

Signed,
SEALED,
Delivered



JULIANA SMITH

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“Penpals to lovers might be my new favorite trope. Full of Juliana’s signature wit, sugary sweetness, and off-the-charts tension, *Signed, Sealed, Delivered* is one you won’t want to miss.” – Madison Wright, author of *Just Go With It*

“*Signed, Sealed, Delivered* is the sweetest penpals to lovers roomance you’ll ever read. Smith’s latest is fresh and funny, and you’ll fall in love with these characters instantly.”– Amanda Chaperon, author of *Every Rule Worth Breaking*

“*Signed Sealed, Delivered*, is packed full of laugh out load and utterly sweet moments that will leave you with the best kind of book hangover.” – Kelsey Whitney, author of *Dear Adam*

To the people pleasers. It's okay to say no sometimes.

And to my dad, for raising me in a household where music
was poured out everyday.

CHAPTER ONE

Calla



Age 13:

To: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

From: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

To my new friend,

Hello, howdy, bonjour,

Looks like you're my assigned partner in our pen pal partnerships group.

Since we have to keep this "anonymous," you can call me Lily. It's not my real name. And since we'll be doing this for the next six months, I have to ask you the following questions. No point in working hard on this if we don't even like each other. There is only one right answer to each, so watch your mouth...or your words, I guess.

- 1. Which Pop-Tart flavor is the best?*
- 2. What would you name your pinkie toe if it suddenly became its own person?*

3. *Who would you cast to play you in a movie about your life?*

I have more, but I'll go easy on you for now.

No pressure, but these questions will determine whether we can truly be friends. And I'm pretty cool, so if I were you, I would answer wisely.

Good luck.

Your almost friend,

Lily

There are over sixty ways to combine English cuss words. And I'd used almost all of them in the last five minutes.

“Come on, you piece of metal donkey. *Move.*”

I banged the steering wheel with both hands, willing my car to get me another forty feet. Just far enough to make it to the pump at the gas station. In response, it shook and gurgled like it was cussing right back. I gasped, appalled by my vehicle's attitude.

So I took a different approach—good cop, bad cop style.

“You are not a donkey, sweet angel. You're a stallion. A racehorse ready to refuel and recharge. In need of a massage and aromatherapy. I gotchu, sis. Just keep pushing.”

Miracle of all miracles, my Corolla reached pump nine. Once we were there, it let out another gurgle, and then a tiny

pop. And I swear the engine sighed. I could only assume it was my car's equivalent of taking her bra off at the end of a long day. Patting the steering wheel, I assured her that she could relax now.

When I pulled out my wallet, I was certain a moth flew out. Or maybe a tumbleweed. Inside the worn leather sat thirty-four dollars in cash, a Starbucks gift card with maybe seventy-two cents left on it, and a business card for a traveling barber. The other side held things most adults considered practical: my driver's license, my debit card, and a gym membership card. But none of those would help me, considering the balance in my checking account was somewhere around negative forty-three dollars, last I checked.

I pulled out a twenty and tapped my steering wheel again.

“Good job, Lola. Man, for a second there, I didn't think you were gonna make it.”

Lola didn't reply in any kind of way, but she didn't have to; I knew she was ready to rest.

I took my keys from the ignition and weaved my way through the parking lot. The gas station smelled like stale Triscuits with a hint of cigarette smoke. It was a glorious scent, considering that about ten minutes ago, I thought I'd be stranded forever, forced to survive on highway roadkill.

Spending roughly 60 percent of all the money I had to my name on gas was like a knife to my chest. But then I passed by a tiny stand of pecan clusters on the way to the counter. They were only three dollars, so really, I was making good financial

decisions. It was an investment. I needed to fuel my car, then fuel myself with the cluster.

It was when the cashier handed me my change and I didn't leave a single penny in the donation box that it hit me: I was truly broke. I could practically hear my mother's voice saying *broke is just a mindset*. But I would like to see her say that to my most recent bank statement.

It was time to download those financial audiobooks from the library and try not to fall asleep on the drive. I may have spent the entirety of my last paycheck on my first student loan payment, but I had a framed sports marketing degree and a box of granola bars my roommate had left behind in the back of my car. I was doing just fine, thank you very much.

Once I was back on the road and on my way to Philadelphia once more, I called the first person I wanted to see.

One ring later, my brother answered and grumbled, "You better be on your way. Layla's been chomping at the bit to see you since she woke up."

I smiled at the thought. "Of course she has. Her favorite future sis-in-law—"

"Only future sister-in-law."

"—is coming to see her," I finished, ignoring my brother's rude interruption.

I'd been making these plans for weeks now. I'd packed my things, ready to move back to Philadelphia. Back to family.

“What time will you be here? We get pretty slammed around six.” Despite his best efforts to sound grumpy when he answered, there was no hiding the smile in his voice; he was excited to see me too.

“I’m about”—I looked at the ETA on my GPS—“thirty minutes away. Are you sure you guys don’t mind if I stay with you?”

He chuckled, and a higher-pitched voice in the background chimed in with a sentiment I couldn’t hear.

“Layla already has scented candles and new pillowcases set up in the spare room.”

I sighed. Ugh, I loved that girl. When Luke and Layla were just friends, I’d pushed hard for this relationship, and now that they were together, I wondered if he was worthy of her.

“Tell her that she deserves better than you.”

He groaned. “I’m not telling her that.”

“Just saying,” I singsonged.

“See you soon. Try not to kill any curbs on the way here.” I didn’t have to see him to know he was rolling his eyes. The move was practically audible.

Smiling, I hung up. I was ready to be back. More than ready, really.

It was *long* overdue. My final semester had nearly killed me. But after graduating—thank you, Jesus—and quitting my not-so-fabulous job as a server at the local Chuck E. Cheese, I

was willing to sacrifice my left pinkie toe to be back in Philadelphia. One perk of having Luke as my brother: I'd always have a temporary place to stay in the city.

I visited pretty often, but I usually stayed at my parents' house. However, the last time I was in town, I walked in on them half-naked and playing Twister. Even after a thorough eye-bleaching, I hadn't recovered. The idea of walking in on Layla typing like a maniac at three a.m.—wild haired and wide-eyed, all caffeinated like she hadn't slept in three days—was far less frightening than witnessing my surprisingly frisky parents in that kind of situation again. I shivered at the thought.

Only this trip would be a little longer than usual, considering I was homeless, broke, and no longer working for the second-most famous mouse. *It's fine. Everything is fine.*

The brightly lit *Romfuzzled* sign greeted me as I pulled into the newly paved parking lot. Smiling, I opened my car door, and before my feet could touch the ground, I was hit with the soft, sweet, and slightly floral scent of spring.

Beds of fresh flowers lined the path to the entrance. No doubt Layla had to force Luke to plant them. Heat radiated from the asphalt in the June heat that greeted me, instantly frizzing my slightly curly hair.

“Honey, I'm home!” I announced the moment I pushed through the wooden French doors.

Layla, who had been sitting at the bar, shot up from her stool and ran over to me, leaving her open laptop and a half-

eaten pizza slice behind. I opened my arms wide in anticipation of her warm hug and squeezed her tight.

It was a miracle that my brother had Layla in his life. A beautiful woman as nerdy as him who also had a heart of gold? She was a unicorn. Something I liked to remind him of often. I was more than excited to have Layla as my sister-in-law in just a few months, although it felt like we had been family since the day we met. From day one, Luke had looked at her with puppy dog eyes. But they circled around each other for a few years, oblivious to their mutual infatuation, before finally realizing what they had. I couldn't say the slow burn wasn't fun to watch.

"I missed you!" Layla squeezed me around my waist and rocked from side to side. When she pulled away, she looked me up and down. "Are you hungry? Are you eating enough? I know what it's like at the end of your college career. Broke and exhausted, right? Come eat pizza with me."

I laughed and followed her to the bar, because I was indeed broke, and though the thought was tempting, I couldn't live off turtle clusters for the rest of my life.

Plopping onto the wooden barstool, I kicked my feet back and forth and happily bit into a slice of pepperoni pizza. Layla dropped her elbow onto the bar and rested her chin in her hand, studying me. "Tell me everything. How long are you here? What are your plans?"

I almost choked on the too-big bite I was working on, because I had no plans. I had less than no plans. I had negative

scheduling. Negative like the balance of my bank account. I needed a roof over my head—preferably one where I didn't have to avoid spontaneous Twister games—and a job that didn't include singing happy birthday to children.

“Right now, the plan is to find a job and somewhere cheap to stay so I'm not bumming off you guys forever.”

Layla nodded. “We have more room than we know what to do with, and the company is nice. You're welcome to stay as long as you'd like.”

“No, you're not” came from down the bar. And there, striding our way and wearing a smirk, was Luke.

I rolled my eyes. “I'm only here for Layla. You know that, right?”

He chuckled and tossed the dishrag from his shoulder onto the bar.

“Do you want a drink?”

“Is it free?”

My brother dipped his chin and gave me a heavy-lidded stare. “I guess this one can be.”

I nodded. “Good. I don't want to spend my last seven dollars on a drink called *Paper Clips*.”

It was three p.m., but who cared?

Luke turned to get to work, but Layla stood from her barstool. “Wait, let me do it!”

With a smile, he jerked his head. “Come on, little one.”

She happily meandered around the end of the bar and beamed at me. “I’ve been practicing my drink mixing skills when I’m not writing. Luke says I’m pretty good.”

My brother nodded, but the second she turned around, he widened his eyes and shook his head, mouthing, “No, she’s not.”

Beside him, Layla happily bounced around, measuring liquids to make my drink as Luke supervised, shaking his head and biting down on his bottom lip. The poor guy didn’t have the heart to tell her how wrong she was.

With a flourish, Layla set a purply-orange drink in front of me and stuck a straw in it. She watched me intensely, bouncing on the tips of her toes while she waited for me to take a sip. I couldn’t help but glance at my brother, who stood behind his fiancée, his eyes giving me a warning that this was not going to be the best drink I’d ever had.

I plastered on a grin and angled in to take a sip. The description said something along the lines of mango and peaches. But this definitely tasted like mouthwash. Mouthwash that had been sitting in a cabinet for at least seven years.

I hummed and held back my gag. “Wow...so good, Lay.”

She clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Really? I’m so glad!” She turned to Luke. “You should hire me when I’m not writing.”

He placed a relaxed hand on her lower back and kissed her temple. “Maybe one day, little one. Can you go ask Alex if he needs help stocking in the back? I’ll be there in a sec.”

She smiled and nodded before turning back to me. “Don’t say I never gave you anything.” She pointed at the wretched drink in front of me.

Once she disappeared behind the door to the back room, I pinned my brother with a hard look. “You’ve got to tell her.”

He simply shrugged. “I can’t yet. She gets so excited. It’s adorable. She’s always made my coffee taste really good, so I assumed she’d be good at this too.”

“You were wrong.”

“I was wrong.” Laughing, he wiped down the surface of the already clean bar.

“So, you’re looking for somewhere to work?”

I took another sip of my awful drink, immediately regretted it, and pushed it away. “Yeah, preferably a position where I can utilize my degree. But my résumé isn’t very impressive. Waiting tables for kids’ birthday parties doesn’t translate to much in the sports marketing world. Neither does selling prom dresses, so my high school job doesn’t help much either.”

He nodded, pressing his tongue against his cheek. “You could work for me. Handle our social media, marketing, what not. Layla’s been doing it, but it takes away from her writing time. I bet she’d love a break.”

I scrunched my nose. Working for my brother *and* living with him? That was asking for way too much.

“Pay’s good; food’s good,” he said, resting his elbows on the bar. “And I can almost guarantee that there will be no mice. And you’ll never have to sing happy birthday to sticky, pizza-covered children.”

That did sound enticing. Managing social media for my brother’s bar would be a nice addition to my résumé. And it would give me some income while I looked for a job in the male-dominated sports marketing industry. But if I had some more experience under my belt...

“I’ll think about it. But I couldn’t live with you and work here. That’s asking too much of you. I’d need to find somewhere else to stay.”

He crossed his arms. “I don’t know. The only cheap rentals are out in the middle of nowhere, in places I really don’t want you staying by yourself—”

“Just stay with Nathan,” Layla said as she exited the wooden swinging door to our left.

Oh heavens, not Nathan.

The day Luke moved into an apartment with Nathan Huxley, I’d suffered the most uncomfortable first impression in history.

I’d shown up to “help” my brother move some things into his new place, but truthfully, I was there for moral support.

And because Mom always made coconut cake when one of us moved, and it had been far too long since I'd had a taste.

But when I knocked on the fancy apartment door, instead of being greeted by my *Star Wars*-obsessed, glasses-wearing brother, I was treated to an entirely different sight.

A man, tall and captivating, lifted an arm to the doorframe and leaned against it. His white shirt stretched across his chest and tightened at his shoulders. I had to crane my neck to take him in as he loomed above me. On his head, he wore a black hat with a tiny Mickey Mouse stitched onto it. *Cute*, I'd thought. He was super, super cute. *Cute* actually didn't cut it; he was downright book boyfriend material. The hero in the romantic comedy I had listened to on the way there had nothing on this guy. I nearly folded, my knees a little shaky, and I had a hard time standing my ground, a rare occurrence, considering men typically did not intimidate me.

"Oh." The mystery man scanned me up and down with a small grin. "The modeling photographer actually lives a few doors down."

Flattered, I dipped my chin and tucked a piece of hair behind my ear. "Actually, I—"

"Yeah, take that hallway to the right of the elevators. He's four-one-three. This is four-three-one."

"Sorry, I think—"

He took a step back and grasped the doorknob. "Don't worry, happens all the time here. If you can't find it, come

back, and I'll walk you over there."

I opened my mouth to clarify, but he shut the door with a loud *thunk* before I could utter a word. I stood frozen, startled and disoriented by the abruptness of the action. He thought I was a model? A clueless model who couldn't follow simple directions, I might add.

I knocked once more, and after some shuffling, the door opened again, revealing the same man.

"All right, darling. I'll walk you there. Let me just get my Crocs—"

"Nathan, who is it?" Luke's voice thundered from inside the apartment.

"Ah, one of Larry's girls again." This guy—Nathan, I assumed—shouted over his shoulder. "Don't worry, I'm taking her—"

"Luke!" I shouted, popping up on my toes so I could see around the man crowding the doorway.

Nathan blinked at me as if I was a newspaper crossword puzzle he'd been working on for weeks and still hadn't solved—brows furrowed, mouth beneath his dark scruff twisted into a confused pucker. He looked back at Luke, and then at me again.

Luke sidled up to Nathan and put a hand on his shoulder. "Dude. I told you she was coming."

Nathan backed away, still looking lost, so Luke made introductions.

“Calla, this is Nathan. Nathan, my sister, Calla.”

Nathan still hadn't stopped looking from me to Luke and back again, as though he couldn't fathom our blood relation.

“Oh? *Ohhh.*” He stood straighter, the revelation finally piecing together in his mind. “I'm sorry. I-I didn't mean—” he stuttered, his head shaking.

I smiled. “It's okay, really. Not the first time I've had a door slammed in my face.”

“What?” Luke piped up. “You slammed the door in her face?”

“I...um...should probably have a better introduction.”

Nathan turned to me and stuck his arm out for what I mistakenly took as an apologetic side hug. So I turned my body, ready to lean into it. Only, the hug was more of a handshake, I suppose, which meant his hand landed on my left boob. In the most awkward of awkward moments, he tried to *shake* my boob.

Nathan's face turned beet red. “Oh, that wasn't meant to be like that. I didn't mean to—I need to lie down,” he sputtered out before running deeper into the apartment. His exit was followed by the slamming of a door and a clicking of a lock.

Yeah, weird to say the least.

Each interaction after that got worse. He spilled water on me at Layla's book signing and stared at me awkwardly during opening night at Romfuzzled. Once, I ran into him while on a

coffee date. He was wearing socks with tiny red birds paired with Birkenstocks and greeted me with a “Howdy do.”

The oddest part was that I’d heard him on the phone with Layla more than once, and he was totally normal. Cool and collected. Laughing, talking like a standard human. He’d been in a dozen or more videos Layla made at work, and he never once shook a boob or stuttered out nonsense. Maybe that initial awkward meeting set a precedent when it came to me.

I shook my head and laughed. “Yeah, no. I’m not staying with him.”

Layla pouted. “Oh, he’s so sweet, though. Luke loved living with him. I think he still misses it.”

Luke rolled his eyes. “I miss seeing him, not living with him.” He turned to me and shrugged. “He is a great roommate, though.”

I grimaced. “Won’t that bother you? Me staying with your best friend?” I scrunched my nose like they’d suggested I take a shot of raw eggs.

Luke considered it for a moment and then shrugged. “Nah. Nathan’s the best. Clean, and he keeps to himself mostly. He’s only loud when he plays guitar, but if you ask, he’ll keep it down.”

He plays guitar? Welcome to Swoon City, population: me. How did I never know that?

I ran over the options in my head. I could live with Nathan in his fancy apartment with his stupid hot self or mooch off

my brother and sister-in-law and become a life-sucking leech. My final option would be to accept my inevitable doom and find a very thick cardboard box outside the local Best Buy and transform it into my new habitat.

Reluctantly, I sighed. “Maybe just call him to see what he says?”

Really, how bad could living with my brother’s best friend be?

CHAPTER TWO

Nathan



Age 15:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hi Lily,

You scare me a little. In a good way, I think. My not-name is Shiny. My mom calls me Shiny cause she says I get easily distracted by shiny objects.

Anyway, here are my answers to your questions. Hope they're good enough.

- 1. Sundae Pop-Tarts are my favorite.*
- 2. My left pinkie toe is named Beauford. The right is Sierra.*
- 3. Jack Black. He just seems like he's got it all figured out.*

Thank you for going easy on me, I guess. Talk to you next week.

Your new friend,

Shiny

In a purely hypothetical sense, how many 5-Hour Energy shots can one take before it becomes a serious health problem? Because at this moment, I am technically 20-Hour-Energys in, and the room feels very zoomy.

Before I accepted this position, my predecessor, Chad, had lain around all day. He would delegate all—and I do mean *all*—his work to Luke and Layla and me. Those days, the three of us would work grueling hours, well into the night. I was always the third wheel, even before Luke and Layla finally got together. Sure, their glances back and forth and flirtatious banter sometimes got old, but now, as I scanned my empty office and my pages-long to-do list, I was starting to miss them.

I tapped my pencil on the desk in a rhythmic beat, overwhelmed by the thought of the work waiting for me. An email notification popped up in the corner of my desktop screen.

Janise: Chad needs you to run this for him. Please have it back to us tomorrow by 10 a.m.

I rolled my eyes and groaned. I was one bad email away from saying screw it and throwing the computer across my office. It was too hot in here. My pants felt a little too tight due

to my recent stress eating. And the calming plinky-plunky background music that Spotify recommended for me was not helping any.

One hour. One more dang hour before I could run out of this place Road Runner-style and go to my nearly vacant apartment to drink red wine, I mean whiskey, out of a plastic Phillies cup.

Before my promotion, the days would fly by like nothing. I'd wake up on Friday morning, almost despondent that the weekend was coming. The days never felt long when I had friends here. Work never felt like work. Just like in high school, when sitting next to friends made Algebra II feel far less horrific. High school still sucked, but there was a small silver lining.

But the days of enjoying my time at West Oak Publishing were far behind me. Anymore, even my lunch break felt like work.

I needed something new. Something exciting. Like a cat falling out of the ceiling tile or a fire breaking out in the basement of this place. Lifting my chin to the light fixture dangling over my fancy wooden desk, I prayed for a distraction. Anything at all.

Just then, my phone vibrated against said desktop. Luke Wells. The one and only. The one who was mine before he was Layla's. Something I liked to remind them both of often.

If anyone could distract me, it was him. He was probably calling with a last-minute invite to the bar, or maybe to tell me

that Layla had hidden a frog in their toilet again and he needed me to come get it out.

“What’s up?” I leaned farther back, the chair creaking as it settled.

“Hey, are you by yourself?”

I paused and glanced through the glass doors into the open bullpen outside my office. “Uh, yeah. But if this is about anything illegal, let’s wait and talk about it when I see you next.”

He let out a laugh, but it sounded tight and strained. “Nah, nothing like that. I just need a really, really big favor.”

“You still owe me from the last favor.” I shivered at the memory of the worst date of my life. A night full of hot yoga and weird guinea pig stories from a coworker that I had no interest in seeing.

Luke groaned. “Gah, I forgot about that. But this is serious.” His voice was hushed, like he was in a coat closet hiding from his fiancée. “I need you to let my sister room with you for a while. Just till she gets on her feet again. She’s trying to find a job. She’s going to work here while she looks, but we can’t find anywhere safe and affordable for her to stay. It would really mean a lot to me, man.”

His sister. As in Calla Wells. As in the woman in front of whom I consistently tripped over myself. The woman who caused my body to tense up like I was about to get a shot in my backside. I wasn’t sure if it was because we’d had such an

awkward first encounter, or if she was just the kind of person that made me nervous. Either way, when Calla got anywhere near me, regardless of how much I fought it, I turned into an alien trying to convince the rest of the world I was human. I stumbled over words, and my hands made weird gestures. Sometimes they even settled on my hips in an unfamiliar sassy pose that was *not* natural.

Bizarrely, my chest always felt sore around her, and my eyes were like heat-seeking missiles directed at her every time she walked into the room. What irritated me most was that she and my best friend were related. With all that in mind, I was instantly sure that having Calla Wells under my roof would be a disaster.

“Nope. Nuh-uh. No, no, no.”

He scoffed on the other end of the phone, the action making the line between us crackle. “Why not?”

“Sorry, I don’t do female roommates.” It wasn’t a lie. Living with a woman meant I’d have to put on this...act. Be someone I wasn’t. It would mean no longer walking around in my underwear, and I’d probably have to share my TV time, which was strictly baseball nowadays.

“Just for a few months? She’s really cool. You’ll love her. I promise she’ll leave you alone. She can even cook. And she’ll be up here so much you probably won’t even see her often at all.”

Luke was desperate. His tone reminded me of the old days at West Oak. When we’d have long late-night conversations

about Layla. Or when I told him about Lily and how she was the only person—other than him—I could trust completely.

Luke was the definition of loyal. He was always there when I needed him. Minus that one time with Katie, which will go down in history as the single worst date of my life. Or anyone's life. With that one exception, he answered when I called. When I needed him to listen to a new riff I'd been working on. If I had a tough day at work, he was there. Unfortunately, that meant my stupid heart always felt guilty for telling the guy no.

“Just for a few months?” I didn't mean for it to come out that way, like it was a possibility, but I couldn't take it back once the words were out.

“Just a few months.”

I groaned and leaned forward in my chair again. “Fine. But only if you name a drink after me. You opened the bar up with all that stuff for Layla. It's my turn.”

Luke let out a laugh. “What do you want?”

“The Nathan-ator.”

I'd been thinking about it for a while. I had no idea what the drink would consist of, but it would have to be good enough to be a customer favorite.

“You've had that on your mind for a while, huh?”

I nodded despite his inability to see me. “Oh yeah, I want to hear it shouted across the bar in a frenzy because everyone loves it so much.”

He chuckled in response. “You got it, man. I appreciate you letting her stay there. She’ll pay you rent, but she probably can’t afford to pay what I did until she gets back on her feet.”

Money wasn’t an issue nowadays anyway. When Luke and I lived together, we had to count the change from our couches to see if we could afford a six-pack of cheap beer from the gas station. But now, I had a job that, although gruesome, paid great. Covering bills even after Luke moved out wasn’t an issue. Space wasn’t technically the issue either, I supposed. The apartment had two bedrooms, two bathrooms, and an office. And the living room and the open-concept kitchen were big. It was way more space than I needed by myself, but I liked my things the way they were.

I liked playing guitar late into the night without bothering anyone. I liked decorating my kitchen counters with Lego sets that took me way longer than I was willing to admit to put together. Sure, sometimes I’d get lonely. And maybe I missed having a roommate to split a pizza with. And yeah, it was possible I’d turn on Lionel Richie and look out the window when it rained, wishing that Luke still lived there. Those were all totally normal growing pains, weren’t they?

“Yeah, yeah.” I grunted. “We’ll be even when I see my name on the menu.”

He laughed. “You got it, man.” Without another word, he hung up.

What had I just agreed to?

CHAPTER THREE

Calla



Age 14:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

All right, I've got something to share. It's been eating me alive, and who better to share it with than someone I talk to weekly and who's never seen my face?

So I may or may not have been reading out of our textbook in class today, and when there was a part that said tube, I promptly said pube. Which made everyone laugh, including the teacher. Ms. Franks thought I didn't see it, but she definitely snickered behind her hand.

Anyway, I'm begging my mom to homeschool me now.

Much embarrassment,

Lily

P.S. Who decided that "foot in the mouth" was a good phrase? Sounds gross to me.

“You guys know this isn’t that serious, right?”

I couldn’t stop the question from coming out as my entire family sat around the kitchen island. My move-in day had been set to entail nothing more than a little help from Luke and Layla. I had four and a half boxes to bring in, along with a small bedroom set. I figured we’d eat a couple slices of pizza, then be done. Instead, my mom enlisted the help of all of my siblings. Which meant we each carried one box in, and...yep, that was it. Moving in with my brother’s best friend, a man who’s letting me stay for practically nothing, was hardly worth a slice of cake and a congratulations card that spits out confetti when opened. But I shouldn’t have expected less from Layla and my mom. They were constantly celebrating others. It was sweet, even if totally unnecessary.

“Luke and I could’ve done this by ourselves, you know?” I laughed at the full room.

“I’m just here for the cake,” Crew mumbled. His cheeks were full, and a coconut shaving sat just below his lip. He’d brought leftovers from his food truck. Well, he claimed it was “left over,” but it smelled amazing and was still warm when he arrived. Every one of us knew good and well that his truck sold out every night, but we humored him anyway.

“Jerry, get over here and eat a slice,” my mom instructed my dad.

Dad was too busy walking around the place, lifting up floor vents to check for original hardwoods and knocking on the mantle of the fireplace to see if it was “real oak.” At what age do fathers suddenly become home inspectors?

“Hold on. Let me just take a look in the bathrooms. Want to make sure there isn’t any mold.” He headed down the hallway without looking back.

“Dad, don’t—” I began, but he was already halfway there. Honestly, who was I to stop the man from doing his fatherly duties?

“It makes him sleep better, sweetie.” Mom petted the back of my hair and smiled.

Thank God Nathan wasn’t here at the moment. It gave me a chance to take the place in without being studied or feeling contained. Yes, we were on the precipice of cohabitation, but I wasn’t prepared to have the man here with my entire family. Plus, I needed time to adjust to the idea of having a male roommate. Did I need to have *the talk* with him sometime? The one about toilet seats staying down and putting socks on doors when partners are over? Or maybe warn him about a few of my not-so-favorable habits? I wasn’t exactly an angel.

“Where are we at with the wedding plans?” I propped my elbow on the granite top of the island and dropped my chin into my hand. Across from me, Layla and Luke were cuddled so close they were practically sharing a chair. I needed a good distraction. Something to take my mind off the fact that I now lived in the land of dirty dishes and raised toilet seats.

“I like the idea of a beach wedding.” Layla looked up at her fiancé, as if asking for permission.

But he just smiled down at her. “Whatever you want. I’ll be there.”

Truth be told, Layla could say she wanted to get married in a parking deck and that she wanted us all to wear inflatable dinosaur costumes, and Luke wouldn’t bat an eye.

Liam, my next older brother, piped up from his chair next to them. “I’m down with a beach wedding. I could take the boys out for shark diving while we’re there.”

Ha. Their mother would *not* let that slide.

“Marigold would never have that. You know that, right?” Layla said exactly what I was thinking.

Liam groaned. “I know. Maybe snorkeling.”

I snorted a laugh and circled back to the topic at hand. “I think a winery would be cool. You could do it in the fall. Warm tones—burnt orange and sage.” I lifted my shoulder and widened my eyes.

“Yes! I look great in fall colors,” Crew said, his mouth still full of cake.

The conversation continued like that, with half a dozen other suggestions thrown out, until, one by one, my family members filtered out, leaving just Luke and Layla.

“Come on, let me show you where Nathan keeps everything.”

I followed Luke around as he pointed out where measuring spoons and baking dishes were, as if I would cook much while I was here. Only thing I would be using an oven for was desserts, and that was just because I was the daughter of Mama B, who made treats for us religiously. He showed me which towels were the best and where Nathan's room was. His door was closed, and I breathed a small sigh of relief. Seeing the man's bedspread was a little too personal, especially for day one.

"Are you sure you don't want to stay with us?" he asked when he turned back to me. I could only imagine the look of concern I was wearing.

"Yes." I groaned. "I need a place where I don't have to worry about my boss using all the hot water."

Layla said, "You and Nathan will be perfect roommates. He's so fun. You'll love him. I promise!"

I was doubtful of that, but I gave a tight-lipped smile and pulled her in for a hug. "Thank you again for setting this up. I love you guys." I squeezed her neck, probably a little too tight.

"We'll see you tomorrow, right?" Luke asked as they headed toward the front door.

"Yup. See you at nine a.m., boss."

"We don't open till six."

"You know me. Such an overachiever."

Luke laughed. "I do know you, smart-ass. Give Nate a run for his money."

I fully intended to do so.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nathan



Age 15:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

Lily,

You'll never guess what happened. During math today (my least fave subject btw), my teacher got up to start the lesson, but he must've sat in something before then, because when he got to the whiteboard there were huge splotches of brown all over his black pants. I mean right in the perfect area for everyone to assume he hadn't made it to the bathroom in time. We kept laughing, and he got so pissed, he told us we were "off our gourds," After class ended, one of the girls tried to tell him, but he wouldn't listen, so he looked like that for the rest of the day.

Maybe it's one of those you had to be there moments, idk. But I've laughed about it all day.

Anyway, hope that makes you smile.

How's that English class you were struggling with? Still need help? Not sure what I can do without seeing you in person, but I can try.

Still laughing,

Shiny

I took the scenic route home, driving a good ten miles per hour under the speed limit. And that was after I worked late and handled some ridiculous task from the accounting department that apparently needed my full attention just as I was ready to walk out the door. None of these people had even looked twice at me before this promotion. They'd just thrown papers at me like I was the personal assistant to each and every one of them. Now that I was their boss, they still threw papers at me. Then they'd give me these fake laughs and puppy dog eyes when they wanted to take a long weekend to celebrate things like National Buffet Day.

Surely, after all that, Calla would already be fast asleep. Not that I was avoiding her. Definitely not. I simply wanted to make sure I didn't disturb her when I turned on the Phillies game in the living room.

Fine. That was a lie. I most certainly was avoiding the girl living under my roof. Because the second I saw her, ridiculous gibberish was bound to fly out of my mouth. Or a random

object would magically appear in front of my feet, causing me to stumble in front of her.

All I wanted was to sink into my sectional with a nice cold beer and watch baseball while wearing my fluffy socks like a real man. It wasn't until I pulled into my assigned spot in the dimly lit parking garage that exhaustion washed over me. My legs were like Jell-O, and suddenly, I wasn't sure I could make it all the way to the elevators and then down the hall to my place. This car *was* pretty comfy. Sleeping out here wouldn't be too bad, right? Except just as I dropped my head back against the seat, a vision of the scary movie *Layla* forced us to watch where a guy murdered people in vacant parking decks flashed in my mind, causing my heart to stutter. On second thought, maybe it was in my best interest to put on my big boy pants and force myself upstairs.

When I slid my key into the lock, I turned the handle slowly and pushed the door open an inch at a time. I slipped my shoes off and attempted to hang my keys on the hook in my entryway, only to miss and have them fall to the hardwood floors with a loud *clunk*.

“Shh!” I hushed, hoping it would negate the previous echo through the apartment.

It was after ten, but the lights were still on. Maybe Calla had just left them on for me. That was thoughtful. Turning each light switch off, I tiptoed my way across the open-concept area to the end of the hallway to turn off the living room lights. But I froze mid-step. Calla was standing barefoot on my couch

with her arm raised straight up, TV remote in hand and eyes glued to a blank TV.

She hadn't noticed me, so I took the moment to study her, to take in her pale legs beneath the blue plaid excuse for pajama shorts and the white tank top that clung so perfectly to her curvy waist. Her hair was flowing, dark and wavy, down past her shoulders. A small clip with a yellow sun on it was tucked behind her ear to keep it out of her face.

"Ugh, come on." She stretched, reaching even higher in an attempt to turn the TV on.

The living room looked...different. The light was coming from a white lamp in the corner of the room rather than the normal overhead fan and light combo that Luke and I had installed. What looked like coasters were spread out on the coffee table, along with a couple of small potted plants. Huh... weird.

I looked back over at Calla, who was still on the tips of her toes and grunting in frustration at my TV.

"You have to point it to your mouth," I eventually said from where I was lingering in the dark of the hallway.

Calla, startled by my presence, jumped down from the couch and onto the rug in a power stance, like she was prepared to tackle me.

She squinted for a second until a look of recognition crossed her face. Straightening back up in a relaxed pose, she said, "You can't sneak up on a girl like that. Some of us carry

lipstick knives. I'd hate to shank you on our first night as roommates."

Lipstick knives? That was a thing?

"Sorry. I was just saying that you have to point the remote to your mouth when it doesn't work."

It took me an embarrassingly long time to figure that trick out. I'd waved the remote in the air like a lunatic in hopes of the signal catching for far too long before stumbling upon the secret. Pointing it to my mouth worked every time, like some kind of freaky satellite.

Calla tilted her head like a confused puppy, wearing a look that had me second-guessing this arrangement all over again. Her brows were pulled together, and her pretty brown eyes were wide and questioning. She watched me so intensely that I broke out in a sweat. Her lips jutted out just slightly, drawing my attention to the small freckle above the right side of her mouth. Her soft features were so tempting. In that moment, I had the strongest urge to trail my fingers across her round cheekbones and to boop her dainty nose. But that would definitely be weird. Though it wasn't any weirder than the way I'd accidentally grabbed her boob when I met her.

She looked down at the remote and up at me again, her brow furrowed and her expression untrusting. To be fair, I couldn't blame her. I wouldn't listen to some weird guy telling me to point a device at my mouth either. But to my surprise, she lifted the remote to her face and hit the power button again. The TV, thankfully, turned on, and I sighed in relief.

Wouldn't it have been my luck if that trick didn't work for the first time ever?

She gave me a small, impressed frown and a nod. "Good to know."

A corner of my lip pulled a little at her reaction. Finally, I'd done something right in her presence.

Without another word, she flipped through channels. It would be a lie to say I wasn't a little disappointed that I couldn't watch the game on the big TV, especially after the workday I'd had. But it was her first night here, and she was probably feeling as uncomfortable as I was, so I'd let it go. Maybe we could figure out a schedule later on. I'd never lived with anyone but Luke, and he and I had fit together so perfectly that I didn't have to think about these things.

After I'd stood there like a creep for a little too long, she turned back to me with a pointed look and tipped her head toward the kitchen. "My mom brought coconut cake. Help yourself."

I practically ran to the fridge before she finished her sentence. Mama B's coconut cake was up there with unicorns, golden goose eggs, and little baby angels in diapers. It was to be cherished, loved, and swallowed in one bite.

Taking a seat at the island, I unwrapped the tin foil—and maybe licked it—then opened the ESPN app on my phone. If I couldn't watch the Phillies game on the living room TV, watching it on my phone while eating a slice of cake was the next best thing.

But before I could unlock my phone, ESPN's iconic *bum bum, bum da bum* echoed through the apartment, and one of my favorite commentators jumped into a recap of last week's game. I looked down at my still-locked phone in confusion, then at the light reflecting off the TV onto the walls of the adjacent room.

Plate of cake in hand, I shuffled back to the living room like I was trapped in some kind of simulation. Calla sat on the couch, wrapped up in an oversized fluffy blanket that certainly didn't belong to me. Her focus was fixed on the screen in front of her, where a highlight reel of Bryce Harper played. I rubbed my eyes and looked from Calla to the TV again. Had I turned that TV to ESPN with my mind powers? Or had Mama B spiked the cake?

Calla looked up at me, her chin popping out from where she'd snuggled into her blanket.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She turned the volume down. "I should've asked before assuming. Do you mind if I watch the Phillies game?"

As if I needed a reason to get her out of here sooner, she had to go for my favorite team. It was as if some divine power had taken all my greatest weaknesses and shoved them into the form of a five-foot-three woman who wore bright colors and had what looked like the softest hair of anyone I'd ever seen.

I took a deep breath, determined not to say something ridiculous.

“I was actually planning to watch it anyway.” I lifted my phone, as if that would prove my point.

Calla smiled up at me, her eyes sparkling like stars in the night sky. Her expression was so bright and contagious it was like a physical force striking me in the chest and knocking the breath out of me.

I couldn't help but smile back, and for a moment, all the worries of the world melted away.

She scooted to the far corner of the couch with her blanket. “Come on.” She patted the seat next to her.

My body involuntarily followed. Feet moving faster than the rest of my body and cake still in hand, I took a seat at the opposite end of the couch. The more space, the better.

Neither of us spoke for a while. I wasn't sure about her, but I had no earthly idea what to say.

A shot of Trea Turner's slide from when he was with the Dodgers played in slow motion as he slid into home like a smooth criminal.

Calla let out a big sigh and leaned forward. “Ugh, how is he is so good?”

I cocked a brow. “You a big Trea fan?”

She pulled her blanket up to her chin, still angled forward. “Absolutely. I was so glad when he came to the Phillies. I mean, he's not Bryce, but he's by far my favorite shortstop.”

Wow. Most of my female friends, which consisted of Layla and...yep that was it, didn't care to talk baseball. But maybe that was because I rarely stuck around long enough to see if the women I met were interested in such things.

Lily and I would sometimes email about sports. She was a big Bryce Harper fan too, though she and I stuck with supporting one another with life in general, along with conversations focused on mental health. It was kind of like free therapy.

Once, when I was young and stupid, I asked her to go to a game with me, like on a date, and her exact email response was *This does not leave our email, you pompous ass*. I didn't ask her to meet in person again. It worked better like this. We had each other through all of life's ups and downs, just not in real life. This way, we kept things simple. It was a little weird to some, I guess, but it worked for us.

I shoveled a bite of cake into my mouth and nodded. "Yeah, I agree," I said once I'd swallowed. "Plus, I have the most respect for shortstops."

Calla perked up, repositioning her blanket to face me. "Ugh, exactly! Everyone says catcher is the hardest position. And I get it. It's probably rough, but shortstops—"

"Cover the most ground," I said, finishing her sentence.

She grinned. "Right?" she said, her voice a little louder and her expression bright. "Plus, look at Turner's stats from when he was with the Dodgers."

I laughed. “I absolutely agree. I’ve got a lot of respect for Schwarber too.”

She nodded and rattled off his stats from last season. Geez, this girl knew her stuff. Maybe living with my best friend’s younger sister—a fact I reminded myself of continually—wouldn’t be so bad after all. I was in awe as she spoke of her favorite players and went on about how she’d loved baseball since she was young. When she was extra excited about something, her voice got louder. Usually, that kind of thing would annoy me a little, but with her, I liked it. I liked the passion that shone in her eyes and filled the room as she chattered on.

It was endearing, to see her in this new light. Unfortunately, though I had been hoping for an interaction that would dampen the stupid crush I’d been harboring since I met her, this one had the opposite effect. I’d go months without seeing her, and each time, I’d convince myself she wasn’t as pretty as I imagined. Then I’d see her again, all full lips and bright smiles and that chest-striking laugh that made everyone in her vicinity smile no matter what was going on, and all those reminders would vanish. She was contagious. It was absolutely infuriating.

When Luke had told me his little sister was coming to visit on move-in day, I pictured a nerdy kid wearing glasses and braces who’d take over the couch and watch *Pokémon* with him while eating some kind of pita pocket. Instead, I’d opened the door to a woman so beautiful there was no way she

belonged in my apartment. Except she did, and now she was living here...with me.

“Do you happen to like Aaron Judge?” Calla’s question pulled me out of my reverie.

I attempted a cool and casual shrug, but the truth was I had the biggest man crush on Aaron Judge. Honestly, I’d sell my left nut to have him sign it.

“Yeah, he’s pretty good. Seems like a cool guy.” I cleared my throat, hoping she wouldn’t catch on.

“He *is* really cool! I met him at an airport once. I totally freaked out.”

I shot up, my posture suddenly pin straight. “You *what?*”

Her laugh was melodious as it rang out over the ESPN announcer. “Yeah, hold on a sec.” She took the blanket off and marched down to her room.

I did my best to keep my eyes above waist level, but the effort was useless. Her soft, feminine curves called to me. They practically whispered my name...*Natthhhaaannn...*

Calla came bouncing back into the room and dropped a white mug in my lap. It was ceramic and printed with an image of Yogi Bear.

“Oh, um.” I didn’t want to offend her but, “I’m not really sure what to do with this.” Or what it had to do with our previous conversation.

She scoffed. “If you looked at it for longer than two seconds, you’d see that he signed it.”

He *what?* I held the mug up and rotated it. Sure enough, right next to the handle, the words *Glad to meet you, AJ* were printed in black Sharpie.

This mug was by far the most valuable thing in my residence. Screw the four-thousand-dollar guitar sitting in my office. *Just kidding, Rosita. I’ll always love you.*

“Shut up. Are you serious?”

She bit her lower lip and nodded. “Yeah, I told him I was a huge fan but that I didn’t have anything to sign. He laughed and said I had to find *something* if I was really that much of a fan. So I darted to the closest kiosk in the terminal. It was all ’90s memorabilia, so I grabbed the first thing I could find. He thought it was kind of funny.”

Slack-jawed and in awe, I watched her. Clearly, life was throwing me a curveball here. And my first reaction was to duck out. Having a woman like this under my roof—someone so beautiful and funny, with signed Aaron Judge mugs and a laugh so perfect birds would probably show up at the window at any minute, ready to do her bidding like she was Snow White—was the last thing I needed.

“Wow, that’s...” I blew out a breath and carefully set the mug on the coffee table in front of me. With my luck, I’d look at it wrong and break it. “Really, really cool.”

Silently, she snuggled under her blanket and turned her attention to the game. The Phillies were winning by a landslide, but when Calla scooted a few inches closer to me, my heart started racing, and I decided to call it a night.

“I think I’m going to get to bed. Early morning and all. But I’ll, uh, see you around?”

For a second, I swore disappointment flashed in her eyes, but I was all out of sorts. Surely, I’d imagined it. Just like I imagined the way her smile slipped slightly.

Her tone was sweet. “Absolutely. I’ll try not to scream too loud.”

“Yeah, thanks.” I chuckled.

I trailed off to my room, away from her fruity scent. Once the door was shut firmly behind me, I breathed in the smell of men’s aftershave and the freshly washed sheets.

I was absolutely screwed.

CHAPTER FIVE

Calla



Age 13:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

SHINY. The most embarrassing thing ever happened to me today.

I was sitting in math class, listening to the teacher drone on about equations, blah, blah, blah, and I felt a weird... something. I don't want to go into too much detail, but I ignored it because I figured it couldn't be, well, that, you know. So later on, I got up to sharpen my pencil, and I heard Jeremy (this guy I used to think was cute) laughing. And when I sat back down, my friend Lauren said I started my period. It was freaking mortifying! I asked the teacher if I could go to the restroom, and he said when he was done with the lesson, so I was forced to wait there, and then he taught till the bell rang. I wanted to crawl into a hole and die. My mom brought a

change of clothes and everything else I needed, but I cried about it all the way through fourth period (no pun intended).

I realize you probably don't care to know that, but you're the only friend that I can tell this stuff to since you don't know me IRL. Plus, I already told you about my middle school crush on that hot fish in Finding nemo, so you already know my deepest, most humiliating secrets.

Anyway, I hope your day was better than mine. How was that history test you were so worried about?

Much embarrassment,

Lily

Waking up in my childhood twin-size bed in an unfamiliar apartment next to three half-unpacked boxes and clothes spilling out of garbage bags felt oddly on track with how my life was going. I had been dreading this move-in with Nathan because I was certain the living situation would be as awkward as every one of our encounters. But as we hung out last night, I realized that Nathan Huxley was actually cool. Really cool. Even though he'd walked in with his tie half on and his hair all disheveled, it was almost impossible to peel my eyes away from him.

I stayed up way too late watching the Phillies game and, if I'm honest, kind of hoping that Nathan would come back out. Maybe I freaked him out a little with the mug thing, or maybe

he really did just have an early morning, but either way, I liked his company.

Technically, I wasn't scheduled to work until Romfuzzled opened at six, but I was desperate to leave the apartment. The air inside was full of hot roommates and poor decisions. So when Layla texted to say she was there writing, I headed into work.

I pulled into the freshly paved parking lot with my windows down and my perfectly tamed hair now a wild mess of frizzy curls.

As I shifted into park, my phone buzzed with an email notification, and I instantly smiled when I saw it was from Shiny.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com.

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I had a weird day yesterday. I just need to hear how you're doing so I feel better about my life. So tell me something weird about yours, please.

Or maybe your life is going perfectly, in which case I will be glad to tell you congrats and lift a mental middle finger your way.

Also, how is your ankle?

