.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” His delighted grin stretched from ear to ear. Alex leaned in close until his lips were a hair’s breadth from mine. The two of us sat grinning like fools at one another for several minutes. That was until my troubles decided to join us. Suddenly, I was glad that Alex was here because my bookstore’s impending doom decided right then to weigh heavily upon me.

“What’s wrong?” Alex asked.

“It’s nothing.” I tried to pass it off.

“Rosie, it’s not nothing. I saw how your face fell just now. I can see in your eyes that something is wrong.” He reached out and took my hand. “Let me help you, baby. Tell me how I can help you.”

“It’s ...” My words trailed off. Should I tell him about my bookstore? Were we at that place in our relationship where we could openly share our problems and sorrows and not worry about it ruining everything? Going by the look in Alex’s blue eyes, yes. Yes, we were.

“It’s my bookstore,” I admitted.

“Has that asshole been harassing you again?” His eyes flared with anger. Alex knew all about Henry Higgins, although I’d

never mentioned the man by name. I couldn't. Just saying those two words infuriated me and left me wanting to go a few rounds with Ivy's brother's punching bag. It also ruined one of my favorite movies.

I'd previously given Alex the Cliff's Notes version of what was happening, but had held back, making it seem less stressful than it actually was.

"He came by recently, but didn't get far. That's actually why I bolted out of the coffee shop. He was peeking in through the window and slapping the door down until I gave him a piece of my mind."

"Let me know if he continues to bother you. I'll make sure he gets the message to leave you alone." Alex was all seriousness. I had no doubt that he'd find a way to put an end to Henry Higgins' surprise visits.

"I will."

"So, are you going to tell me what else is bothering you? Or are you going to act like this isn't a big deal? Because I know it is."

I heaved out a long, heavy breath. "It's the deadline. We're all being evicted and the deadline is quickly approaching. I have to move in a matter of weeks and I still have yet to find a new location."

That part was probably the most frustrating of all. I spent several hours last night searching real estate websites looking for comparable spaces within a close distance from where my

bookstore was located. To no one's surprise, my search was fruitless. The only place that was close *and* was comparable was in a nearby building but to my dismay, they weren't renting out space to businesses like mine. Art and dance studios only. To add to my anger, the next building on the list was another holding of the craptacular Hastings Investment Group. Knowing my luck, it would only be a matter of time before I got kicked out of there too so some socialite with far too much money and no sense could buy another high-rise condo that they'd never use.

"You'll find something," Alex said as he squeezed my hand. "I know you will. I can help you if you want. I can hire a real estate agent to help you."

"That's so sweet of you, but I want to do this on my own. It's a pride thing." Alex knew all about how my good-for-nothing birth givers and how through hard work and sheer determination, I'd beaten the odds and succeeded when so many had expected me to fail.

"I know how important that is to you." He raised our intertwined hands to his lips and tenderly kissed each knuckle.

"Thank you for understanding that. I just love it there on Harper Street with all my neighbors. I love the little community we've built there." I paused to look into his eyes. "And thank you for being there for me. You don't know how much that means to me to know you've got my back."

"I'd do anything for your Rosie." Alex gently brushed his knuckles across my cheek before leaning in to brush his lips

over mine.

“And I’d do anything for you.” I meant every word.

“Even having lunch with me while your best friend and my brother make it hard for us to keep our food down?” He glanced over at Roman and Ivy who seemed lost in their own little world. One where the sexual tension was thick and the pheromones they were giving off were suffocating.

“Especially that.” I wrinkled my nose as I tried to ignore them.

The four of us—Okay, the two groups of us spent the rest of lunch laughing, talking, eating, and enjoying the rest of our time at the restaurant. When the time came for me to leave, I didn’t want to say goodbye.

“I hate that you have to go back to work after this,” Alex whispered against my skin as he leaned in to kiss me. We were standing outside the restaurant. Roman and Ivy were on the verge of dry humping in front of everyone while Alex held me close, reluctant to let me go.

“For the first time ever, so do I, but my temp is scheduled to leave at two and if I don’t go right now, I’ll make her late for her other job.”

“Then I guess I have to let you go.” Alex kissed me again before kissing the tip of my nose. “Would it be all right if I dropped by later or called you this evening?”

“If you don’t, I’m going to track you down and demand that you do.”

“There’s my little rosebud.” Alex smiled warmly as he kissed me once more before letting me go. I walked away with a wave and a smile, but not before asking Ivy if she wanted to share a cab. My best friend batted her hand at me, silently letting me know she was right where she wanted to be and wasn’t about to leave. As soon as I arrived at my bookstore, I relieved my temp and got down to work, hoping to distract myself long enough until Alex either dropped by or called me. Too bad it didn’t work. Or at least not until some rando came in from off the street and made a fabulous day all that more interesting.

Annoying Brothers and Leering Jackasses

Alex

“SO, THAT’S WHAT YOU’VE been hiding from me, eh?”
My stupid brother grinned, doing his best to tease me. Which I hated. A lot. We remained standing outside the restaurant as foot traffic passed us by. When Rosie left in a cab, Ivy lingered until she announced that she risked running late for an appointment that she couldn’t miss. I had a sneaking suspicion that her ‘appointment’ had everything to do with meeting up with my brother to pick up from where they’d left off.

“It’s a shame to hide something that lovely,” Roman added rather annoyingly

“I wasn’t hiding her, asshole, and keep your eyes off *my* woman!” I snapped, regretting not hopping in the cab with Rosie.

“Someone’s touchy.” Roman smirked again. The jerk.
“Afraid to introduce her to your family?”

I scoffed and shook my head. “No, you asshole. Unlike *other* people, I don’t introduce my girlfriends to my family the second we start dating.”

Unbothered, Roman kept right on being Roman.

“I can’t help it if I want my dates to know more about me. And I wasn’t referring to your girl. I was referring to that sexy little blonde she brought with her.” Roman’s eyes glazed over for a second. No doubt my little brother was reminiscing about the hour and a half he just spent flirting up a storm with a woman who was entirely too good for him. A woman, who despite knowing better, was just as into him.

“You leave Ivy alone,” I ordered.

“Why would I leave *that* alone? That woman was *funny*. I can’t remember the last time I laughed so hard at such corny jokes.”

“I don’t want anything to affect my Rosie.”

“*Your* Rosie?” Again, the fucker smirked and I wanted to punch it right off his stupid face.

“Yes! *MY* Rosie!” I half-yelled. My patience was hovering on empty.

“Tell me how exactly this will affect *your* Rosie?”

“Ivy is her best friend. What hurts her, hurts Rosie.”

“And you think I’m going to hurt her?”

“Dude, you forget, I know you. It’ll be just like how it always is. You’ll ask her out. Sleep with her a few times and

once you've got that out of your system, you'll dump her and move on to the next woman."

"You don't know that." Roman went on the defense. I took the offensive.

"Yes, I do. There are hundreds of women out there that would agree with me."

"Don't you think 'hundreds' is over-exaggerating?"

"No, I don't," I bit out, doing my best to hold back my rising anger. "You have brought a different woman to Sunday dinner every week for years, Roman. So yes, hundreds isn't an over-exaggeration."

"Well, I guess we all can't be so lucky as you to find our soulmate while getting a cup of coffee." Roman rolled his eyes. It took everything in me to bite my tongue. Turns out, my everything wasn't quite enough.

"You know what? I don't want to fight with you. I don't want to spend this lovely Saturday being angry with you."

"Oh, and I suppose you want to go spend it with your lovely little rose?"

"Yes," I snapped, tired of his unnecessary attitude. "I'm going to go see Rosie and *you* are going to stay as far away from Ivy as possible. Do you hear me?"

Roman laughed and flipped me the bird before walking off to who only knew where. I'd put money down that his destination was named Ivy. Shaking my head, I quickly hailed a taxi, needing to get to Rosie. The driver was just turning the

corner when something swept over me. Something Rosie had said stuck out and suddenly, there was something I needed to check.

I quickly asked the driver to drop me off at work instead. Once inside, I raced up to my office. Something wasn't sitting right. During lunch, Rosie had spoken a bit about her building, but something had stuck out to me. Something that hadn't really clicked until I sat down in the backseat of that cab.

I reached my office a few minutes later. Several files sat on my desk and I immediately began to comb through them, looking for one in particular. The file for Rosie's building was in my hands a second later. I began to skim all the details while her sweet voice kept repeating in the back of my mind.

"I just love it there on Harper Street ..." Her words echoed.

Harper Street. Harper Street.

My eyes flew open as it all dawned on me. Rosie's building *wasn't* on Harper Street. It was on Center! A sudden jolt of joy shot through me as I realized that somewhere, somehow, something had gone terribly wrong. Rosie's building and its tenants weren't getting evicted. Someone had made a colossal blunder and had sent the notices to the wrong building. Unable to contain myself, I let out a whoop and rushed back down to the curb where the cabbie was still waiting for me.

Ten minutes later, the driver dropped me off in front of Rosie's book store. Handing over another century note, the driver gave me his card and told me to give him a call if I ever needed to go somewhere, any time, any place, no questions

asked. I thanked him and wished him luck as he took off in search for his next fare. Every cell in my body was ready to burst with joy. Even though I'd just seen her, I wanted to be close to Rosie. I had the best news. Her worries were over and I couldn't wait to share it with her.

Pivoting on my heel, I went to head inside but came to an abrupt stop. A sudden rush of anger swept over me as I quickly spotted some asshole leaning over the counter leering at Rosie's delectable ass as she bent down to retrieve something. Rage flicked at my insides as I watched the smarmy creep lick his lips and not-so-casually adjust his crotch. No jerk was going to get away with eyeing my lady like that. He certainly wasn't going to touch his junk around her either. The unsuspecting jerk had no idea that he'd just fucked around and was about to find out.

"Welcome to Rosies are Rea—Alex!" My bright-eyed beauty beamed as I opened the door and stepped inside.

"Hey, baby." I let the door swing shut behind me.

"What are you doing here?" she asked sweetly as the asshole at the counter continued to ogle her. Ever the professional, Rosie continued to work. Meanwhile, I was a short fuse that was lit and ready to explode.

"I just came to see my *girlfriend*," I said loud enough so the leering jerk would get the message.

"You got a boyfriend, Rosie?" The jerk himself piped up as my girl stopped to look at him.

“Do you see that tall blond man standing in the doorway?” She grinned as her eyes slid over to me. The dickwad didn’t even bother to look.

“I don’t see anybody but the girl I’m taking out tonight.”

I scoffed. Loudly.

Who the hell did this guy think he was insinuating that *my* girl was going anywhere with *him*?

Over my dead body.

“Hate to tell you this, pal, but she’s already busy tonight with me. Her *boyfriend*.” I pointed at myself and instantly felt like I was back in eighth grade fighting Randy Jameson over who was going to take Carrie Elkinson to the dance. For those who want to know, he did. I wasn’t even an option.

“Rosie,” the guy laughed incredulously. “Do you believe this clown?” He pointed his thumb at me. “Who does he think he is walking off the street and proclaiming himself to be your boyfriend?”

“He’s my actual boyfriend, Thomas,” Rosie clarified with a straight face. The leering jerk’s mouth dropped open.

“Since when were you seeing somebody?” he asked, again in disbelief.

“Since it’s none of your business. Now, are you going to continue to take up valuable space on my counter or are you going to buy something?” Although her words were direct, Rosie’s inherent softness was laced around every syllable. Her special brand of grace gave her the ability to let someone

down easily without humiliation or making the other person feel like crap. I, however, did not possess such grace and stood there grinning as this Thomas character stood to his full height and after thanking Rosie, left without a word. I watched the guy disappear from view before turning back to the sexiest book maven in existence.

“Was that necessary?” Rosie giggled as she came out from behind the counter and walked over to where I stood.

“Was what necessary?” I drew her into my arms and pulled her close before dropping a kiss down upon her honey sweet lips.

“You flexing just now,” Rosie laughed as she reached up and caressed my cheek.

“You should have seen how he was staring at your ass, baby. The guy needed to know you’re mine.”

“Thomas always stares, but he’s harmless.”

“Didn’t look so harmless to me.”

Rosie’s eyes danced in the sunlight that filtered in through the front windows. “Trust me, Thomas is harmless. Even though he asks me out every time he comes in here, he knows I will never go out on a date with him.”

“How can you be so certain?”

“I grew up with him. He and I have known each other since kindergarten and he often forgets that I know what a manwhore he is. Granted, he’s a manwhore with a tender heart, but a manwhore just the same. He’s also the guy Ivy lost

her virginity to. Besides, now that he knows you're in the picture, I probably won't see him for a while."

"Good."

"Good, eh?"

"Yes, good." I cupped her cheek and let my forehead rest against hers. "Now, can we stop talking about that dickhead and talk about our dinner plans tonight?"

Rosie's smile fully bloomed as she listed off a few places she'd like to try. We stood there for several minutes as we mapped out our evening and the bookstore grew busy. When a line of customers started forming, I reluctantly had to let my lady go back to work. Brushing a kiss across her succulent lips, I kissed Rosie again before forcing myself to let her go. With her blue eyes sparkling and a sexy, flirty smile tugging at the corner of her mouth, I waved goodbye and stepped out of the bookstore and collided with none other than Henry Higgins. Little did I know that he was about to lay a giant clusterfuck at my feet.

The Jerk Returns

Alex

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING here?” My words came out sharper than intended. As I walked out of Rosie’s bookshop, I was certain nothing could rain on my proverbial parade. I was wrong. Instead of sunshine and birdsong, I stood face to face with the one person I did not want to see. Henry Higgins.

“Just grabbed a coffee from across the street,” Henry said as he held up a cup bearing Bean There and Gone’s logo. “I discovered the place not too long ago. Best coffee in the city. They roast their own bean blends.”

“I see that, but why are you *here*?”

“I was just checking in with a few of the tenants in the building. Just wanted to see if everyone was on schedule with the timeline.” He pointed his thumb at Rosie’s building.

“Why would you be checking on them here? This isn’t the building that’s being torn down.”

“Yes, it is.”

I shook my head. “No, it isn’t. I was just looking at the paperwork a few minutes ago.” I was utterly confused, yet something suddenly niggled me from the back of my brain.

“Yes, it is. This *is* the building scheduled for demolition,” Higgins explained easily. The man almost looked happy in correcting me.

“No, the building on Harper Ave is. That’s the cross-street right at the corner. This building’s on Center.”

Higgins paused to take a drink. “The street address for this building isn’t on Center. Even though the storefronts face towards Center, it’s officially listed as being on Harper.”

All the blood drained from my face. Someone hadn’t made a huge clerical error. I had. I’d lived in this city my entire life and had no idea *this* building was the one scheduled for demolition, and my great news was now a heaping pile of garbage.

Shit.

No.

Not shit.

Higgins had to have it all wrong. It had to be the building across the street, not this one because if it was ... My stomach went sour as I suddenly fought the urge to not throw up.

“Surely there’s been some mistake,” I said, desperately trying to convince both him and me that we were wrong.

“No mistake about it,” Higgins replied casually. “I double-checked the address. I was there when all the documents were signed. This is the building that’s getting knocked down.” He rocked back on his heels before slurping another sip from his cup. “And between you and me, I’m glad to see it go.” I raised my eyebrow, silently ordering him to elaborate. Either oblivious to the glare that now hung on my face, Higgins kept talking like we were both in on a secret. “I’ll be glad to no longer have to deal with that florist woman or that irritating girl that owns that bookstore.”

“If you want to keep your job, you will watch what you say about Rosie.” I wanted to rip the man’s throat out, but by the grace of God, I managed to keep my hands to myself. No one talked about my lady that way.

“I thought you despised the woman?” Henry asked ignorantly.

“When did I ever say that?”

Henry shrugged. “I guess I assumed.”

“That’s what you get for assuming. And I’ll have you know that irritating woman just happens to be my girlfriend.”

Henry’s eyes flared wide as he gulped audibly. “You *know* her?”

“I do. I met her at the coffee shop, actually. Not long ago.”

“Sir, I don’t think I have to tell you that this could definitely be seen as a conflict of interest.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” I snapped, suddenly worried and furious and wanting to kick my own ass. Then, panic decided to add itself to the mixture. “Look, you can’t tell her.”

“I can assure you, she knows about the building. She knows it’s being knocked down. I handed her the final paperwork myself.” Again, Henry looked almost smug. He was also about ten seconds away from having his ass fired if he didn’t change his tune.

“I mean don’t tell her that it’s my family’s company that owns it. She needs to hear that from me.” Suddenly, a wave of anger swept over me. Mostly anger at myself, but a shred was reserved for the man standing next to me. “And if I hear anything about you harassing her or ‘dropping by’ unannounced or trying to make her life hell in any way, I will personally see to it that you will never get another job in this city again. Do I make myself clear?”

Henry gulped again and nodded. “I’ll stay away. I won’t go near her book store or any of the other stores until this building comes down. I’ll—I’ll even help them find new situations.” I had no doubt that Henry threw that last bit in because he knew his butt was on the line. With a glare, I ordered him to leave and soon found myself standing on the sidewalk, staring inside Rosie’s window watching as she went about her day helping customers and keeping everything running smoothly. A new, uncomfortable tightness burned across my chest as it all hit me again. Just like the wrecking ball that would knock this all down in a few weeks, my happiness now lay in ruins because I was the destroyer of my

heart's dream. I *was* the one who was putting her out of business, stomping on everything Rosie had ever wanted, and what she'd worked so hard for so many years to build.

Regretting what I needed to do, I went back inside to speak to her. I had to tell her what I now knew, no matter what it cost me. However, my phone stopped me in my tracks.

“Yeah?” I answered after seeing my brother's name flash across the screen.

“I need you to come back to the office. I just noticed something that I think just might turn all your happiness tits up.”

Not needing further clarification, I told Roman I was on my way, hung up, and shoved my phone back in my pocket. With dread weighing my shoulders down, I flagged down a taxi and minutes later, was headed up to my brother's office where, no doubt, he would confirm just what Henry Higgins had said. That Harrington Investments was going to be the end of me and the woman I loved. Knowing I couldn't face her until I had this all sorted out, I shot Rosie a quick text asking if we could postpone our dinner date. I gave her a watered down version of the truth, explaining that something had come up at work and that finding a solution was going to keep me busy late into the night. My Rosie took it all in stride, stating that she understood and that she'd call me later to check on me. My girl ended our call by making me promise to find time to eat and not to overtax myself. I couldn't help but smile even though my guts were churning. I knew as soon as the line

disconnected that I had to find a way around this. I needed to find a solution where I could keep my girl and not end up with her hating me.

This is All Going to Blow Up in Your Face

Alex

“GENTLEMEN,” I SAID ONCE our table was ready and we were seated. “I’m glad everyone could be here today.”

It had taken Roman and I minutes to realize that my conundrum was going to need more input. Far more than what he and I could come up with. While Roman dialed his best friend, I’d made a call to mine. After giving them each a brief synopsis—even though Evan had a basic understanding, we’d agreed to meet at a bar and grill close to Noah’s, Roman’s best friend’s, penthouse. That’s how I found myself in this dark hole-in-the-wall where the only light came from the neon signs that covered the walls.

“You’re making this sound like a business meeting,” my brother sniped as his eyes suddenly fixed on something across the room. Curious at what had caught his attention, I glanced over my shoulder and saw none other than Ivy seated in a corner booth with what looked like a date. Ignoring him, I

turned my attention back to the others with us. “Noah, I’m glad you could make it.”

“Me too.” Our once employee-turned friend slumped in his seat, looking more tired than I’ve ever seen him.

“Is everything okay?” Evan patted Noah’s shoulder just as our server arrived. One that was a dead ringer from the night I met up with Evan. Her eyes went wide as she took in the four of us. With a not-so-subtle lick to her bottom lip, the woman thrust her ample boobs out and introduced herself as Natalie. No one missed the hungry look in her eye as she offered us anything on and off the menu.

“Whiskey neat for me and this bozo.” I thumbed towards my brother whose attention was still glued on the spot where Ivy sat.

“Same for me,” Evan and Noah replied in unison as our server thrust her chest out as if offering us an appetizer. When none of us reacted, she let out another giggle before announcing she’d be right back with our drinks and to take our food order. With Roman otherwise occupied—more like obsessed, I took a small moment to take in my other friends.

Like I’d said before, Noah looked tired. Not like he’d been overworking or just finished running one of those ridiculously long marathons he loved. No, he looked *emotionally* tired. Like something was off in his world and it was taking a toll on him.

“Are you alright?” I asked, pointedly asking him because I knew no one else would. Noah sat quiet for a few seconds as

Natalie reappeared with our drinks and left without us ordering anything further.

“Yeah,” he began, but quickly added, “No. Shit, I don’t know.”

“Why? Is something wrong? Is it work?” Evan asked before I had a chance to.

“No, it’s not that. Work’s fine. It’s—it’s Vi.”

Everyone’s eyebrows raised. For as long as I could remember, Noah had been best friends with Violet Davies. Noah met the would-be-baker in school and they’d been attached at the hip ever since. Even when he was Mr. Popular-Life-of-the-Party and she was the invisible nerd no one noticed. Violet was a solid woman who’d had a rough life, a lot like my Rosie. Like my darling lady, Violet didn’t let anything hold her back while she struggled to take care of herself and work towards her dream of owning her own bakery one day. She also got bonus points for putting up with Noah’s whorish ways and not thinking less of him.

