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Or, are they...*

some kind of blunderful

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To The Office Ladies Jenna Fischer and Angela Kinsey. You'll never see this, but your podcast and my Office re-watch inspired so much of this story. If I had a Schrute Buck for every laugh you've given me, I'd have infinitely many Stanley Nickels.

And to my real life "Office Ladies" Shanda and Hilary, who support this wild writing endeavor both at home and at Disney.

One

MIA

The road to Hades is paved with suspiciously hot online dating profiles.

I peek at Alex's picture for the fourth time in twenty minutes. He's cologne-model handsome: amber eyes that glint with mischief, light stubble, a roguish smile. The kind of timeless hot that your grandma and twenty-year-old cousin can agree on.

Could be my dream guy. Could be a catfisher. Online dating is a real coin toss, but unless I bump into a suitable man—"suitable" meaning he has a job, car, and an address that he doesn't share with a wife or girlfriend—and he declares it love at first sight, I'm not sure how else to meet someone.

My gaze sweeps the expanse of picnic tables in this food truck courtyard. If he's not here at the thirty-minute mark, I'll give up the wait, order my bacon feta panini to go, and pretend this never happened.

Not for the first time, I wonder if the angst of dating will be worth it. I feel like an exposed beating heart just waiting to be trampled every time I agree to meet someone. I am Mufasa, and the men from Bumble-Tinder-Match-dot-com are my personal Scars.

I glance around. Alex's profile claims he's over six feet—which probably means he isn't—so I keep my sights set accordingly as I sip my sweet tea. The smells of fried dough and blooming magnolia mix and mingle in the air to create the distinct perfume of a North Georgia spring night.

My best friend Josie swears that asking men to meet in real life is the easiest way to weed out the app's non-contenders—the guys who only want to spam you with nudes or lose interest when you suggest an actual, honest-to-god *date*. Given she's on a ten-date streak with a man she asked out on the app, I gave her strategy a shot and asked Alex out immediately after we matched.

Like fishtail braids and complex dessert recipes, some things just work better for Josie.

I check the time on my watch. The last remaining seconds of the buffer zone burn like the fuse of a dead firework.

Time of date death: seven thirty.

An embarrassing ache blooms in my chest. Forcibly ignoring it, I abandon my picnic table and join the long line in front of the Persnickety Pig to get my consolation dinner.

I scroll to Josie's number. She answers on the third ring, her velvet speakeasy voice a sound for sore ears. "Mia! You're supposed to be on a date."

"He didn't show up."

"Oh *no*."

"Oh yes. My third ghosting in two months. Just call me boo." I draw a circle in the dirt with the toe of my shoe, heat flooding my cheeks. "I hate these apps."

"I'm sorry." There's a rustling on her end and a crescendo of cricket song, like she's scooting out to her porch to take the call. "What's his name? Should I go find his profile and swipe left to make him feel bad about himself?"

"It's fine."

"It's not fine! You deserve a date with a decent guy who is jumping at the chance to meet you." She *tsks* directly into my ear drum. "Mercury in retrograde strikes again. I should've told you to schedule this for after next Tuesday."

I don't know what the strike of retrograde means, and at this point in our friendship, it's too late to ask. "No harm, no foul."

"At least he wasn't one of the Bait and Switchers, right?"

This pulls a laugh deep from my chest. The men with fantastic profiles who turn out to be totally different in real life make for some of the worst dates and best stories.

"I didn't even tell you about the most recent BS-er," I say. "This burly redhead lured me in last weekend with a killer 'about me' section. Ten minutes into dinner, he looked me dead in the eye, ripped a bite of fried chicken from the bone, and said, *I'd like to pay you an hourly rate to cook for me in your lingerie*—with his mouth still full."

"Talking with his *mouth full*? Straight to jail."

“That’s your primary objection?”

“Honestly, yes.” Josie’s laugh fades and leaves a soft sigh in its wake. “You okay?”

I blink up at the starry sky. If there’s one upside to being left at the altar by your high school sweetheart, it’s that the experience made me resilient. It took a broken heart and tens of thousands of dollars wasted on a wedding to get to this point, but a few bad/non-dates in a row aren’t going to crush me.

Doesn’t feel great, though.

“Peachy keen,” I finally say. “It’s really for the best. The dude was extremely good looking. Like *too hot to be real*.”

“Oh? How hot are we talking?”

Alex’s smile flits in and out of my mind. “He’s hot enough that people would see us side by side and think, *What blackmail does she have on him?*”

“Excuse you, hottie. Do we need to revisit our daily affirmations? Repeat after me: ‘I am a ten. My presence is a gift. I am enough.’ Let’s hear ’em, Mia.”

My mind wanders back to all the times I made Josie recite uplifting mantras after a bad date while blissfully unaware my own engagement was hurtling toward a cliff. I’m sure she didn’t want to say them any more than I do right now. “I’m a ten. I’m a gift basket of bruised pears left on someone’s doorstep, turning sour in the heat. I don’t need a man, because relationships never end well, and I am perfectly capable of doing this whole ‘life’ thing on my own, thank you very—”

“Ma’am. Those are not the affirmations.”

“What? It’s true. I’m going to enjoy a nice solo dinner, and then I’m going to go home, do yoga, and fall asleep to *Two Broke Girls* reruns. Then I’ll repeat that cycle indefinitely. See? No man needed.”

“Of course you don’t *need* one, Miss Independent. But it’s okay to want one. Don’t let setbacks make you feel like you can’t put yourself out there again. You’ve got to kiss a lot of frogs to find your prince. Which brings me to the silver lining of tonight: now you can go on that double date I told you about. My new man already planted the seed with his friend. Plenty of other fish in the sea.”

“The sea is full of trash, and aquatic life is dying in droves. Even the fish aren’t safe,” I point out.

“For someone who claims to be okay, you don’t sound okay.”

“Sorry. I guess I’m a little frustrated with myself. I should’ve known better

than to swipe for him. He has one of those *here for a good time, not a long time* profiles. It's just a bulleted list of places he's traveled to followed by his bucket list items, which are more trips and thrill-seeking stuff like skydiving. Like, we get it, you have ample free time and an expendable income. And dudes with money are loudly opinionated about what other people should do with theirs." The sadness expands in my chest like a pufferfish the longer I talk. "It just gets so tiring, you know? I wish people took these apps seriously and put what they're looking for in a relationship right in their bio. What's a girl gotta do to find a—"

"Excuse me—"

"—nice, monogamous man? The dude I was meeting tonight couldn't even commit to one *date*. I'm not asking for much, just a guy who would rather lay around and watch *Bridgerton* with me on a Friday night than go to a bar. Bonus points if he's not afraid to admit it gets him hot and bothered. Someone who doesn't need exotic trips or skydiving to have a good time, lets me be me, and enjoys weekly trips to the flea market followed by good sex. Or, heck, missionary in the dark where no one speaks." I groan. "I'm so tired of silicon orgasms. I need a good ol' fashioned—"

"Mia?"

My thoughts fall off a steep cliff.

I peer over my shoulder. A man with burnt-coffee-colored hair, the perfect amount of dark stubble, and newly familiar eyes looms behind me, illuminated by the soft light of decorative tiki torches.

Alex.

I stare, mouth agape.

"I have to go, Jo." I shove the phone in my purse and turn to face him. "Alex?"

"That's me." He offers me a big hand to shake. His fancy Rolex glints in the torch light. The silver band is bright against his tan skin. "Nice to meet you. It is Mia, right?"

"Yup."

Though the temptation to assume a new identity is at an all-time high.

Our palms meet. My blood hums in my ears as my gaze moves across his smile—nice but a little too *knowing*, like he's in on a joke I'm not privy to—down his arm—firm, like my commitment to never speaking on the phone in public again—all the way to our joined hands. He's in a snug hunter-green shirt that does his arms and chest every favor in the world and worn jeans that

are *exactly* the right length. Harrowing in the precision of their fit.

Unfortunately, his profile picture is an accurate representation of how he looks in real life. I would argue that the great photo doesn't even do him justice.

Which makes this all the more mortifying.

I dry swallow. "How much did you hear?"

His expression is cryptic. "Not a lot."

He's lying to spare us both. I can feel it. But since I can't imagine anything worse than hearing the words *silicon orgasms* repeated back to me, I do not ask for clarification.

"Cool." I hook a thumb through my purse strap and blink toward the pink-and-white-striped awning jutting out from the truck. "I see you found the courtyard."

"I did. Your request to meet didn't specify which truck. What are the odds we'd wander up to the same one with eight to choose from?" he asks with a tight smile.

My request. There is something decidedly unromantic about the way he phrased that. Requests are for Venmo or library books.

"It's the best truck on the lot," I say, scraping the bottom of the barrel for conversational topics. "And who doesn't love a hot sandwich?"

"Sandwiches are great." His attention drops to his phone.

I bite the straw of my sweet tea as I pretend to watch the live musician tuning his guitar across the courtyard while actually studying Alex from the corner of my eye. Strange he only chose to post a headshot on the app; if I had a body like his, I'd post it on every platform. His legs could run their own account.

It's almost my turn to order. Time to address the elephant in the Persnickety Pig line. "So...are we still doing this?"

His gaze lifts for half a second before dropping back to the phone in his palm. "We've got to eat, right?"

We've got to eat, right? is about as romantic as me and Josie agreeing to go halvesies on an entree at the Cheesecake Factory to soak up our happy hour wine.

"We do," I hedge, eyeing his flying thumbs as he types. "Unless you've got something important going on. I can take my dinner to-go."

I'm giving him the perfect out. If he didn't like what he heard from my phone call, or doesn't like what he sees, he's more than welcome to take it.

“Nah, I’ll stay. This is just work—”

His phone blares. I jump at his ringtone, a siren that would give the local tornado horn a run for its money.

He checks the screen, and his brow furrows. “Sorry, I’ll be quick. My office is having a staffing crisis. If you want to go ahead and grab dinner, take this”—he reaches in his pocket and procures a card—“and get two of whatever you normally order.”

Before I can make sense of what’s happening, he places an American Express Platinum card in my palm and steps out of line.

I peer down at the Lexus of credit cards, or whatever car is nicer than a Lexus; as a teacher, I wouldn’t know.

After ordering two of my favorite bacon feta paninis and a sweet tea for him, I stall briefly when it’s time to pay. I was always going to pay for mine, but I can’t very well swipe that man’s card for his order when I don’t know his zip code or the bare minimum about him. Feels illegal.

This one’s on me, I guess.

A group vacates a table at the edge of the cluster. I swoop in to sit with our food until he returns. Etiquette dictates I don’t start without him.

I’ve waited this long to eat. How long could a call possibly take?

• • •

Twenty minutes later, when my concern has festered into full-blown dismay—*did he bail? Am I about to be framed for AmEx card theft?*—he drops into the seat in front of me, shaking the picnic table. He pockets the card I laid next to his food. “I’m sorry about that. I didn’t expect it to take so long. You could’ve eaten. You didn’t have to wait for me.”

“I wasn’t sure,” I say flatly, lifting my panini to my mouth. It’s cold, but I’d eat the paper bowl it came in at this point. “Did you solve your crisis?”

He waves this off. “They’ll live. It’s not the end of the world, even if they think it is.”

Based on him having a *siren* as a ringtone, something tells me he doesn’t quite believe that.

“Okay, back to you.” He tries to meet my eye, but I evade and choke down a bite, still too hangry to forgive. “Your profile said you’re a professional kid wrangler. What does that mean?”

“I teach preschool at Avondale Elementary.”

“Oh, wow. What’s that like?” By the awe and fear in his tone, you’d think

I'd confessed to a life of crime.

A vision of my students squealing over the new interactive white board, mounted on my freshly painted mint wall, pops into my head.

How do I put how I feel about my job into words? It's like a scrumptious apple pie with way too much filling. Delicious, but impossible to finish in a reasonable amount of time. Hard to imagine eating every day indefinitely. It's a steppingstone I'm afraid I'll be trapped on forever while my biggest career goal remains out of reach.

But given Alex looks horrified at the mere *thought* of teaching, I tuck thoughts away and give him the party line. "It's a joy. My classroom is my happy place, and I just won a grant to spruce it up. I'm going to learn how to build a sensory wall. That should be fun."

He lets out a low whistle. "I don't know how you do it. I've worked with a lot of former teachers who quit after a few years. They've told me horror stories about tough kids. You must have the patience of a saint."

The wind leaves my sails in a gust. "Horror stories? That makes me sad."

"Oh, don't worry! They're all fine." He pulls his bowl closer and studies his panini. When he takes a bite, the crunch of cold toasted bread is almost obscene. "They've all ended up loving their new roles."

I was more sad about the tough kids, very likely acting out their traumas in an underfunded, out-of-date public school system that doesn't meet their needs, but all right. "Well, I'm happy for them, then. I'm lucky to work at such a great school."

His gaze flits across my face. "Nice. I could never. You deserve all the money in the world."

I fight a grimace. All I hear in his tone is *have fun with that, I'd rather take a long walk off a short pier*. "Not a fan of kids?"

"Hard to say. Haven't really been around a kid before."

I chew on this. In addition to being a teacher, I'm an aunt to three kiddos. It's impossible to fathom having never been around one. He'd keel over and die at a Madden family event.

He opens his sandwich, studies the contents, removes the tomatoes, and replaces the bread.

"Oh, sorry." I point at his bowl. "Didn't realize you weren't a tomato guy."

"Just a texture thing. And a taste thing. It's not usually a big deal, but they put *so many* on there. I can't for the life of me figure out why they'd serve a perfectly good sandwich this way."

I clear my throat. “You said order two of what I usually get. I always double the tomato. They’re my favorite food.”

“Ah.” He casts a sheepish look at his dinner. “Very healthy of you. Do you count your macros and stuff?”

“I would rather count my days on Earth than count macros, honestly.”

He winces. “Right.”

Note to self: Alex almost assuredly counts his macros. I guess it makes sense, with a body like that.

Time to pivot. “What’s your favorite movie?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t think I’ve seen a movie start to finish since college, truth be told. You into stand-up comedy?”

I pick my proverbial jaw off the ground. *Who would watch a comedy act over a good movie?*

“No stand-up for me,” I say. “My anxiety flares just thinking about that. Those poor people are up there on stage sweating under the bright spotlight, fighting for their lives. Everyone is cringing in the audience, wondering what they’re going to say next. How can anyone tolerate it?”

His smile is wry. “I love it. Everyone is hanging on the comedian’s every word, and the energy is electric. I could watch it all day.”

Awesome. I shift in my seat, avoiding his eye.

I once accidentally walked naked in the background of my ex-fiancé Mason video chatting his extended family, and it was still somehow less awkward than this conversation. I need to pivot again. I’m basically Ross from *Friends* moving the couch at this point. “Do you have family around here?”

“Nope. Just a friend from college.”

I nod as I consider this. Moving to a new place without family nearby would be hard. “Sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry for,” he says, his tone breezy enough that I believe him. “What about you?”

My dad and two sisters may be in my business 24-7-365 and keen to share their opinions on my every decision, but I can’t imagine not having them close by. “My whole family is here. My dad, my two sisters and their spouses and kids.” Warmth moves through me. “Very rooted. I love that we’re all close. Makes parties much more fun, you know?”

“Huh,” he says, spinning his panini bowl as he watches me.

I don’t know if it’s a *huh* of surprise or confusion, and I’m not about to ask.

“There are worse places to be rooted,” he adds. “Avondale is nice. Small still, but it won’t be for long. It’s the next high development spot.”

I sigh, visualizing the new bank building that now casts my wing of the school in nearly perpetual shade. “I’ve heard. What a bummer.”

He laughs until he realizes I wasn’t kidding. “Oh, sorry, I thought— It’ll be great for home values, though, right? All the growth?”

Right. All that inflation, which is killing my ability to purchase a home. But that’s more than he needs to know.

“Avondale has been the same for so long it’s weird seeing all the construction,” I admit. “I’m not all that excited about it.”

“Gotcha. Well, you could always move if you don’t end up liking the changes. Though you may be happier than you think once you get that second Target and some actual *roads* in this place. More than two lanes.”

I’ll see his two lanes and raise him three words: *lapse in pay*.

“It’s not easy to move across town, let alone to another city or state,” I say with a pointed stare. “It’s tough to line up leases and job start dates just right so there’s no overlaps or gaps. Plus, this is home, so I wouldn’t just move away.”

His brows furrow. “Really? You aren’t at all curious about what else is out there?”

“Not really, no. I’ve got a good thing going on here.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” He tents his hands beneath his chin, his gaze contemplative. He perks up a few seconds later. “Remember I mentioned former coworkers of mine who used to be teachers? If you want, I can give you some of their numbers if you ever want to reach out and see how their situations compare to yours in case you find yourself curious about pay and quality of life in other places.”

“Oh.” I nod noncommittally. And as much as I appreciate what I think is a well-intentioned offer, I’m not entirely sure what to do with it. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“No problem. Happy to make it happen.”

To use Alex’s answer, *huh*.

If he thinks it needs upgrading, I can’t help but wonder if my “situation” isn’t all that impressive to him.

I shouldn’t care. He may just enjoy helping. But internalizing people’s opinions on how I should live my life didn’t work out for me in the past. Not that Mason gave me much of a choice; his opinions took up a lot of real

estate in our household.