-S

It was hard not to let out a laugh. I loved that he felt the need to send me every little update he had.

What Shiny and I had was simple and easy. Sometimes, when life got busy, we'd go weeks without chatting, but we always found our way back. We rarely argued, and when we did, it was over food. Even though we hadn't met in person after all these years, he was one of my biggest supporters. It was like we were always meant to find our way to each other.

I happily answered.

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com.

Sorry, bud. Nothing too weird over here. Other than the fact that I am now completely broke and relying on someone for a place to live. But to be fair, the place I'm staying in has an incredible view of the city and so many opportunities for plants. So that's a plus.

What's weird in your life?

Missing you,

Lily

I bounced the entire way into the bar, my sandals clicking against the refinished hardwood floors.

Luke was leaning against the bar top, mindlessly wiping down the counter space and homed in on his brunette fiancée across the room. Layla sat in a booth, hunched over her laptop. Her fingers raced against the keys so fast and there was so much passion radiating from her that it looked like she was mad at the computer. Luke was caught in some kind of trance,

completely unaware of the people moving kegs behind him or my arrival.

“Maybe you should tell her you like her.” I broke my brother’s captivation by plopping onto the barstool directly across from him.

Luke scoffed, tossing the cleaning rag at me. “Yeah, thanks. I’ll get right on that.”

I hefted my backpack onto the bar and yanked my laptop and Canon camera bag out. “All right, boss, let’s do this.”

“Should I be scared?” Luke pulled back, looking down at my extravagant case of lenses and filters.

“Maybe. Be prepared for some TikTok trends.” I shook my phone and gave a cheeky smirk.

My first day of “work” didn’t feel like work. I followed Luke around with my DSLR and worked on his social media branding. New logos, font templates, color palettes, picking hex codes to match the vibe of the bar, the works. I set up accounts on all my favorite social media platforms and made two posts explaining who they were and how Romfuzzled came to be. By the time I got back to the apartment, I was exhausted and sweaty, and my eyes were blurry after far too much screen time. I was tempted to drag my butt straight to bed, but on my way there, the ajar door of Nathan’s office and the soft light from within piqued my curiosity.

I tiptoed my way closer and knocked on the white door. “Nathan?” I whispered, even though I was 98 percent sure he

was still at work.

The door creaked open farther, and I casually tossed my keys onto the floor on the other side. “Whoops, my keys fell into your office. Let me just get them real quick...” Whether he had cameras around here or not, I figured it was as good an excuse as any.

I slipped into the room and froze at the sight. There was a baby grand piano in the far corner, three guitars hanging on the wall, and a small black drum set off to the side. A record player sat on a shelf, and several vintage records lay behind it.

I couldn’t help but whistle. I knew Nathan played guitar, and I knew he taught kids’ lessons here and there, but an entire room dedicated to music? I hadn’t seen that coming. I bit back a smile and looked over my shoulder, as if he’d pop up any second and yell at me like the beast telling Belle to get out of the west wing.

I snagged my keys off the floor and trailed over to the piano. It was sleek and black, with a small bench below that matched. Under the lid, it was perfectly clean and just begging for me to run my fingers over the keys and play a ridiculous made-up song. I had no clue how to play, but I’d always wanted to learn. When I was a little girl, my mom took me to a concert on a girls’ date, and it stuck with me—the way the girl on stage let her fingers fly effortlessly across the keys like it was second nature. Her curled hair flowing behind her and her long dress made her look like an angel.

I tried lessons once, but my instructor was a cranky old woman who told me I didn't have the skills to be a musician. I may or may not have kicked over the flowerpot on her front porch when I left. Those words hurt. Especially because all of my siblings had picked up on their talents so easily. Meanwhile, everything I did was mediocre.

Like the instrument was calling to me, I lifted my fingers to the black and white keys, trailing them lightly. Pausing near the middle, I pressed gently to let out a note and—

“Do you play?”

With a jolt, I jumped up from the seat and dropped a hand to the instrument, attempting a casual pose. A deep, jarring tone echoed through the room, which made me jump again.

“I'm taking that as a no...” Nathan crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe.

I shuffled around the other side of the piano bench and twisted my body from side to side. “You know, you shouldn't keep scaring me. One day I really may have a knife on me, and I can't be held liable for what happens when I'm in survival mode.”

He chuckled and took a step into the office, making it feel so much smaller.

“So...what are you doing in here? Snooping?” The smirk on his face told me he already knew.

“No. Just...researching. I live with you, but I don't know much about you. How do I know you're not a serial killer?” I

lifted my chin like I could pose some kind of threat, even though he had a solid foot on me.

Nathan tilted his head. “I’ve known your brother for almost five years. Doesn’t that give me some form of street cred?”

Shrugging and more than ready to deflect, I looked around the abundant room. “Do you play all of these?”

He perked up. “Yeah, I took lessons for years. I think my mom just wanted me to find a hobby that kept my hands busy so I wasn’t always destroying her house.”

Huh. That sounded about right. I could picture a tiny Nathan running around and causing all sorts of chaos. He gave off vibes that reminded me of my nephew, Dallas. There were always Legos on the floor of my brother’s house and stickers of Spiderman on kitchen cabinets.

I looked at the piano and back at him. “Would you play for me?”

CHAPTER SIX

Nathan



Age 15:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I am so sorry that happened to you, Lil. If I had been there, I totally would've pulled the fire alarm and screamed "FIRE!" up and down the hallway so you could escape. Since I can't be there for you like that, let me tell you a story that'll make you feel better. About a year ago, my class was giving presentations. We had to sit silently and listen to each one, so, of course, my brain was wandering all over. I zoned out entirely. Meanwhile, blood was rushing to...other places. And when it came time for me to go up and present, I had to wrap my jacket around my waist. I don't think everyone in the room noticed, but a couple of the guys were totally laughing. Kids are mean, Lily. Don't let it get to you. If it makes you feel better, send me their addresses, and I'll gladly go roll their houses.

Screw those guys,

Shiny

“Would you play for me?”

I’d played for thousands of people over the years, from small venues full of friends and family only to larger stadiums during college. Yet none of those felt as significant as playing for her.

If she was anyone else, I would have sauntered over there without a second thought, all cocky and grinning, then played a random piece floating around in my head. But when she looked up at me with those big doe eyes and pouty lips, my heart stuttered. *What piece? What tempo? Would she think I was showing off?*

“I, uh.” *No* was on the tip of my tongue. But she was watching me like I was a magician who’d just pulled a bunny out of a small top hat.

She looked so sweet, fingers twiddling and a smile shining up at me.

“Sure.”

I took a seat on the bench and placed my hands on the keys. It was all so normal. So familiar. Yet, with Calla’s eyes on me, my mind went blank. I couldn’t think of a single song. Couldn’t remember how to move my fingers.

So I closed my eyes. *Just forget the rest, Nate.*

My fingers flew across the keys as I played a symphony I'd learned years ago in order to impress some girl at the high school talent show. It was symbolic, I supposed. Except Calla was one hundred times harder to impress, and a fog of pressure so thick it was blinding surrounded me. As if her presence was the equivalent of an entire arena of eyes staring up at me through the harsh stage lighting.

I squeezed my eyes shut tighter, letting my fingers do all the work as I pushed away the worries. I tuned out the woman in the room as Beethoven's music filled the air. I didn't even have to think about it anymore. My body knew the melody better than my brain did. It was the same way I played guitar. Or any other instrument, for that matter. No sense in thinking. Thinking ruined it all for me. It caused distractions. It caused questions like "Did I turn the oven off before leaving the house?" and "Why did I write a seven-page letter to my first crush when I was twelve?" Each and every day—heck, multiple times a day—thinking caused my brain to fly off on a whim. But when I let the music just...be, when I let go of all control, that was when the beauty of it all came into play. That was when the song spoke the words I couldn't. When tears were shed and hearts were moved.

I stopped halfway through. I could've gone on for ages, but the piece was long, and I would've been devastated if I'd opened my eyes to see a yawning Calla.

Instead, when my fingers trailed off the last note and I slowly lifted my gaze to her, Calla was slack-jawed and in awe. A lone tear trickled down her cheek, and she cocked her head to the side.

“How did you do that?” she asked. She was only a few feet from me, but her voice sounded light-years away.

“Uh, practice.” It was a simple answer, but it was the truth. “I’ve been practicing since I was seven, so I’m kind of used to it.”

“Wow,” she whispered, sounding like some of my younger students the first time they heard me play that piece. “You’re really, really good. I can’t even play ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star.’”

I chuckled. “I could teach you, if you want.” *This is not keeping your distance, Nathan.*

Calla stood straighter. “Really?” She had stars in her eyes, like a puppy watching a treat dangled just out of reach.

“Absolutely. Everyone can be taught how. It’s just discovering how you perceive the music. Some people need sheet music. Some need to hear the rhythm and then go for it. I personally have to think of the melody like a puzzle. Each piece comes together as my fingers find the right key. And after enough practice, my fingers do all the thinking for me.” I pressed one key quickly, then another, and another to prove my point.

She nodded, wearing a smile bigger than any I'd seen from her. Her voice picked up higher and louder. "Okay! But I haven't tried to play since I was a kid, so fair warning—you'll have your work cut out for you."

I laughed. "Here. Come sit." I scooted to one side of the bench. When she sat beside me, I scooted some more. Because I had no business knowing what it felt like to be pressed up against Calla Wells.

"Here, spread your fingers like this and follow me."

I pointed toward her end of the piano while I took the lower notes. Listening intently, she followed along as I played. G C C CD EE. I taught all my students to play *The Itsy-Bitsy Spider* first because it was simple and didn't require much thinking.

Calla's fingers stuttered as she mimicked my movements, awkwardly bending to reach each key since they were far shorter than mine. She wasn't half bad, though.

She chuckled after trying for a few rounds. "Yeah, I don't know about this."

I waved a hand. "We'll work on it. Don't worry." What was I saying? I should *not* be offering to spend more time with her than I had to.

"Would you really teach me? I want to play stuff like "Interstellar" and Mozart. Pull out some crazy stuff as a party trick, you know?"

My brain told me to say something like *actually, I'm pretty busy with work and lessons, so maybe another time...or never.*

Except my lips moved without my permission. And the next thing I knew, I was confidently saying, “I’ll get you there in no time.”

It was the truth, though. As long as I could crack the code and discover how she learned best, she would have limitless potential.

She stood from the bench and twisted from side to side. “Except”—she cringed—“I don’t know how I’ll pay for it. Money is kind of tight. Your best friend is a cheapskate. When I told him my desired annual salary was one million dollars, he told me to go back to Chuck E. Cheese.”

I laughed. I would’ve had a heart attack at ten if I’d gone to a birthday party and Calla was my server.

“Well...how about you pay me in other ways?” I grinned and waggled my brows.

She reared back a bit. Probably because it sounded like I’d just offered piano lessons in exchange for sex.

“Oh, uh,” she stuttered, and her face turned red.

It was a sight. I, for one, had never seen Calla Wells speechless.

“I mean like help me with marketing. I’m trying to expand my business. Give more lessons, but I’m having a hard time. I made a flyer, but no one’s responding.”

She let out a long breath, and her shoulders sagged. “Well, what did the flyer look like?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I used a lot of bright colors and stock photos of children who looked excited.” I’d made copies at work and had stuck them up at local coffee shops and bookstores.

Calla winced. “Oh heavens. Okay. Yeah, we can work on that. How about I handle your social media pages for you and you can teach me?”

“You don’t mind?”

I was awful with social media. My last post included a picture of me on the beach in Ocean City. I was holding a giant cotton candy, and the caption read: *Pour some sugar on me.*

But I was always looking to expand my classes, especially if it meant spending a little less time in my apartment or at West Oak.

“Absolutely. Come on. I’ll even shake on it.” Calla stuck out her right hand and grinned.

I stood from the bench, wiping my hands on my navy work, then wrapped my hand around hers. The instant our fingertips touched, my chest tightened, and tiny sparks danced across her skin to mine. She was soft and warm, like a comforting pillow I wanted to wrap my whole body around.

This close, I could smell her sweet, floral perfume. I was not a perfect gentleman. I’d had my fair share of experiences with women, even if I didn’t always create the best first

impression. But I'd never felt a connection so electric through a handshake alone.

Calla's eyes were locked on mine so intensely I wondered if she was challenging me to a stare off. Her expression, so bright and cheery, was like a lighthouse calling me in. Her ever-present smile radiated pure joy. And right now, that joy was directed at me. It was too much to handle. *She* was too much to handle.

I yanked my hand back like she'd burned me and spoke far too quickly. And too loudly. "*Well, gotta go to bed! Goodnight, now!*"

Skittering past her, I headed toward the door, bumping the wind chimes next to my drum set in the process. Without stopping to right the fallen silver chimes, I hollered, "I'll fix those later. Bye."

I shut the door on her and darted to my room, where I threw myself onto my bed, face in my pillow, and let out a sigh.

Luke's sister. Luke's sister. Luke's little baby sister.

If I said it enough times, maybe my brain would get the message. Then maybe it'd help me out by telling my heart not to race at mere handshakes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Nathan



Age 17:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hey Lil,

Out of curiosity, what do you want to be when you grow up?

I have to do this project about my “dream career,” and I said I wanted to be an underwater welder. Turns out it’s super hard. It’s actually one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. So there goes that, I guess.

Isn’t there some kind of job out there where you can be rich and not work your entire day away? ’Cause I want that. I guess for now I’m going to put down bunny farmer, just to piss my home ec teacher off.

Definitely want to know what you’d pick. How’s your nose doing? Still got a small scar? When you said you broke it, I

nearly had a heart attack. I wish I could kick your brother in the balls for throwing that softball at you too fast.

Anyway, miss ya. Pls answer before tomorrow 'cause that's when my project is due.

Thanks.

S.

The older generation always made comments about “the good old days” and said things like “ah, to be young and have freedom again.” When I was a kid, I wondered when I’d say annoying stuff like that. Turned out, it was at the ripe old age of twenty-five. Because I was over being an adult. I wanted to go to Legoland and snack on playdough again.

But instead, there I was, doing my old job, my new job, *and* my boss’s job. I’d taken this position because the pay seemed too good to be true (it was indeed) and because I thought maybe it was time to grow up. But I take it back. No more growing, please.

The last email Chad from our New York branch—who was also my boss—sent said, *Hey, Nathan, need these done by seven tonight.* He’d then added a string of emojis that included a clenching bicep and a beer. He’d also attached a ten-page document regarding sales numbers in *his* branch that I could guarantee his own boss had asked him to do.

Before his promotion and move to the New York office, I found the man mildly annoying. These days, when I saw his name, my body would break out into chills. He was like a leech—attached to me and sucking all the joy from my life. Janise was worse. She'd lightened up since Layla quit (probably because it had been a solid year with almost no toilet pranks), but without my friend's distractions, she'd buckled down harder on work.

Once, after working nonstop without a lunch break, I'd attempted to leave a half hour early, but Janise gave me this awful look, as if I was being lazy. She didn't have to speak a word. She just said, *Well, if you think you're worthy of leaving early.*

Rather than deal with her wrath, I'd chosen to sort files until the end of the day, making sure I didn't leave until the rest of the staff did.

I didn't hold meetings often. More often than not, when Chad was in charge, they were a waste of time. Not to mention they were a little awkward since I had hooked up with a few of the girls from the editorial staff when I started working for West Oak. Now I tried to create as much distance as possible. Thankfully, I didn't oversee that department. My position left me in charge of accounting, sales, and administration.

Sick of late nights and early mornings, I was determined to stand my ground. How hard could it be to stand up for myself? *Tell Janise you're leaving early to go to an appointment and that you'll be back on Monday.* She didn't have to know that

appointment was with my couch and a nice cold beer. It was three o'clock on a Friday. Why shouldn't I take off early for once?

I took a deep breath, puffed out my chest, and checked my hair in the small mirror hanging beside my desk. "You got this," I whispered to myself.

I marched across the office with purpose and knocked twice on Janise's door. But I didn't wait for an answer. No. She liked to burst through my door from time to time, so I considered this payback. Only, instead of munching on cheese puffs and listening to the previous night's LA Dodgers game like I was, she had her head in her files. She was probably searching for her next email audit victim.

"Nathan, can I help you?"

That's Mr. Huxley to you. My inner voice was far more confident than my physical being, so I told him to settle down.

"Yeah, just letting you know I have an appointment, so I'm heading out."

Janise peeked up from the deadly files. "Oh?" She smirked at me like Medusa.

"Yup." I stood firm, but I avoided making eye contact just in case. I left my response at that. There was no need to give her more details. She was not the boss. I was.

Suck it, Janise.

"So you're leaving"—she peered at the clock on the wall—"two hours early?"

I nodded succinctly, my hands clenched into fists at my sides. “Yes.”

She tilted her head and pursed her lips. “Oh, I see.”

I didn’t leave until eight.

How did this always happen to me? I came in so confident, so prepared to tell Janise to stick it where the sun don’t shine, but all it took was a few measly passive-aggressive comments to make me crumble to ash.

I trudged my way up to the apartment, praying my worn-out desk legs could make it to the couch before giving out. Except when I stepped inside, Calla was snuggled under that same blanket, her knees tucked up to her chest. She was engrossed in what was playing on the television, so she didn’t notice me taking my jacket off and putting my keys down on the accent chair to the right of the sectional.

“What are you—”

“Shh.” She hushed me, never looking away from the screen.

Without a word, I took my seat next to her, curious about what had captivated her attention like this. There was a line of shirtless men on the screen. Every one of them was blessed with rippling abs that looked like bookshelves hanging off their stomachs. And there was a woman throwing water balloons at them. I looked over at Calla and back at the TV. *What the heck was she watching? And what was so riveting about it?* Honestly, I was too scared to disrupt her again to find out.

Thirty minutes, one bag of popcorn, and two wine glasses with Dr. Pepper in them (Calla polished off the wine last night, apparently) later, I was sucked into *The Bachelorette*, as if our world was coming to an end and this show contained the answers to how to survive the apocalypse.

The main girl was seated on a couch with one of the contestants now. She was holding his hands as tears trailed down her cheeks. “Jordan, I just don’t think we belong together.”

“Oh, come on!” Calla shouted at the TV, throwing a piece of popcorn at their faces.

I shook my head. “I cannot believe she’s picking Matt over Jordan. He brought her flowers with a love note! Matt never even told her that her blue dress matched her eyes.”

Somehow, in the span of one episode, I’d become a worthy commentator. Obviously.

Jordan did a pitiful walk of shame out to the limo as Marie stood back, wiping her tears so her makeup wouldn’t smear. I slumped back on the couch. “This is bullshit.”

Calla just shook her head and tossed a handful of popcorn into her mouth. Her voice was muffled when she spoke around it. “Yeah, of course she really likes the guy with dark hair that rides a motorcycle and looks like he may wear eyeliner.”

“Why, though? When the other guy is so much nicer.”

She tilted her head, her eyes narrowing to slits. “The morally gray guy always gets the girl.”

Huh...morally gray?

“Maybe that’s why I don’t pull chicks. I need to be a little more bad. Gotta steal a pencil or something. Maybe spit out my gum on the sidewalk.”

Calla guffawed adorably, throwing her head back against the cushion. “I bet that’ll do the trick.”

The episode faded to black, and Calla turned the TV off. Then she hopped up and stretched her arms above her head.

“Wait. We need to watch the next episode.” I didn’t mean to sound so desperate, but my voice was raw, and I had to know who Marie was going to pick from the fourteen men left.

In response, she just shook her head, long ponytail swishing from side to side. “Nope. The next episode doesn’t air for a week.”

My jaw fell. “A *week*? Are you kidding me?”

Calla sashayed down the hall without a word. She opened the door, and just before stepping in, she peeked over her shoulder and smiled. “Welcome to the club, my friend. I’ll make matching jackets for us soon.” With that, she slipped inside her room and closed the door quietly behind her.

I tried so, so hard to go to my room and climb into bed. It was late, and my first lessons of the day started early. Yet this remote called to me. I waited a few more minutes as my mind and my body warred over what to do. Finally, I said *screw it* and reached for the remote.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Calla



Age 18:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Did you know that as of next month, we will have been friends for FIVE YEARS??

What are you going to get me for our anniversary? I expect either diamonds or a signed Nickelback vinyl. Your pick.

In all seriousness, we should celebrate! Five years is a big chunk of my life, tbh.

Let's agree to watch Finding Nemo at the same time tonight, and we can send each other our live reactions.

It'll be super fun.

Happy almost anniversary,

Lil

Unknown number: Hey, wtf is up with this show??

Unknown number: Seriously, how is it possible to put crack into a TV show?

Unknown number: I liked this john guy in the beginning. What's wrong with him?

Unknown number: Never mind. He's a douche.

Unknown number: This real estate investor is cool. I guess your best choice is to pick the lesser of all evils

Unknown number: Okay, Derek for the win. I'm sticking with him till the end.

Unknown number: Also, this is Nathan. Layla sent me your number because I didn't want to wake you up to talk about this.

Unknown number: It's 2 am, and I have to get up at 7, but I'm almost caught up. One more episode!

Unknown number: I finished. Please don't take away my man card.

"You're telling me that Nathan stayed up all night watching *The Bachelorette*?"

Layla and Marigold passed my phone back and forth, reading the string of random texts I'd woken up to.

"I guess so." I laughed and took my phone from Marigold. "I thought he'd hate it. He came in so judgy when he saw what I was watching, but now I wouldn't be surprised if he ordered a shirt with Derek's face on it."

“That man is something else. Did I tell you about the time he argued with me over who was best dressed at the Met Gala? And Luke once posted a Snapchat story of Nathan dancing on a table to the Scissor Sisters. He was wearing a cowboy hat, and he had a lightsaber in one hand and a beer in the other.”

I snorted a laugh. “Yeah, that doesn’t surprise me.”

Marigold piped in. “Is he a good roommate so far?”

I hadn’t had much experience with roommates, so I wasn’t an expert on the subject, but he hadn’t left trails of popcorn through the house or questionable adult things on the bathroom vanity. At least not yet.

“I think so? He works all the time, so I don’t see him much, but we get along.”

I intentionally left out the part where he played the piano for me. For some reason, that felt a little too intimate to share.

Layla smiled. “I figured he would be. Luke never had any issues with him as a roommate. Speaking of, he looks busy. I better help him.” With that, she pranced away.

Luke was manning the bar alone tonight, so he could use help, but I was tempted to warn the people waiting for their drinks that if Layla made it, it was probably better off being flushed down a toilet. Though watching their reactions to fluoride-flavored cocktails could be fun too. In the end, the latter side won, and I stayed put.

Luke gave Layla a tight smile and nodded, inviting her behind the bar top to help. The man would probably take a

thousand bad reviews on Yelp if it meant making her smile.

I felt a little guilty for not jumping in right then. Taking aesthetic shots of drinks being poured, customers being served, and of the interior design of the place did not feel like work. My gig here was a blast. I'd been working on filming short videos and matching them up to trending audio and posting them on all social media platforms. Yesterday, I made one of Luke tossing a bottle into the air and pouring it in slow-mo. It had almost one hundred thousand views already. I tried to ignore the "hot bartender" comments in reference to my brother, but Layla found them hilarious. Pimping my brother out for marketing was a little icky, but who was I to deny the people what they wanted?

"Could you do me a favor?" Marigold interrupted my thoughts.

I turned back to her. "Whatcha need?"

"Could you watch the boys tonight? Around eight or so?"

Dropping my elbow to the table, I rested my chin in my hand. "Liam can't watch them?"

Marigold's eyes practically rolled to the floor at the mention of my brother. "It's technically my night, and I don't want to ask him to watch them again. Last time he kept them on my night, he teased me for weeks and said he would send me a bill."

I snorted. Yeah, that sounded like Liam. He'd never found a button he didn't love to push. Especially when it came to

Marigold.

“I’d love to have them. What are you doing tonight?” I scooted to the edge of the booth and grinned. “Ooh, does someone have a date?”

As far as I knew, Marigold hadn’t gone out since she and Liam split up. Though it probably wasn’t the kind of thing she’d want to tell her ex-husband’s sister. Not to mention, she knew me well enough to know I’d research her dates so thoroughly I’d know their favorite Chick-Fil-A dipping sauce by the time I was done.

She snorted a laugh. “I wish. More like a mandatory girls’ night with the ladies from work. Apparently, my attendance is nonnegotiable. I believe Nicole’s exact words were ‘Tacos and tequila are the only thing you need right now.’” She rolled her eyes.

“I agree! You need some good time off. You’re always with the boys or working. You never stop to breathe and enjoy yourself.”

She gestured to the table in front of us. “I’m not working right now.”

“Taking a late lunch break doesn’t count. Go out tonight, have fun, and stay out late. The boys and I will have the best time. I’ve been missing those little boogers.”

I was already planning our itinerary: Nerf guns, pillow fights, homemade brownies. Possibly getting a little too rowdy and watching *Jurassic Park*.

“You really don’t mind?” She bit her lip and spun her water glass, as if asking me to babysit my nephews was like sentencing me to death.

“Not a bit. We’re gonna have the best night.”

She gave me an appreciative smile across the table.

What she didn’t realize was that, as much as I adored my nephews, I’d do anything for her. Thankful didn’t begin to describe how I felt about having Marigold in my life. For a while after the divorce, I worried we would lose her entirely, and for a moment, we did. But she slowly found her way back to us. She still came to family dinners, and she hung out with us almost as much as she had when she was still married to my brother.

At first, it was awkward. She and Liam would steal glances at one another, then trade snippy comments about parenting. But they worked it out, which meant I was able to keep my best friend. She’d been there for me time and time again, so I’d be there for her just the same. Especially if it meant watching my seven-year-old nephews for a night.

Our phones buzzed repeatedly on the table, and we shared a thin-mouthed look. Neither of us had any doubt the messages were coming from our family group chat.

Crew: Does anyone have an extra hand mixer??

Crew: Not everyone at once please.

Crew: It doesn’t have to be fancy. Calla, I know you’re broke so a cheap one will work.

Me: I don't even own a fork, Crew.

Crew: I'm not asking for a fork, CALLA.

Liam: Buy your own kitchen appliances. You own a food truck. It's a business expense.

Crew: Whoa, whoa, whoa, fancy finance pants.

Crew: If I had the time, I would've done that already. My hand mixer died, so food prep is taking way too long. And there is a new truck parked next to me. They're taking all the business.

Adam: In the time it took you to text us, you could have been working to catch up.

Calla: I agree

Liam: Same

Marigold: Ditto

Crew: SCREW YOU GUYS.

Marigold and I laughed at the text exchange, and as I was putting my phone back on the table, she was snagging her purse from beside her. "Shoot, I gotta go. I have a client coming in a half hour. I'll see you tonight, right?"

I nodded. "Yup, see you—Oh! Wait..." I hadn't really thought about the logistics of tonight though. Should I check with Nathan before having the boys over? It was his apartment, after all. "I should probably ask Nathan first."

"Really?" she asked with a head tilt.

“Yeah. This is like a part of the roommate code, right? Don’t bring seven-year-old twins into the apartment without a heads-up. It’s right up there with clean the microwave after you heat up something really stinky and always replace the trash bag when you take the trash out.”

That’s right. I was a dream roommate.

I pulled up our previously one-sided text conversation and fired off a message.

Calla: Hey, do you mind if Dallas and Miles come over for a little bit tonight?

Only a few seconds had passed before his reply came in.

Nathan: Not at all. I love those little guys. There are some Legos in my office closet from the last time Luke had them over.

The thought of Nathan saving a bucket of Legos for my nephews made my heart race. He was thoughtful like that. Always putting others first, never himself.

“He said it was fine,” I murmured, locking my phone’s screen.

Across from me, Marigold wore a devious smirk, but she didn’t respond.

“What?”

She pointed at my face as if I had a big, fat glob of chocolate on my chin—which wasn’t entirely impossible. “You’re smiling.”

I was? I guess so.

I shrugged. “He’s funny.”

She gave me a hint of a smile before sliding out of the booth and waltzing out the door.

Alone again, I picked my camera up and got to work. For the rest of the afternoon, I followed Luke and Layla around like I was a paparazzo and they were A-list celebrities. After I’d gotten more than enough footage, I worked on marketing, creating fun reels, stories, polls, and Q&As. Anything fans of Romfuzzled would want to see. One cute boomerang of Luke kissing Layla on the cheek as she poured a drink was capturing the most engagement so far.

By the time I packed up for the day, my SD card was full, and I was ready to go home and edit till the boys arrived.

CHAPTER NINE

Nathan



Age 20:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

Five years?? How is that even possible? Absolutely down for a simultaneous live watching of Finding Nemo...as if we haven't watched it a hundred times already. But it'll be cool to think that, wherever you are, we're under the same sky, watching the same movie. Make it feel like you're close.

Sorry, got a little emotional. You know me.

Let's do something big for year ten, yeah? Maybe we can finally meet up then! I can bring Megan Fox with me, because, of course, we will be married by then, and you can bring your nerdy IT husband who doesn't deserve you.

It'll be great.

Happy anniversary,

Shiny

It was symbolic, really. Slipping my key into the lock at the end of a long, tough shift, only for the key to get jammed in place. Like I was the key, unable to break free from the stressors holding me captive.

I'd worked late again, then I met a student at the studio for a last-minute guitar lesson. He had a recital coming up, and his mom had begged me to meet for a few extra sessions. And although I had worked way past my scheduled time at West Oak, I couldn't say no. Just the thought of saying that word made my skin itch. Like a miniature Nathan was sitting on my shoulder, convincing me that if I said no, then I was officially the world's biggest jerk. That thought would fester until I'd eventually say fine and give away every free hour I had.

The lessons weren't the issue. I loved teaching kids to play far more than I liked my actual job. Truth be told, if I could swing it financially, I'd love to do it more.

Watching the way their eyes lit up, just like mine had once, as they put the puzzle of music together, was far more rewarding than anything else I'd ever experienced. Especially with the ones who really struggled. For weeks, they'd practice. Sometimes they wanted to give up, but I encouraged them to keep going. Over and over. Until it happened. Their brains fired off signals that finally connected to their hands, lighting up the synapses and directing their movements in all the right ways. Sliding that last piece into the puzzle until the final picture became clear.

It was incredible, and I felt almost guilty being the one who got to witness those moments time and time again. And I felt fortunate to be the one parents trusted with their kids. They'd drop them off for one hour a week, and in a month or so, new little humans would form.

So I wouldn't mind the late nights and tired mornings. The kids were worth it.

On nights like tonight, I'd come home and run straight to bed. Tonight, however, I opened my door to see Dallas, Luke's seven-year-old nephew, tiptoeing across the floor in full kid-sized army gear. He had a Nerf gun lifted to his line of sight like he was ready to fire at any given moment. What looked like brown eyeshadow was smeared across his cheeks for war paint.

"Hey, Dal—"

Dallas lifted a finger to his lips, signaling me to hush.

I put both hands out in front of me, then slowly set my keys on the counter quietly.

Dallas, brows furrowed and lips sealed tight, shifted his gun to one hand and raised the other to the sky. He gestured wildly: two fingers pointing toward the couch, then a fist, then an arm straight out, a tap to his ankle. And finally, he dropped to the floor and army crawled to the couch.

I had no idea where Miles and Calla were, and I wasn't interested in getting caught in this crossfire without a weapon,

so I followed Dallas's lead and army crawled my way behind my gray sectional.

He sat up and leaned against the back of the couch, procuring a sandwich bag full of Goldfish from his camo pocket as he did so.

"Rations?" he asked in a hushed tone, holding the Ziploc bag out to me.

I looked down at the bag of crushed orange crackers and back up to him. "Uh, no thanks. I had an MRE before I got here."

He mumbled, "Good, good" before shoving a handful of *the snack that smiles back* into his cheek and chewing fiercely.

I peeked around the couch, but the little man thrust a forceful hand out, smacking my chest and jolting me back to the safe zone. He made no noise, only shook his head.

"Hey," I whispered, "how do you know all those signals?"

Dallas scanned the living room from behind the couch. "Dad plays *Call of Duty* a lot."

Pressing my lips together, I gave him an impressed nod.

A slight creak behind us had me whipping around. Calla was sitting a few inches from me, wearing tiny light purple athletic shorts and a gray T-shirt that said *Unagi* on the front.

I nearly jolted out of my skin at the jump scare.

Her response was a wicked smile, then she whispered, "Any last words?"

I raised both hands. “Mercy?”

She had none. No, she shot me at close-range, her suctioned Nerf bullet nailing me in the middle of my forehead.

In a fit of giggles, Miles poked out from behind Calla. Dallas joined in, and their aunt couldn’t resist either. Their laughter filled the apartment as I attempted to break the suction off my head.

I broke the seal and reached out to Dallas for a spare gun.

Still cackling, he handed it to me.

Calla pointed to my forehead. “You may want to check your injuries first.”

Heart lurching, I rushed to the mirror in the entryway. Injury? From a Nerf gun?

Sure enough, there was a purple circle in the middle of my forehead. I had a hickey from a Nerf dart.

I cocked my own plastic weapon. “You have no idea what you started.”

Calla turned to Miles and nodded, lowering her protective goggles. Then they were off, running into the kitchen.

Dallas and I chased them, using the coffee table, throw pillows, and barstools as protection from the foam bullets coming our way.

The boys laughed so hard when I got Calla in the nose and her mouth popped open in a shocked snort. Her soft brown hair flew behind her, and her vanilla scent filled my nose as

she circled the island and I ran after her. She looked over her shoulder, gentle laughter escaping her lips, and fired, only to miss and hit the couch behind me.

I paused and switched gears, turning the opposite way so I could catch her on the other side of the counter. She shrieked when I grasped her waist and spun her around. My chest heaved as I gasped for breath, and my cheeks hurt from smiling.

Man, when was the last time I'd actually run? I was far more out of shape than I realized.

When I set her back on the ground, she looked up at me. Her smile slowly vanished as she stared into my eyes. As if she were longing for an answer to an unspoken question. One she was desperately seeking.

Without my permission, my focus dropped to her mouth, to the pretty pink lips jutted out slightly.

She watched me, wide-eyed, as I openly took her in. The spell was broken when her attention drifted over my shoulder and caught on something behind me. She shook her head slightly and turned to Miles and Dallas, who were wrestling over the last gun.

“Uh, who wants cookies?” she asked in a high-pitched squeak.

The boys dropped their weapons and immediately called an unspoken truce as they scrambled off the floor and raised their hands, arms pin straight in the air.

For a second there, it was like the world around us had vanished. I couldn't look away from her, and her eyes were locked on me just as intently. I wanted to kiss her. Bad. To find out whether her lips tasted as good as they looked, or if she'd melt into my touch. I wanted to know things about her that no one should know about their best friend's little sister. Just like a couple of nights ago in the music room, a bolt of lightning hit my chest as I watched her with the boys. She pulled out mixing bowls that I didn't even know I owned and moved to the pantry to find ingredients. I rubbed my chest in an attempt to calm the dull ache. I needed a shot of Pepto and a good deep breath.

Thirty minutes later, Calla had me rolling out parchment paper onto two baking sheets as she scooped spoonfuls of cookie dough onto them.

"What are these called again?" I asked while definitely *not* licking the raw cookie dough off my finger.

"Beach cookies. A Mama B classic." Calla popped the baking dishes in the preheated oven.

"Why are they called beach cookies?"

With a smile, she licked the spoon.

I had to look away from her. The action was too intimate to witness.

"Because we only make them when we're going to the beach. *And* the most important ingredient is coconut, of course."

Coconut. A staple in a Wells kitchen. Though I would devour just about anything as long as it was labeled *Mama B's recipe*.

“But we’re not going to the beach.”

“Hush.”

I chuckled as she scraped the bottom of the mixing bowl for the last remnants of dough. Dallas and Miles sat in the living room, the reflection of a blue dog dancing in their eyes as they watched a TV show, completely content. I couldn’t help but smile. They were the perfect mix of Liam and Marigold. The way they naturally moved at the same time was cute. Without looking at one another, they scratched their noses simultaneously, then lowered their brows as if they were in sync.

“I’m sorry if this is...a lot. I didn’t think about asking you until after I told Marigold I would watch them. You were gone so early this morning, and you always work so late. I hope this isn’t disrupting your routine.”

Taking note of how she noticed my absence in the early morning, I smiled.

“Nah, it’s fine. I always loved when Luke would bring them here.” They were about four the first time I found Luke chasing them around with a Darth Vader lightsaber.

Calla smiled up at me as she washed out the dishes in the sink. I joined her, taking the utensils out of her hand and grabbing a spare sponge and dish soap.

“I know it’s getting late, but do you think you could teach me a little piano tonight?”

Holding my breath, I looked at the clock on the microwave. It was already nine, and I did have to get up early so I could finish up a report, but if I said no, I’d only end up tossing and turning in bed, looking back and regretting my choice not to spend more time with her. Saying no was always difficult, but when it came to Calla, I had no doubt it would tear me up inside. It was like the idea of stomping on a bunny. My mind just wouldn’t let me get there.

“Sure. As soon as they leave, we’ll work on it, okay?”

She bounced on her heels a little, a habit so adorable it was already etched into my memory, and squealed, “Yay! I wanted to practice when I got home, but I already forgot everything you taught me.”

I sniffled a laugh. “Yeah, that’s common. Especially since it’s been a couple of days. We’ll get you there.”

She gave me a grin so big it made my heart ache.

As soon as Marigold came to get the boys, who may or may not have been hopped up on sugar and overstimulated after watching various dinosaur shows, Calla practically ran to my office.

I snorted a laugh when she slid through the doorway *Risky Business* style and plopped onto the bench. Turning back to

me, she patted the seat next to her as though I needed permission to play my own instrument.

Though I rolled my eyes and bit back the smirk threatening to break through, I obeyed.

“Okay, let’s focus on notes first. There are eighty-eight keys, but you only have to remember the notes A through G. See these?” I settled my fingers on two black keys.

Calla nodded, her eyes bright and curious.

“Between these is the D. You can remember this because the two black keys on either side look like dog ears, and the white key, D, looks like a snout. D means dog.”

Calla nodded again and whispered, “I will name it Rover” under her breath.

“Um, sure. Next is hand position, so put your hands up here.”

She followed my instructions eagerly, positioning her fingers on random keys. I leaned into her to adjust her positioning, only to be assaulted by a playful mix of vanilla and jasmine. Forcing the air out of my lungs, I gritted my teeth and got back to work. Gently, I moved her left hand, ignoring how natural it felt touching her soft skin. Ignoring the sight of her long, delicate neck up close and the pulse fluttering in her throat.

“Left pinkie on C.” I pressed her pink-painted pinkie finger on the key to prove my point. When I leaned over her to move her right hand, our thighs slid against each other. Her knee

brushed against mine, spreading warmth to my chest. My neck went hot, and my heart rate picked up a notch. Having Calla's leg pressed against mine was comforting and frightening all at once. Like jumping into a pile of leaves when I was a kid. The piles always looked so tempting, but somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew a poisonous snake could be hiding under the leaves.

“Right thumb on this other C.” I pressed down again, letting the note ring out.

We stayed like that for a while, her leg pressed against mine as she followed my instructions through each disconnected note. Every piano string pulled felt like a tug in my chest, yanking me into Calla's orbit. When she made a mistake, she'd let out a frustrated sigh, and her pulse would flutter in her throat. But she didn't give up. She stuck with it, playing the instructed notes over and over until things began to click.

Calla Wells was overwhelming in every sense; her presence was overpowering, her beauty captivating, and her laughter contagious. I found myself unable to resist her charisma. She was simply too much to handle, and I could already see myself getting lost in her every time we were close.

Just as she was finally piecing it all together, her hand slipped so the melody turned into a deep, chaotic mess.

“Ugh. Maybe Ms. Mindella was right. I just don't have the potential to be a musician.” She stood from the bench with a sigh and shuffled to the door.

Before she could get far, I snagged her wrist, wrapping my fingers all the way around it. The expression on her face as she glanced down at the connection and back up at me made my chest tight.

I took a deep breath before dropping her hand. “Don’t give up after one lesson. You’re doing great. If you find yourself getting frustrated with it, take a break. As long as you keep hitting that wall, you’re going to resent the music.”

I had seen it over and over again. A kid who went to two lessons and didn’t enjoy it or didn’t feel successful right away. He’d give up, and his parents would pull him out without so much as a thank you. But I’d also witnessed some pretty incredible kids push through their glass ceilings and really reach for their limits. And though it could only spell disaster for me, I wanted to push Calla to that limit too.

CHAPTER TEN

Calla



Age 17:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Shiny,

Do me a HUGE favor and watch How To Lose A Guy in Ten Days RIGHT NOW!

I'm in the middle of bingeing '90s and 2000s rom-coms, and I'm 99% sure this one is my fav. My mom and I watched it like 100 times (jk. It was twice) this week, and we've been quoting it all day. Anyway, Matthew McConaughey could totally get it. That smirk, ugh.

My point here is that if you ever have a crush on a girl and you want her to find you hot, pull up that movie, wear your hat backward, and at least act like it's the best movie you've ever seen. Thank me later. From now on, you can consider me your love expert, because let me tell you, I would KILL it as the man of the relationship, SO YOU'RE FREAKING WELCOME.

Anyway, what are your plans for next week? My oldest brother and I are going downtown together. He's on leave from the air force, and I can only see him for a couple days, so if I don't answer much, that's why. He's never home, so when he is, I soak it in as much as possible. I miss him like crazy the second he leaves, which probably sounds ridiculous to you, an only child. It really is strange, I guess, because he used to drive me crazy, and now he's all I think about when he leaves. Well, him and Matthew McConaughey.

Sorry for ranting. Ate a LOT of chocolate-covered popcorn, and it's rushing to my head.

Hugs and sneezes,

Lily

For the first time since I moved in, Nathan was home before me. When I saw his car in the designated parking spot for our apartment, I felt almost giddy. I rushed up to the apartment quicker than usual. Maybe because I had such a good day, or maybe because there was an incredible frozen meat lovers pizza in the freezer just calling my name, but either way, I picked up the pace.

I caught sight of my reflection in the stainless-steel door of the elevator, and *yikes*. My hair was in a knotted bun on my head, with stray hairs—which I liked to call my angel wings—flying about. What little makeup I'd put on this morning was smeared from sweat, and I was almost positive I smelled of

craft beer and new construction sheetrock. I licked my pointer finger and attempted to fix my hair, but it was no use. The defiant little wings sprung back up, one by one.

And why did it matter anyway? I had no one to impress at home. For goodness' sake, I spent far too much time in an oversized *Winnie the Pooh* zipper onesie before I moved home. And when I ran into my hot neighbor, I'd offer to let him borrow my Piglet one, and when he said no, I'd move on with my day. With a long breath out, I forced my shoulders to relax and focused on my feet. Because the mirror was not for me today.

Opening the door wide, I went with the first thing that came to mind. "Honey, I'm home!"

There was no response. Hmm. Maybe he was in his room. Or maybe he was playing music. I didn't hear the sound of his piano or guitar, though. Oh my gosh, what if he had a girl over? We never did discuss the sock on the doorknob thing. If I interrupted Nathan's boinking session by shouting "Honey, I'm home!" I'd surely go down in history as the world's worst roommate.

I tiptoed my way deeper into the apartment, as if it would make up for my shouting upon entry. And there, in the living room, was Nathan, remote pointed at his mouth, scrolling through a list of movies queued up on the TV.

"Hey, how was your day?" he asked, casually propped up against the couch cushions. He wore a red hat turned backward. It had a white Phillies logo I could only make out

because he was still facing the TV. His black shirt was tight around his arms, showcasing the veins cascading down to where he held the remote, his gray shorts were a little shorter than anything I had seen him in so far, and I couldn't help but appreciate the man's incredible legs. I knew a good shin when I saw one.

I cleared my throat and set my camera bag on the accent chair in front of me. "Pretty good." I bit my lip, suddenly nervous. "I spent some time setting up a social media page and creating logos for you. Do you want to see?"

Rationally, I knew he wouldn't say no. He was a nice guy, and I was pretty good at getting people to say yes to me. My track record of sneaking my way to the front of sporting events and concerts spoke for itself. And by no means would I ever consider myself shy. But Nathan Huxley's opinion had somehow become the one I valued above all else, and I was apprehensive about his reaction.

So, naturally, he did exactly what I thought he would, even if my heart was prepared for rejection. He sat up straighter, tucking his legs closer to the couch and lifting his chin. "Definitely. Show me what you got."

Smiling to myself, I pulled out my laptop and opened the browser. Clicking the tabs, one after another, I showed him three logo examples, along with a branding kit filled with navy, natural wood, and white accents. I'd even done a mockup of a graphic that said *Guitar and Piano Lessons Near You!* in a neutral and inviting font.

Nathan scrolled through each one, his expression the definition of neutral. The graphic on the last slide was a guitar pick. His name was printed above it, and inside it, the words *Music Lessons* were scrawled in a retro style. It was my personal favorite because the text looked similar to a classic baseball font, and there was a tiny cap above the *a* in *Nathan*.

“You just...made these?” He was staring at the screen in rapt fascination, and his voice was low and filled with awe, like that of a child seeing the Welcome To Walt Disney World sign for the first time. It was adorable.