“Is she okay? What’s wrong?” Evan blurted out, sensing there was something more.

“You know her apartment building caught fire,” Noah explained. “Something to do with some newspapers or whatever, but the building’s totaled. All they can do is level it and rebuild.”

“Shit, I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“You’re sure she’s okay? Does she need help? I know she just lost her job.”

“Yeah, where’s she going to live?”

Noah sighed again. “That’s the thing. She’s been living with me. I thought it would be fun, you know, best friends and all, but it’s—it’s not turning out at all how I thought it would.”

“What do you mean?”

Noah shrugged before his eyes dropped down to his hands. “She’s been going out on dates ... and I—I fucking hate it. God, I fucking hate it. I want to throw every dude that shows up at our door down the stairs. Why can’t they just leave us alone? Why can’t she just be happy there? *With me!*”

“Someone sounds jealous.” Evan casually took a sip of his whiskey.

“Dude, I’ve never heard you talk like this before. What changed?” Roman added, despite being distracted.

“I think I love her.” He shook his head. “No, I *know* I love her. I’ve always loved her, but I stupidly thought it was like best friends’ kind of love.”

“What kind of love is it then?”

“The kind where I want to grab her and kiss her and take her to bed and make her forget all other men but me!” Noah roared. Clearly, he was going through some stuff and decided now was the time to vent. While I wanted to get back to my dilemma, I wasn’t about to deny him the need to get this off his chest.

“What are you going to do?”

“I have no idea what the fuck to do because ... she doesn't feel the same way about me.”

“How do you know? Did she tell you?”

“Well, no ...” Noah trailed off for a moment.

“Then how are you certain?” Evan said. “What if you're reading this whole thing wrong? What if she's always been in love with you too but—and I'm saying this as your friend—your history with women has made her feel that it's impossible for you to love only one person.”

Noah's eyes went wide as it dawned on him. “Shit, I never thought of that.” He ran an unsure hand through his hair and stood up from his chair. “I've been such an asshole. I've—I've got to go guys.” He suddenly grabbed his jacket and began to put it on. “I know I promised to help out but—”

“Vi's more important,” I said, understanding the depth of what he felt. It's how I felt about Rosie. Finding the woman you love more than anything was a precious gift and was not to be wasted.

“Thanks guys. Wish me luck,” Noah said with one foot already out the door.

“So, I guess that leaves you and me.” Evan raised his whiskey in toast.

“Looks that way. God knows my brother isn't going to be much help.” I turned just as Roman rumbled out a loud, angry growl and jumped out of his seat. Evan and I watched him

storm across the bar, headed straight for the corner booth and Rosie's best friend. Ivy was on her feet just as he reached her table and the two began to argue. Loud, raised voices filled the smoky air. A few seconds later, the bartender shouted for them to either take it outside or he was going to kick them out. For once Roman didn't argue back. In a move that shocked everyone, he leaned down, scooped Ivy up around the thighs, and hitched her over his shoulder. Roman then charged out of the bar with a hissing, spitting, thoroughly pissed off Ivy clawing at his back.

"I guess he had enough of watching that douche canoe flirt with his girl," Evan said knowingly as he brought his whiskey back up to his mouth for another sip.

"Which leaves just us to figure out a solution to my little problem."

"I think the answer is simple my friend. Like it was the last time we had this discussion."

"Oh? And what is that, genius?"

"You find her a new location."

"I can do that. I can help her find a new place." Hope sprouted within me.

"Exactly. Find her a better location, but first, you come clean. Tell her what's going on. Don't leave her in the dark."

"If I find her a newer, better place, is that really necessary?" I knew the words were a mistake the second I uttered them.

“Yes!” Evan slapped his hand down upon the table. “Don’t make the same mistake I did and lie to the girl you love. You’ll lose her and you’ll regret it. And you’ll never get over it. I guarantee you’ll never get over it.”

I nodded, but didn’t push further. It was rare that Evan mentioned ‘the one that got away.’ The girl he dated in college. The only girl he’d ever loved but lost all because he’d chosen to hide the truth from her.

“Fine. I’ll tell her. I just hope it doesn’t all blow up in my face.”

Dumbly Deciding to Keep One's Mouth Shut

Alex

“ARE YOU SURE YOU’RE okay?” Rosie asked as she came back from putting her register in the safe. Two days had passed since I’d canceled our date to convene with my brother and our friends to figure out what to do about the whole building-eviction business. After agreeing to Evan’s solution, I went to bed that night filled with doubts. Would Rosie let me help her find a new location if I told her the truth? Or more importantly, would she understand why? I just didn’t know. I’d expected clarity but found it absent. So absent that it had weighed upon me since and I’d come into the bookstore looking haggard. Rosie had taken one look at me and immediately planted me on a stool behind the counter.

“You’re sure not coming down sick?” A second later, her soft palm was pressed against my forehead checking for a temperature. “You’re not running a fever, but you look tired.”

Seeing her concern for me left me breathless. How did I get so lucky? And what was I going to do that wouldn't cost me the beautiful woman standing next to me?

"I'm okay," I said, forcing a smile that I didn't feel. I know she was worried, but now *wasn't* the right time to tell her why I was off. No, that conversation would have to wait until later. *Much* later.

"I promise I'm fine. It's just work. It's that issue from the other day. I'm not sure what the right thing to do is."

Rosie's features softened as she cupped my face between her hands. "Did you talk to Roman about it? I know your brother wouldn't steer you wrong." Rosie already knew that when it came to work matters, my brother would be the first person I'd go to. Granted, we butted heads a lot, but Roman solidly had my back when it came to our family business and, even though I hated to admit it, he often gave great advice.

"Yeah," I sighed. "We think we found a solution. We just need a little more time to tweak things. Hence why he's staying home tonight to work on it. Or at least that's what he said when he texted me earlier."

"So, no hot date for him then?"

I snorted. "I'd say no seeing that his now *former* belle du jour called him crying about being pregnant last night claiming that she's one-hundred percent certain it's his."

Rosie's eyes widened with curiosity. "I take it that it's not?"

“You’d have to sleep with someone in order to get them pregnant, and according to my brother, they hadn’t gotten that far yet. Even if they had, she crumbled as soon as he threatened her with a DNA test.”

“I do not understand women like that.” Rosie was currently shutting everything down while I continued to lean against her counter, watching her as she worked. I’d never get enough of watching her while in her element. My girl was a badass boss lady wrapped up in a sweet, beautiful package. Across the few evenings I’d stood here waiting for her to finish closing up, one thing was for certain; My Rosie was an incredibly savvy business owner. Knowing that made the guilt I was suddenly harboring that much worse.

“Do you mean gold-diggers?”

“Yeah. I don’t understand how someone would choose to blackmail someone like that. Or choose to live off of someone instead of supporting themselves.”

“That’s because you have integrity, my little rosebud.” I leaned in and brushed my lips over hers. “You’re not the type to depend on others like that. You’ve got pride. That’s something those others lack.”

Rosie shrugged, but I knew she believed I was right. And I was. My Rosie was absolutely incredible. Coming from a completely shitty background, my girl defied the odds and made something of herself. Granted, that success was now in jeopardy thanks to me, but that didn’t take away from what she’d accomplished.

“So, my sexy little bookworm, are you craving anything particular for dinner?” I decided to change the subject before we went down the Roman wormhole. Or worse, the wormhole where I confessed everything and risked losing the greatest thing to ever happen to me.

“I’ve been craving Italian all day.”

“Italian? I can work with that. I know a really nice place. Let me make a quick call and see if we can get a reservation.”

Rosie laid a gentle hand upon my arm before urging me to put my phone away. “Actually, I’ve got a place in mind. I think you’ll like it if you’re willing to go there with me.”

“I’d go anywhere with you, baby, just as long as I can be with you.”

Rosie’s smile was brighter than the Sun. “How did I get so lucky to find you?” She raised up onto her tiptoes and kissed me. I held back the groan that built at the base of my throat as that wicked little tongue of hers slipped out and teased my lower lip.

“It’s me who’s lucky,” I whispered against her lips. “I’m so lucky to have you in my life. I—”

The words “I love you” were right on the tip of my tongue but went left unspoken as Rosie pulled my mouth down to hers and kissed me until *I* was the one left panting.

“What do you say we get out of here?” she finally said, pulling back just enough so our foreheads lay against one another.

“I say lead the way, my lady.”

After she finished her nightly routine, Rosie locked up. Taking her hand in mine, I offered to get us a cab, but she assured me that the place we were going to was just a handful of blocks away.

“It’s such a beautiful evening,” she breathed into the crisp, slightly chilled air. “I’d hate to waste it sitting in the backseat of some smelly cab.”

“And I can’t think of a better way than to spend it with a beautiful woman.” Wearing a grin, I pulled Rosie in close and pressed my lips to hers and kissed her until we were both breathless. Slightly out of breath and both grinning like fools, Rosie led us to our destination. A place that made me believe in destiny. The very place where my parents had their first date and where their love story officially began.

Oh, the Irony!

Alex

“YOU’RE KIDDING ME?” ROSIE laughed in my arms as we stood in front of Carusso’s. The same place where my parents fell deeply, madly in love during their first official date. There was even a family rumor that Roman was conceived in the alleyway out back, but I didn’t want to think about that because ... gross.

“Why would I kid you?” Rosie stepped forward and wrapped her arms around me. “I love this place.”

“I just think it’s ironic.”

“Because I love this place?”

“No,” I chuckled softly. “I think it’s ironic that *this* is where you brought me for our first official *night time* date.”

“I’m confused. How does that make us coming here ironic?”

“This is where my parents fell in love.” Rosie’s eyes flared with interest. I grasped her hand and brought it up to my mouth. “Their very first date was here.”

Rosie's hands went to her cheeks. "Oh my gosh, Alex! That's so romantic!"

"Which is why you bringing me here is so special. Not only is this where they had their first date, but it's where I met my stepdad for the first time."

Rosie knew about my history. How my parents met and how I went from a fatherless child to having the kind of dad any kid would kill for. Yes, Malcom Harrington had been a workhorse and was often gone a lot, but he *was* there when it truly mattered. Like when Roman came down with scarlet fever and Dad cut his business trip in Tokyo short to fly home to be with us. Or when I was made goalie for the very first time and he managed to catch the tail end of my game because he hadn't wanted to miss seeing me play. That was the type of man Malcolm Harrington was. The kind of man who believed he hadn't been there enough for us growing up and wanted to change that before it was too late. A devoted husband and father, but most importantly, the kind of man I wanted to be someday.

Whether it was the romance of nostalgia or just her being caught up in the moment, Rosie raised up onto her tiptoes and kissed me. "I'm even more glad I decided that we needed to come here," she said softly before brushing her lips across mine again. "I want to build memories like that. You know I don't have a lot of memories, and it's sad to say that most of the ones I do have aren't that great, but I want to build those with you, Alex. I want to look back on this moment with a smile and feel grateful that not only did the universe conspire

to bring us together, but it also worked its magic to make memories like this happen.

What else could I do but kiss my girl right there in front of God and everyone? It was impossible to keep my hands off of Rosie as she said all the things I wanted to hear. As I claimed her mouth and held her pressed tightly to me, I swore that ten years from now, we'd come back to this very spot and we'd look back on how our lives together began and how that mirrored my parents' love story. Maybe we'd even have a child or two to pass those stories down to. Whatever happened, I knew two things: that I loved Rosie Cooper more than anything and that even though I had yet to tell her about the building, I would fight tooth and nail not to lose her. Rosie was mine and I'd be damned if I let anyone or anything take her from me.

Love ... in an Elevator

Alex

“THAT WAS THE BEST thing I ever put in my mouth,” Rosie said so innocently, yet seductively, not realizing just what those words would do to me or the images it brought to mind. Her on her knees before me taking every bit of what I can give her—

Shit. I was two seconds away from dragging her into the closest alley and having my dirty way with her. I couldn't stop thinking about her. Those blue eyes staring up at me. The way her cute sundress hugged her curves. The thought of whether or not she wore panties under it—

I shook my head and thought back to the rich, mouthwatering manicotti I'd ordered and how Rosie had helped herself to a bite. Watching those ruby-colored lips wrap around the fork and the near-orgasmic moan that escaped her lips nearly had me coming in my seat. It took all my effort to ignore my stiff, throbbing cock and not claim her right there on the table in front of everyone. After we'd finished our

meals and shared an order of tiramisu, Rosie and I decided to stroll the several blocks to her house. We slowly made our way, each one of us more and more wrapped up in the other with each step we took. By the time we got to her building, I was not ready to let her go.

“Do you want to come up?” she half-whispered as we reached the front door of her building. My hand rested upon the small of her back as I guided her inside, not answering straight away.

“Alex?” Rosie looked at me again as we reached the elevators. “Did I say something wrong? Did I misread everything?” Her eyebrows dipped with a mixture of confusion and disappointment.

“No, baby, you didn’t.” I leaned down and pressed my lips to hers to reassure her that she definitely *hadn’t* read things wrong. In fact, she read them absolutely right, but deep down, right now wasn’t the right time for us to take things further. When we were at Caruso’s, I’d come up with a brilliant idea while Rosie had excused herself to go to the ladies’ room. The Fourth of July weekend was coming up. Ivy was heading upstate to visit her brother, leaving Rosie here alone without anyone to spend the holiday with. Or so she thought. As soon as she admitted that she was going to spend the nation’s birthday solo, my brain started formulating a plan.

My parents owned a beach house in The Hamptons. While my family normally gathered there every summer, my parents planned to spend the holiday in Napa Valley with my mother’s

sister and her husband, leaving Roman and I to fend for ourselves. Since Roman was spending the holiday with whatever girl he was currently dating, I had every intention of whisking my Rosie away to the beach where we'd spend a few days enjoying the surf and the sand and hopefully, making the nights memorable.

“You look lost in thought.” Rosie trailed her fingers down my cheek while the other brushed across the nape of my neck. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” I answered, turning my head into her cheek and nuzzling against her soft palm. “I'm sorry I spaced out there for a moment.”

“Do you not want to come upstairs with me?” Her blue eyes brimmed with worry and insecurity.

“Trust me, baby, there's nothing more that I want in this world than to go up to your place with you.” I leaned forward and pressed the call button for the elevator. “But I feel like we need to wait. I want our first night together to be special and I think I've got an idea.”

Rosie's mouth curved, teasing me with a hint of her dazzling smile. “And what might that be?”

“You mentioned earlier that you don't have plans for The Fourth.”

“That's right. Normally, I spend it with Ivy, but she's going upstate to visit her brother. So that means I'll be here in this big ol' city all alone.”

“Not if you come with me.”

“What?”

“What do you think about spending the holiday with me at my family’s beach house?”

Rosie’s eyes flared wide and her adorably amazing smile suddenly stretched across her face. “Really?” she asked as if surprised.

There was no way I was going to leave her alone. Wherever I went for the holiday, she was coming with me.

“Really.” I reached out and tucked a loose tendril of her hair behind her ear. “Roman’s going to be off somewhere partying it up and my parents are going to be in the Napa Valley visiting my aunt. I’d already planned on going up there, but knowing you’re free, I’d love it if you’d come with me.”

“Yes!” Rosie shouted just as the elevator door dinged and opened. I replied by wrapping my hands around her waist and picking her up before walking her back into the elevator car.

“I thought you said you didn’t want to come up?” she asked as I set her down. Her blue eyes twinkled in the otherwise harsh elevator light, but I didn’t care. No matter the light, my Rosie was the most beautiful thing in creation.

“I’m going to see you up to your apartment,” I explained. “Then, I’m going to make sure you’re safely inside with the door locked. Then, I’m going to go home and have a cold shower and try—and fail—not to think of you as I stroke

myself to climax.” I leaned down and whispered in her ear.
“But right now, I’m going to kiss you.”

I was on her before the words left my mouth.

Pushing her back against the elevator wall, I slammed my mouth down upon hers and kissed her slow and dirty, letting my hands run down her luscious curves until we were both breathless. Over and over, I claimed her lips and slid my tongue inside the cavern of her sweet mouth. The few seconds it took for us to reach Rosie’s floor felt like an eternity. A type of forever where I happily drowned in her scent, her taste, and the feel of her willing and eager body next to mine.

The door dinged open and without missing a beat, I picked her up again. Rosie’s legs immediately wrapped around my waist while she ground her hot core against my aching, hard dick.

“I know ... you said— you wanted to wait ...” she panted in between kisses.

“I do want to wait. I want to take my time with you.” I barely managed to tear my mouth away from hers. “But I’m not done kissing you yet. I don’t think I’ll ever be done kissing you.”

I slammed down on the button that closed the doors and somehow also managed to hit the button for the ground floor. Nothing could stop me from consuming this woman. Her breathy moans, her curvy, expressive body, the fierce way she kissed me back, my desperate need to touch her—all of it combined had me on the verge of saying to hell with waiting

and taking this woman right here, right now. Over and over, I fed from her lips as if I'd die without tasting them. I needed her touch like a dying man needed a last minute reprieve. Nothing could ever get Rosie Cooper out of my system. No woman would ever compare to this breathtaking creature in my arms.

The two of us went at it like wild cats, barely able to keep ourselves from tearing each other's clothes off. It wasn't until Rosie's dress had ridden dangerously upward and she was riding my leg, begging for more that I finally—and barely—forced myself to take a step back.

“We have to stop,” I gasped, unable to catch my breath. My heart thundered against my rib cage while my dick cursed me for denying him what he wanted. To be buried deep inside her.

“No, please don't stop,” Rosie pleaded before grabbing my shirt and pulling me flush her eager body. Rosie's lips slammed down upon mine and I was seconds away from breaking.

I managed to pull back once more. “Rosie, baby, we need ... to wait. I want this to be special for you. I don't want to take you in an elevator like some one-night stand.”

Rosie must have realized how important waiting was to me because to my surprise, she stepped away and put a short distance between us. Despite the divide, all I could do was stare at her with her puffy lips, her heaving chest, and her wild, tousled hair. She looked like a ravished sex goddess and

the thought did nothing to stop my hard cock from pressing painfully against my zipper.

“You don’t know how much I want to say to hell with all that and take you right now.” Her words did nothing to tamper down the desire flowing through me. “You also don’t know how much I respect you right now, too. Any other guy would have just gone upstairs with me and that would have been that.”

“I’m not just any other guy, baby. I’m *your* guy.”

“Yes, you are and all I want is to take you up to my apartment and never let you go, but I’m going to respect your need to wait. So, you’re going to step out of this elevator and you’re going to go home while I stay inside and go up to my apartment.”

“I can do that.”

“I’m not sure I can, but I’m going to try.”

“Please don’t say that, baby. I’m barely holding on as it is.”

“So am I, but we can do this. We can wait.”

“We can. We can wait. Even though it might kill me.”

I took a sudden step back into the lobby, leaving Rosie alone in the elevator car. If I didn’t, I’d have her naked and on her back and be buried deep inside her. The opposite of waiting.

“I’ll see you soon,” I promised as I reached in and slapped the button to Rosie’s floor. Watching the doors close on her was one of the hardest things I’d ever done, but when the

indicator above the doors showed the elevator car was ascending, I knew I'd done the right thing. Two more days. We could wait two more days and when that time finally came, I was never, *ever* letting my Rosie go.

Taking the Next Step

Rosie

“YOU’VE REALLY NEVER BEEN out of the city before?” Alex asked as we strolled hand-in-hand down the shoreline. So far, the day had been wonderful, except for the back-to-back phone calls from my mother that ended with voicemails demanding money. Not wanting her to ruin the perfection that this day was, I’d left my phone back at the bungalow.

“No. I went to school in the city and always worked through spring break and summer vacation. I saved whatever extra cash I had while focusing on things like feeding myself and putting a roof over my head,” I answered, feeling free for the first time in ages.

Alex nodded as if he understood, even though he really couldn’t. He’d had the privilege of growing up with parents who actually cared for him. Who had supported him fully in every way that counted. He’d never experienced the type of deadbeat that had been put in charge of raising me. I would give my handsome boyfriend credit, though. He was one hell

of an empathizer. The way he cared about me, what little he knew of my past, my current work situation, and was trying to help me relocate, even though I told him I wanted to do it myself, were just a couple of ways he showed that he truly cared. Alex was the unicorn I'd been searching for.

We'd been here at his family's beach house since this morning. Alex surprised me by showing up almost thirty minutes early, armed with coffee and bagels from the shop down around the corner. Cinnamon raisin and honey almond cream cheese, to be exact. My favorite. He took my things down to his car while I savored my breakfast and my morning dose of caffeine. Once we were all set, we left the city and headed towards the beach house. The traffic had been nightmarish for most of the way, but once we reached 'the cottage', any irritation was forgotten.

I'd assumed he was joking when he said their family's vacation house was a bungalow nestled not too far from the shoreline. I honestly believed he was being modest and had expected a modern, all glass oceanside mansion. I had never felt comfortable in a grandiose setting. Whether it was my upbringing or whatever, I avoided anything posh or sophisticated. I liked low-key, laid back things. I liked eclectic, easy-going, brimming with culture over the bourgeois. What I found when we pulled up into the driveway was definitely *not* what I'd expected.