Regardless, I can always network on my own if that becomes something I want to do.

Silence wraps its arms around this table and squeezes. Even vaguely discussing the *F* word has ground this conversation to a halt.

Future. Not the other *F* word.

Which I'm not thinking about, because we don't seem to be on the same wavelength about much of anything.

I sigh. My soul sighs. Dating feels like a boxing match, and I'm one hit away from tapping out.

Two

ALEX

I've been on a lot of dates in a lot of places. Avondale Mia is the first to dislike me before the date even started.

I study her face as the cool night breeze sends a chill across my skin. It's a head scratcher as to why she asked me out in the first place if she hates my profile so much, but I enjoy a good puzzle as much as the next guy. More importantly, I'm hungry, and we're already here.

She's even more attractive in real life than in her photo: cute dimples bracketing full lips, warm brown eyes, and a glossy blond ponytail teenage me would've yanked for attention. When she smiles—the few times it's happened—it's almost enough to make me forget that after a thirty-minute wait by the willow tree outside the front gate in which I was *sure* she was blowing me off, I overheard her babbling about dead fish and dragging me and my dating profile when I stepped into line to grab dinner.

She's not entirely wrong for that. I told my best friend Ezra that putting my bucket list on my profile was cheesy. That's what I get for taking creative advice from a man whose own profile quotes *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

Cheek propped on my closed fist, I study the woman whose greatest dating wish is a trip to the flea market followed by missionary in the dark.

She laces her fingers together and leans into the table, her pretty eyes pinning me to my seat. "So, where are you from?"

"Philly," I say, intentionally vague. My upbringing doesn't make for good first-date conversation. "But in the last few years, I've lived in Portland, Denver, Salt Lake City, and San Francisco. Man, San Francisco was something special. Have you been?"

"Nope." She watches me with a curious gleam in her eyes. "Four major cities in a few years? My gosh, you must be so exhausted."

The response catches me off guard. Most women I've taken on dates seem to think this is interesting and want to talk about skiing or whether I experienced earthquakes in California (yes). Or they are too busy texting under the table to care one way or another. "Exhausted? Nah. Momentarily confused as to where I am when I wake up on any given day? Yes."

She moves a loose strand of hair the ponytail failed to contain off her face. "Why all the hopping around?"

"Everyone job-hops in their twenties, right?"

Her expression screams *does not compute*. "They do?"

"Sure." I shrug. "We've got to be flexible and follow the opportunities, wherever they are."

There's a lull between us as a smattering of people clap for the musician. "I've only ever done one job at one school," she says. "But on the plus side, my whole family went through school there, so we're legacies. And it's near my dad and sister's offices and my best friend's bakery. Job perks."

"That sounds nice," I say.

And I mean that—it sounds nice for her. Not me, though. If I'd have been stuck in my very first job, I would've been so bored and restless I'd have bought a volleyball and *Castaway*-ed myself just for a challenge.

Though to her point, I'm not close to my family. I don't have to take them into consideration when I'm making decisions. My aunt and uncle took me in when my mother—pregnant at fourteen—was prepared to put me up for adoption, operating under the assumption my mother would come around on being a parent when she was older, and I could keep their real son company in the meantime. She never did. Other than texts and Venmo requests from my cousin Derek, I'm on my own these days.

But telling Mia any of this would open the door to a much longer conversation I'm not inclined to have. No need to get too personal.

We lock eyes across the table, and my pulse jumps. Her stare is probing; if teaching doesn't work out, she would thrive in a boardroom. I swirl the cup of tea she ordered for me, refusing to look away until she does.

She breaks eye contact first, polishing off her last bite and folding her trash into a neat square. At least she enjoyed her sandwich since I'm not entirely sure she's enjoying my company.

New strategy. "How about I get us a round of margaritas from the Sweet Pica truck?"

"Oh, actually"—she grapples for her massive purse and starts digging

around—"I've got a cheaper idea."

That she'd worry about me footing the bill for two seven-dollar margaritas from a food truck is actually very thoughtful. "You do?"

"Yes." Victorious, she produces a bottle of red wine and brandishes it like a sword. "One of my student's parents gave me this today for teacher appreciation week. Screw off top and all. This will save us a few bucks."

"You don't have to worry about that," I assure her. "I'm happy to take care of it if you'd rather save your stash."

"No need!" She sets it on the warped wooden table and throws back the tiny amount of liquid remaining in her cup.

This is a first for me, but since she seems determined, I'll follow her lead. "Handy that you carry wine in your purse."

"I don't always. I've only had this one for a few hours since school ended. But I'm glad we can put it to use. Otherwise, I'd just go home and drink it by myself in my pajamas." Her babbling ceases as her gaze flies up to meet mine. "I mean, I wouldn't drink the whole thing. I might drink like half of it before I fall asleep."

Before I can stop myself, I imagine her in cute, skimpy pajamas sipping from the bottle.

I clear my throat and sit up a little straighter. "Makes sense."

Her face falls. "You think that's weird."

"No! Not at all." Though I'm not eager to tell her what I was thinking.

Her gaze flits between me and the bottle, like she's trying to figure out if I'm telling the truth. "It's fine, we don't have to drink it."

"Really, I think—"

"—you know what, I'll just put it back—"

We reach for it at the same second, our hands colliding. It tips sideways, sending red wine sloshing over the side of the table.

Our knuckles knock as we fight to stand it back up. She gives up and lets me fix it.

"*Crap*. I'm sorry." She glances down at her lap, then at the grass beside us. Her attention lingers on my legs. "Did it get on you? Or your...taco socks?"

I peer down and twist my ankle to see if my third favorite pair of socks are compromised. "Nope. Looks like neither of us was in the wine line of fire. It all fell on the ground."

We blink at each other for a few seconds.

She glances at the ground. "Got a straw?"

“The dirt will soak that up, or I could grab some napkins.” I meet her eye, watching the flicker of humor die out in real time. “Oh! You were kidding.”

My laugh is too little, too late.

Cheeks flushed, she makes quick work of recapping the bottle and shoving it back in her bag. I don’t fight her this time. She looks uncomfortable, which makes me secondhand uncomfortable.

My phone pulses against the table, giving me an excuse not to marinate in this awkwardness. Another incoming resume from my head of HR, Christos. With the lead accountant at my branch choosing *today* to quit, we’re scrambling for a replacement. He sends me a resume he’s approved, I approve it and send it to Timothy at corporate, Timothy sends it back, and I make the initial call. A corporate circle jerk that has interfered with tonight’s date.

While my phone is still illuminated, I glimpse a text from Ezra on the home screen.

Lunch is off for tomorrow. I’m staying at J’s.

A laugh bubbles up in my throat. Canceling lunch for noon *tomorrow*. The man is already gone on this girl, and it’s only been a few weeks. Leave it to Ezra to fall head over heels.

I turn the phone over and return my attention to Mia.

She’s watching the guitar performer on the grass. Her sunny yellow sweater has slipped further down one shoulder, revealing an expanse of smooth, pale skin.

My brain lights up with familiarity at the side view of her face, the delicate slope of her jaw and her flushed cheeks. *Deja vu* hits me hard and fast. We’ve definitely never met, but it feels like I’ve seen her before beyond just her profile picture.

She turns toward me, and our gazes snag. The back of my neck prickles with heat. I Hoover the rest of my sandwich in two big bites.

“So we talked about my work,” she says tentatively. “What do you do?”

“I just started a new position at a hospitality tech company. Moved here two months ago.”

“Hospitality tech company,” she echoes. “You don’t mean Peachtree Tech?”

“Peachtree Tech. Yes.”

Her face lights up. “My dad works there!”

Peachtree Tech's parent company, Georgia Sweet Solutions, hired me to spearhead the reorganization of their Avondale business. What was once a company that only focused on selling payment systems to hotels is rebuilding and expanding in scope, with me at the helm. Bringing companies up to speed with emerging tech, creating avenues for revenue growth, and streamlining day-to-day operations is what I do.

To put it plainly, I'm a fixer. Restructure, rebuild, repeat at the next company in a year or two.

What I *don't* do is talk about this stuff on dates, because it bores women to tears.

I lean back, flattening my palm against the wooden tabletop. "Huh. What are the odds?"

"Small town and all," she says. "I know Peachtree brought on quite a few new people. Also let go of a lot. Too many, if you ask me. People so close to retirement it feels criminal to send them back into the job-searching trenches in this economy."

I blink a few times, my cogs turning fast.

If she knew who I was—or rather, what my role is at Peachtree Tech, and what part I played in those "criminal" layoffs—would she have brought it up?

I shift in my seat. "Who's your dad?"

"Richard Madden. Have your paths crossed yet?"

The guitar player strikes the wrong chord. Or maybe my brain morphs it.

Richard Madden. Big Rich.

The head of our sales team, beloved by every single person in that office. That's not an exaggeration; the receptionist Brooks made a social media account with the handle @BigRichWisdom just to post the random things Richard says.

Work wise, he has the highest client satisfaction scores of anyone at the branch, has been with the company for decades, and is the consummate team player. Just yesterday the guy pitched in to help the maintenance man change all the air filters because "no one should operate a ladder without supervision." They stayed almost as late as I did.

He may be stuck in his ways, but he's good with people. That's why he's head of his department.

But I got the job he wanted.

That might have a little something to do with our current dynamic. One

founded on him lamenting every change I try to make because it's not how *he'd* do things if he was in charge. Never mind that I paid Vanderbilt a hefty sum of money for an MBA and reorganized four companies in as many years. This is what I do, whether he likes it or not.

At least I now get why Mia was wary of me from the jump; it's in her DNA, even if she doesn't know who I am.

And now I know why she looks familiar. He's got a photo on his desk, and I'm almost certain she's in it. My brain is hazy trying to recall it; I hold all our meetings on neutral conference room terrain, so I've only been in his office once for any real length of time.

"I've heard the name," I hedge.

Richard is way too involved in my day-to-day to get involved with his daughter. I'm positive it would bother him even more than I already bother him just by performing my job. Which is a lot.

Thankfully, this date with Mia is already over, if you can even call it a date. And if it wasn't over, I'd find a way to end it.

She tilts her head as if trying to place me. "Are you one of the new engineers?"

The specificity of her question, while fair, is about to lead us down a conversational road I'm not going to travel. I've got to end this.

"Product development," I lie, nerves flaring. I pluck my empty bowl off the table and rise to my feet. "Well, it was really nice to meet you, Mia. Thanks for joining me for dinner."

"Oh! Okay." She flashes the skin of her thigh as she hops up from the bench seat.

"You were done eating, weren't you? Didn't mean to rush you, it's just...I should really get going. Lots of work to do. Busy is as busy does, as the saying goes."

Silence falls between us as my made-up saying hangs in the air.

She blinks toward the parking lot. "I'll be on my way, then."

"Have a good night."

I watch her walk away, a weird combination of relief and frustration working through me.

I scrolled over a hundred profiles the night I found Mia's, and it's the only one that piqued my interest. The first line was, "The only games I play are of the board variety," and it made me laugh. And yeah, her photo did something for me—she's the apex of cute and sexy, the exact point on the graph where

the two concepts meet.

There goes that.

I step away from the table, pressing between my eyebrows to offset my growing headache. My shoe lands in the wine-soaked grass.

Oh, hell.

I take the long way to the parking lot, giving her plenty of time to exit the premises.

I care more than usual that this thing went south. For the first time ever, I actually went into a date hopeful for the idea of a second one, or maybe even something more.

With my last three jobs, I didn't bother looking for anything long lasting in any of those cities. I knew the assignments would be short, and no one wants a man who's always on the move.

Great for broadening my horizons. Terrible for developing relationships.

When I saw the Peachtree Tech job was based at a branch near Ezra's town, I jumped at the chance to be considered, knowing it would put me near my college roommate-turned-best friend. In the friendship department, I'm covered.

Romantically...let's just say Mia's profile gave me *what-if* ideas.

Then reality took those ideas and put them through a meat grinder.

Maybe dating is just harder than it needs to be. Or maybe I should stick to meeting women organically. You never know what you're going to get on an app. Daughters of your coworker—or nemesis, depending on who you ask—for example.

Dropping into my car, I reply to Ezra's text.

No problem about lunch.

As I start my ignition, I catch the sight of Mia standing next to a red Kia, rustling around in her purse. The search lasts a comical amount of time. How much stuff is in that damn bag?

I frown and scan the area. It's dark out here, and if she's lost her keys, she may be here a while. Probably not safe for her to wait alone.

As I push open my door to check on her, she yanks them out with a flourish.

Good. At least she won't be stranded.

I shove away the twinge of warmth at her triumphant smile and quickly send another text.

I'm down to meet Josie's friend next weekend. Let me know the time/place.

I could use another date to get this one off my mind.

Three

MIA

The best part of my job, other than the delight of seeing preschoolers learn and grow and the excuse to hoard glitter, is that my school is located next to my favorite bakery in downtown Avondale. In addition to being owned by Josie and her mom, Cake My Day is perfectly located for emotional eating after a rough day or spur-of-the-moment gift acquisition.

Today falls in the second category. I need a present.

The heady smell of sugar and cinnamon hits like dopamine as I step inside the pink-and-green-striped store. Josie is leaning forward with her elbows on the glass counter, staring at her phone. French braids frame her heart-shaped face, and a pop of coral lipstick contrasts nicely against her dark features. She's the spitting image of her mother, who is also a Brazilian goddess of a woman. Adriana, who is no doubt baking something epic in the back right now, looks young enough that people often mistake them for sisters.

"This place open?" I tease.

Josie's flour-smearred face brightens when she spots me. Her hand flies to her chest, and she stands upright, pocketing her phone in her apron. "Is that *the* Mia Madden, curator of our Netflix homepage? In *my* bakery? What an honor!"

I shield my face from the empty lobby, hiding from the nonexistent onlookers. "Please, you're making me blush!"

Her laugh beckons me closer. I step up to the glass display case, eyeing today's fresh options. Red-velvet cupcakes butt up against sugar cookies and chocolate Brigadeiros, a Brazilian dessert that singlehandedly changed me into a sweets person. I want to line my cheeks with the Brigadeiros like a chipmunk so I can access them throughout the day at random.

"Honestly, I'm just glad you're alive." She guilts me with a playful glare.

“You hung up on me Saturday and didn’t answer my calls or texts last night. I was getting worried.”

“Sorry. My date showed up out of the blue while I was on the phone with you and derailed my night. Then, yesterday, I went to bed at nine thirty and missed your call.”

“It’d take an act of pharmacy to get me asleep before eleven. Why so early?”

“I need all the rest I can get. I’m starting prep for the *Magic School Bus* musical this week. Auditions and rehearsals take an exorbitant amount of energy when four- and five-year-olds are involved.” My heart expands in my chest. “It’s going to be so stinking cute. It’s also going to mean a lot of late nights rehearsing, building sets, and creating costumes. Speaking of, if you have any bags of clothes set aside for donation, I’ll gladly take them off your hands.”

“I’ve got two bags in my closet with your name on it.” She stretches her arms overhead. The Taylor Swift–inspired butterfly tattoo above her elbow comes into view. If you look closely enough, you can see the words Certified Lover Girl inside the wings. “I’m exhausted just thinking about all the work you’re about to do. I’d just put on the *Magic School Bus* video for the class and call it a day.”

“That’s why you’re a baker. And a darn good one. Speaking of, I need a cake for my dad. Apparently, it’s Boss’s Day.”

She swipes her cheek with the back of her hand. “Ah. He’s still upset over losing the promotion?”

“Somehow, he gets more upset as time passes. He lives in perpetual disappointment at all the changes the new manager is implementing. It’s all I hear about. Conroy *this*, Conroy *that*. This Conroy guy might as well pull up a chair at our weekly family dinners for how often he comes up.”

Thus, if anyone deserves a mid-day surprise treat, it’s my dad. His office has become his personal hellscape.

Dad was hoping to move into management when the reorganization of his company was announced. His old, retiring boss fed him a lot of hope on his way out the door, encouraging him to throw his hat in the ring. But when Dad told the CEO he’d get his MBA at night to stay competitive and do whatever it took to secure the new management job, the CEO told him not to bother.

They wanted “fresh talent” and hired a boss half Dad’s age, instead.

Needless to say, he’s been moping around the house, playing a lot of sad

guy music in his study. Tragic stuff, like back-catalog Chicago and Aerosmith.

It's hard for me to see Dad struggle. After Mom died, cooking meals, coaching our various teams, and working until sundown were his coping mechanisms. So long as he had something to do and felt useful, he was more himself. On days when he had too much downtime at home, he was markedly different. Restless, always in the backyard or garage, incapable of actually being *in* the house.

Missing Mom was hard enough without having to watch him miss her, too. It was like nursing two broken hearts in one body. My sisters and I forced him to go on weekend trips no one actually wanted to go on and join us on long runs just to keep him busy. To keep him happy.

So to have someone jeopardize his happiness again feels like a personal attack, even if it's just some faceless corporate drone who made Dad feel less-than. Is that entirely fair? No. But it's how I feel. Maybe I'm overprotective, but I learned it from him—the sovereign king of overprotectiveness.