I smiled to myself. “Yeah. Took me about an hour to throw it together. We can change the colors or patterns. It’s just a rough idea.”

“I—” He puffed out a breath, shaking his head with a small laugh. “This is incredible, Calla.” He clicked through each tab again, his focus firmly locked on the images before him.

I snorted in the most unladylike manner. “It’s not a big deal. Just some simple mockups. But I’m happy to do it. I thought maybe I could go with you to a lesson this week so I can get a few pictures for your socials. Then we can go from there. Also, email me your pricing lists and what not so I can include it all.”

The whole time I rambled, Nathan smiled and nodded like a baseball player bobblehead. “This is so cool. You did all these in half an hour, and it took me an entire day to make one really awful flyer.”

I took the laptop from his lap, bumping my elbow against his. When my fingers grazed his shorts, my cheeks flamed, and I swore the couch shrank. All of a sudden, it was far smaller than when I was on it by myself last night.

Clearing my throat, I closed my laptop and averted my gaze to the TV.

“So, uh, what were you about to watch?” I waved a hand at the remote sitting on the end table beside him.

He hesitated for a second, blinking like he was coming back from somewhere far away. “Oh, um. *How To Lose A Guy in Ten Days*...” He trailed off.

“Shut up!” I cried, pulling my knees to my chest. My sandals dropped to the floor in front of the coffee table. “I love that movie.”

Nathan opened his mouth, closed it again, then gave me a side smirk.

“You don’t say?” The way he said it sounded so confident, so suave. So not the Nathan I’d known for the last couple of years.

“Yes! It’s one of my favorite movies of all time. I’ll get the popcorn.”

I practically jumped off the couch and ran into the kitchen. The man kept an absurd amount of movie theater popcorn on hand. It was ridiculous, really, because the microwave stuff had nothing on the tiny balls of heaven popped fresh at our local Amstar. But I would take what I could get.

With two bags popped, I held them each by a corner so I wouldn't get burned and skipped back into the living room, where Nathan had the movie pulled up. He looked up at me and smiled, his right cheek sporting a small dimple and the scruff on his face looking a little more kempt than when I first moved in.

His eyes—like a desktop screen saver of a forest filled with sage greens and wood accents—trailed to my hands full of popcorn, and back up to my face. How had I never noticed how beautiful his eyes were?

He reached for a bag when I stopped in front of the couch. “Thanks. Luke left a bottle of seasoning he kept on hand for Layla. You're welcome to it if you want. It's in the drawer by the microwave.”

I let out an amused puff of air through my nose. “Yeah, she's obsessed with that stuff.”

He laughed. “You should have seen Luke when he found out she liked it. He ordered it in bulk from Costco. Pretty sure he has enough for a lifetime.”

“I'm not surprised. He'd probably buy her an entire factory and manufacture it just for her if he could.”

Nathan let out a deep, throaty laugh. A laugh I wanted to swim into. It was so comforting and inviting. Like a pool on the first day of summer.

“I could definitely see that.”

Ten minutes into this movie I adored, one that I watched on the regular with my mom and could quote nearly every line of, I was distracted. My brain was too busy ruminating on questions like *How in the world is Nathan Huxley still single?*

Though that was an assumption. The man had never explicitly said he wasn't seeing anyone. He could be seeing multiple women, a whole flock of them, an Uber pool full of Nathan groupies. But then again, I lived with him, and I didn't know many women who would be okay with their boyfriend living with another girl. Especially one as great as me. That was another topic that should have been covered during a roommate 101 course. Relationship statuses of roommates should probably be common knowledge. So no, it was unlikely he was involved. Plus, between his day job and music lessons, the guy worked nonstop, so I couldn't see how he'd even have the time.

It was rude to ask, and my mom got on to me all the time about manners, but I. Couldn't. Stop. Staring. He was a puzzle I wanted to put together, have framed, and then hang on the wall so that every time a guest came over, I could brag about it obnoxiously.

I was memorizing Nathan's jawline, which I felt the strong urge to do a diamond on, when he turned and frowned at me. "What?"

My head was turned almost ninety degrees, and my lips were pursed as though I was solving a Rubik's cube in my head.

“Why are you single?”

I hadn't meant for it to sound so brash, but the question was an honest one. The man was an anomaly.

He looked a little taken aback at first. He cocked a brow, then dropped his head back so the brim of his backward hat hit the cushion behind him. When he sat up straight again, he stared at something over my shoulder and hummed like he was searching for the answer.

“You play multiple instruments. You have a good job. You love kids. You voluntarily watch *How To Lose A Guy in Ten Days*. And you have *that*”—I gestured to his stupidly handsome face—“whole thing going on. It doesn't make sense.”

Nathan's neck turned red under my watch, and pink splotches rose to his cheeks. “Um, thanks?”

I shook my head. “I don't want thanks. I want answers.”

He let out what sounded like a nervous laugh and squinted down at me. “You remember the first time we met?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “I vividly remember the occurrence.”

The pink on his tan skin deepened. “That's why.”

Not understanding, I repositioned myself, pulling my yellow throw blanket across my lap and adjusting my legs so they were crossed a few inches away from his thighs. “What do you mean?”

“I—” He sighed. “I can have all this confidence before I talk to a girl, right? In my head, I’m so smooth and confident. It’s all good up there, no problems. And then the second a beautiful girl approaches me, it all crumbles. I stutter and say things that I’d never normally say. My hands look for something to do—”

“Like shake her boob?”

He groaned and dropped his head back against the cushion. “Agh, no. Not that. That was an accident. But all my brain cells say peace out, and I’m left to clean up the mess. Me and beautiful girls don’t mix. I can give all the advice to Luke about Layla or make up good pickup lines in my head, but when the time comes, it just—”

“Falls flat?” I finished his sentence.

“Yeah, I guess so.”

I squinted, giving him a once-over, from his shorts all the way to his cap. “Okay, I gotcha. So you just need practice.”

He scoffed. “Kind of hard to practice when it takes me less than two minutes to scare them all away.”

The day we met, my first impression was that he was good-looking. I believe my exact thought was *this guy should be on a firefighter calendar*. But yeah, I suppose the attraction fizzled a little after the awkward boob thing. And he did think I was a model looking for the guy down the hall, *so...*

“You think I’m attractive, right?”

It was a bold question, but I was a bold person, and this would be a good test.

His eyes widened. “Oh, I mean generally speaking—”

“No, not generally speaking. Yes or no. When you first saw me, what were your thoughts?”

He turned away from me and picked up the Yogi Bear mug that had become a centerpiece for his coffee table.

Studying it, he mumbled, “Um, yes.”

“Alrighty, then. You can practice on me.”

He jerked back again. “Practice what, exactly?”

“Pickup lines. Your moves. Whatever you want to call it. Like sexy talk classes 101. You definitely don’t need help in the looks department. You just need to take all that”—I waved my hand in a circle around his face—“and transfer it here.” I pointed at his full lips, trying not to focus on them too hard.

He nodded along. “All right, so I should try to hit on you?” His focus dipped to my chest, where my tank top wasn’t concealing much, and his breath hitched. That reaction *may* have given me a little too much confidence.

“Don’t make it so complicated.” I angled forward and snagged the remote from the end table behind him, my chest grazing the arm he had propped on the side cushion. I turned down the volume on the TV and said, “Pretend you just met me at a bar, and you want to talk to me.”

He shook his shoulders and bounced a little, like a boxer getting ready for his match. “Yeah, all right.”

“You got this, big guy.” I patted him on the forearm and grinned. Turning away from him, I prepared myself, then turned back, batting my eyelashes. “Oh. Why, hello, kind stranger.”

Nathan’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head. “Maybe you should practice instead.”

My smile fell flat. “All right, fine. I’ll be normal.”

He stuck his tongue against his lower lip and gave me a once-over that felt like tiny caresses against my skin. Like he flipped a switch, fun-loving Nathan was gone, and in his place was this masculine, overwhelming presence of a guy who knew exactly what he was packing. The look alone made me a little flustered. My chest heaved, and suddenly, the room felt too small. I was hit by a wave of lightheadedness, along with the undeniable urge to climb into his lap like he was Santa Claus and I had a *long* list of wants this year.

“Hey.” His deep voice was super, *super* hot, and it sent shudders through me.

“Hi,” I squeaked.

“You know,” he said, lifting his chin, “I won the school-wide cup stacking Olympics in sixth grade.”

And with that statement, the was ambiance gone. The hot calendar firefighter had left the building. He’d been called to

put out the dumpster fire that had just spewed out of this man's mouth.

"Nathan," I said, using a tone my mom had used on me often when I was caught flipping the bird to our neighborhood cats. They always gave me bad vibes.

Nathan dipped his chin. "I know, I know."

"You were doing so well."

He shrugged. "I tried to warn you."

He did, but nowhere in that warning were the words *cup stacking*.

"That was really, really bad. Now that I know you better, it makes total sense, and it's endearing, but you can't open with that line."

He nodded. "It was the first thing that came to mind."

"Okay. New rule. Don't say the first thing. Maybe go with the fourth or fifth thing?"

He laughed that same deep laugh as before. "All right, let's try again."

I adjusted myself into my previous position and nodded when I was ready.

"Hey, you have a beautiful smile. I would love to buy you a drink if it meant I could see it again."

With a hand pressed to my chest, I nodded, impressed. "There you go, tiger. That's perfect."

“Yeah?” Eyes wide, he sat up straight, like he was surprised. Utterly adorable.

“Totally hot. Keep that one in your back pocket,” I encouraged him, but as the words left my mouth, a hint of irritation blossomed inside me. Not at Nathan, but at the idea of him using that line on another woman.

“All right.” He shook out his shoulders again. “Let’s keep going.”

Pushing away the vexation that threatened to take over when I pictured Nathan talking up some faceless woman, I nodded. Regardless, I looked forward to every sentence that would come out of this man’s mouth.

“Give it to me.”

He dipped his chin. “Has anyone told you that it’s physically impossible for pigs to see the sky?”

“I-I’m sorry. Was that the line, or are you spouting random facts at me? Also, please tell me that isn’t true.”

Nathan shrugged. “A little of this, a little of that. And yes, that absolutely is true.”

There was absolutely no way it was true.

“You’re telling me”—I took a deep breath; suddenly, my chest was tight, and so was my throat—“that no pig has ever seen a cloud shaped like a dragon? Or a pretty sunset on the farm? They don’t know what it’s like to see a rainbow?”

I was going to cry. I couldn’t hold it in.

Nathan stared at me, pulling his lips in to hide a smile. “Nope, totally kidding.”

I dropped my shoulders in relief. “Are you sur—”

“Let’s keep practicing!”

The movie credits had rolled, and our popcorn bags were empty. The sunset skies filled with orange and purples that had peeked through the curtains when we started were now full of navy blues and twinkling lights from the street.

I couldn’t stop laughing. Nathan was so incredibly awful at pickup lines that it was almost becoming attractive. Never in my life had I thought I’d be complimented on my “very proportionate eyebrows,” and yet there I was, wearing a grin so big my cheeks hurt.

“Seriously?” I wheezed. “Luke thought the lyrics were ‘I’ll never leave your pizza burning’?”

Nathan nodded and let out a deep, throaty laugh. “Layla and I told him a hundred times that the words were ‘beast of burden,’ but he would just keep on singing.”

I was sitting with my legs stretched across the couch, with his feet beside mine under my throw blanket. Occasionally, when we were laughing uncontrollably, I’d brush up against him, or he’d brush up against me, and we’d immediately yank our feet back to the middle. The couch wasn’t quite big enough for us to sit comfortably without somehow touching each other.

“Do you ever miss working with them?” I asked, laying my head on the couch cushion. It was getting late, and I was exhausted, but I wasn’t ready for the night to end.

Nathan sighed. “Yeah, I miss them a lot. Don’t get me wrong, I was really happy when they got together. I was rooting for them pretty hard, but I miss having Luke here. And I miss Layla, my office friend. Now that they’re gone, work kind of sucks.”

“I get that. I missed them a lot when I was at school.”

He nodded. “So what about you, then?”

I lifted my head and frowned. “What about me?”

Nathan shifted the blanket, accidentally pulling it off my feet, but he quickly covered them again.

“Why are you single?”

I snorted. “Who says I am?”

He drew his feet away from mine under the blanket and shifted. “I was—well, I assumed—I mean...aren’t you?” He sputtered each word in a barely coherent sentence.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I am. I’ve been busy with school until recently. Trying not to drown in bills and eating a strict diet of ramen noodles and Crew’s free leftovers. Now that graduation is over, I’m looking for an actual job, not just waiting on kids’ birthday parties, so dating right now probably wouldn’t be ideal.”

Nathan moved his feet back under the blanket, as if he approved of my answer. “Ah, I gotcha.” He glanced over at the time displayed on the TV’s lock screen. “I should probably get to bed. Early morning and all.”

Although disappointed that our night was coming to an end, I nodded. The movement caused a tendril of hair from my loose bun to fall in front of my eyes.

Nathan leaned forward, his abs pressing against my drawn-up knees, and tucked the hair behind my ear. He didn’t pull his hand away. At the gentle contact, chills raced across the back of my ear and down my neck. I shuddered at the sensation, looking from his eyes to his mouth and back. This didn’t feel like practice. The way he chewed on his bottom lip while holding my jaw, as if he needed to keep it in place. Or the way his cheeks were flushed with splotches of pink. It felt all too real, and I could have sworn that Nathan Huxley was going to kiss me.

Involuntarily, I leaned in, my body expecting something, anything. Or maybe I was reading too much into it. By the time we’d finished our lesson, his flirting was top-notch. Maybe my brain just couldn’t distinguish between the simulation and reality. Hormones and all.

Nathan’s warm eyes went wide, and he drew his hand away. Like it had dawned on him too. He *was* going to kiss me, and I was absolutely going to let him.

It was the movie’s fault. Matthew McConaughey had set the tone. It was a well-known fact that his voice made any

moment sexy. And even after the credits, his influence remained. Between that and the fake flirting, it was no wonder we got swept away. Nathan was an attractive guy, and I wasn't hard on the eyes either. Put all that together with popcorn and fuzzy blankets, and it was like an atomic bomb of sexual tension.

Nathan pulled away and stood so quickly he nearly fell over. He doubled over and dropped one hand on the coffee table to steady himself. The other hand went to his temple. "Whoa."

"Are you okay?" I reached up, as if I could keep him from falling, but he was far bigger than I was, and chances are, if he was going down, I'd go down with him.

He stood up slowly, fingers still pressing into his temple, and backed out of the room. Though backed out wasn't really accurate. It was more of a slide. His feet never left the floor. Like a really, really awful version of a moonwalk.

All the way down the hall to his room, he mumbled, "Yeah, yeah. I have low iron. Don't eat enough red meat. Can't donate blood. Pass out sometimes. Anyway, goodnight. See you later."

He backed into his door, hitting the knob with a thud. "Ah." He rubbed the sore spot on his back and slipped into his room. The click of his lock echoed through the silent apartment.

I chuckled. How could I not? The guy was as adorable as he was funny. Watching him was like witnessing a train wreck.

After cleaning up our mess—because who can eat popcorn without making some kind of a mess?—I trudged my way to my room.

It wasn't until I was brushing my teeth that exhaustion hit me. I nearly fell asleep while washing my face. Eyes half shut, I flopped onto my bed, but I snagged my phone from where I'd dropped it on the nightstand so I could set my alarm.

There, on the lock screen, was an email notification from Shiny.

The sight made me smile. It had been a couple of days since I'd heard from him, and I missed him. We were both busy—I was with the move and starting my job at Romfuzzled, and his job was slowly driving him crazy.

We'd been emailing for years, and through every change, our friendship remained. We had an understanding. If one of us needed a few weeks to get our life together and couldn't talk, that was okay. Or if we needed extra support and emailed like a text exchange every ten minutes, that was great too.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

LILY, MY MAIN SQUEEZE. HELP.

Hi, my dear. Hope your ingrown toenail went away. Anyway, I have an emergency. I met this girl, and she's... everything. I don't know what to even say. Okay. Okay. You know how I get all excited when it rains and the asphalt smells all good? I always say I want to take that and shove it in a

candle and keep it burning all day long? That's what I want to do to this girl. I want to burn her. She makes my heart beat fast, and she likes all my favorite things. She is so funny and has nice hair. My chest hurts when I'm around her. She has this smile, Lil, like nothing you've ever seen. I'm serious. It will absolutely blind you. I'm typing too fast to keep up with my brain. Help.

Your fave human,

Shiny

I couldn't help but smile. At least one of us was going to get some soon. Shiny deserved a nice girl, one to burn and all. Truth be told, I was a little jealous. Not because I was interested in Shiny that way. But because one day, I wanted a guy to look at me and think the same kinds of things. I wanted a man who would tell his friends how gone he was for me.

Once, a long time ago, I had a crush on Shiny. Mostly because my fourteen-year-old self loved that a guy was interested in what I had to say. I loved to stay up late and picture him as some perfectly handsome guy who would come to my doorstep with flowers and reveal his identity in a big way.

But truth be told, as the years went on, I cherished his friendship more and more. He truly listened to all I had to say and was always ready with advice when I asked. And when I needed to vent, he'd gladly encourage it.

And he knew he could do the same with me. Tonight's email was the perfect example of that.

I typed my response before passing out for the night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Calla



Age 23:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Hey, bud. I need you to sit down for this news, my friend.

Are you sitting? Do you have a grip on reality? Is there a pillow nearby to catch your fall?

Ready?

You. Are. In. Love.

Sorry to be the one to break it to you. In your own special little Shiny way, you have completely fallen for this girl. Now, what does this mean?

You have three options:

- 1. Tell her now.*
- 2. Keep it to yourself forever.*
- 3. Wait a while and scope out the situation.*

Personally, I would choose lucky number 3. You haven't known this girl for long, right? Why not see how things go? You don't want to scare her off by telling her how you feel too soon. So maybe wait for the perfect opportunity to arise. Then again, you could just kiss her. Except some girls don't like when a guy is super up-front like that. Judging by what you've told me, I like this girl already. I hope she knows how incredible you are and also wants to burn you. Please keep me updated.

Much love,

Lily

As teenagers, girls assume life as an adult is glamorous. Like the days of a twentysomething are filled with nothing but fun parties, cute boys, fancy shoes.

Never once did I picture myself sitting on the floor of a kitchen with a bowl of sugary cereal and a laptop with job availability sites pulled up on close to a dozen tabs.

I spent the morning applying for every position I could find. My résumé was still pathetic, to say the least, but it was worth a shot. I was most excited about the opening for a social media coordinator for the Pittsburgh Pirates. They weren't my favorite team, of course, but it would be an absolute pleasure to take pictures of Tucupita Marcano's backside and use *#raiseit* as the caption.

Plus, I'd get to see all the behind-the-scenes action and meet the players.

At this point, I would settle for a simple marketing job in a boring office, but it was fun to dream.

Working with Luke had been more fun than I expected. So far, he hadn't driven me crazy like when we were kids, and I'd gotten to see Layla almost every day. Plus the work—making graphics, applying presets and adjustments to my photography, coming up with fun captions for his social media—didn't actually feel like work. The job felt more like a hobby. Something to keep my hands and mind busy while I also tapped into that creative space in my brain. Like writing was for Layla. Or like running for some disturbed people out there. Or like music for Nathan.

Nathan.

I glanced over at the couch where, unless I'd been drunk on buttered popcorn last night, Nathan had definitely almost kissed me. People don't simply tuck strands of hair behind their roommate's ears, look passionately into their eyes and then down to their lips without kissing them.

My phone buzzed on the laminate floor beside my coffee mug.

Nathan: Hey, are we good?

So he was thinking about it too. There was no way to deny the chemistry between us. Because, naturally, there would be

chemistry. Forced proximity was a classic trope in many of my favorite romance novels.

Just like when a guy my age is on the elevator alone with me. Every time, this weird sexual tension builds in the air. He doesn't even have to be super cute. Same with any guy my age I notice at the airport. Those circumstances alone make him an automatic ten.

Being shoved into an apartment with Nathan was bound to cause at least a few sparks to fly. The important thing to remember was that being an adult, as I was these days, meant handling scenarios like this with grace.

I shoveled a spoonful of Lucky Charms into my gullet and sent my reply.

Me: We're all good. Who wouldn't want to kiss me?

I attached a picture of me shoveling another bite of cereal into my mouth, no makeup on and my hair in a rat's nest. That should curb any sexy thoughts he might be having about me.

Nathan: Good, I'm glad. I was kind of worried.

Nathan: Because I like being friends with you.

I smiled. See? There we go. All is well.

Me: I like being friends with you too, million-dollar band.

Nathan: Mmm, don't love that.

Me: Little twanger?

Me: Get it? Like the sound the guitar makes?

Nathan: Please never say that again.

Me: Would big twanger make you feel better?

Nathan: I'm going to be pissed if you eat all my cereal.

Me: Whatever you say, slowhand.

Luke planned to spend the day restocking shelves, so I hadn't planned to go into work. But truth be told, I really wanted to. I'd already applied for every job that was even remotely relevant to my skill set, and I'd texted a dozen or so GIFs of dancing goats to my family group chat, and it wasn't even noon. What was a girl to do with an entire free day? Definitely not work out. But I was ready to get out of the house. And considering I didn't exactly have "fun money," work was the next best place to go.

When I got to Romfuzzled, Layla was lounging in an egg-shaped chair near the back, homed in on her laptop. Her tongue was poking out of the corner of her mouth and her brows were lowered in concentration as her fingers flew across the keys effortlessly.

I hated to interrupt her, but I couldn't resist sneaking over and waiting to see how long it would take her to notice me. Silently, I slipped into the chair across from her. My clothes brushed against the fabric more loudly than I'd expected, and yet she didn't even lift an eye.

For seven minutes, I waited. I even sent her a text to see if she'd hear her phone buzz. But nope. Layla was entirely engrossed in her writing. She eventually sighed, shutting her

laptop, and stretched her hands out. When she finally noticed me perched across from her, she jumped in her seat and let out a squeak.

Hand over her heart and chest heaving, she rasped, “Calla, you cannot scare me like that.”

I shrugged. “Been here for a while, babe. You were really in the zone, huh?”

She reached for the half-full water bottle on the table in front of her and nodded so violently I worried she’d do permanent damage to her spine. “I got to a scene where the killer left a note for the detective inside her home. It got my blood pumping.”

Layla’s last book was so good I read it in one sitting. I even cried at the ending. She had this way of pulling her readers in so they felt like they were living inside the pages. And even though I’m not exactly a thriller girl, the romantic secondary plot between the detectives—enemies to lovers, naturally—was so detailed it could have been its own story.

I clapped and scooted to the edge of my seat. “Ooh, tell me more. Who is the love interest? *Please* tell me the detective falls in love with the killer. I’m feeling some stalker vibes in there.”

She snorted. “Not much romance in this one. It focuses mostly on the female main character.”

I rolled my eyes. “*Lay*.” I dragged her name out. “Add just a teeny bit of romance in there for me, please?”

Twenty minutes of consistent, and probably very annoying, begging later, I got her to agree to spice the romance up a bit.

Just as I was gathering myself to finally get to work, the front door opened, and Layla waved. I turned to see my favorite, albeit only roommate making his way over to us.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nathan



Age 23:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

LIL.

I am on the WORST date of my entire life. I wish we'd exchanged numbers so you could call and get me out of this. None of my so-called "friends" are answering, and I'm dying here.

The girl is a cute, tiny blonde. I thought her pixie cut seemed a little off at first, but you know, I'm willing to give everyone a chance. NOPE. NEVER AGAIN. Lily, she took me to hot yoga. If I hadn't been so dehydrated from it, I probably would have cried. They tried to hold my legs over my head. My freaking balls hurt.

Let me be clear, though. I only went on this date because my best friend asked me to distract her so he could take out this

girl he's in love with—which is a long story I'll save for another day.

Note to future self: My dream girl does not take me to yoga for fun.

Plus, this girl (not my dream girl), is pulling up pictures of her dead childhood guinea pigs. I WANT TO CRAWL INTO A HOLE.

I miss you. Please break our pact about never seeing one another or speaking. Just long enough to unleash me from this torture. I'll love you forever, I swear.

P.S. Please help me figure out how to get my friend back for this one.

Lukewarm regards,

Shiny

I never stopped by Romfuzzled on my lunch break. But truth be told, I had this gnawing need to just be in Calla's presence, and I hoped she would be there.

Reading Lily's email after I nearly kissed Calla last night was like being slapped in the face. In the best way possible. Her honesty was exactly what I needed so I could get my head on straight and figure out what in the world was happening.

I told Calla I was bad at talking to beautiful women, but that wasn't entirely true. There was only one specific beautiful woman I struggled to speak to coherently. One who shall not

be named. So when she suggested practice, I went with it. Because when it came to Calla, I needed all the help I could get.

My first instinct was to hide away. And I gave in this morning, leaving for work early to avoid unnecessary conversation with her after last night. But Calla was a good friend, a good sister, a good roommate. Ignoring her or brushing her off entirely would be hurtful and so unlike me that the thought alone crawled under my skin and made me itch. So when I texted her this morning, and she responded with a picture of her with her eyes crossed and a mouthful of cereal, I knew it would all be okay.

This wasn't my first crush, and it wouldn't be my last. Lil said I was in love, and although I had it bad for Calla, I wasn't sure love was the right word. It hadn't been the right word for any girl up until now. But then again, I had never met a girl like Calla before.

Layla waved wildly at me, making Calla turn. When her eyes landed on me, they lit up, and a smile split her face. I considered looking over my shoulder to confirm that she wasn't grinning at someone else. A wolfish smirk pulled at my lips. Did my presence alone really have that kind of effect on her?

I got close enough to rest my forearms on the back of Calla's oversized chair.

"What are you doing here?" Calla asked, her tone sweet and light, like sunlight pouring through a window, casting rays

across the entire space.

Layla piped up. “Yeah, Nathan, what *are* you doing here?” Her tone was an accusing one, a tone I’d come to know well during the years I worked with her smart ass.

I cut a glare at Layla when Calla turned to her friend. She’d make this so much worse if she figured out how I felt.

I held up the plastic bag of Chinese food I’d ordered for Luke. “I’m here to bring your fiancé lunch. You better watch your back, Lay. I may take the man back as my own.”

Calla laughed below me, eliciting another grin from me.

“Wow, that level of kiss-up is low, even for you.” Layla crossed her arms.

I shook the bag a little. “Step it up, Lay. I’m not here to mess around.”

She rolled her eyes, but she was fighting back a smile. Man, I loved pushing her buttons. I loved fighting with her over who would play DJ at the office or who was on shredder duty. These days, I had my own office. I could listen to anything I wanted and use my own shredder, yet neither of those excited me the way they used to.

Calla stood between us. The white tank top she wore under light denim overall shorts contrasted perfectly with her tan skin, and her wavy brown hair flowed past her shoulders. She briskly walked past me, so close that with her hands in her pockets, her elbow brushed ever so lightly against my dress

shirt. The button of my shirt pulled slightly against her skin, causing me to turn with her.

“Luke is back this way.” She practically skipped behind the bar and through the double doors leading to the commercial kitchen.

I followed her, pulled by an invisible string connecting the two of us, but turned back toward Layla, who was shaking her head and smirking, her arms crossed over her chest. She obviously thought she had me all figured out. Maybe she did, but I refused to let her know it.

Scrunching my nose at her, I turned away like the fully grown adult man I was.

In the kitchen, Luke was lifting heavy kegs into a system I’d helped him install last summer. That same day, I bumped a wasp nest as I was climbing down a ladder and ended up in the hospital, but that’s a story for another day.

He turned his head, and a slow smile spread across his face when he saw Calla and me.

“Hey, man. They let you go during work hours?” He knew all too well how things were done at West Oak. They were notorious for terrible lunch breaks.

I lifted the plastic bag I was still carrying. “Janise may or may not think I’m at a sales meeting right now.”

He chuckled and set the keg down. “That sounds about right. Give me just a minute, and I’ll sit with you guys.” He

nodded to the door that we'd just come through, and I lifted a chin in response.

As I made my way to the bar, Calla followed me like a cute little puppy nipping at my heels.

“Did you bring food for the rest of us, or just your boyfriend?” She plopped onto a stool, tossing her hair behind her and placing her elbows on the bar top. She was teasing me, batting her lashes and everything, but my heart stuttered all the same.

I let out a semi-forced laugh. “Just him. I didn't know you'd be here.” *Even if I hoped you were.*

“I got nothing else to do. Spent my morning applying for every available job I could find. I might as well hang out here in case they need me.” She shrugged and grabbed the tabletop version of a ring toss game. Pulling the silver ring by the string, she attempted to toss it so it landed over the hook.

Layla slid onto the seat next to Calla, asking about the job descriptions and threatening harm if she even considered leaving the state. Which was about the most Layla thing I had ever heard.

“Most are sports media jobs in the area. Most of them would allow me to work from home. I'd only travel on game days and stuff like that. The one I want the most is a long shot. It's a social media coordinator position for the Pittsburgh Pirates. It would mean taking game day pics, going to practices, maybe short interviews, stuff like that.”

“You would be really, really good at that,” I said without hesitation and with more admiration in my tone than I probably should have let slip.

Layla smiled and opened her mouth, probably to give me a hard time about my compliment to Calla, only to be interrupted by the double doors opening.

Luke came out dripping in sweat. He lifted the bottom of his gray Romfuzzled T-shirt and wiped his face with it, smirking at Layla.

Layla was practically panting, while Calla and I cringed.

“You live together; make eyes at each other like that when you’re at home,” Calla said, swiveling on her stool so she faced me.

I nodded. “It was kind of sweet when we all worked together, but this is too much.”

In response, Luke winked at Layla and she giggled.

Calla rolled her eyes. “Ugh, I can’t. I’m going to get B-roll of the lounge areas while the place is empty.”

“Ooh, I want to watch,” Layla said.

Calla bounced down to the floor beside me, and both girls walked back to the other room, leaving just Luke and me.

I opened the bag of to-go food and pulled out a container of sesame chicken for him.

“Thanks for thinking of me. I’m starving. Every time I’m here, I get so caught up that I forget to eat.” He broke the

provided chopsticks in two and went to town.

I opened my container of teriyaki chicken and did the same. “No problem. It’s been a while since I’ve seen you anyway.”

I absolutely did not bring your favorite meal because I feel guilty about being one centimeter away from kissing your sister last night. And because I very well may want to do it again.

He took a big bite, his cheek puffing out like a chipmunk. “Well,” he said around his food, “thanks anyway. Hey.” He leaned in and lowered his voice a bit. “How is it going with Calla?”

At that, my face flamed and sirens blared in my head screaming *do not answer*. The collar of my button-down threatened to strangle me, and I dropped my chin, fixing my attention on the single piece of rice stuck to the opened container lid so I wouldn’t give myself away.

“Why wouldn’t it be great? She’s great. I’m great. All is great, everyone is...great.”

Seriously, Nathan? How many times can one person use the word *great* in a single sitting? After that disaster, there was no way Luke wasn’t picking up on my uneasiness. Especially with the way my hands were flexing around these chopsticks. He probably thought I was about to Hulk out.

Instead of giving me the questioning look I expected, Luke sighed and put his chopsticks down. “Is she bothering you? Is it the laundry thing?”

The laundry...

“Uh, no. Laundry thing? Never mind. I probably don’t want to know. No, she’s been good. Great, really. I’ve been tired from working a lot of late hours and stuff.” To be fair, that wasn’t a lie. Work had been really hectic. And I had bags under my eyes as receipts of the gruesome hours.

“Yeah, I get that.” He took a sip from the water bottle beside him. “You should get back out there. Hang out with me and Layla and Calla sometime. I haven’t seen you much since I moved out.”

Never in my life had I felt like a more disloyal friend than I did in that moment. I missed my friend, and I *did* want to see him more, but just the thought of hanging out with him and Calla at the same time made me nearly break out in hives. There was no way I could play it cool, and then he’d accuse me of taking advantage of his little sister. Even though I hadn’t done anything wrong...yet. And I was determined not to. I was the epitome of a law-abiding citizen. My garbage and recyclables always made it to the right bin. I’d never filed my taxes late, and I’d even been known to help turtles out of the road. So why did I feel so unbelievably guilty about having the hots for my friend’s sister?

Still flustered, I settled on “does that mean you miss me?” I’d tackle the rest another time.

He dipped his chin and narrowed his eyes at me. “Don’t push your luck.”

With that bit of brevity, my anxiety waned, and we dug back into our food. After a bit, Layla rounded the bar and plucked a piece of chicken out of Luke's takeout container, which he didn't seem to mind at all.

Calla took the seat next to me and rested her forearms on the bar. I instinctively drew my knees in.

"You should do a little bachelor and bachelorette night out sometime next weekend. Give Layla the chance to see what else is out there."

Luke threw a chopstick at Calla, and she laughed, the sound melodious as it bounced around in my head.

"I'm kidding. Calm down, you caveman. I thought it would be fun if we got the wedding party together and went out."

Luke hadn't asked me to be a groomsman yet, but that would come eventually, right? We had been friends since college, but then again, there was that time I helped Layla zip tie all of his stuff together at the office, so maybe I wasn't the best candidate. Definitely not best man material.

Layla wrapped an arm around her fiancé's waist and angled closer to him. "I think it would be fun. We could go bowling or do trivia at Froggy's for old times' sake."

Luke was nodding before she finished the sentence. He would have agreed to anything as long as the suggestion came from Layla. She could have said *let's go dive into the Grand Canyon* and he'd be like *Yep. See you there, honey.*

Calla bumped her knee against mine, and I jerked back like a prepubescent boy who was terrified of cooties.

Thankfully, she didn't notice. She just leaned in farther and asked, "What do you think, Nathan?"

"Bowling sounds fun. I'm really good at bowling." Actually, I was awful at bowling. I should have suggested laser tag. Now *that* was where I could show off skills.

Layla smirked. "Really? I had no idea you were *good at bowling*."

I squinted at her. "It never came up."

Ugh. She knew me so well. She was like a sister. Most of the time, I liked our connection. We were both only children, so we took it upon ourselves to try out the sibling rivalry thing. Sometimes, it was a blast. This was not one of those times.

She nodded. "Ahh, I see. Yeah, definitely. Let's do bowling and," she said, lowering her brows and smirking at me in the most terrifying way, "we could go line dancing."

Oh no. *Not* line dancing.

Calla almost jumped out of her chair. "I *love* line dancing!"

Layla faked a gasp. "What a coincidence! So does Nathan."

I loved Luke. I loved Layla. I truly thought of them as family, but I was seconds away from stuffing my best friend's fiancé into the freezer in the back.

Luke frowned and cocked his head. "What about that one time we went line dancing after work and that guy—"

“We *do not* discuss it,” I said, my tone firm.

Shivers raced up my spine at the memory, and phantom pain erupted in unmentionable places. That night, a very, very large older man kicked me in the crotch while in the middle of “Copperhead Road,” simply because I turned right instead of left and came face to face with him. I tried to apologize, although I was a few margaritas in, so who knows what I said. Regardless, the guy didn’t like it. I blacked out from the pain and didn’t wake up until Luke and Layla were carrying me out to Luke’s Jeep.

Calla bit her lip and cast a weird look around the group. “There’s a story there that I need to know, isn’t there?”

I looked at my phone and jumped down from the barstool. “Look at that. I have to go back to work. See you guys never.” Then I turned and strode for the door, leaving their collective laughter behind me. Just as I was almost to my car, Luke came jogging out through the parking lot.

“Hey, I meant to ask you something.”

I eyed him warily. “I am not going to see *Return of the Jedi* again.”

He shook his head. “Nah, nah. I’m more on a *Last Hope* kick right now. But I was wondering if maybe you’d want to be my best man.”

I froze, my keys dangling from my fingers, shocked into silence.

“You know, like for the wedding? It won’t be some big, crazy ceremony, but I want you standing beside me.”

He was asking *me* to be his best man? Like *the* best man? The only thing I’d ever been the best at was making boxed mac and cheese, binge watching four seasons of a show in a single week, and okay, maybe playing piano or guitar. Oh, and homing in on every dog in a one-block radius.

“Oh, uh. You aren’t gonna ask one of your brothers?”

An insurmountable pile of guilt pressed against my shoulders. He was asking me to be his best man, and all morning, I had been fixated on how soft his sister’s hair was and how pretty she looked in the glow of the television in my apartment. I’d tried to kick my evil thoughts out. I prayed, worked, ate, and *maybe* lay face down on my office floor. All to no avail.

“Nah, I’d rather have my unrelated brother do it. You’ve always been there for me. Without your help with Layla, I wouldn’t be getting married in the first place.”

That did it. I was the absolute worst best friend ever. I was also a grown man with scruff and stubble, for heaven’s sake. I was *not* going to cry.

“Please don’t cry,” Luke said, tilting his head.

I sniffed. “I wasn’t going to.”

“Uh-huh,” he said with a smile. “So is that a yes?”

I took two steps away from the car and wrapped my arms around his broad shoulders. He was a little taller than me, so it

was kind of awkward, but I was determined to follow through.

“I’ll be the *best* best man in history. By the time you tie the knot, statues created in my likeness will have been erected, and I’ll have set new standards to go along with the title *best man*. They’ll have to call everyone else their *okay man*, or *did all right man*, or maybe even *not the best but not the worst man*.”

Luke hugged me back, patting my shoulder blades forcefully. “All right, bud. I’ve got faith in you. You’ll do great.”

Yeah, I would. And I would no longer let my mind wander to forbidden places. Nothing could happen between Calla and me. Luke trusted me. He had faith in me. He called me his unrelated brother. I would just have to accept that Calla and I would only be friends from here on out.

It was fine. She’d eventually start seeing someone—gag—and I could find a nice girl to take out from time to time to erase the memory of her on my couch.

“I’ve got to go. I’ve got a ton of work to do at the office before my lessons tonight. I’ll send you some ideas later.”

“Ideas for what?”

“Best man stuff, bro. We’re going all out.”

He opened his mouth, but before he could object, I jumped in my car and closed the door, pointing to my ears and saying a muffled “sorry, can’t hear you.”

Regardless of what was to come, I would never betray his trust again.

The whole way back to the office, I planned. As best man, my first order of business would be to order personalized Speedos with Luke's face on them for the groomsmen. Yes. It would be epic. I was getting into the groove of thinking non-Calla-related thoughts as I pulled into West Oak's parking lot. In my cupholder, my phone buzzed. Janise would be breathing down my neck when I got inside, so I figured it was best to check it now.

Calla: Luke said you had lessons tonight. Still want me to come?

Shoot. I just promised myself—and Luke, even if he didn't know it—that I would keep my distance from Calla. But then again, friends could do this kind of stuff, right? She was working on my branding, after all.

Me: If you can make it, that would be great. Although, fair warning, I may recruit you to help with crowd control.

Calla: Crowd control? How wild can children's music lessons get?

Me: Oh, just you wait.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Calla



Age 18:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Shines,

You know how my oldest brother has been gone for about four months on active duty? Well, my birthday was on Friday (thank you again for my Amazon gift card. I used it to buy fancy highlighters and a three-pack of bras), and by Saturday, none of them had even mentioned it. I was fully prepared to tell them all to vamoose out of my life. Except when I woke up on Saturday, my room was filled with balloons (I'm a really heavy sleeper, okay?) and there was a trail of Kit Kats that led out into the hall and down the steps.

When I got downstairs, there stood my parents and all of my brothers. All of them. There, in head-to-toe camouflage, was my oldest brother. Before I even hugged him, I fell to the floor and cried. He flew all the way here to surprise me for my 18th

birthday. Naturally, I accused everyone of getting the date wrong, but it turns out he was supposed to arrive on my birthday, but his flight got delayed, so they all stayed quiet so as not to ruin the surprise.

I hugged him for a solid ten minutes. He had, like, six new tattoos, which I totally want to get one day. He seemed a little sadder than the last time he visited, but overall, it was the best birthday ever.

Sorry for the ramble. I was just way too excited. Anyway, love ya so much. Hope you had a fun time playing video games with your friends all weekend. You probably should visit the outside some, you know?

Dopey and Sneazy,

Lily

To be fair, Nathan tried to warn me.

Never in my life had I thought a simple children's music lesson at my local community center would be so rowdy and boisterous.

Nathan sat in the front of the class in black cut-off shorts and a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The tan skin of his arms peeked out from beneath a sprinkling of dark hair, and a waterfall of veins rippled as he flexed his hand around the neck of the guitar he was showing to a group of kids.

He bobbed his head to the music every time he strummed, and he smiled at every kid like they were so special to him they deserved their own exceptional Nathan grin.

In the twenty minutes since I'd arrived, I'd been watching him through my camera lens. I did my best not to be distracted by the way he got lost in this music or the way his dark, unkempt hair sometimes fell into his eyes, causing him to do a little head shake to get it out of the way. I was doing my best, but right now, my best wasn't good enough.

I'd hoped to slip into the class so I wouldn't disrupt his lesson, but when he saw me sneaking in, he lifted his head, and his words trailed off. He smiled so brightly at me that my heart picked up an unhealthy beat. Thankfully, not many kids noticed. But oh boy, the moms did.

It was all going fine and dandy until I caught sight of them. A whole lineup of them. At least nine sat in their seats in the back. They were all craning their necks to get a look at the class, and I was in their way. At first, I thought it was precious, all these moms wanting to watch their kids learn, but the longer I observed, the more obvious it became that they had their eyes locked on the way Nathan's fingers pressed into each string. And every time he spoke to their children in that calm tone of his, I swore they leaned closer.

Not long after, he started moving around the room to work one-on-one with the kids. There was a collective sigh as he gave a fist bump to a tiny boy wearing glasses. And one mom

was definitely drooling. Several were wearing wedding rings, but that didn't stop them from shamelessly ogling Nathan.

It shouldn't have irritated me. I had no business caring what these ladies drank in during the day. And honestly, how could I blame them? Nathan was gorgeous. And I even caught myself staring on occasion. But watching them watch him made my chest all tight.

Near the end of the class, I inched closer to where Nathan was working with a young girl and shot a quick video. She couldn't have been more than seven, and her guitar was bright pink. When she got the snippet of melody right, she looked up at Nathan in pure surprise and admiration. He raised both hands to clap and broke out in a smile bigger than I had ever seen him make.

“Yes!” He gave her a high five and ruffled her hair. “That’s what I’m talking about!”

I caught every bit of it without either of them noticing, my heart melting as I did. No doubt there was a mom in the crowd who would pay me good money just to take my entire SD card right there.

Once the lessons were over and my camera had nearly four hundred pictures and videos of mostly Nathan's hands—forgive me, Lord—the kids filed out, stopping one at a time to give Nathan a handshake. Oh yeah, did I mention that he has a unique handshake for *every single kid*? Yeah, the range of fist bumps, high fives, and dance moves that he had somehow memorized with every one of them was adorable. No wonder

these moms were cuckoo for Nathan puffs. If I had kids, I'd have them enrolled in a class every night of the week.

The last mom and son duo stayed the longest. She was probably in her mid- to late-twenties, with bright blond hair pulled into a tight ponytail. Her mom jeans were trendy, and she wore a white button-up that was half tucked in a way that would have looked frumpy on me but was stylish on her. Beige statement earrings dangled from her ears, and a very large and, judging by the brand, very expensive handbag hung off her wrist. She had the kind of style that I so desperately wished I could pull off. Except when I tried, it looked like I was playing dress-up in my mom's closet.

This lady looked like the kind of mom who had it all together. She probably made homemade gummies with no red 40, and she'd likely never visited a Walgreens at midnight to buy poster boards because her children had forgotten to tell her they had a project due the next morning. She probably ate salads because she actually liked them and willingly drank kombucha as if it didn't taste like root water.

When I was a mother, I'd seek her out and follow her on Pinterest, knowing well and good it would only make me feel worse about my mundane household.

Her son darted away to grab his jacket off one of the chairs but tripped over his own feet. He caught himself before he fell, holding his arms out and giggling. He was adorable, really.

Nathan, obviously agreeing with that sentiment, chuckled at the young boy before turning back to the mom. He said

something I couldn't hear, and she lifted a hand to his bicep as she laughed in response.

I did not enjoy seeing that.

When the boy returned, he and Nathan shook hands and did a weird little fish motion before making a pufferfish face and falling into a fit of laughter. The woman eventually let go of Nathan and said an extended goodbye.

Once they were out the door, I casually strolled up. "You were great tonight."

"Yeah? You had fun? Did you get any good pic—"

"Hey, Nate?" a high-pitched voice full of sugar called from the doorway behind us.

The gorgeous mom was back. She stood on the threshold, holding out a finger and scrunching it toward her in a *come here* gesture. Nate? Since when did he go by *Nate*?

Nathan smiled, as he always did, and turned back to me. He muttered, "One sec, Calla," and gave my forearm an ultra-friendly tap before stalking over to the tiny, perky blonde.

I did not enjoy that either. The man had been in the middle of a conversation. Ever heard of manners, lady? The audacity, really. And Nathan with his hot and deep, rumbly *One sec, Calla*.

With a flirty smile, the woman handed him a business card, her perfectly manicured nails tucking it into his callused hand. His responding smile was automatic. He smiled at everyone. All the time. The man told me he had no game, said he

couldn't talk to beautiful women. And yet she lit up at his reaction.