The quaint, beachside bungalow stood a few hundred yards from the coast and offered a view that took one's breath away. Simple and elegant, the small building had a cute wraparound

porch that encompassed the entire perimeter of the house. Two rocking chairs sat on the porch, slightly swaying in the light breeze that blew. Cozy. It was the only word I could think of to describe what sat before me. A cozy, magical little place. The kind I had wished and dreamt about as a child.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Alex whispered once we were out of the car and he stood with my back to his chest, his arms around me and the expansive coastline stretched out before us.

“Beautiful feels so insignificant.”

“Especially when compared to you.” Alex’s lips fell to my nape. Tenderly, he kissed his way across my shoulder before returning to the soft skin behind my ear. “I’m so glad you’re here with me. I don’t ever want to be anywhere you’re not, Rosie Cooper,” he whispered as his arms banded tightly around me.

“I’m glad to be here too,” I said back. “I can’t think of any place else I’d rather be either.”

Alex turned me to face him. Cupping my face between his large hands, he gently lowered his lips to mine. I quickly fell under his spell as he showed me how truthful his words were. The two of us stood there before the ocean and the sky, our lips caressing as if nothing else in this world mattered. All too soon, Alex pulled back but kept a firm hold on me.

“Before this turns into something X-rated, why don’t we go in and I can show you the house? After we get settled in, we could take a walk along the coastline and I can tell you what I’ve got planned for dinner.”

I couldn't help but grin from ear to ear. "That sounds wonderful," I breathed, wondering how in the hell I was so lucky to be here right now with this wonderful man. Alex took hold of my hand without saying anything else. He led me back to the house and up onto the porch before digging into his pocket for the keys. A heartbeat later, the door was open and I could not believe my eyes. I was stunned. Truly and utterly stunned.

When I was little, I'd often daydreamed about spending summers along the coast and fun-filled vacation holidays where I could just cut back and be a kid who didn't have to worry about where her next meal was coming from. In those dreams, my mom was the quintessential mom and my dad was an active part of my life who loved us very much. I'd dreamt them to be honorable people who absolutely adored me. The house I'd pictured us staying in was a near match to this one.

The front door opened up to a small, quaint, open-concept living room with a fireplace built into one wall with a pair of couches placed around it. The entire room had been decorated in a myriad of soft grays, ocean blues, buttery creams, and crisp clean whites. Every color one would imagine inside a coastal bungalow. The living room opened up to an equal-sized kitchen. Despite its diminished size, it was easy to see that it possessed all the modern accessories and luxuries one would find in a spacious gourmet kitchen.

"Like it?" Alex's arm was around my waist as I slowly introduced myself to the space.

“Oh my God, Alex,” I breathed again. “This ... I can’t tell you ...” Tears burned at the corners of my eyes as I tried to fight back the sudden wave of emotion that threatened to crest over me.

“What is it?” Alex suddenly cupped my face. His thumbs brushed away the rush of tears that flowed down my face.

“What’s wrong, baby? Did I do something to upset you?”

“No,” I barely managed to say before my throat grew tight. “No, this—I’m not upset. I’m crying because this is *perfect*, Alex. All this—it’s like you peeked inside my brain and brought my fantasy to life.”

Alex never looked away from my face as I explained my childhood fantasy. A fantasy I never believed would ever come true.

“To know you’re happy means everything,” he whispered as he pulled me into him and hugged me close. His soft lips pressed against my temple before adding, “Your happiness is all that matters.”

Just as promised, Alex finished the tour before he carried in our things, setting everything down in the equally elegant master bedroom. Meanwhile, I used the master bathroom—one that rivaled any uptown spa—to change into an airy, light blue sundress and paired it with a light cream-colored cardigan to protect my upper body from the wind if it grew cool.

Alex ushered me out of the house once I was ready. The house next door echoed with upbeat music and infectious

laughter as the current occupants sat around a bonfire drinking and possibly sharing stories.

“Do you want to go over and join them?” Alex asked as he caught me watching them.

I shook my head. “No, I came here to spend time with you. *Alone.*” A dazzling, pleased smile stretched across his face as he pulled me into him once more, his arm encircled around my waist.

We walked and walked until both of our stomachs started to rumble. Alex and I slowly made our way back. When we grew closer to the house, he ushered me over to a pair of Adirondack chairs I hadn’t seen when we left. I spotted an overturned pit of sand nestled a decent distance from them. Before I could ask him what it was, the mouthwatering scent of baked clams hit my nose. I inhaled deeply, appreciating the combo of aromas that met my nose.

“Is this a clambake?” I asked, hoping that his answer was yes. A clambake had been yet another part of my childhood dream.

Alex grinned as he nodded as he led me over to the chairs and helped me sit down. “I put it together while you were inside changing. The neighbors kept an eye on it for me while we were gone.”

And that was how I found myself right here, right now with the most incredible man on the planet. A man who had gone out of his way to make a sweet, romantic getaway something extraordinary.

The moon has risen. Our bellies were full of the savory mixture of fresh baked clams, corn cobs, pearl onions, sliced sausage, and baby red potatoes that Alex had cooked for us. We lay contented, snuggled together upon a blanket Alex had pulled from out of thin air as we waited for the fireworks to begin. Alex held my hand in his as he told me about his summers spent on this very beach and how, when they were just young boys, Roman had gotten too close to a rather cantankerous crab and ended up getting a claw snapped onto his pinky finger. I cried laughing as he told me about how the then-six year old Roman howled as if the crustacean had severed his finger from his body and how their father had taken pity on him by promising him an extra scoop of ice cream when they went back inside. Listening to him should have made me happy. And it did. I'm not saying that I couldn't enjoy the happy childhood he had. I appreciated that he was so lucky. Yet, his words, his memories—all of them deepened that ache inside me. The ache that came from wishing for those kinds of experiences only to never have them come true. One had to have parents who gave a shit out about you for that to happen. Instead, what little happy memories I had were from Ivy and her family. Weekends spent at their grandmother's home in Maple Beach, an exclusive, highly-sought after, gated community on the edge of Long Island. Days spent swimming in her grandmother's pool and nights spent staring at the stars, hoping that one day I had the power to change mine.

“What has your brow wrinkled?” Alex’s head was turned to face me. Softly, he traced his finger across my forehead.

“The stuff from earlier,” I admitted. “I was thinking about how lucky you are to have those memories.”

“You will have them too,” he promised. “One day, our kids will have them.”

My eyes went wide as I stared into his bright blue orbs.

Kids? Did he really just say kids?

“Children?”

“Children,” Alex said softly. “Because that’s how long I plan on keeping you, Rosie Cooper.” He brought my hand up to his mouth and kissed each knuckle as if it were the most precious thing on the planet. “I want to marry you someday. I want to build a life with you, have children with you—everything—I want it all with you.”

How did someone respond to that? To hear the man you love not only confess that he loved you back, but that he saw his future closely entwined with yours. By kissing the ever loving shit out of him. That’s how.

Holding his face between my palms, I kissed Alex until I could no longer tell what was up or down. Over and over, I crashed my lips over his, taking his mouth until it trembled with a rash of soft, needy whimpers. Ones that reassured me that this man was mine. All mine.

“I want you, Alex,” I breathed several minutes later. My body was on fire with the need to have his naked body pressed

to mine. I wanted to join my body with his, fueling the fire as our connection crackled and sparked with the power of an amped up Tesla coil. “I want to feel you inside me. I want you to make love to me.”

Alex’s forehead pressed against mine. “I want that too, Rosie. You have no idea how badly I want that.”

“It feels like there’s a but there.”

“I don’t want you to regret this. You’ve got to know that once I have you, that’s it. You’ll be mine and I’ll be yours. There will be no one else. Not ever. It’s forever for me, baby. You and me, forever and ever.”

“What are you saying?”

Alex drew in a deep breath before letting it out slowly. “I love you, Rosie Cooper. I have loved you since the moment I saw you. All it took was one look and I knew I’d never want anyone else. You’re the first thing I think of when I wake up and the last thing on my mind when I go to sleep.”

The world blurred as the soft, silvery moonlight shone down upon us. The firelight created shadows that danced across the side of Alex’s face and I felt like my whole world had just spun on its axis. A really *good* spin.

“I—” I tried to say but my words failed me.

“You don’t have to say it back,” Alex assured me. “I didn’t tell you I loved you to push you to say it back. I just couldn’t go another minute without you knowing how I feel about you.”

“I love you too.” The words fell from my lips so easily. So easy because I meant them. I truly, truly meant them. Years of wanting love, of wanting to belong to someone and for someone to belong to me, had culminated in this moment and I’d be a goddamned fool if I let it go.

Alex gave me no time to say anything more. A second later, I found myself in his arms, his mouth sealed over mine. Slowly, our lips meshed as we tasted one another, teased each other’s tongues, and cherished just being with one another and kissing each other until we were breathless.

“Wow,” I whispered a bit later as I pulled back just enough for my eyes to meet his.

“Wow, is right, Rosie Cooper. Wow is right.” Alex’s soft smile lit up his features as he softly brushed his knuckles down my cheek. His lips found mine again just as the pop of the first firework launching sounded all around us. We lay there entwined, lost in one another until long after the lightshow had ended and the stars came out to play.

Dancing in the Moonlight

Rosie

ALEX AND I BARELY made it through the door before tearing each other's clothes off. Electricity skittered across my body as his hands touched, caressed, *explored* every inch of my body as we stood naked in the front room, making out and slowly dancing in the moonlight that filtered through the windows.

“What if someone walks by and sees us?” I froze. Anxiety suddenly consumed me, realizing the curtains were open and we were exposed.

Alex chuckled, his hot breath delicious against my neck. “There's no need to worry, my little rosebud.” He kissed the soft skin under my ear before sliding his hand from my shoulder down to my hip. “No one can see us. The windows are tinted. We can see out but others can't see in.”

“Oh, okay. That's—that's—good.” It was all I managed to get out before Alex slammed his mouth down upon mine again, capturing my lips in a kiss that made me forget that time

and space existed. Over and over, he consumed me. His tongue tangled with mine, teasing me, taunting me until I was near mad with want. Alex d made my body experience things it had never experienced before. The man had me wet and wanting with that soft moan that rumbled deep from his chest.

Somehow, we managed to stumble to our room and crashed down onto the bed in a tangle of mouths, lips, hands, and limbs. Alex had me on my back. His hard body pressed me deep into the mattress. My breath came out in short gasps as he kissed a trail down the length of my body. All I could do was surrender to it all. My mind reeled, making me feel bigger than my body. Greater than the desire that left me aching for him. *Needing him.*

“What—What are you doing?” I gasped suddenly. Alex’s attention had been solely focused on my neck, but he’d caught me by surprise when he slowly started working his way down my body, stopping at my breast and capturing the stiff peak between his lips. His magical tongue circled the rosy tip, sucking and licking in tandem, sending pleasure-filled shockwave after shockwave towards my center, filling me with desire until I was nearly out of my mind.

“Worshiping this magnificent body.” He exhaled against my skin before lathing his tongue over my diamond-hard nipple. My body rippled as he stroked my tight peak over and over, creating a second, insatiable pull within my core “You’re so beautiful, Rosie. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And I love you. So fucking much.”

Alex moved to the other side. His other hand cupped the other breast he'd just left, stroking his thumb over the tight bud. I moaned wantonly in reply. Mere words were not enough to express how I felt. So many feelings and emotions flooded my system. Desire and lust had top billing, but there was so much more. Want and the need to feel him were close behind. But most of all, there was love. True, honest, never-ending love.

Alex continued to kiss his way down my body, moving methodically until his hot breath blew against my soaked, needy core. "God, you smell incredible." He pressed his nose against my slit and inhaled deeply. His tongue followed, slowly teasing its way up my cleft with a hungry lap. Another moan escaped my lips as he licked me again, this time his tongue breaking through my seam to taste my inner folds.

"I knew you'd taste sweet." He looked up into my eyes and licked his lips. "My new favorite flavor."

Alex buried his face between my thighs and ate me up like a man who'd lost all control. All I could do was surrender to him as he feasted. Alex devoured me hungrily, lapping and licking as if I were the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted. Over and over, he teased my clit, flicking it with his tongue before sucking down so hard it erased everything in my brain but what he was doing to me.

"Alex," I panted heavily as he slipped one finger inside me before adding a second. A loud, wanton moan escaped my lips

as he curled those two highly-skilled digits up, striking that spot that no man had ever hit before.

“Does my baby like that?” He moved up to capture my mouth again. Alex’s tongue tangled with mine, stroking in tandem with his fingers until my release hit its crescendo, launching me into the cosmos.

“Yes, Alex! God, yes!” I screamed hoarsely. Alex’s magic stole my breath. I was lost in a storm of sensation. My thighs shook and quaked. My heart pounded. I never wanted this to end. I wanted to stay right here in this moment with Alex for the rest of my natural life and beyond.

I’d barely started to come down when Alex suddenly lifted himself up and positioned himself at my center. Without a word, he slowly entered me even though I knew he wanted to thrust hard and deep. But that wasn’t who he was. Alex took his time, slowly pushing himself in until he was fully seated before pulling out in a slow, controlled rhythm until the rhythm became a struggle for him to maintain.

“Let yourself go,” I whispered as he continued to move in and out of me, his thumb working my clit to the point my climax was quickly building again. “I want to *feel* you.”

Alex went wild. His control snapped and before I knew it, I was gripping the headboard to keep from crashing into it headfirst. Alex fucked me savagely, repeating my name against my skin as he possessed my body over and over until his own pleasure crested with a roar.

“It’s—I’ve never had that before,” he whispered softly, his head resting in the corner of my neck.

“Me either,” I panted as my breath started to normalize.

“You’re it for me, Rosie. I never believed in love at first sight until I met you. I want to spend the rest of my life loving you.”

Fat tears formed at the corners of my eyes. His words, words I’d longed to hear my entire life, stole my own from me. I wrapped my arms around him, tightening my hold, as I graciously accepted what this wonderful, thoughtful, treasure of a man wanted to give me. The one thing I’d needed for so long. Love.

Bedtime Confessional

Rosie

“THERE’S SOMETHING I NEED to tell you.” The words formed on my tongue and slipped from my mouth before I could stop them. The sun had yet to fully rise faint beams of light stained the inky darkness with the promise of its golden rays. The room smelled of the ocean and the petrichor. Sometime in the night, Alex must have gotten up and opened the window, unaware that it would rain.

Alex and I had been up all night making love, talking, sleeping, and doing it all over again and again. We’d been lying in the quiet, content to be in each other’s arms while the world slept around us.

“What?” Alex scooted up to rest against the headboard, his features visibly alarmed. “Is something wrong?” He pulled me up next to him before wrapping his arm around my shoulders..

Reaching out, I soothed my hand down his bare chest before saying, “No, nothing’s wrong. I—I just need—no, I want to

tell you something, and I hope it doesn't change your opinion of me."

"There's nothing you can say that would ever change my opinion of you." Alex dropped his head down and brushed his lips over mine. He followed it with a tender caress across my cheekbone. I leaned into it, savoring the comfort he offered.

"What if I told you I suspected my biological mother was a prostitute, had a raging drug problem, and was an alcoholic on top of it all?"

"I wouldn't give a shit." Alex shook his head and looked directly into my eyes.

"What if she also left me alone for most of my childhood and I had to raise myself?"

"Again, I couldn't care less except I'd want to get one of those time spinner things from Harry Potter and go back in time to take care of you."

My chest swelled with love for this man, yet it still wasn't enough to keep my demons at bay.

"What if I had to do questionable things like steal bread and peanut butter jars just to make sure I didn't starve? Don't you think that makes me a terrible person?"

"I'd say none of that makes you a terrible person. In fact, it shows me that you were willing to survive at all costs. And knowing you like I do, I bet you paid back those you stole from as soon as you were old enough to get a job."

This man knew me so well.

“The day I got my first paycheck, I went to the corner bodega where I pilfered everything from and fessed up to what I’d been doing.”

“What did the owner say?”

“Oddly enough, he said he knew and refused to let me pay him back. He said that he had paid for what I’d taken out of his own pocket. He knew what I was doing but never said anything because he didn’t want anything to happen to me. He said he always kept an eye on me because he knew I didn’t have anyone else.”

“But you had Ivy.”

“I did, but she didn’t live close enough to be there 24/7. Her parents did all they could, but with Gladys—that’s the vessel that birthed me—I was always waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“That life couldn’t have been easy, but look where it got you. You’re independent, you’re a successful business owner, and you were able to land the hottest bachelor in all of New York.”

I slapped his shoulder as a playful laugh bubbled up from his chest.

“What? You are all of those things, *and* wicked little witch you are, you did cast your spell, leaving me absolutely enchanted.”

“Enchanted?”

Alex nodded. “Yes, my darling. I feel like I’ve been blessed with the greatest gift I could ever receive.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

“Your love.”

I would have swooned if I wasn’t lying down. Alex definitely said the right words and I, well, I was so happy that it almost didn’t seem real.

“Sometimes I think I’m dreaming,” I confessed, giving voice to my thoughts.

“You’re not dreaming.” Alex dipped his head down to kiss me again. “And neither am I.” Taking my hand, he threaded his fingers through mine before bringing the back of my hand up to his lips. “This is real life.” He kissed my hand. “And to quote John Lennon, ‘*It’s real love.*’ What we have is real love.”

Tears blurred my vision as a wave of intense emotion swept over me. It was all too much. His understanding. His patience. His *love*. All of it was too much and I’d never been so grateful.

“Thank you for sharing yourself with me,” Alex whispered as he kissed my forehead. The man knew what was going through my head and didn’t hesitate to set my mind at ease. “I know it wasn’t easy. But I want you to know that I think it took a lot of bravery to bear your soul like that.”

A pregnant pause lingered briefly between us. “My past doesn’t scare you? It doesn’t make you want to ditch me here and run back to the city?”

He shook his head. “No, if anything, it makes me love you more. And I do love you, Rosie. I’ve never loved anyone the

way I love you.”

I could only stare at him, amazed that this man was mine. I’d been dreading going deeper into my horrible past. I’d feared that once Alex knew more about my neglectful upbringing, my poverty, and the struggle to survive, he’d assume I was a gold digger and would be out the door, leaving nothing but a trail of smoke behind him. But he hadn’t and I knew he wouldn’t. My Alex knew me inside and out now and loved me more because of it.

“How did I get so lucky to find you?” I lay my head against his chest, hearing the beating of his heart under my ear.

“It’s not you who’s lucky. It’s me.” His arms tightened in a protective band around me. “I’m the lucky one and we owe it all to that atrocious instagrammer.”

A laugh bubbled up from my chest as I thought back to the woman I’d all but forgotten. “I wonder what she’d think if she knew she was instrumental in creating a meet cute?”

“She’d probably make a video about it and spread it across the internet.”

“I have no doubt she would, but do you know what?”

“What?” He peered down at me with that stormy gaze I loved so much.

“I’m really glad I went back to satisfy my sugar craving that day.”

“And I’m glad my taxi driver got stuck in traffic and I discovered not only my new favorite coffee shop, but also my

new favorite person.”

“I love you, Alex.”

“I love you too, Rosie.”

The two of us lay nestled against one another until we both drifted off and slept until the bright morning sunshine peeked in through the curtains. After another round in bed and another in the shower, we reluctantly pulled apart enough to agree that we were both hungry and that food would be best found exploring the nearby town.

“Are you sure you want to go?” Alex asked me for the third time.

“You make it sound like I’d rather stay here with you and do nothing?”

“I mean, is that such a terrible idea?”

I grinned. “No, and I think that’s what we should do tomorrow, but you promised me waffles and a stroll around that lovely little village and I’m not about to let you renege on that.”

“Whatever my baby wants, my baby gets.” He crossed the room and pulled me into his arms. Kissing me thoroughly, Alex let me go before slapping me on the ass. “Let’s get out of here. The sooner we leave, the sooner we can get back and the sooner I can have my wicked way with you again.”

And he did. Many, *many* times over during our oceanside rendezvous.

Lazy Days and Plays

Rosie

“YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO walk me all the way to my door, you know.” I giggled as Alex took my keys from my hand and opened my door. He had no idea how cute he was right now. Not only had he not let me carry my bags to the car, he’d also refused to let me bring them up, and now, this with the door. It wasn’t controlling, like so many other guys acted. It was care. He didn’t force anything, just simply did it because he wanted to take care of me.

“I know, but I realized something when we pulled up in front of your building.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“I don’t want to say goodbye. Not yet.” Alex pulled me to him and kissed me fast and deep.

“It’s not like I won’t see you tomorrow,” I teased.

“Not soon enough.” His grip on me tightened. I wrapped my arms around his neck. “I don’t ever want to spend another day,

another minute, hell—not even another second without you, Rosie Cooper.”

Pressing in closer, so close my chest brushed against his, I rested my hands upon his shoulders before running one down to palm the hard length currently tenting his pants.

“Then I guess it’s a good idea you decided to *come up*.” Alex scooped me up in a fireman’s carry that left me laughing heartily. “I think someone’s anxious.”

“Not anxious.” He slapped me on my ass with a playful growl. “Just impatient to be inside you, baby.”

We spent the next several hours making love until we were both sweat-soaked and breathless. The eventual rumbling of our tummies reminded us that we needed fuel. Not leaving my bed, Alex leaned down and fished his phone from his pocket. A few minutes later, our lunch order was on its way.

“I think I’m going to take a shower while we wait for the food to get here,” I announced.

“Good idea. Let’s go.”