Hence the cake. It won't make his boss less of a nuisance or fix the problem in any tangible way, but it won't make things worse. Probably.

"I've got a two-tier chocolate cake that may be some of my best work chilling in the freezer," Josie offers. "Or a Brazilian carrot cake my mother made on a whim this morning, in addition to the run-of-the-mill red velvet, bourbon rum, and vanilla cakes we always carry."

"There's nothing run of the mill about your cakes, Jo. I don't think you could make something bad if you tried."

"Are you forgetting the great chicken cacciatore debacle?"

"I should amend that statement: you couldn't make a bad *dessert* if you tried. Anyway, Dad's a big fan of chocolate."

"Got it." She plods toward the back room, her work clogs squeaking on the tile.

I gasp when she emerges with two tiers of decadent chocolate, coconut, and curly ribbons of fudge. "Holy moly. Is it possible to be attracted to a baked good?"

"Sure. I'll take that ego stroke." She boxes her creation. "While I have your attention, we should solidify plans for Friday night. You're still down for the double date, right? Because I bought a Groupon for an escape room. I figure you and I can ride together and meet the guys there?"

“That’ll work.”

Her bottom lip juts out. “You sound less than excited.”

“No, no. I am.” I trace a line on the counter next to the cash register. “It’s just after my last date, I’m a little discouraged.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“It wasn’t great.” Alex’s face flashes in my head, and I let out a sigh. “I don’t know. It started with me embarrassing myself when he heard me on the phone with you and never got back on track. I get the impression he’s not sticking around Avondale for long. He was sure to let me know how busy he is with his fancy engineering job and that I deserve more money for tolerating children as a career. No way he’d enjoy being around my family. My nieces and nephews would probably vomit on his Rolex.”

She blinks at me as if waiting to be sure I’m done.

“*And he likes stand-up comedy,*” I add in haste. “He hasn’t watched a full movie in years.”

A sympathetic *ugh* leaves her mouth. “No movies? How depressing.”

“Thank you. It wasn’t a good fit. And I’m sure he agrees, since he got up and left the *second* we were done eating like he couldn’t escape fast enough.”

“I’m sorry. I was hoping if it wasn’t a love connection, it’d at least end in a bed. Or a backseat. Your slump persists.”

So it does. It’s been six months since I so much as kissed a man, and it was a bumbling kiss that immediately led to two-minute sex in the passenger’s seat of his truck because I was afraid I’d forget how to do it if I didn’t rip off the Band-Aid a year out from my breakup with Mason.

“If I think about how long it’s been since I’ve been in a bed, backseat, or beyond with a man, I get bummed out,” I admit. “Maybe I’ll take a break from the apps and go back to my Etsy side hustle for a few months. That takes up all my free time when I open to orders.”

Her glare is pointed. She’s about as intimidating as a baby rabbit. “You need to make time for fun, Mia.”

“Making stuff *is* fun. As is profiting from it. More fun than dating has been lately. I’ll just keep on riding my pogo stick through life. Enjoy your tandem bike with your boyfriend.”

“Please do not let this random bad date crush your spirit. Remember: we aren’t letting setbacks win. So what if he wasn’t your perfect fit? Don’t let him ruin the hunt!”

“The hunt isn’t over. It’s just on hiatus. It wouldn’t kill me to focus on

making extra money. I've got to get serious about saving for my down payment and paying off debt. I'm getting close on that credit card, then the saving can begin in earnest."

She peers at her ensemble. "Wish I had your ambition. I can't stop buying clothes long enough to save a penny."

"We need to get you to the thrift shop. You'll have your own down payment saved in no time." I am careful to keep my voice low, in case her mother is listening. "Or you could just live with me in my future house for free. That's always an option."

Josie won't abandon her mother in their shared condo, despite their constant bickering and Adriana's penchant for inviting their loud relatives over for weeks at a time. I know this because I've tried to poach Josie as a roommate many times before. I hate coming home to a quiet apartment—loud railroad crossing outside my window notwithstanding—and there's no one I'd rather cohabitate with than Josie.

I understand why she can't, though. Daughters of widowed parents do what we must to keep them happy, and having Josie close makes Adriana happy.

Secretly, I'm jealous of the mother-daughter bickering and the random aunties and cousins staying over because it means their condo is full of life. My family rarely visits me in my tiny studio apartment, not that I blame them. *I barely fit inside there.*

That's why I want a house, so I can have family, friends, and neighbors coming over at random. I want the ability to host potlucks, craft nights with my team teachers, and parties. I want a place I can comfortably babysit my nieces and nephews.

I almost got there once when the market was much better for buyers. My dream bungalow came up for sale in a portion of downtown Avondale that I adore. The kind of older house people look at and say, *Gosh, they don't make 'em like that anymore.* But Mason said it wasn't the right time, that we should focus on the wedding first and our house after. He called the shots on *everything*, and this was no different. He made triple my salary, so who was I to argue?

Now I know the real reason he said no. There was never going to be an *after* for us.

So I'll do it on my own, single teacher in Georgia's salary and all. I'll fix my credit score and pinch every penny until I get there. My heart longs for the moment I can point to that house and say, *That one? She's all mine.*

It won't be that bungalow, though; someone scooped it up and turned it into an Airbnb. Probably someone who is excited about all the Avondale *growth*.

"If you want to take a break from the apps, I support it," Josie says, interrupting the visions of the house from *The Notebook* and its blue shutters dancing in my head. "It's moot anyway because you're going to hit it off with Ezra's friend. Worst-case scenario, you get a surface-level hot fling out of it. Best-case scenario, he's the real deal and we get to go on *lots* more double dates."

My eyes widen. "Wow, so no pressure or anything."

"None at all! It's fine if it's just the hot-fling option. I can live with that. Listen, I'm proud of you for getting back in the saddle, but you actually have to *ride*." Her lips twist into a devilish smile. "Something other than a saddle."

"Message received." Out of nowhere, Alex's remarkable, very rideable body barges into my mind, and I boot him right back out. "I guess it'd be nice to have someone in my bed once in a while, even if it's just for a few nights. It gets lonely waking up and finding the other side cold and empty."

Her smile is almost wistful. "Hey, Ezra's busy tonight studying for an exam. Want to pass out watching *NCIS* in my bed?" She taps her temple. "Can't be lonely if you're never alone."

"Have you two been spending every night together?"

"Maybe." Her gaze softens as a blush spreads over her cheeks. "Okay, yes. I can't seem to stop."

Happiness bursts in my chest like a firework. I want this woman to be happy as much as I want it for myself. I'd dismantle a mountain with my bare hands to keep her smiling. "You're glowing through all that flour on your face."

She wipes her cheek and smears even more flour across her skin. "*Gah*. How did we get on the topic of me?"

"Because you're interesting." I offer her my credit card.

She waves it off. "My treat. I'm happy to cake your day."

"That's okay." I slip it into her palm and force her to take hold of it. "Please charge me."

"You're ridiculous." She nods her head. "What's the point of co-owning a bakery if I can't give dessert to my best friend? Let me give you things, woman!"

I catch a look at the clock on her wall and then a pile of small wooden

crates stacked cattywampus in the corner behind her counter. “How about you give me those crates? But *only* if you’re throwing them away.”

She snorts. “Does *Hoarders* know about you? Those are trash.”

“One man’s trash is another man’s classroom storage unit. I’ll come by after school today and grab them when my hands are free.” I walk backward, hugging my cake box to my chest. “Just a coat of paint, a few nails, maybe some decals, and these will be cuter than cute.”

Her headshake is incredulous. “Wish I had your vision.”

I blow her an air kiss on my way out the door, wishing I had her romantic luck.

• • •

I breeze through the revolving door at Peachtree Tech—and by that, I mean stutter through, because there’s no dignified way to approach a propeller masquerading as a door—with forty-seven minutes remaining on my combination lunch/planning period block.

Enough time to drop the cake, lavish Dad with compliments about what a great employee he is, and score the latest gossip from Christos Papadakis, Dad’s coworker of twenty years. I’d call them friends, but they’re more like brothers with a twelve-year age gap.

The elevator kicks me off on the fourth floor with a *ding*.

I stare at the office layout for a few seconds, getting my bearings. All the fake peach trees with their waxy plastic leaves and fruits are nowhere to be found. The cubicles have been removed, and the old desks have been swapped for standing desks. All the soothing watercolor art on the walls has been replaced with glittering shots of the Atlanta skyline. Because nothing says *Avondale* quite like pretending you’re Atlanta, I guess.

Dad’s office is tucked into the back left corner, near the break room. I snake through the main floor, fielding *hellos* from a few longtime employees.

I’m still a few feet away when Dad spots me through his glass wall. Given I didn’t respond to his texts this morning lovingly harassing me about my tire that needs to be replaced and asking what I want him to grill for our standing weekly dinner, I’m sure he’s surprised to see me.

Phone to his ear, his smile widens as he flashes me the *one second* finger. He looks like George Clooney, if Clooney shopped at Men’s Wearhouse and neglected SPF. He’s in the dark blue sport coat and light blue button-up my sisters and I bought him last Christmas to spruce up his wardrobe.

Christos manifests on my right like a summoned spirit, toned arms crossed over his svelte chest. Christos works out more in his late forties than I do in my twenties, and it's not even a close race. "That's his neediest client on the line. He'll talk Richard's ear off. What've you got there?"

"A cake. Apparently it's Boss's Day. Wanted to cheer him up."

"Thoughtful of you." He studies me for a second with a critical eye. "You haven't been by for lunch in ages."

"I have an energetic class this year. I spend most of my lunch and planning period staring into the void to recharge." I peek over my shoulder. "And I'm also not eager to drop by when there's a tyrant afoot. Is the new guy here?"

Christos casts a lazy look over his own shoulder. "Believe me, if he were here, you'd know it."

"What does that mean?"

"Just that the man commands a room." He lowers his voice, and a thoughtful half smile twists his lips, the fluorescents bathing his olive-toned bald head in yellow light. "You look like someone drew your mother from memory. It's always been true, but the resemblance gets stronger with age."

"I don't think I could ever tire of being compared to her," I say, warmth creeping through my chest. "It's my favorite compliment."

He waves a hand up and down. "Maeve would never have worn sneakers with a dress, though, even in her own classroom. Do better, Love."

I feign offense. "Excuse me, these are limited edition Jordans. And I got this dress for four dollars at the thrift store. This is what is in style!"

Brows climbing, he pinches the clear arm of his glasses in playful disgust. "Where, on teacher Pinterest?"

Dad's door swings open. "Sorry about that. Had a chatty guy on the line. C'mon in."

I trail in behind the men and present the cake box. "I brought you a present."

"You did?" Dad asks. "Let's see 'er."

I unveil the cake.

"Hey, my favorite!" Dad pulls me into a hug before taking his seat. His warm embrace buoys my spirit. "What a nice surprise. Thank you."

Mission accomplished. A smile claims my face as I drop into one of two chairs facing his mahogany desk. To commemorate the moment, I whip out my phone and take a photo of Dad gazing fondly at the cake box and fire it off to the *Sister Squad* group chat I share with Lucy and Harper with the

caption *Mid-day pick-me-up for Pops! Hoping this helps.*

The responses come quickly.

Lucy: *Nice work, my little crumpet.*

Harper: *Is little crumpet French for “over achiever”? Put my name on it, too—I still haven’t gotten Dad a birthday present and that was three months ago. What’s the occasion, anyway?*

This is a very “them” way to respond. Lucy, the oldest, delivers praise with a bunch of emojis that don’t quite match her words, in this case a knife, a ghost, and a peach. Harper, the chaotic middle child, brings sass and demands.

Lucy: *Dad’s been a massive bummer the last four family dinners, that’s what. He barely spoke last week. Haven’t you noticed?*

Harper: *Oh. I guess I was distracted by the blackened shrimp and grits. Marcelle and I have tried to replicate that meal twice since, and it doesn’t taste the same.*

Lucy: *You’re welcome. I brought that.*

Harper: *Don’t be shy, drop that recipe.*

I pocket my phone. Those two have the combined focus of a single goldfish.

Despite all the adjustments at Peachtree Tech, his office hasn’t changed. No standing contraptions or cityscapes here. Run-of-the-mill sports decor, photos of me and my sisters, and a trophy from his college basketball days. His true pride and joy. It is the New Balance sneakers of Dad offices: dependable.

He offers me and Christos a fork and napkin each, rustled up from one of his drawers. “Should we dig in?”

I rub my hands together. “Let’s do it.”

Dad’s face, tan from weekends spent either swimming or lounging next to the outdoor fireplace, boasts a broad grin as he hacks us off a piece each. “What’s this for, anyway? Not that I’m not grateful.”

I shrug a coy shoulder. “I have a mighty hankering that only chocolate cake can solve.”

His stare is patient. “I always know when you’re lying.”

“Just a little something to brighten your day. I couldn’t help but notice it’s

Boss's Day.”

“Ah.” His winning smile kicks up at the corners. The one that makes him friends everywhere he goes. “This is an ambush over a fake holiday.”

My hands lift in surrender. “Take it up with the Hallmarkian gods. And as far as I'm concerned, you're the boss of this establishment.”

“I tend to agree,” Christos stage-whispers.

Dad lets out a noise of dissent as he serves all three of us a slice. “The plaque outside my door says otherwise. But I am never going to turn down an opportunity to spend time with my daughter.”

“With your *favorite* daughter,” I clarify.

“A three-way tie, but you just may pull ahead if you keep up the good work. What's the status of the tires?”

“I'm handling it.” At the stern downturn of his lips, I quickly add, “I only drive four miles round trip a day, it'll be fine.”

“Mia—”

“Next week, I promise. I already have an appointment scheduled.”

That is technically true. I *do* have an appointment scheduled—with myself, to call some place to make an appointment. But if I tell Dad that, he'll worry because he wants everything done yesterday, and I don't like it when he worries. His blood pressure would agree with me.

His desk chair lets out an unholy squeak as he rolls to hand Christos his piece.

“How come you didn't get a stand-up desk and Lamaze ball chair?” I ask.

“Don't want them,” Dad grunts. “Don't need them.”

“I'm rather enjoying mine,” Christos says with a hand placed on his stomach. “Good for your core and posture. Would it kill you to give them a try, Richard?”

“It might. I could fall off that godforsaken ball and fracture my skull.”

Christos casts him a generous amount of side-eye.

“Kidding,” Dad mutters, stuffing cake into his mouth. “I'm perfectly content in my chair is all. Not looking to make a change just for change's sake. If it ain't broke, don't fix it. Plus, Mia's fancy cushion won't fit on a ball. It's custom made for *this* chair.” He twists so we can get a good look at the blue-and-white seat cover tied to his chair. “Not about to give that up.”

I work to keep the silly grin off my face. That thing is at least three years old, and he acts like it's the most special office accessory in the world. “Dad, it's okay. It's just an easy crochet job and some foam. You've still got my

giraffe over there.” I point at the wire coat hanger I fashioned into a giraffe hanging above his minifridge. “If you want a Lamaze ball, please get it.”

He harrumphs at this.

As I take my first heaping bite of cake, a rapping at the doorframe echoes off the walls. Dad looks past me, his expression flat lining.

“Hey, team.” The voice is rumbly, authoritative, and utterly familiar. An itch that requires immediate scratching. “Am I interrupting something?”

I twist in my seat, sugary goodness melting in my mouth.

And then I nearly choke.

“Just having a quick visit with my daughter,” Dad says evenly. “What’s up, Conroy?”

I’m 98 percent sure that’s what Dad said, but my brain evacuated my skull the instant I laid eyes on the imposing man in the doorway. He’s wearing a crisp teal shirt, cigar-brown pants, suede shoes, and a pained look on his face. An *attempting complex calculus* or *I just backed my car into a mailbox* sort of look.

Alex.

Darkening the doorway with an air of authority.

Cake scratches on its way down my throat.

“Alex?” Christos says dully. “You all right?”

Alex comes to life at the sound of his name, Pinocchio slapped in his wooden face by Geppetto. He puts on a dazzling smile that makes my stomach turn as he rolls up the sleeves of his shirt, flashing a healthy amount of toned forearm. “Just fine, thanks. This is your daughter?”

I bristle at that. He *knows* I’m Richard’s daughter, unless we were speaking different languages on the date.

Actually, that tracks.

“My pride and joy, yes.” Dad waves a hand in the air. “Mia, this is the new director of operations, Alex Conroy. Alex, this is Mia.”

He crosses his arms. Our eyes meet, and he tilts his head almost imperceptibly. Silence descends on the room like a swarm of raptors.

“Conroy?” My voice sounds like it was stepped on.

“Alex Conroy,” Dad repeats.

I search the shallow grave where I laid the memories of our lackluster date to rest. He told me he was in *product development*. AKA, I thought he was one of the new second-floor guys, engineers brought on to lick schematics or code apps. Double AKA, someone I never expected to cross paths with on the

fourth floor.

My skin prickles the longer he holds my gaze. He's going to blow our cover and say he knows me. I'll have to explain to my dad later that the date meant nothing, that I didn't know Alex was the same guy who took his job and is making his life a living hell—

“Pleasure to meet you, Mia.” Alex's voice is rich and thick, molasses shoved down my throat.