I had this terrible urge to tell her she wasn't special. That Nathan would probably smile while standing in a lineup at the police station. But unlike her, I do have manners. So even though I wanted to run over her white sandals with a golf cart, I backed away and pretended to mess with my camera bag to give them some space.

That didn't mean I wasn't eavesdropping, but I couldn't pick up any distinct words.

Nathan eventually came back, puffing out a breath. "Sorry about that. I was asking you about the pictures. Was everything okay?"

I smiled through my irritation. "Yeah, the lighting was great, and I got a lot of content. I should have everything I need."

Which meant I wouldn't have to come back and witness single moms practically fanning themselves like they were at a debutante ball.

"Perfect. I'm really glad you came." He gave me a smile. It was different from the ones he'd passed out to his students and their parents tonight. It was softer, more genuine. Maybe it was the spirit of pride, or maybe it was wishful thinking—that he'd save the softer smiles for me. Either way, I would take it.

"Yeah, me too. I'm impressed. The kids love you."

Each and every one of them lit up when he kneeled in front of them. Like he was truly a rockstar.

He laughed. “Yeah, I’ve been working with most of the kids in this group for a while, so they’re used to me. I’d be lying if I didn’t have some favorites.”

“I think you kind of have to, right?” I asked, zipping up my camera bag and slinging it over my shoulder. “Ready to go home?” I asked, as if we were a married couple heading home from church to eat chili and take a two-hour nap.

“Nope.” Nathan reached for the strap on my shoulder. Sparks ignited against the exposed skin along the strap of my tank top as his fingers brushed against it.

I turned around with an accusing “hey” and reached for my bag.

“Might as well get a little more practice in. The stuff here is higher quality than I’ve got at home. Let’s see how you do in a different environment.”

Glancing over at the prettiest white baby grand piano in the corner, I chuckled. Trying again now, when I was exhausted after a long day, didn’t feel all that promising. Especially because I wasn’t one to give up. We’d probably be here for hours, and I still wouldn’t get it right. But when I glanced back up at Nathan’s smirking face—his dimple highlighted in the soft glow of the room, and his hair messy from bouncing from student to student—I couldn’t say no.

And on a completely unrelated note, I was giddy. He’d chosen to spend the evening with me instead of running off with one of the cute single moms.

“All right, Steven Tyler. Let’s do this.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Nathan



Age 23:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Lil,

I have been on, I kid you not, ten dates in the last two months, and nothing ever clicks. Am I being too picky? Or maybe my standards are too high. Idk. I swear every single date is the EXACT SAME. We start with a bit of awkward small talk. She mentions something about her job. I mention mine. Then we eat in peace. They're all just...fine, I guess? Nothing wrong with these women: beautiful, sweet, good manners. And I've even kissed a few (I know. Don't judge), but I don't feel anything. I mean zilch.

I blame you for raising my standards. You're cool and easy to talk to and don't take yourself too seriously. And the rom-coms you make me watch help too. I dunno. I hope one day I

find someone who makes me laugh when I need it the most. Or someone who takes me at my worst?

It's very late, and I'm tired and rambling. Overall: I'm sick of going out on dates that lead nowhere. I want to get serious. I want someone to take me seriously.

You wouldn't happen to have a super-hot sister who acts just like you, would you? Family dinners would be very interesting, lol.

Anyway, night, Lil.

Shiny

It's an odd thing, to wake up in the middle of the night to a beautiful woman rifling through your underwear drawer.

It took me a solid two minutes, judging by the alarm clock next to my head, to fully comprehend what was happening here. At first, when I saw a dark figure opening drawer after drawer, I had accepted my fate, figuring this was the weirdest sleep paralysis demon ever, and that at any moment, I would start screaming for help.

But when said demon stubbed its toe on the corner of my great-grandmother's dresser and yelped, I realized it was Calla. She was wearing pink pajama pants with lemons all over them and a huge black hoodie that fell to her knees. *Wells #23* was printed on the back.

She whimpered and held her bare foot with one hand while opening my underwear drawer with the other. She lifted a pair of black boxer briefs like they were in the way and continued her search.

I cleared my throat, and she jumped like a skittish cat.

“The really sexy stuff is in the back.” I propped myself up against my headboard, watching her watch me.

She dropped her shoulders in relief and whispered, “I need to borrow your car.”

I scratched my jawline, the stubble across it grazing my fingertips, and whispered back. “Why are you whispering? We’re both awake now.”

She stood straighter, slamming the drawer closed. “Oh, you’re right.” This response was at a normal volume. “Where are your keys?”

I squinted at her. “Absolutely not. I’ve seen the rims on your car, and I don’t trust you with Bessie.”

“Bessie?” She tilted her head. “You call your Rav4 Bessie?”

I shrugged. “Luke named her.”

With a nod, she pursed her lips. “Makes sense. Alrighty. Hand me those keys, mister.” She stuck her hand out as if I’d magically changed my mind.

“Layla said you ran over a curb the other day. Nearly took your bumper off, and you just said ‘whoopsies.’”

She didn’t even try to deny it. Only kept her hand held out.

When I stayed put, arms crossed and glaring at her palm, she threw her head back and groaned.

“Come on. My car won’t start and it’s raining and I really need a Philly cheesesteak.”

I tilted my head. “Why won’t your car start?”

“Do I look like a mechanic?”

I took in her oversized pajamas and the way her hair was haphazardly thrown into some odd updo with little stray hairs poking out around her ears. God, even when she was a mess, she captivated every part of me.

“No, you look like a homeless panty raider.”

Calla snorted. “If I was a panty raider, then I would be severely disappointed by what is in those drawers. Not a tighy-whitey to be found.” She clicked her tongue. “Shame, really.”

A loud, thundering clap interrupted my chance to respond. The weather had been awful when we left the community center after lessons. I had to stick her camera bag up my shirt to keep it dry while she ran full speed to her car through all the puddles. She didn’t even try to avoid them, like it was a game to her.

I shook my head. “You’re not driving in this weather. Especially so late.”

She stomped her foot like a child, which made it incredibly hard to take her seriously. “I won’t hurt your car.”

“It’s not the car I’m worried about,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

I hadn’t meant to say it so harshly, but it was true. A car was just a car. But if I let her drive in this, and she got hurt, I’d never forgive myself.

Calla straightened, her mouth agape and her lips drooping slightly. A red-hot sensation crept up from my bare chest, which Calla must have noticed, because her eyes crept down to my exposed abdomen before widening and darting back up to my face. Not much shocked her, but truth be told, I enjoyed the look on her face at that moment.

I broke eye contact, glancing at the clock beside me. It was 1:38 a.m.

“Is anything even open right now?” I rubbed my eyes, trying to avoid glancing at her with fondness again.

“Liberty Bell on tenth. They’re open twenty-four seven. I’m always stopping in at weird hours.”

I took my hands off my face and gaped at her. “You go to tenth by yourself in the middle of the night? Calla, you cannot do that.”

She shrugged, like that knowledge wouldn’t be keeping me up at night for the rest of my life. “I’m a big girl. I can handle myself.” She patted her chest, which drew my attention to her petite frame. She couldn’t protect herself from a squirrel, but if I told her that, she would probably hit me with the bat sitting beside my bed.

So I sat up further and tossed my blankets aside, exposing my blue plaid pajama pants.

“All right, killer. Let’s go, then.”

Calla bounced on her heels. “Are you coming with me?” Her tone was so sweet, so thrilled at the thought of me joining her on this midnight trip to a hole-in-the-wall sandwich shop.

I stood and stretched my arms above my head. “Yup, I’m gonna need a bodyguard if I’m out getting sketchy subs in the night.”

She stood firm while I shuffled to my closet to grab a long-sleeve shirt and toss it over my head.

“I will protect you with my life, sir.” She bowed her head, wearing a faux-serious expression.

“Come on, BG.” I bumped her arm with my elbow as I passed her on the way.

My keys were hung on the hook by the door, just like they always were. Until now. After tonight, it was obvious I’d have to hide them from Calla to keep her from attempting any more of these late-night food runs. Maybe I’d hide hers too. Just pull them back out for her every morning.

And that was how I ended up in my car with an incredibly large and messy Philly cheesesteak on my plate, a.k.a. my lap, and Calla in my passenger seat singing “Girls Just Wanna Have Fun” at the top of her lungs like it was her full-time job.

A month ago, I never would’ve believed I’d be in this position. Or that Calla would feel comfortable enough to be in

a car alone with me. Seriously. A year ago, when she stopped over to see Luke, I waved bye to her with my pinkie. My *pinkie*. The girl had always brought out the weirdest parts of me.

“Didn’t you watch that UFO documentary on Netflix? Of course they’re real.”

Calla pointed to the sky above us through my windshield. “Look how many stars there are. You don’t believe there are other living creatures out there? We’re a teeny, tiny blip in the existence of the universe.”

Laughing, I held my hands up in defense. “I didn’t say they weren’t real. I said they’re not what we *think* they are.”

“Oh yeah? And what are they?”

I shrugged. “Who knows? I just think they’re already here and they aren’t little green guys who can’t open doors. They’re far more intelligent than us. The government’s just been feeding us lies so we won’t all frantically run around like ants.”

“Speaking of lies, you’re sitting on a throne of lies.” Calla pointed her entire sub at me accusingly.

I looked down at the leather seat below me. “I am?”

She took a big bite and nodded. “Yes. You told me you were terrible with beautiful women.” She spoke around the food, her cheeks puffed out. “And yet you were over there laughing it up and being all smooth with single mom Barbie.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Nah.” I dipped my chin to hide the pink splotches dancing on my cheeks.

She cocked her head and pursed her lips and sent me a look, sandwich halfway to her mouth. “Yeah, right.” She scoffed. “You were all suave, Mr. Casanova, over there.” She bumped her elbow against my arm.

I couldn’t help but laugh again, tilting my head down, but I didn’t have the first clue how to respond.

She dipped her chin and affected a deep tone. “*Hey, babe. Let me show you how good I am at guitar.*” She lifted her right arm in a flexing motion. “*Yeah, I work out too. Ugh.*”

I lost it the minute she tried to waggle her brows and shot me a smolder.

When I got control of myself, I took a few deep breaths through the laughter and shook my head. “I definitely do not sound like that.”

With a shrug, Calla took a bite of her sandwich. “Whatever you say, Casanova.”

There was no right way to respond to her comment. I couldn’t just be like *Oh, yeah. I have no problem talking to hot women. Unless they’re my best friend’s little sister. In which case, I become a blubbering mess.*

I stuffed my mouth full of steak, cheese, and peppers so I wouldn’t have to answer. In the middle of our silence, the majestic voices of ABBA soothed me slightly. Just when I

thought she'd given up, I glanced over and found her staring at me, brows raised and eyes wide and questioning.

“I'm not interested in her, so it's easy to be myself, I guess?”

I still think of her as Ms. Thompson or Christian's mom. And although I love the little guy and would gladly take him home with me, I'm not interested in going on a date with his mom. Because even if Calla is right about her being beautiful, the possibility of *more* isn't there. And I'm over casual dates that never go anywhere.

Calla leaned into the console between us, her elbow close to mine but not quite touching. “Hmm, I'm surprised. I figured your type was flirty blondes who boost your ego.”

I smirked over at her, testing. “Nah, my type is sassy brunettes who roast me every chance they get.”

Calla's cheeks flushed instantly, the freckles across her nose slowly fading into the pink behind them, but she squinted at me in question. “Was that supposed to be practice?”

I could've been honest. I could have said something along the lines of *It's never been practice. I don't need practice for other women as long as you're in my life.* But what good would that have done? It was late, and we were parked in a vacant parking lot. If she didn't feel the same way, then the ride home would have been a long and awkward one.

“Yeah, practice.” My voice was muffled by the bite of sandwich I forced myself to eat so I could look busy.

Calla nodded. “Not bad. You’ll be a pro soon. Snatching up sassy brunettes left and right.”

This time I looked her in the eye when I said, “Yeah. But maybe, let’s keep working on it. Just for now.”

A half grin tugged at her lips as she studied the dashboard in front of her. “Yeah, just for now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Nathan



Age 25:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I'll tell you this. I've never in my life wished so badly that I could call you and convince you to meet with me. We're almost at ten years. Let's just get this done so I can know for sure you're not a 32-year-old man catfishing me from your mom's basement. Kidding. Of course.

I'm at a bar (not saying where. I know it's against the rules) with my best friend and his siblings. They are so, so weird. I wish I was kidding when I say I am surrounded by the oddest people I have ever met—other than you, my dear.

I'm also slightly tipsy, and I just have to say that I love you so much. I am so grateful for you. I want to give you a big giant hug one day, okay?

Let's hug it out, brother. I mean sister.

Let's watch Shrek and eat ice cream sandwiches. Come see meee. Ten years, shmen years. We're basically already there.

Bye bestie,

Shine

“Where are the strippers, bro?” was the very first thing Crew said when he walked into Romfuzzled.

I came in before it opened—since I have an in with the owner, you know—and spent all day prepping. I mean really, really prepping. Signs, balloon arches—which are incredibly difficult and painful to erect—and a box of T-shirts I made for all the guys (I went with Luke’s face pressed over Luke Skywalker’s from *Return of the Jedi*.) I know, I was killing it at the whole best man thing.

I’d already ordered everyone a Nathan-ator—Luke and I decided renaming the old fashioned was the right way to go since it was my drink of choice—and I’d forced everyone to show up early and don their Luke shirts.

Crew busted in late, of course, while the rest of us were waiting at the bar for him and Luke.

“There are no strippers. I already told you that.”

He groaned and pointed to his button-up. “I wore my best Hawaiian shirt for nothing?”

I took in the pink Hawaiian shirt covered in dinosaurs of all shapes and sizes wearing leis and cringed. “Uh, sorry, bud.”

He shrugged. “What a waste. I spent my whole day working to look this good just for you guys. And strippers.”

Liam, who was happily wearing his Luke shirt, threw back his drink. “I’m just glad to be off work long enough to be here.”

Beside him, Adam had the homemade shirt thrown over his shoulder.

He scanned us all and shook his head, arms crossed. “I don’t know why I even bothered coming.”

My phone buzzed in my pocket, so I pulled it out. Instead of the warning text I expected from Layla that would let me know Luke was on his way, it was from Calla.

Calla: Sooo what do you guys have planned for tonight?

I had absolutely *no* business being this excited at the sight of her name on the screen. Especially when I was minutes away from surprising her brother with a party as his *best man*. I swore to myself there would be no more funny business. No more heart palpitations accompanying the sound of her name. No more long looks every time she walked past me in the apartment. And yet...

Me: Alcohol, Little Debbies, and debauchery.

Calla: Oh, is that right?

Me: Wild night at Romfuzzled, indeed.

Calla: I may have to sneak over to the bachelor side instead. All I planned was a bookstore crawl and bowling,

but Little Debbies and debauchery sound so much more enticing.

Me: Come on over anytime, BG.

My intentions were good, I swear. Just a friendly night out with friends and their siblings. Friends, friends, friends, friends, friends.

Me: You guys should stop by after your bookstore crawl.

The sound of Luke's Jeep shocked me back to reality. His tires on asphalt screeched in my head like he'd run over the tiny part of my brain that considered Calla Wells a candidate for the *more* I wanted out of life.

Pocketing my phone, I ran to the light switches and turned them all off.

"Everyone hide!" I whisper-yelled as Crew, Liam, and Tom all jumped the bar to duck under. Adam simply ambled around the other side, as if he was cooler than the other three. And let's face it; he might be.

I tucked and rolled behind the bar and settled into a squat beside an assortment of liquor bottles and flavoring tucked into the opened cabinets just as a car door slammed in the lot.

"I think he's coming up," Crew said at *full volume*.

"Shh!" Liam and Tom and I whispered to him in sync.

He raised a defensive hand before pointing over at Adam, who was standing at his full height behind the bar. "Adam isn't even crouching."

Adam shrugged, his shirt still hanging off his shoulder. “He can’t see me till he comes inside anyway.”

When keys jangled outside the door, I bounced a little, preparing to jump up. A moment later, the old wooden door creaked open, and I nodded to the rest of the guys.

We all shot up in the air. Well, except for Jerry. It took him a minute to get up.

“Surprise!” we shouted. Even Adam joined in, although much less enthusiastically.

Luke staggered back a little, but caught himself quickly, his brows crooked in confusion. He scanned the bar, taking in the banner that read *Let’s make pour decisions* and the color-coordinating balloon arch. His lips pulled into a smile when he got to where we were standing, wearing matching shirts with his face on them.

Luke opened his mouth and then closed it, pointing his thumb out to the parking lot. “You know I own the place, right? And that you asked permission to throw a party here? And you realize all of your cars are in plain sight in the parking lot?”

I rummaged in a paper bag on the bar and pulled out a party horn emblazoned with *RIP single life*. With a deep breath in, I brought it to my lips and blew, making the most obnoxious noise I could. “Surprise?” I shrugged.

Luke moved a few steps closer, looking at our shirts in detail.

He pointed at my chest. “Please tell me I get one of those.”

A few drinks, four rounds of pool, and many terrible dance moves later, Luke and I were laughing so hard beer was coming out of my nose.

“Shut up. I did not,” I choked out.

Luke nodded ferociously. “You told me you were going to hit Layla with a box of paper clips if she ever got near the shredder again.”

“She kept stealing it from the neutral spot.” I snorted. “I thought you were going to kill me when I tried to yank it away from her. You were so pissed at just the thought of me going near her.”

He sighed. “Yeah, I was a little crazy about her back then, I guess.”

I quirked one brow at him. I didn’t have to voice my response to that.

Luke elbowed my arm with a laugh. “Shut up. You’ll be the same way when you meet the right girl.”

I stiffened at that, because in the back of my head, deep, deep in my subconscious, I felt like I’d already met the right girl. But if she was the right girl, why did the idea of dating her feel wrong?

Luke took a sip of his beer and leaned back in the booth. Crew and Liam had gone up to the bar when a group of young

women stepped through the front door about twenty minutes ago, and Adam was standing at the jukebox with Tom.

Luke sighed. “What about the girl you were talking to for a while?”

Had I been talking to someone recently? It had been months since I’d been on a date, and the last few were setups. Friends wanting me to meet women they thought I might like. And I didn’t think I’d even mentioned them to Luke.

I scrunched my nose when I figured out who he meant. “Oh, Lily?”

Luke had caught me shooting off emails to Lily once or twice and laughing at her two-a.m. responses with memes and inside jokes that would’ve taken way too long to explain.

“Yeah. The one you were talking to so much when we were in Ocean City.” He tapped his finger against the perspiration on his glass.

“Nah. She’s just a really good friend. We’ve known each other forever.”

Luke looked like he wanted to argue, but instead, he just gave me a slow nod. “Hmm, okay. Anyway, you need to get out there. Go on a date. Seems like you’ve been lonely lately.”

Actually, I hadn’t been. Calla and I had been hanging out a ton this week. If I wasn’t at work or at lessons, then I was with her. Truth be told, I didn’t think I’d felt lonely since she moved in. But what was I supposed to say?

Don't worry, your sister is keeping me company in our cozy apartment.

“Yeah, maybe.” My response was flat. Mostly because I was so unbelievably sick of dating. Sick of looking for a mediocre relationship that would last a few months, only to end up being ghosted or falling into a boring back and forth and never being interested in going further. These days, more than anything, I craved permanence.

But I craved it with the wrong person. Living together had made that all too clear. Leaving a cup of coffee for her each morning, finding her bobby pins scattered about. Her signed Yogi Bear mug with fake flowers in it on my coffee table. Yeah, it was all too easy to picture permanence with her. Except I valued my friendship with Luke so deeply that I was afraid to risk it.

A shrill whistle had me turning to the bar, where Crew and Liam were waving me over to the group of women they were chatting up.

A blonde in a tight miniskirt turned on her barstool to face me and smiled. Sarah. The mom who'd chatted me up at lessons recently. She raised a hand, and I dipped my chin at her before setting my glass down and turning to Luke.

“I'm gonna say hey to a friend real quick.”

He smirked up at me. “That was fast.”

I shrugged off his comment with a laugh—there was no use arguing, anyway—and meandered my way to the bar.

Liam patted my shoulder. “This young woman was telling us that you teach her son, what was it? Christopher?” He turned to Sarah for confirmation.

“Christian,” I answered before she could.

“Christian!” Liam continued. “You give her son guitar lessons, huh?” He gave me an exaggerated wink.

“Yep, every other Tuesday night.” I let out a chuckle and nodded to Sarah, who flashed a pretty smile at me.

It was absolutely infuriating that I didn’t find her more attractive. Objectively, she was cute. She had bright blond hair and a petite figure that could rock a stiletto, judging by the six-inch bedazzled heels on her feet, and yet...nothing. My heart didn’t kick up a single notch. Not like it did when Calla walked into a room wearing her stupid lemon-printed pajamas. For some absurd reason, a scene like that would have my heart doing somersaults like there was a Y2K celebration going off in my chest.

“How’s the little man doing?” I asked to be polite.

Sarah unlocked her phone and pulled up a picture of Christian passed out on the couch with a bowl of popcorn in his lap. “Didn’t hang very long with the babysitter. I guess I should’ve planned something more fun for him to do.”

I laughed. “Nah, kids love movie nights. I’m sure he had a blast.”

Sarah nodded. “They watched *Shrek*, so I’m sure he had a good time.”

Liam moved closer to where Crew and one of Sarah's friends were sitting a couple of seats down. Crew was going on about one of his *Lord Of The Rings* theories, so I figured it was best to stay where I was.

I tapped my fingers on the bar. "Are you having a moms' night out or something?"

Sarah chuckled. "Uh, not exactly. I'm the only mom. We're celebrating my birthday, actually."

I raised my hand. "Oh, happy birthday! This is the perfect place to celebrate. Have you by any chance tried the Nathanator?" With a flourish, I pointed to the menu on the bar top.

Sarah snickered. "Is that named after you?"

I nodded. "The one and only."

Easy conversation continued from there. Easy yet *boring*, if I was being honest. Even as I begged my heart and God himself to allow me to feel *something* for the pretty girl next to me. Even a single, solitary goose bump would suffice. A fluttering in my chest or a half a belly flip. It didn't matter how hard I wished for it; my body remained unmoved. Still. So utterly still.

Sarah sat up straighter, her pink blazer shifting across her shoulders. She peeked up at me from under her lashes and said, "I don't really do this, and it's probably too forward, but would you maybe want to go out sometime?"

No was the response that came to mind. But maybe a distraction was exactly what I needed to get my mind off

Calla. Maybe sparks needed to be built up. They didn't always come all at once, right? Sometimes chemistry took time.

“How about next weekend?” I asked.

I was livid with myself. I was a crappy roommate, a crappy guy, for even saying yes to a date when my heart lay at the feet of someone else. And I was an even crappier best man because of *where* my heart was. But I had to do something to set myself straight. One date. Just push through one dinner in hopes that it would electrocute my heart into action.

Sarah gave a full, grateful smile. “Yes, definitely! I'll get someone to watch Christian.”

I responded with a polite nod. “Sounds good. How about I text you details?”

She bit her lip and dipped her chin demurely.

I thumbed over my shoulder to where Luke was still sitting. “I'm gonna go back to my friend. Best man stuff and whatnot. I'll be in touch.”

Sarah smiled and gave a quick wave as I turned away.

Halfway back to where Luke sat with a dumb grin on his face and a thumbs-up, the hairs on my arms stood up.

Behind me, the front doors opened, and I turned at the sound. Calla, decked out in a sleek black dress that hugged her curvy waist and had a slit up to her mid-thigh, walked in. At the sight of her, my stomach jolted like I had been punched in the gut, and my chest tremored like I'd been shocked by an electrical outlet. I couldn't hear anything over the sound of a

stampede of elephants racing through my ears, but she was laughing at something Layla was saying, her head thrown back and her face glowing with joy.

My own face warmed, and my heart raced as she craned her neck and scanned the crowded bar like she was looking for someone.

When her eyes landed on me, she broke out into a wide grin. It was the prettiest smile I had ever seen. Then she popped up on her tiptoes and waved wildly at me.

With her attention focused on me, my body relaxed. Yes, she was done up and looking good enough to send me into cardiac arrest, but she was still my Calla. I laughed, shaking off the shame that had been strangling me all night.

Long ago, someone had told me that guilt correlated with what a person had done, while shame was a feeling related directly to how a person viewed themselves. And right now, I was not just someone's friend, a son, a worker, or a best man; I was Calla's objective. How could I possibly be ashamed of who I was when a woman this special was searching an entire crowd of people just for me?

Maybe I would pack guilt and shame back on later, but right now, as Calla weaved her way toward me through the crowded bar, I was euphoric. Tonight, I'd soak in her attention. Leave the shame I'd shaken off in a pile on the floor.

When she got close, she spoke, but the bar was loud, so I leaned in. My lips grazed her ear, my words kissing the ends of her cheek.

“What were you saying?”

She put her hands on my forearms for support and popped up on her toes again. “I’m really, really, glad to see you!” she shouted. Judging by her excitement and sloppy tone, I ventured to guess she’d had a couple of drinks as well.

With a shake of my head and a laugh, I bit my lip. “Yeah, BG, me too.”

I turned to Luke, where Layla, Rachel, Marigold, and Mama B had squished into the circular booth surrounding him. He gave each a hug and kiss on the cheek and pulled Layla into his side.

When I faced Calla again, her attention was fixed on my shirt, and she smiled so brightly that the rest of the world looked dull in comparison.

She grabbed fistfuls of my Luke Skywalker shirt and yanked me down so we were eye to eye. I jerked forward as she turned and brought her lips to my ear.

In a sexy tone, she said, “I bought so many books tonight.”

I couldn’t help but laugh, my chest fluttering against her shoulder.

“Is that right?” I asked, unable to fight back a grin.

She nodded, her hair brushing against my cheek. “So. Many. Books.”

As the music died down between songs, I pulled back. “It sounds like you bought a lot of drinks too.”

I searched her face for signs that she was under the influence, but her eyes were clear, and she wasn't swaying or faltering at all. She was smiling at me brightly. Like a kid who'd won a stuffed dolphin from the claw machine and was just waiting for the mechanism to release it.

Shaking her head, she shouted—louder than necessary, considering the music was transitioning. “Nope. I'm just on a book-buying high.”

I couldn't hold my smile back. “I can't wait to hear all about them.”

She nodded. “I got more blue aliens, and even a couple pirates.”

“Wow, really going all out, aren't you?”

She glanced over my shoulder to where Luke and the rest of the girls were. “Yup. Didn't hold back at all. Layla's trunk is packed full. She let me drive here, which is surprising, considering someone”—she poked my side, her tiny pink nail digging into my rib—“has apparently been complaining about my driving skills.”

I shrugged and pulled away from her accusing finger. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

She laughed and grabbed my wrist. “Come on. Let's go sit with our friends.”

And who was I to argue with her?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Calla



Age 21:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Attached picture of puppies in a shelter

I'm volunteering at a shelter this week for extra credit, and I need you to see the cuteness surrounding me. There is no way I can make it a whole week without taking one of these little guys home. Look at the one with the different colored eyes! He's practically begging me to adopt him.

Anyway, I need help with picking out a name, so give me all your best suggestions. I'm thinking Deeogee (get it? Like D.O.G.). I know, I'm hilarious.

Anyway, happy Monday, my friend!

Hugs and puppies,

Lil

Pulling a chair up to the table, I squished up next to Marigold and waved at Nathan to sit beside me. He looked uncertain, glancing around the table to where Luke sat. Finally, he pulled a chair up beside me and settled in it.

Dropping my elbows to the table, I leaned forward. I'd never been great at dining etiquette. "Have you guys had fun?"

Luke took a sip of his drink—the new Nathan-ator, if I had to guess. I had been hearing a lot about it. "Yeah. I'm really loving the shirts." All the guys, except Adam, of course, were wearing matching Skywalker shirts.

Luke tipped closer to Layla and gave her a look full of gentleness and compassion. "Have you had a good time?" he asked her in a voice so soft I could barely hear it over the music.

Layla nodded like a bobblehead. "Calla showed me the romance section of every bookstore, and there was a bottomless mimosa spot outside one of our stops. Actually, I don't know if it was bottomless. All I know is that I never found the bottom of it."

Luke laughed and patted her hand. "I don't think you did either."

Soon enough, Crew and Liam left the group of women sitting at the bar and joined us, each grabbing a spare seat from the surrounding tables and forcing Nathan to scoot his chair closer to me.

Nathan turned to Crew, who had a bright red lipstick stain on his cheek. “How did that go?”

My brother snorted. “All I had to do was show a few pictures of me with my adorable nephews at the park and they were tossing numbers at us like confetti.” He turned to Liam. “And you said it wouldn’t work.”

Liam lowered his brows. “I said your Hawaiian shirt wouldn’t pull.”

Crew looked down. He’d layered the Hawaiian shirt over the Skywalker shirt, leaving it unbuttoned. “They liked me, Hawaiian shirt and all, so suck on that.”

Marigold laughed to my right, a little louder than necessary. “I hope those poor girls know how badly you snore, Liam. I wouldn’t want them awake all night, listening to the water buffalo snoozing next to them.”

Liam smirked, his eyes flashing as he canted forward in his seat. I knew that look all too well. Liam loved to find someone to mess with, to argue with, and Marigold was the easiest one to set off.

“Ahh, I wouldn’t be too worried about them getting any sleep, Goldie.”

Dang. If Marigold had the supernatural power to set a man on fire with a single look, Liam would’ve been a flaming ball of cockiness right now.

Unfortunately, she did not possess such skills. So as retaliation, she just glared at him. “Were you sure to tell them

you have to stretch before bed on account of your old man back?”

Liam scoffed, his smirk growing further. “At least I don’t watch *Bluey* for hours after my kids go to bed.”

Marigold gasped and slapped her palm to her chest. “*Bluey* is for adults. I wouldn’t expect your pea-brain to understand that.”

Liam practically growled at her as he leaned back, shooting daggers and looking like he was about to punch a wall. The tension between them descended on the table like a thick fog.

Layla faked a gasp. “I love this song.” She turned to Luke. “Let’s dance!”

Luke cocked his head to the side, oblivious. “Do you even know this song?”

Layla narrowed her eyes and elbowed him. “It’s only my favorite song ever. Remember?”

Luke’s eyes widened, then traveled from Liam to Marigold. “Oh yes, yes.” He nodded. “This is a great song.”

The rest of us followed suit, all spouting some form of “Yeah, let’s dance” and “Sure, why not?” in order to avoid the crossfire happening between the divorced couple at the table.

Rachel, Layla’s best friend, moseyed up to where Adam, my mom, and my dad had settled at the jukebox, surely about to take over song selection.

Luke and Layla headed straight to the dance floor, wrapped in each other's arms, swaying back and forth to the beat of the slower song. Crew also hit the dance floor. But with no partner, he simply shrugged and raised both arms, a beer in one hand and...was that a soft pretzel in the other? Either way, he swayed to the music by himself.

I leaned against the far wall, where I had the perfect view of my siblings and our friends. I couldn't help but laugh at Marigold and Liam. They were practically nose to nose, leaning over the table, making snarky comments.

Everyone I cared for most was here. Sure, I had friends here and there, but none of them even came close to the people here tonight. Except Shiny. But I'd email him later tonight, and all would be right in the world.

Luke and Layla were still dancing. He was sliding his hand down to the top of her waist and whispering in her ear, and she was throwing her head back in laughter.

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. How it took them three years to figure out what was right in front of them, I'd never know.

Behind me, a throat cleared, and I turned toward the sound. Nathan had his arms crossed, and he was smirking at Luke and Layla.

I smiled at him and turned back. "You would think they'd be sick of each other by now."

Nathan chuckled. "I guess they've been dancing around each other for so long they want to make up for lost time."

At that exact moment, Luke lowered his hand farther and squeezed Layla's butt, making her laugh even harder.

"Ugh, gross." I groaned. There were some things better left unseen.

I turned my back to them, facing Nathan.

He laughed and took a sip from his water bottle. "I think it's sweet."

"Oh yeah?" I smirked. "You a big romance guy? You can borrow a couple of my new books if you want."

"Not necessarily romance, you dork. But having one special person in my life? Finding my other half? Yeah, I want that one day." He watched Luke and Layla with a mix of envy and desperation. It was honestly precious.

I could picture Nathan settling down with a nice girl; she'd be all put together. Her hair would be perfectly straightened every morning, and she'd never eat cereal while sprawled out on her kitchen floor in her pjs. She'd make gourmet dinners using quinoa and never once miss a credit card payment.

Was it possible to want to slap a figment of one's imagination? Because if so, homegirl is wrecked. There wasn't a woman in existence who was worthy of such a caring and funny man. The day he brought home a girl and I had to show her my lipstick knife would be an awkward one.

My stomach growled, pulling me out of my musings about Nathan and his future wife.

“Hey.” I tugged the bottom of his shirt. “Do you want to go to Liberty’s?”

He sighed. “Can you really eat Philly cheese steaks at any hour?”

I nodded with a smile. “Some would say it’s my most impressive skill.”

“*Some* would say it’s an obsession.”

Nathan and I pulled an Irish goodbye and slipped out of Romfuzzled without stopping to wish the future bride and groom goodnight. Judging by their dancing, they wouldn’t miss us a bit.

Twenty minutes later, we were sitting side by side in Bessie with messy handfuls of Philly cheesesteak sub.

With a sigh, I slumped back in my seat. “I swear they put crack in their sandwiches.” I took an oversized bite, stuffing my cheeks full.

Nathan scanned the sketchy, mostly empty, very dark parking lot. “Uh, yeah. I wouldn’t be surprised at that.”

I snorted and elbowed him. “Don’t act like you didn’t eat here for lunch yesterday. I saw the receipt in the trash can.”

“You went through my trash?”

“I didn’t *go through it*,” I said in my best mocking Nathan tone, throwing in an eye roll. “It was sitting on top when I threw away my own trash, practically begging for me to read it.”

He took another bite of his sandwich and avoided my gaze, basically admitting I was right without coming out and saying it.

“So, any job interviews yet?”

I had been searching my email like a madwoman, as though my spam account would hold a magic job opportunity. Instead, all I’d been met with were Bath and Body Works three-wick candle sales and notifications from real estate websites that a new apartment, which was far beyond my price point, was now available.

“None yet. I’m still hoping to get into a position where I run social media accounts and maybe work with the players. My resume is tiny”—abysmal, really—“but I have tons of photography experience. And maybe my work with Luke and your lessons will help keep me from looking like such a fraud.”

A fraud was exactly what I felt like as I applied for job after job I was nowhere near qualified for. An unskilled impostor. I was trapped in a vicious cycle. I couldn’t get a job without experience, but I couldn’t get the experience necessary without a job.

Nathan set his sandwich on its paper in his lap and wiped the corner of his mouth with his napkin. He turned to me, and in a tone more serious than I’d ever heard from him, he said, “You don’t actually believe that, right? That you’re an impostor?”

Silence was my only answer. Sure, I knew I'd be good at a job like that, but I wasn't sure I had what it took to get hired. All I had was a degree and a brother who, thankfully, saw an inkling of potential in me.

I picked at my sandwich, pulling at a pepper so I could hide my disappointment.

"Calla." Nathan reached over the console and placed two long fingers under my chin, forcing me to turn his way. His deep brown eyes locked on mine, and a wave of comfort and familiarity rushed through me, followed by a contrasting spike of adrenaline and a yearning that got my blood pumping. Like a sugar rush after eating Mom's coconut cake. A bite of nostalgia and cheer now; a rush of exhilaration later.

"You are *not* an impostor. You've done things in one day that I couldn't do in a year. You've tripled the number of followers for Romfuzzled in only a couple of weeks."

He was right. I'd seen the bar's socials grow, but it hadn't really sunken in. Like my brain wouldn't let my heart get involved.

I shrugged. "I can't put that kind of stuff on paper, and they won't see how *amazing* I am if I can't even nail an interview."

My reply was casual, but Nathan wasn't letting up.

"Calla, seriously, you have talent. And once the right employer sees that, they'll snatch you up so fast."

He sounded so certain. As if he had this vision of success and possessed a confidence that I would reach the potential

he'd somehow planted in his mind. And maybe he was right. Maybe I'd luck out and get called for an interview. I had no problem making a good first impression. And I was very good at small talk: weather, school districts, paint colors. You know, the works. If I could just get my foot in the door...

"How do you do that?" I whispered.

"Do what?"

"Make me feel like I can actually do this."

He snorted. "You *can* actually do it. I don't put my faith in things I don't believe in. But you, Calla, are something worthy of all my confidence."

Maybe it was the butt-warming seat heaters or the peppers finally kicking in, but my cheeks warmed at how undoubtedly sure of me he was.

Nathan shrugged and took another bite of his sandwich, his attention focused on the building across the parking lot. "And if it takes a while to find a job, that means I get to keep you as a roommate for a while longer, and I have to say, I don't mind that at all."

It hit me then. Spending my night in a dimly lit parking lot with Nathan Huxley, laughing so hard my cheeks hurt and stuffing my face full of Philly cheesesteaks, had become one of my favorite pastimes. Watching his chest rise and fall when he chuckled or how he would tilt his head like a puppy when I was telling a story. And the way his eyes filled with such

intent and curiosity made my heart race like I'd run up a flight of stairs.

Maybe I needed a few minutes to myself to figure out what that meant.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Nathan



Age 25:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

Lil,

Just so you know...the girl I told you about?

I'm screwed. I don't want to say too much, but uh...yeah, say a prayer for me. I think I've got my work cut out for me. And I am about 60% sure she likes me too. I definitely saw her staring at me while I was wearing a Henley. Keep in mind, YOU are the one who told me about the magic of Henleys, so you're not allowed to give me crap about it.

How's your new roommate, btw? Is she single? My best friend has brothers who could use a good woman in their lives.

Have a good night. Do not reply till morning. I know you hate the red unread notification bubble, but you need sleep.

Night,

Shiny

You know what I was getting really sick of?

Work. And adulthood. And the inability to wake up one day and fly to Jamaica just because I felt like it. Also that it was virtually impossible for me to say no to my coworkers. Because that meant I had to work later than I should have. Also, maybe I was getting tired of having a hot roommate who was untouchable. Every morning, I'd find her sitting cross-legged on my living room floor. Her hair was always in long, tangled curls, and without fail, she'd be wearing fruit-covered pajamas that had absolutely no right being sexy yet made my heart pound so hard I worried I'd crack a rib.

Not even picturing her in a Coca-Cola polar bear costume could tone down Calla's hotness. Believe me, I'd tried. And was rewarded with visions of her looking as beautiful as always, snuggled up in white and holding a glass bottle of my favorite soda. She would sell so, so many bottles.

"Morning," I grumbled out as I locked my gaze on the container of coffee grounds, tunnel vision taking over. Maybe a caffeine fix would temper the fantasies.

Behind me, Calla yawned and dropped her spoon into her ceramic bowl. The sound was so familiar to me these days. It told me that she was having another bowl of my cereal. I almost teased her about how empty the box was, but truth be told, I loved it. I loved when Calla paraded through my kitchen

in the middle of the night, searching for Froot Loops. It made her more human. Slight imperfections like that only magnified the teeny, tiny baby crush I was harboring.

Okay, maybe it was closer to borderline fascination, but that was all. I had absolutely no business being “in love” with my best friend’s little sister, despite what Lily argued. So from here on out, I was banning the word “love” from my vocabulary.

And so what if I’d had a couple of inappropriate dreams about her? That kind of thing happened to even the best of us. It wasn’t like I’d stolen Luke’s last piece of gum. And it wasn’t like I saw Luke with spinach in his teeth and didn’t say anything. I’m not a monster.

And technically, I was the one who’d gotten Luke and Layla together, so he owed me more than just a drink name on a menu. Surely he’d let a few simple dreams slide...if he were to find out. God, let him never find out.

“Good morning.” Calla’s light voice tiptoed along the thin ice that was my mood. Working late for the past three days meant I’d gotten very little sleep.

I groaned as I poured coffee grounds into a filter.

“Oh,” she said from her spot on the floor, “could you set aside your leftover coffee grounds? They’re good for Georgie.”

It was far too early for me to try to decode that question.

“Georgie?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Calla said sweetly. “My fig tree. He’s looking a little sad over there.”

She had a plant? She’d been here for weeks, and I’d never noticed. Although, now that she mentioned it, my eyes caught on the hanging plant in a terracotta pot in the kitchen. I sniffled. *Cute*.

With my second favorite mug in hand, the one that made me look like I had an incredible mustache when I drank out of it, I poured the freshly made coffee.

My most favorite coffee mug, the one with Aaron Judge’s signature on it, which wasn’t actually mine, was still being used as a centerpiece on our coffee table. Calla had placed tiny flowers, baby’s breath as she called it, inside and stuck it next to her clean linen-scented candle. I considered commenting on how she’d moved all her things into the common living areas, because as a grown man who had only ever lived with other men, I shouldn’t find it as comforting as I did.

By no means should I have been grateful for the throw blankets draped along every surface. And coming home to the warm, soft glow of the three-wick candles Calla got on sale shouldn’t be so soothing. Wiping my feet on the mat that had conveniently appeared at my door—the one that said *so happy you’re here*—so I didn’t track mud into the living room shouldn’t brighten my mood after a long day at work.

I was a masculine, burly man who wasn’t supposed to enjoy such things. So I let her continue. You know, for her own sake.

I turned the corner of the kitchen after a hefty sip of coffee and found Calla sitting cross-legged in her oversized pajamas with a heaping pile of laundry on either side of her. She didn't notice my presence, so I watched as she grabbed a random T-shirt and folded one side in and the other side out before she tossed it into a new pile. She did this over and over again.

I was by no means a neat freak. I left dishes in the sink sometimes, and my bed was not made twenty-four seven, but this was ridiculous. I was forced to watch in awe, or disgust maybe, as she "folded" every piece of laundry like it was a crumpled-up napkin and sorted them into piles across the floor. The worst part was that while she did it, she hummed tunes that made no sense at all.

One minute she was humming "Beauty and the Beast," and a few seconds later, she was mumbling the lyrics to "I Believe in a Thing Called Love." The girl was downright bizarre.

"What are you doing?" I asked, interrupting her as she tossed a shirt that read *Hot girls read romance*. Side note: I certainly could not deny that sentiment.

Calla jumped but quickly regained her calm position, back hunched slightly and head tipped down. She reached for another article of clothing. "Uh, folding? What are *you* doing?"

I shook my head. "*That* is not folding. That is throwing things into piles."

She took in the mounds of items surrounding her and shrugged. "Seems like folding to me."

So this was what Luke meant when he mentioned the laundry thing. Guess I should have pushed for details.

“Uh-uh, no. That’s it. Put the Phillies shirt down,” I commanded.

With one brow cocked, Calla glanced up at me, then at the red shirt she was holding, then back at me. “What? It’s not your laundry.”

“No, but I live one wall away from you, and the thought that these are going to be sitting in the closet like this will keep me up at night.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Then how would you do them?”

I crouched low beside her, only then remembering that I was wearing navy blue pants, a white button-down, and brown leather shoes. I needed to get to work. Chad was on an impromptu vacation, leaving me to finish two of his projects by the end of the week. I had lessons scheduled later in the week too, so I needed every minute I could at my desk.

I straightened up again. “Tonight. You and I are having a folding party.”

She let out a scoffed laugh. “You are insane.”

“No, *that*”—I pointed at the mess of laundry on the floor—“is insane.”

“Whatever you say.” She waved a hand dismissively. “I’m working from here today, so we can have your little folding party when you get home.”

Was it odd that I really, really liked the way she said home? She'd only been here for two weeks, and yet she'd already made this place more of a home than I ever had.

I held back a smile as I lifted my mug to my lips. "I'll be here."

It's just folding clothes, Luke. Geez, would you relax?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Calla



Age 23:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Shiny,

I mean this in the most modest and polite way possible.

You should, respectfully, take this girl to pound town. Whilst wearing a Henley.

Also, my roommate is pretty great. HE has been nothing but a gentleman. A very particular gentleman, but still. Think I'll stick here for a while.

Use protection. Have fun,

Lily

P.S. Ten years is coming up soon. Are we going to make plans or not? I'm dyingggg.

I'd never truly had a hard time securing a job until this point.

At sixteen, I worked as a cashier at a pharmacy down the road. At eighteen, I was a salesperson at a bridal store—where I used that phrase “Girl, you look like a snack” way too often for comfort. There was a brief time where I decorated windows at local businesses downtown, but I quickly discovered I had no artistic ability, and drawing a bunny drinking an energy smoothie was much harder than those aesthetic TikToks made it out to be. Then there was the infamous server position at Chuck E. Cheese.

Maybe I'd never had to fight for any of those jobs because they were simple and employers hadn't even looked twice at a résumé. Or maybe it was trickier now because this was my first “adult” job and everything up to this point had been kind of useless. Either way, I was sick of the rejection emails flooding my inbox. Sick of searching for subject letters from Indeed or CareerBuilder. Introductions that included the words *Thank you so much for applying, but...* or *We are grateful for your application, unfortunately...* were tossed into my trash folder faster than a toupee could fly in a hurricane.