Minutes later, Alex had me pinned against the shower wall. My moans filled the air as he fucked me through one orgasm and straight into another. Something I never thought possible until our first night together on the coast. Focused solely on our mutual pleasure, he moved inside me masterfully, pushing my body to the point of delicious delirium. I was on the verge of breaking as the hot water flowed down upon us.

How could one man deliver so many orgasms in such a limited time?

As if he knew what I was thinking, Alex continued to pound away until he came with a roar.

“Oh, God.” I panted breathlessly against his heaving chest. Still joined together, Alex kept me pressed up against the wall as his head fell to my shoulder.

“I think I saw him there for a second,” he whispered against my skin.

“You made me see stars.” I clung to him, enjoying the feeling of holding him inside me.

“Next time it’ll be the Universe, baby. Next time, you’ll see the Universe.” Alex dropped his head and recaptured my lips in a passionate kiss. One that spoke of intimacy rather than desire.

“I want that.” I managed to say between kisses. “I want that so much.”

“And you’ll get it. Right fucking now.”

The doorbell ringing put his promise on hold.

“Please tell me I imagined that?” Alex closed his eyes as his forehead came to rest against mine.

“I think dinner’s here.”

With a groan, Alex pulled out and stepped out of the shower, leaving me to clean up while he went and answered the door. I took my time and when I finally stepped into the living room,

Alex had laid out a romantic picnic, complete with burning candles, glasses, and a bottle of wine.

“What is this?” My eyes went wide, matching my smile as I took it all in.

This man. This wonderful, wonderful man.

Alex sat in between the couch and the coffee table, shirtless, as he dished out a sampling of all he'd ordered onto two plates. “A picnic.”

“A picnic? Alex, you didn't have to do this.”

“Yes, I did. My lady deserves only the best,” he said softly and patted the space next to him. I quickly sat down and watched as he continued plating and again as he cracked open the bottle of wine and poured us each a glass.

“This is ... This is so thoughtful. And romantic.”

“You like it?”

I leaned in and kissed him. “I love it, my darling. You're so thoughtful and so sweet. How did I get so lucky to find you?”

“I told you, Rosie. It's me who's the lucky one.” Alex kissed me again before pulling back to say that if we kept this up, our food would get cold. I couldn't have cared less. The food could grow cold, hell, it could spoil, and I wouldn't mind. All I cared about was this man beside me. The one who went out of his way to make a simple Sunday meal into something both romantic and absolutely unforgettable.



We'd stuffed ourselves on a buffet of kung pao chicken, sweet and sour pork, beef and broccoli, steamed dumplings, and an order of spicy noodles Alex swore I'd love. He was right.

I'd just come back from washing my hands when he called out, "Your phone's ringing," offering my device to me as I entered the room. A delicious sizzle shot up my arm as our fingers touched. The fire in Alex's gaze made that sizzle verge on an inferno.

"It's Ivy," I said as I looked at my best friend's name and number flashing across the screen.

"Answer it. It's the second time she's called," he urged as I plopped down on the couch next to him.

"Hey," I answered, doing my best to ignore the growing heat in my cheeks or the pang his stare currently created within my ladybits.

"Oh my gosh! You're home!" Ivy shouted. "Where the hell have you been?"

"What do you mean, 'Where have I been?'"

"Just that. Where have you been? I dropped by your house because my brother and his family all came down with food poisoning—soooo much diarrhea and vomit—and had to cancel at the last minute. I thought since you were going to be on

your own, we could celebrate the holiday together, but obviously you were with your *boyfriend*, and didn't bother to tell me."

A laugh bubbled up from out of my chest. "Ivy, did you check your text messages or your voicemail at any point?" Not only had I told her of my plans over our daily coffee date, but I'd also texted and emailed just in case she forgot. Which she apparently did.

My best friend went silent for a beat. "Okay, maybe not, but still. You should have told me."

Deciding it wasn't worth arguing with her right now, I let it go. "Well, I'm home now."

"I can see that. So, before you tell me all the delicious, *dirty* details of your holiday getaway, and you *will*, I wanted to see if you were still coming to my opening tonight?"

My best friend had been a huge theater nut since high school. During college, that had only grown exponentially. While her talents were more geared towards the limelight, her stage fright made a career on the stage impossible. It did not, however, keep her from being involved. Ivy's work backstage had allowed her to continue to follow her passion and kept her from breaking down into a shivering, sweaty, vomiting mess. The theater she was currently involved with had recently moved to a small, out-of-the-way theater in Chelsea after receiving a substantial, yet anonymous donation. Their first production in their new location was scheduled for tomorrow

night and, like the supportive friend I was, I had promised to be there. It was a promise I intended to keep.

“Of course, I’m coming,” I said. “I told you I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

“It sounds like there is a ‘but’ there somewhere.”

“There’s no ‘but’, I just might not come alone.” I glanced over to Alex to find him watching me.

“Oh! If you want to bring Mr. Sexy Coffee Man, I would totally be okay with that. One more butt to fill a seat.”

“What’s going in that cute brain of yours?” he asked as he played with the ends of my hair.

“Ivy’s got a play tomorrow night. I promised her I’d go. Do—do you think you’d like to go? I mean, if you don’t want to, I completely understand,” I asked Alex while my best friend low-key squealed on the other end. The smile he answered with was dazzling. It was about to knock me right out of my undies in a second if I didn’t look away.

Without breaking eye contact, Alex gently took my phone and held it up to his ear. “Ivy? This is Alex. I’m sorry to cut this short, but Rosie’s got to go now. She’s got to deal with a situation that’s just come up.” A second later, he disconnected the line and set my phone down upon the coffee table.

My eyes went wide with desire. “What is this important *thing* that’s come up?” I wanted to know as Alex pulled me into his lap. One hand buried itself in my hair while the other slowly coasted up my thigh.

“There’s a matter that needs addressing,” he whispered as he leaned in, his breath hot against my lips. His hard length prodded my core. Licking my lips, I cupped his face between my hands as I ground down upon him, showing him I was more than ready to deal with whatever he had for me.

“You’re going to make me blow in my pants if you don’t stop doing that.”

I ground down again for good measure. “Then I guess we need to get down to business before that happens.”

Alex moved swiftly like a panther. A second later, I was on my back. The next, the shorts I’d been wearing and my underwear were off and flung to someplace unknown.

“Do you feel this?” Alex groaned as he ran the steel of cock through my wet folds. “Do you feel how much I want you?” He leaned down and brushed his lips over mine. Then, he slid into me with one swift, solid thrust. “Do you, Rosie?” he said again, unmoving, allowing me time to adjust.

“Yes, Alex.” I moaned. “God, yes.”

“What are you thinking? Tell me what you’re feeling.”

“I feel so full. You feel so good, Alex, but I need you to move. Please.”

Alex needed nothing more. He took me over and over right there on my living room floor before picking me up and moving us to the bedroom. We spent the night together and when my morning alarm rang, neither of us were ready for this

to be over. But the world waited for no one. Our jobs awaited us and so did my best friend and her play.

Shakespeare and Company

Rosie

“I’M SO GLAD YOU guys could make it!” Ivy shouted from across the theater. Two seconds later, she was handing us each a plastic wine glass filled with water. Her excitement was tangible.

“Thank you for inviting us,” Alex said genuinely, surprising me with his candor. I knew the theater wasn’t his thing, but it was sweet of him to come with me. Even though I’d sat by myself plenty of times, I was thrilled to no end to have company.

“Lily’s going to be so happy you both came! She was hoping we’d get a packed house, and by the looks of it, we are.” Ivy clapped her hands excitedly.

“Lily’s in the play?” Lily was initially Ivy’s friend, but I’d gotten to know her over the past few years and considered her to be a friend too.

“Yeah. She’s in the lead role.” Ivy explained. “The woman who was supposed to play the lead has laryngitis and Ivy was the only one that knew all her lines.”

“That sounds intense.”

Ivy nodded. “It is, but Lily’s got this. She was a theater major so I know she’s fully prepared.” The three of us shared a bit of small talk until the lights overhead dimmed for a second, announcing the play would start soon.

“That’s my cue. I’ll see you after the show.” She hugged us both before rushing off to where she needed to be. Alex and I made our way to our seats and sat down.

“Do you know this is my first play?” He raised my hand he’d been holding up to his lips.

“Really?” I was genuinely surprised.

“I’ve never had much interest in the theater, but now that I know you do, I think it’s become a lot more interesting.”

I couldn’t have stopped my grin if I tried. Knowing that he was willing to try things because I liked them had my heart pounding against my chest and made me want to do the same for him. I wanted to know what he was passionate about and experience that with him.

A few hours later, the play was over and we were readying to leave.

“I really liked that,” Alex admitted as we vacated our seats and waited for the line to move. “Your friend Ivy is a really

good actress. I swear she made me tear up during that death scene.”

“She is and I’m so glad you liked it. It’s one of my favorites.”

“Well, then that makes it my favorite too.” Alex took my hand and held it against his thigh, letting the heat from his core warm my fingers. A shiver rippled up my spine knowing just how warm he was and that I’d definitely be getting another sample of it later.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as we waited for the aisle to clear.

“Starved, actually,” I admitted just as my stomach let out a rather embarrassing rumble. “I was just thinking about asking if you wanted to go to B—”

“Evan?” Alex said suddenly. The man that had just turned to walk away from us froze for a second before turning around.

“Oh, hey.” This Evan guy flashed us a forced smile before nervously walking towards us.

“What are you doing here?” Alex asked as the other man glanced around as if he didn’t want to be caught talking to us.

“I—uh.” The man rambled nervously, cementing my suspicion that there was something or someone he wanted to avoid. “I—I was supposed to meet my sister here, but she bailed at the last minute.”

Alex studied the other man closely. His body language told me that he didn’t quite buy the story this guy was giving him.

“Really? When was the last time you stuck around when Callie bailed on you?”

The man chuckled nervously before running a quick hand through his hair. “Do you think you could introduce us?” He gestured towards me, effectively changing the subject. For now.

“Rosie, this is Evan. Evanston Langley. Owner of Langley Industries and my best friend.”

A grin broke out across my face as I accepted the hand that Evan held out to me. “Rosie Cooper. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Evan gave my hand a few hearty pumps before letting me go. “I see you decided to take my advice.” Although his eyes were on me, he spoke directly to Alex.

“I decided I wasn’t going to let this one slip away.” Alex’s arm slipped around my waist. He pulled me in close before brushing his lips across my cheek.

“I’m glad to see you didn’t fuck things up. I’m proud of you, man.”

“I’ve got to admit. I’m pretty happy, but I can’t say the same about you. What are you really doing here, Evan?” Instead of answering, Evan clapped Alex on the shoulder before saying it was nice to meet me and quickly disappearing into the crowd. Not even a handful of seconds passed before Evan was stopped by a red-faced, furious Lily.

We watched Lily tear into Evan as if they knew each other. *Intimately* knew each other. Evan immediately threw his hands up in surrender while Lily stepped closer, going in for the kill.

“Do you know who that is?” My boyfriend asked curiously as we continued to watch them argue.

“Ivy’s friend Lily.”

Alex barked out a laugh. “Please tell me that her last name is Price.”

“It is.” I gawked at him, amazed at how he had guessed that.

“Oh man. I don’t know how I didn’t recognize her.” He chuckled. “This is going to be *interesting*. Very interesting,” Alex added, laughing again. I stood watching him, not sure I understood what was going on. My confusion must have been written across my face because Alex quickly explained.

“Evan is in a lot of trouble.”

“Trouble? How is he in trouble? How does he know Ivy’s friend?”

“She’s the one who got away,” he explained further. “They dated in college. He fell head over heels for her and she did too.”

“I feel like there’s a but coming up.”

Alex nodded. “*But*, he fucked it all up because he stupidly did something that ruined it all.”

“What did he do?” Obviously it wasn’t that great because Ivy was still tearing into him.

“I don’t know because he never would say,” Alex explained. “But enough about them. Why don’t we go get dinner?” His stomach growled suddenly as if agreeing that food was a good idea.

“Someone’s hungry.” I leaned into him, laughing and enjoying the feeling of having him close.

“Yeah, but not I’m not hungry for food. The sooner I feed you, the sooner I get to get my *eat* on.”

My laughter echoed through the theater. An hour and an order of cheese ravioli later, Alex *definitely* got to sample his favorite meal. Me.

The Fit Hits the Shan

Alex

“THANK YOU FOR THE coffee,” I whispered, leaning in and brushing a kiss across Rosie’s creamy cheek. After waking up to a repeat of last night, I decided to walk with her to her work where just as Rosie started her opening ritual, we quickly got *distracted*. As in naked-distracted that ended in upending a case of new releases in her tiny stockroom.

“And thank you for that *other thing* you did earlier. I never realized your *literary pursuits* were so ravenous, my little rosebud. Perhaps we should go in search of some sustenance to fuel us for later?”

Her cheeks blazed as I tenderly nipped her ear. We’d temporarily closed up shop to grab a quick cup of coffee from Bean There and Gone. Once we had our coffees in hand, we casually made our way back to her bookstore.

“Actually, I think it’s *me* who should be thanking *you* for the stockroom. And why order food when what I want to eat is right here.” I reached out wanting to cup my hand over that

delectable pussy of hers, but decided I didn't want the world to witness me palming what was mine. I grabbed a handful of her ass instead, pulling a loud, lusty laugh from her. A laugh that was cut short.

“Mr. Harrington!” An all-too familiar voice shouted. My skin bristled as Henry Higgins shouted again. “Mr. Harrington! Wait! I need to talk to y— Miss Cooper?”

The giant pain in my ass caught up to us a second later. I stood with my hands at my sides ready for a fight while Rosie blanched of all color. Henry Higgins stared at us as if both she and I both had two heads.

“Miss Cooper?” Higgins glanced at me before looking back at Rosie. “Mr. Harrington? I don't understand.” The irritating man's brow furrowed. “Why are you here? I guess I should have checked with you first.”

All it took was a few sentences to blow my world to smithereens.

“What did you just say?” she asked as if she'd heard him wrong. Higgins looked between Rosie and I for a beat. All the while I felt my lips moving yet no words came out.

“I didn't know Mr. Harrington was going to come speak to the building's tenants himself. Your father asked me to drop by. If I'd known, I would have stayed at the office.” Higgins clarified and I felt like I was falling headfirst off of cloud nine straight into the lowest pit of hell.

“How do the two of you know each other?” Rosie’s voice was now cold, completely void of all the happiness that was there a minute ago.

“I work for him,” Henry admitted before I could stop him.

“What do you mean you ‘work’ for him?”

“His family’s company, Harrington Investments, owns the building where your bookstore is located. I told you that when we first met, Miss Cooper.”

“What?” Her icy tone sent a shiver up my spine. Rosie suddenly looked at me, demanding an explanation. I couldn’t stay silent.

“My stepfather—my dad—he owns the company.”

“And you work for your dad?” She recalled me mentioning my job, but not what I actually did. I’d withheld the specifics from her. At first, it was unintentional because I wanted to hear more about her. After I learned how we were connected, I’d remained tight-lipped because I was afraid it would all blow up in my face. Which it had. Just like Evan had said it would.

“Alex.” She looked stricken as she said my name. “Alex, please tell me he’s lying.” My Rosie begged, her beautiful eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Please tell me this is all just a big misunderstanding.”

“I—” The words I needed to say refused to come out. It was like my brain knew that once they were spoken, there was no taking them back. Just like there’d be no getting Rosie back.

“I can’t believe this,” she whispered, her voice thick as several tears slid down her face. “I can’t believe you did this to me.”

“Did what?” I stupidly said even though I knew.

“You tricked me!” Her voice broke as she cried more tears. “You *lied* to me, Alex!” She threw her hands up in the air. “I can’t believe you right now. I can’t believe that you sat there and listened to me cry about how I was losing my store. The one you *promised* to help me find a new place for, all the while knowing that it was *you* who was putting me out of business!”

“Rosie, I—”

“NO!” Rosie roared, cutting me off. “No, Alex. I’m not going to stand here and let you lie to me again.”

“Please, Rosie. I can explain.”

“Explain what?” Her nostrils flared with a mixture of fury and heartbreak. “Explain that you’ve kept this secret from me the whole time we’ve been together?” Her blue eyes now sparkled with a thin liquidy pool rather than the brilliant sunlight.

“I—I didn’t know how to tell you.” I grasped at straws. “At first, I thought I got it all wrong and yours *wasn’t* the building we were tearing down, but then this asshole told me it was. I know I should have told you. I didn’t want to lose you. I—I can’t live without you, Rosie.”

“Then you should have thought of that before lying to me this whole time.”

“Technically, he didn’t lie.” Higgins decided to help, albeit unhelpfully.

“A lie of omission is still a lie!” Rosie roared. Her voice carried so far that several pedestrians turned to see what was going on. The hotdog seller at the corner looked up and seemed ready to intervene. A rarity in this city.

“Rosie, please—” I descended to begging as I felt her slip away.

“No, Alex! I don’t want anything to do with you. I never want to see you again.”

If that moment couldn’t get worse, a strange, rough-looking woman suddenly appeared next to us, shocking my Rosie to her core.

“What the hell, Rosie?” The overly made-up, bottle blonde snarled sharply as she jabbed Rosie in her shoulder. Rosie’s mouth dropped open. Her flushed face grew redder as she eyed the stranger standing between us. A wild look blew out her pupils, turning her blue eyes almost black.

“What the hell are you doing here?” she demanded angrily. The strange woman let out an annoyed scoff followed by an eye roll.

“You haven’t been answering my calls. Since you can’t be bothered to call your own *mother*, I decided to hunt you down.”

“Why?” Rosie’s strong voice went low, almost timid. “Why can’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because I need money you spoiled, entitled bitch!” The woman’s hand lashed out and slapped Rosie across the face.

“Hey!” I jumped between the woman I loved and this bitch who had hit her. “Touch her again and I’ll have your ass thrown in jail!” I warned, needing to protect my lady, even if she wanted nothing to do with me right now.

“Who are you?” The woman turned on me. “Are you that rich moneybags she’s seeing?” The woman eyed me as if I were her own personal ATM machine. “If so, maybe you can lend me a few hundred, seeing that my ingrate of a daughter can’t seem to give a shit about her own mother!”

“I don’t give a shit?” Rosie roared as she shoved me aside. “How dare you stand there and say *I* don’t give a shit?” Rosie’s breath was heavy. Her chest rose and fell as if she’d just run a marathon. “Growing up, all I ever wanted was for *you* to give a shit! But no! Not you. You could never care about anyone except yourself.”

Rosie’s mother rolled her eyes again, pissing me off to the point where I might do something foolish like have her arrested. Rosie, however, wasn’t finished with giving her mouth a tongue-lashing.

“Don’t you dare roll your eyes at me! If anyone here is ungrateful, it’s you. It’s you who doesn’t give a shit. If you did, I wouldn’t have been left all alone. I wouldn’t have spent most of my nights wondering if you were ever going to come home. Because of you, I had to raise myself. I wouldn’t have had to get a job at fourteen just so I could eat. I wouldn’t have

had to bust my ass to support myself without relying on the kindness of other people or social programs. If *you'd* been less selfish, I wouldn't have spent my entire adulthood trying to get away from you. So no, Gladys. I'm not the selfish one! You are. You're toxic, manipulative, and you'll always be a leech."

The woman's eyes, ones that matched her daughters, darkened. "How dare you speak to me that way. *I* gave you life! You *owe* me."

Rosie scoffed through her nose. "I don't owe you shit. Just because you gave me life, doesn't mean anything because you've never cared about anyone or anything except your drinking and screwing around."

"God, you're more trouble than you're worth. Are you going to give me my money or not?"

"Not." Rosie didn't miss a beat.

"I knew I should have aborted you. You're absolutely worthless."

If there had been a crowd, there would have been a loud gasp. At best, both Henry and I sucked our breath in, neither of us knowing what to say to this horrible woman. Rosie didn't either. Instead of deservedly ripping into this woman, she paled. Stood stock still. Frozen. With words as venomous as those, who could blame her. If my mother had been this woman and she'd said those horrendous things to me, I can't say that I wouldn't react the same. But this woman wasn't my mother and I wasn't about to let her get away with such vile, disgusting words.

“You have exactly ten seconds to walk your ass away,” I warned her, ready to call the cops or do whatever it took to make sure she never bothered the woman I loved again.

“Oh, and who’s going to make me? You?”

“Yes,” I said with all the conviction I possessed. “My aunt is married to the chief of police. One call to her and you’ll find yourself inside a jail cell,” I seethed through my teeth. “I don’t know who you are—”

I had no time to finish what I was going to say. Rosie let out a strangled cry and bolted down the block. Her store, her evil birth giver, and me forgotten for now. Watching her run away broke something inside me. A second later, I was chasing after her, leaving Henry and the hag behind. My feet moved as fast as they could. I kept shouting at her, calling her name, begging her to stop and give me a minute. Rosie ignored me and continued to widen the distance between us.

“Rosie! Please, just stop. Let me explain!”

I chased her down the block and again as she chose to take a sharp right instead of waiting at the crosswalk. My chest burned from the exertion, leaving me wondering if it could cause a heart attack. I was a healthy, fit young man with no major health issues, but still the thought was there.