I swallow. “The pleasure is all mine.”

Four

ALEX

Four different Mias fill this room.

Mia beaming at Richard in a gold frame on the bookcase, Mia laughing alongside two women in a black frame on the desk, a tattered newspaper clipping with the heading “North Georgia’s Teacher of the Year Mia Madden” tacked to a corkboard.

And the real one, gawking at me from her chair.

I was wrong that there’s only one photo of her in here. It is a funhouse mirror of her face in this office.

I drag my eyes off in-the-flesh Mia. “I’m here for our twelve ten round table. Do we need to push it to twelve twenty?”

“I was just on my way out,” Mia insists, jumping to her feet. “Don’t let me interrupt your work.”

Richard points at her napkin. “Hold your horses, Mia. You’re only half done with your cake.”

“I’m all set, see?” She lifts her overflowing fork toward her mouth. Chocolate crumbs flake off the side in transit.

Christos looks on with mild amusement. “You don’t have to eat and run. Surely the office won’t go off the rails over a minor cake delay.”

After a dramatic chew and swallow, she ekes out, “Why risk it?”

“Looks like a party in here,” I say, avoiding Mia’s eye. Avoiding her everything, really. “What’s the occasion? I don’t recall seeing a birthday listed on the big board, but I could’ve missed it.”

“Mr. Conroy?” Brooks, the receptionist, interrupts as he crosses the main floor.

He approaches with a massive fruit basket in his hands. Chocolate-dipped pineapples on skewers sway dangerously with his every step. A foil balloon

reading “Best Boss” sits on a stick in the middle. “You got another one. This one is from the product development team.”

I peek sideways and find Mia and Richard staring at the fruit. Judging by the look on Richard’s face, this made-up holiday isn’t winning me any popularity contests. But it’s nothing compared to Mia’s narrow-eyed appraisal of the basket.

“Product development.” Mia’s sharp gaze lands on me. “I wonder if I know anyone on that team these days.”

Richard pokes at his cake. “Nah. It’s all new people.”

Her nod is almost imperceptible. “Got it.”

The lie I told her about my job is like a bull kicking up dirt between us. I was trying to avoid an uncomfortable situation for both of us, and I sure as hell didn’t think we’d cross paths again. Most grown adults don’t drop by their parents’ workplace, do they? Does Ezra pop into his mother’s hospital to visit during a nursing shift? I make a mental note to ask.

Regardless, it was a huge miscalculation. Avondale is an even smaller pond than I realized, and now I’ve just pissed off another fish.

Brooks lifts the basket higher. “Did you want me to leave it with you or—”

“Could you leave it on my desk?” I tug on my tight collar. “Thanks, Brooks.”

“You got it. I’ll put it with the others.”

His exit is followed by a painful beat of silence.

Mia swipes her mouth with a napkin and struts toward the trash can. “Thanks for letting me interrupt your afternoon. I’ll get out of your hair now.”

“You can interrupt my day with cake anytime,” Christos offers.

Mia gathers her purse. “I’ll keep that in mind. Dad, I’ll see you very soon. Christos, tell Jameson I said hello and that if he skips book club again there will be heck to pay.”

Christos presses his palms together and bows his head. “He’ll be appropriately terrified, I assure you.”

Mia approaches the door, her gaze skating over my chest, skillfully avoiding my eye. In her shoes—clean white Jordans, which I have no choice but to respect—she’s shorter than she was on our date.

“Excuse me.” Her smile is saccharine as she stares a hole into my collarbone. “I’m in a bit of a rush. Busy is as busy does, as the saying goes.”

I step backward, suppressing a heavy sigh. This woman’s memory is *next-*

level specific. Which would be a positive, under normal circumstances.

This is not normal.

She breezes past in a cloud of vaguely tropical perfume and irritation.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. Wait. *She* doesn't get to be irritated. I'm the one who accidentally took out the "pride and joy" of the coworker who likes me the least. If anyone should be irritated, it's me.

It's taken me weeks to win the beginnings of support from HR. Accounting hates me out of loyalty for the ones I had to let go and because their workloads changed. The edible arrangement their team got me could be laced with poison, for all I know.

Sales, though, is my golden goose. It's the biggest team and the one corporate cares about the most. They generate revenue. Revenue makes a branch successful.

Big Rich is the lynchpin. If I get his buy-in with my initiatives, the rest will fall in line like dominoes. Which means I need to manage this Mia thing before it becomes a problem by making sure she isn't going to say anything about our brief encounter.

"I'm going to grab my coffee," I inform the men curtly. "I'll be back."

Richard lifts his fork in acknowledgment. "We'll be ready."

As soon as I'm out of view, I fly through the fourth floor, dodging desks, reaching the breezeway just in time to catch the elevator with a hand shoved through the crack. Mia's face grows from a sliver to the full thing as the doors open.

Her posture stiffens.

I file in beside her so we're both staring at the mirrored door.

Her reflection crosses its arms. "What are you doing?"

"Taking an elevator," I offer drily. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You're Conroy," she says.

"Comma Alex." I clear my throat. "Alexander Kent Conroy, if we're getting birth-certificate specific. And this is the most I've ever said my own name."

She attempts a scowl. The effect isn't even enough to scare off a skittish squirrel. "You lied to me about your job."

"I didn't lie. Technically I *am* in product development, in that I oversee that department. I just happen to oversee the rest of them, too. Close enough."

"Close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades." She presses the lobby button over and over again, as if it'll make this go faster. "Why didn't

you list your last name on your profile? This could've been avoided if I knew who you were up front."

"No one lists their last name. *Mia*, for example."

The doors finally shut. "I have to do that for safety. I can't have strange men knowing my last name."

"Nor can I. No one is safe on an app. Had I listed my last name, someone might've asked me out and shit-talked me on the phone for the whole courtyard to hear."

The air thins out as she gasps. "Please never mention that phone call again. I'd like to pretend it never happened."

"Wait a second." I pivot to face her. "Why would it matter if I listed my last name on my profile? Would you have recognized it?"

The elevator beeps. *Third floor.*

"I would've recognized Conroy." Her feet remain planted, but she turns her head just enough to flash her eyes. "I definitely know who you are."

Shit. I know Richard wasn't thrilled about an outside hire getting the director of operations role—no one was—but if he's talking to his daughter about the state of affairs over the dinner table, that doesn't bode well for morale.

It's a documented fact that companies are more successful when employees are motivated and happy. It's my job to make sure they're both. High workplace morale is essential if we're going to grow Peachtree Tech into what it's capable of becoming.

Being twenty-six, I already have to work twice as hard to earn everyone's respect. Hence why the blonde to my right might as well be wrapped in barbed wire, because I'm not going anywhere near her again.

I school my face into something passably neutral. Teachers can sniff out fear. Mine always could, at least. "Had I known who you were..." I trail off, searching for the right words. "What I mean to say is I respect your father very much. I don't want to complicate the workplace dynamic."

Her lashes flutter from a series of too-fast blinks. "Right. I respect my dad, too. Which is why I wouldn't have asked you out had I known who you were."

Even though we're in agreement, this still rubs me the wrong way. I've got my professional reasons for this, but I don't know why *she* cares. Her dad shouldn't be in control of who she does—or doesn't—date. It should be totally up to her.

Not that it matters.

“Great.” I turn back toward the doors. “We’re in agreement.”

Even having said this out loud, the nagging feeling that I’ve messed up on the job by taking her out even once grows more insistent with each passing second. The silence drives into my ear drums.

I grasp for a distraction from this pointless spiral.

“So what’s this about, anyway?” I gesture to Mia’s colorful dress, striped sleeves, and beaded earrings. “Your class having a costume party or a parade or something?”

Her expression sours. “No, Alex. If I was dressed for a parade, you’d know it. This doesn’t even have tassels or sequins.” She flattens the front of the fabric. “We’re reading *Fancy Nancy* today, so I dressed nicely.”

My gaze skims the fit of the sweater-like material over her chest and hips. “*Fancy Nancy*? Is that code for something?”

Her eyes press shut. “Forget it.”

Great. Now I’ve insulted her by accident. This conversation feels like being dragged through a bed of rusty nails. “Not a costume. Noted.”

“I wore this dress to a bar two weeks ago,” she mutters as the doors open. With a dramatic flourish of her arm, she waves me forward. “After you, Boss Man.”

I shift around her and press the button for floor four. “I’m going up, actually.”

With an enduring sigh, she side-steps me and exits the elevator.

I press the button two more times as she struts through the lobby, a bounce to her step. The ridiculous dress doesn’t show a lot of leg.

Unfortunately, I’ve got a great imagination.

• • •

Early Friday evening, I snack on the last of a fruit basket, accidentally dribbling pineapple juice on the trackpad of my computer more than once as I rush to submit the week’s end data to Timothy at corporate.

My eyes burn, and not just from the citric juice I rubbed into them by accident. Eye strain. I need a break from staring at screens and concentrating.

I’m actually looking forward to this double date tonight. If I don’t force myself to have fun soon, I might forget what it feels like.

I take one last bite of fruit and slide the basket aside. The “tropical medley” tag with its pink passionfruit logo triggers a thought.

A pink dress thought.

“Hey, Siri...” I trail off, searching for the right words as I scratch the back of my neck. “What is ‘Fancy Nancy’?”

“*Fancy Nancy* is a series of children’s books by author Jane O’Connor and illustrated by Robin Preiss Glasser that follows a precocious young Nancy on her quest to rescue her relatives from their humdrum existence by accessorizing their mundane wardrobes.”

That explains Mia’s ensemble, which has popped in my head more than once over the last few days.

Now I know. I can officially stop thinking about it.

“Would you like me to order the *Fancy Nancy* book series?”

“No,” I say in a rush. *Hell no.*

I snap my laptop shut and rise to my feet. “Siri, what’s the forecast for this evening?”

“This evening, expect a low of forty-nine degrees.”

I open the temperature-control app on my phone and switch on my heater. It kicks into gear with a soothing *click*.

If my kid self could see me now, he’d never believe this house is my reality. That, while I’m not rich by any means, I don’t have to fret about money *all the time*. My aunt and uncle didn’t have any to spare. Not for me, at least. Not for a single field trip, sport, pair of socks, or spare hoodie that didn’t first belong to Derek. Nothing until I was able to buy it for myself.

A series of horn honks creates something of a melody outside.

Ezra.

His arrival perks me up, even though he probably just made an enemy of my neighbors.

I’m still getting used to having him around all the time. I’ve missed the guy. Ezra and his family, who are all local to the area, have always been good to me. His mom, Deborah, used to drive to Vandy every few weeks with a Home Depot box filled with food, at first just for him, but eventually for both of us. It was all healthy, no-frills types of food: cans of soup, mixed nuts, and other non-perishable snacks.

Having not had two pennies to rub together—my scholarship only covered tuition and lodging with no wiggle room whatsoever—I appreciated those no-nonsense care baskets more than I could ever say.

I emerge from my house to find Ezra’s arm hanging out the window of his Nissan Pathfinder, an easy smile on his face. He smacks the side with an

open palm. “Let’s light this candle, handsome.”

I jog down the sloping path to my driveway. “Someone’s hyped. Was today a Red Bull or coffee day?”

“Both. You look like hell. Have you been crying?”

“Got citrus in my eyes.” I circle his car and climb inside. It smells cleaner than I’d expect, based on historical inference. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

He cranks down the dial on his console, and the ethereal wail of whatever artist he was listening to cuts away. “The girls are meeting us there.”

“You picked me up instead of your date.” I *tsk tsk* as I click my seat belt. “Poor form, my guy.”

“Please, regale me with more dating wisdom.” He reverses at a breakneck speed. “I would hate to waste the chance to learn from the best. You’ve had how many serious relationships again? Zero point five?”

The jab rolls off my shoulder. Mostly. “I’ve dated. Remember that girl Lizzie I told you about? We went out several times.”

“More than one date with no clarification of status does not a relationship make. You never had the ‘what are we’ talk.”

“I tell you too much about my life.” I adjust the seat to make more leg room. “In all seriousness, I’m glad things are going well for you. I’m curious to meet the woman who motivated you to finally cut your hair. She must be something special.”

He flattens a palm over his tight curls. “My mother has been begging me to cut my hair for six months. This is to appease her.”

“Sure thing.” I flick the Evergreen tree dangling from his rearview mirror. “And the clean car, shaved face, and new air freshener—is that all for your mom, too?”

“Let me live, Conroy.”

I snicker as he exits my neighborhood.

The muscles in my neck relax the longer we drive, and finally, my shoulders ease down.

My ringing phone cuts into the comfortable silence, and everything in me tenses all over again. I eye the caller and silence it immediately.

“Derek?” he asks, a knowing lilt in the way he delivers my cousin’s name.

“How’d you know?”

“I know your different ringtones by now. His is the worst.”

When I don’t answer the call, Derek texts me.

Pick up please.

As predictable as he is temperamental, he fires off another message less than a minute later.

What, too busy to take a call?

I grit my teeth and switch off the phone completely. I'll be better able to focus on my date without worrying that he'll try his usual tricks to get my attention. He always wants help to get himself out of self-inflicted problems, but he never takes my advice. Just my money. Somehow, he's still a jerk about it 80 percent of the time.

"Just ignore it," Ezra says. "He'll get the hint eventually."

"He hasn't since I moved away. Why would he start now?"

Ezra pulls into an old plaza at the command of his GPS. A few of the storefronts have shoddy neon signs, but the rest are in good enough shape to give off a respectable facade. "What's this? I thought we were going to Benihana?"

"We are. Benihana is that tan building on the other side of the lot." He throws the car into park in front of Escape and Sip, a storefront in the strip mall. "This is an escape room. Josie got a Groupon. Have you ever done one before?"

"No, but I've always thought it'd be cool."

"Josie's thrilled about this." Ezra checks his hair in the mirror. "As am I, obviously, but she hasn't stopped talking about it. She's hoping you and Mia hit it off. No pressure or anything, but if there was ever a time to slather on the Conroy charm, it's tonight. Remember in college when you chatted up that girl so hard she broke up with her shitty boyfriend for you on sight? Be *that* Alex."

I barely hear the end of his sentence. I've latched on to one word, and one word only.

Mia.

A blue van creeps into the lot. The blinker inexplicably continues flashing as it crawls closer.

"What did you say her name was?"

"Mia. Can't remember her last name, but that's definitely her first name."

The inside of my brain mimics the strobing light. *Danger. Danger.*

The van pulls into the spot to the left of us, giving us a very good view of the passenger's window. I'm treated to Mia's profile, dirty-blonde hair, button nose, *all of it.*

“No way.”

“Uh—yeah way,” Ezra says slowly. “And Josie wants us to keep double dating, and I want whatever Josie wants—”

“I swear to fuck.” My fingers press into my temples.

Ezra tents his hands. “Why do I sense we aren’t having the same conversation?”

“That’s Mia Madden. Is there a shortage of single women in the state of Georgia? How the hell does this keep happening?”

“You know her?”

“Yes. Barely. But yes, definitely.”

He nods. “That clears it up.”

“She’s my sales manager’s daughter who I accidentally went on a date with.”

“How do you *accidentally* go on a date?”

“Long story. Point is, Mia and I are not going to be a thing.”

“Oh, damn. I had no idea.” He casts an anxious look out his window. I haven’t seen him nervous since that time we almost got arrested in college for lighting a moldy futon on fire in our yard. “I wonder how Josie didn’t make the connection when we were planning the setup... Maybe I didn’t tell her your full name? I honestly don’t remember. Shit, this is not ideal. What do we do?”

Guilt kicks my discomfort aside. I don’t want to be the reason he’s panicked. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to make it weird for you and Josie.”

“You sure this is okay?”

Given Ezra is my best friend, that’s an easy question to answer. “Yes. It’ll be fine.”

It has to be.

A dark-haired woman in jeans and a blue frilly shirt circles the front of the van, stepping onto the sidewalk in front of the Escape and Sip. Josie is indeed a bombshell, just as Ezra told me after their first date.

He throws open the door and scrambles out of the car in his haste to follow her.

Yeah, Ezra has left the building permanently. That’s Mr. Josie now.

And then Mia emerges from the van, with red-painted lips and yet another ponytail. Her tight black shirt and black leather skirt combo is *nothing* like what she wore to the office or on our date. Where’s the color explosion? She looks like pure sex.

I hate it.

At least in her prissy, conservative teaching dress or the loose sweater from the food truck courtyard, I didn't have to grapple with all those curves. There wasn't even a whisper of cleavage in those outfits. Barely a flash of collarbone.

That is not the case this evening. It's all on full display.

Her smile is a mile wide. Glad to see she has the capacity to express joy. Had I not seen her beaming in all her dad's photographs, I might not have thought it possible.

Her dad, with the office *full* of photos of this girl. Who would probably chop my head off, mount it on a stake, and plant it in the breakroom for others to spit on if I wronged his precious daughter in any way. And since Mia always looks at me like I wronged her, another night in her company doesn't bode well.

I exit the Pathfinder and circle the front of it, pulse hammering. Any question as to whether or not she knew it'd be me on this date evaporates with a *poof* when her gaze meets mine. That dimpled smile melts away.