Just one *tiny* little interview would make my whole week. Heck, my whole year. Sure, some of these positions were a long shot. I didn't really expect an answer regarding those. But even my backups were saying no. Scratch that. My backups' backups were throwing me into the big fat no pile too.

Spending my day refreshing my inbox, calling Layla to complain about said inbox, applying for more jobs, and texting

Nathan memes about *The Bachelorette* turned out to be more tiring than I ever imagined it could be. It was almost six, and I was utterly drained. And I had barely left the couch since I'd finished my bowl of cereal this morning. I wouldn't be surprised if the cellulite on my thighs had fused to the fabric. I lifted one leg just to check, but miraculously, my leg was still free. But a few hours from now, the story may be different.

Thankfully, I followed Rachel on Spotify, and she had half a dozen playlists that fit my current mood. My personal favorite today was one called "Sad Girl Hours." It was a mixture of Taylor Swift and The Kinks, and it totally gelled with the mood I was in.

So the expression on Nathan's face when he walked in on me belting out the lyrics to "Better Things" with a half-empty pint of Half-Baked Ben and Jerry's laid out in front of me on the coffee table came as no surprise.

In case you can't imagine it, I will paint that vision for you: Eyes darting to the piles of laundry that had yet to be moved. Jaw slack for a moment before his lips tipped up in a tight smirk. Eyebrows furrowed in confusion. And then a head tilt with a face full of pity.

"So, how's your day been?" he asked, not bothering to hide his amusement.

I shifted from under my fuzzy blanket with seasonal pumpkins on it—despite October being two months away (it was never too early for fall decor).

“If you consider going through rejection emails and downing an entire pint of ice cream whilst also avoiding my adult responsibilities as good, then it has been absolutely wonderful.”

Nathan slid his work shoes off at the end of the hall and hung his keys on the hook. “Give me five minutes,” he said before heading to his room.

Three minutes later, Nathan came strolling back into the living room barefoot. He was wearing a black shirt that was form fitting around his rather muscly biceps and gray sweatpants. My favorite part of his comfy ensemble, though, was the pink throw blanket—one of mine—tied around his neck like a cape.

Without explanation, the man plopped down next to me on the couch, propped both feet on the coffee table, and leaned back to view the screen in front of me. He reached for my computer with both hands and said, “Gimme.”

Obediently, I handed over the sad little device.

Nathan pulled up my email, the one I had been using strictly for the job hunt. “Every single place, even the ones I helped with, said no?”

“Yup,” I said, making sure to pop the *P*.

He shook his head and frowned. “Impossible. Your resume is impeccable. Someone should have at least been interested in bringing you in for an interview.”

I pulled my pumpkin blanket up to my chin. “You would think. But nope. I stopped reading them all after the fifth or sixth *We regret to inform you but—*”

Nathan held his fingers over the keys and side-eyed me. “So you didn’t read them all the way through?”

“Uh, no? I’d rather not read every detail of why they didn’t want to hire me.”

Nathan scoffed and scrolled through my trash folder. “Sometimes they give constructive criticism that could be helpful, or they’ll recommend that you apply to a different branch. Hold on.” Squinting, he skimmed a handful of emails.

It felt stupid having him comb through rejection after rejection, but I hadn’t cared what he thought of me before, so why would I now? Nathan had seen the worst of the worst of me, including my LED face mask that supposedly attacked aging like nobody’s business, so this was just par for the course.

He paused on one in particular. The one that hurt the most to see. The sports media manager for the Pirates. I hated the team, but the experience I’d get there would be incredible. They sourced out their media team to a third party, so I didn’t feel *that* bad for applying for it.

Nathan’s body tensed up as he read the email.

“I know, I know. That one was harsh. I really hoped that could come together, but I knew the risk going into it.”

“Uh, Calla...” His voice trailed off, and his eyes remained riveted to the screen.

“Let’s move on.” I rolled my eyes and waved a hand.

“Did you read anything more than the first sentence of this email?” he asked, finally tearing his attention away from the screen and scrutinizing me with a frown.

“I mean, no...”

Without replying, he turned the screen toward me.

“What?” I squinted at the small text.

“Read it all!” He practically shoved my laptop into my chest.

“Geez, you sound like my second-grade teacher trying to raise my AR points. Calm down, Tina.”

Mumbling, I read the stupid thing out loud. “We regret to inform you that this position has been filled. This particular job requires a degree in marketing and public relations. However, I looked intensely over your recent work, and I was impressed by your cover letter. There is a position open with another team our organization is affiliated with. The job description is similar, though it would involve more work with the players and less public relations. This particular position would be with the Philadelphia Phillies. If you’re interested in applying, please email me back or call me at—”

I shrieked and turned to Nathan, who was staring at the screen, slack-jawed.

“What do I do?” I asked, but it came out more like *whatdoIdo?*

Nathan stood, his blanket cape draping behind him still. “You have to call her! When did you get the email?”

I frantically scrolled up to the heading of the email. “Ten a.m. Is it too late?” I was already unlocking my phone and clicking on the keypad icon.

Nathan winced. “I don’t know. If I were hiring, I would probably prefer to get an email first. You should tell her you appreciate the response and that you’d like to call at the most appropriate—”

The call connected, and a loud tone rang out.

“It’s ringing.” I pointed out the obvious.

“Calla!” He scolded me like I was a two-year-old and he’d caught me stealing candy from the pantry.

It rang three times before a woman answered. “This is Angela.”

Her voice was so confident, so clear. I liked her already. I could see us getting our nails done with a tiny matching P for Phillies on each of our big toes. We’d post about it on our stories with captions that said *besties for the resties*. Then we’d go meet our hot baseball boyfriends at a trendy place downtown where everyone would ask us what we did for a living.

“Hi, Angela. This is Calla Wells. I applied for the social media manager position for the Pirates?”

Nathan was now standing on the couch, waving wildly as if this train hadn't already left the station.

“Ah, yes.” Angela cleared her throat. “I wasn't sure how you'd feel about the change in positions, especially since the Pirates and the Phillies are rivals—”

“Oh, that's not an issue. I'm a massive fan.” I probably shouldn't have interrupted, but I'd never want to be mistaken for a Pirates fan. Better to clear that up immediately.

Thankfully, she let out a small chuckle. “Great. Could we schedule a time for an interview next Thursday?”

Oh my gosh, *an interview*? She wanted to interview me. Me!

“Let me check my calendar.” I didn't have a calendar. I hadn't had one since high school. I muted the call and turned to Nathan. “Oh my gosh!”

He jumped off the couch and ran around the coffee table, his arms still in the air. It was a spot-on representation of how my brain felt.

I unmuted the call and hummed as though I needed to consider my options. “Ah, yes. Thursday looks free.”

“Wonderful. I'll email the details. We will see you soon.”

“Thank you, Angie!”

Look at me, already tossing out nicknames. She cleared her throat in response. Okay, maybe we weren't there yet.

“Yes, ma'am. Have a good night.”

I waited for her to hang up first so I wouldn't risk missing a last-minute invitation to get late-night burritos. But then my phone beeped, signaling that she'd ended the call.

Throwing the device onto the couch with a little more aggressive excitement than was necessary, I turned to Nathan, who was in this weird star pose with his arms halfway in the air and his legs spread.

“Did I just get an interview?”

“You just got an interview,” he said, still frozen.

“To work...with the Phillies.”

“To work with the Phillies.” He confirmed my suspicions.

In sync, Nathan and I jumped up and down, both shouting some version of “oh my gosh” and “did that really just happen?”

Nathan stopped his fervent jumping and said, “We have to celebrate.”

“Okay.” I stopped jumping too, although my brain was still bouncing off the walls, processing my phone call with my new best friend. “How do we celebrate?”

Nathan rounded the corner to the kitchen without any explanation.

“What are you doing?” I shouted to the wall between us.

“Hold on!” he yelled back.

Moments later, he returned, presenting a familiar brown paper bag with the Liberty Bell logo on it.

I stomped my feet like a child on a sugar-high in the audience at *Disney on Ice*. At the part where Elsa just pops out in skates, with Olaf trailing behind her.

“Why didn’t you bring those in here earlier?”

He laughed. “I got these for our folding party, but this works out even better.”

Without an ounce of shame, I squealed, but cut it off abruptly. “Wait, does this mean we still have to fold laundry?”

Nathan made a point of looking at the multiple piles lying around our living room. “Uh, yeah, we do.”

So that’s how I wound up sitting on the rug, eating a very messy sandwich and watching Nathan fold my T-shirts from high school while a compilation of the best Phillies moments played in the background.

“Are you going to help me?” With a groan, he stretched to throw another shirt in the far right pile—which I’d labeled as not-super-cute-but-I-wouldn’t-be-upset-if-I-ran-into-an-ex-while-wearing-it pile.

“Mmm.” I popped an abandoned grilled onion into my mouth. “I don’t know if I should. You’re doing such a good job all on your own.”

Nathan rolled his eyes and leaned back against the coffee table. “I am not folding your bras and underwear, so you’re gonna have to figure that out for yourself.”

On his other side, black lace and an occasional pair of yellow boy shorts with orange slices on them peeked out from

under other clothes.

I let out an annoyed groan. “Fine, fine. I’m so sorry to gross you out with women’s underwear. Newsflash, though, bud: you’ll have to come across it someday.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “That’s not—I. Just go fold.”

With a snort, I crawled my way over to the underwear pile. I picked up each delicate item and folded them one by one before setting them in their own pile. Nathan relaxed against the table, taking large bites of his sandwich and stuffing his cheeks full.

On the TV, an ad showcasing a hot guy riding a motorcycle flashed across the screen. Wearing all black and a tinted helmet, the fit man zoomed down the road and held up some kind of French cologne—one that I would definitely buy, despite the bottle being slightly phallic-shaped. All because of the gorgeous man. How was it that I found him so attractive, yet I hadn’t gotten a glimpse of his face? Maybe it was the deep curiosity I felt to know what he looked like under there. Either way, I was intrigued.

“I think I have a mask kink,” I said louder than I meant to.

Nathan inhaled sharply and coughed, beating his chest like a silverback gorilla as he struggled to take a breath.

“Oh my gosh. Are you choking?” I foolishly asked, as if the man could answer when his cheeks were flaming and he was coughing violently.

Popping up on my knees, I crawled closer, fully intending to give this man the Heimlich. But he stuck one long finger in the air, signaling that I should stay put. He coughed a few more times and shook his head. Then he cleared his throat and rasped, “Just went down the wrong way.”

I fell back onto my bottom. “Try to be more careful. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

Nathan scoffed, his neck and cheeks still pink from the coughing fit. “I gave *you* a heart attack? You can’t just throw out comments about having a mask kink while I’m mid-bite into a sandwich.”

I raised my hands, my bra still dangling from one. “I was just making an observation. The man on the motorcycle was very hot, but I couldn’t see his face. So it’s safe to say I have a thing for masks. Or maybe men just look better with their faces covered up.”

Nathan’s own face was contorted in a mix of confusion and curiosity, with just a dash of humor and a pinch of disgust.

I shrugged. “Don’t judge me.”

He raised his hands in defense. “I haven’t even said anything.”

“You didn’t have to. Your disappointed dad face is shining bright as day.” I waved a hand in front of his annoyingly gorgeous face.

How did he look this good after a long day? It honestly ticked me off. I had barely moved all day, and yet I looked like

I'd run a marathon that ended with a crowd full of people throwing garbage instead of confetti. Nathan had worked a nine-hour shift and come home looking perfectly put together in his white button-down and his stupid-hot fancy pants. The urge to find his mother's home address and write her a handwritten thank-you note was almost too strong to ignore. I'd use washi tape and cute stickers to show my gratitude for being blessed with such beauty. Which reminded me that I didn't really know anything about Nathan's mom. Actually, I hardly knew anything at all about the man.

It was a strange thought. I considered Nathan a good friend, and yet I didn't even know where he'd grown up. What were his childhood dreams? Did he have a dog when he was a kid? Had he ever kayaked? These were things I should have already known about him. The man had already seen my bras. I should at least know his go-to order at Chick-Fil-A.

"Where's your mom?" I blurted before I could stop myself. Normally, I'd aim for a little more tact. But then again, I hadn't been subtle yet, so why force it?

Nathan puffed a small laugh. "Right this minute?" He glanced at the time on his phone. "She's probably arguing with a grocery store owner about how her coupons that expired three months ago should still be valid. That or playing pickleball with my dad and their friends."

I nodded. "I think I'd like to meet the woman who made you."

Nathan laughed, his shoulders bouncing and his eyes crinkling. “You’re something else, BG.”

I sat up straighter. “I’m serious! I need to know these things. Go draw me a map of your childhood home so I can imagine six-year-old Nathan running around.”

“Why are you so curious all of a sudden?”

“It’s not all of a sudden. I just was too distracted”—by your dumb hot face—“to ask.”

Nathan eyed the two piles of unfolded laundry left. “All right. An item of clothing for a question. We each get to ask whatever we want. No holding back.”

I nodded and smiled, locking eyes with him. “Deal.”

Laundry was about to become my new favorite pastime.

He moved first, grabbing a shirt with *Romance isn’t dead* inscribed on the front pocket. “What’s your favorite color?”

I cupped both hands around my mouth. “Boo! That was terrible. I’m talking real questions, Nate. Dig deep here.”

“All right, all right.” He was already tucking the sleeves back in the fold of the shirt, pressing out creases. “Who was your first crush?”

Now we’re talking. “Celebrity or real?”

“Hmm, both.”

I sighed dreamily. “Ashton Kutcher and Tyler Smith.”

Nathan smirked at me. “Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“I used to watch *That '70s Show* after my parents went to bed. He was the driving force behind my sexual awakening. Oh, and Tyler’s mom always gave out full-size candy bars at Halloween. And he used to leave me little notes in my backpack about how he liked my hair or my outfit.”

“Ooh.” Nathan laughed and set the shirt aside. “Tyler had moves, then.”

I nodded. “Oh yeah. It totally worked on me.”

I picked up the next item of clothing and began folding. “Where did you grow up?”

“New Hope. I stayed there till college. Went to Penn State and then moved here shortly after. I visit my parents a lot in the summer since they still live in the house I grew up in.”

I couldn’t help but smile to myself as we continued asking questions. With each discovery, I liked him more. He’d gotten involved in music because his mom knew he needed something to do with his hands. I told him how I wanted to be a vet until I found out I’d have to see blood and gross stuff.

Soon enough, we ran out of laundry. My clothes were folded and stacked on the far side of the couch, but we were lying flat on our backs on the rug, staring up at the spinning ceiling fan above us.

“Favorite movie in high school?” he asked softly as he shifted his head a little closer to mine.

“Hmm, probably *50 First Dates*.”

Nathan puffed out a laugh through his nose, amused at my answer. “What’s your favorite thing about romance books and movies?”

“Oh, so, so many things. The chemistry, the light touches here and there. Wondering when they’ll finally get together. Watching their first kiss and getting all the butterflies, as if it was my own.” I could’ve rattled off more reasons for days. They were like lyrics I’d memorized from all my favorite songs.

I dropped my head to the side and came face to face with Nathan. We were closer than I’d realized. From here, I could make out every detail of his dark green irises, but the rest of his features were blurry. When his eyes dipped to my mouth and darted back up, I instinctively licked my lips.

Without breaking eye contact, I continued. “The way the characters fit together so perfectly, even if they don’t see it right away.”

He had never looked so serious before. His brows were tucked low and his teeth were pressed into his full bottom lip. My eyes trailed down to his mouth and back up. My own mouth began to water, and tingles danced across my palms. He was so close I was surrounded by his scent. A mix of his laundry detergent and a spicy citrus cologne I’d caught sight of in his bathroom the other day. I wanted to steal that bottle for myself. Screw the French guy on the motorcycle. Nathan needed his own fragrance commercial ASAP.

Great job, Calla. You finally have a stable home, and now you have the hots for the guy who's letting you stay for practically nothing.

I had absolutely no business thinking of what kissing Nathan would be like or wondering what kind of noises he would make if I tackled him to the ground right now like a deprived lioness.

We had a good thing going on. Philly cheesesteak sandwiches, watching baseball, piano lessons, joking about our connected family and friends. Shaking the foundation we'd built would only complicate things. And for what? The chance at a relationship that would likely be temporary? I didn't need temporary. I needed stability. Friendship with Nathan, and nothing more, would provide that stability.

I cleared my throat and turned my head so I was looking at the ceiling again.

"So, uh, what's your favorite part about teaching music lessons?" I continued our game as though I hadn't just been counting the freckles across the bridge of his nose. They were so tiny they could only be seen up close.

Miraculously, he didn't call me out on my obvious staring. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see him staring at the fan as well.

"The breakthrough. Watching how their skills develop from almost nonexistent to incredible in just a few weeks. These kids have no idea how bright their futures are. Knowing I can show them just a piece of that? I dunno. It's just really cool."

This was *not* tempering my attraction. Listening to Nathan talk about being so gentle and encouraging with a group of children was the strongest aphrodisiac I'd ever experienced. And suddenly, the living room was very, very hot.

Dazed, I muttered, "That's really sweet."

In my periphery, he shrugged, as if it really was nothing. Then, groaning like an old man, he sat up. "Speaking of—you need to practice some more too."

"Do we have to?" I huffed.

Last time, it took two hours to get six simple notes down. By the end, even Nathan was ready to fire me as a student.

"Yup. Can't break through the wall if you never try." He held out a hand to help pull me up.

Even though I longed to feel that spark of electricity that shot through me every time we touched, I didn't reach for it. I wanted to lie on this floor with him all night.

I let out a moan that was the equivalent of a toddler crying face down on the floor because her mom wouldn't let her listen to "Baby Shark" one hundred times in a row.

Nathan laughed, the deep rumble striking me right in the chest. "I promise not to push you so hard tonight. Just give it one more shot."

Quirking my lips in acquiescence, I held my arm up. He grasped my hand, his palm grazing mine, and those delicious sparks danced between us. Then Nathan pulled me up more

forcefully than I expected, and I slammed into him, my chest pressed tight against his.

Then, as if the occurrence hadn't affected the man *at all*, he turned on his heel and strode to the music room. "Let's do it."

Conviction hit me heavily as I pictured exactly what *it* would be like with Nathan.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Nathan



Age 25:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

Did you know that alligators can't stick their tongues out? Not sure why, but I thought you'd like to know that.

I need your help. I've got a date tonight. Shocking, I know. Should I wear loafers or dress shoes?

And before you ask, I'm not sending feet pics, you perv. You just have to imagine it.

*We're not going anywhere super fancy, but this girl seems more...high class than I'm used to, and I REFUSE to ask my best friend again. Last time, he said I looked like I belonged on *The Widgles*—he meant *Wiggles*.*

I need an answer in the next .2 seconds, so hurry it up.

Pls say dress shoes, 'cause I already have them on.

Shiny

There are very, very few things I hate more than getting ready for a date. I mean it when I say I would rather stick my pinkie toe in lava than spend an hour in front of a mirror trying to figure out which tie matches my eyes better.

And in the hours leading up to the date, I'd have this urge to pee like all the time. Was that what butterflies felt like? Or maybe I needed to see a doctor. Either way, I was so unbelievably uncomfortable. I hadn't even left my room, and I was already over tonight.

The girl herself didn't make me nervous. She was nice enough, but I didn't like her in that way. I was just sick of the dating game in general. Sick of going out to dinner and making the same small talk, desperate for some kind of spark. Some kind of chemistry to magically appear when it was never there in the first place.

Sarah was easy on the eyes and always put together. She had a kind soul and a cute kid. That should have been enough. But no, my big, dumb heart was chasing the adrenaline that only one girl sent coursing through me. The girl who had the power to break the best, most meaningful friendship I'd ever had.

Once again, I reminded myself that it wasn't possible. It never would be. If I could drill that into my thick skull, then maybe my heart would believe it too.

I sighed, combing my hair and looking over my outfit one more time. Black pants that I wore to work on the regular, a light brown button-up, sans tie, with the top two buttons undone, and shoes that matched well enough for me to stop overthinking.

Calla was moving around in the kitchen, probably grabbing a bowl for cereal, humming, and bouncing around on her tiptoes in her giant pajamas with a soft blanket draped over her shoulders. The vision was crystal clear in my mind, and it made me want to stay home so, so badly. I wanted to snuggle on the couch with her and watch baseball highlights. Or maybe rewatch the latest episode of *The Bachelorette* while Calla held a giant popcorn bowl and we took turns tossing pieces into each other's mouths.

Instead, I was preparing to drive in the rain to a fancy restaurant with very tiny courses and equally fancy wine that would be wasted on my immature palate. Only Philly cheesesteak sandwiches had sounded appealing to me lately.

Sounds of cheering fans from the TV filtered to me as I opened my bedroom door. In the living room, Calla sat exactly as I envisioned her, bundled up, bowl of cereal in her lap despite it being six thirty in the evening. Her hair was curled perfectly, framing her face in a way that made me want to run my hands through it. It was in direct contrast to her thick gray sweatpants and...was that my shirt? I tilted my head for a better look. Sure enough, I recognized that worn-out right sleeve. That sneaky little rat had stolen my old college T-shirt.

I couldn't even be mad, though, because she looked way better in it than I ever had.

As soon as I turned the corner, she popped up, and a wide grin spread across her face.

She let out a low whistle. "Well, look at you. Mr. Fancy pants over there."

With my arms stretched wide, I did a little spin, showing off how great my butt looked in these pants. Calla laughed, her reaction immediately making me feel better about this whole dating thing.

"Are you going to work? It's kind of late, isn't it?" She looked down at the time on her phone. "Oh, is that ratty HR lady making you come in? What's her name? Janet? I could call in sick for you if you need me to."

Why did the idea of telling her I had a date make my stomach ache? I didn't owe her an explanation, but I felt this strong urge to burst out a big apology to Calla and cancel on Sarah. I was a single guy in my midtwenties. I'd have to go out eventually. And she would eventually find someone too. Although the thought made me want to take a few antacids. Regardless of my indigestion, neither of us could be expected to stay this way forever.

"Uh, no. Actually, I have a date." The word *date* came out all high-pitched and squeaky.

Calla's bright smile dimmed slightly, and for a second, I wondered if she felt the same disappointment I did, but then it

picked right back up, and it was even brighter than before, though it didn't reach her eyes the way the last one had.

When did it get so hot in here? I tugged at my collar.

“Oh.” Her nod was succinct. “Well, good luck. I can leave for the night if you need me to...” Her voice was shy and so un-Calla-like that my stomachache turned into full-on roiling.

Why would I need her to leave? We're going to a rest—*Oh*.

“No!” I practically shouted before clearing my throat. “No, that won't be necessary.”

She relaxed back into the couch and pointed the remote at her head, turning the volume of the TV back up. “Hope you have fun. I'll be here when you get back.” She gave me a soft, closed lip smile, though she didn't meet my eye.

Would it be rude to cancel at the last minute? *Sorry, Sarah. There's a wild dog on the loose in my apartment. He stole my keys and is now wreaking havoc on all of Philadelphia. See you and Christian at lessons next week?*

Okay, yeah, definitely rude. But the thought of leaving Calla when she was all snuggled up and practically begging for me to cuddle next to her while she gave me more in-depth details about the background of each of her favorite players? Yeah, that killed me. I was a desperate man here, pulled between the door and the couch.

She said she'd be here when I got back. If I powered through this date, then I could come home to her, and it would

all be fine. It would all be fine. Maybe if I said it enough, it would be true.

“All right.” I dug both hands into my pockets. “I’ll see you later.”

Calla turned her attention to the TV screen and responded with a casual. “See ya.”

Why did I have a feeling I would deeply regret this choice?

“And then Missy said that her daughter’s toe touches were way more on point than Lauren’s. I mean, seriously, it was ridiculous.”

This whole date was ridiculous.

Any green flags I’d gotten from Sarah previously were wiped away in a solid ten-minute conversation about some high school cheerleading competition drama that her coworkers had gotten her sucked into. It started with a simple “How was your day?” from me and quickly moved through a “Oh, my coworkers are so crazy” to “Watch Paisley’s toe touches and tell me they weren’t the weakest you’ve ever seen.”

I hadn’t watched a toe touch since I’d last attended a college football game a couple of years ago. And even then, I wasn’t exactly worried about that. Now, all of that being said, Paisley’s toes definitely weren’t pointed.

“Yeah, that’s crazy.” What was really crazy was that I had made it this far truly listening to every word out of Sarah’s

mouth. It was my best and worst quality: the undeniable need to make people feel heard.

She had moved on to critiquing the flier of the group but stopped mid-sentence and cringed. “Sorry, this probably isn’t what you want to listen to.”

“No, no. This is fine.” I shook my head and gave her a reassuring smile.

And honestly, this date *was* fine. The food was pretty good, and the atmosphere was nice. I didn’t care much for cheerleading talk, but then again, it wasn’t guinea pig talk. Hallelujah. After my date with Katie in Ocean City, my perspective on bad dinner conversations had drastically changed.

But maybe this date was all too fine. Adequate, tolerable, good enough, acceptable, or any other synonym listed under the word *fine* in the thesaurus. And I had no one to blame but myself. And Calla.

I came in here telling myself that if sparks ignited, then I could officially let Calla go in my head and my heart. Even though, deep down, I didn’t want sparks to fly. Somewhere inside me, I wanted the excitement that came from just a brush of her hand, or the goose bumps that erupted when I watched her put her hair up in a high ponytail. I wanted Calla so badly it gave me indigestion. That, or maybe it was the lobster.

Sarah turned the conversation to her son’s grades and PTO meeting drama, and that’s when I tuned out. I wondered what Calla was doing back at the apartment. Was she feeling

lonely? Should I text her? Was she asleep on the couch? Last time she did that, her neck bothered her the next day. Should I call her and wake her up?

I imagined her rolling her head, massaging her neck muscles with one hand and wincing from the pain. My teeth pressed into my lip at the image. I wanted to roll out her muscles and help her relax. I wanted to wrap her up in a blanket and make her a cup of coffee and set a succulent next to her and put on Pixar movies like my mom used to do for me.

“I’m losing you, aren’t I?”

I straightened in my seat and tore my eyes away from the barely touched lobster in front of me. “I’m sorry. I swear I’m listening.”

And I had been. Until my mind drifted to Calla.

“You seem...distracted.”

Distracted was the friendliest way to say I had been incredibly rude and selfish all night. And I could feel it too, in the way my mind would slip into fantasies of Calla and me cuddled up on the couch. Or at a Phillies game, where I could proudly walk around with my arm around her. It was so easy to picture, and the thoughts alone would have had my heart racing faster than any time Sarah had made googly eyes at me or subtly pushed her breasts toward my face.

“I’m sorry.” I’d apologized at least five times in the last twenty minutes. “It’s been a crazy day.”

Which wasn't totally a lie. Janise worked me like a gerbil on a wheel, and she wasn't even my boss. I fully intended to tell her this at some point, but it wouldn't be today...or anytime soon. Not while she had that whole *I'll push you down a manhole and pretend it was an accident* vibegoing on.

Sarah tilted her head and smiled. "Who is she?"

Now that caught my attention. "I—uh, who is who?"

"The girl you're thinking about." She took a sip of wine and smirked like she could see every thought dancing through my mind. How did women do that so well? Could Calla do it? If so, she'd seen *way* too much.

I cleared my throat and went with "well, you know," but it came out more as "*wellshoetoe*."

She laughed a sweet and endearing laugh. "Is it the girl who took pictures at lessons? Her brother owns that bar, right?"

"Right."

"Ahh." She leaned back into her chair and gave me this Cheshire cat smile.

"No, I meant *right*. As in that is her brother," I stuttered, knowing I was already too far gone.

"What do you like about her?" Sarah asked.

I blew out a breath, hesitating. I did *not* want to be that guy. The one talking about other women on a first date, no matter how far south this night had already gone.

Then, as if she saw those thoughts floating through my mind too, she cut in. “I already know, so you might as well humor me and tell me about the situation.”

I sighed. “Well, she’s...I don’t know. She’s bold. She says just about everything she’s thinking. And she smiles so big. Like she walks around waiting for the opportunity to flash it at people so she can make them smile too. Plus I’ve seen her dressed to nines and looking entirely homeless, and I would take her either way.” I ran a hand down my face. “Good lord. And she loves all the same things I do. We can talk for hours and hours and never get bored. At least *I* never get bored. And sometimes she does this thing with her hair—” I lifted my hand to mimic it, but when I caught the attention of the woman at the next table, I realized how obnoxious I was being and dropped my hands to my lap.

Sarah laughed. “Fascinating. Why are you sitting here with me, then?”

I gave her a sheepish smile, figuring honesty was the best way to go here. “Because I have no idea how to say no to people, and I was hoping this would help take my mind off her.”

“And did it?” she asked, though she already knew the answer.

There was no point in denying it. “Unfortunately, no. You’ve been great. It’s just a me thing.”

“Ah. Sounds like all my exes.” She smirked.

I cringed. I really was the worst. “I’m sorry. Let’s go back to dinner.”

“Yeah. If you want to go, it’s okay, but I’m eating the rest of my food.”

I laughed. “I’ll stay.” Picking up a piece of lobster with my tiny fork, I leaned forward. “So, tell me about Paisley’s herkie.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Calla



Age 15:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Hey, Shine,

I hope you had a good weekend!! I'm excited to hear about how your piano recital went. I hope you got a video without your face in it so I can hear.

Anyway, let me tell you what happened on Saturday since I'm way too embarrassed to tell anyone else. I had my first kiss. It. Was. Awful.

I always thought my first kiss would be romantic; flowers, chocolate, twinkly lights, maybe in the rain. I've never cared all that much about the details, but a little effort would have been nice. Instead, my first kiss was awkward and sloppy in the back of his mom's Camry while she was inside Wendy's, complaining to the manager because her fries were cold. He

didn't even warm me up to it. He just threw his lips on me like I was his life support—and not in a good way.

So that sucked. And he didn't even walk me to my door or anything.

Shiny, please do me a favor. Promise that if you're ever a girl's first kiss, you'll put effort into it. And pay attention to the atmosphere. The back of your mom's car in a Wendy's parking lot is not the right place to do it.

One day, I want a kiss so good it wipes away this one. I want a kiss that feels like it's my first.

Much love,

Lily

P.S. My rash went away, so no need to be worried about that anymore.

Nathan and I had developed a routine of sorts.

It went a little something like this:

Monday: We both worked. Then we'd hang out at Romfuzzled and watch Layla torture Luke. Sometimes Crew danced on the bar. When we got home, we'd watch *The Bachelorette*.

Tuesday: After work, Nathan taught lessons. I tagged along so we could stop to get greasy fast food on the way home.

Wednesday: Folding party and piano lesson for me. Then we'd listen to various playlists from Rachel's famous Spotify account.

Thursday: Nathan worked out when he got home. I walked in on it one time. Yowza. Romfuzzled for trivia night after.

Friday: We'd order pizza, argue about whether we should watch Pixar—my personal fave being *Monsters, Inc.*, but Nathan had a weird obsession over Tow Mater—or the Phillies highlights. End up watching both.

We'd grown comfortable and had come to know each other so well that our movements throughout the apartment were practically synchronized. We rarely had to discuss what we were doing next. He'd leave coffee grounds out for my plants. I'd leave sticky notes in his work bag or his lunch box, sometimes with little doodles. He'd try to recreate them on his own sticky note at work, then text pictures of our drawings side by side.

It was perfect.

But today was entirely out of the routine. My job interview was scheduled for Tuesday, and in preemptive celebration, and/or pity, depending on how it went, I bought tickets to the Phillies game. It had been too long since I'd been, and I was desperate to watch Nathan yell at the ref in person like he did at home. His jaw would tighten, and his neck would get all thick and red and veiny. The sight totally revved my engine up.

“Come on, princess. Bryce Harper isn’t gonna care if you wear the blue shirt or the red one,” I yelled from the couch.

Nathan had been in his room getting ready for approximately ten years. He said, and I quote, “I need to look my best in case I meet someone.” I responded with “Do you mean one of the players?” to which he said, “Possibly.”

So that was where we were with that.

“I can’t find my gray tennis shoes!” he shouted back with the sass of a twelve-year-old girl at Starbucks holding up a secret recipe she found on TikTok.

“They’re on the left side of your bed.”

An adorable *oh* was his response.

Hopping into the living room on his right foot, Nathan crammed his left foot into a shoe. “How did you know that?”

I shrugged. “Went snooping the other day.”

He snorted. “Find anything interesting?”

I stood up and stretched. “Just your Speedo. Can’t wait for you to bring that bad boy out this summer.”

He double knotted his shoe and looked up at me. “Really?”

“No.” I grinned. “But it’s good to know you have one. I’ll keep that for a rainy day. Now let’s go.” I jerked my head toward the door.

The seats I ordered at Citizens Bank Park—*very* last-minute—were, well, garbage. But Nathan didn’t blink twice. Nope.

He happily sat in one of our assigned seats behind two human giraffes who blocked the entire view.

“Calla, sit down. We can watch the screens.”

Crossing my arms, I huffed. “We might as well have watched it from home, then.”

I turned my head, searching the crowd until I spotted a buff security guard a few rows down. He was wearing dark sunglasses and a hat low on his brow. For a moment, he broke character, smiling sweetly at an older couple as he directed them to their seats. Once their backs were turned, he shifted right back to his stone-cold, serious demeanor. *Perfect.*

I grabbed Nathan’s hand and yanked. “Come on. Let’s go.”

Mouth ajar, he looked up at our joined hands and back up to me. “Go where?”

I pointed to the security guard below us, and before I could even explain, Nathan was violently shaking his head. “No, no, no, no, no.”

I tugged on his hands again, trying to ignore how good it felt to tangle my fingers with his. “I need to ask him a question.”

With a groan, Nathan gave up and followed me as I bounced down the concrete steps, passing through the waves of people decked out in red and white. Mr. Scowly-face stood still like he was a guard of Buckingham Palace, arms crossed and bulging tattooed biceps peeking out, as if to say *try me*.

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Nathan whispered in my ear. But he was trailing behind me, his hand still locked with mine.

“Hi!” I bounced on my toes to meet the guard’s eye.

He lowered his head enough to peer over his sunglasses. “Hello.” His tone was all rumbly and probably should’ve been scary enough for us to turn right back around. Instead, I zeroed in on the small tattoo of a wolf on his hairy forearm.

“I love your tattoos. Is that a wolf?” I raised my finger to the ink.

He glanced down at his arm like he needed a reminder and then lifted his sunglasses. He had a slight tan line where they sat, as if they were practically glued to his face. “Yeah, it is.”

“Don’t wolf tattoos stand for strength? You seem like the kind of guy to have a strength tattoo.” I hyped up his ego, possibly batting my eyelashes a little.

Behind me, Nathan muttered, “Oh brother,” but I ignored him.

The security guard lightened up, raising his brows and giving me a half grin. “It *is* for strength, actually.”

I nodded and smiled up at him. *Perfect*. “I knew it. They did a great job. Love the shading.” I was practically kissing the guy’s hand like an overexcited puppy.

“Thank you.” He looked at Nathan, who was hovering behind me, and then back at me. “Was there something I could help you with?”

I perked up, pulling my shoulders back and biting my lower lip. “Actually, yes. My friend and I”—I grasped Nathan’s forearm and forced him to take a step up since he was a flight risk—“were looking to scoot a few rows down since our seats don’t really allow for a view of the field. And we spent so long getting here and settling down, I promise we won’t be in the way.”

Scowly-face pulled his sunglasses right back down and flashed me his pearly whites. “Absolutely, ma’am. If someone shows up and says the seats are theirs, just move over a bit, okay? If you need anything, my name is Tony.”

I placed a grateful hand over my heart. “Ugh, you are an angel, Tony. We appreciate you so much!”

Nathan wrapped his hand around mine again, and we jogged down the stairs to a mostly open section where the seats were far more expensive. I settled in a seat that was almost directly behind the Phillies dugout.

For a moment, Nathan just stood in front of the seat beside me and inspected it. But finally, he plopped down next to me. He was silent for a second and then turned to me. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?” I shrugged and pulled down the armrest to my right.

“Make everyone fall in love with you.” His voice was full of awe. Like Luke’s was the time he forced us all to go see *The Phantom Menace* in theaters with him.

I scoffed. “It doesn’t work with everyone. It took you a while to warm up to me, didn’t it?”

It was an offhanded comment, but it was true. Nathan hadn’t come to like me till a few days after I had moved in with him. Before then, each of our interactions was a train wreck. Awkward exchanges, strange, prolonged eye contact, and let’s not forget the time at the Romfuzzled opening when I straight up told him he looked homeless. To be fair, he did look rough.

Nathan turned and scrutinized me, his brow furrowed and his eyes serious. “Trust me, it didn’t.” He didn’t look away then. As he continued studying me, I swore his pupils dilated. Behind those eyes lay the most loyal and kind man who was always true to his word.

The way he watched me sent my heart racing and made my palms clammy. What would it be like to have this kind of undivided attention from him always?

He was the definition of a people pleaser, until it came time to defend his friends. Then he was there, ready to fight to the death over one sassy comment. For years, he’d stood by Luke, and Layla too, when we were all working our hardest to bring the two of them together. He was slow to anger when all odds were against him, but if one of the people he loved was pushed, he became a force to be reckoned with.

That loyalty was there now, mixed with this...admiration? He was hard to read sometimes. Flirty one minute and pulling back the next. I straight-up wanted to ask him, *is there*

something here between us? It felt like something, all right. And I wanted to grab on to it so we could see where it took us.

But Nathan was like a skittish cat. He had to be the one to approach. Every time I'd attempted to pull the truth out of him, he had freaked out and run. Or if I ramped up my flirting, just to see his reactions, the cogs in his brain would work so hard to move, but it was like one of them was stuck, shutting down the whole operation. Maybe later, though, after he'd watched the game and eaten some solid hot dogs, and possibly had a couple beers, I would see what he was thinking.

But for now, I just smiled at him and shoved those emotions aside. "Well, that's good to know."

Nathan smiled back, but it wasn't the kind that made his eyes light up. Like he was holding himself back too.

Our friendship had become more important to me than I could have imagined. Our routines were perfectly aligned, and we were always so open with each other. Heck, I'd told the man that I had a mask kink without a second thought. Because I trust him, and because I knew if my words were going to Nathan, then they weren't going anywhere else. The man was a vault. One that held secrets and love for those around him. Now if I could just take a hammer to that vault and see every thought that was running through it.

"Excuse me."

Two older ladies stood beside me, decked out in matching red jerseys and shorts that didn't conceal much, especially considering their age. The woman holding a walker with

tennis balls on the bottom of them had several tattoos on both hands. The other was loaded down with gold jewelry and wore designer sunglasses that probably cost more than my monthly car payment. Talk about Layla and me in fifty years.

“We just need to squeeze by you.” The one without the cane pointed at the seats next to Nathan on my left.

I pulled my legs in as far as they could go and smiled up at them. “Yes, ma’am. Come on in.”

Nathan stood and leaned against his chair, taking off his white Phillies hat and holding out a spare hand to help them through.

“Oh my. What a gentleman.” The one with the cane and tattoos held a hand to her chest. “Paula, look at this sweet young man.” She fluttered her lashes in an exaggerated manner, making Nathan’s cheeks turn pink.

I couldn’t help but giggle into my hand.

Paula replied with a mocking but firm tone. “Edith, you had varicose vein surgery last week, and you’re hitting on a man in his twenties? Pull it together.”

Edith, who I was ready to claim as my new best friend for life, nudged Nathan. “Just ’cause I got both hips replaced doesn’t mean I can’t shake ’em, honey.”

“Oh, great heavens!” Paula shook her head. “Sit down before you make the man uncomfortable.”

Too late. Nathan was laughing his nervous laugh, and his face was flaming. “It’s fine,” he said like the sweet gentleman

he was.

And I was absolutely dying to poke his nerves about it.

Once the elderly women got seated, Paula being sure to sit between Edith and Nathan, he turned to me, mouthing, “*Oh my gosh.*”

I pressed my lips between my teeth and mouthed, “*I know*” in response.

He leaned toward my seat a smidge so our shoulders brushed. An announcer came over the speakers as the players were practicing pitches on the field, and I took the opportunity to whisper, “I can Uber home if you want to take Edith out for a wild night.”

He laughed, the red on his face fading. “Like take her to bingo and then out for gluten-free pastries after?”

I shrugged. “Hey, whatever makes you happy, fella.”

Thirty minutes into the game, the Phillies were already running circles around the away team, and Nathan was headed to buy hot dogs and drinks. I may have hinted that if he came back with a cookie for me, I wouldn’t complain.

“Is he your honey?” Paula turned to me, her cloudy eyes full of curiosity.

I waved a hand. “Oh, no. Just friends.”

Edith scoffed and leaned forward so she could see around her friend. “I would’ve been on that in a heartbeat. That young

man is the whole package. I mean, I hate to see him go, but oh, it is nice to watch him leave.”

Paula grimaced. “You can’t even get in a canoe, much less deal with a man that young.”

Turning back to the game, Edith nodded fiercely. “I would figure it out.”

I held in my laughter, but it was a struggle. “I hate to disappoint, but we really are just friends.”

Paula shook her head this time. “I’m sure you are.”

Between the eighth and ninth innings, the teams’ mascots chased each other around the field. I couldn’t help but laugh when one of them took popcorn from a vendor and threw it at the other.

“Hey, look. It’s your boyfriend.” Nathan pointed at the field below.

I scanned the open space for Bryce Harper, because, duh, and only found our fluffy green mascot twerking on second base.

Nathan grabbed my hand and pointed it toward the Phillies mascot. “I thought you were into masks,” he said, his tone full of faux innocence.

I threw my head back and guffawed. “You are the worst.” I shoved a hand in his ribs, and I couldn’t help but notice how tight his abs felt.

With a howl of laughter, he said, “I’m just looking out for you, BG. Gotta play my part as wingman.” He leaned back into his chair, still crowding my space to avoid brushing up against Paula.

“Oh yeah? You’re my wingman now?”

He draped his arm along the back of my chair, which I guess technically didn’t count as putting his arm around me. But the way it brought our faces close, and the scent of his cologne as it wafted toward me, sure made it feel like he was making a move.

“I’ve been your wingman since day one. I’ve just been keeping it all to myself.”

“Is that right?” I laughed.

Nathan nodded, a cocky smirk on his lips. “Yup. Just wait till you see who I set you up on a blind date with. I’ll give you a couple of hints. He’s big, yellow, and possibly resembles a bird.”

I had my head thrown back in laughter, ready to make a comeback about how Big Bird wasn’t my type, when a spectator sitting behind me tapped my shoulder. I twisted in my seat, finding a middle-aged man and his wife. They were smiling at Nathan and me and pointing at the large screen in front of us.

There, in high definition, Nathan and I sat. His arm was still draped along the back of my seat, and there was a big, fat pink border around us covered in hearts that said *Kiss Cam*.

My smile couldn't be contained. It was kind of adorable how everyone was watching us excitedly. Edith's comment floated through my mind. She was right. Nathan was the full package, and the kiss cam might be the perfect excuse to test the chemistry we shared. Except...

Nathan caught on to what was happening and shook his head violently, dragging a hand over his throat. "No, no, no, no, no."

Shocked, I sucked in a breath. On the screen above us, my jaw was hanging open. "Come on. It's just one kiss."

It wasn't like I had to climb him like a spider monkey. Although I wouldn't have objected if asked.

"It's not—I just." He groaned in frustration and threw his arms up before letting them drop to his lap. "It would be like kissing Luke."

I recoiled like he had physically hurt me. Because it honestly did hurt. My heart lurched. *Like kissing Luke?* Had I been imagining our connection? I was having fun, and I swore I'd caught him watching me with this soft look from time to time. He even admitted over text that he'd almost kissed me weeks ago. Dipping my chin, I considered just walking away, but my mind raced back to moments ago. No...no. He definitely didn't think kissing me would be like kissing my brother.

Judging by how close he'd been, how he'd so easily wrapped his arm around my chair and moved in so his breath tickled my neck? No way.

More images floated to the surface. His fingers brushing through my hair the other night. Conversations about things he'd never told another soul.

Nathan, still staring at me with such conflict in his eyes, glanced down at my lips. He was holding back, but I knew Nathan well enough to know he didn't really believe this would be like kissing his best friend.

I brought my hands to either side of his face, soaking in the feel of the sharp stubble on his jaw. I gave him a moment to protest, and when he didn't, I pulled his face to mine and sealed our lips in a kiss.

He opened up, immediately leaning into me with a sigh. The kiss tasted like a delicious cocktail of the beer he'd been drinking and my cherry ChapStick. I wanted more, needed more. I wanted to leave this stadium immediately and pull him into the nearest utility closet.

But just as I was settling into the kiss, ready to open my mouth for him, Nathan yanked away, avoiding eye contact.

With a shrug, I leaned back and took a sip of my water, trying to calm my racing heart. All while pretending that reaction didn't feel like a knife to the chest.

Around us, the crowd cheered, but the sound barely registered. Because in that moment, I realized I'd just kissed my roommate. And he looked pissed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Nathan



Age 16:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hey Lil,

I'm really, really sorry about that.