“Rosie! Rosie, stop! Please!” I shouted more as I continued to chase after her. Rosie wasn’t stopping though. She kept running, faster and faster until I blinked and she was gone. Unable to breathe, I hunched over, my hands on my knees as I struggled to catch my breath.

“Mr. Harrington?” Henry Higgins materialized behind me a few seconds later. He too breathed as if he’d been running but unlike me, he seemed used to it.

“WHAT?” I roared, pissed off that this all blew up in my face. My hands went to my hair, pulling the strands frantically.

“You need to calm down.”

I shot him a menacing glare. “Do not tell me to calm down!”

“You need to calm down.” He ignored me as he repeated himself. “Standing out here hunched over like you’re about to puke isn’t going to do you any good. We need to get you off the street and to someplace where you can get yourself back to a place where you can think clearly.”

“Oh, bite me!” I yelled, unintentionally scaring an older woman who just happened to walk by at the wrong time.

“Not the answer I was looking for,” Higgins bandied back. He was now the epitome of calmness as if he too hadn’t been running a minute ago. “But I’m going to say it again. You need to come with me. Let’s go to that coffee shop across the street from her bookstore.” The man gestured for me to follow him.

“Why would I go anywhere with you?” I shouted, angrier at myself than anything. “You just cost me the woman I love.” I stood there screaming while Henry just took it. I knew why he didn’t scream back. We both knew the responsible party here was me. *I* was the one who ruined things between me and Rosie. I was the jackass that didn’t tell her when I had the chance. I was the big bad wolf that was tearing down her

building and destroying her dreams. I'd broken my girl's heart because I'd been afraid and now, it was too late.

“We both know that's not true.” His hand went to my shoulder. “I also know you're thinking it's too late, but I'm telling you it's not. I've stood in your shoes.” Henry glanced away and swallowed hard. “I almost lost someone and if I hadn't listened to the advice that was given to me, I wouldn't have won her back. Because that's what you want, right? You want Rosie back?”

“More than anything.”

“Then you definitely need to give her some time and come with me.”

Henry said nothing else as he turned and headed towards the closest intersection. Minutes later, we were inside Bean There and Gone. The barista that had previously hit on Rosie was working. The second he laid eyes on me, the shithead smirked as if he knew what had just gone down.

“I know what you're thinking. He's not worth it,” Henry urged as he led me to a table and ordered me to sit. I did it because it was either that or punch the smug barista right in the nose. “I'm going to go get us some coffee. Stay here until I get back.”

Henry was gone less than ten minutes. I spent the time he was away figuratively kicking my own ass. How could I be so stupid? I should have taken everyone's advice and just told her. If I had, it would be her with me right now instead of my employee. Rosie would be in my arms, her sweet lips pressed

to mine, and my future wouldn't have exploded to smithereens.

“Here,” Henry said as he handed me what looked like a regular cup of coffee, my preference, and sat down across from me. “Drink that while you and I have a chat.” He took a sip of his own before leveling his brown orbs onto mine.

“What do you want to chat about?” I snarked even though I already knew.

“We're going to discuss how you just blew up the best thing that ever happened to you and how you're going to get her back.”

“You know, Henry,” I snapped. “I don't think I'm ready for —”

“I really don't care what you're ready for,” the man countered. “If there is anyone who knows what you're going through, it's me. Like I said, I once stood in your shoes and like I said earlier, I almost lost the most precious thing in my life.”

“Who did you almost lose?”

“My wife.”

Surprise sent my eyebrows rocketing up towards my hairline. “You're married?”

“I am. For almost ten years now.”

“And you almost lost her?”

Henry nodded. “I did.”

“How?”

“Because I was married when I first met her.”

Surprise no longer accurately described what I felt. Shock was more like it. “You were married when you met your current wife?”

Again, Henry nodded. “I was. My first marriage was ... it was bad. We were ill-suited. We got married because she thought she was pregnant, but it turns out she did it to trap me because she wanted someone to take care of her.”

“That’s awful.”

“It was, only—I didn’t realize it until I met Eliza.”

I nearly spit out my coffee. “You’re having me on, right?” I almost laughed. “Your wife’s name is Eliza?”

“Ironic, I know, although truthfully, I didn’t realize how ironic until I met your Rosie. She shouted out something about the rain being someplace and then got mad when I didn’t understand the reference.”

“Henry, *My Fair Lady* is a famous film. With a name like yours, how could you not know what it was?”

“No one ever mentioned it until your Rosie.”

“What about your wife? Didn’t she ever say anything?”

“Not a bit. When Eliza and I watched it a few nights ago, she told me she’d never seen it. We both ended up loving it.”

“What about all that business with her mother?” I redirected back to my problem. I heaved out a heavy sigh. I was

exhausted and needed to focus on something I *could* fix. At least for the time being. “How do I make sure she never bothers my Rosie again?”

“I’d have her investigated, to start. See if there is something in her past you can use against her. If it turns out there is, then we put our heads together and figure out how to keep her away from Rosie.”

I hated to admit it, but Henry was on to something. It was just that right now I couldn’t see myself taking it. I wanted to track Gladys down and make her pay for hurting my Rosie. I wanted to hunt my Rosie down and force her to listen to me explain why I did what I did. But knowing her, she wouldn’t go home. She’d go to Ivy’s to lick her wounds. Even though all it would take was one call to Roman to find out where Ivy lived, I couldn’t do that. I wasn’t about to do anything to make her distrust me more. What I needed, I realized, was time to think. Time to digest what had just happened, what I’d done and figure out a way to fix this mess we were in. I just didn’t expect to wallow because that’s exactly what I did. Right after I made Gladys regret the mistake she’d made taking advantage of my Rosie.

Licking One's Wounds

Rosie

HOME.

I was finally home. After running until my chest ached and my legs were about to collapse, I made it to the one place where I knew I was safe. Shame coursed through my veins. And humiliation. How could they do this to me? I mean, I expected this from Gladys. She never missed an opportunity to show up at the worst moments. But Alex? How? How could he say he loved me and keep this from me? I didn't know, but what I did know was that I was furious. Furious. Devastated. And most of all, heartbroken.

The last few days had seemed almost too good to be true. Since I met Alex, I'd been thanking my lucky stars thinking good things had finally come my way. Yet, there had been a shred of doubt I just couldn't shake. I'd silently warred with myself that that sense of dread, that lingering fear was just negativity trying to plant self-doubt into my brain. I should have listened when it said, "*You don't deserve this. You don't*

deserve to be truly happy and if you dare try, something will happen to ruin it all.” And did it ever. It all backfired and was ruined spectacularly.

How could Alex not tell me? All the time we spent together. All the times I complained and vented about what was happening to me. He had dozens of chances to tell me and he'd chosen silence. Worse than silent. He had the *nerve* to offer to help, all the while hiding a secret so disgusting it made me sick.

Betrayal.

That's what I felt.

I felt betrayed because Alex *should have* said something the second he knew what he and his family were doing to me. To all of us. He should have confessed that his family's company was the big bad wolf that was not only robbing me of my livelihood, but was also hurting others with their greed. Never would I have thought he would be so greedy as to destroy a neighborhood that's been in existence for well over a century. But I was wrong. I was absolutely wrong. Just like I was wrong when I believed Gladys would one day wake up and be the mother I needed her to be. Just like when I believed that the man who sired me would ride in and save me from the hell that was my adolescence instead of being found dead in a ditch from a drug overdose during my first year in college. And just like when I believed that I could finally have something good in my life and not have someone ruin it. None of that was supposed to be mine. So where did that leave me? Looking for

a job to pay my bills while searching for a new location to start my dream over again. Because that was the one thing I refused to give up on. My dream of being my own boss and owning my own bookstore. The piles and piles of books stacked across my living room floor and spread out across every surface in my bedroom was proof that books were my escape. They were my lifeline in a world and a life that had been less than what I deserved. Books, along with Ivy and Mr. Darcy, were the only constants in my life. The only two things I could count on. The rest, it seems, were always destined to let me down.

And I'd hit rock bottom.

With the door shut firmly and locked behind me, I gave my weary, weak, and unsteady knees permission to let go. I slowly sank down, hitting the floor a whimpering, blubbering, wounded mess. I don't know how long I sat there, crying over what Alex had done, crying over being humiliated by the one person who shouldn't have the power to do so. Tear after tear flowed as I relived it all. Mr. Darcy sat on my lap, twitching his tail, purring at high volume, and rubbing his head against my hand as if to tell me that it was all right. That everything was going to be okay, but that it was also okay to mourn. To feel angry, hurt, betrayed, and most of all, furious.

"I know, little man," I said shakily as I ran my hand down his back, finding comfort in the softness of his fur. We'd been sitting here for roughly about an hour but still I wasn't ready to move. "But thank you for giving me some love, baby boy." I pet him again. "You don't know just how much Mom needs it right now."

A soft knock sounded above my head. Sensing company, Mr. Darcy dashed off towards the bedrooms, leaving me alone.

“Rosie?” Ivy’s voice sounded a second later. Getting to my feet, I quickly unlocked the door and pulled it back to find my best friend standing at my threshold, arms laden with reusable bags and unconditional love upon her face. Silently she opened her arms to me and I fell into them, sobbing.

“Hey.” She somehow managed to set the bags down and wrapped her arms around me. “It’s okay, babe. It’s going to be okay.” Her hands rubbed soothing circles across my back. “You just let it all out.”

My best friend held me until I couldn’t bear standing in the hallway, stripped emotionally bare and visible. With the tenderness and compassion that first drew me to her, Ivy picked up the bags she’d brought and escorted me back inside. She quickly ordered me to sit down while she worked behind me unpacking all what she brought. A few minutes later, Mr. Darcy was munching on a shrimp and Ivy had planted herself on the couch next to me. Two glasses filled with our favorite cabernet sauvignon rested on the coffee table, along with two pints of chocolate cherry ice cream.

“How?” I finally asked after several long silent minutes passed.

“How what?”

“How did you know I needed you?”

“Roman,” Ivy replied with a shrug. “Some guy that works with them texted right as it all happened. He filled Roman in and how Gladys showed up.”

“I’m surprised Alex didn’t call him.” I stared down into my barely eaten ice cream while my still-full glass of wine sat untouched on my coffee table.

“Roman said Alex was devastated. That the dude who called him had to calm Alex down because of how distraught he was.”

Instant fury surged within me. “Did he tell you what exactly happened?” I couldn’t look at my friend directly but watched her from my peripheral vision. Ivy nodded.

“Roman admitted their father owns the company tearing down your building. That Alex had been keeping it from you and it all blew up in his face.”

“It did.” My voice didn’t sound like my own. It sounded distant and as if I were underwater. “He knew this whole time and never thought to tell me. All those times I talked to him about it, he just sat there silent, not saying a goddamned word. It’s like he only pretended to care.”

“And he got what he deserved,” my friend said with conviction. “He shouldn’t have ever kept that from you. You deserved for him to be upfront and honest from the start. Not unknowingly consorting with the enemy.”

“He knows all our plans, Ivy,” I said weakly, my voice trembling as the words tumbled off my lips. “I told him all

about what we're doing as a building. He knows what our attack plan is and now I'm scared he's going to use it against us."

Shame and regret nearly drowned out the anguish currently causing the tightness in my chest tight and making it hard to breathe. Knowing that I unwittingly betrayed my friends and neighbors sat like a stone at the bottom of my gut. Sensing that I was on the verge of going down a spiral, Ivy took my ice cream from me and sat it down next to my wine. Shifting in her seat, she grabbed my shoulders and forced me to look at her.

"First of all, do not go and blame yourself." Ivy's hands gripped my shoulders, holding me so I couldn't turn away even if I wanted to. "Second, Alex is solely to blame for this and according to Roman, not only is Alex beating himself up, but he's also about to get the asschewing of a lifetime. Roman called their dad before he called me—he's introducing me to his parents, by the way. Did I tell you that?—and let's just say Daddy Harrington is not too happy with one of his sons right now. Their mother is pretty upset too. With all of them."

I simply nodded because I didn't know what else to do or how to respond. From the bright glimpse in Ivy's voice when she mentioned meeting Roman's parents to the dread currently threatened to swallow me whole. Sensing I was on the cusp of another meltdown, Ivy grasped my shoulders and turned us both so we were facing one another.

“Don’t go there,” she urged softly. “Give yourself some time to just process everything. Don’t make any decisions. Allow yourself to grieve, but don’t for one minute let them make you feel like the victim here.”

“But how?” I tried to say but my words came out in a broken sob. “How can I not feel like I’ve been victimized when that’s exactly what happened?”

“I didn’t say you weren’t. I said don’t *allow* them to make you feel like a victim.” Ivy’s grasp on my shoulders tightened. “Do not let either of them steal your power. Granted, it may feel like your tank’s on empty right now, but you’re so strong babe. You’ve got power in spades and you’re going to overcome this just like you’ve overcome every other shit-tacular thing you’ve had to face.” Unable to help herself, my best friend pulled me in for a much needed hug.

“I know your heart is broken, Rosie.” Ivy soothed circles across my back as she held me close. “And right now, all you need to do is just cry it out. Let yourself grieve for what that dickhead did to you, but I need you to remember that this isn’t who you are.”

“Oh? Just who am I?” I sniffed against her shoulder.

“You’re the badass boss bitch who not only raised herself up out of the ashes of her past, but forged a path that is to be both respected and admired. You’re the brilliant boss lady who owns her own bookstore. The woman who risked infection and disease to rescue her kitty out of a public dumpster. Not to

mention, you're the best friend anyone could ever have and I'm so lucky that you're mine."

Ivy and I continued to hug it out, me weeping against her shoulder and her doing her best to comfort me. It was only when my eyes were heavy and burned with exhaustion that I finally let her go.

"I think I need to sleep," I said, eyeing the melting ice cream on the coffee table but did nothing about it.

"Do you want me to stay?" Ivy asked, knowing intrinsically that yes, I wanted her here. I nodded again telling her what I wanted. With a supportive, sympathetic smile, my friend drew me into her arms again and hugged me tight. "You're going to get through this," she half-whispered. "We're going to get through this and you're going to come out of this even stronger than you were before."

Thanking her again for everything, I left Ivy in the living and headed into my room. After stripping off today's clothes and standing in the hot, steaming shower until my muscles relaxed and the last of my tears cried themselves out, I slipped into my pajamas and climbed into bed. For the first time in ages, I went to bed without my phone by my side. I'd silenced it as I sat crying on the floor after seeing all the missed calls from Alex. Ivy went one step further and shut the damned thing off before hiding it somewhere in my kitchen with a warning to leave it where she put it at least until morning. And that's where it would stay. At least until I was ready to pick it up and delete the text messages I knew were there. To erase Alex's

number without looking at anything he'd sent. A clean break was what I needed. Time to lick my wounds, to mourn, to recover, and eventually move on. Whatever happened, I knew two things were certain: I was going to save my bookstore and I was going to forget that Alex Harrington ever existed.

Guess Who's Coming to Dinner

Alex

“OH, DARLING,” MY MOTHER exclaimed as she met me at the door. Dressed in a flowy blouse and cream-colored wide leg trousers, Mom was ready for guests. Even if those guests were her own children. “Why are you so late? I thought I told you to be here at six?”

“You did, Mother,” I said as I leaned in and kissed her cheek. “According to my watch, it’s five after. Besides, I had to take an important phone call before coming in and I know how much you hate it when we’re on our phones while we’re here.”

I silently recalled the phone call I received from a local detective who had been trying to get in touch with Rosie and had failed. Apparently, her phone had been shut off and each time he’d gone to her bookstore, it had been closed. A little digging had told him that we were a couple, therefore prompting him to try to reach her through me.

“Yes, you’re right. I do hate it when you, your brother, and your father are on the phone. It’s so rude, but, no matter. Late or not, you’re here. I’m so glad you are. You’re just in time to meet your brother’s new girlfriend. Have you met her?”

“No. I wasn’t aware that Roman was dating anyone. What’s this bimbo of the week look like?”

“She’s not a bimbo, dear. She’s quite the opposite. She’s lovely. I wouldn’t have expected Roman to bring home such a lovely girl for us to meet. She’s just the nicest thing, but I get a strong sense that there’s a bit of fire underneath that sweet exterior. And we both know that your brother needs someone with fire. All those other ... well, the *ones* he brought home? None of them hold a candle to this girl. Your father and I already adore her.”

Mom kept gushing on and on about Roman’s new girlfriend as we walked from the front door to the sitting room where we all grouped up before the gong for dinner was served. Nothing, however, could have prepared me for the surprise that awaited me as I walked through the door.

“Ivy?” I exclaimed, surprised as hell to see Rosie’s best friend sitting on the settee next to my father.

“Oh, look,” Rosie grinned with a healthy dose of snark. “If it isn’t the guy who lied to my best friend and broke her heart?”

My mother gasped while my father shot a loaded look my way. “Care to explain yourself, Alexander? One girl was bad enough, but now another?” Dad’s strong voice demanded yet never raised in tone.

“She’s talking about Rosie,” I clarified. “Ivy is Rosie’s best friend.”

“And your brother’s girlfriend.” My mother felt compelled to add even though it had no bearing on our conversation. I think she said it because she had never ever in her life referred to one of Roman’s ‘lady friends’ as his girlfriend.

I didn’t have to fill my parents in on the details. The day after Rosie left me, I’d come home and broken down, blurting it all out while my parents sat back and listened quietly. Once I was through, each of them reacted the opposite of how I’d expected them to. My mother shook her head as if she were disappointed in me, while my father eyed me with compassion but still proceeded to rip me a new one. They’d offered up their advice, but also urged me not to push Rosie or try to manipulate her into coming back to me. “*Give her time,*” was all the advice they had and even though I wanted to ignore it, I knew that their advice was the best pathway forward. Or it was until this dinner.

“That doesn’t erase the fact that my best friend is heartbroken right now and has hunkered down with her cat while currently eating enough ice cream to feed the city.”

I cringed inwardly as Ivy continued to provide the barest of details about what Rosie was doing. I knew firsthand that ice cream was her go-to comfort food whenever she felt down or was dealing with something heavy. It was her coping mechanism. One that had seemingly rubbed off on me because since that horrible day, all I’d done since was sit at home

bingeing episodes of Gilmore Girls and eating enough Ben and Jerry's that I seriously considered buying stock.

Oh, and Roman. My kid brother had taken it upon himself to 'invite' himself over to my house indefinitely. Spending every minute with me, both at work and at home, never letting me have a minute to just be alone.

"It's not good for you," he'd argued when I'd told him I wanted to be on my own. Roman had refused to leave and joined me in marathons of Rosie's favorite shoes and tossing back pints of ice cream like there was an endless supply. When I asked him why he wouldn't leave, Roman claimed he was worried. Worried that I might become so depressed that I might not be able to find my way out of it. Maybe he was right. And maybe he made a solid point, but still, it was annoying to have him underfoot.

Having Roman around *had* been good for something. He'd enlisted the private investigator he often worked with to look into Gladys. Or, according to Jerry, the former detective turned investigator, Gladiola Agnes Cooper nee Maguire. A woman who'd been skirting and blatantly breaking the law since before Rosie was born.

When Jerry first handed me the file containing the info he'd compiled, I felt a rush. A certainty that magically my Rosie would fly back to my arms and all would be okay again. It took approximately two-point-three seconds to realize I was being delusional and forced myself to focus on what I could do something about.

A quick perusal made me sick to my stomach. Gladys' crimes stretched from petty theft to fraud. What sickened me the most was the prostitution ring she ran from a seedy motel located on the outskirts of the city. A ring that, according to Jerry's research, specialized in underage girls.

I slapped the file closed and sat there, my hand pressed to my mouth, wondering how Rosie had escaped 'working' for her mother. While my girl saw her mother's abandonment as that, abandonment, I saw it as a blessing in disguise. Things could have turned out far, far worse for Rosie if her mother had been more of a present parent. Gladys' misdeeds were something I'd recently filled my family in on, but had yet to tell Ivy.

Seeing that there was no time like the present, I avoided any further interrogation and proceeded to fill Ivy in on all that Roman and I had found. Ivy listened quietly, something rare when compared to her normally boisterous personality. Dinner was called just as I finished telling her everything I'd learned. To her credit, Ivy waited until we were well into the soup course of the four-course meal my mother and their chef had planned to reply.

"I can't believe Gladys would do something like that!" Ivy hissed, shaking her head over her bowl of cream of mushroom and shallot soup. "I mean, that's low. Even for her."

I nodded because what else could I say? Gladys was the lowest of life forms. I suspected she supplied her business through human trafficking and according to Jerry, so did the

police. All they needed was proof. That meant telling the detective who'd reached out everything Jerry had uncovered, including the smoking gun they'd been searching for.

“That poor girl,” my mother chimed in. “How could someone do that to their own child?”

“If you ever met Gladys, you'd know,” Ivy added, already as attached to my mother as Mom was to her. “As long as I've known Rosie, Gladys has always been focused on one person, and that's Gladys.

Mom shook her head, no doubt thoroughly disgusted and unable to understand how someone could be anything but the best mother possible. Dad listened carefully, taking in the details and sorting through them mentally while remaining quiet. My brother was all eyes for Ivy. Every time she moved, smiled, looked his way, hell, even breathed, his eyes were on her. I found his infatuation humorous. In all his dating life, Roman had never been so besotted as he was with the love of my life's best friend. A secret part of me believed that Ivy was good for Roman. The kind of woman who made him want to come into his full power as a man. The kind that would give him focus and a reason for life beyond a string of hookups who were only after his money. Ivy was the kind of woman I could see him settling down with and sharing a life together.