I almost feel bad she didn't have the same lead time I did to form an adequate, socially appropriate response to my presence. Because had she found out I was her date ahead of time, it might've prevented the shocked, "*Not again,*" from falling out of her mouth.

Josie and Ezra are too busy kissing to notice Mia's declaration.

Not me. I get it all to myself.

Five

MIA

I must've passed a cemetery without counting backward from thirty or eaten a cursed apple or something. Whatever the superstition is that traps me in the date version of *Groundhog Day*.

As Josie embraces her man, Alex wanders closer to the door that leads to what might've been a fun night in another life. He's whistling at a high pitch with his hands clasped behind his back, ever the portrait of calm, cool, *annoying*.

"Alex!" Josie trots his way. "I'm so glad you could make it. I'm Josie."

She throws open her arms and hugs the man.

When did she become a *hugger*? Ezra's kiss must be laced with a sedative that makes her forget she fears touching strangers.

"Thanks for the invite," Alex says warmly, wrapping her in a buffalo-plaid embrace.

I blink away from the rolled sleeves showcasing his strong arms. On paper, a man who pulls off boardroom in the streets, lumberjack in the sheets would move my needle in a major way. The more equipped a man looks to throw an ax, the better. Alex probably unwinds after a day of laying off innocent employees by chopping down redwoods.

Ezra, by contrast, is exactly Josie's type—cute, lanky, looks more like Tom Holland than Tom Holland himself. He's bright and stylish in a striped T-shirt, corduroy pants, and slip-on Vans.

"Alex, *this* is Mia." Josie gestures at my body with such gusto you'd think she built me from scratch. "My best friend and the nicest woman on earth. I'm very jealous you get to enjoy her company."

I shift my weight, avoiding Alex's eye.

Josie's face falls as she peers between us. "Is something wrong?"

Crap. I don't like that look of disappointment. She's really excited about tonight.

Alex crosses his arms, watching this show as if he's not the star of it.

I force a smile, hoping it tricks my body out of fight-or-flight mode. I don't want her to know he's Bad Date Guy, so I'll settle for something simpler. For now. "No! Just...we've met. He works with my dad. Nice to see you, Alex. And hey, you must be Ezra!"

"Yes, sorry!" Josie chirps, linking arms with her man. *Distraction achieved.* "I figured it went without saying, but this is Ezra."

It definitely went without saying, but I'm melting under Alex's stare and need something to focus on. "Great to meet you."

"You as well." Ezra's voice is a warm hug with a scratchy edge. "Josie talks about you all the time."

"A lot," Josie confirms proudly, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

"Oh yeah?" I direct a pointed smile her way. "Only the good stuff, right?"

"The good stuff," she confirms. "Don't worry, none of the back-catalogue embarrassing moments have come up. He doesn't know about the mechanical bull you broke or the *One Tree Hill* tattoo you almost got on your twenty-first birthday before darting out of the parlor." Her grin unfurls in a very Grinch-like way. "Whoops, guess he does now."

I answer with my best evil smile. "I'll have to share all my greatest hits Josie stories tonight. This will be fun. Everyone ready to head in?"

Alex lunges for the door, heading me off as I attempt to do the same. "I got it."

Josie flits through, still Velcro-latched to Ezra's arm. I pass through next but hang back as Josie and Ezra approach the check-in desk.

Alex hangs back with me, hands shoved in his pockets. "You got your phone?"

"What?" I pat my hip reflexively. "Why?"

"I figured we'd go ahead and sync our Google calendars, so I know when to expect you moving forward."

"Hilarious." I pitch my voice lower. "Listen, we've got like two minutes while they check in. Now, I don't know if you're stalking me or—"

"If I were stalking you, you'd never see me." He strokes his chin. "What's the opposite of stalking?"

I roll my eyes. "Anyway, Josie has been really looking forward to this. And I haven't told her about..." I gesture between the two of us, trying to summon

the right words. My skin prickles uncomfortably. “She knows I went on a date recently but not that it’s you. Yet.”

He crosses his arms. “Ah. You told her about last week.”

I examine the linoleum. “Friends talk.”

“Was she the one you were on the phone with in line?”

“Didn’t we agree not to mention that call?”

“*You* agreed. I said no such thing.”

That call will haunt me until my dying day, and probably long after. I exhale in a frustrated huff. “Can we focus, please? I see no need to throw a wrench in her night by telling her the full scope of our situation.”

“There is no situation. Nothing happened that night. We didn’t even—”

“Please don’t finish that sentence.”

“—exchange numbers,” he says with a wry smile.

My heart hammers as I turn my attention toward Josie across the small lobby, hoping my skin isn’t as red as it feels. “Right. That.”

As soon as Josie realizes that Alex is my bad date from last week, it’ll change the whole energy of this evening. I would hate for that to disrupt her mood tonight. She’s been looking forward to this.

And selfishly, I miss hanging out with her. Work only gets busier for me these days. I thought a double date was a surefire way to secure quality time with her, both tonight and beyond, pending it went well.

Little did I know who *else* I was tethering myself to. There will be no “beyond” for me and Alex. But I’ll make sure tonight is a success. It’s important to Josie, and she’s important to me.

“Success” in that Alex and I don’t storm off. Again.

I’ll fill her in after.

“We’ll be plenty busy escaping this room and—pending we get out—eating after,” I explain. “No need to make this complicated for our friends. I really want Josie to enjoy herself, so can we be civil?”

“Of the two of us, only one is panicking.” He nods toward the desk. “I, personally, am looking forward to solving this escape room with my best friend, his new girlfriend, and a completely platonic acquaintance.”

I exhale in a relieved gust. “Great.”

He steps in my path before I can walk away. “I was never *not* going to be civil, for the record. I don’t know what you’ve heard about me...”

I await him to finish his sentence.

He waves his hand for me to speak. “That was an invitation to tell me what

you've heard about me. And don't say it's nothing, because in that elevator you expressly stated you *definitely know who I am*."

Oh, he's *bothered* not knowing what my dad has said about him. But even without everything my dad has told me about hard-ass, wunderkind *Conroy*, I have plenty of reason to be wary on my own. There's something very "my way or the highway" about him that makes me want to rebel. "Nice try. I'm not getting involved in your workplace saga. I formed my opinion of you based on our date."

A date that was like trying to match two wrong puzzle pieces together with shaky fingers, if one of the pieces was also a Rubik's cube.

"Fine." His gaze travels down my body and takes a little too long returning to my face. "Fair enough."

"What, do you have a problem with tonight's parade costume, too?" I hug myself. All that does is plump my cleavage, so I drop my arms.

"Your outfit is fine." His tone is diplomatic.

"Oh my God, I wasn't fishing for compliments." And if I *was*, "your outfit is fine" would've humbled me faster than the forward-facing camera on my iPhone.

His jaw ticks as his gaze snaps to meet mine. "Then why bring up the parade thing?"

"Because you were studying me—"

"You two kids coming?" Ezra calls over his shoulder.

We turn in unison toward our friends. Pretty sure we gulp at the same time, too.

"Go before they get suspicious," I hiss.

He snorts. "Suspicious of what? Two people talking like they desperately want us to?"

Point taken, though it doesn't taste good on the way down.

I brush past Alex and close the distance to the counter just as Josie finishes checking in. She lifts a clipboard in the air. "Are we ready, squad?"

A task that will take up all my mental energy, leaving none for Alex or the date that's no longer a date?

Readier than ever.

...

The host follows us down a suspiciously musty hallway and shuts us into a large room. My pulse quickens at the *click* of the lock.

“I expected something smaller,” Josie admits, head tilted as she scans the high ceiling.

This area is set up like a dining room, adorned with black walls, lush maroon carpet, and a fake fireplace in one corner giving off real heat. A large family portrait in an ornate gold frame anchors a gallery wall, surrounded by pictures in smaller, mismatched frames. My eye is drawn to a portrait of a woman in a pink ball gown with a flamingo-feathered hand fan and a man in a tux. The placard beneath reads *Fanny Flamingo & Professor Peach*.

I step up to a cherrywood table. It is prepped for dinner with place settings and a big fake meal in the middle. “Is it...dining room themed? Turkey dinner themed? I was thinking it’d be an escape from a desert island or something.”

Alex circles the table, tracing a long finger over the wood. “If food knowledge is a prerequisite, I’ve got us there.”

“You a food connoisseur?” Josie asks.

“I like to cook. I once got to take a class with Gordon Ramsey’s assistant through my old job.”

Of course he has. This man has lapped me and everyone else in the Game of Life.

“Holy crapola, I’m so jealous,” Josie says. “Mia and I bake a ton when we hang out, but neither of us are as interested in cooking.” She catches my eye, and her appraising stare yells, *Take the conversational baton*. “Right, Mia?”

“Baking is awesome,” I acquiesce. I lift up a gold fork and tap it against an actual ceramic plate before my gaze darts to a giant red countdown on the wall. “Why hasn’t the clock started?”

Alex encroaches on my personal space, leans over the table, and flips a gravy boat. Nothing comes out. “I gotta say, cooking is much more fun than baking. With baking, you have to measure everything so precisely, and it still doesn’t always turn out right. Cooking gives you more leeway.”

“Baking is more satisfying to get right,” I argue, stepping sideways. “Because it’s so precise. When you nail a recipe, it’s a huge victory.”

He lifts a wineglass by the stem and twirls it. “When I nail a recipe, I’m usually pretty satisfied.”

“How very *American Pie* of you.”

Ezra snorts under his breath at my joke. Ezra is clearly the superior friend in their duo.

The large family portrait fades to black.

“Got ourselves a television,” Alex needlessly announces.

The image of a man with red hair and intense caterpillar brows stirs to life on the screen. A pipe would look at home in his mouth. “Hello, detectives, and welcome to the O’Brady mansion. Your agency received a call from the local PD requesting your assistance following the murder of Harry O’Brady, but when you show up at the mansion, the officer who called you to meet is nowhere to be found.

“Inside, you find a smudged note. It’s all you have to guide you in your investigation. It’s your job to solve the murder, which will lead you to your escape tool, within the hour—or you’ll be next. Good luck, and Godspeed.”

He fades out, and the family photo fills the screen once again. On another wall, a giant timer with red numbers starts counting backward from one hour. As far as I’m concerned, it’s counting down to the minute I’ll get distance from Alex’s Sauvage Dior or whatever the heck he wears. The Rolex of colognes, no doubt.

“Well, that was vague.” Ezra sidles up beside Alex. “Usually there’s more to go on, no?”

“I’ve got the note.” I lift the clipboard closer to my face and squint. The handwriting is horrific. “It’s a list with a bunch of hints about weapons and motives.”

-Harry O’Brady is dead, his body Gone from the premises

-With no trace of blood or struggle, I’m at A loss as to what happened. According to the family, one Second they were setting the table for dinner, The next he was dead.

-I don’t trust Franny. She evaded my questions and flirted Awfully hard for a married woman.

-Rope, candlestick, empty revolver, letter opener, butcher knife are potential weapons, but None showed prints when forensics came out.

-Knowing how this family operates from past experience, and Knowing how much money Harry’s benefactors stood to gain, I wouldn’t put anything past them.

“So this is basically *Clue*,” Alex says after I’ve read the page out loud, “which explains the dining room and the cast of characters in the portrait.”

The people in the family photo *do* look like an alternate-universe version of those you’d find in the game. Fanny Flamingo is definitely a Mrs. Peacock

substitute.

My heart soars. “This will be fun. *Clue* is my jam, and I’ve watched *Knives Out* at least twenty times. This note will give us everything we need. The secret to winning is a meticulous process of—”

“Found something!” Alex wields a candlestick in the air. “See the base? It’s got a key taped to the bottom.”

“—elimination,” I finish quietly. “And solving the riddles.”

“Stick it in all the locks,” Ezra goads. “Wouldn’t it be funny if that solved the whole room?”

“Wouldn’t that be a little too easy? They wouldn’t put the final key on the table.” I nod toward a doorway. “We haven’t even visited the other room yet.”

“Maybe that’s what they want you to think.” Alex removes the key. “We have to out-game the game master.”

“The man on the screen said we won’t have the exit tool until we solve the murder,” I point out. “Therefore, it stands to reason that we shouldn’t worry about the key until we’ve solved the murder.” I look to my friend for backup. “Right, Jo?”

Josie has her ear pressed against the wall.

I step closer. “What are you doing?”

“Checking for hidden nooks.” She raps her fist against the wall. “The walls are never the walls in these kinds of places, you know? They have secrets.”

Ezra and I share our first *oh, Josie* look. I tuck away the fondness in his eyes so I can describe it to Josie later. She’ll call me a hopeless romantic for noticing, but after giving speeches at my sisters’ weddings, I’m now in the habit of collecting little moments. You never know when one might be meaningful—

“On your left,” Alex blurts as he all but shoves past me.

“Excuse you,” I grumble, returning my attention to the clipboard.

He attempts to stick the key in the door’s lock. “It doesn’t fit. Oh well, it’ll fit somewhere. There’s a lock for every key.”

“A key for every lock, you mean?”

He meets my eye. “Those are the same phrases.”

“Not really. A lock for every key doesn’t make sense, because for every singular lock, there are many key copies made.”

“But those multiple keys still fit the same lock. A lock for every key.”

“But the word *every* implies a one-to-one correspondence—”

“Okay, Ms. Madden,” Josie says in a low voice. “It’s not that serious. No need to detonate the teacher switch.”

“Sorry.” I snap my mouth shut.

She’s right. I’m coming in way too hot, and I’m not even sure why.

I catch a glimpse of Alex’s smug smile as he turns away.

Ah, yes. *That’s* why.

Alex peeks into the adjoining room. “Oh, we’ve got ourselves a nice little office. Or *study*, as the game would call it. Should I go explore and see what this thing unlocks?”

“My gut says we start with this page full of hints they gave us.” I return my attention to the clipboard, rereading the note aloud a few more times, focusing on different words each time. “This letter is important. I think we should try to figure out the hidden meaning.”

“My gut says ransack the rooms,” Alex replies, putting the key in his pocket. “Let’s check out the study.”

Josie speeds toward the open doorway. “I spy bookcases that are begging to be searched. So many spots for clues.”

“Do you think the books are real?” Ezra asks. “Maybe they’re hollowed out like the walls.”

“Yes!” Josie exclaims. “Now you’re thinking. I’m telling you, everything is hollowed out in these places.”

Ezra’s laugh is a quiet rasp. “I love your enthusiasm.”

He follows her through the doorway, barely leaving a breath of space between their bodies, hands anchored on her hips. Alex trails close behind, a dubious look on his face as he eyes the ceiling, like he might punch a hole through to check for clues.

And then, the three of them are gone, their shared laughter diminishing as they get further away. At least Josie seems to be having a good time.

I blink down at the *actual* key to solving this place—the riddle.

Looks like I’ll be doing this part on my own.

Six

ALEX

We haven't found a single clue to help us solve the murder, let alone prevent another one by escaping, and we've lost ten solid minutes searching desk drawers, fake logs, and bookcases in the study.

Meanwhile, Mia hasn't even bothered to come in here. If her attempt to avoid me is supposed to be subtle, she'd have the same outcome wearing a foam finger that's flipping the bird.

No matter.

"This is the worst escape room ever," Ezra laments, trying to wiggle the bolted-down rotary phone base. He lifts the receiver to his ear. "Too much stuff and none of it does anything cool."

"Hey, come look at this book, Ezzy." Josie beckons him to join her on the ground, where she's sprawled on an area rug. "*Mastering the Art of French Cooking*."

Ezra drops down beside her. "Nice. You think the book is a clue?"

"Oh, I hadn't thought about that. I just really want to cook my way through the desserts. Mousse à l'Orange, Biscuit au Beurre, Bavarois Praliné."

Ezra scoots closer and lowers his voice. "You should speak French more often."

The fucks those two give about solving this room seem to be dwindling. Can't fault them, though. Once upon a time I actually enjoyed my dates.

"English, Portuguese, and Pig Latin not enough for you?" Josie says between giggles as he nuzzles her neck.

"And that's my cue," I declare, scooting out of the study so they can have their moment.

Which unfortunately means *I* gain a moment in the fake dining room with Mia.

As though this is her actual domicile, she's cleared a space at the table and is hunched over, scribbling on a piece of paper.

I venture a step closer. "Where'd you get a pen?"

She jolts upright and clutches her chest. "You scared me."

The sight of her palm on her bare cleavage would make a lesser man grit his teeth. "Sorry. I'll leave you alone. I know you prefer a silent, empty room."

"What are you talking about?"

I gesture at the air. "You're hiding in here alone."

"Hardly. You three went on a mission to search the nooks and crannies. I didn't make you go." She taps her cheek with the pen. "Will you come here and look at this?"

This time, I'm the one who jolts. "You want me to come over there?"

Her lips pull into a frown. "Is that such a hardship, moving a few feet closer to me so you can see the paper?"

I close the distance between us and peer over her shoulder, careful not to get too close. Her bubble has an electric charge, and I'm not trying to get shocked. "Where did the numbers come from?"

"See how random letters were capitalized in the note they gave us? The handwriting is so bad it almost didn't occur to me, but they spell out a code. *Gas tank*." She peeks over her shoulder and glances up to meet my eye. At this angle, she's all lips and lashes.