If it makes you feel better, my first kiss was super awkward and uncomfortable. It was after a soccer game (in which I only played for about five minutes). One of the sophomore girls said she liked my hair, then followed me to my car, where I basically shoved her against the hood and stuck my tongue down her throat. She said she liked it, but it was definitely weird, and I'm sure it was obvious I had never done that before. I haven't spoken to her since. Kinda sucked. If I ever get the chance to be a girl's first kiss again, though chances are slim, I'll be sure to make it special.

And I hope one day you find a guy who wipes away every bad kiss you'll ever have (hate to say this probably won't be

the only one).

Also, I'm glad your rash is gone. Was definitely up the last three nights worried about it...

Love ya,

Shiny

P.S. Did you ever finish watching Master Chef? I need you to catch up so we can discuss Gordon's last rampage.

“Will you slow down a minute?”

I was furious. Livid. With myself and with Calla.

Without responding, I kept my stride all the way up to the apartment. If I didn't hold tightly to this control, I'd say things I didn't want to tell her just yet. Things like *this didn't go the way I imagined it would and I needed to sort through you in my head before kissing you*. Instead, Calla, hyped up by a crowd and a giant screen with our faces on it surrounded by hearts, had ruined it. Did I want to kiss her? Absolutely. Did I want to wrap my arms around her and pull her to me and murmur words about how beautiful and funny she was against the skin behind her earlobe? Without a doubt.

But I had a system for these things. And I needed to talk to Luke before laying a hand on her. Some may consider the bro code to be a casual list of suggestions. But not me. The bro code is the eleventh commandment. Thou shall not touch one's best friend's sister without permission.

It was old-fashioned, sure. Calla would call me out on it if she knew I upheld such a traditional value. Yes, she could make her own decisions without Luke's permission. But *I* needed to respect him. And nothing says disrespect like a carnal urge to stick my tongue down his little sister's throat.

In other news, when Calla did kiss me, I barely kissed her back. I leaned in, and then froze, still as a statue. I had moves. I was no saint. And yet the second she went for it, I was fifteen again, in a movie theater with my first girlfriend. I clammed up, and now there was no way she didn't think I was a horrible kisser.

And what did it say about me that a small peck for a kiss cam was about the most erotic thing I'd ever experienced?

Calla followed me, her shoes clomping against the tile of the hallway between the elevator and our door. "What's the matter with you? You're acting so weird, and I'm sick of it." She was talking so loud our neighbors were sure to hear.

"Nothing. I'm just tired." The words were sharper than I intended, and my voice was practically unrecognizable.

I unlocked our door and opened it for Calla, because even though I was irritated, I still had manners.

She scoffed as she passed me and threw her purse on the counter. "I have seen tired Nathan, and he doesn't treat me like this."

"Like what?" I asked, my throat all sore and raspy from holding back for the last hour.

“Like you’re...I don’t know. Like you can’t even look at me. I had a really good time today, and I guess I thought you did too.” She took a deep breath and sighed. “Look, I’m sorry I kissed you. I didn’t think it would upset you that much. Honestly, I thought you’d like it and—”

“Please stop talking.” Tugging at my hair, I dropped my chin and studied the floor. This was so, so bad.

Calla backed away and scoffed, shaking her head with an insincere smile. “You know what? I’m done. I’m gonna go to bed.” She spun on her heel toward her room directly across from mine.

My brain went into panic mode, a million synapses firing to form one thought: stop her.

My shoes squeaked against the hardwood floor as I strode after her. She pushed the door open, but before she could cross the threshold, I snagged her wrist and spun her around. With that hand pulled into my chest, I raised my other arm and propped it against the doorframe above her.

Calla tipped her head back, her eyes wide. Dipping low, I brought my lips to that sliver of skin behind her ear where her hair laid perfectly and practically growled.

“Our first kiss wasn’t supposed to be like that.”

She gasped when I dropped my hands to her waist and pulled her closer. The tips of our noses brushed, and I bit my lips in restraint, searching her eyes for an answer. For a green light. *Give me something, Calla. Anything.*

When her eyelids drooped and she leaned into my hold, her chest brushing against mine, I took it as a sign. *Go ahead.*

I pressed my mouth to hers instantly. There were no careful, light touches this time. I wanted the side of Calla that was bold and entirely unapologetic. My lips tangled with hers, and I slid my tongue out for a taste of her absolute perfection. Like the first bite of watermelon in the summer, she was fresh and so unbelievably sweet. I savored every taste, every movement, every precious gasp she made when my fingers lightly grazed over her.

I explored her body with my hands, grabbing at her hips, brushing along her ribs, all the way down to the backs of her thighs so I could pull her closer. *More, more, more* my brain screamed. I fought back, digging deep for patience rather than rushing like a teenager, which was what my body desperately wanted. I slid my hand up her neck and cupped her jaw, bringing my thumb to her bottom lip, careful not to break the kiss. Just to make sure this was real, that *she* was real.

We stumbled against the doorframe, her head banging against the wood and my hand racing up to cup it to protect her from any future damages I may cause. In this frenzied state, I felt like an animal. Like I was going to swallow her whole if I wasn't careful. Or possibly ram us both through her bedroom door.

Her groans mixed with mine, and she let out a gasp when I bit down on her lower lip. She threaded her fingers through

my hair and tugged me closer like she was as starved as I was for this.

She was the first thing in my life that felt this...permanent. And I craved more of it. More of her.

I pulled away to catch my breath but didn't leave for long. I couldn't resist dipping in again and planting a couple more soft, sweet kisses along her lips. It was like my brain knew this could be the last time, so I'd take what I could get. Keep all the tiny kisses in my head as memories of her throughout my day.

I needed to stop, needed to garner some sense of control over myself. This was not only my best friend's sister but also my roommate. As in we would have to deal with this head-on at some point. And dragging her into her room would only complicate that further. Calla needed stability, and I could provide that for her. Just not like this.

Just...a few...more. I kissed down her throat to her collarbone, where I nipped at her. Calla, being as responsive and unapologetic as she was, moaned and tugged harder on my hair.

Stop, stop, stop, a small voice inside me shouted, drowning out the part that begged for more.

I pulled back and held her at arm's length so I could look into her eyes. "It was supposed to be like that."

I turned on my heel, and on a shaky breath, I walked into my room and closed the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Calla



Age 23:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Shiny, I have had the craziest week ever.

I got this INCREDIBLE job opportunity. The interview is today, and I could throw up just thinking about it. I have no clue what to wear or say, and I know you'll probably say something like "Just be yourself," but I would like to remind you that my true self is a force to be reckoned with. So it's a little scary.

Also something a little weird happened with my roommate this weekend, but I can't even go into all that since I'm still processing it.

Maybe we can go over it all on our ten-year anniversary? Still need to figure out what we're doing there. Maybe people watching at an airport? It's fun watching all the dads run.

Hope you and that girl are doing well! I haven't heard any updates about her lately. Did you end up actually burning her? I can help hide the body. (For legal reasons, that was a joke.)

Love you and miss you,

Lil

My life was now broken up into two eras: BTK (before the kiss) and ATK (after the kiss).

Before the kiss, the perfect, mind-blowing, eye-opening kiss, life was full of grays and beiges. After the kiss, I could confirm that my life was full of rainbows, butterflies, and puppies that stayed tiny forever. Well, kind of. I still had to wait in traffic for thirty minutes and then pay for my fast-food breakfast with quarters, but I felt like a whole new being. I was Aretha Franklin singing about being a natural woman. I was ready to go skydiving. I could have gone up against a kangaroo in a boxing match and won.

After Nathan turned away from our kiss and left me in the hall, I stared at his closed door for several minutes. My brain felt like microwaved mush. Eventually, I went to bed, but I lay there for hours, replaying the way he'd grabbed me so ferociously. My eyes glazed over as I stared up at the circling ceiling fan above me.

Years ago, Shiny had told me that one day I would have a kiss so passionate it would erase all other kisses.

That was exactly what Nathan had done. Erased every pathetic kiss that I'd had up until that point.

“In that moment, he was a starving man, and I was a perfectly seasoned medium-rare steak.” I leaned back into the booth with a sigh, reliving the memory for the one hundredth time.

“Nathan? Really?” Marigold’s eyes were wide as she sipped her lemonade.

When I woke up this morning, Nathan was already gone, but there was a note on the counter that said *Good luck at your interview. You’re going to kill it* with a little bag of coffee grounds next to it for my plants.

I texted him immediately.

Me: Thank you for the note. And the coffee grounds. I think I might pass out before I get there today.

Nathan: Breathe in for four, hold for four, out for four and repeat. Always works for me when I’m waiting for Stacy to pick who to give the red rose to.

And just like that, things felt normal. The two of us texting notes of encouragement, GIFs of giraffes fighting. Without a single mention of the life-altering kiss we shared yesterday. Therefore, as soon as I could, I texted Marigold, Rachel, and Layla in our group text and begged them to meet me at Romfuzzled ASAP.

Layla shrugged. “I could see it. The man got passionate over a shredder, so I could imagine him being more than a

little excited to kiss you.”

With a nod, Rachel said, “He’s got that golden retriever energy. Like when someone new walks into a room, he might run in circles to get all of his energy out before approaching them.”

I laughed. “We’ve been flirting for weeks, so I thought he may like me, but I never expected him to be so...animalistic.”

They all swooned with me as I gave vivid descriptions of our shared kiss.

Marigold leaned forward, practically sprawled out on the table. “What does this mean? Are you going to be together? Has anyone told Luke?”

I sighed. “I’m still sorting through all my feelings about him, but it’s hard to think when he’s around. I swear the man walks around in these shirts that are just tight enough to show off his muscles. He’s got a swimmer’s body, without a doubt.”

The girls snickered like we were fifteen and at a sleepover, discussing boys and braiding hair. Layla piped up. “Luke has absolutely no idea. The man is clueless. I thought he’d pick up on it after you invited Nathan to dinner, but we got in the car and he literally said”—she dropped her voice to a deep monotone to mock him and puffed out her chest—“Calla’s so sweet to invite Nate for me. She must’ve known that I’d been missing him.”

Rachel scoffed. “Lay, I mean this in the best way possible, but your man doesn’t notice anything that doesn’t involve you.

And even then, it took him three years to piece that whole ordeal together.”

Layla nodded, not even bothering to disagree.

Waving a hand in front of her, Marigold said, “Who cares what Luke thinks. You need to take that man to bed and show him a good time. And then tell us all about it.”

Layla smacked her arm. “Don’t tell her that.”

Marigold only shrugged. “What? I need to live vicariously through you. I’ve been single way too long. And I’m curious to see how good he is at—”

Luke busted through the door to the bar behind her.

Sitting up straight, I said, “And that’s why you should always brush a porcupine’s tail downward” a little too loudly, in hopes that she’d take the hint.

Luke rounded the bar and stopped at our table to drop a kiss to Layla’s forehead. She leaned into him and sighed like she was a cat curling up in a pile of laundry fresh out of the dryer.

Luke straightened up, rubbing small circles on Layla’s back. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Porcupines,” Rachel muttered. “*Apparently.*”

Luke nodded. “Nice.” He turned to Layla. “Did you tell them about the wedding plans?”

Layla’s eyes went wide, like he’d put her on the spot. “We, uh, were talking about something else that was a little more exciting first.”

Luke's face scrunched up. "Porcupines are more exciting than our wedding?"

"Yes," the four of us said in unison.

He held his hands up in defense. "Geez. Guess I should do some research. I feel like I'm missing out here."

Marigold nodded. "You should."

The front door of Romfuzzled opened, and Alex, Luke's favorite bartender, sauntered in. Luke held one finger up to him, then turned to Layla. "I'll be right back. Have fun discussing...porcupines."

The second he was gone, all eyes were on Layla.

"Come on, out with the wedding details, missy," I demanded.

Layla's voice was soft when she said, "I wanted you to get all your Nathan talk out first so we could focus. Forgive me for being a good sister-in-law."

Marigold dropped her elbows to the table and scooted to the edge of her seat. "Please tell me I can do your hair."

Layla gave her a sweet smile. "Obviously. Luke and I decided that since it's just family, and the budget is a little tight, we want to have the ceremony and reception at Liam's house."

I expected Marigold to protest. Being an attendant in a wedding alongside her ex-husband *at* her ex-husband's house

would likely be awkward. But to her credit, she didn't even flinch.

“His yard is so beautiful, and with the pergola in the back and—”

“He has a pergola?” Marigold asked, blinking in surprise.

“Uh, yes. And the inside is so pretty now that he's renovated. It would be perfect. Are you guys okay with that?” Layla bit her lip as if she were ashamed to even ask us to consider the idea.

“Of course, Lay. We'd be there if you wanted to get married in the middle of Alaska or in my great-uncle Randy's trailer down in Georgia. We wouldn't miss it for the world.” Rachel gave Marigold a pointed look, then me, and we quickly jumped on board.

“Nothing would keep us from being there,” Marigold said.

I added to that by saying, “We could even get a porcupine to be the ring bearer.”

Layla laughed and swiped the tears forming in the corners of her eyes. “You girls are the best.”

The timer on my phone went off then, and I jolted up from the table. “I've got to get ready for my interview. Wish me luck.”

Each one offered positive sentiments as I waved goodbye. I passed by Luke on the way out and gave him a firm salute. “I'm off to my interview, boss. Hopefully I can quit soon so I

won't have to see your name on the top of my paychecks anymore.”

He chuckled as I ran out the door, ready to conquer this interview.

I changed my bra three times. The first one was a little too casual, not that I'd be showing it to anyone. But it was obvious my boobs did not mean business. The second one had far too much lift. The interviewer wouldn't be able to focus on my incredible conversation skills if my cleavage was ready to poke someone in the eye. The third one was perfect. The Goldilocks choice in brassieres, if you will. The perfect amount of padding that showed I was indeed a young woman, but not so much that it said, “Look out, ladies and gents. You might catch a show if she bends over.”

But no matter how perfect my bra was, as I drove to the marketing firm, I felt ill-prepared. Like a comedian with stage fright. Like a singer who'd forgotten the lyrics as she stepped out into the arena. All the big girl words I learned in college were dissipating. This was it. I was about to walk into that building and talk like a true caveman.

Me Calla. You give me job.

Oh my gosh, what if I looked like a complete fool? What if I forgot every amazing thing about myself? I was melting into this pathetic excuse for the Blob, turning into blue mush and preparing to eat everything in my way.

I needed a slap to the face or a stern dropkick to the boob. Anything.

My brain whirred, searching hopelessly for the answer, but all it could come up with was *Nathan*.

I pulled into the parking lot and parked as far away from the entrance as possible, then frantically pulled Nathan's contact up.

It rang twice before he answered. "Are you calling to tell me Bryce Harper wants you to be his roommate now that you've got the job? Do me a favor and tell the guy I said over my dead bod—"

"I'm freaking out." My voice warbled, like my brain didn't know how to control it.

Nathan didn't skip a beat. "Take a deep breath with me."

I followed his rhythm, breathing in as he did, holding, then letting it out when he directed.

After a second and third round, my heartbeat slowed, and my blood pressure dropped to a normal level.

We repeated it again, but my chest was still tight and my throat was closing up.

Nathan's voice grounded me as he said, "Look around you. Tell me what you see."

I obeyed, searching the interior of my car. Cracked paint on my dashboard. The gold bracelet that Liam gave me for

Christmas a few years ago. A spaghetti stain in the passenger seat that refused to come up no matter how much I scrubbed.

But I couldn't form the words to name those items. Instead, I said, "Uh...stuff."

"Sweetheart, tell me what kind of stuff you see." If I wasn't so panicked, I would have melted at the sound of his raspy, worried voice and the way he'd called me *sweetheart*.

"Um, my dashboard. Other cars. Pretty landscaping. Nice flowers." My words were less shaky this time.

"That's it, Calla. Keep going. What kind of flowers are they? I know how much you love plants, so don't even act like you don't know."

Along the walkway, yellow bulbs were surrounded by specks of white petals and green stems. Then a sunset of light pinks fading into white bulbs, with pops of orange here and there. A fountain with water danced behind them. A worn wooden bench to the side with a gold plate, likely in honor of an important person.

I puffed out a half laugh, my chest lighter by pounds. "Calla lilies. They're calla lilies."

As if God knew I'd need a sign to feel like I was where I belonged and planted these flowers just for me. Like he knew I'd need the reassurance.

Nathan laughed shakily. "Is that right? I'll tell you what, you go in and nail that interview, and I'll bring all kinds of calla lilies to lessons tonight. Just for you."

I had forgotten about his lessons tonight in my dazed panic. He had piano lessons with three kids, one of them being a favorite of his. One he saw so much potential in.

“Tonight. Yes, I’ll be there.” I sucked in a deep breath, already feeling far more comfortable than when I’d pulled in.

Nathan reassured me again, topping off my cup. “You’re going to be amazing, Calla. And I’ll be the one who gets to take credit for that. Don’t forget it.”

I let out a laugh. “I won’t.”

I could picture him leaned back in his office chair, swiveling just a little, wearing that cocky smirk I loved. “That’s right. I’ll see you tonight, all right? Go show them all how incredible you are.”

“Thanks, Nathan.”

With far more confidence than I’d had only moments ago, I opened my car door and stepped onto the pavement in a pair of four-inch heels, trusting that I had every ability to get this job. And if I didn’t, it wouldn’t be the end of the world. If I didn’t, it meant I could stay with Nathan a little longer.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nathan



Age 23:

To: *lilypad10@gmail.com*

From: *shinyobjects@gmail.com*

You know when you have a breakthrough? Like a really big mind-blowing breakthrough, and everything feels perfect? Witnessing it happening to someone else might be even more incredible than experiencing it yourself.

You know how I said I'm kind of like a teacher? Today, one of my "students" hit his first breakthrough, and I think it was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I could see the cogs in his tiny brain moving to piece everything together. It was like pure magic.

I hope you get to do the same thing one day, because it is indescribable.

P.S. can you please stop sending me those jump scare videos?? They get me every time.

My fingers flew along the keys naturally, as they had done over and over again. This wasn't anything new, except tonight, Calla was watching me.

When she called me earlier, freaking out about how perfectly her interview had gone, I reassured her that I knew she could do it and then proceeded to buy her a giant bouquet of lilies. Unfortunately, I didn't remember what lilies looked like. So I bought a white flower with a tiny yellow bulb in the center and hoped it would be enough. I set them in a vase in the kitchen, but that felt too formal, so I stood by the door, waiting for her to get home so I could hand them to her. When she walked in, her appreciative eyes homed in on me, and gave me an immediate embrace, it felt like the right move. But in the awkward moment after, I realized I'd more than likely tipped my hands in more ways than one.

The drive here was normal. There wasn't a hint of discomfort, but I know she felt the same bump I did.

I could feel her presence through her lens across the room, could sense the warm smiles she gave the kids when they asked if they could look at her pictures. Her laughter floated through the air, causing my fingers to slip. The sound that emanated from the piano when I did was similar to the noise it would make if a cat had fallen onto it.

A giggle sputtered out of the young boy next to me. Bennett had been coming here for two and a half months now. He was

quick to learn and sharp as a tack, and he had a heart of gold. It was clear in his eyes. He was desperate to perfect the practice. Each week, he improved. He understood how important it was to practice at home, and it showed.

Scales were easy for him, and reading music came to him naturally, but when it came time for the little guy to play the melody, something wasn't clicking. Like he was overthinking it. The music was messing with his head. The cogs got stuck, making the little boy next to me with glasses and a giant heart feel entirely defeated.

I was showing him a new way to look at the music when Calla erupted in laughter near the back of the room. We hadn't discussed the kiss yet. I desperately wanted to tell her that I had feelings for her but that I wanted to have a conversation with Luke as well. Instead of giving her an explanation, I practically ate her whole and then locked myself inside my bedroom. Tonight, I'd sit her down so we could talk. But truth be told, I wasn't sure what to say.

Bennett snickered next to me. "That's not right, Mr. Nathan."

I tore my eyes from Calla, where she shone so brightly she made my heart pound against my ribs. Shaking my head, I turned back to the piano. Not far from where we sat, Riley and Sophie practiced scales, only they weren't in sync. Between that and the conversations between various mothers and Calla, the room felt chaotic. And maybe that was what had caused Bennett's disconnect.

“Hold on one second, bud. I’ve got an idea.” I stood and snagged my drawstring bag from near the entrance. Inside, I had a pair of thin but durable headphones.

A year or so ago, I had a student whose sister was sensitive to noises. Her mom kept a pair of headphones with her for overstimulating situations. But one evening, they’d forgotten the headphones, and it was a loud lesson. The class was full, and some of my kids were working at the piano and others had guitars. The little girl was so uncomfortable, and my heart broke for her.

Since then, I’d carried my own pair of headphones. I had a few students, and even some parents, who’d borrow them when the noise got to be too much. They weren’t noise-canceling, but they dulled the background sounds enough to allow a student to focus solely on what they were working on.

Approaching the baby grand piano where Bennett sat, I pulled out the headphones and held them out to him. “Try this and let’s do it again.”

Bennett eyed them. “Uh, I don’t really need those.”

I shook them and gave a nonchalant shrug so he’d see that it was no big deal. “Let’s just see what happens.”

Pressing his lips together, he studied them for a long moment, then reached out for them. Once they were on his ears, I spoke a little louder so he could hear me. “Give it a go.”

His fingers twitched on the keys, and he peeked over at his mom, then back at me.

I dipped my chin and smiled. *Come on, kid.*

His pointer finger tapped the correct note, followed by two thumb taps. I watched, entranced, as he closed his eyes and his shoulders relaxed. The rhythm developed, and the melody of “Yesterday” by the Beatles played out as his hands moved in time perfectly. I stayed frozen so as not to disturb the master at his work, but my heart squeezed and a bolt of excitement coursed through me.

Keep going. Keep going. I balled my hands into fists, holding back the cheers that wanted to erupt from within me. Like I was at a Phillies game and the bases were loaded. I was desperate to encourage him, push him, remind the kid that he was smart and capable. Tell him all he needed was a little more help and a little less distraction. But I held back, a bundle of pure nerves, as he played the last few measures.

Finally, the last note held. The entire room was silent. I so badly wanted to turn around to see Calla’s face, but I remained still.

Bennett opened his eyes slowly, like he couldn’t believe he’d done it. He flexed his fingers and looked up at me, his face splitting in a huge smile and his baby blue eyes dancing. I couldn’t help the grin that took over my face in response to his expression.

He turned to his mom, who was seated on the bench by the doorway, and she nodded with a smile, as if to say *you did it.*

Unable to sit still any longer, I jumped to my feet and pointed at the kid with fierce aggression.

“What did I say?” I was practically shouting. “I *told* you that you could do it!”

Bennett stood on the piano bench. It was something I normally didn’t allow, but I didn’t even blink this time. He leaped onto me, wrapping his arms around my neck and his legs around my torso until his tennis shoes jabbed me in the back.

He clung to me so tightly I couldn’t breathe, but I was so proud it didn’t even matter.

“I did it, Mr. Nathan! You’re the best,” he said, his voice a little wobbly.

Oh, geez. Now I’m gonna cry.

I patted his back and set him down. “Thanks, kid. I think I needed that as much as you did.”

Head tipped back, he pushed his glasses back up the bridge of his nose, then tore off toward his mom to celebrate. Turning away from the group near the back of the room, I wiped the rogue tear that had escaped down my cheek.

“That was incredible.” Calla was so close, she practically purred in my ear.

I spun, finding her standing by the piano, her camera slung from her neck and a wide smile across her face.

Even though my heart was racing at the thought of her witnessing that exchange, a cocky smirk took over my lips. “Yeah?”

She bit down on her lip and nodded. “Oh yeah.”

My chest shook with a light laugh. “Now I’ve got to get to work on figuring you out.”

She angled in, our height difference becoming more apparent the closer she got.

She twisted a curl of hair in her fingers, and in a sultry tone, she said, “Do you mean with the piano or with...something else?”

My mind raced back to the feel of her hips, to how responsive she was, how she curled into me without hesitation.

I brought my fist to my mouth and cleared my throat, then sputtered something along the lines of “well, I—you know” before taking a deep breath in through my nose and out through my mouth. “Piano. Piano, of course.”

Geez, this girl sucked every bit of confidence I’d ever had right out of me. Where were all those moves I’d perfected in college?

Calla’s giggle was light and airy and refreshing as she turned. She took one step, then another, and peeked back at me over her shoulder. “Uh-huh, right.”

Was that a wink? I think I drooled a little as she sauntered back to her little corner near the acoustic guitars, hips swaying all the way.

Was my relationship with Luke really that important? I mean, I was loyal 99 percent of the time, so what would that tiny, insignificant 1 percent really do?

A lot, you jerk.

Ugh. Calla meant the world to Luke, as she should. And Luke had never really witnessed me treat a girl right. So it was unlikely he'd be on #teamnalla right away. And who could blame the guy? I didn't deserve to zip up Calla's heels, much less go for anything *more*.

“Mr. Nathan?”

I gasped when a tiny voice popped up next to me, and I jerked my arm back in shock. Beside me, Sophie had her head tipped back, and she was staring at me in wide-eyed confusion.

I sighed and brought a hand to my chest. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and tried to center myself. I opened them back up, determined not to tackle Calla, physically or mentally. At least until lessons were over.

I clapped my hands together. “All right let's wrap this up!”

Calla and I practically stumbled into the apartment together, both exhausted from work, interviews, lessons, and the undeniable tension between us that was so thick I had been sweating since the moment I saw her.

I figured she would want to go straight to her room since we were both clearly tired, but instead, she bounced to the piano, yelling at me to hurry while I was taking my shoes off. I laughed and dragged myself behind her and over to the piano bench. She patted the open spot to her right, the movement

bringing back a memory of the first time I caught her in here. It was odd how much we'd grown since then.

“All right. Let's do this again.” She stretched her fingers and was about to place them on the keys when I reached out. “Wait, I've got an idea.”

I stood and walked over to where my drum set was. Hanging off the metal bar beside it was my own set of headphones.

“Let's try it with these.” I handed her the headset, and just as Bennett had done, she hesitated and stared up at me like I had lost my mind. I jerked them in front of her, and she sighed, grabbing them from my palm.

“Just because it worked for him doesn't mean it will for me,” she said as she placed the headphones over her ears.

“No, but it's worth a shot.”

She closed her eyes, nodded, and took a deep breath in her nose and out of her mouth. She brought her hands to the keys again, fingers splayed, but hesitated. Like she was worried that this last resort wouldn't work.

She was still trying to learn the *UP* theme song, “Married Life.” It was on my list of beginner songs, and when she saw it there last week, she was determined to get it done. Only about fifteen beats in, she would find her fingers getting tangled up. The last time we tried, she said she was officially done, but maybe seeing Bennett today got her rethinking things.

She opened her eyes, wearing a look of fierce determination, and positioned her fingers the way I taught her. Holding my breath, I watched her pink-painted fingertips on each correct note, one after the other. Slowly, but surely, she gained momentum, focusing on each note, each expression of the music. The hesitance faded, replaced, little by little, by newfound confidence.

Her fingers moved with a fluidity that I'd only seen hints of so far as she lost herself in the music, allowing it to guide her. The piano became an extension of her emotions. I recognized it, because it had done the same for me once. With every note, her playing became more passionate and expressive, as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. Each one flowed effortlessly now, and she let the music carry her to a place of pure bliss.

Her hands danced across the keys with precision. The song swelled, growing in intensity, echoing through the room with an enchanting harmony. Like with Bennett, I wanted to celebrate, but I couldn't. I had to wait, had to let her finish. Because she was going to do it. On her own.

A mixture of concentration, joy, and pride radiated from her face. I should've been used to moments like this. I'd seen this breakthrough scene over and over again with my students. But Calla's success felt like a whole new goal. And with it came a whole new reward, one I never expected.

The final notes of the song fill the room, lingering in the air for a moment before fading away. Calla slowly opened her

eyes, her breath hitching as she realized what she'd accomplished.

She turned to me, eyes filled with disbelief, and I wondered if that's what it felt like to be in love.

Instead, I opened my arms for a hug and said a raspy "See? I knew you could do it."

She sniffed through her nose and smiled before practically jumping into my lap to hug me. With her arms draped around my neck, she pulled me in tight, squeezing so hard I could barely breathe.

I laughed and tapped her shoulder. "I wish I could watch that over and over."

She pulled back enough to see my face. "*What?*" she yelled, squinting at me.

I laughed. In the commotion neither of us had thought to remove her headphones. Keeping my attention fixed on her face, I slid them off her ears and settled them around her neck. "I knew you could do it."

She smiled and nodded. "You did, didn't you? Come on, let's celebrate." She hopped up and linked our hands, pulling me off the bench and toward the door.

I cleared my throat. "Don't you want to do it again?"

Calla shrugged. "Nope, I know I can now."

She pranced to her room and slammed the door, and for a moment, I wondered if I was supposed to follow. I felt this

instant loss when she went in. How pathetic was that? My heart was a piñata, and Calla was a six-year-old cracked out on Pixy Stix, taking a bat to it with an Elmo blindfold. And deep down, I was still trying to decide whether that was a good thing or bad thing.

Before I could knock, she came back out. She'd replaced her tiny denim shorts with leggings and an oversized Romfuzzled shirt that hit her mid-thigh. The way she rubbed off her makeup with a wipe and yawned as she shuffled down the hall was adorable. It was like watching a tiny bunny climb into bed. I wanted to wrap her up in one of her throw blankets and force her to rest. She was comfortable enough to be herself around me, bare-faced and in clothing that made her feel good. That made my heart lurch in some kind of way.

Hopefully that kind of ease meant she was building trust in me. Trust that had the potential to provide us with some kind of future together.

Though I supposed it could mean she only saw me as a friend. If so, I'd have to army crawl out of the friend zone and hope my heart would still be intact by the end of this.

Either way, I had a long road ahead of me.

“All right.” She sighed and threw the makeup remover wipe in the trash. “I'll heat up the leftover cookies. You queue up Sunday's game.”

That was the moment I realized I was in love with Calla Wells. And, simultaneously, I realized how much it would hurt when she inevitably moved out.

She smiled at me innocently, as if she hadn't just mentioned my two favorite things in the world. And I sat there like a confused moron with nothing to contribute.

She dipped her chin and narrowed her eyes at me. "Did you hear me?"

I shook my head, forcing myself to let out a gruff "yup," then snatched the remote from the coffee table.

We had done this what felt like a hundred times by now. Grabbing our snacks and blankets and making a fort on my couch. We'd turn on trashy reality TV or baseball while we talked. But tonight, I was hyperaware of Calla. Every time she shifted on the couch, when her ankle brushed against my thigh or when she'd stretch and stick her chest out. I'd never noticed before, but every time there was a close call on the game, she'd grimace and then sigh heavily when it was over. I hadn't been able to focus a single moment of the game so far because I was so engrossed in the woman next to me.

"Go, go, go! Come on, what are you doing?"

Calla's shouting at the TV was another thing I'd grown fond of. She hollered at the refs like she was defending a blood relative. My personal favorite was when she told the last ref he was as useful as a tanning bed in a gas station. I didn't understand the sentiment, but I chose not to ask, preferring not to get on her bad side.

I cleared my throat and forced myself to look at the screen. "Yeah! Come on!"

I had no idea who we were yelling at or why, but I had to do something to break the spell I was under.

Saved by the bell, the timer on the oven dinged, giving me an excuse to pull myself together.

“I’ll get it!” I shot up from the couch at the same time Calla did, my hip bumping hers. She reared back in surprise, and of their own volition, my hands gripped her upper arms to keep her from falling back.

“Ooh,” she mumbled, righting herself.

Before me, the light from the lamp cast her in a warm glow that made her skin look almost golden. I met her eyes and was immediately swallowed up by the dark green waves full of natural beauty and mystery, like the depths of a forest. Her irises faded in intensity, from a vivid green to nearly black.

It was like time stood still, the two of us locked in that instant. My heart pounded at her suddenly close presence. My hand shook as I tucked a piece of hair behind her ear, and her breathing quickened as I drew closer. We were so close that our chests were almost touching, and in that moment, nothing existed outside of this room. There was only the two of us, our eyes locked, our hearts racing, our breath caught.

She was equally captivating and intimidating. Ethereal, like she was from a different realm entirely. Dipping her chin, she raised her brows, scrutinizing me.

“Well, are you gonna do it?” Her voice was raspy. It demanded attention, craved something, desperate yet

persuasive.

“Do what?” My own voice was as dry as the Sahara.

“Kiss me again.”

Was I?

More than anything, I wanted to. But our last mind-blowing, feet-lifting kiss had brought with it a wave of regret.

I always did the right thing. I was the people pleaser. The yes man. I put others ahead of myself, even to my own detriment. So why, just this once, couldn't I say yes for *me*? Put my desires first. Say to hell with Luke and kiss Calla like I'd been dreaming about for weeks now.

Her taste already haunted me, dragging me into dreams about nothing but her as soon as I shut my eyes. I couldn't forget for a moment what her cherry ChapStick tasted like against my lips, or how she sank so naturally into me. I'd keep that memory close until the day I died.

The word *yes* pressed against the back of my teeth, urging to escape my mouth, and yet I hesitated.

Calla sighed and pressed closer until we were chest to chest. Her pink fingernails trailed up my arms until her arms were around my neck.

She leaned forward, her lips dancing against my ear as she whispered, “I know you feel this too.” She had no idea. “Let's just get it out of our systems.”

My mouth dropped open, ready to respond, ready to shout an *alrighty then* and get straight to work. But my brain snagged on that last part, and my throat constricted.

“Out of our...systems?”

She nodded, brushing her nose along the side of my neck. “Yeah, like just get it out of the way, you know?”

A wave of dejection washed over me, and I let out a deep sigh and took a step back, deflating. When her arms fell from around my neck, I took another step back and stuffed my hands in my pockets. With a heavy heart, I said, “I...I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

Was that all she wanted? A one-time thing? To get it over with?

“Oh.” Her eyes went wide. “Oh, yeah. I understand. Luke and all that. Well, um, no hard feelings. I understand.”

My heart was in shambles. Piñata candy sprinkled all over the ground.

I pointed to the kitchen and took a step toward it. “I’ll get the cookies. Then. I think I’ll head to bed. See you tomorrow, I guess.”

Calla rubbed her hands together, wearing a fake smile. “Yup. See ya.”

With that, I spun and retreated to my room, worried I’d just made a huge mistake.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Nathan



Age 25:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hey Lil,

We have an issue. I have the love sickness. I don't know if I'll make it.

Maybe it's weird to send this to you, because if roles were reversed, I think I would be a little sad to hear you talk about another guy in your life (I mean, I should obviously be your main man), but I have to tell you...I have a new best friend. I can't hide the secret any longer. It feels like I'm cheating on you. You have always been my #1. You know that. But I now have this girl...this amazing, heart-wrenchingly funny, food-loving, incredibly big-hearted girl who has absolutely mowed me over. So I regret to inform you that although you are still in my top 3 friends on Myspace, I had to bump you down to #2. I

hope you can understand this and not hate me. Please don't hate me.

You told me I was in love, but at the time, I wouldn't let myself get there, but, uh...yeah. I am 1000% in love, and it is causing my organs to shut down. My body is in constant fight-or-flight mode because I can't decide whether I want to ask her to marry me or ask her to move far away so I can regulate my stress levels. She is infuriatingly beautiful. She's got these eyes and this smile that could stop traffic. And her hair is always so shiny (Haha. Get it?). She's just as hot in Flintstones pajamas as she is dressed to the nines. She likes all my favorite things, and she makes me feel...valued. No matter what I do in life, it'll never be enough to earn her. I can't say no to a single thing she wants, partially because I feel like I owe her for her friendship alone—gag—and also because I don't know how to say the word no to her without doubling over in pain. I'm absolutely screwed.

Shiny

My fingers had been flying across the keyboard for hours now, and I was beginning to wonder if blue light glasses actually worked. Because my eyeballs were sore, and I could have certainly used them hours ago. I was powering through this project so I could leave work early on Thursday to attend a recital for one of my students.

The publishing house was hosting an event next Saturday, and at the moment, my job had morphed from branch manager into event coordinator. After the last several days, I had far more respect for wedding planners than I ever expected. Seriously. The caterers, the tables, the decorations—which I had to farm out to marketing once I decided on a color scheme, because I had enough self-awareness to know that if I did it all on my own, the guests would be eating off dinosaur plates, and there would be a dinosaur-egg-balloon arch with a T-Rex in the middle. On top of all the event work, I was still expected to keep up with managing the office like normal. The problem was that I'd set the standard too high when I took the position. Now I was nearly two years into it, and they sent everything my way because they knew I'd say yes.

Instead of coming across as a can-do, optimistic, yes-I-totally-deserve-this-job boss, I was perceived as a pushover. A doormat. And that's how I found myself saying yes to the entire editing department when they asked for a long weekend for National Punctuation Day. I was almost positive that wasn't even a thing. I'd have to google it.

Another *itty-bitty* piece of my brain was avoiding Calla, who I knew was at home right now. I wasn't quite ready to tackle that whole situation yet. I'd made a list of pros and cons in hopes of making a decision about telling Calla how I felt about her. After last night, it was obvious I had to be up front with the girl or cut myself out as a friend entirely. And neither of those options felt right.

Pros: Telling her the truth would ease the weight on my chest. She *could* reciprocate (I drew an extra big smiley face next to that one). I would have a live-in girlfriend. I could call her *mine*. I could hold her every time I wanted and not worry about repercussions.

The list went on for half a page.

Cons: What if she doesn't feel the same? What if Luke disapproves?

Now that I'd compiled the list, I considered both options, pacing across my small office while throwing a stress toy in the air. The pro list seemed like a no-brainer. Until I really studied the con list. It was much shorter, sure, but it weighed so much more heavily.

The thought of losing Luke as my best friend...yeah, that sucked *bad*. The guy had never let me down for a second, and he deserved that kind of loyalty in return. But the thought of Calla not reciprocating my feelings? That one was far, far more detrimental.

So there I was, alone in the office, working late and ruminating on what my future might hold. Were we meant to be? Or was I grasping for excuses to confess my love for Calla? Just as I was about to say screw it, give up my man card, and ball up in the corner and cry like a baby, my phone buzzed.

It was a single text from Calla.

Calla: Hey, I made a blueberry cobbler, and I've got that dinosaur documentary with the narrator you're so obsessed with queued up! Hurry home!!

It was that last word that I got snagged on. *Home...*

It brought flashes of memories of my time with Calla to the surface. Babysitting Dallas and Miles, folding parties, late-night talks over popcorn and Little Debbies, spreading handwritten notes all over the apartment for each other, leaving out my leftover coffee grounds for her. Anymore, I didn't even remember what the place looked like before Calla moved in. When I lived alone, it was all about survival. Living day to day and never so much as wondering what else was out there for me. Because never in my life could I have imagined someone as incredible as Calla. Even the hopes and dreams I had for a future relationship didn't hold a candle to what we had.

That place had never been a home until Calla moved into it. And it had nothing to do with the curtains she added or the colorful throw blankets or even the fancy soap that magically appeared in my bathroom. It was *her*. Her warm, comforting presence. The way she made everyone feel valued and included. How, despite how overwhelmingly amazing she was, she was still so humble. It didn't hurt that she was so beautiful my chest ached every time she'd prance by in one of those little T-shirt dresses she liked to wear.

I looked up, like I was expecting God to point little finger guns at me. To make it clear that this text was my sign to rush

home and flay myself open for her. Instead, all I found was a smooth white ceiling and a blinding light bulb poking out of the gold fixture.

I was just about to reply with an *On my way* and a GIF of Forrest Gump running when another notification popped up.

**Luke: Four years ago today. Weird how old I feel now
haha**

He'd attached a picture of the two of us at West Oak. Layla must have taken it. The three of us had worked late, and we had made a tower of staple squares on my desk that almost reached the ceiling. Luke's mouth was agape, and he had his hands pressed to his cheeks. His eyes were wide and his hair was a wild mess. My arms were crossed, and I was wearing Layla's white-rimmed sunglasses. A smug smirk tugged at my lips because that tower had taken us hours, and I was feeling cocky about our abilities.

Four years ago today. In the last four years, I'd spent a lot of nights hanging out with our friends at the bar and then ending up alone in my bed. Lots of random dates and flirting but nothing substantial. Late nights at the office and early morning commutes. None of that had been as fulfilling, as rewarding, as the last two months with Calla had been.

My thoughts ping-ponged. Calla or Luke? I just sat on the floor of my office for a while, weighing both options and feeling an ache in my gut.

Eventually, I pulled myself off the floor and drove home on autopilot. I hadn't answered either text. I feared if I responded

to Calla, then my thumbs would betray me, and I may accidentally type out everything I was thinking. And if I answered Luke, it may come out as a *I'mso sorryI'minlovewithyoursisterandIhavehadreallyawfuldre amsabouther.*

I pulled into my assigned parking spot, wincing at the new dent in Calla's bumper. My phone buzzed again. This time, it was an email from Lily. She was one person I could always answer.

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Hey shiny!! Haven't heard much from you this week. Just making sure you're okay. You know I get worried after so long. I start to wonder if you were abducted by aliens. Or maybe your new little girlfriend has kidnapped you and you're on your way to the Cayman Islands.

Speaking of your crush: I was thinking about it last night. If you really love this girl, I mean really, really love her like you say you do, go tell her. Stop wasting your time. You know how before I was all maybe wait and see how it goes? Yeah, I take it all back. March your butt up to that little angel and tell her everything you've been thinking. Don't just email me about your feelings. Find a way to tell her. (Also, still email me about your feelings because I am a succkeerrr for romance.) I say all of this because I'm desperate to know what's going on in the head of someone in my life, and I just...need you to know it's

really important to us that you speak your truth. Even if it hurts at first.

Idk. You were just on my mind. I love you, my friend. Keep me updated.

Also, please reply to this so I know you're not dead.

Lily

Well. That settled it. I should've known to ask Lily in the first place. She'd always been there for me and had always given great advice. When I couldn't decide what color bands to get for my braces and when I told her my childhood dog needed to be put down, she was there. I never had to wonder or worry. Maybe that was why I hadn't rushed to Lily in the first place. Because Calla had become that trusted person in my life. Or maybe I was being a crappy friend to Lily. Regardless, it was time to fix both of those issues. I would start with telling Calla, and then I'd email the results to Lily. Good or bad.

With my big boy pants hiked up and my confidence firmly in place, I marched inside. On the elevator ride up, I frantically tried to fix my hair, and I realized my scruff needed to be trimmed. But it was too late for that now. I also didn't have any flowers or chocolates or Philly cheesesteaks to give her as a token of my affection. I could run out for something, but Lily had already hyped me up for this, so I was feeling like giving her some verbal flowers instead. And by verbal flowers, I meant telling her that I loved her.

I took a deep breath at the apartment door and shook my shoulders a bit. “You can do this. You’ve got this.”

I opened the door and was immediately overtaken by the scent of warm blueberry cobbler. The living room was empty, as well as the kitchen. Her purse was on the hook and her keys on the counter, so the only other option was her room.

I stomped down the hall with purpose, listening to her bump around her room and firmly knocked on the door three times.

“That’s it. I can’t do this anymore, Calla.” My voice was raspy and desperate, a pathetic representation of my feelings. “You have two options right now: marry me or move out tomorrow, because my brain can’t take this anymore. You consume my every thought. I have tried so, so hard not to fall for you, but nothing works. You’re so beautiful. By the end of every day, my head aches from all the straining I’ve done to avoid staring at you.

“You like all my favorite things, and you bake freaking cobblers for me. I never stood a chance. I hate that your brother is so dear to me. I hate that I have this loyalty to him because he’s been there for me for so long. I hate that you’re the one person I need most and yet the one person I cannot have.”

Okay, that was a bit much. Though I meant all of it. My only regret was that I could have been a little more gentle with the delivery. That, and she wasn’t responding. Why wasn’t she responding?

I waited another breath before knocking again and muttering, “Are you all right?” I pressed my ear against the door, waiting for a sign of acknowledgment or even disgust, but inside her room, it was silent. All too silent.

My whole body tensed, waiting for the worst. “Look, BG, I’m sorry. I’ll just go. Just come talk to me when you’re ready, all right?”

I expected at least an okay, but there wasn’t so much as a creak of the floorboard. Deflating, I took a step back, ready to turn to my own room and wallow in self-hatred. But before I could follow through, the door flew open.

In the doorway, Calla stood, soaking wet hair dangling down her neck and boxy black headphones over her ears. The look of shock on her face told me she’d had no idea I was even standing here.

With a shriek, she pulled one leg back and kicked me right in the crotch.

“Gah!” I hunched over in agony and yelled out as white-hot pain coursed through my body and a pulse of lightning raced up to my abdomen. A wave of nausea came over me, and I whimpered a nearly silent and very pathetic “help” before collapsing to the floor.

Calla sucked in a breath and fell to the floor next to me, which was when I became painfully aware that she was in nothing but a towel. She was fresh out of the shower, judging by the droplets of water dripping from her hair onto my legs.

But I couldn't appreciate the sight because my whole body was on fire and I desperately needed to be away from here.

"Nathan, oh my gosh! Are you all right?" She took off the boxy headphones and set them aside.

A groan was my only reply.

"I borrowed Rachel's noise-canceling headphones to listen to the last couple episodes of my true crime podcast. I was just about to find out who the killer was. I am so, so sorry. I thought you were a murderer. I didn't even hear you come in."