I'd been so engrossed in my thoughts that I'd missed out on a fair chunk of our discussion. I hadn't realized my father had been speaking to me until Roman nudged my leg under the table with his foot.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized once I realized what was going on. Everyone was staring at me waiting for me to answer. “My mind drifted there for a minute.”

“It’s no wonder,” Mom added helpfully. “You’ve got a lot on your mind.”

“He does, so let me repeat myself. What do you plan on doing to solve this problem?”

“I reached out to the police. They’re going to deal with her mother and make sure she never hurts my Rosie again and then I’m going to win my girl back, even if it takes forever.”

“That’s what I like to hear, son.” My father offered me a proud smile before glancing over at my mother. “I hope you remember that your mother and I will help in any way we can.”

“Ivy and me too,” Roman chipped in.

“You know you can count me in whenever it concerns my girl.” Ivy was the loudest and the sincerest out of all of us. Her love for my Rosie went beyond all the years they’d known each other. They weren’t just best friends. They were also sisters who’d been forged in the fire of Rosie’s childhood and early adulthood. Two women who were each other’s ride or die no matter the consequences.

“Then that settles it,” my father said with finality. “Now, let’s finish eating and we can talk all about that later.”

The rest of dinner and after dinner drinks in the sitting room revolved around Rosie and Gladys. By the end of the night, I

left just after Roman and Ivy headed out. The trip back to my apartment was filled with a feeling of confidence that I hadn't felt when I first arrived at my parents' house. A confidence that I felt deep in my gut. A visceral knowing that everything was going to work out.

Washing One's Hands Clean

Rosie

“WHO’S BEEN MINDING THE store since you’re obviously here at your apartment with me and this sweet little guy here,” Ivy asked, pausing with her ice cream-laden spoon in her mouth to pet Mr. Darcy who lay contentedly between us. She’d been a frequent flier at my place since everything went down. Except for when she was with Roman, whom I suspected was now her boyfriend, even if she refused to own up to it.

“I officially hired the temp who’s been helping me out.”

“Maggie?”

“Yeah. She came to me and said she needed a few extra hours because her boyfriend asked her to move in with him.”

“That’s so sweet. They’re cute together.”

“They are.” I hated to say it because it made me think of the one thing I *didn’t* want to think of. How cute Alex and I were together. At least once a day someone would stop and admire

us as a couple. Knowing we were such a good match made his betrayal that much more bitter.

“What happens if your bookstore has to close? Does she know there’s a chance the job might not be there in a few weeks?”

“I talked to her about that and she said she had a fallback if needed, but I was her first choice because she loves the store and the community around it. She said it was worth taking the chance.”

“That it is, Rosie. You and everything you’ve built are worth taking a chance on.”

My best friend’s words, despite how much I appreciated them, did little to soothe the constantly growing ache within me. An ache that would only ever be soothed by one person and one person only: Alex.

“Please tell me you’re not over there moping.” My friend teased, sensing that was exactly what I was about to do.

“I can’t help it, Ives. I miss him. Even if I don’t want anything to do with his lying ass, I still miss him. I miss how I felt when I was with him.”

Ivy sighed and sank back into the cushions of my couch. “I know. For what it’s worth, Roman says Alex has been a big grouch since all this shit blew up in his face.”

“I hope he’s not going easy on him?”

“Oh, trust me. No one’s going easy on Alex. Not their parents and definitely not my dreamy, sex god of a boyfriend.”

There it was. A confession at last. Ivy proceeded to gloat just *how much* of a sex god Roman was.

“Can we not go there right now?” I wrinkled my nose as I shot her a look that said I wasn’t in the mood to hear about what she and Roman got up to in the bedroom.

“I’ll give you a pass just this once because you’re still licking your wounds,” she stated. “But you know as well as I do that I tell you *everything* and that includes how well that man can use his dick.”

“Again, Ivy, TMI.”

Ivy had no time to clapback because my phone suddenly rang from where it lay on the coffee table. “That better not be Alex if he knows what’s good for him,” Ivy growled as I reached for my device and immediately froze as I read the name flashing across the screen.

Gladys.

“What’s that face for?” Ivy immediately scooted over and glanced down at my hand. “Are you serious right now? What the hell does she want?” Ivy growled again as she saw who it was and instantly was ready to go on the warpath with me. Ignoring her, I hit accept and prepared to dig in my heels.

Since everything broke down with Alex, I’d been speaking with a therapist online. So far we’d only met a handful of times, but in those few instances, Dr. Sullivan had done wonders with me working through the issues surrounding Gladys and all the baggage she brought with her. It was during

our last meeting that she suggested I write Gladys a letter telling her how I felt and informing her one last time that that would be it. I didn't have to give it to her. Just write it. It would be the last time I'd let her into my life. The last time I'd speak to her and most definitely the last time I'd let her try to use me as her personal ATM.

“What do you want?” I didn't bother with niceties. We were long past that and frankly, Gladys had never done anything to deserve them.

“Is that how you speak to your mother?” Her irate, nasally whine filled my ear, mixing with the loud murmur of a crowd behind her.

“It's how I speak to people who don't have a reason to call me.”

“I have a reason,” Gladys scoffed incredulously. “I'm short again and I was calling to see if you could float me a few hundred until payday.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I knew it. I fucking knew it. And I was fucking over it. Yet, this was one conversation I wanted to have face to face. I wanted to be able to look into Gladys' eyes as I told her that I was cutting her off in every way. I wanted to see that flare of anger, the way her mouth scrunched together like a turtle's ass as she realized that I was no longer going to let her sponge off of me.

“We need to talk then,” was what I said.

“Why the hell do we need to talk? Just transfer the goddamned money and you’ll be out of my hair.”

Again, her selfishness knew no bounds. The woman couldn’t accept that it wasn’t *me* who was in *her* hair, but the exact opposite. As I breathed in and out of my nose trying to keep a hold of my patience, Ivy sat next to me holding my hand, silently telling me through her touch that everything was going to be okay.

“Because I said we need to have a discussion first.”

Gladys must have sensed that I wasn’t willing to budge because to my surprise, she willingly agreed. “Fine, where do you want to meet?”

“The park. The bench where we would sleep when we’d get evicted,” I said, recalling the many times we’d ended up sleeping outside in either freezing cold weather or humid heat so sweltering it made it hard to breathe.

“We never slept on no bench!” Gladys lied, her voice tinged with anger from me calling out her shortcomings as a provider.

“Yes, we did. The one that’s near the fountain with the big tree and all the bushes,” I clapped back, knowing full well she didn’t need a reminder. I’d found her there at least a dozen times since I moved out and moved on. It was her go-to place when she was broke, had been kicked out, or couldn’t find a friend’s couch to bunk down on for the night.

“Fine. I guess I can find it since you’re so forthcoming with all these details. What time do you want to meet up?” I

glanced at the clock on my wall. It read just after eight o'clock in the evening. With twilight setting in, I wasn't about to go to the park alone, especially not with her.

"It's going to have to wait until Saturday," I said matter-of-factly. I expected her to argue. To demand that we meet ASAP because of how badly she needed money, but again Gladys surprised me by eagerly agreeing.

"I can do that. I've got a place I can hole up until then," she said offhandedly like she was handling business rather than trying to mooch off her only daughter.

"Good. I'll meet you there at the bench at—" I said just as Ivy held up two fingers while mouthing the word. "I'll meet you there at two. If you're even a minute late, I'll leave."

Gladys hung up abruptly, not sparing me the courtesy of saying goodbye. I ended the call on my end and laid my phone down.

"That bitch has some nerve," Ivy growled again, no doubt itching to punch something.

"Always has, but as of Saturday afternoon, it's no longer my problem. Good ole Gladys is in for a rude awakening."

"Oh?"

"I'm not meeting her to give her money." A slow smile tugged at the corner of my mouth.

"Then why all this business about meeting in the park?"

“I’m going to tell her once and for all that we’re finished. She’s going to learn that I’m cutting her off. No more contact. No more money.”

Ivy let out a joyous yip before throwing her arms around my neck. “That’s perfect! This is going to be so great. I can’t wait to see it all go down.” My best friend continued to scream happily as she about damned near choked me out.

“What makes you think I’m inviting you?”

Ivy pulled back enough to where she looked me straight in the eye. “If you think for one minute I’m going to miss watching you torpedo that heinous beotch, then you’ve got another thing coming!”

“Then I guess it’s official. You get to be the one woman audience that gets to see it all go down.”

“You bet your sweet ass, I will! Oh, this is going to be so great, Rosie. I can’t wait to see the look on her face when it all goes down!”

Ivy shot out a quick text before she and I continued on eating ice cream and watched cheesy 80’s horror flicks—I wasn’t in the mood for romcoms—while planning out what could possibly happen when I reclaimed my freedom from the albatross that had hung off my neck for far too long. All the while, Ivy’s enthusiasm grew, making it seem like there was something she wasn’t telling me, but I chalked it up to her normal enthusiasm. I didn’t want to think about anything going wrong. I’d walked through Hell itself to get here and I wasn’t about to turn back now.

Righting the Wrongs

Alex

“AND YOU SAID THERE’S cops everywhere?” Roman whispered into my ear via my phone.

“Yes. Just like I’ve told you a dozen times now. Everywhere you look, there’s a cop hiding out. And why are you whispering?” I glanced over to the copse of bushes he’d taken shelter in.

“Um, because Rosie’s coming up the walk and I don’t want her to hear me.” I barely heard him because at the same time, I spotted the woman in question walking along the path towards the bench Ivy stated she was slated to meet Gladys at.

Beautiful.

So goddamned beautiful it hurt.

It had been so long since I’d seen her in the flesh and Rosie had only managed to grow more gorgeous.

“Are you even listening to me?” My brother’s annoying whine filled my ear again.

“Yes.” *No.*

How could I pay attention to anything other than the absolute vision of loveliness that had just sat down on a lone bench canopied by a black cherry tree. Dressed in a pale blue dress, Rosie was the image of perfection. Her normal long, flowing locks were tied back in a high ponytail while her face remained bare and natural.

So fucking beautiful.

“Dude, eyes on the prize and pay attention!” Roman snapped, bringing me back to a reality I suddenly had no interest in. All I wanted was to go to Rosie. To throw myself at her feet and beg her for mercy.

“Would you shut up?”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” My brother cut in again.

“And don’t you tell me what to do!”

“I’ll do whatever I want, asshole! It’s a free country.”

“Both of you shut up!” Ivy’s voice cut in, admonishing us. “You’re both acting like assholes and you’re going to blow this thing. I swear, if you two don’t stop bitching like a bunch of spoiled brats, I’m calling your mother.”

Roman and I both went silent. If there was one thing to be feared, it was how close Ivy and Mom had become in the short time they’d known each other. Ivy and Roman ate over at our parents’ house at least three times a week. Mom and Ivy were either shopping or having brunch or whatever just as often. I’d heard Mom say more than once that Ivy was the daughter

she'd always wished she'd had. Meanwhile, Dad had 'advised' Roman that if he didn't marry Ivy, he was certain Mom would divorce him and marry Ivy herself. It got a laugh out of everyone except my stupidly infatuated brother.

"There's no need to get her involved, baby," Roman cooed seductively. "We'll behave. Or at least, I will until I get you alone later."

A playful giggle filled my ear followed by her flirty reply. "Oh? And just *what* do you plan on *doing* to me?"

"Well, first I'm going to strip you down. Then I'm going to lay you out on the bed and ea—"

"Knock it off!" I hissed, not wanting whatever this was going to devolve into to go any further.

"What? What did I do?"

"Your brother is also on this line, you horndog," Ivy admonished him playfully. "But keep that thought in mind because I stopped by that store we went by the other day and got those satin ties that you haven't stopped talking about."

"Could you two please stop? You're going to make me throw up," I griped. "And Ivy, aren't you supposed to be sitting on the bench with Rosie?" I pointed out that Ivy was still thoroughly tucked away in her own hiding spot. A second later, I heard her disconnect and step out of the bushes behind Rosie like a reverse Homer Simpson.

"Was that necessary?" Roman said irritably.

"Yes, it was necessary."

“Even though that was my *girlfriend* I was just talking to?”

“Technically, you were on the verge of having phone sex, so I did what needed to be done.”

“Still rude. You shouldn’t have cut us off like that.”

“Do you want this to work?” I clapped back. “Because the only way this whole set-up is going to work is if your girlfriend keeps her end of the bargain to be with Rosie instead of talking dirty with you.”

“Whatever!” Roman’s half-whispered shout echoed from nearby. “Like you’d know what dirty talk is?”

I shook my head and tuned my brother out, not wanting to hear anything more he said. My nerves were already frayed and he was seriously wearing them even thinner by being his usual self. Just as Roman was droning on about something else, a flicker of movement caught my attention. My eyes shifted across the way to find the same short, emaciated-looking woman headed towards my Rosie. Dressed in clothes that revealed more than they covered and her face covered in a pancake-thick layer of makeup, the woman looked like she was out for the kill. It was clear she believed she was the Big Bad Wolf ready to eat my Little Red Riding Hood. I scoffed through my nose, as I watched her approach, eyes locked on Rosie who was looking the other way, watching a pair of children chase each other while their guardian watched. Gladys had no idea what was in store for her today. The unsuspecting woman had no clue that today was the last day

she'd wreak havoc on anyone's life. Her legacy of manipulation and abuse was over.

“How did you set all this shit up again?” The sudden sound of Roman's voice tore my attention away from the skag that was inching closer and closer to my girl. Just the sight of her made me want to jump out and rush over to protect the woman I loved. I couldn't though. Neither Rosie or that hag Gladys could know I was here. Even though I'd helped to set this up, I needed to stay out of sight. If I made my presence known, this whole thing could blow up in our faces. I wasn't about to do that to my Rosie. I wasn't about to be the reason why she lost her chance to finally have it out with her poor excuse of a mother once and for all. With Ivy seated next to the woman I'd do anything for and the low murmur of police chattering behind me, I hunkered down and waited for the show to begin.

Sh*t's Going Down

Rosie

“IS THIS THE BENCH you told me to meet you at?” Gladys shouted as she came around the bend, instantly spotting me.

“The one where I *supposedly* made you sleep? What a crock.”

I looked up just in time to lock eyes with the devil that was forever on my back. Even from here, I could tell she'd recently been with a man. Her disheveled appearance and the strong scent of stale, musky cologne combined with the distinctive sex smell hung heavy in the open air. Gladys was also still drunk, and if she was drunk, she was sure to be extra mean.

“Thank you for coming,” I said instead of taking her bait. Judging by the tense set to her shoulders, Gladys was itching for a fight. Too bad I wasn't about to give her one.

“We could have been done at your apartment instead of out in the open. I mean, really, Rosie. A public spectacle? I can't believe what a selfish bitch you are sometimes. You know, other people have shit to do with their lives instead of meeting

you in some shitty park at some shitty bench that you have some delusions about.”

Yep. Extra mean.

Whatever. I wasn't about to let it affect me anymore.

“I wanted to meet somewhere neutral. Where there'd be witnesses if you tried to pull something. Again.” I referred to the time where I believed she slipped something into my drink and I woke up to a terrified Ivy the next morning after I'd spent the night unconscious, unintentionally ignoring texts and phone calls, and finding my wallet absent of the two hundred dollars in cash I had in there. In hindsight, I was glad that I hadn't put my credit card back into my wallet after using it for dinner that night. If I had, the odds it would have also disappeared and then maxed out were high.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever, drama queen.” Gladys flicked her hand in the air as if she couldn't care less. “Why don't you quit wasting my fucking time and just give me what I want?” The woman who gave me life came to a stop directly in front of me. She stood dressed in what I called her “bar attire”. A barely-there shirt and a skirt so short that if she even tried to bend over, it would be indecent.

“Does she know she looks like a low-end streetwalker?” Ivy leaned in to whisper in my ear. Gladys' attention shot to my best friend, creating an immediate frown.

“Who invited you?” Gladys sneered while Ivy met her glare with one of her own.

“She did.” My best friend pointed her thumb at me.
“Because she needed support. You know, that thing *you* should have given her but never did because you’re such a selfish bitch!”

“That’s my girl!” A male voice shouted suddenly, instantly grabbing my attention.

“What was that?” I asked, ignoring Gladys for a moment while I scanned our surroundings.

“Probably nothing. Actually, I saw a couple playing around back over that way.” Ivy pointed behind us before grumbling something about kicking Roman’s ass. Choosing to believe her, I turned my focus back to Gladys.

“So, do you have my money?” Gladys wasted no time getting to the point.

Sitting back against the bench, I simply smiled and said, “No.”

“What do you mean no?”

“Just that. No.”

“But you said you’d give me money!”

“I never agreed to give you any money. I said we needed to have a talk and that’s what we’re going to do.”

“Are you serious right now?” Gladys stamped her foot on the ground. “I need that money, Rosie. Are you telling me I came all this fucking way for nothing?”

“Oh, you’re not walking away with nothing.” I couldn’t hold back the grin currently tugging at my mouth. “In fact, you’re definitely leaving here with something. Just not what you want.”

“Then what the fuck is it? A hotel room or something? I’m kind of in dire straits here, so if you’re not going to come through, I’m leaving.” Gladys made like she was going to walk away. It was her tell when she wanted to fake me out. She stopped when she saw I was definitely not taking the bait.

“I’m not fucking around, Rosie,” Gladys warned. “I’m done with this shit. Either give me what I want or you can go fuck yourself.”

“I told you, Gladys. I’m not giving you any money. I’m giving you a final goodbye.”

Gladys’ eyes bulged out as her mouth dropped open. “What the fuck? What the hell does that mean?” Her eyes narrowed as she tried to piece together what I’d said.

“This is goodbye, Gladys. This is the last time you and I will see each other. It’s also the last time I will speak to you. I’m not taking another one of your phone calls. I’m also not ever giving you another cent. I’m not dealing with the toxicity that you bring into my life. I’m washing my hands of you once and for all.”

“You’re what?” Gladys’ face went beet red, almost purple. “What the fuck did you just say to me?”

“I said I’m done. I’m finished with you. You are not to contact me again. I don’t want you showing up at my apartment. If you try to reach out to me, I’m going to block you. I’ve had enough of you taking advantage of me. I’ve had enough of you never being there for me when I needed you. I’m just done.”

“You little selfish bitch!” Gladys’ hand flexed as if she wanted to slap me. “How dare you! After everything I’ve given you? After all I’ve done for you!”

A bitter laugh slipped out of me. “Man, are you delusional?” I shook my head because I just couldn’t believe this. “You’ve *never* given me anything and you’ve certainly never done anything for me.” I scoffed. “Actually, that’s not true,” I added as Gladys’ expression showed she thought she’d successfully changed my mind. “You did give me something.”

“See, I told you—”

“No, Gladys. The only thing you’ve taught me was how to be self-reliant. Growing up with no dad and no mother to rely on taught me that I am the only person I can depend on.”

“And me! You can count on me!” Ivy piped up.

“That goes without saying, Ives.” I reached out and squeezed my best friend’s hand.

“Did this little bitch tell you to do this?”

“You better watch who you’re calling ‘bitch’, you bitch!” Ivy warned, ready to throw down and not giving a shit who saw.

“Yeah! Get ‘er, baby!” Someone shouted close by, causing Ivy to turn around and shush the air. I got to my feet, deciding I’d had enough of this and I’d already spent too much time in Gladys’ nauseating presence.

“No one talked me into anything. I made this decision all on my own because I’m tired of you using me.”

“Using you? I’m your mother! How can I *possibly* be using you?”

“You’re a leech, Gladys, I’m done being your host. Now, I’m going to walk away and I expect you to respect my wishes.”

Gladys raised her arm to slap me when a loud shriek pierced the air. “That’s her! That’s the bitch that tried to sell me!”

My head snapped to the right. Standing no more than hundred feet away was a young, tired and worn out-looking girl of no more than fourteen or fifteen. The girl was dressed in clothes that screamed “for sale” and currently taking offers.

“That’s the bitch that bought me at that auction and then stuck me in that rundown motel where that fat, greasy senator paid her to have sex with me.”

What the fuck?

I shot a look at Ivy who, for some reason, didn’t seem to be as appalled as I was. In fact, she looked rather unaffected. Like she somehow knew this was going to happen. I went to ask her what the hell was going on, but couldn’t because the quiet park suddenly erupted into chaos.

Police officers shot out from everywhere. From behind bushes. Behind trees. From around the bend. One even had pretended to be a hot dog vendor before blowing his cover and jumping into the fray.

I watched with silent shock as the cops immediately took Gladys into custody. A tall, burly officer with a fabulous seventies sitcom mustache, slapped a pair of handcuffs on her. Then came a lengthy list of charges including that she was being arrested for prostitution, possession and distribution of narcotics, and worst of all, promoting prostitution of several minors. All that came before reading her Miranda rights.

My knees gave out as I watched the police officers whisk her away. I could barely recall what was happening. The only thing I remained aware of was that Ivy had been with me the entire time, holding my hand, brushing my hair out of my face, and promising me that I'd never have to worry about Gladys again. All the while, I felt numb.

“Are you okay?” Ivy’s fingers remained threaded through mine as we sat on the bench.

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “I have no idea what to think of what just happened.”