I sway backward a little. So much for not getting shocked. "You think they murdered him with gas?"

"I don't know. My brain is like a sluggish computer trying to connect to wifi." She returns her attention to the paper. My gaze skates down the curve of her neck, stalling on its way to... Where was it going?

"The tank part is tripping me up," she murmurs. "*Gas tank*..."

Right. Riddles. "I wonder if it's not related to how the murder happened. Maybe it's a clue to get to the next clue."

"But what do we do with that? Were there books on cars in the study, maybe?"

I stare hard at the riddle. Growing up, I played approximately one million solo computer games on an ancient PC tucked away in the corner of my and Derek's shared bedroom. When it was too hot to go on my usual long walks to get out of the oppressively small trailer, I drowned myself in strategy quests—the only kind of game that held my interest. This should be easy for

me.

Glancing at the entrance to the study, inspiration strikes fast and furious. “Wait a second. *Gas tank* has seven total letters. Phone numbers have seven digits. They put an ancient rotary phone in that study, and I bet it’s not a coincidence.” I leave a wide berth, careful not to touch her as I lift her page off the table. “May I?”

“Sure, I’m right behind you.”

We cross the threshold to the study, and the love birds break apart. If this were an actual scenario that required our escape from danger, we’d be shit out of luck with those two manning the helm. They’re so distracted by each other they’d probably go down on a sinking ship without noticing.

“You figure something out?” Ezra asks as he rises to his feet to follow me.

“Just a hunch.” I drop into the desk chair and start dialing the corresponding numbers. 427-8265.

“Look!” Josie squeals, pointing at the top shelf of the farthest bookcase. “That black book is *moving*.”

It falls off and hits the ground with a *thud*. Based on the lack of pages, it’s the answer to Josie’s hollow book premonition.

She crab-crawls across the room and snatches it up. “Hello, Mensa? We’ve got ourselves a genius. It’s got something taped inside! Nice work, Alex.”

Ezra slaps me on the shoulder. “Well done. We would’ve made zero progress on our own. Glad one of us brought our A-game.”

Josie passes me the envelope. “Carry on, code cracker.”

“Mia figured out the numbers,” I correct. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t have known.”

Mia does a double take and uncrosses her arms. “Oh. Yes, but you figured out the point of the number.” Her cryptic gaze holds mine for the span of three blinks. “That’s the important part. Right?”

It doesn’t sound like a rhetorical question. But she also doesn’t strike me as someone who needs or wants my assurance.

She may be the real riddle in this place.

Ezra claps his hands, snapping me out of my brief trance. “Great. What’s next?”

I rip open the envelope and scan the page, happy for something else to focus on.

The numbers and shapes take me straight back to my college geometry class, and I immediately go into problem-solving mode.

“Yes.” My smile is triumphant. “You all can relax. I know exactly what this means.”

Seven

MIA

We solved the mystery with seconds to spare.

Rather, Alex solved the rest of it on his own, decoding some geometric pattern that led him to a book with another key inside, which he then shoved into a bunch of padlocks until he found the final clue.

He may have boss-manned his way through that room and made the rest of us redundant, but he wasn't totally insufferable about it. He gave me credit for the one thing I actually managed to get right.

I could've done without him loudly repeating how "surprisingly easy" the room was on the way out the door, though.

At least we get to eat now.

The Hibachi restaurant is a standalone building in the same plaza as Escape and Sip, which is a large reason why we made reservations there. The other equally large reason is my and Josie's love of eating our weight in sauce-drenched rice and chicken. Ambling across the cracked black cement parking lot, Josie and Ezra walk in the middle while Alex and I flank them like bodyguards.

I wrap myself in a hug in an attempt to ward off the frigid air. "Should I run back to the car and grab our jackets, Jo?"

"Nah. I'm good." Josie lets out an apathetic noise as the breeze ruffles her hair. Goose bumps scatter over her skin. "It'll be warm inside."

Ezra shimmies out of his sweater and drapes it over Josie's shoulders. "If I had an extra, it'd be yours, Mia." Ezra throws a pointed look at Alex. "Or a flannel shirt, even."

Whether Alex heard his friend or not—and I desperately hope *not*—is unclear. If he did hear, he's as uninterested in sharing his flannel as I am in wearing it. Regardless, he's busy eyeing the sky with an intensity that rivals

my chocolate cravings during PMS week. “Moon is only sixteen percent illuminated tonight.”

I blink up at the sky. “What does that mean?”

“It means there isn’t a lot of light pollution. Good for seeing stars.” He almost stutters to a stop, lost in whatever he’s looking at. With his head tipped up toward the sky, I begrudgingly register his profile. This guy has no bad angles. “Saturn and Mars are in conjunction tonight, though that’s better experienced from a telescope.”

“You and that telescope,” Ezra says with a chuckle. “A match made in my dormitory hell.”

Alex spares him a glance. “It’s not my fault that particular model took up so much space. The stand broke, and I couldn’t collapse it.”

“Most roommates bring a mini fridge,” Ezra continues with a flourish of his arm, almost like he’s about to shoot a web. I remind myself for the third time tonight he isn’t actually Tom or Peter or Spider-Man. “This asshole brought—what was it? The Celeste Powerpro?”

“Celestron PowerSeeker,” Alex corrects.

“Sounds like a sex toy,” Josie offers brightly. “Probably an expensive one.”

An alarming red flush creeps over Alex’s face. “Nope. Just a telescope I found dirt cheap at a garage sale.”

Curiosity gets the better of me. “Of all the things for a college dude to put in a dorm, I can’t imagine a telescope being a priority. Were you a science major at some point?”

“Nah, it’s just a hobby,” Alex says in a throwaway tone as we close in on the restaurant.

“*Just* a hobby? Hobbies imply a casual interest. You and that telescope are in a long-term relationship.” Ezra slings an arm over Josie’s shoulder as we start down the shrub-lined path to the entrance. “When Alex gets into something, he gets really into it, *major* tunnel vision—”

“Oh good, we’re here.” Alex reaches for the handle, throwing his friend a chilling look. “And not a moment too soon.”

I guess it shouldn’t shock me all that much that Alex has actual interests, but they don’t align with the impression I have of him. Figuring him out is like trying to hitch a wagon to the wrong horse. He doesn’t look like he’d fire up a dusty ol’ telescope and stare at an eclipse. Or not stare at an eclipse. Whatever you’re supposed to do with an eclipse.

If I had to guess, I would’ve said he spends all his time watching stand-up

comedians sweat bullets on stage, or maybe trolling Pinterest for standing desk and ball chair inspiration. Or it's possible he spends all his free time dating, closing each night with a kiss. Maybe more than a kiss.

Nope. None of my business who he's kissing, or not kissing, or touching—"Mia," Josie calls. "You good?"

I blink twice. The men have already gone inside.

"Just zoning out." I slide past her into the dark waiting area. "Are you having fun?"

"No, I mean...Alex. You two clearly have history. What gives?"

I exhale in defeat. "He's the guy from that bad date."

"Which bad date?"

"Wow, cut me where it hurts." I throw a sideways glance at the boys, who have flocked to the bar. "The most recent one."

"I was afraid you'd say that." She worries her lip into her mouth. "You have bad blood with my boyfriend's best friend. That's not good."

"No, I don't," I blurt. This is exactly what I was afraid of. "It's fine. *Really.* Let's get back to it. I don't want the men to think we're talking about them."

Her dark brows lift. "But we are."

"Okay, I don't want Alex to know I'm talking about him. Not because I care one way or another, and not because I'm not having a good time. I mean—This is fine. Everything is fine."

She laughs and ushers me forward. "That was one 'fine' too many, babe. I think we both need a drink."

Our reservation is still a few minutes out, and the rest of the table hasn't arrived yet. We kill time at the bar, AKA Josie and I take a shot—her idea, not that I'm complaining—while the guys hover behind us, chatting about Ezra's current physical therapy clinical rotation. When Ezra asks Alex about work, Alex sneakily reroutes the topic to the weather.

The hostess finally escorts us back with the promise that the chef will come out as soon as the rest of the table is settled. Fine by me, so long as they let us order another drink.

The table is L-shaped, the seats facing a flat-top grill. Perfect for the chef-led show Benihana is known for. There's a row of four chairs open on one side and two empty on the adjacent side.

Josie and Ezra choose their spots, and we file in beside them.

"You should take the outside, so you have more leg room," I tell Alex. "That way I can sit next to Josie."

“You got it.”

We’re seated all of five seconds when the hostess returns with two more to fill out the table.

A woman with a meticulous blond bob passes, dousing the air with the distinct scent of Chanel No. 5, followed by a short, fit man with a very square torso. My breath catches, and the noise of the packed room blends to a low hum.

Emily and Chester Larabee. My parents’ former best friends.

Perhaps, more notably, my ex-fiancé Mason’s parents.

Maybe Alex had a point about this town being small.

The sight of those two stirs a flipbook of old memories: summer trips to the lake, board games that stretched for hours, cannonballs in cold water, Nutella sandwiches on white bread, hot cider when the sun went down, spiked cider when the adults weren’t looking.

And the more recent memories of a screaming match between Chester and Dad in our front yard about the wedding that never happened and a tearful “this isn’t goodbye” goodbye between Emily and me in an IHOP.

My legs tense as if prepared to stand. Or maybe run.

Emily’s gaze lands on me as she pulls out her chair. The polite but tight smile most people wear in public falls off her face in a rush. “*Mia?*”

Two feelings fistfight for dominance in my heart: a lifetime of fondness and a deep yearning to disappear. Chester and Emily are *it’s complicated* in human form.

“Miss Emily!” I manage. “Hi!”

She releases her chair and spreads her arms open. “Come here, Mia Girl.”

My parents’ nickname for me warms me long enough to ignore the insistent voice in my head chanting *Mason’s mom Mason’s mom Mason’s mom*. She was Mom’s best friend long before I ever dated her son. That’s what I need to focus on.

Regardless of what she is to me, I wouldn’t have chosen to see her on this not-date.

I push away from the table—far away, because Alex is between us and I have to climb out around him—and circle the corner of the table to hug her.

For how small Emily is, four feet and some change to my five foot three, her embrace surrounds me. It activates muscle memory, and I relax just enough to get us through it unscathed.

“It’s been forever n’ a day, hasn’t it?” She pulls back and plants her hands

on my shoulders as she gives me a once-over. A loud sizzling from the neighboring grill fills the momentary silence between us. “Too long.”

It’s been a year and a half since I sat at their dinner table like the future daughter-in-law I thought I would be.

I’ve long since moved on from mourning my relationship with Mason. He did me the biggest favor of my life when he bailed, even though I didn’t see it that way at the time. My confidence and heart were blasted to smithereens when he crashed into my bridal suite the morning of our wedding just to tell me he wouldn’t be waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

We’re all each other has ever known, and I think we forced it. There are better people out there for both of us, you’ll see. I know the timing isn’t great, but please trust me, I’m sparing us from something worse. You always said divorce was a fear of yours.

He didn’t even let me get a word in edgewise.

In happier news (for him), he found his “better person” and proceeded to marry her six months after our (almost) wedding.

In worse news, I now must endure the soul-snatching awkwardness of dining with his parents knowing darn well Chester and my dad haven’t spoken since the wedding fallout. Maybe the chef will light me on fire like he does everything else on his grill. He’d be doing me a favor.

I arrange my lips into a smile for Emily’s benefit. “It *has* been forever.”

Chester, already seated and tucking a napkin into his Georgia Bulldogs polo, offers me a wave, which I return on my way back to my seat. Ruddy-cheeked and wobbly, he looks like he got lost on his way home from an SEC tailgating party and wound up here.

As I pull out my chair to sit back down, Alex squeezes my elbow, sending a current of energy up my arm. In a turn of events a clairvoyant couldn’t see coming, I’m suddenly grateful for his giant presence. I’m not keen to skip down memory lane over dinner, and he’s the perfect size to eclipse me from Emily’s view.

“Should I switch with you so you can sit next to them?” he asks in a low voice.

“No!” I grapple for a quick recovery so as not to sound rude. “I mean...you need the leg room. It’s okay.”

He tilts his head and lifts his brows *just* high enough to visually call my bluff. “It’s no prob—”

“Thanks, though.” My voice is firm as I drop into my chair.

He attempts to catch my eye as I fiddle with my silverware roll. I can't very well tell him that I'm going to use him as a human buffer. Because then I'd have to explain why, and the last thing I want to do is tell this man about my relationship with Mason. The only thing Alex will learn about me tonight is that I take my steak medium well.

And given Alex already thinks I'm an unadventurous, parade-leading, teacher-townie, clueing him in that Mason left me only to then marry *way* up to Georgia's version of a Kardashian is a hit my ego doesn't need tonight.

But judging by the interest flickering in Emily's eyes as she scans our party, she doesn't intend to let a human wall stop her from engaging.

I am stranded on Benihana Island with only Alex and the love birds to help me—two escape rooms in one night.

Eight

ALEX

Mia wrings her hands in her lap as the waiter approaches.

I've seen her uncomfortable, but this is different. She's on edge. I don't know who the people on my left are, but based on the tension in Mia's posture since the second they walked in, my guesses are landlords for a house she's damaged, former teachers who failed her at her favorite subject, or relatives with opposing political views.

"What can I get y'all to drink?" the waiter asks, fixing his attention on the landlords.

"Heineken for me, Cabernet for my wife," the man in the Georgia polo says without lifting his gaze from the menu.

The woman, whose strong perfume is overpowering the hibachi scents, nods in agreement.

My turn next. "House cabernet for me, too, please."

Mia cuts me a surprised look before ordering two lemon drop shots for her and Josie and a lemon drop martini for herself.

The short-haired woman nearly yells over the bustle of the dining room. "Josefina! Great to see you again. How've you been?" Her Southern accent is so strong she makes *Josefina* sound like four names in one.

Josie cranes her neck forward to yell past me and Mia in return. "Just fine, Miss Emily. How are you?"

"Fine and dandy, thanks."

Emily continues to stare past me at the women. If only Mia had traded seats with me, all this would be easier.

"And who else do we have the pleasure of dining with tonight?" asks Emily.

Mia clears her throat and shifts beside me, her leg brushing mine under the

table. The contact stirs me into uncomfortable awareness of how close we are. “That’s Ezra, and this is Alex.”

Emily’s thin lips lift in a tiny smile, apparently very satisfied at the names we were given at birth. “Hi, Ezra and Alex. Oh, Mia Girl, this makes me so happy. I’m so glad to see you settled down.”

Before I can so much as process that statement, Mia lifts a hand. “*Oh*, no. No, no. I’m— That’s so sweet, but I wouldn’t say settled. You know me, wild at heart! Anyway, this is a friend of mine.”

Good lord is she floundering. I glance right, and her wide eyes meet mine. Maybe it’s just the close proximity, but for the first time, I catch a flash of something raw in her expression. Vulnerable, even. The foreign instinct to comfort her in some way, to squeeze her hand or something under the table, hits me hard.

“Emily and Chester were—*are*—friends with my dad,” she says evenly.

Oh.

This news is the equivalent of ice water dumped over my head. I spare the couple a nod. “Hi there. Great to meet you both.”

“Likewise,” Chester says, gaze flitting up from his menu for the briefest second.

I replay the conversation Mia and I had in the elevator at Peachtree Tech at double speed in my head. We outright agreed not to tell her dad about our date—*singular*, since tonight hardly counts. Are these people going to say something to Richard?

I peek at Mia and glimpse a cocktail of emotion swirling in her brandy-colored eyes. One of them could certainly be fear.

That conversation will have to wait until after dinner. She’s bothered seeing these people for some reason or another, and since there’s nothing I can do to make them un-see us together, the best I can do is field as much small talk as possible.

Her problem now feels like my problem, unfortunately.

The waiter returns with our drinks. After all six of us place the exact same food order for filet, chicken, and fried rice hibachi meals, Emily points to our matching wineglasses. “A good red goes with everything, wouldn’t you say?”

Reds don’t pair well with a lot of things, but only a *douche* would correct someone on that. “A good red can do no wrong.”

“We’re itchin’ to do Napa this summer with our family, if Chester can get the time off.” I can tell Emily is looking past me, trying to get Mia’s

attention.

Mia, however, is busy downing her shot. Her elbow knocks my bicep as she throws it back.

Wordlessly, Josie slides her shot glass an inch to the left.

Mia downs that one, too.

Interesting.

“So how’s your dad, Mia?” Emily asks, swirling her wine. Chester perks up at the question.

Fingers still gripping the empty glass, Mia replies with a terse, “Great!”

“And teaching?” Emily presses. “How’s that going? Are you still at the same school?”

“Teaching is good. I love my school.” Mia relaxes an iota, leaning back in her chair. “Tiring at times, but I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

“Bless your heart. I could never teach in public schools these days. Too much responsibility. Glad I left when I did.” Emily fans herself with an enormous menu. “I got out in the early 2000s.”

Mia’s laugh is clipped, like a balloon releasing a pulse of air. “Public school is broken in so many ways. There are so many kids and so few resources, you know? I wish I could open my own Montessori-style independent school, do things my way to align with researched-based best practices—” She snaps her mouth shut. “Anyway, there’s plenty I wish I could fix, to your point.”