Calla's hands were sliding up and down my shoulders in comfort, but I could hardly enjoy it because the urge to throw up was so strong.

With deep breaths in and out of my nose, I shook my head and attempted to stand.

Calla shot up with me, grabbing my elbow in support. "Come on, let's get you to the couch."

I let her assist me to our couch and dropped my head back as she ran off to the kitchen. A freezer drawer opened and closed, and she came running back to me with a bag of...

"Is that bread?" I squeaked out.

She looked down at the plastic bag and back at me. "Yeah, my mom made it like a week ago. You don't freeze your bread?"

My hair fell into my eyes as I shook my head.

“Oh, maybe that’s just us. Okay, well, hold still, bud.” She tossed the bag into the air, and suddenly, the loaf was landing on the zipper of my pants. In the same place she’d kicked me.

I couldn’t stop the roar that escaped me as that bolt of pain shocked through me again.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Calla ran circles around me, flapping her hands and frowning her brow.

Note to self: this girl is terrible under pressure. That trait seemed to run in the Wells family.

“I thought I would kill two birds with one stone.” She giggled a little. “I guess I killed two stones with one bird instead, though.”

I groaned at the poor joke.

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll get some aloe, or maybe Neosporin? What do guys rub on their—”

“Calla.”

“Yes?”

“Please stop talking.”

“Sorry.”

She sank to the floor next to me, still wrapped in a towel, which only made my situation worse, and patted my foot.

That definitely hadn’t gone the way I’d hoped.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Calla



Age 23:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Oh, Shiny. I am so happy (and only like 10% jealous) of you. You have to keep me updated. Tell me the second you know how she feels! You deserve this. All those years of meaningless flings and terrible first dates that never amounted to anything have finally paid off. She's your girl. She sounds like a total hottie. I'm sure if you love her, I would too. You'll always have a special place in my heart, but I know it won't be just the two of us forever.

I can't wait for the day when I get to email you that I'm engaged to some hot Alaskan oilfield man and we've adopted an abundance of German shepherds and have moved to a cottage house with blue curtains. Until then, I'll support you from the sidelines. Or in this case, your inbox. I don't know how your girl will feel about our friendship, but I hope this

doesn't mean we can't keep reaching out to each other. Even if it does, I always wish you the best.

Don't forget our ten-year anniversary is coming up. Let's at least push till then.

Love forever, Lily

Silently, I sat on the floor, waiting for Nathan to say absolutely anything. Instead, we both had our eyes glued to the TV, which was now playing some Spanish drama with no subtitles. It was already playing when I clicked the TV on, and neither of us had the energy—or strength, in his case—to turn it off. After watching Nathan curled up into a ball on the couch for nearly ten minutes, I reached for the remote, unsure of what to say.

I had a lot of questions. Truth be told, the biggest two were:

1. What did it feel like to be kicked in the balls?
2. What were the people on the TV saying?

A younger woman with ample breasts—I believe it was Maria?—was yelling at an older woman who I think was her mother. Maria tossed her head back, wild curls like a lion's mane flying around her. By her body language, I believed she was saying something along the lines of “How dare you?”

The older woman gasped and brought a hand to her chest. She yelled back, her shoulders shaking from...what? Grief? Pain? Shock? Amazement? I was dying over here.

Maria suddenly glanced around. Then, without further ado, she pushed the other woman down the stairs. The woman, who'd definitely been replaced by a male stunt double judging by the beard and suddenly very hairy arms protruding from the sleeves of the tight red dress, tumbled exaggeratedly down the stairs.

Nathan and I gasped in tandem, both leaning closer to the TV.

“Why did Marissa just push her maid down the stairs?”

Okay, so maybe I was wrong about the name. And the relationship between the women.

My eyes were still wide as I said, “I think she either owed her money or slept with her husband. Maybe both.”

Nathan chuckled. The sound instantly put me at ease. His shoulders were far more relaxed and his usual smirk had returned, sending a wave of relief washing over me.

Yet somehow, I still felt the need to ask, “Nathan, do you hate me?”

He sighed heavily. “No, Calla. I don't hate you.”

“Even though I might have just ruined your chance at future children?”

A snort came out of him. “Yes, even then.”

I smiled and leaned against him, dropping my head to his shoulder. “Good, because I have nowhere else to go, and you mean a lot to me.”

It was nice to tell him. To finally have a true friend to rely on. A person I could trust. A person so undeniably loyal. I loved that about him.

Nathan went rigid for a second, then let out a breath. “Yeah, you mean a lot to me too.”

“Can I ask a question?”

Nathan nodded in reply.

“Why were you coming to my room in the first place?”

He blinked a few times and bit his lip. “I wanted to ask if you’d go to this work thing with me next week. Everyone’s bringing dates. It’s kind of fancy, though, so I don’t know if —”

I sat up. “Like a fake date?”

He nodded, and his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “Yeah. Yeah, like a fake date.”

The romance lover in me had a field day with that one. My mind flipped through scenes from early 2000s rom-coms with Adam Sandler and Jennifer Aniston, or Matthew McConaughey and Kate Hudson. The thought of getting dressed up and pretending to be Nathan’s eye candy sounded appealing as well. Plus, I would get to meet the infamous Jamey or whatever her name was.

“Absolutely. I would love to.”

Nathan’s lips quirked just a little, but he ducked his head like he was trying to hide the reaction. It made me smile too.

We sat like that for a while, with my head propped against his shoulder. Every now and then, he'd shake a little with laughter, or we'd both shoot up in shock at the sight of a knife or a family jewel in a character's hand.

I yawned, my eyes watering, and heaved myself off the couch. "I'm gonna head to bed." I put one arm in the air and stretched while I used the other to hold my towel up. "Do you want me to wrap up the rest of that cobbler and put it up?"

Nathan stood too. "Nah, I'll get it. I'm going to stay up a little while longer. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

I felt an odd urge to hug him good night, to wrap my pathetic arms around his muscular body and squeeze him tight. Though it probably wouldn't be the smartest choice, considering I'd caused the man severe harm twice tonight.

So I settled with a swift "night" and dragged myself to bed, where a dark slumber took over as soon as my head hit the pillow.

My phone buzzed in the passenger seat as I turned left, following the directions of the GPS voice.

I pulled into the lot and parked in the closest spot I could find.

You almost here?

My heart raced. *What is he like? What does he look like? Is he as nervous as I am?*

Our last-minute plans to meet were a blur. He'd sent me an address and a cryptic message that said *If we're doing this, we're doing this now*. Which had my blood pumping and my cheeks flushing. I wanted to meet Shiny. Of course I did. I'd always been curious about my online best friend. But I'd never entertained the idea until now. We always said we'd meet at the ten-year mark, but I never really expected that to actually happen.

The unfamiliar building was nothing but a shadowy structure in the dark night. The only light came from the moon and a dim orange streetlamp close by.

I'm here. Where are you?

It was a little sketchy out here. Hopefully this wasn't part of some kind of ten-year plan he'd made to lead me here. Nah. There was no way. This was Shiny. The guy I confided in. Who knew all my deepest secrets. Who constantly reassured me that I was worthy and enough. The guy who, without ever even truly knowing me, had told me for years that I was his favorite person on earth.

"I'm right here," a deep voice rumbled across the dim parking lot.

I jumped. The low vibrations of his tone rattled my chest, and I flushed at the thought of turning around and seeing... him.

Slowly, I turned, waiting to come face to face with a short, not overly attractive guy with hair longer than mine. And possibly extra toes or something. It would make this a whole

lot easier on me if he was entirely not my type. Then I'd never again have to lie awake at night wondering.

What I found was a man propped up against a familiar car in a dark corner of the lot. His black hood obscured his face, but the hoodie didn't hide his tall, muscular frame. His chest was broad, his shoulders wide. His arms were crossed over his chest, and his stance was intimidating, yet inviting. Pulling me in like a snake charmer. I knew he could be dangerous, and yet I didn't care.

My mouth froze in shock. "I, uh, I." Come on, words. Do your job.

I stepped out of the light, my feet moving before my brain could process.

"I thought it might be you. I pictured it being you a lot."

That deep rumble...what was that? So perfectly familiar, but a blurry memory.

I was only a couple of steps away when Shiny lifted his hands and lowered his hood. Half of his face was covered by a black mask, the material stretched over his jaw up to just above the tip of his nose.

Though I probably should have run screaming from the masked man in the sketchy parking lot, my mind raced back to the time Nathan teased me for finding masks *somewhat* attractive. Oh god. He'd have an absolute field day with this.

I smirked. With Nathan on my mind, my confidence grew. "So you can see me, but I get you in a mask?"

Shiny scoffed. “I thought you liked masks, BG.”

I froze, and tingles raced down my arms, like sparks bouncing off a flame. My smirk fell. How did he...

Shiny lowered his mask, exposing stubble and lips and a jaw I knew all too well. I knew that shaggy, messy hair and the dark green irises like they were my own.

“Nathan?”

Deep down, I supposed it made sense. Nathan and Shiny had practically identical senses of humor, and harmless flirting was so on brand that I wondered why I hadn't figured it out earlier.

He chuckled. “Course it's me, sweetheart. You think there are any two people out there who fit together as well as we do?”

“But, but how did you—”

He moved in so close his chest brushed mine. “We could ask questions all night long, but I think we both know we have more important priorities right now.” He trailed his fingers along my jaw and palmed my neck, gently pulling me into him.

I leaned in, the feeling so natural. “Is it really you?”

His face came into focus as I got closer, a mirage of muscles and cocky smirks. “Wake up and tell me, sweetheart.”

I gasped as his lips covered mine.

Just as I closed my eyes and leaned into his kiss, I shot up from the bed. Sweat dripped from my forehead, and my heart raced as I grappled with reality.

My bed. I was still in my bed. No Nathan and no Shiny to be found. Just me alone in the dark. What in the world had I just dreamed about?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Nathan



Age 25:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hey Lily, just checking in. Did I freak you out with all the talk about crushes and whatnot?

I haven't heard from you in a while, and I guess I'm a little nervous. I feel like you're slipping from me. Maybe it's just me?

It'd be nice to know you're okay.

We're still on for our ten-year, right? People watching and soft pretzels?

Love you. Miss you.

Shiny

I had anticipated finding Calla bustling around the apartment as usual when I woke up. Lately, she had been shadowing me during my morning routine, probably unaware that I noticed her sneaking sips of my coffee or snatching bits of my breakfast when she thought I wasn't looking. Honestly, it was endearing, so I didn't mind at all.

To my surprise, the apartment was unusually still when I woke up. The TV remote lay exactly where I'd left it last night, and the coffee machine had been turned off. Calla's purse and keys were missing from their usual spot on the hook in the entryway. It was silly of me to feel a twinge of disappointment; we hadn't ever agreed to spend our mornings together. But over the past few weeks, the routine had become comforting. I had grown accustomed to her company in the mornings and even when I returned later in the day, and I'd come to cherish her company.

I found myself wandering around the apartment aimlessly. I wanted to wait until she came home before I had my coffee, and it felt wrong to watch TV, since I'd probably put on something she would want to see too.

Just as I was ready to settle on the couch, my phone vibrated in my pocket. A mix of emotions washed over me when my mom's name flashed on the screen. Hearing from her made me happy. On one hand, , but a shadow of dread crept in behind it because if she was calling this early, that meant she was gearing up for one of her rants.

I took a deep breath through my nose and braced myself.
“Hey, Mom.”

“My Shiny! How are you?”

It always amazed me how a woman who wasn't even five foot could be so loud so early in the morning.

“I'm good mom, what are you guys up to?”

They'd gone on a riverboat tour down the Mississippi recently, so there was no telling what kind of stories she'd have. It was nice sometimes being an only child, but there were days I wished I had grown up with siblings so I'd have someone to commiserate with. Mom was great at advice, and they were overall really good parents, but they could be...a lot.

“Ugh. Well, your father is trying to convince me that we need a telescope. As if he wants to even watch the stars.”

In the background, Dad grunted in disagreement.

“And that's why we said no more conspiracy documentaries for you!” she shouted, nearly deafening me. “Anyway, how is your new roommate? She's quite a cutie.”

Frowning, I took a seat on the couch. “How do you know what she looks like? Did I even tell you her name?”

I could practically hear her smile. “I have my sources.”

Layla. Layla was her source. They had met at the book signing event Layla held recently. I'd invited my parents, and the women hit it off immediately. By the end, Layla was

planning a surprise birthday party for my mom's birthday next year and reminding her to act surprised when she showed up.

“Anyway, yeah, we're good. She's nice to have around.” Understatement of the century. More like I was slightly obsessed with the woman. But if I mentioned my giant crush to my mom, Calla would know before she even made it back home tonight.

“Hmm, that's nice. You need a good woman in your life. No more of those tinder dates.”

“Tinder, Mom. And I don't even use Tinder.” Anymore.

Listen, I've had high highs and low lows.

“Either way, I've been telling you for years now that it's time to settle down. Get me a few of those grandkids like all my friends have.”

I snorted a laugh. “Calla's just a friend. No grandkids popping out over here.”

In the background, my dad mumbled words I couldn't understand. He was probably reclined in his La-Z-Boy, remote in hand, watching current affairs and grunting about how both sides are wrong.

“What about your little online friend?”

Lily was another hurdle I hadn't taken on yet. We had been doing great. Especially over the last month. She'd been helping me with Calla and I'd helped her with her job stuff. Until now. All of a sudden, it's like she dropped off the face of

the earth. I hadn't heard from her in almost two weeks and with no reason as to why either.

“We, uh, haven't been talking much.”

“What did you do?” my mom asked. In the background, I could hear her shuffling through her pantry.

“Why do you have to assume I did something?”

“Did you not?”

Hmm. Did I? I didn't think so, but then again, my track record with women wasn't the best. Chances of me making mistakes were highly plausible.

I thought back to our previous conversations. Had I been so focused on my feelings for Calla that I neglected Lily? I wouldn't be surprised, I guessed. This last month and a half with Calla had been too good to be true. I liked her way too much, and I could see myself brushing Lily off for that.

“I...don't think I did?”

Her responding laughter was warm and familiar, a reminder that I needed to call her more. “Why don't you check for yourself?”

She had a point. She always did, and frankly, it was annoying.

“Yeah, I think I will. I'll call you guys later. Have fun with the telescope.”

“Do *not* bring that up to your father. Last week, he tried to tell me that pigeons weren't real, and now he's convinced

satellites are just Airbnbs in the sky.”

I snorted. Sounded about right. He believed everything he read.

After our goodbyes, I hung up and pulled up my email on my phone.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Come on, Lily. Will you at least tell me what I said that's bothering you? Or what I did? I'd send you flowers if I knew your address. But since I don't, please see the attached picture of a bouquet of lilies. Get it? Since your name is Lily?

I feel terrible. I've been reading over our last few emails and realized I talked a lot—A LOT—about my own feelings and haven't been attentive enough to yours. That's not cool at all, Lil. I am so, so sorry. You know me so well, and I value all your opinions, so I guess, in this particular situation, I have no one else to talk to about it, so I went to you first. Anyway, not trying to make excuses. Just want you to know I understand and love you.

Please don't disappear. I need you. Not just for advice, but as my best friend. I really, really need you.

We're so close to ten years. Just give me that before you go.

Shiny

It took a while for her to answer. I spent about an hour nervously cleaning the house since there was nothing better for

me to do. Every time my phone buzzed, I would turn into Usain Bolt to get to it, only to see notifications like *Your subscription has ended* or *50% off all sandwiches today only*. Though I'd be lying if I said that didn't make my heart race too.

When she did answer, I had never opened up an email so fast.

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Sorry I haven't been able to get back to you as much, Shiny. Finding work and some things with my new roommate have been distracting me.

That's a lie.

I can't lie to you.

I've been freaking out a little about meeting up. Not because I'm scared or because I feel like it's not right, but...we've spent the last ten years talking almost daily, and yet I have no idea who you are or what you look like. That feels like...a lot, I guess.

I just don't want to lose this. Lose you.

Lily

P.S. stop apologizing for things you didn't do, you goober.

I breathed a sigh of relief. Nervousness I could understand. Of course she was nervous. We knew each other so well, yet

not at all. How could she not be a little anxious about that?
God knew I was.

I replied without thinking.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Lil,

I'm so, so glad you answered. I almost fell when I saw your email pop up. I get being nervous. If it helps, I'm terrified. But even if it's scary, it's the right thing to do. And we'll be mad at ourselves if we don't. I know it's harder to keep up now that we've got our own lives, jobs, relationships, etc. But it'll be even harder to keep in touch when we're married with kids. (Not to each other, to be clear.)

If you don't want to, I get that. But if you do, let's plan for dinner tomorrow night.

I can be flexible (remember that hot yoga I went to?), so name the time and I'm there.

I don't know why we're so nervous, but I know you're important to me. And I really, really want to see you.

Shiny

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Nathan



Age 16:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Hey, Lil,

Thanks for recommending The Proposal. Watched it last night, and I actually really liked it. I even took notes like you suggested. Ryan Reynolds seems like a really cool dude.

One day, I'm gonna snag a girl that is my own version of Sandra Bullock.

Love ya,

Shiny

“Come on, Calla. It’s not prom!” I yelled from the living room.

It had been nearly two hours since she'd disappeared to get ready for this event. Judging by all the noise she made rifling through her closet and how long it went on for, I was beginning to wonder if I was underdressed, even in a suit.

"I don't wake up looking like this, *Nathan*."

She put emphasis on my name like I was an annoying sibling.

I huffed a laugh. "We gotta go soon. I'm sure you look perfect."

"I'll be out in five minutes. Chill. We've got plenty of time and you know it. Go sit down and turn on *Jurassic Park*."

How did she know that movie calmed me down?

It was almost irritating how well she'd gotten to know my quirks in such a short period of time. Things had been a little awkward between us lately. And I didn't think I was the only one who could feel the tension growing and the attraction building. Between my rejection of her casual hook up request the other night and the moment we shared during her last lesson, it was clear that we were both unsure of where to go from here.

Seven minutes later, Calla sauntered out of her room. The sight made me so lightheaded I thought I'd pass out. She wore a long, tight black dress that had a slit up to her thigh and heels so tall she was almost my height. Her head was tilted, and she was slipping a small gold earring into one ear.

My tongue practically fell out of my mouth and my fingers twitched at the glimpse of tan skin peeking through the slit of her dress. The straps of her heels were dainty. Only a thin buckle. I had to hold myself back from bringing my fist to my mouth and biting it. If only she'd come in here and asked me to help her with them. The image of sitting below her with her foot propped up on my suit pants, the heel digging into my thigh, was threatening to do inconvenient things to my body. My long fingers struggling to put the strap through the loop. The way she'd chuckle and smirk down at me. Man, I was in trouble. We hadn't even left yet, and I was already trying to find excuses to stay home.

"You ready?" She brushed her hair over her shoulder and planted her hands on her hips.

I shook my head to clear it. "Yeah. You look, I mean, really...wow." The garbled words tumbled out of my mouth one after the other.

She sniffed. "Not sure whether that was supposed to be a compliment, but I'll take it that way."

I nodded, my eyes still caught on her curves. "It really, really is."

Blowing out a breath, I stood and grabbed my keys from the counter behind her. I dipped, because I did still have a couple inches on her, my lips a breath away from her ear.

She shivered and tipped her head, her eyes finding mine. "So when do I *officially* get to be your date, Mr. Huxley?"

My heart stuttered, but somehow, I kept my composure and gave her a sly grin, my lips inches from hers and my mind racing back to what she tasted like. “As soon as we get out that door.”

Calla turned, taking in the door, then slowly pulled back and strutted to the entryway, her hips swaying like a pendulum in front of me.

Entranced, I followed, and I nearly squeaked when she opened the front door and stepped out into the hallway. I stepped out and locked the door, and when I turned around, I held my hand out to her, an open invitation.

She glanced down at it and back to me, that smile that I’d grown so addicted to over the last few weeks spreading across her beautiful face. She happily laced her fingers through mine and pulled me so close she had to tip her head back to look at me.

I jerked my chin to the elevators. “Come on. I want to see what Calla Wells is like on a date.”

We walked down the hall hand in hand.

“Oh. I’m your pretty standard date. Butt grabs when no one’s looking, drinking too much and dancing on tables. Writing my Venmo handle on a paper and waving it around in hopes that someone will pay my rent if I send them a couple of feet pics.”

I scoffed a laugh. “Is that right? Sounds like a regular Tuesday night for you.”

She shrugged and hit the ground floor button.

“Pretty much,” she said, pinching my butt with a giggle.

Turned out that Calla was a pretty incredible date. There hadn't been any feet pics or drunken dancing just yet, but she had managed to make the entire staff of West Oak Publishing fall in love with her. One of the women on the editorial staff asked her to drinks on Tuesday, and then Bill from accounting, a balding fifty-year-old man, invited her to his investment small group on Thursday.

The woman had been there an hour and was making better connections than I had in the five years since I'd been hired. She was flawless. Laughter followed everywhere she went, and her smile brightened the room as she joked with Brenda, our head accountant and owner of seven cats. The punchline being something about *right meow*. She was an absolute star.

Why hadn't I invited her up here sooner? If I had, maybe she could've helped me out with the awkward meetings I'd finally put an end to.

Calla swayed over to me and sagged against my arm with a flirty smile. “It looks amazing in here. You did so good.”

Her praise made my heart race. I was a sucker for any kind of affirmation, but from her, it was far more special.

“You think so?”

I'd fretted over color schemes and themes until I eventually handed over the reins to the girls in marketing. They were all younger and more "hip" than I was—something they reminded me of *often*.

The black and gold and white I'd chosen had remained, but now the food and balloon arches added pops of color. It looked like a queen's birthday party was going on in here.

She nodded and hummed. "Mmm. You did amazing."

"Well, it wasn't just me—"

"But it was. Even if you didn't hang the decorations or set out food, you planned it all. Take some credit. Enjoy it a little. You deserve some appreciation, and I, as your non-date date, am here to provide it."

I laughed. "All right. I'll try."

It was hard to focus on anything other than Calla. Some of West Oak's higher-ups were here, along with important people in the publishing world. I should have been working to make good impressions for future deals and potential job opportunities. But instead, my mind was fixed on Calla's pretty laugh and big smile, memorizing every detail so I could recall them forever.

She wandered off, and I tried to listen to the conversation going on around me. I could probably learn a few things from these men who actually deserved their jobs and didn't feel like kids playing dress-up. But out of the corner of my eye, I

caught a glimpse of Calla swaying to a slower song, her attention fixed on the people on the dance floor.

“Excuse me for a second.” I squeezed through the crowd, ignoring the murmurs behind me.

I made a beeline straight to her and pulled the drink from her hand.

“Would you like to dance with me?” I asked, setting her drink on the high-top table next to her and pulling her delicate hands into mine.

The smile she sent back was soft, almost shy. “I would love to.” She followed me into the open space where the other couples swayed.

Placing my hands low on her hips and bringing my lips to her ear, I whispered, “Is this all right?”

She shifted closer so our midsections were pressed together. “More than all right.” With a smile, she draped her arms around my neck, sending my brain whirling.

“Have I been an acceptable date so far?” she asked, her flirty tone messing with my head.

I cleared my throat. “Pretty good. Waiting for you to bust out the real fake dating moves.”

She sighed in contentment. “Ahh, fake dating. Such a good trope.”

“*Trope?*” I asked.

She shrugged, still swaying. “Yeah.”

I dipped my chin and cocked a brow. “You made that up.”

She scoffed. “I did *not*. It’s a real word. People use it all the time.”

I laughed. “Whatever you say.”

“People don’t just make up fake words, Nathan.” She ran her hand up the back of my neck and tugged on my hair playfully.

“Uh, yes, they do. Ask Luke and Layla. Where do you think Romfuzzled came from?”

Calla giggled, her laugh flowing over the soft instrumentals and the rich vocals of Lionel Richie. “I guess you’re right.”

We held each other close through the rest of the song. Maybe it was the music or just having her so near, but the room around us fell away. There were no bosses, no HR reps, no accounting or editorial staff. Just Calla and me. And I wanted to keep it that way.

“Can I ask you something?” she whispered as the music faded.

I rested my chin on top of her head. “Anytime, BG.”

She took in a long breath, her chest pressing against mine. “This is probably ridiculous, but do you ever go by Shi—”

A tap on my shoulder had me pulling back a fraction.

“Nathan, could I speak to you for a moment?” Janise was standing far too close, pulling me back to reality with a jolt.

She was a pro at that, making good things disappear. At some point, while I was lost in my connection with Calla, the dance floor had emptied. She and I were the only two left. Other than Janise.

“Oh, hey, Jan.” I turned back to Calla, who was watching the lady beside intently, clearly piecing together her identity.

“This is Calla, my date. Calla, this is—”

“Janise! The one and only,” Calla said with a forced enthusiasm. “It is such an honor.” She bowed dramatically, her forearm resting over her abdomen, but she straightened quickly when I elbowed her side.

“Stop that.”

There was no need to get on Janise’s bad side tonight, though I did have to hold back a snort.

Calla had heard not just me gripe about the infamous HR rep, but Layla and Luke too. When Layla quit, she’d been a big supporter. Janise, Chad, and the work environment they created were toxic, and she’d witnessed each of our struggles here. I was pretty sure she pictured Janise as Ursula when I brought her up.

“Um, yes...” Janise eyed Calla’s dress, which was by far the most eye-catching thing in this building.

And I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed. All eyes snagged on her. It was inevitable. She had this gravitational pull about her that I had yet to see anyone resist. God knew I couldn’t

have. Instead of their boss, now my employees would see me as Calla's date. And I couldn't blame them.

In comparison to Calla's dress, Janise wore a lime green two-piece pantsuit and a weird floppy hat that made her look unapproachable. It suited her.

"Nice to meet you," she uttered dismissively. "Nathan, did you complete that file for Mr. Thompson?"

The file wasn't due until early next week, but in my frantic state, I'd stayed late a few nights this week to get it done.

"Yes," I clipped, folding my arms across my chest, hoping Janise would take the hint that now was not the time to discuss these matters.

I caught the exact moment she wondered whether she should say it. Caught her glimpsing at Calla like she was a wild animal in a tiny cage, waiting for her to go rogue.

"I'd like you to send it over tonight. Chad needs to review it before it gets even close to the corporate office." Her tone was firm, and her focus was set on the space between Calla's shoulder and my arm.

It was ridiculous, to have to go into my office at a work event on a Saturday night just to send an email, but then again, Janise was a ridiculous person. And going along with it was a whole lot easier than pushing back. It would take me all of five minutes to do. I'd have to pull Calla in there with me, though, so I could keep her as far away from Chad as possible. He had

been glancing at her all night, and I did not appreciate where his eyes had traveled.

I trusted Chad with Calla as much as I'd trust a lion with a sack of raw meat.

“Of cou—”

“No.” Calla took a step forward, her heel clicking. The word wasn't rude. It was dripping with honey, but with a kick. “It's Saturday night, and this is a party. Surely it can wait until Monday.”

The words were innocent, but I knew her well enough to know there was a furnace behind her voice, and Janise was not prepared for the backlash. Neither was I.

I uncrossed my arms and tapped Calla's hand. “Uh, no, it's fine. I don't mind,” I reassured Janise and hoped that Calla would back down and trust me to handle it. It would be so much easier to just go in and send the email.

Instead, Calla yanked her arm away from me, her eyes ablaze with a fire that I'd yet to see in her. A burning desire to light this place up. Part of me wanted to put it out, to tell her it wouldn't be worth the fight. Another part of me, though, wanted to see just how passionate she could get.

She turned back to Janise and pulled her shoulders back. “Well, I do. He already works far more hours than he should, and he goes above and beyond his requirements every single day. I don't see how you could think asking him to put more time in is okay. He does too much already. He comes home

exhausted and leaves early every single morning. Did you know he works harder than anyone I've ever known? The guy probably works more than any of you ever do. And does anyone recognize him for it?"

No one answered the rhetorical question. Probably because they were scared of the five-foot-six woman about to tear my HR rep apart.

Her voice was getting louder by the second, and my colleagues were beginning to take notice and share glances. All eyes trailed to us, and the attention made my body feel like it would burst into flames. Yet I didn't care. I was supposed to be their boss, the kind of boss that should probably put a stop to her rant, but I couldn't. Not yet.

"He is kind," Calla said, with a touch of awe in her voice. "And he's considerate and optimistic, but you use that kindness as an opportunity to walk all over him. And maybe he's fine with that, but I'm not."

I reveled in the way she spoke about me, the compliments she shared so passionately and the fire in her eyes. She puffed her chest out and nodded at the ground like she was her own hype man.

"And you know what else? He could run circles around each of you here. The man is burned out. And you either see it and choose to ignore it or you are so blind to your coworkers that you steamroll them anyway."

She was on fire. She didn't even stop to take a breath between each accusation. I'd seen this look on her before, or

one similar, as she yelled at the refs during the Phillies games. For a moment, she was setting free that out-of-control wild animal she kept locked up tight. There was no holding back. And she was doing this for me.

Janise was also on fire. The tip of her nose was red hot and her eyebrows creased into each other.

“Well.” She huffed an insincere laugh, then glanced around at our audience, wearing a nervous smile, her cheeks rosy. “We compensate our employees fairly and respect their time manageme—”

“Unless it’s Nathan, right? Also, isn’t he *your* boss? Or am I the only one confused here?” Calla scanned the crowd gathered around us for validation. Several people nodded and gave me apologetic looks.

This was like watching the opening of *WWE Smackdown*. If I thought the girl was hot before, the way she defended me like I was a prized jewel she treasured multiplied my attraction by a hundred.

“He is. At least until we see signs that he’s unfit for the office or until he brings...unhealthy relationships into the workplace.” Janise’s reply dripped with poison. It was a threat if I’d ever heard one, and I’d been around long enough to know she had the power to end my career.

Calla only laughed. “Good luck finding anyone who works as hard—”

“All right, Tiger. I think you made your point.” I wrapped my hand around her elbow.

She reared back, and her eyes widened with shock and *disappointment*? Disappointment that I stopped her rant about how amazing I was? Yeah, I was keeping her. There was no way around it. I couldn't care about anyone else anymore. Not after watching her defend me like that.

I jerked my head, motioning for the door. She considered it for a moment, eyeing me, then Janise again, before raising both hands in defeat. “All right.” She snagged her purse off the high-top where I'd left her drink and strode to the door, looking over her shoulder to say, “Better find someone else to walk all over. Since I know where you work.”

I turned to Janise and the others watching and muttered, “You'll get that on Monday.” Then I raced after my girl. Fake date, my ass.

When I caught up, she was aggressively pressing the down button and tapping her foot, rage practically steaming out of her ears.

Once we stepped inside the elevator, I leaned against the stainless-steel wall and smiled. “What was that?”

She paused, her scowl making me a little fearful of her reaction. “Yeah, what *was* that? I had a *lot* more to say, and you cut me off.”

It was difficult to take her seriously when she looked this beautiful. Even under the fluorescent lights, her eyes shone

almost an emerald green, and her skin was more flushed than usual. Her mouth was a little pouty as she pressed her teeth into her bottom lip like she was holding back.

“I never want to hold you back, Calla. I appreciate you standing up for me, a lot more than you know. I guess I didn’t realize how long it had been since I’d said no to these people. It felt...good. But I still need my job. And I have a feeling that if I let you keep going, that by the end of the night, the whole building would catch fire.”

She puffed a small laugh through her nose and uncrossed her arms, her guard slowly falling. “I may have gotten a little overzealous.”

I leaned closer to her, resting my arm on the railing below her waist. “I loved it.”

She angled closer to me, just a fraction. “You did?”

“How could I not love it when someone like you stands up for me?”

Calla quirked her head. “Someone like me?”

My heart was thundering fiercely against my chest as I stared at her unapologetically. This woman, this beautiful, big-hearted, hilarious ray of sunshine woman, had defended me without hesitation. Like it was all she could do to hold herself back from jumping on Janise. For her to not know, truly know, how deeply I loved her felt criminal.

“Someone so incredibly out of my league. Someone who deserves a whole lot more than I could ever give her. Someone

who makes my mind go blank when I look at her.”

Brows furrowed, she searched my face, swallowing thickly and leaning closer, the smooth material of her black dress pressing into my suit.

Instead of running away this time, I sank into my feelings for her. I needed to put myself first. Put us first. “I’ve never met someone who made me want to treat them like royalty. Someone so—” I took a deep breath.

Slow down, Nathan. Don’t freak her out. Be open. Talk to her. It always helps. Reaching out, I laced our fingers together.

“I like the way your hands fit in mine. I like that you’re the first person I talk to each day. I like leaving notes for you next to my coffee grounds, and I like that you hum weird songs when we fold laundry together. I like your scented candles and your Yogi Bear mug on my coffee table. I like that you trust me. That you’re bold and unafraid. I like that you’re so beautiful you literally cause traffic jams. You know you’ve caused at least six wrecks since I met you?”

Calla laughed, a tear rolling down her cheek, and I huffed out a laugh too. Because I realized then how stupid it was of me to not say this sooner.

“I like that you make everyone around you fall in love with you...including me.” I blew out a breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. *“Especially me.”*

Which was an understatement. Love wasn’t a big enough word to encompass all I felt for her.

Calla squeezed my hand. She could probably feel how clammy my palms were from that confession. With her attention locked on my tie, she opened her mouth and closed it again. Was she working up the courage to let me down easy? Had I just ruined what could have been the kind of incredible friendship that only comes around once in a lifetime?

“Nathan. I—” She closed her eyes and shook her head.

I sucked in a breath and winced as I waited for the blow.

“I love you so, so much. I probably made that a little too clear when I yelled at one of your employees, I guess.”

She laughed, but I couldn't find it in myself to tease her in response. No, I went ramrod straight at her admission, the weight pressing on my shoulders and squeezing my chest instantly lifting. It was pathetic, really, how long I had been waiting for that release. Waiting for any form of confirmation that our connection was real.

“Nathan?” She tilted her chin up and searched my face, probably wondering why I was frozen and gripping her hand like a vise.

“Say it again,” I rasped out.

The smile that I adored so much stretched across her face and I wanted to sink in it. Sink into the warmth that spread through my chest when she looked at me like that. She leaned into me and freed her hand from my clutches. Moving it up my chest and behind my neck, she sighed. Her long nails lightly

traced along the sensitive skin above my shirt collar, making the hair on my arms raise.

“I love you, Nathan.” Her voice was so sure, so confident. I wished I could play it on repeat.

“Mmm.” I smirked down at her, my hands on her waist. “I don’t think I’ve ever enjoyed hearing you speak so much.”

Popping up on her toes, she brought her mouth to mine, our lips barely brushing against each other. “What about when I said that I had a mask kink? You seemed to enjoy that.”

I laughed against her, my smile uncontrollable. “Even then. I think I was more flustered than anything.”

“I like you flustered.”

“Yeah?”

She nodded, still so, so close. “It’s the realest part of you,” she said, her breath whispering across my lips. “My favorite part.”

“Even when we first met?” Read: even the time I slammed a door in her face and shook her boob instead of her hand.

Her eyes were filled with mirth. “Especially then.”

Calla put her other hand around my neck and linked her fingers, and we moved in sync as I dipped low to plant my lips on hers.

The elevator doors suddenly opened. Calla and I turned in unison to see an older man from our accounting department and his wife standing on the other side, smirking at us.

Frowning in confusion, I turned back to Calla, who still had her hands firmly planted on my chest.

“Did you not hit the button?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I thought you did it.”

Laughing, I brought Calla with me and leaned forward to hit the ground floor button as the older couple settled in on the opposite wall.

The woman smiled at us, eyeing the way my hand rested on Calla’s hip and sighed. “I remember those days. Too distracted by love to notice your surroundings.”

That was an understatement. More like too distracted by love to notice anything but Calla.

I squeezed her in reassurance. In response, Calla looked up at me and winked. I knew then that someday I’d look back remembering these days too.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nathan



Age 25:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Can you tell me something really grotesque about you so I'm not so nervous tonight? Or maybe something a little too political so I can think slightly less of you? Just to level my heart rate out...

Feeling sick,

Shiny

I woke up to Calla not so quietly shuffling around in the kitchen. My curiosity piqued, I poked my head out my bedroom door, then shuffled down the hallway in search of her. She was perched up on the island counter, her legs swinging in sync as they dangled down the white cabinets.

She was holding a cluster of grapes above her head, mouth open, but when I stepped into the room, she forgot her mission and watched me as I moved closer. Her hair was a mess and her eyes were wild. She looked like an untamed animal.

How hard would it be to convince her to just stay home with me and roll around all day? I was pretty confident I could do it.

“Any plans today?” She read my mind. Her voice was almost scratchy and full of mischievous intent. She leaned back and spread her legs just a little in invitation.

As if I’d pass that up.

My eyes snagged on where her light green skirt rose above her thighs each time her legs swished. I licked my bottom lip and took a step toward her, taking my spot between her legs.

I dipped down and snagged a grape from the vine she was holding with my teeth, then brought my lips close to her ear.

“Nothing too crazy. What’s up?”

She popped a grape in her mouth and sat straight again, bringing herself closer to me. “Was wondering if you’d be up for doing something different today.”

“Different?” My ears perked up at that. As much as I wished we could stay here all day, I liked the idea of *different* with her.

“Yeah, like people watching outside a sex store. Or going over to Liam’s and taking all of his left shoes and hiding them in different spots around his house.”

I couldn't hold back my grin. "That's definitely different. As much as I'd love to be a shoe thief, people watching sounds pretty good. It'll have to be this afternoon, though. I have a final suit fitting in a little while."

Making plans with her and Luke on the same day felt like betrayal with a side of guilt. But maybe also a little desire and excitement. The strange cocktail sloshed around, mixing together in my chest.

"I, uh, I was thinking about maybe talking to him while we're out today. Talking to him about...us."

Saying *us* felt premature, considering I'd only confessed my feelings for the woman yesterday, but there was no chance there wouldn't be an *us* at this point. Luke deserved to know, and if I did it this way, then when he lashed out, at least it wouldn't be directed at Calla. I wanted to take that initial blow for her. Then we'd figure things out from there.

Calla loved me, and that was what mattered. That was *all* that mattered.

She lifted her chin, eyebrows raised. "Are you sure? I could go with you. Or we could wait till tonight. Maybe we could meet him at Romfuzzled. Or maybe we should wait till after the wedding."

Tonight? Crap. I had plans with Lily tonight. In all the chaos of confessing my feelings to Calla and wrapping my brain around our relationship, I'd forgotten that Lily and I planned to meet up for our tenth anniversary.

I'd finally gotten over the idea that I Was being a terrible friend to Luke, but here I was doing the same thing to Lily. Brushing her aside. Forgetting entirely about one of my closest friends because I was so consumed with the woman who was currently running her hands along my biceps. I couldn't win.

According to the clock on the stove, it was only ten. I wasn't meeting Lily till seven, so I could make this work. Probably. I'd get things sorted out with Call and with Luke, and if I played everything right, I'd have plenty of time to meet Lily.

She deserved my complete focus for one dinner, and I couldn't do that as long as Calla was still floating in the forefront of my mind.

"I think I should tell him first. Let him get angry, and then while he's figuring it all out, we'll talk, yeah? As soon as we're done with the suits. You and me, Love Shack parking lot."

Her eyes were swimming with fear, but she nodded her agreement anyway. I angled closer and kissed her forehead, just below her wild hair. Then I turned to my room to get ready for what was bound to be an incredibly stressful day.

Behind me, she snickered.

When I spun around again, she was biting her lip, holding back a smile.

"Is Love Shack your preferred retailer?" Calla laughed.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I winked and headed to my bathroom to get ready.

By the time I’m out of the shower, there’s a text from Luke waiting for me.

Luke: Fifteen minutes out. I’ve got everyone else with me so we can get it all done at once

Me: You know we could’ve driven separately, right?

Luke: And miss out on Crew’s singing?

Me: Fair enough.

Calla had made her way to the sectional and was cuddled up with a book. She’d settled in her regular spot. The corner she’d named the Abyss. She said it’ll suck a person in and never let them leave. I think it’s just an excuse for her to be there all day.

“Cowboys or aliens today?” I asked, nodding at the book in her hands.

She looked up and smiled, a lightning shot to my chest. “Cowboys. Finished the blue aliens last night after you fell asleep.” Calla turned the book so I could see the cover. A shirtless man had a curvy blonde pressed up against the side of a red barn, gripping her hips passionately.

“Nice. You’ll have to tell me about it when we’re people watching later.” I wasn’t really into romance, but if Calla was talking, then I wanted to hear all about it.

“You know I will.” Her soft grin was sweet and fresh, like cherry Italian ice on a hot day. I wanted to sink into that smile, hold it tight, and keep it all to myself.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, signaling that Luke was probably here and calling me from the parking lot. But I ignored it. I wasn't ready to end this little staring contest.

Calla cocked a brow. “You gonna answer?”

I nodded, giving her a smile in return. “Yeah...I will.”

First, though, I had the urge to memorize her just like this. This small voice in the back of my head whispered to take a mental picture of her on my couch, book in her lap. Her curly hair falling over her shoulders, and her tiny green skirt spread out around her. I bit my lip, capturing the moment and hoping it stuck. I hadn't even left yet, and I was already dying to get home. Get back into her space. And this time know for sure nothing was holding us back.

My phone stopped buzzing and then started back up a moment later.

I finally broke the connection and dug the device out of my pocket. “Hey. Sorry, I was looking for something. I'm coming down now.”

Calla shifted back into the couch cushions, her book laid out on her lap.

Pulling my phone away from my ear, I watched her. A distant “hurry up” came from Crew, then the line went dead.

“I’ll see you later...at Love Shack,” I reassured her. And myself.

She smirked. “At Love Shack.”

It was all going to be all right. It would have to be. We would talk, and then we could move forward together. That’s where we belonged. She belonged with me. And avoiding the truth with Luke for any longer would only pull us apart.

Forcing my attention from her, I made my way to the front door. It was time to get the ball rolling. Then there would be nothing left standing between us.

“Do you guys think I look like James Bond in this?” Crew asked, checking himself out in one of the hundred mirrors in the bridal shop.

“No.”

“Not even a little bit.”

“Why would you even say that?”

Liam, Adam, and I all answered at the same time as Luke stepped out in his suit. He pulled at the collar and tugged the sleeves down as he moved to the center of the room.

I pointed at my best friend. “See, there’s James Bond.”

Crew turned around and looked Luke up and down. “You’re right. His suit has JB written all over it.” He sauntered up to his brother and got a little too close as he inspected the buttons and collar.

Luke jerked back. “What are you doing?”

Crew leaned in even closer. “Trying to figure out if we wear the same size. Could we swap?”

Liam and I both scoffed. “Why would he swap with you?”

Crew blinked at me like the answer was obvious. “He has a 100 percent chance of getting laid after the reception. He doesn’t need to look like James Bond with that kind of odds. Save some for the rest of us.”

I did the math in my head. “Uh, you know a majority of the women who are coming are your relatives, right?”

Crew stood up straight and tugged on his lapels. “Rachel isn’t.”

Adam grumbled something unintelligible from his chair in the corner.

My phone buzzed on the chair to my right, and on instinct, hoping it was a text from Calla, I reached for it.

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Hey, Shiny,

I hate to do this, but something came up later tonight. Could you meet me earlier? It doesn’t have to be at the same place. How about FDR Park? Or wherever, really. I’ll explain what’s going on when I see you in person, but it’s something really important to me. And I want to be able to give you all of my attention. Please, please tell me you can meet me for lunch.

I'm a little terrified. Good terrified, but still terrified. Feels like I keep having to pee even though I just went. Is that bad?

Lily

I let out a deep breath as I read it. Thank God. It was for the best. I could focus on Lily first this way and then explain everything to Calla tonight. Typing out a quick reply, I confirmed our meeting place at FDR park and suggested we meet at two pm by the bridge. I just hoped I could pull all of this off.

Crew's shouting had me looking up from my phone. Adam was pulling him back with one hand while he protested. "Let me just try it on!"

My phone buzzed again, but instead of another email from Lily, it was a text from Calla. Heart racing instantly, I clicked on the notification.

Calla: Soo could I borrow Bessie for like an hour?

I smiled down at my phone. At this point, she could ask for anything and I'd say yes. I was starting to see why Luke bought bulk packages of anything Layla seemed even remotely interested in.

Me: What do I get if I say yes?

Calla: What would you want?

I held back a groan. I wanted a lot from her. A long list that I would like to take my time going through. But first, I just wanted to hold her. To be with her unapologetically and know

this wasn't a shallow infatuation but the kind of connection that could last a lifetime.

I was turning into one of those cheesy guys from her romance novels, and I didn't even mind.

Me: We'll talk. Be careful. Can't have my girl getting hurt.

Calla: Me or Bessie?

Me: Obviously Bessie. But you should probably watch out too. Just in case.

Calla: I'll keep that in mind ;)

"What are you smiling at?" Liam's voice cut into my thoughts of Calla. When I peered up from my phone, all four brothers were staring at me.

Luke wore a cocky grin. "He's been talking to this girl for forever. Won't do anything about it."

"Seriously?" Crew asked.