“Do you want me to take you home? I can call us an Uber.”

“No,” I shook my head. “I think I’m going to walk. I need to clear my head and try to make some sense of all this.”

“Keep your phone on,” my friend stated. “That way I can track you on that Find My Phone thingy so I won’t worry.”

“I promise it’s on and I won’t turn it off.” I pulled my cell phone from out of my pocket to show her and soothe her doubts.

“You better not, because if you do, I’m going to hunt you down and kick your ass.” Ivy pulled me in for a hug. “I won’t actually kick your ass, you know. It’ll be more like a stern talking to while making you watch me eat the last of your ice cream.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at my plucky, yet devoted friend. I was so lucky to have her. “I’ll text you when I get home. Will that make you happy?” I continued to hug her back while she rubbed soothing circles over my shoulder.

“Yes. Yes, it will. And you know for what it’s worth, I’m sorry that you had to see all that go down with Gladys, but look at this way. Now you know she’s never going to bother you again and you’re free to live your life without any chains holding you back.”

Ivy was right. Witnessing Gladys go down like that was further confirmation that at long last, I was finally free. I knew I should be rejoicing, but it all felt anticlimactic because I couldn’t call Alex. He’d let me down and even though I wanted nothing more than to call him, I had to admit that it was over between us. Just like Gladys, I was going to have to leave him behind and find a way to navigate the future. I was also going to try to find a way to be happy again, even though I wasn’t sure if that was possible.

Ivy and I said our goodbyes and headed off towards our destinations. By the time I reached home, I had at least six missed texts from her. Replying just once to let her know I was home safe and under the watchful eye of Mr. Darcy, I told her I loved her and thanked her for being with me today.

Ivy: I'll always be there for you. Now, go watch some Gilmore Girls, eat some of that peanut butter ice cream I love, and get a good night's rest. The first day of the rest of your life begins tomorrow.

I went to bed knowing I was well-loved by my best friend and, like she had said, confident that life was bound to get better from here. And it did. It even came with a new and unexpected friend.

An Unexpected Ally

Rosie

SIX DAYS HAD PASSED since Gladys' life of crime came to an end. A six, blissful days of no phone calls. No name-calling. No threats, and most of all, no requests to drain me dry in every way. It also meant I was six days less from saving my bookstore.

Although Agnes assured me that everything was looking up and up on our end, I didn't dare let myself hope. In this scenario, I felt like I needed to be a realist. To look at the picture clearly and prepare for the worst. Prepare for my beloved bookstore to close and for my dream to end.

At least for now.

As I'd been sitting at my kitchen table earlier, looking out the window at the city with Mr. Darcy laying on his side, basking in the sunshine, I'd come to the decision that if I was forced to start over, I would need a new set of ideas. Ideas that would propel my new business to greater heights and make it

even more popular than it was today. That meant treading in the once place I loathed to tread: the big box bookstores.

I loathed big box chain stores. Why? First, there was no individuality. Nothing set them apart from one another. Sure, they had their cafés with handcrafted coffees and fresh from the bakery pastries and sweets that would rot your teeth out in a heartbeat. They also had discounts up the wazoo, hosted slews of book signings, and other fantastic perks, but they had no soul. Nothing warm and inviting like a small, single-owner bookstore had. Not like mine that when it came to heart, mine beat theirs hands down. And that's what mattered and kept people coming in through my door. At least for now. Still lost in thought, I headed into the romance section with the objective to check out the latest releases and see how they were displayed only to bump into someone.

“Oh, excuse me!” I exclaimed, shocked to realize I hadn't been watching where I was going.

“It's quite alright—Miss Cooper!”

In all the bookstores in this city, I had to pick the one where I'd walk smack dab right into the man whose face had become synonymous with the doom of my livelihood.

“Henry Higgins.” My tone betrayed my annoyance despite trying to school my features.

“Miss Cooper.” He seemed just as surprised to see me.
“What a surprise to see you here. Are you in search of a book or just checking out the competition?”

For the first time, maybe ever, Higgins looked back at me wearing a smile instead of the frown I thought was a permanent feature of his face. I was so taken aback that I didn't realize I'd left him hanging, waiting for an answer.

“Um, I'm here to check out the competition,” I said honestly. “I wanted to get ideas for my next book store.”

“You're opening up a second location?”

“No,” I scoffed. “You and the big bad wolf are going to blow my house down to put up some crappy condos or million dollar penthouses, remember?”

“About that—”

“I really don't want to hear any more excuses,” I snapped without meaning to. “I don't want to think about all that mess and *his* role in all of it, if that's okay with you.”

“Understood.” Higgins nodded easily and didn't push further. “What do you like to read?” Not sure of where he was going with this and why he wasn't being his usual jerk self, I decided not to fight. Right now, it wasn't worth it.

“I read everything, but right now, I'm on a young adult kick. But that's not why I'm in the romance section. I'm here more for research.”

“My wife loves young adult. Her favorite is *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green.”

“Your wife has great taste. That's one of my favorites too, but what about you?”

Higgins blushed. The man actually blushed. “This might seem weird, but I’m a *huge* romance fan.”

That was *definitely* not what I was expecting to hear.

“Really?”

Higgins nodded. “Really. I’ve recently discovered a passion for it and well, that’s why I’m here. I came to find a few books to tide me over.” Before I could reply, he added, “I’d rather give my business to your bookstore, but I wasn’t sure I was welcome.”

“We may not be on great terms, but don’t ever think you wouldn’t be welcome in my store. I might hold a grudge about you not getting my fabulous *My Fair Lady* reference, not to mention your involvement in my bookstore’s demise, but I wouldn’t withhold the chance for you to buy a book. I wouldn’t deny someone the chance to read.”

“I feel like I owe you an apology, Miss Cooper.”

“You can call me Rosie.”

“I definitely owe you an apology, Rosie.” Higgins shifted on his feet, holding his jacket that was curled over his arm close to his body. “I want to apologize for how rude I’ve been to you.”

Again, I was absolutely and utterly gobsmacked. “I’m not going to lie. You were really rude and I really didn’t like you because of it.”

“I realize that and I know you probably don’t want to hear this, but it was Alex who made me realize it.”

“Alex? How did Alex make you realize you were being a jerk?”

“It’s quite simple, actually.” Higgins suddenly shifted closer to a display before gently cradling my arm and shifting me out of the way of an oncoming employee carrying a towering stack of books in his arms. “Since all that ugliness happened between the two of you, not to mention that *awful* woman, he and I have become friends.”

“Really?”

“Yes. In fact, I can honestly say he’s become one of my best friends. We talk about everything and that includes him calling me out for treating you so badly.”

“As much as I don’t like him right now, I think I owe Alex a thank you.”

“I’ll make sure he gets it, but he was right. I didn’t realize what an ass I’d become, both at work and at home. I didn’t realize what a dick I was to both my co-workers and my wife, but I’m making an effort to change my behavior and be a better version of myself.”

“Wow, Henry,” I said, awed by his confession. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Would you be willing to start over? Can we wipe the slate clean so we can start off on the *right foot* this time?”

I stuck out my hand, offering it to him. Henry happily accepted and we shook hands, turning a new page. The two of us continued to chat, discussing mutual books we’d read and

liked. Books we didn't. We also discussed something totally unexpected.

“What would you say if I told you I've been thinking about changing my life. That I want to give up the law and maybe think about *writing* a romance novel?”

Again, total surprise.

“Oh, Henry!” I clapped my hands together excitedly. It was everything I could do to not pull him in for a hug. We weren't at that level, yet. “I think that's a wonderful idea. And please don't think I'm being rude, but do you know anything about writing?”

“I actually have another bachelor's degree in English and Creative Writing. The legal degree pays the bills. The other was me following my passion. I've also written several short stories and I write the storylines for the gaming group I joined recently.”

“That's a great start. Would you mind if I recommended a few technical and how-to books to you? Oh, there's also this podcast I feel would benefit you greatly. The guy that runs it is a former editor-turned-million-plus dollar self-published author.” I continued to ramble off names and suggestions while he whipped out his phone and began to take notes. An hour later, Henry and I sat sipping on matching coffees inside the Bellman's cafe with all the books he purchased sitting in a bag at his feet.

“Don't forget to look up that self-publishing course I told you about. It's pumped out several best-selling authors,

including that one you just picked up.” I took a sip of my coffee as Henry pulled out his cell.

“I’ve got it in my phone. I’m going to check it out as soon as I get back to the house.” He held the device up for me to see before pocketing it once again. “I’m so glad I ran into you today. I’m really glad I got the chance to make things right.”

“I’m glad we did, too. And I hope to see you at Rosies are Read.”

“You can expect me to become a regular.”

I smiled, knowing that he meant well, but the likelihood of that happening wasn’t in the cards. “I look forward to it.”

Henry and I finished our coffees before heading out and going our own ways. On the slow walk back to my apartment, I couldn’t help but think back on how unexpected today had been. Instead of trudging through a large, soulless bookstore I loathed to make a plan to make my place ‘more marketable’, I ended up making a friend out of a would-be enemy and, for a moment, forgot about the axe looming over my head. I almost felt like things were going to be alright. That no matter what happened, Mr. Darcy and I would land on our feet. That we weren’t losing our lives, we were being led down a path towards something better. Most of all, I felt like the bleak future I’d been dreading wasn’t so bleak after all. And for the first time since it all began, I felt like maybe my life wasn’t ending, but was just beginning.

Waving the White Flag

Alex

“I RAN INTO HER at Bellman’s Books.” Henry sat across from me in our executive meeting room. Henry and I had both arrived at the same time after receiving a text message from my father instructing us to meet him there.

Ever since things blew up in my face, Henry and I had become good friends. We met every week for lunch and sometimes for coffee too. I found the time with him therapeutic. Having someone who just listens and doesn’t always offer well-meaning advice was a breath of fresh air. Unlike my family, Henry asked what I want, what I planned to do as far as Rosie is concerned. While those who love me mostly handed out advice, he rarely did unless he felt it was pertinent to my plans. I also liked to have a true, genuine friend.

“Saw who?” I said, distracted by what else? Thoughts of Rosie.

“Rosie. I saw your Rosie.”

“My Rosie was at Bellman’s? Why was she there? She hates that place.” That shocked me. Rosie was vehemently anti-big box bookstores and avoided them at all cost. To hear that she’d willingly gone in one was definitely a surprise.

“I was looking for something to read while waiting for my wife to finish having her hair done. I was in the romance section when she and I ran into each other. She was there because she was checking out displays to get ideas for her shop.”

“Is she okay? Did she ask about me?”

Henry smiled sympathetically, silently telling me that no, my girl hadn’t mentioned me whatsoever. “No, but don’t let that discourage you,” my friend offered. His continual encouragement to not give up was sometimes the only thing that kept me hanging on.

“I’m trying not to, but it’s been over a month since it all happened. I—I just don’t know if I can wait much longer.”

“Gentlemen,” my father announced as he suddenly entered the room, followed by Roman, a serious-looking man wearing a gray suit, and quite possibly the tallest woman I’d ever seen. Both Henry and I rose to our feet to shake hands with our guests.

“Alex, I’d like to introduce you to Mr. Pfeiffer and Agnes Culpepper. Henry, I’m sure you need no introduction.” Henry swallowed a hard gulp before nodding. I reached out to shake their hands, first shaking Pfeiffer’s since he was directly behind my father, and then Mrs. Culpepper’s.

“So, you’re the infamous Alex,” the statuesque woman said sternly before giving my hand a firm squeeze. One that made my fingers go slightly numb.

“Pardon me,” I said, slightly taken aback. “Do I know you?”

“No, but I know you and frankly, I don’t think I like you.”
The woman squeezed again before letting me go.

“What did I do?”

The statuesque woman leaned in and said, “You broke my friend Rosie’s heart.”

You could hear a pin drop with how silent it became. Looking into this amazon’s strong, intimidating eyes, I immediately felt like a giant piece of shit. Again.

“You know Rosie?”

“We’ve been friends for years. She and I also happen to have shops in the building you’re trying to sell. Mine is the florist. Isn’t that right, *Mr. Higgins?*”

Henry gulped again. “That would be correct, Mrs. Culpepper.”

The amazon smiled knowingly, like the mouse cornered by the cat and had nowhere to go. “Rosie’s, as you know, is that cute little bookstore, but I’m sure you already know that.”

I did. I’d spent so much time there with her. I enjoyed watching her in her element, interacting with her customers, running her business, and looking the happiest I’d ever seen her outside my arms.

“You’re the one who’s like a mother to her,” I said, recalling the many times Rosie had said just that. Agnes Culpepper and her wife had stepped in where Gladys had failed. They’d supported my girl during rough times. Cheered her up when Gladys broke her heart over and over again and always made sure that both she and Mr. Darcy were fed when times were lean. I owed this woman everything because I had no doubt she was supporting my girl through this rough and hopefully, temporary time of strife.

“She’s like my daughter. That’s why I’m not overly fond of you right now. No one makes that girl cry and gets away with it.”

Everyone else had taken their seats while Agnes and I continued to talk about Rosie.

“I never meant to hurt her,” I admitted. “If I could go back and fix everything. To tell her the truth instead of being the dipshit I was, I’d have already done it. I hope you know how important she is to me. I love her so much and it’s killing me that I hurt her.”

“I think I dislike you a little less now,” Agnes said evenly. “I hear the right words coming out of your mouth and after getting to know your father and your brother, I have no doubt that you’re going to do the right thing where she’s concerned.”

“I want to. I’m just not sure she’ll give me the chance to.”

“Give her time to get out of her head and process everything a little more. She’ll eventually come around.”

“How can you be sure?”

Agnes smirked as if she had the key that unlocked all the secrets in the world. “Because I know my girl and she still loves you. Of that, I’m sure. I’m also sure she’s forgiven you but just doesn’t want to admit it yet.”

“You think she’s forgiven me?” A rush of excitement coursed through my body, bringing with it hope that maybe, just maybe, this was going to all work out okay.

“It’s what you do when you love someone. I know it’s been a while, but continue to be patient. Sooner or later, she’s going to wave the white flag and talk to you.”

Once again hope flooded my every cell, leaving me slightly giddy. The world, which seemed dull, drab, and lifeless this morning, was now brilliant again, overflowing with color and possibility.

My Rosie still loved me.

I had no doubt that Agnes spoke the truth. She didn’t seem like the type of person to bullshit anyone and that you could take what she said as gospel. And that was just what I was going to cling to. Hope and faith. Faith that eventually, my girl would give me a second chance. A chance I wasn’t about to waste.

The next hour and a half was spent going over the details of the deal and what an art appraiser had found. If my father hadn’t already agreed to call off the deal, thanks in part to my mother, who was one of Rosie’s most loyal customers it

seems, the appraisal results would have. Turns out Rosie's building was a genuine time capsule. A testament to this city's history and the city now wanted to designate it as such. By the end of the meeting, all parties were satisfied with the results and left to go on their own ways. All except for Agnes and myself.

"There's one more thing I want to tell you," Agnes said as she stood up from where she'd been sitting to look me straight in the eye.

"Yes?"

"If you ever hurt Rosie again, you're going to answer to me. Got it?"

"Loud and clear."

Agnes left with a satisfied nod, her promise still lingering in the air. I sat back down and thought about how my life had changed in just a handful of months. How I'd gone from an unattached workaholic to a lovestruck idiot who'd made the biggest mistake of his life. I also decided that harboring on that mistake wasn't good for our future. I wouldn't forget it. Oh no, that wasn't ever going to happen. I would use it to make wiser, smarter decisions in the future. Ones that didn't end up with me almost losing the love of my life.

Victory is So Sweet

Rosie

“DOES ANYONE CARE TO tell me why we’re in Chomsky’s backroom again? I’ve got a line out the door and I can’t leave my guys alone for too long,” Chuck the Butcher complained as he came in and took a seat amongst the rest of the store owners.

Standing stoically at the front, Agnes wore an understanding smile. “I know it’s midday and I know this is inconvenient, but I promise, what I have to tell you is going to make the inconvenience welcome.”

“This better be good,” someone grumbled behind me.

“I think it’s good news. My spirit guides and the tarot reading I did earlier suggested good news was coming today.” Our local mystic, Madame Melinda, owner of the new age store, sat beaming, assured in her belief that positive things were on the menu.

“Well, those cards were right.” Agnes clapped her hands together and gained everyone’s attention. “I again, I know everyone’s busy, but I felt this was too important for a phone call or going door to door.” We all sat with bated breath as she paused dramatically and left us hanging for a few excruciating seconds.

“Well? Are you going to tell us or not?” Chomsky himself barked with anticipation.

“Our lawyer called a short while ago. It seems that the guy that came out here to look at the paintings and the mural *are* Banemores!” A short, ear-piercing cry rose from the crowd but Agnes was quick to tame it. “Not only that, but the genealogist was able to confirm that Banemore *was born* here in the building. The top floor to be exact. His parents rented it out when it was still an entire room instead of broken up into smaller spaces.”

A thrill rippled through me as I listened to Agnes confirm that not only was the city going to officially designate it as a historical landmark, but that the lawyer representing us all had spoken with Alex’s dad. Personally. Not through his team of lawyers. Agnes filled us in on the details of their meeting, letting us all know that the elder Harrison had had a change of heart and even if the building hadn’t turned out to have historical significance, he was nixing the demolition regardless.

“He said there are other more advantageous spots in town.” Agnes finished just as everyone jumped out of their seats.

Hugs and more hugs and happy tears filled the room as we all celebrated our victory. My own eyes flooded more than once knowing that the heart of this community, the first place where I felt like I actually belonged, was no longer in danger and no one could ever threaten us again.

“This is a happy occasion, but you look like you want to cry.” The woman herself came over and threw an arm over my shoulders.

“These are happy tears.” I tried to lie, but she saw right through me.

“Then why do I see sadness in your eyes?” Agnes pulled me close and gave me a motherly squeeze. The kind I’d never experienced until I met her. “This is about that fella of yours, isn’t it?”

Again, I couldn’t lie and nodded my head.

“Did you decide what you’re going to do about all of that?”

“No, not yet,” I said. “There’s something else I need to deal with first.”

While I had decided to let Alex go, I couldn’t bring myself to physically say it. Instead, I pushed it back and tried to focus on the future that no longer looked so bleak.

“Well, whatever it is, I hope it works out. You don’t deserve to be unhappy, Rosie. You’re one of the best people I know and I think you deserve nothing but the best.”

Another wave of tears coursed down my already damp cheeks. I wrapped my arms around my friend, thanking her for

everything she'd done and for always being there. Our group allowed ourselves a few more minutes to celebrate our victory over the big, bad wolf before reluctantly heading back to our respective jobs.

“Well?” Maggie’s eager face lit up when I walked in the front door. “What happened? What did they say?” I’d told Maggie all about the building drama and even though she knew there was a chance that she might lose this job, she’d still been all in on sticking around no matter what.

“Well, it depends whether you want to go full-time or not?”

“Omgee!” Maggie squeed as she jumped up and down, clapping her hands in joy. “Are you telling me the building’s saved?”

“The city’s going to designate it as a historical landmark. Even if it hadn’t, the lawyer spoke with the building’s owner and they came to the decision that it wasn’t in the best interest to tear it down or destroy our community.”

“This is so great!” Maggie was nearly in tears, she was so happy. “Do you mind if I go call my boyfriend really quickly and tell him the news?”

“Please. You’re due for your break anyway.”

Skipping around the counter, Maggie hugged me tight before rushing towards the back, phone already attached to her ear. I stood and took in the business I’d fought to build and no longer had to fear losing. Everything had worked out for the best and Rosies are Read Books would live to see another day.

Arming myself with a grin, I forced back the negative and focused on the positive. The rest of the day flew by and by its end, a text chain between all the shop owners had been created and before I knew it, they were planning on throwing a block party to celebrate. A block party that I really didn't feel like attending, but by the time I'd closed up for the night, I'd sworn to myself that I would attend because this was a victory worth celebrating. The people who had become my chosen family deserved to celebrate this win. So, I would go and join them. Even if my life right now really didn't have much desire for festivities.

A Party Time Surprise

Rosie

THE BLOCK PARTY

“Rosie!” Ivy shouted my name just as I finished speaking with Madame Melinda who had invited her nephew with the sole intention of introducing him to me. While sweet, there was a major flaw in her plan. Her handsome nephew had decided to bring along his even more handsome boyfriend, Gerald.

“Anyways, we need to go mingle,” Madame Melinda) said as she motioned for the two men to follow her.

“Rosie!” Ivy’s shout grew closer. I looked up to see her rushing towards me with Roman trailing behind her. Two other people followed at their heels. An older, distinguished looking gentleman and much to my surprise, my favorite customer Mrs. H.

“Mrs. H.!” I cried out as I ran over to greet her.

“Rosie, my dear!” Mrs. H. pulled me in for a hug before letting me go.

“What are you doing here? I didn’t know the customers were invited too.” I looked towards her, to the man standing next to her, and to Roman before turning my attention back to her.

“I came here to celebrate with my son and his lovely girlfriend,” she explained as she beamed at me with a wide, happy smile.

“Wait?” I looked at all of them again. “What do you mean ‘your son and his girlfriend’?”

“Roman is my son,” she explained proudly. “And this lovely young woman is his girlfriend, but I’m sure you already know that, seeing she’s your best friend.”