I turn my head so I can get a good look at her. I can feel her breath on my neck we’re sitting so close. “Your own school? Wow.”

“Just a dream. Not an actual plan or anything,” she amends quickly.

“Still, it’s very cool.”

Her expression softens under the glow of a pendant light as her gaze catches mine. It’s warm butter sweating, the cusp of melting. It jars me to know something I said could inspire that softness, and I can’t bring myself to look away.

She blinks toward her plate. “Well, cool as it may be, it’s too ambitious for a girl who knows nothing about the business side of opening a school like that. Just daydream fodder.”

Emily’s voice cuts in. “This one was born to teach. She’d make her sisters and my sons listen to her lessons as a kiddo, even though she was the youngest of the lot. It was always quite the production.”

Mia’s fingers drift over the base of her martini glass. “Fun times.”

Her strained tone suggests otherwise.

“We didn’t make it to the lake house last year with all the excitement. I’m sure you’ve seen all the photos of Saila and Sasha.” Emily’s attention hops back to me. “Those are my new granddaughters. Maybe Mia told you? I’m not sure if you two— Well, anyway, they’ve been keeping us *all* busy, the little miracles.”

Mia has told me less than this woman could ever fathom, but I nod along. Since Mia is uncharacteristically quiet, I fill the dead air. “I can only imagine how busy you must be.”

The chef rolls his tray into the nook, greeting us all with a nod. He confirms orders and steak preferences down the line, and when he fires the grill, a sharp wave of hunger moves through me. It gets loud in a hurry, and everyone has to yell to be heard.

Emily procures a phone from beneath the table. She presses the side button and extends her arm. “This is them.”

Two very chunky babies in pink hair bows fill Emily’s home screen. “That’s Saila on the left—she’s my big personality baby—and Sasha on the right.”

It’s unclear if she’s showing me or the whole table. I lean in for a good look. “Oh, wow.”

Emily’s lips pull into a frown. I rack my brain for what I might’ve said wrong. I’ve never been around a baby smaller than two years old, nor do I have any parent friends. What is the protocol? Do I comment on the planet-size bows? Their matching clothes? Sweat peppers the back of my neck. “Cute.”

Emily sticks her arm out a little farther.

Mia side-eyes me, a hint of amusement in her tiny grin, before adding, “They’re beautiful. Being a grandmother suits you. I’m sure Matthew and Laney are loving life.”

“Matthew’s my oldest,” Emily clarifies no doubt for my benefit, dabbing a napkin to her mouth. “They are overjoyed—as are we.” Her tone shifts as she levels Mia with a probing stare. “And I imagine you’ve heard Mason and Alessandra’s exciting news by now.”

Mia brings the rim of her martini glass to her mouth. She seals her red-painted lips around the rim and takes a long sip. The devil works hard but that lipstick works harder, not staining a thing. “Mason has news?”

“Oh, you didn’t see the press release on social media? I thought you kids

saw everything with all the high-falutin' tech y'all own."

"I barely own any technology." Mia's smart watch lights up in mockery of this claim. She shoves her arm down between us to hide it.

I study her profile, trying to glean even a fraction of what's going on here. "Press release?"

Emily turns her gaze to me. "My son Mason and his wife Alessandra joined the cast of *New Housewives of Atlanta*, airing this fall on Bravo. They're part of the core cast, which means their lives are prominently featured."

Mia's eyes go saucer wide. "That's...holy moly. *Television?*"

"He always did know how to make a scene," Josie says brightly.

"What was that, dear?" Emily yells, cupping her ear.

"I said Mason will be great on TV!" Josie yells back.

"We were all fit to burst when they were chosen. It's going to be fantastic timing, with Alessandra's pregnancy," Emily continues. "The public will get to follow on the journey with her. Making a nursery, shopping for preschools, all that good stuff. And Mason's busier than ever at the firm, so viewers will get a peek into that, too—"

I stop listening to Emily's rambles when I catch the look on Mia's face.

I may not know Mia that well, but I know a look of distress when I see one. It's like a cold front moved over her expression. She pushes around the fried rice on her plate as the rest of us devour our entrees.

She proceeds to eat three whole bites the entirety of the time the chef is cooking. He wheels his cart away, and she's still got a mountain of food, when most of us are already almost done.

It frustrates me an unreasonable amount that the woman who mentioned this place multiple times while we were in the escape room—and who also put away a massive bacon-and-tomato panini with speed and finesse and a country-size hunk of cake at the office—suddenly can't be bothered to eat.

I poke her in the forearm.

This elicits a narrow-eyed perusal. "Excuse you."

I keep my voice low so as not to invite any more conversation from our tablemates. "Your stomach was rumbling and you've eaten three bites? What gives?"

"You're counting my bites?"

"There are so few of them."

She cocks her head to the side. "I'd pay MyFitnessPal if I were interested

in that service.”

“I’m just confused. Aren’t you hungry?”

She watches me from the corner of her eye and scoops a massive bite of food into her mouth as if to say, *Happy now?*

The waiter ambles over a few quiet minutes later and offers us a list of desserts. He seems to have a special place in his heart for the brownie sundae, which he describes at length.

Josie looks left and right. “What do we think? Dessert, or should we head to a bar, maybe? I’ve been dying to check out that western-themed place on Saxon. Ring of Fire, I think it’s called?”

“That sounds fun,” Ezra affirms. “And it’s still early.”

“Whatever the group wants.” Mia’s tone suggests she’d rather force-feed herself another bite of food than extend this outing any longer.

“I’ll have a piece of fried cheesecake,” an eager Josie tells the waiter. “To keep my drink company on the way down.”

The weight of this particular work week hits me like a slap in the face. I stifle a yawn. A bar sounds terrible, if I’m honest.

A bar with Mia, who is clearly in a sullen mood for reasons that are beyond my pay grade, sounds equally unappealing.

Chester and Emily bid us all goodbye as soon as their tab is paid. Emily throws an arm around an unsuspecting, still-seated Mia on her way past. She plants her cheek against the crown of Mia’s head and closes her eyes for a second, as if soaking it up.

“Still the spittin’ image of your momma,” Emily says softly. “Don’t be a stranger, girlie.”

Mia nods, her lips pursed.

As soon as the couple is gone, I lean into Mia so only she can hear.

“I’m pretty tired. Want me to drop you off on my way home?”

Her head snaps my way. She’s pulse-tripping close, enough that I catch the subtle shift in her expression. “I’m so ready to go. Wait...why are you offering?”

“Uh, so you don’t have to third-wheel that Josie-Ezra bicycle over there? Unless you’re into that sort of thing.”

She sighs. “What if I’m out of your way? And wasn’t that Ezra’s car you showed up in?”

“Do you want to leave or not?”

“We should just endure the rest of the night. We’ve made it this far.”

My meal sours in my stomach. “Way to use root canal language to describe a perfectly fine evening. It’s just a ride, Mia. We don’t even have to talk.”

“You think it’ll upset them if we bail early?”

“Watch this.” I crane my neck past her. “Ezzy, we’re heading out. I’ll drop your car off in the morning.”

He doesn’t even look at me when he surrenders the keys, instead using it as an excuse to kiss Josie’s cheek.

Mia drops a hand on her friend’s forearm. “You good if I head out?”

“Of course!” Josie blows her a kiss. “You two have fun. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

Before the disgust on Mia’s face has time to take hold, I drop two bills on the table. “Dinner’s on me. I never did get you a graduation gift.”

“I don’t graduate until June,” Ezra insists.

“Exactly.”

“Wait,” Mia complains, yanking her purse from the hook under the table. She rifles through the massive bag. With an annoyed huff, she pulls out a slinky and a pink bag with a brush sticking out of the zipper’s teeth. Whether it’s for makeup or craft paint is a mystery for anyone but me to solve. “My wallet is buried here somewhere...”

“You can get it next time,” I offer, knowing damn well there won’t be a *next time*.

She shoots me a small smile like she can read my mind. “I’ll be paying you back one way or another.”

The sooner we put an end to *this* time, the better. Because the longer I spend with Mia—out in public, no less—the more complicated things become.

Nine

MIA

It's too cold to pretend I'm not, so I scurry across the parking lot with Alex hot on my heels.

"I would've pulled the car around if you'd just waited a minute." His stride makes walking this fast look easy. "You're an impatient one, aren't you?"

My wedges strike the concrete. "Maybe I like a good after-dinner jog."

Truth is, I cannot get home and into my bed fast enough, where I can sleep off the double-date-that-wasn't and the awkward interactions with Emily and Chester.

Thoughts of Emily's hugs chill my skin. It's been so long I'd almost forgotten the soothing timbre of her laugh, how effortless she is in groups. How utterly lovely she is, if not a bit overeager.

Losing Emily as a mother-in-law—losing the family my own mother was certain I'd marry into—stung for a long time. My mother loved Mason like her own son. I know she entertained ideas that I'd wind up a part of that family she loved and trusted—she told me as much after my and Mason's first kiss. I'll never forget the sight of Mom and Emily huddled over their mugs of spiked cider across the bonfire, conspiring about the wedding they'd throw us someday.

If she could see me now, back out there dating—Alex blips notwithstanding—rebuilding all the savings I blew on the wedding, and being the best daughter and sister I can be, I hope she'd be proud.

I swallow down a swell of emotion. Too many Lemon Drops.

Alex earns a dime's worth of credit when he opens Ezra's passenger door for me. He lingers as I climb in, like he just might earn another few cents by closing it for me, too.

"Thank you," I manage through chattering teeth. "I swear it wasn't this

cold earlier. Must've been all the Lemon Drops. My blood's running hot."

He merely smirks as he shuts the door.

Fine, then.

I cross my legs and aim all the vents at myself while he circles the front of the Pathfinder and slides into his seat.

"You know," he says, shrugging out of his flannel and throwing it on my lap without a sideways glance, "you could've just asked if you wanted my jacket that badly."

"What? I didn't— This isn't a jacket."

"Sure it is. Enjoy."

The smell of him on the fabric reaches out to choke me. "I'm fine. I've got the heater vents."

He turns one toward himself. "You've got half the heater vents."

"I wasn't trying to imply you needed to strip for me."

"I've still got this shirt." He plucks at his plain white tee. "Unless you want that, too?"

When I don't immediately respond to what I *thought* was a joke, he tugs the hem as if he's about to pull it off.

"Please stop." I sigh mightily as I type Josie's address into the console's GPS system. That's where we met up, so that's where my car is. "You enjoy this, don't you?"

"What?"

Seeing me flustered, I almost say. But I settle for, "Whatever you're doing."

He places a hand on my headrest and twists to look over his shoulder as he backs up. "Kind of, yeah. It's preferable to you poking your food all sad and quiet for the entirety of dinner. You looked like someone stole your cat."

"What the heck kind of example is that? Wait, did someone actually steal a pet of yours?" My stomach drops as I consider it. Not much could make me feel sympathy for a man who laid off some of my dad's most esteemed coworkers—who were ten years or less out from retirement—during his first week on the job, but this might nudge me in that direction. "Oh, that's so sad."

His gaze is a glancing blow. "'Stole your cat' is just an expression, Mia."

"It's really not."

"I've never even had a pet," he adds. "So there'd be nothing to take."

"Well, that's depressing. You should get a pet. If I had a house with a yard,

the absolute first thing I'd do is get a dog."

He shrugs. "I probably shouldn't. I never know when a lease will outlaw pets, and I don't want to risk it."

"Right, because of your moving fetish. Any chance that'll happen again soon?"

"Not for a while." He cuts me another look. "Touching that you already miss me."

"You wish." I slide a hand over my churning stomach. "I was just curious. If you love moving so much, it stands to reason you'd do it again."

I peek over in time to see the shadow of unease darkening his features. If I didn't know better, I'd think I'd actually hurt his feelings.

Now I'm the uneasy one. I aim the vents away from me. The heat isn't as delicious as I'd hoped.

Alex's voice breaks the silence that follows. "So why do you hate that nice couple and their grandkids?"

I whip my head his way. "What?"

"Why do you hate that—"

"I heard the question. I just don't understand why you'd ask such a thing. I don't hate them at all."

"My mistake. You were delighted to see them, and it didn't upset you at all. So much so that you downed two martinis and two shots in the span of thirty minutes, then engaged in a hunger strike."

"Why are you paying so much attention to me?"

"I'm not," he huffs. "I just notice the blatantly obvious."

I've never felt so far from a destination that's only twelve more miles away in my life. "Flattering you care so much."

"I do care. I am deeply, wholly invested in figuring out your beef with Emily, Chester, baby Sophia and Sampson, and the desperate housewives of Bravo—"

"I told you, they were friends of the family. Also the parents of my ex-fiancé who left me on our wedding day, only to then marry someone else six months later and, apparently, start a life in television."

The car falls pin-drop quiet.

"You can say something," I blurt. "Or make a joke. It's objectively funny."

"I'm not going to make a joke." He flicks the blinker as the GPS yells at him to turn right. "I'm really sorry that happened."

"Don't be. It's fine."

“Really? Because it sounds shady to me that he waited until the day of your wedding to end things and then suddenly wound up with a wife.”

“I’m over it. He had a vision for how his life should look and wasn’t willing to deal with anything that didn’t fit his exact plans. Sucked to be collateral damage, but whatever. The television thing caught me off guard, but he’s always had delusions of grandeur, so it tracks. If I was awkward at dinner, it’s because I haven’t seen Emily and Chester in a long time. There are a lot of memories and feelings tied up in that family. Definitely didn’t expect to see them today. My dad hasn’t talked to Chester in a year and a half, since the non-wedding. Not that I’d begrudge Dad if he kept that friendship going, but it got heated and things were said.”

“Got it. Families fighting on behalf of their kids.” He squeezes the wheel tighter. “Makes sense.”

“Yeah. Sometimes I feel bad, but then I remember their friendship was gasping along anyway without my mom around to be the glue anymore. Once she died, it changed everything.” I suck in a breath. “This is all way more than you need to know. The point is I can’t have you thinking I’m beefing with babies or Bravo TV.”

His eyes meet mine before returning to the road. “I’m sorry about your mom, too. I didn’t realize. I’m not sure Richard’s ever mentioned her.”

“Thank you. I imagine the topic doesn’t come up often in a work setting.”

Tense silence invades the car. It’s smelling a little bit like I overshared and made it heavy in here, so I sit up straighter and take back the conversational reins. “Josie really likes Ezra, you know.”

He runs a hand through his hair, disturbing the mess of brown strands perfectly. “Oh, I can tell. Those two are like magnets.”

“The *intense* magnets you get at souvenir shops that need to be pried off your fridge with a butter knife.” I point an accusatory finger his way. “I will be livid if he hurts her.”

He chuckles. “Ezra couldn’t hurt something even if he wanted to. I kill spiders for that man. Literally, I get in my car and drive over to his house.”

I suppress a sigh. “There are lots of ways to hurt someone, Captain Literal.”

His jaw ticks as he considers this. “I suppose so.”

A few quiet, blissful minutes pass as we approach Josie’s neighborhood. When the GPS loudly alerts us that we’ve reached the destination, he clears his throat. “Want me to pull in the driveway?”

“Curb is fine.”

Slowing to a stop, he shifts the car to park and adjusts his position so he can face me.

One thing I can’t fault him for: he’s committed to polite eye contact.

Maybe *too* committed. That’s probably why he’s in a leadership role. His attention is a little dizzying. My stomach turns over. I’m starting to wonder if the liquor was a bad decision.

He plants his elbow on the steering wheel. “So.”

The friendly neighborhood cicadas scream at top volume. The noise, usually relaxing, makes me antsy tonight. I remove the flannel from my lap and discard it in the backseat.

“So. Tonight was a thing that happened,” I offer. “Thanks for the ride.”

“No problem.” His gaze skates down my face and shoots right back up like a boomerang. “We’re not going to be telling your dad about tonight, obviously.”

I bristle at the abrupt subject change. “That goes without saying.”

His sigh is one of relief, which somehow annoys me, even though I feel the same. “Great.”

“Speaking of which, what are we going to do about Josie and Ezra’s relationship?” I ask.

He arches a brow. “Call me old fashioned, but I usually stay out of my friends’ relationships.”

“My point is I’m not sure how we get past the fact that our best friends are dating. It’s already getting serious.”

“There’s nothing to get past.” He flashes me his profile as he stares out the windshield. “They’ll understand that it’s easier if we just avoid each other. All it would take is getting spotted at Benihana by one of my employees and people will get the wrong idea. Work is complicated enough without my staff catching wind that I’m hanging out—or *God forbid* more—with Richard’s beloved daughter. They’ll say things to him, he’ll have thoughts, everyone will turn on me and slow down the progress I’m hoping to make...just bad business all around.”

I cross my arms. “Really? *God forbid*? The idea of getting caught dating me is now morally offensive to you? I should be the one afraid to be discovered hanging out with *you*. If he thought we were dating, my dad would—” I cut myself off from finishing that sentence and shake my head. “You get it.”

His tone is terse. “Your dad would what?”

Oh, grill him about his intentions, threaten him within an inch of his life, make his job harder in big and small ways, give him the Ben Stiller treatment in *Meet the Fockers*...any or all of these things and more. He’s a lamb in every area of his life except when it comes to protecting his family. With us, and especially as it pertains to our partners, he’s pure lion.