I shrugged and grinned. This situation was way too uncomfortable, and I really didn't have an answer. Telling Luke in front of all of his brothers, specifically Adam, wouldn't bode well for me.

"It's not like that. She's just a friend."

Luke laughed as he undid his tie. "Yeah, right," he said, shucking off his jacket next. "I don't know anyone who is friends with a girl like that without wanting more."

“Didn’t you and Layla stay friends for, like, three years?”
Liam cut in.

In my periphery, Crew was reaching for the jacket Luke had tossed onto a chair.

“Yeah,” Luke said, “And now I’m getting fitted for a tux. Just proves my point further.”

I shrugged. Couldn’t argue with that. Lily and I had stayed friends for so long simply because we hadn’t met in person. It was easiest that way.

“All right, all right. Enough about me. Let’s get these suits off. I got things to do.”

Things involving their sister, but I’d keep that to myself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Calla



Age 23:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

What are you wearing? So I can know whether I should walk away or not when I see you.

Just kidding, of course.

I wouldn't walk.

I'd run.

Lily

Skipping down to Bessie with Nathan's car keys, I prepped myself for meeting Shiny. Whether Shiny knew it or not, today would be the end of an era. A time when I so often used this outlet as an escape from reality. A place free of judgment. Just true and pure friendships. And I would miss that. A lot.

But a whole new era with Nathan was starting now. One door was closing and another was opening. One friendship was coming to an end and one relationship—one that had the potential to be forever—was beginning.

I think I'd love Nathan since the first time he kissed me. Well, *really* kissed me. And I felt this overwhelming peace about the whole thing. I wasn't sure how wrapping things up with Shiny would go. And sure, I was a little concerned about how Luke would handle the news, but deep down, I knew it would be okay.

But first, Shiny.

Plugging my phone into Nathan's car, I pulled up one of Rachel's many playlists. This one was called "The Girls Who Get It, Get It." It made me giggle every time. I don't know how she found the time to make playlists for all of her friends, but it was absolutely precious.

I wasn't supposed to meet Shiny at the park for another hour, but my anxiety was getting the best of me and I was ready to get the scary part of this meetup over with. So what better way to do that than meandering up and down the aisles of the nearest Target?

I hummed along to "Break My Stride" as I pulled out of our parking deck.

My hair was curled perfectly, a fun contrast to the rat's nest it had looked like when Nathan walked into the kitchen this morning. That didn't stop him from looking at me like I was a chocolate bon-bon he wanted to pop into his mouth.

I giggled to myself at the thought. He was insane. Insane for falling in love with me and insane because, even at my worst, he still saw me as beautiful.

Part of me was ready to meet Shiny so I could tell Nathan all about him. After that whole dream about Nathan being Shiny, it was a bit touchy for me. I'd needed time to process the meaning behind it. Now, though, I couldn't wait.

I turned my left turn signal on and accelerated, the afternoon sun casting a warm glow over the interstate. The hum of engines and the rhythmic beat of music filled the air around me as I merged into the flow of traffic. The music momentarily hushed as a cheerful text alert chimed from my phone, nestled in the cup holder beside me. A playful smile tugged at my lips as I hoped for a message from Nathan, my heart dancing with anticipation.

With a sense of excitement, I leaned down to steal a glance at the phone, my fingers brushing against the smooth surface. The anticipation turned to surprise, then a hint of dread, as I saw the sender's name: an email from Shiny. My heart fluttered in my chest, anxiety tightening its grip as I dipped my chin to read the ominous notification.

But before I could even open the email, the world around me transformed. A blinding flash of white filled my vision, accompanied by the screeching wail of tires on pavement, tearing through the music's rhythm. Panic surged within me, instinctively causing my foot to slam onto the brakes, a

desperate attempt to halt the impending collision. But time betrayed me, and the collision was inevitable.

The impact was a violent explosion of sound and sensation. The violent force of the collision rocked my car, sending shockwaves through the frame. My phone, once a source of excitement, was now an airborne missile, torn from its resting place and sent soaring. My body was thrust to the right, a helpless passenger in a chaotic symphony of crumpling metal and shattering glass.

Glass erupted around me like crystalline fireworks, the tinkling shards dancing in the air before cascading down like confetti. The airbags, those silent sentinels, erupted from their hidden chambers with a forceful embrace, enveloping me in a cloud of white dust. The acrid scent of burnt rubber mingled with the metallic tang of exposed metal, assaulting my senses.

As I struggled to make sense of the chaos, the world felt distant and distorted, like an ethereal dream. My ears rang, the clamor reminiscent of action scenes from movies, a discordant symphony of disorientation. A warm wetness trickled down my chin, drawing my attention downward. Trembling fingers reached up to touch the source, only to be met with a chilling reality. The tips of my fingers were stained red, the color vivid against my pale skin.

Time hung suspended in that moment, a tableau of shattered hopes and shattered glass. In the midst of the wreckage, my thoughts swirled like dust motes in the aftermath of a storm, a whirlwind of fear, pain, and confusion. And as the world

slowly came back into focus, the taste of copper on my lips and the distant echo of sirens became my haunting companions.

Huh, that's weird.

Nothing hurt. Why did nothing hurt?

The car was still in gear. I should put it in park. But my eyes felt so heavy. My arm dropped to my lap. Try as I might, I couldn't reach for my phone. All I wanted was to call Nathan.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" The voice in my ear was frantic, but my heart rate felt so slow. Everything felt slow, like time was moving at half speed.

Shiny. I needed to tell Shiny. He would think I stood him up. He wouldn't understand.

"Stay with me."

I lifted my head and turned toward the voice, but tiny black dots formed in my vision, then quickly turned into bigger dots.

"Shiny," I called out with a scratchy throat, my voice far away.

But as I said his name, all I could think of was Nathan.

And as an image of the man I loved flashed in my mind, the world went dark.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Nathan



Age 25:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I'm by the bridge. Gray shirt and black shorts. Devilishly handsome. (I am happily taken, btw.)

Shiny

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

You good, Lily? We were supposed to meet up twenty minutes ago.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I'm getting worried. Are you okay? Seriously, if you got freaked out, it's okay. I swear. Just let me know you're safe.

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

I can't even call 911 because I don't know your real name or number or anything. Please, Lily. I have to know you're safe.

I was beginning to get frantic. My heart was racing right along with my mind, and though it wasn't an overly hot day, I had broken out in a full-body sweat.

Things happen. She was only thirty minutes late. Maybe there was traffic. Or maybe she'd forgotten. No, we'd only made these plans an hour ago. Maybe she'd fallen asleep. That felt like a very Lily thing to do.

In my gut, I knew that was wrong, though. Lily wasn't surface level. Yes, she was silly and could be flighty sometimes, but she was like Calla. She cared a lot about people. She wouldn't just not show up.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. When I pulled it out, the number on the screen wasn't one I recognized. I didn't know whether I should be relieved or more concerned. Maybe she'd somehow found my number?

"Hello?" I answered reluctantly.

"Is this Nathan Huxley?"

I was weary, one arm wrapped around my stomach, clutching it. "Yes?"

“This is Tyler with PFD. We have a woman here, Calla Wells. She was just admitted to Pennsylvania hospital. According to the insurance information brought in with her, it looks like the car she was driving yours. Were you aware of this?”

This felt like one of those monumental moments that would be etched into my brain forever. *Calla Wells was just admitted* would forever be tattooed on the part that holds memories. My racing heart instantly lurched, and I swore it stopped altogether.

Calla was in an accident?

“Is she okay?” The words rushed out so quickly I was practically yelling at the poor woman.

“We can’t provide medical information over the phone without her consent. Can you confirm that you did give her permission to drive your vehicle?”

“Is. She. Okay?”

I was already jogging to the front of the park, ready to wave down a cab and rush to the hospital.

“Sir, please calm down. I need to confirm this for the insurance company and the police before we continue.”

“Yes, she had permission. Now tell me how she is.”

“Sir, as I previously stated—”

I hung up. I didn’t have time for this. I had to see her. Had to hold her in my arms and know she was all right.

My heart raced like a drumbeat in my chest, a relentless rhythm of worry and urgency. Frustration tangled with anxiety as I tugged at my hair, a futile attempt to channel my restless energy. Clutching my phone in a white-knuckled grip, I willed my legs to move faster, each step a desperate push toward the promise of answers. The park around me was a blur of colors and sounds, a cacophony of life that I couldn't fully register.

The thought of her hurt and vulnerable drove me forward like a man possessed. The knowledge that it was just a twenty-minute drive to the hospital taunted me, a cruel reminder of distance and circumstance. I didn't care about the stares of the onlookers. Their gazes were like distant echoes as I flailed my arms, waving for a cab. The urgency of the moment overpowered any shred of self-consciousness, any lingering sense of decorum. The world shrank to a pinpoint, and all that mattered was reaching her side.

Finally, a cab screeched to a halt before me, its tires grating against the pavement. I practically lunged into the back seat, my voice raw as I shouted at the driver, a torrent of words laden with desperation and fear. "Pennsylvania Hospital! Go."

She would be okay. She had to be. There was no other option. I lifted my eyes up to the cloudy skies above us. Small raindrops formed on the window to my right as I prayed that she would be okay. *I just got her, God.*

I'd just gotten to hear her say she loved me. I'd just gotten to kiss her unapologetically. It couldn't be over so soon. We had to have more time.

As minutes stretched like endless miles, the car navigated the web of weekend traffic, each second an eternity of anticipation. When the cab finally pulled into the drop-off zone, I barely hesitated. Money exchanged hands in a flurry of desperation, bills passed over as if they held the very essence of my hope. I could have given him any amount, a twenty or a hundred—it didn't matter. Time was my most precious currency now, and I was willing to spend it all to be by her side.

I ran through the main doors and slapped my palms against the front desk. "Calla Wells. She was in an accident. They called me."

The older woman behind the desk raised her hands above the keyboard in front of her like a sloth. As if I hadn't come in here like a bat out of hell, desperate to see the woman I loved.

"All right, honey. Give me just a minute. Ooh, this darn mouse. Needs new batteries. Hold on just a second—"

"Nathan?" a familiar voice called out to me.

I spun and found Layla standing halfway across the lobby. "Are you here to see Calla?"

I breathed a sigh of relief, even as the older woman was still rifling through her drawers for batteries.

"Yes. For the love of God, yes."

She reached out and gave me a soft smile. "Come on, she's in the ER."

The ER? How bad was the wreck? What if her seat belt wasn't on right? Was it an eighteen-wheeler? Was she texting? Was some other driver texting? I'd find them. I'd kill them.

I strode down a corridor that was at least a mile long to a red flashing sign that read *Emergency Room*.

"She's in here. Second on the right." She pointed to a double door where people in scrubs were rushing in and out. Were they rushing to see her?

I took off, pushing the swinging door so hard it bounced off the wall behind it.

Rows and rows of curtains blocked my view. Second on the right.

I was hyper-focused on the beige curtains. So much so that I almost missed the small sign outside one that said *Wells*.

I practically ripped the curtains off in desperation.

There, in a blue and pink hospital gown under a sea of blankets, was Calla. She was propped up in the bed with dried blood on her chin. Her eyes brimmed a soft pink, her under eyes a gray blue. She had been crying. Her pupils widened as she took me in.

"Baby," I rasped out.

She was here. She was all right. I needed to touch her, to hold her and confirm what I was seeing.

Out of breath, I jumped to her side and hovered over her.

My hands instinctively ran through her hair. It was even more messy than usual. The tears at the corners of her eyes began to spill, breaking my heart all over again.

“Nathan.” She sniffed and dropped her eyes to her covered lap.

I slipped my hands to either side of her jaw, careful not to touch the small cut on her chin. Angling low, I planted my lips on hers. Her tears soaked my cheeks, but I couldn’t care. She was here with me. Nothing would happen to her now. I wouldn’t let it.

She tried to pull away, but I brought her back to me. I needed another minute. I needed all of her minutes from now on. She was never leaving my sight.

She sobbed, a pathetic little cry coming from her mouth against mine. “I wr-wrecked Bessie.”

I sniffed a laugh. “It’s okay, sweet girl.” I kissed the corner of her pink lips. “What did I tell you before, huh? It’s not the car I’m worried about.”

“But—but—” Her lips quivered.

I was dying to make them stop. I straightened a little and pulled her head into my chest, ignoring the way the bed’s railing dug into my stomach.

“Stop that now, all right? You’re safe. That’s all that matters.” I jerked my chin back to look down at her. “I love you. You gave me a heart attack. I assumed the worst. I almost punched the lady at the front desk. Why didn’t you call me?”

She sniffled, this time with a small smile on her face. Progress.

“I thought you’d be mad. I wasn’t ready to tell you. I called Layla. She and Luke just got here about ten minutes ago. She went to get water for me.”

“Baby, you ought to know me by now. You know I wouldn’t be mad—”

“Don’t say that just because you think you have to.”

“I’m not. I love you. A car is a car. It needed new rims anyway. Someone kept hitting curbs.” I winked down at her in hopes of lightening the mood.

The curtains behind my back were pulled, and a nurse with a clipboard came in.

“Oh, you must be Shiny! She was asking for you when she woke up. I’ll leave you two alone. Just hit the button on the bed if you need anything, sweetie.”

A sense of unreality swept over me, as if I had been transported to a different realm. The words that had just reached my ears seemed utterly implausible—so much so that I questioned the very fabric of my perception. Filled with doubt, I instinctively pivoted my gaze towards Calla, desperately seeking affirmation or refutation in her expression.

Every detail of her countenance seemed amplified in that charged instant. The hue of her cheeks intensified, resembling the vibrant scarlet of a freshly bloomed rose, and this flush of color extended downward, tracing an intricate path along her

delicate neck. The convergence of emotions painted across her face was a spectacle in itself. Her eyes flickered with a mixture of astonishment, vulnerability, and a touch of embarrassment, while her lips seemed caught between forming words and maintaining their poised composure. It was as though her entire being had become a canvas, displaying an intricate blend of hues and shades that hinted at a profound inner turmoil.

“Calla?” I asked, unsure of what to say.

She sputtered, “That sounded bad, I know. I was going to explain tonight, but then this happened. I promise it’s not what you’re thinking. I’ve got this friend—”

“Did she say Shiny?”

She bit her bottom lip and nodded. “Um, yes.”

I pulled away from her. “Why did you need to borrow my car?”

My voice emerged as if from a parched desert, devoid of any discernible emotion. The tempest of thoughts raging within me made it impossible to decipher the intricate tapestry of feelings weaving through my consciousness. The puzzle pieces of this situation lay before me, their edges fitting together in a confounding fusion of contradictions.

As I allowed my gaze to ascend once more, my eyes captured a startling transformation in Calla. The vibrancy of her irises had surrendered to an expanse of widened orbs, mirroring an ocean of astonishment and doubt.

It was in this suspended moment that the dawn of understanding finally broke, casting its illuminating rays upon the obscured corners of reality. The threadbare fabric of disbelief gave way, unraveling to reveal an unexpected tapestry of truth. A shiver cascaded down my spine, as if a profound revelation had carved its path through my very being. And in that instant, it hit me—the truth suddenly became clear.

There was no way...

“Lily.” I meant it as a question, but my tone was certain as the name left my lips. Like my brain had made the decision for me.

“Shiny.” She mumbled it like she was testing it out.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Calla



Age 19:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

What do you think it'll be like when we meet one day? I'm picturing you in a top hat and loafers and me in a mid century dress with an oversized collar. Hot, right?

I also picture you dressed up like the guy from Monopoly. Hot for sure.

Lily

Was this a dream? It wouldn't be the first time I replaced Shiny with Nathan.

Without a word, he captured my jaw with both hands. Then he covered my lips with his, kissing me with more passion

than I'd ever felt from another person. The tension radiating off him was palpable. As tears dripped down my face, I looped my arms around his neck, raking my fingers through his hair. As the kiss went on, our breaths synced, quickening in anticipation.

The sounds of the hospital—the beeping of machines, small talk down the hall, the chime of the door opening and closing—faded away. All I could focus on was this intense connection. The electricity arcing from me to him and back again. This kind of passion had always seemed mythical, yet here it was. And really, it had always been there, in muted form. But now that I knew he was Shiny, that he knew every one of my secrets and I knew all of his, the passion was magnified. It grew and grew until I thought I'd explode with it. The sensation of his mouth brushing against mine was so amplified that I practically melted into the warmth and tenderness of his embrace.

Our lips danced, exploring as he caressed the back of my arms and slid his hands lower to squeeze my hips, as though he was testing that this was real.

Shiny. My Shiny. How had I not seen it before?

Nathan pulled back, brushing my hair from my face and searching my eyes. His fingers trailed across my lips like he still didn't quite believe I was here.

I whispered, my voice barely even there. “In my head, it was you.”

His response was raspy, his voice almost unrecognizable. “My Calla Lily. I should’ve known.”

He planted two more kisses on my lips, this time soft and sweet, his mouth gentle on mine, and slid his hands to my shoulders. His fingers traveled to my hair, running through it till they got caught in my curls. Then he gripped the strands and pulled me back gently.

I choked on a laugh, tears still spilling over my cheeks. “And I should have known that only you would think mint Oreos are better than peanut butter ones.”

Nathan laughed and hovered over me, brushing his nose against mine, his own tears cresting his lashes. I leaned forward as much as the hospital bed would let me and kissed the tear away.

Smirking, he shook his head. “I can’t believe you’re real. That this is real.”

When we floated back down, he dropped the railing on one side of the hospital bed and sat beside me. He couldn’t stop touching me. Fingers grazing my knee, a light squeeze to my arm, brushing my hair off my shoulder. And I adored it.

His eyes never leaving mine, he asked, “How did we never put this together?”

My cheeks hurt from all the grinning. “I told you. In my head, you were Shiny.”

He chuckled. “I have to be honest. I never, ever thought it could be. I don’t think my brain could handle the thought of

you being the same person. I still don't think it can. I'm kind of short-circuiting right now."

I laughed and squeezed his hand, my smile never fading. "So what do we do now?"

He squeezed back. "Whatever you want, sweetheart. I'm there if you are."

I believed him. How could I not? He was the most loyal and faithful man there was. And he was mine. He had been mine longer than either of us had ever realized.

Nathan leaned in for one more kiss, then pulled back just enough to murmur, "I love you."

"I love you more," I said right back.

Nathan groaned, tilting his head back. "All this time, I was emailing Luke's little sister about embarrassing erections in class and asking for advice about girls. This is so unreal."

I sighed and relaxed back against the pillows. "It's wild. You know everything about me. Everything. It's all out now. The spark will fade so soon."

"I think there's still some spark, honey." His hand traveled down my leg and back up, and I giggled. Only he could make me feel sexy in an oversized hospital gown.

And that's when it dawned on me. "Here I was thinking we were living the brother's best friend trope. Turns out we're fated mates, Nathan."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Nathan



Age 19:

To: lilypad10@gmail.com

From: shinyobjects@gmail.com

Do you think there are people out there we're tied to for life? Like you meet someone and...that's it. They're it, you know? That would be a cool feeling to have one day. Idk.

It's late, and I barely ate today. Maybe I'm hallucinating.

Godspeed,

Shiny

“So, we’re doing this?” I asked, parked in the lot at Romfuzzled.

Calla nodded. Her brows were scrunched. She had her war face on. I wouldn’t be surprised if she pulled out red bandannas to tie across our foreheads. “We’re doing this.”

There was a tiny scar on her chin from her accident a couple days ago. She fussed when I forced her to not leave the house for at least twenty-four hours, even though the doctor confirmed she didn't have a concussion. I had been treating her like my own patient the last two days. Bringing her soup, watching her favorite movies over and over, brushing my fingers in her hair, and, of course, taking care of her plants.

Today was the first day I'd allowed her to leave, with me driving obviously. We had a new rental car while Bessie was in the shop and it was kind of nice. Something new. A shift. The beginning of a new era with Calla by my side.

After the revelation of our email exchanges, we decided to wait until everything had settled down to tell Luke. Which, unfortunately, meant today.

I took the keys out of the ignition and turned to her. "Let's go over the plan one more time."

She mimicked my position so we were facing one another. "We go in, and we stand in front of Luke holding hands."

I nodded. "Yes, yes. And then when he freaks out?"

"We stand firm. A solid wall. We keep our arms locked and tell him he'd have to physically break us apart for our love to falter." She crossed her arms, looking like all she was missing was war paint.

"And when he says he doesn't want to speak to us ever again?" I cringed.

“You know what? I love my brother, but if he can’t see how right we are for each other, then he can get over it. I love you, Nathan. And that’s all that matters.”

She was so sure. So certain. Who was I to question it? If I had Calla by my side, then I didn’t need anyone else. She was the best thing that had ever happened to me, and I refused to lose her just so I could maintain a long-term friendship, no matter how much Luke meant to me.

She was a dream come true, every piece of her. “You have no idea how good it is to hear you say that. It’s like my every fantasy is coming to life in front of me.” I cocked my head toward the front door of the bar. “Let’s do this.”

I rushed around the car and put my arm around Calla, then guided her up to the steps. We paused at the door, simultaneously taking in a deep breath.

“Let’s stick it to the man.”

“I have never been the protestor type, but you are really hyping me up right now. Do we need pitchforks?”

I pressed my lips together and considered it. “Hmm. Maybe another time?”

When we walked into Romfuzzled, Luke and Layla were seated across from each other in a booth, their hands gripped tightly in a thumb wrestling competition. Judging by the frustration on Luke’s face, Layla was winning. She smiled wolfishly as she leaned back, while Luke looked like he was about to hop over the table.

Instinctively, I reached for Calla's hand and squeezed. She copied the action, reassuring me. We walked up to the booth and hovered over Luke and Layla, but neither of them looked up at us. If anything, they were even more zeroed in on their thumb war.

I obnoxiously cleared my throat, and finally, Layla looked up at me. Then she glanced down at our joined hands and smiled. Across from her, Luke took advantage of her moment of distraction and pulled her thumb down.

He stood and shouted, "Ha! Told you I'd win eventually." He cracked his neck and stretched a hand back out to her as he sat once more. "All right. Best out of fifteen."

Just as I was about to say screw it and walk away, Calla blurted out, "Nathan and I are together!"

Layla gave Luke a sly smile, and looked at our joined hands again and then at where his hand was resting on the table.

I waited for the bomb. Waited for the other shoe to drop. For the emotions to set in. For Luke to chase me around the parking lot with a baseball bat.

Calla sucked in a breath next to me, probably regretting the way she'd blurted out our business to her brother, who must have been seething, because he didn't even flinch.

Luke stretched his fingers toward Layla, but she didn't reach for him. She, too, was probably waiting for his reaction. Finally, he cocked his head our way. Pulling back, I winced,

preparing to hear the words I knew were true. *You don't deserve her. She could have anyone she wants.*

Instead, he shrugged and mumbled, "All right." Then he turned his attention to Layla.

Calla and I blinked at each other in shock.

Calla spoke up first. "Uh, did you hear us?"

Luke groaned. "Yes, I heard you. Now, can I get back to what I was doing? I've got to kick my fiancée's tail in thumb war."

Layla smiled at us with an *I told you so* grin plastered to her face.

"You mean you aren't upset?" I asked, my heart in my throat.

Luke looked up at me, a small, genuine smile on his face. "No. I trust you, man. If I didn't, you wouldn't be my best friend. I know you're a good guy. Plus, she doesn't need my permission."

I'm sorry...*what?*

Had I known what his reaction would be, I could've saved so much time. So many struggles. So much mental anguish at the thought of what he might say. Not once did I imagine his words being anything remotely close to this.

I sniffed, holding back the tears threatening to escape. Because I was absolutely about to cry over this stupid

friendship that I should have known wouldn't be shaken so easily.

Flinging myself into the booth, I wrapped my arms around Luke's neck. He was taller than me, and the booth wasn't huge, so it was a little awkward, but he couldn't just blurt out stuff like that and not expect a bro-hug.

Luke patted my back. "All right, buddy. It's okay."

I sniffled a little more.

In my periphery, Layla slid out of the booth and put an arm around Calla. "Come on. Let's give them a moment."

Calla snorted. "Men. So emotional."

I was going to get her for that remark. But for now, I just wanted to hug my best friend a little longer.

Once I settled down (read: once Calla pulled me off Luke's neck), the four of us settled into the booth, and Calla and I answered all the questions they had.

Luke closed his eyes and shook his head. "Let me get this straight. You two"—he pointed to us both—"have been emailing each other this whole time? For *ten years*? And you had no idea?"

Calla nodded. "Pretty much."

Luke squinted. "Oh my gosh. So the girl you were interested in like two years ago was *Calla*?"

A warmth spread through my chest and up to my cheeks.

Calla pulled on my arm, her eyes those of a puppy begging for treats. “Aw, really?”

I shrugged, feigning nonchalance. “Sounds about right.”

“Perfect,” Layla said, resting her head on Luke’s shoulder and pointing at Calla. “It’s the romance you’ve been waiting for.” Then she pointed at me. “And the loyalty you deserve.”

It *was* perfect. The kind of perfect that could urge a person to look over their shoulder in fear that things were too good to be true. Only, I had this strange feeling that when I looked over mine, all I’d see was the good. A future full of love and hope. I didn’t know what it held. There would no doubt be trials and tribulations. But as long as I had her beside me, I’d gladly take on every one of them.

“Are you going to keep living together?” Luke asked.

I glanced at Calla for direction, and she looked up at me with a mixture of fear and hope in her eyes. “If that’s okay?”

I snaked an arm around her waist, pulling her closer to me and placing a small kiss on her forehead. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Luke groaned across from us. “Aw, man. I’m going to regret being cool about this whole thing, aren’t I?”

I pulled back from Calla just enough to point at him. “I was forced to watch you two flirt for three years straight. It’s about time I get my payback.”

Layla snorted and Luke shrugged. “Fair.”

Calla's phone buzzed on the table in front of us, and she practically launched off the seat to grab it. She unlocked it with such frantic motions that she nearly dropped it. She quickly swiped down, refreshing her email, only to slump and set the device on the table again.

It was a sore subject, but Calla hadn't heard back from her interview yet. They were supposed to give her an answer by today, and although I warned her that things like this could be delayed, she'd been stuck in her head since she woke up today. We'd lounged in bed for a long time this morning, but she'd refreshed her email every five minutes or so, then she'd checked her spam folder just in case.

She frowned, and the most pathetic little pout spread across those beautiful lips.

"They may not have an answer just yet, but don't give up." I let my thumb trail across her skin in hopes of reassuring her.

She nodded. "Let's talk about something else." Straightening, she dropped her elbows to the table. "A week till the wedding. Are you getting nervous?" Calla cupped a hand to her mouth and leaned close to Layla, whispering, "If you're getting cold feet, it's not too late."

Luke dug a pen out of his pocket and threw it at his sister as Layla and I chuckled.

"Nah, she's stuck with me. She's already my wife in my mind. We're just signing papers and having a party to confirm."

Those words gave me hope that, one day, I'd get to say something similar about Calla. I pictured her in a white dress, veil trailing behind her, insane flowers in her hand, and her hair all done up. She'd probably want to eat cake the second the ceremony was over, and she'd definitely break out the inappropriate dance moves in front of our families. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Layla hummed in contentment. "Not nervous. I can't wait. I figured you two could walk down the aisle together, and Liam and Marigold could go together."

"Oof" was Calla's response.

"I know," Layla continued with a sigh. "And then Adam and Rachel, if they're okay with it."

"What about Crew?" I asked.

Luke scoffed. "He didn't tell you?"

I looked at Calla and back at him. "Uh, no?"

"Crew is"—Layla blew out a breath—"officiating the wedding."

Calla burst into laughter, snorting and hitting my leg under the table.

"Oh, this ought to be good."

Crew Wells presiding over a wedding? It was bound to be... something.

The conversation continued, and the girls talked ceremony logistics, but I couldn't help but let my mind trail to the time

the four of us were here more than a month ago, and how everything had changed since then.

And how I'd never want to turn back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Calla



Age 16:

To: shinyobjects@gmail.com

From: lilypad10@gmail.com

Weddings are overrated. When I get married, I want to jump out of a helicopter with my groom. The priest will have to scream over the wind. We'll kiss when we land. And then he'll give me a puppy as his first gift to me as his bride.

Sounds a little crazy, but if he's going to marry me, he's gonna have to be a little crazy, you know?

And then, of course, cake and what not. BRB. Going to Pinterest now to look for dresses that are suitable for both skydiving and a reception.

Lily

Layla stood in front of a full-length mirror in a perfect white gown. The front pieces of her long, glossy brown hair were elegantly held in place by a delicate hairpiece adorned with a subtle floral arrangement. The rest of it cascaded gracefully down her back in soft waves. A few loose strands framed her face, giving her a touch of gentle allure. Her tan complexion glowed with a healthy and natural radiance, complemented by a soft, rosy blush that enhanced her cheeks, reflecting her excitement and happiness on such a special day.

Her white gown was a masterpiece, carefully chosen to accentuate her figure. A sleek, elegant silhouette that hugged her curves. The dress was adorned with delicate embellishments that caught the light and created an otherworldly aura around her.

Why had I ever thought weddings were silly?

I'd witnessed Layla cry at least four times this morning, and every time one of us would ask if she was all right, she would choke out an "I'm just...so...happy" between sniffles. And if Layla was like this, then I couldn't imagine how much my brother was losing his mind outside.

Liam's house was the perfect venue for a small wedding. The home itself was cozy and intimate, setting the mood perfectly for what Luke and Layla needed.

It had this charming weathered-wood finish that showed the age of the home despite its recent renovations. There was a pond out back. When he first bought the place, I'd come over practically every day. The aroma of blooming flowers in their

boxes on the windows and freshly cut grass reminded me of spring, sunshine, and all things happy. Once Liam added a large covered gazebo with the perfect view of the undeveloped acreage around it, I would pull a chair out there and listen to the gentle chirping of birds or the wind rustling through the trees. Occasionally, a fish would jump out of the pond, creating ripples.

The whole property was a serene, sheltered sanctuary. It felt like home. I'd always wondered why Liam had wanted such a big place after his divorce, but I'd never asked.

The house had three bedrooms and two bathrooms when Liam bought it. And over the years, he'd renovated it room by room. New paint and floors, and even special features in the boys' room. A firehouse pole and a secret bookshelf door to a closet. Recently, Liam finished the attic, adding an extra bedroom and half bath. He said it was for resale value, but I'd heard the mention of it being his forever home when he bought it. Either way, the attic was just as gorgeous as the rest of the house.

My mom, Rachel, Marigold, and I stood in a half circle around Layla. She fit into this family perfectly, like she had always been here. Her love for my brother was a miracle, since he was a giant nerd and kind of annoying, but we couldn't have asked for a better addition to the Wells family. After they'd tiptoed around each other for years, the pieces had finally fallen into place perfectly.

My mom wiped at her eyes. “I always knew this day would come. I’ve been waiting for this since the night he came home for dinner and told me his new coworker loved *Revenge of the Sith* as much as he did.”

Rachel and I couldn’t help but howl in laughter. They were such nerds.

“Aw, you guys should have gotten matching lightsabers that say Mr. and Mrs. Wells.”

Layla sighed as she played with a stray curl framing her face. “They’re on the way.”

Yeah, she was definitely right for Luke.

On the dresser across the room, my phone buzzed, and I stood to grab it. “It’s probably Nathan. He said he would let me know when the boys were all lined up.”

Only when I unlocked my phone, it wasn’t Nathan. It was an email from Angela.

Calla, thank you for being so patient. My son has been ill, so I’m playing catch-up. I wanted to reach out and offer you the job as social media coordinator for the Phillies. If you are still interested, I can send over the offer package along with detai—

My phone fell to the floor with a loud thud, and I froze in place. “Oh my gosh.”

“Is everything all right?” Layla turned in a panic, her breathing turning rapid.

All I could do was let out a manic laugh and shake my head. There was no way this was real.

“Please tell me Luke didn’t get cold feet.” Layla’s eyes went misty like she was about to break into tears.

I blinked, taking in my surroundings. Yeah, that didn’t look too good. “Oh, no. No, no, no. Nothing to do with the wedding. I just have—” I clamped my mouth shut. Nathan was the reason I’d gotten the offer in the first place. I had him to thank for this opportunity, and he was the one who deserved to know first.

“Excuse me,” I mumbled. I bit my lip to hold back a smile and scurried from the room. I hoofed it down the stairs and to the backyard where the boys were milling around.

I halted as I took in the yard. White picket fence lined the perimeter, adorned with delicate blooms that added splashes of color to the landscape. The yard had been transformed into a romantic venue, with a beautifully decorated archway under the pergola, standing as the altar’s focal point. The golden rays of the setting sun cast a warm glow over the surroundings. A soft breeze rustled through the leaves of the nearby trees, creating a gentle whisper that would accompany the vows. The aisle, lined with flower petals in hues of pastel pinks, purples, and whites, led from the house’s entrance to the pergola. A few wooden chairs were arranged neatly on either side of the aisle, each one adorned with a delicate ribbon or a small bouquet of fresh flowers.

Standing alongside my brothers was Nathan. He exuded elegance in his immaculate navy tuxedo. His well-groomed scruff added a touch of rugged charm, perfectly complementing his flawlessly styled hair. I was ready to climb the man like a tree.

At full speed now, I ran to him. I was still barefoot, the neatly trimmed grass tickling my feet as a medley of floral scents hit my nose.

He turned to me and gripped my upper arms, his eyes full of concern. “Is everything all right?”

It took me a second to realize he thought that maybe I was hurt. Adorable.

I gripped his arm back, a smile taking over my whole face. “Yes. Perfect, actually. Can I borrow you for a minute?”

He looked at my dad and my brothers for approval. Luke nodded at him with a small smile, and then he turned to me. “Come on. We can go back here.”

He pointed to the far side of the property, where Liam had a two-car workshop. I grabbed his hand and yanked him around the side of it until we were out of sight of our friends and family. Back here, the trees provided the perfect amount of shade.

“What’s going on?” Nathan searched my face, then scanned me from head to toe, taking in my bridesmaid dress. The enchanting gown draped gracefully in a captivating shade of sage green. Its bodice hugged my figure with tailored

precision, accentuating my waist and bestowing an air of sophistication that made me look as if I hadn't eaten a hot dog for breakfast.

He smiled a little. "You look like heaven."

I snorted. Man, I loved how cheesy he was. It made my romance-loving heart soar. Squeezing the hand I was still gripping, I bounced on my toes. "I got the job!"

He paused, his eyes widening. "You—you got it?"

My nod was feverish. "I just got an email from Angela. They're going to send an offer package over."

Nathan's initial shock transformed into a radiant and delighted grin, causing him to gently place his hands on my waist. With a surprising ease, he lifted me off the ground and twirled me around in pure euphoria. As my hair flowed freely behind me, my joyous giggles filled the air, adding to the magical moment.

Once I was on my feet again, he embraced me tightly, peppering kisses along my hairline, my jawline, and my cheeks, savoring each tender touch. Our connection intensified as he pressed his lips against mine, a sweet and lingering moment that seemed to suspend time itself.

"What did I tell you? I knew you would get it."

He had. The man had reassured me over and over that this was in the bag. And instead of listening to him, I'd relied on my own understanding and doubted myself again.

I sniffed. "I love you so much."

He kissed me once more. “I love you more.”

Our lips collided. I stood on the tips of my toes and pulled him down to me by his tie. In response, he grasped my waist, squeezing me and bringing me as close to him as I could be.

As we took our time walking back to the house, my phone buzzed.

Mom: We’re about to line up. Could you at least wait till after their ceremony to make me more grandkids?

I laughed out loud and showed Nathan the text.

His face flushed and he ducked his head. His once-styled hair was a mess from my hands. I swore he’d never looked better.

“As soon as you’re ready.”

We hadn’t even talked about marriage yet, and the guy was saying he was ready to have babies with me. I honestly didn’t think I could have loved him more.

When we were all lined up, Nathan and I linked arms, and he dropped one more kiss to my cheek.

Layla, her thin white veil in place, walked down the aisle. Luke and Layla had made a joint decision that they were better off without her parents in attendance. When we asked who would walk her down the aisle, Crew offered first. But then we reminded him that he was officiating the wedding.

Eventually, she decided to walk by herself. She just wanted to get to Luke. She said she didn’t need to be given away

because he already had her. At the end of the aisle, Luke was beaming, his eyes welling with tears. He looked dapper in a navy-colored suit that matched the relaxed and rustic ambiance. Luke and Layla exchanged their vows and rings, filling the air with their love and commitment and touching the hearts of all of us. Crew happily read their commitments to each other from a piece of paper I was pretty sure he'd just printed out. A few tears of happiness were shed, and the atmosphere was filled with a sense of love, support, and unity.

After the ceremony, the newlyweds practically skipped down the aisle hand in hand, encouraged by cheers and applause from their loved ones. The celebration continued into the evening. The reception was filled with laughter, dancing, and toasts, as the stars twinkled above, blessing the couple's journey into the future together.

As I watched the newlyweds dance under the string lights, Rachel snickered behind me. "Uh, Calla. There's a twig in your hair."

Nathan leaned down to whisper to me, "If we hadn't been interrupted, it would've been the whole bush."

I laughed and fell into his hold as his arms wrapped around each side of me.

It was then that I knew he was always going to be far better than any romance book boyfriend I had ever had.

He pressed a kiss to the temple of my forehead and whispered, "I don't think it could get any better than this."

And I couldn't agree more.

EPILOGUE

Nathan



Except, somehow, it did get better.

I watched Calla as she attempted to screw in a bolt on the set of monkey bars she'd purchased for her nephews. For the past hour, she had been outside Liam's house, grunting and cursing at the wind, attempting to put together a way too expensive, possibly never going to be used parkour set for the boys.

Dallas and Miles would've appreciated a twenty-dollar bill as much as the giant play set, but Calla liked being the cool aunt. In fact, Calla liked it so much that she had been calling Layla, Rachel, and Marigold to see what the rest of them were bringing to ensure she'd one-up them.

Selfishly, I stayed back and enjoyed the view of her in the tiny denim shorts that rode up every time she jumped to make sure the monkey bars weren't loose. I had set up the base of the structure, but I liked sitting back and watching her do the rest herself.

Leaning back in the Adirondack chair on Liam's newly extended back porch, I smiled. I was feeling grateful for my sunglasses. They allowed me to take Calla in as much as I wanted without getting crap from her brothers.

"Does she know the party doesn't start for another hour?" Marigold asked as she stepped through the open French doors with two water bottles.

Her hair was a mess. She looked exactly like the mom of twin nine-year-old boys who'd spent the entire day setting up for their party.

"I think so? She's been at it for going on three hours, and she still hasn't figured out how to get the last piece in to screw that top bar."

Probably because I'd hidden it in my back pocket when she wasn't looking. I wanted to watch this scene play out a little longer.

Marigold sighed happily next to me as she watched her former sister-in-law piecing together the giant set. She handed a water bottle to me, and I took in the label. Marigold had covered the label with a custom one: Spiderman wearing a Call Of Duty mask and holding a football under one arm.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "Uh, what's the theme?"

Sighing, she ran a hand through her hair. "Chaos, Nathan. The theme is chaos."

It was hard not to laugh. Karma was probably going to come back to me for laughing, but it was comical watching her

run around like the sky was falling if the napkins weren't set right.

Liam stood from where he had been fixing a spot where the stain "didn't match perfectly." I guess he and Marigold had different opinions on getting ready for a party.

"What do you need from me?" Liam asked, sweat dripping down his forehead just below his backward cap.

Marigold rolled her eyes. "No, by all means, your stain is all I'm worried about. Not like you've got fifty children coming over expecting a magical birthday party since Adeline Phillips tipped the fire department to come to Andrew's party last month. The standards in this school district have now been set so high we might as well have hired Tom Holland himself to be here as Spiderman." She huffed and stomped a foot before turning to the door.

I glanced back to Liam, who was smirking as she walked away, his eyes trained below her waist. It was a look I was all too familiar with myself.

Which reminded me...I turned back to Calla, who had somehow managed to get the final bar to hang without the bolt I was hiding in my back pocket. She was swinging upside down from the bottom bar, her hair dangling almost to the ground and her smile wide.

"Having fun?" I shouted her way.

She shrugged. "Monkeying around."

I snorted and got up from my chair and headed toward her.

“Party is in an hour. Want to relax for a bit before the real chaos starts?”

Calla grinned at me and, grasping the bar with both hands, flipped and dismounted gracefully. “I should probably help Marigold.” She said, peering over my shoulder. “I’m sure Liam’s driving her insane.”

I spun, following her line of sight. On the other side of the glass French doors, Marigold was holding a spatula out like she was going to slap her ex-husband with it. Liam was grinning at her, and I could practically hear the sarcasm dripping off every one of his words. He did it just to rile her up.

Behind Marigold, Mama B was holding a tray of beach cookies out like an offering.

Side by side, Calla and I chuckled. The more time I spent around the Wells family, the more I felt like I fit in here. Truly fit in.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. The vibration was louder than usual since the device was pressed up against a velvet ring. To be clear, I had no intention of proposing at a kids’ birthday party. I was more romantic than that. I had bought a four-carat diamond ring, even though Calla would happily accept a candy ring. But she deserved the best.

Luke had helped me pick it out three months ago, and when the salesman mentioned the price of the ring, he almost fainted right there beside me. Business had been good for the past six months. Ever since a TikTok Calla had posted of me playing

guitar with three kids in my class had gone viral, my lessons were booked out months in advance. I accepted as many new students as I could, but I was resigned to starting a waiting list. There just weren't enough hours in the day. Even after I finally left West Oak.

Quitting in front of Chad and Janise had been glorious, especially when I shouted, "Per my last email!" as I strode out of Janise's office. I didn't really understand the sentiment, but Luke said they would know, so it felt right.

Calla handled all my social media, along with working full time for the Phillies. She'd done amazing things with my brand, and once that TikTok video took off, I had a massive following almost overnight. There were even a few BuzzFeed articles going viral that mentioned me. It was unreal, but we were thankful. Thankful that we were both given the opportunity to chase our dreams.

And now, my newest dream was to officially—and legally—make Calla mine. I was ready to slide this ring on her finger and call her Mrs. Huxley.

But again, not at a children's birthday party.

Calla combed her wild hair and headed to the house. My gaze lingered on her form, my attention snagging on the way her hair caught the light of the sun above her, creating a dance of caramel and rich chocolate strands.

The sight had me reminiscing about the first time we met and how her laughter had echoed in my ears like a melody I couldn't get out of my head. Every shared adventure, every

stolen kiss, and every whispered promise played like a movie in my mind. A soft chuckle escaped me as I recalled the last year and all the time we had spent watching the world go by, lost in our own little universe. The feeling of her hand in mine, the warmth of her body against my side—it was all imprinted on my heart and etched into my soul.

“You coming with me?” I blinked out of my reverie to find her watching me with a smile.

I’d go anywhere she went. Instinctively, I slid my hand into my pocket and grasped the small box.

“Yeah, I am.”

Also by Juliana Smith:

Per My Last Email

Baggage Claim

I Can Fix That

PHEW. WE DID IT!

I can't tell you how much I fell in love with these two, but at the same time I wanted to strangle them throughout writing this. Any author would agree with me when I say sometimes our characters do things that we could never expect, and in this one Calla was a rebellious little booger. That being said, she is also my absolute favorite.

I had SO MUCH FUN with the emails as this was a completely different style for me but it was great for me to grow in my creative abilities!

I have a city (a very small city but still) of people to thank for this book but I'm going to go with those who impacted me the most.

First, my sweet, precious, incredibly good looking, mountain-bike-loving husband. I don't think I could put my shoes on in the morning without you, much less write a book. You are constantly encouraging me and pushing me to my next

stage in life and I am so grateful! Thank you for being the best husband and father to our precious girl, Saylor.

Then of course, my pancakes. You guys are a constant resource of love, patience, and kindness and I couldn't be more grateful. I love you each more than you know and I am blessed to annoy each of you for the rest of our author careers.

Alexis and Kayla, you guys are the sweetest girls ever and I just had to say a special thank you to you both! You ladies are such an inspiration in my spiritual life and mom life. I have no idea how I went so long without you two and all of our girls being friends but I am just so grateful for you both. Praying for you guys and your family as always!

Sam, OF COURSE, for always killing it with this cover. It is one of my favs you've ever done and I can't wait to continue to work with you till you eventually fire me. hehe.

Beth, for being the BEST editor!! You have incredible talent to really shine up a turd (kidding but also not lol) and you are so great at pushing me to be my best self with writing! I also love that we have such a similar taste in music despite me being the same age as your children, which is honestly hilarious.

MOST OF ALL, THANK YOU!

My readers, I would never ever write more than one book if it weren't for you guys. Your never ending love and encouragement is a daily reminder that God brought me here for a reason. You guys are all so precious to me, even if we've never spoke.

Let's do this again. :)

Juliana Smith is an author in a small town in Alabama. She is a full-time realtor, and part-time author, but she spends a lot of her free time with her husband and daughter. Juliana writes heartfelt romance filled with laughter and warm fuzzies. She can usually be found in a Chic-fil-a drive-thru or listening to Star Wars theory podcasts, often at the same time.

To subscribe to her super amazing newsletter and receive VIP behind-the-scenes, special offers, and exclusives go to her Instagram [@authorjulianasmith](#) .