“Alex is your son?” I couldn’t believe it. The woman who was often the brightest spot of my day was the mother of the man I still loved.

“Alex is my oldest. You have no idea how disappointed I was in him when I found out about what he did to you. He was definitely in the doghouse for quite a while.”

I wanted to brush it all off as if it were nothing, but I just couldn’t. I’d always been open and honest with Mrs. H. and that wasn’t about to change. “Yeah, it surprised me too, but I’ve got to stop wallowing.”

“That you do, my dear. That you do, but if I can say one thing? As a mother?”

I nodded.

“Don’t be afraid to rip his ass a new one, but also don’t be afraid to hear him out too. I know your heart is broken, but something tells me that things aren’t over between the two of you.”

“See? What did I tell you? I told you she was going to say something about them getting back together,” Roman interrupted unhelpfully.

“Roman, my dearest.”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Will you please shut up?” Ivy elbowed him in the ribs before wrapping her arm around his waist.

“Like I was saying,” Mrs. H. shot both Ivy and her son a silent warning. “Don’t be afraid to talk things out and listen to one another. If we hadn’t,” she looked at her husband who affectionately wrapped an arm around her waist. “I would have missed out on marrying the love of my life and having the family I always dreamed of.”

Even though my mind told me to forget all about Alex, I took Mrs. H.’s words to heart. Maybe someday down the road when my heart had healed somewhat, I’d reach out and let him explain himself. Until then, I would continue to keep my distance from Alex Harrington because even now, being surrounded by his family, I realized that despite what I’d told myself, the wound was still as fresh and raw as it was when I lost him.

The five of us spent the rest of the night together celebrating the building's victory and cheering towards a long, happy, and successfully abundant future. The one thing no one mentioned was where Alex was and why he had chosen not to show up tonight to join in on our celebrations. Over and over, I told myself I didn't care and tried to convince myself that what he did was his life was his business. My brain bought it, hook, line, and sinker. My heart, however, refused to listen and I doubted it ever would.

History Gives Us Another Chance

Rosie

“I’M SO HAPPY,” MAGGIE said excitedly as she stood next to me, watching and waiting as I opened up the bookstore. “I can’t believe all that happened. I didn’t think miracles happened anymore.”

“Neither did I,” I said back as I turned the key in the lock and smiled at the familiar click of the lock’s inner mechanism doing its job. “But apparently they do and I’m glad we got our storybook moment.”

I sighed deeply as I opened the door and held it back, allowing Maggie to go ahead and begin our opening duties. It had been one week since the block party and I couldn’t be happier.

I remained outside for a moment, silently celebrating our good fortune and the simple fact that my bookstore would live to see another day. I also found myself filled with regret.

Regret over putting Alex on mute until last night when, after finishing a couple bottles of strong wine with Ivy, I drunkenly sent him a text confessing I missed him. That I loved him.

Did I regret it?

Honestly? No. I didn't regret it whatsoever, but I felt like I should. Instead, I poured my heart out to him, explaining everything that happened with Gladys. About how glad I was that his family had changed their minds about the building, and most importantly, how much he meant to me. I also dove in deep and confessed just how *much* he'd hurt me with his omission. If he'd trusted me enough to tell the truth, I would have forgiven him and we wouldn't be apart right now. But we were. We were no longer together and thanks to copious amounts of wine, I confessed that I wished we still were.

I woke up this morning parched, with a slight headache, and yet feeling better than I had in weeks. A lightness had replaced the heaviness that had weighed down my shoulders and worsened the ache in my neck. A lightness that spoke of good things on the horizon despite it all.

That same lightness followed me into the shower. It was there while Mr. Darcy and I ate our breakfast—me, oatmeal and him, his beloved shrimp. It was with me as I made my work and greeted a beaming, overjoyed Maggie, and it would be with me for the rest of the day. I could feel it in my bones.

“Did you want me to start setting up that display?” Maggie asked as I stood behind the counter, lost in thought. I looked over to see her putting the lid back on the coffee carafe before

making sure there were enough cups and that the creamer and sweeteners were full.

“Yes, but I’ve decided I want to put it by the register rather than in the back. It should be someplace where everyone can see it.” I spoke of a book series by a local self-published author that had gone viral. Over the past few days, I’d had scores of customers come in looking for her novels. Fortunately, she was a friend of Maggie’s and we were able to get several copies in.

“I’m going to send her a photo when I’m done. She’s going to love it.”

“Has she mentioned anything else about coming in to do a reading?” I turned my back to put a few books that we were holding on to the shelf just as the bell overhead rang.

“Yeah, she said—Holy shit! You’re back!”

“What?” I laughed to see why Maggie had taken such a strange turn but when I did, I found myself face to face with the man I’d messaged last night.

“Rosie.” Alex beamed as he stood there smiling at me. He’d passed over his usual, well-fitted suit and stood in a dark gray henley and a worn pair of faded jeans. The man was delicious in a suit, but dressed like this? He was downright sinful.

“Alex,” I said back, my tongue suddenly two-sizes too big. “What are you doing here?”

“I was hoping we could talk?” The corner of his mouth tipped up as we held each other’s gazes. “I came to see if

maybe you were free to go get a coffee?”

“She is! She’s totally free!” Maggie shouted as she answered for me. I shot her a look that said, *what the hell* while she continued to grin.

“Don’t you worry, Rosie. I’ve got this all handled. And if anything happens, I’ll call Agnes.” My newfound friend abandoned her position at the door to come around and practically push me out the door. Alex’s laugh boomed through the air as Maggie ordered us to leave and not come back for at least a good hour.

“Is she always that animated?” Alex asked as we started walking towards the intersection. Neither of us needed to say anything to know where we were headed. Bean There and Gone. The place where our love story began.

“She is, especially since we don’t have to worry about the store closing anymore.”

Alex said nothing as the light changed and we crossed to the other side. It was only once we arrived in front of the coffee shop and I was headed towards the door that he reached out and stopped me.

“Rosie—” he whispered my name as his fingers gently grasped my arm and slid down until my fingers were wrapped in his. His face was tight with remorse. It was the first time I’d seen him bear the weight of what he felt and that weighed heavily upon me.

“What?” I squeezed his fingers, silently reassuring him that whatever it was that he had to say, it was okay.

“I know I can’t change what’s happened between us,” he began, taking a deep breath before continuing. “And I honestly thought it was over, or at least until I got your text last night. It ... it led me to believe ... that it’s not over.”

“It’s not.”

“Did you mean it?” His blue orbs stared intensely into mine. “Did you mean it when you said you missed me? That you loved me?”

“I did.” There was no hesitation in my answer. I’d already admitted it to him, so why hold back?

Alex’s mouth curved into that smile I loved so much. The one he’d worn every moment since we met. “I love you, Rosie, and I’ve missed you so fucking much, but I need to know you forgive me. That you know I stupidly kept all that from you because I was scared to lose you.”

“I know and I understand why you did it, and I forgive you. Can you forgive me, too?”

“There’s nothing you need to be forgiven for.” A second later, Alex’s arms were banded around me, holding me tightly against him. “I am so sorry, my love,” he whispered as he buried his face against my neck. “I’m so sorry and I promise I’ll never betray your trust again.”

“I’m sorry too.” My voice was thick with emotion.

“I told you, there’s nothing you have to apologize for.”

“But I do. I shouldn’t have just cut you off like that. I should have told you how I felt instead of doing what I always do and shut down. If you’re making a promise, so am I. I promise I won’t ever go silent on you like that again. If something’s wrong, I’ll talk to you. I won’t ghost you.”

Alex captured my mouth and kissed me, hard and slow for all of the city to see. It could have been hours or it could have been minutes that we stood there, making up and making out, both full of forgiveness and ready to start again.

“Let’s go back to my place,” Alex whispered against my lips as he held me tight against him. So tight I could *feel* just how eager he was to get me alone.

“Too far,” I barely managed between his all-consuming kisses.

“Your place then.”

“Still too far.”

“Then where?”

“The stockroom.”

“Sounds perfect.”

By the time we arrived back at the bookstore, Maggie had everything under control, including waiting on the single customer. Alex eagerly grabbed my hand and pulled me back to the stockroom, not giving me a chance to explain to Maggie where we were going or that we’d be back soon. Once he had me where he wanted me, the man I loved locked the door, shoved a couple of boxes against it, and proceeded to ‘make it

up' to me over and over as if we had never been apart. I'm surprised Maggie wasn't beating down the door with the way Alex made me scream his name as I came hard, surrendering to the pleasure that only he could give me. By the time we reappeared an hour later, Maggie had closed the store with a sign stating we were out to lunch and would be back in a half-hour.

"It seems like we've got an extra thirty minutes on our hands," Alex growled as he pulled my back to his front. He dipped his head low and nipped my neck, making me squeal.

"How would you like to spend it, my dear?" I turned to face him and looped my arms around his neck.

"I'd like to spend it under you." He kissed me. "Over you." Another kiss. "Next to you. *Inside* you." Yet another kiss, this time just below my ear. "Any way you'll have me."

"Then I guess we better get busy. Those are some lofty plans for such little time."

"We've got all the time in the world, Rosie. All the time in the world."

Happily Ever After

Alex

THREE MONTHS LATER

“Where are we going?” Rosie giggled as I held her hand tightly in mine.

“I told you, it’s a surprise.”

“A surprise that requires driving across town and a ride in an elevator?”

“You know I only want the best for my baby.”

Rosie giggled again. “I know, I’m just really curious.”

Pulling her to me, I gently kissed her, taking care not to disturb the black sleep mask I’d slipped over her eyes before we left her apartment. An apartment she was in the process of moving out of because she’d more or less been living with me. Even Mr. Darcy now called my high-rise home. A place where he enjoyed endless amounts of shrimp, courtesy of yours truly, and spent his days sitting atop his cat tree while watching the

city below, joyously accepting his position as a four-legged supreme being for all to worship.

The elevator came to a soft stop before the doors opened. Threading my fingers through Rosie's, I led her out into the hallway and over to a short stairwell.

"There's a small set of eight stairs. Do you think you can make it or do I need to carry you?"

"I don't know, Alex." Rosie's grin brought a glorious blush to her cheeks. One that came after every orgasm I'd given her. I swept her up off her feet without waiting for her answer. Carrying my breathtakingly beautiful woman in my arms, I made quick work of the steps before opening the door at the top and pushing it open.

A loud, joyous cry erupted as a soft, cool breeze blew against us.

"What?" Rosie gasped as I set her down onto her feet and gently removed the sleep mask from her face. Her eyes went wide as she took in what I'd had set up. A table draped in a cream-colored tablecloth, bearing a bucket of chilled champagne and several burning votive candles set the theme while dozens of fairy lights twinkled over our heads.

"Surprise, my love," I said just before Rosie jumped into my arms and buried her face in the crook of my neck. I wrapped my arms around her and simply her, letting nothing come between us. "Do you like it?" I asked a few minutes later. Rosie's sniffles were the answer I needed.

“Like it?” She pulled back just enough to meet my eye. I studied her features as they went from shock to happy to elated back to happy. “Oh, Alex! I love it.” She hugged me tighter. “No one’s ever done something like this for me before. I can’t believe you set all this up? It must have taken forever.”

“It wasn’t anything that Henry and his wife couldn’t handle?”

“Henry did this?”

“He sure did, along with his wife. Did you know her name is Eliza?”

“Oh my gosh! Like *My Fair Lady*!”

I laughed and nodded. “Just like *My Fair Lady*.”

“When did you all have time to do this?”

“When he and I met for coffee the other day, I mentioned I wanted to do something special for you and he stated his wife decorated event spaces and suggested I hire her. Right now, I’m thinking I made the right choice.”

“I’ll have to thank him next time he comes into the shop.”

“He told me now that the two of you have buried the hatchet, he’s become a regular.”

“He sure has. He’s the one that suggested putting the free coffee carafe at the door. He brought me some research showing that it helps keep customers inside the store longer which in turns leads to a purchase, and so far, he’s been right.

Plus, it helps tide me over between my Bean There and Gone breaks.”

A laugh rose up from my chest as I held my woman tighter. “Are you happy?” I asked her.

Rosie held me close, her hand now buried in my hair at the nape of my neck. “I’m so happy, Alex. I don’t think there’s anything in this world that could make me happier.”

I’d planned on doing this when the time was right and with those words, I knew that time had come. Stepping back, I untangled myself from her and promptly knelt down onto one knee. Rosie gasped as she quickly realized what was happening.

“Alex?” she asked, her voice whisper-soft.

“Rose Marigold Cooper,” I said before drawing in a deep, steadying breath. “I wasn’t the type of man that believed in love at first sight. That was until I saw you. And I did, Rosie. I loved you from the second I saw you. I loved every moment we shared together. I loved our time at the beach. I loved you during the time we spent apart. I’ve loved all of it and I will continue to love every second I get to spend with you for the rest of our lives. Will you please make me the happiest man in the world? Would you marry me?”

Rosie’s reply, “Yes!” echoed out across the rooftops of the city, rising up above the traffic and other white noise. “Oh my gosh, Alex! Yes! Yes, I’ll marry you.”

A second later, a deafening roar of cheer drowned her out. Glancing over, we both watched as our friends and family came out from their respective hiding places to celebrate this new stage of our lives. One that would end with Rosie taking my last name.

“I didn’t know anyone was here!” Rosie cried out, tears in her eyes as she took in all the smiling, happily laughing faces of those we loved.

“It was so hard trying to keep quiet, my dear.” Mom stepped out from the crowd and rushed over to us. Wrapping us both in her arms, she choked out how happy she was and welcomed Rosie to our family. My father and everyone else were quick to follow her in congratulating us. By the time we’d thanked everyone, Roman busted out the champagne and began filling glasses while Ivy distributed them. I couldn’t care though. I didn’t need champagne. I had everything I wanted and would never take it for granted again for as long as I lived.

The next hour was spent much with us mingling amongst everyone, never taking more than a step away from the other. It was only when everyone’s enthusiasm seemed to temper down that I finally pulled Rosie away to a dark corner and kissed her for the first time as her fiancé.

“I hate to tell you this, but ours isn’t the first kiss tonight.” She smirked as she stood, her arms looped around my neck.

“What do you mean?”

Rosie nodded her head over towards the bar where my brother and Ivy both stood. I grimaced as I watched him

practically inhale her face. Not to be out done, Ivy grasped each cheek of Roman's ass and kneaded them like she was making dough. Rosie laughed as I fought against the dry heave building at the base of my throat.

"I swear, those two," she muttered happily as she shook her head. Drawing her closer, I held her so there was no space between us.

"They're gross, right?" I leaned in and pressed my lips against the soft skin under her ear. Rosie stood facing Roman and her best friend who had been attached at the hip since they arrived.

"Who would have thought that would have happened?" Rosie giggled, burying both the sound and her smile behind a bubbling glass of champagne.

"I surely didn't. They don't have much in common, so I'm not sure if I'm sure that's going to last."

"You know what they say, though?" I kissed her again before looking back at my brother who was unabashedly making out with Ivy, despite this being *my and Rosie's* engagement party and that our parents were in attendance.

I mean, really? Get a room.

"Opposites attract?"

"They do. Look at us? I'm the jerk who was born with the silver spoon in his mouth and you're the beautiful, independent, intelligent, and hella sexy bookshop owner I just can't keep my hands off of."

Rosie laughed lightly as she slapped my shoulder. “Are you trying to say that maybe they’ll work out?”

“Stranger things have happened. Besides, Mom’s already gearing up to start planning their wedding.”

“All of a sudden, I feel really bad for Ivy.”

“Why’s that?”

“Between your mom and her mother, she won’t stand a chance at getting the wedding she wants.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Does what bother me?”

“That you don’t have that.”

Rosie’s smile bloomed and lit up her face. “Oh, Alex, but I do. You’re forgetting who your mother is. I’d barely had a chance to say I’d marry you before she announced she was going to ‘swing by’ tomorrow with a few bridal magazines that just happened to be lying around. Oh, and that she has a friend who can get me an appointment at Kleinfeld’s.”

“I don’t know what that is, but that woman *never* misses an opportunity.”

“Especially if it involves her son and the soon-to-be daughter-in-law that she just so happens to adore tying the knot.”

“Especially if it’s about us getting married.” With a soft tug, I pulled her body flush against mine. Close enough for her to feel the ‘growing’ situation I had going on down south.

“Speaking of weddings,” I pressed my hips against hers.

“What do you say we cut out early and get a jumpstart on the honeymoon?”

“Practice makes perfect and right now, I can’t think of anything I want more.”

“I love you, Rosie. So, so much. I’m so grateful you gave us a second chance.” I pulled away and took her hand.

“I love you, too, Alex, and if you’re a good boy and hurry us the hell out of here, I’ll give you a third chance. A fourth. A fifth—”

Alex wasted no time getting us out of there or across town back to the apartment where I gave him all the chances. All night long. For as long as we both shall live.

Making the Same Mistake. Again.

Ivy

FINAL

A shrill, piercing noise shattered the peace of my slumber. Stretching out, I tried to ignore it, choosing to sink back into the plush, comfortable cloud I was laying on. The loud, angry tone continued to scream not caring that it woke me up from the best sleep I'd had in months. Refusing to open my eyes, I reached over blindly to shut it off when I stopped. That wasn't my alarm and this most definitely *wasn't* my bed. No springs stabbed me in the back. No uncomfortable hollow dip in the center of the mattress. No, I was definitely not in my apartment or in my bedroom. That could only mean ...

There was no slow dawn of realization of where I was and *who* I was with.

“It’s okay. I’ll shut it off, baby. Go back to sleep.” A deep voice whispered against my skin before he silenced the alarm and rolled over. I listened to his breathing even out as memories of last night flooded back.

Roman.

I was with Roman. In his bed, resting up after a night of athletic, vigorous sex that left me sore in places I didn’t know existed.

How the fuck did this happen? How did I end up here with him where we fucked on every available surface in his home. Rosie and Alex. That’s how. That stupid lunch had led to more which ultimately led to this.

My eyes flew open as it all came back with stunning clarity. I’d done it. I’d repeated the mistake I vowed I’d never, ever make again: I slept with my boss.

And shit, did I like it.

I fucking *loved* it.

That didn’t mean I would repeat it. Oh no, despite everything, I couldn’t be the girl who eventually got her heart broken by another millionaire, socialite playboy. If Alex and the office gossip was to be believed, Roman’s reputation for female conquests was as frequent as it was extensive. Who knew how long he’d string me along before he cut bait and flung me back into the sea? I had no idea and I wasn’t about to find out. Instead, I was going to forget what I’d done here and

we were going to go back to a strictly professional relationship.

With my heart racing against my chest, I hopped out of bed, taking the top sheet with me to cover up my bits until I found my clothes. Which I eventually did after my search led me to the living room that looked like a cyclone had hit it. Roman's tie hung from the light fixture over the kitchen island. My blouse and his shirt were lying on opposite ends of the couch. His pants were pooled beside the refrigerator. Just where he'd left him after he'd taken me against the sturdy appliance and had me screaming his name until I was hoarse. My purse lay on its side. Its contents half-spilling out across the crisp marble floor. I eventually found everything except my underwear. Unable to recall what had happened to them, I left them behind as I rushed to get dressed. I was eager to get out of here before Roman came looking for me. I needed to get the hell out of here and back to my apartment where I could get my head on straight and process the major mistake I'd made by letting my boss fuck me across his apartment.

I was ready in less than a minute, although I gave off serious walk-of-shame vibes. I didn't care though. There was too much to lose. Too much was at risk. If I continued down this path, Roman would no doubt do what my shithead ex did. Dump me and give me the boot, leaving me jobless once again and struggling to find a job in a city where I was blackballed.

No, I thought to myself as I gathered the contents of my purse and shoved them inside the small clutch. I wasn't going to go down without a fight, and when I mean a fight, I mean I

wasn't going to repeat the mistakes of my past. I was going to forget this ever happened. I wasn't going to encourage Roman whatsoever from now on because I couldn't lose my job. I'd only gotten it because Royce loathed Roman and hadn't thought to call him when he was slandering my name all over town. Hence why I needed to do things differently. I needed to keep a level head and to stay out of Roman's very well-endowed pants. I wasn't about to let anything ruin this job. And if that meant avoiding Roman Harrington for the rest of my life, well then, that was just what I would do.

Somehow I managed to make it to the elevator and out of the building without Roman waking up and chasing after me. After a short cab ride home, one where the cabbie kept giving me the eye, I went upstairs, got undressed, and showered the night of hot, toe-curling, filthy best-sex-I've-ever-had off my body. Too bad it didn't erase the memory of Roman's cock filling me so completely, leaving me begging for more. That, despite how fucking fantastic, was just something I'd have to learn to live without. I had priorities I had to focus on. Priorities that were my job and providing for myself. What wasn't important was allowing myself to get closer to him. Even if I thought his dad was adorable and I absolutely loved his mom. I had to focus on my goals and not focus on the six-foot, hazel-eyed living embodiment of Michelangelo's David. I had too much at stake and too much to lose.

So why did I feel like I was making a mistake?



Ivy and Roman's story continues in *Climbing Ivy*. Coming soon.



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Also By

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank my friends and family for their encouragement and support.

I'd especially like to dedicate this to the memory of my friend Tim. A hilarious, all-around great guy with the best stories and the inspiration for Chapter Eight's title. You are missed each and every day.

About the Author