He gave Lucy’s former-frat-boy husband Jace hell until he proved himself responsible enough for a relationship. Marcelle, Harper’s teddy bear husband, was hazed with a line of fifty questions every time he came to dinner. Half of the questions were actually warning Marcelle *about* Harper—*Harper isn’t the settling-down type. She told you this, right? Did you know she wants a life of travel? She’s not selling her motorcycle for anything, best not to argue with her on that*—but it’s for the same purpose. He wanted to be sure Lucy and Harper met their proper matches before they got any marriage ideas. And after Mason broke my heart, he’s extra wary of anyone I so much as *look* at.

Not that I’m looking at Alex.

My blood pressure cranks itself up a notch. “Never mind. This is officially the most ridiculous conversation in the history of conversations because we aren’t going to be seen together in public. I was going to suggest we could rally if our friends wanted a game night at their houses or something. But fine. No co-mingling at all. Got it.”

“You’re annoyed.” The corner of his mouth twitches, as though this fact amuses him. “I forgot you were so interested in games. I guess we could risk one Monopoly night if you want to.”

I blink skyward, attempting to summon the strength to deal with him from the roof of this Pathfinder. “You just said we can’t so much as share the same airspace. Let’s start now, because I need to get out of this car.”

I’ve got the door halfway open when his voice interrupts my exit.

“Why’d you ask me out last week if you hated my profile so much?”

I swivel to look at him. “Are you serious?”

His eyes flash a rare sincerity. “Yes.”

“Because I wanted to.” I shake my head, incredulous that someone as presumably smart as this man would need it spelled out. “I didn’t *actually* hate your profile. It got my attention. But then you were thirty minutes late, so I thought you were standing me up. My feelings were hurt, so I called Josie to complain. You heard that conversation—and clearly memorized it—which means you could probably tell I was grasping at straws for things to

criticize. There, happy? Can we put that whole thing to rest?”

“I wasn’t late. I stood by the willow tree outside the front gate for thirty minutes waiting for you. I thought *you* were late.”

I blink, heat flaring up my neck. “No, I was sitting at the picnic tables. Waiting for you.”

“Huh.” He strokes his chin. “I guess I could’ve messaged you on the app to ask where you were. Lesson learned.”

“I didn’t even think of that.” I twist my hair around my hand, recalibrating my thoughts. I was very preoccupied with my Alex gripe list that night. It never occurred to me to actually try and give him the benefit of the doubt. I mean, I was largely right about him, but still.

I feel...chastened.

“I also could’ve messaged you,” I finally manage.

His smile is diplomatic. “Well, now you’ll know for the next guy you match with.”

Our eyes hold a second too long. For someone who was so recently a stranger, I’m starting to find the familiarity in his face. His mouth is a smidge uneven at rest, as though he’s perpetually amused and on the verge of a smile. It’s a contradiction to the worry lines between his dark brows. I wonder what kinds of thoughts forged that groove.

“And you,” I say. The cicada’s song swells as my pulse quickens. “For the next girl.”

He shakes his head with a throwaway laugh. “I deleted the app. But I appreciate the sentiment.”

This definitely shouldn’t stoke a reaction out of me. And I shouldn’t ask questions, because it’s zero percent my business. But I can’t seem to help myself. “Why’d you delete it?”

He taps the center console as he considers this. “I’m not sure I’ll find what I’m looking for on the internet.”

It feels like we’re toeing some personal waters, but since he’s now well aware of Mason and his entire family, it’d be only fair for him to offer up something in return. “What is it you’re looking for? Since your profile was mysterious in that department.”

He shrugs as his gaze meets mine. “I guess I’m hoping I’ll know when I find it. Find *her*.”

“Ah.” My stomach lurches as the word *her* repeats in my head. “Well, good luck with um...the finding. And then the keeping.”

“Luck.” His mouth lifts on one side in a mischievous half smile, as understated as it is captivating. “Think I’ll need it?”

My attention lingers on his mouth a second too long. In a rapid burst, I imagine his lips brushing over my jaw, drifting higher, inching toward the hollow beneath my ear as he winds his fingers in my hair—

Whoa.

I blink too fast, trying to reset my brain.

If he’s trying to prove he doesn’t need luck to catch a woman’s eye, it’s working. With such a deep voice, piercing eyes, and undeniable charm, he could do colossal damage with a quirk of his lips and a few choice words. That’s all it would take.

His ego doesn’t need to know that.

“Uh. Yeah. You’ll need luck dating in this town,” I lie. My breathy voice has me gritting my teeth in frustration.

Get it together, Madden.

He reaches forward.

I bang the car’s ceiling with the top of my head as I jump up instead of sideways. “What are you doing?”

“I was going for the mirror.” He leans past me and pulls down the passenger side’s visor. “You’ve got something on your cheek.”

I wipe hastily at a smudge of eyeliner, a furious blush spreading across my face, before nearly throwing myself out of the car with a mumbled goodbye. The motion of the door opening the rest of the way triggers the floodlight attached to the front of Josie’s condo. It casts a wide swath of light across the yard.

I make it halfway to my car before I succumb to the impulse to look over my shoulder. Immediately, I wish I hadn’t.

Because now I know he’s leaning sideways in his seat to watch me walk away. Physically working to keep me in his sight.

And now he knows I checked.

Ten

ALEX

“Happy Fun Friday.” I cross my arms and lean against the doorway of the emerging tech lab, which formerly served as a storage space for old filing cabinets before the reorganization. Now it’s my engineers’ workspace.

Engineers Anish and Darian are seated on the ground with two beta-phase Peachtree Tech Floor Sanitizers between them. As the first two people I hired when I took over, it’s important to me that they are acclimating well, so I’ve developed a bit of a hovering problem where they’re concerned.

“Hey, boss,” Anish says, turning his gaze from the machine driving itself in circles to me. “Happy Friday. I remembered to wear my jersey, against all odds.”

Darian’s laugh is loud and contagious. “The odds were good, considering I made him set an alarm on his phone.”

Anish dismisses this with a *meh*. “You’re worse than my big sister. I would’ve remembered on my own.”

“History suggests otherwise,” she quips.

It brings me a hit of joy that they’re participating in Smells Like Team Spirit Day. Anish chose to wear a Jets football jersey, while Darian is rocking a Texas Rangers hoodie. It’s not unusual to see Anish dressed down, as he’s usually in some shade of blue T-shirt, shorts, and Birkenstocks with socks. But for Darian, casual clothing at work is unheard of. Her usual wardrobe consists of stylish blazers, floor-length dresses, and platform boots.

That they took extra effort to remember and remind each other about today’s workplace morale initiative warms me more than it probably should. Maybe my morale needed a little boosting, too.

“How’s it been this week?” I ask.

“Great,” Anish offers. “No complaints here. Other than my ulcer, but that

feels like a me problem.”

“Been there. I’m glad to hear it’s going well otherwise. Are either of you going to make it to the Hawks game tonight?”

“I am.” Anish prods the floor sanitizer until the tiny machine turns off. “Thanks for the hookup.”

“No thank-you necessary. Just glad to hear people are taking advantage of the tickets. Great job on the sanitizers.” I tap my chin. “Maybe we need a catchier name for these?”

“You can call it a glorified hotel Roomba,” Darian suggests. “We do.”

“Right. Well, I’ll leave you to it.”

I return to the fourth floor with a spring in my step. Overall, they seem happy here. Though admittedly, morale has never been an issue with my new hires.

Only the people who already worked here. A great many of them hate everything. Just one of many reasons why I push the initiatives so hard.

Today’s event is the best of the lot: free employee tickets to the Hawks-Bulls game in Atlanta. It’s also an expensive, once-in-a-while treat. I’m really counting on the new break room coffee machine to do the heavy lifting most other days of the year. Whoever said money can’t buy happiness doesn’t know the cost of NBA tickets and espresso pods.

The accounting wing is empty as I stroll toward my last meeting of the day, a one thirty check-in with Richard. If leaving before two on a Friday and wearing a jersey in celebration of the free tickets doesn’t rouse his spirits, I don’t know what will.

Richard’s door is open, but I knock on the frame anyway.

He ceases typing and laces his hands on his desk. “Come on in.”

I drop into the seat in front of him and fire up my laptop. He’s not in a jersey, even though his sports-themed office suggests he’d own at least one. “Thanks for making the time to meet with me. I’m sure you’re eager to start your weekend, so I’ll keep it brief.”

His nod is tight. “Sure thing.”

I pull up a list of sales-related topics. Last night when I was typing up bulleted lists for all my meetings today, his agenda took the longest. I spent fifteen minutes deciding what order to introduce the topics in, intentionally frontloading the list with good stuff to outweigh a few new process changes I’m suggesting.

I work my way through the first five items, receiving little more than a nod

in return, even when I lavish him with praise about his sales numbers.

“All right, next up...” I clear my throat and peer up from my screen. My gaze lands on the photo on his desk.

An aftershock moves through me at the sight of Mia, a full-body reminder that last night, long after we said goodbye, thoughts of her crept into my head as I was falling asleep.

As I was helping myself fall asleep, specifically.

The vague but unmistakably Mia-shaped images that infiltrated my brain are the worst fucking things I could think about while sitting across from her father. But they were powerful enough to override my usual stock footage fantasies last night, and now they’re barging into my head yet again.

Distinctive curves, siren-red lips bracketed by dimples that are a little too cute, hair always swept off her neck.

That low-cut shirt and leather skirt combo—

“Next up?” Richard asks.

I resist the urge to reach over and flip that picture face down.

“With Mariana retiring,” I continue, taking a guillotine to my thoughts, “we’ve decided to hire a new person for the sales team.”

“Makes sense,” he says flatly, swiping his forehead. “Lose one, gain one.”

“We’d like you to sit in on interviews next week. The person needs to really charm on screen because they are going to be working remotely, full time.”

“Remote sales?” He scratches his jaw. “How does that work?”

“They’ll correspond with clients online. Lots of hotel upper management are remote, too. Or at least taking many of their meetings that way.”

“I don’t know, Conroy. Can you really be a compelling salesperson over the computer? Plus, we’re all in the office full time. Are they going to be part of our team? How does that work?”

I brace myself like I always do when I’m in a meeting with Richard. This “how’s this going to work?” speech is his go-to when he disagrees with me. “They’ll still be a part of your team. We will see how the next few months go with this new hire. One upside is it widens the hiring pool and levels the playing field for applicants.”

His gaze is pointed. “There’s plenty of talent in Avondale.”

“There is,” I concede, not wanting to belabor the point.

“I had an idea a while back about a traveling salesman role. Someone to go farther than Avondale and North Georgia to connect with hotel management.

In person. If you're going to put someone in a remote role, what if you give me a chance to travel for a probationary period of time to see who can sell the most? That'd be great data to have, don't you think?"

"You're already selling in person."

"Give me a wider playing field to compete with the remote person, and that'll give us good insight as to whether we need to be pushing for internet salespeople."

I chew on this for a minute. "I'll think about it."

I'm about to note the obvious in his statement—if he's worried about competing, that means the remote role is inherently a good idea for the company—when he closes his eyes for a beat. When he shifts and the light hits him just right, I catch the sheen of sweat on his skin. Yet he's still bundled up in a sweater as he massages his temples. "You good, Rich?"

"Fine."

"You sure?" I press.

"Yes." There's a gruff edge to his voice as he leans his forearms against the desk. "Been under the weather today, that's all. Nothing to write home about."

"Oh." I lean back in the chair. "Well, let's table this, then. You're welcome to head out."

His pause is lengthy, like he's warring with himself. "You sure?"

I snap my laptop shut. The last agenda item can wait until next week. Richard will not like it any more on a Friday than he will on a Monday. "Yes, you should head out. We'll revisit this next week. I'll share a calendar invite."

"I'd expect nothing less." His tone takes a rare, never-been-heard-before shift for the sincere. "Thanks, Conroy."

"No problem. Hope you feel better in time for the game tonight."

"We'll see. My daughter is really looking forward to it, so I'm hoping to rally for her sake."

"Oh?" I push up from the chair, avoiding his eye. "Which daughter?"

"Harper. I gave her my guest ticket."

Relief settles over me. I don't know Harper, but him inviting her makes more sense than him inviting Mia, who doesn't seem like she'd enjoy sports. At least I don't think so.

Maybe I don't actually know a ton about what hobbies Mia enjoys.

"Well, you two have fun," I offer, frustration at my dumbass mental

tangents at an all-time high. “Supposed to be a good game.”

His brows furrow. “You aren’t going? Isn’t this—the jerseys and games and stuff—sort of your whole deal?”

I shrug. I don’t have anyone to go with since Ezra is evidently busy from now until the end of eternity with Josie. Beyond that, I sort of assumed people would enjoy bonding with their coworkers more without the boss breathing down their necks.

“I have a lot of work to do this weekend. I want to get a jump start.”

“Alex. You’re what, twenty-nine?”

The sound of my first name out of his mouth is a shock to the system. I wouldn’t have guessed he even knew it. “Twenty-six.”

He lets out a weak laugh. “Can I give you a little advice?”

It must be the illness talking, because he’s not the forthcoming type. Not unless he’s advising me to get lost. “Sure.”

“Go to the game. Live your life. Work will be there when you get home. I wasted a lot of time when I was your age going above and beyond to prove myself. If I could do it all again, I’d spend more of that energy at home. Nose to the grind is respectable, don’t get me wrong. It’s just not all there is, and it doesn’t always pan out the way you expect.”

I turn over his words a few times as I exit his office. They’re heavy, knowing that he lost his wife.

Maybe advice always lands like a brick weight you have to find space for. Truth be told, I can’t recall a time anyone’s bothered to offer me any.

• • •

Pathologically early to everything that involves self-parking, I’m the first from Peachtree Tech to file into our block of seats at the arena. Hopefully the staff appreciates free, even if free comes with a potential nosebleed.

Christos and a man with a small backpack dangling off his arm file into two open seats on my left.

“Alex! Good to see you. This is my partner Jameson. Jameson, this is Alex Conroy, the reason we’re able to come tonight.”

Jameson, a short and freckled redhead, tips an imaginary cap in greeting. His Southern drawl is strong as he says, “Nice to finally put a face to the new boss!”

“Glad you two could make it out.”

Jameson is all smiles. “Wouldn’t miss it. Love a good game.”

Christos rests a hand on Jameson's thigh. "You're very convincing. I'd probably believe it more if you'd left your Kindle at home."

"I married an athlete—what do I need with the rest of them? Plus I've got client deadlines." Jameson shakes his backpack. "Two birds, one stone."

The rest of the arena fills out fast, including our block of seats. Three members of the sales team, four engineers, and all their guests arrive in succession, plus a smattering of accountants.

"Great turnout," I tell Christos. "I guess people weren't opposed to driving into the city."

Christos's smile is almost pitying. "I've seen several of these people close down a Golden Corral buffet just to get their money's worth. There's no way they'd miss a free game. Our old boss never did anything like this. I'm sure you won quite a few popularity points today." His smirk deepens. "Not that you're counting."

Satisfaction at this small feat lights me up. Maybe I can collect these elusive "popularity points" and cash them in for one good week where no one fights me in our Monday roundup.

Speaking of. "I met with Richard earlier. He didn't look so good. You hear from him?"

"Richard is sick as a dog." Christos crosses his legs at the ankle and leans back in his chair. "Has been since Wednesday."

"He was at work every day this week," I counter.

"He doesn't take sick days unless he's on death's door."

"Well, he should take time off when he needs it." I cross my arms, fixing my gaze forward as players flood the court. "His daughter must be bummed to miss the game."

"Actually"—Christos cranes his neck past me and lifts his hand—"there she is now."

I glance right and do a full double-take as a woman in a sleeveless Hawks jersey and a short jean skirt scoots down the row. Her black-and-red-striped knee-high socks draw attention to a pair of fantastic legs.

Unless Harper is Mia's twin, that's *not* Harper.

"That's not Harper," I announce. For some reason.

"Richard must've given his ticket to Mia."

Mia comes to a stop when her gaze lands on me. She rallies quickly, completing her sideways walk to the empty seats beside mine.

"Mia." Christos stands, leans past me, and pulls her into a hug. "Glad you

made it.”

“Thanks.” Her fond smile for Christos flushes itself down the drain when she turns to me. Her round eyes go wide for a few seconds before she plasters on a smile. “Mr. Conroy, was it?”

In an upsetting turn of events, the way Mia says *Mr. Conroy* has a filthy effect on me. Which means she needs to never say that again.

I rise to my feet, since the two of them are still standing. “Alex is fine. Preferable, even.”

Her gaze flits to Christos. “Harper bailed. Marcelle seems to have the same thing my dad does. Must be going around.”

“Thank goodness it’s spared you,” says Christos.

“Same. I’ve been missing our season tickets lately.” She peers over her shoulder at the court. “Maybe I’ll re-up next year as a Christmas gift to him.”

“*You* had season tickets to the Hawks?” I blurt.

“Me and my dad, yes. We’re a huge basketball family.” She stares me down, and it’s a little like being punched in the ribs. Her eyes are heavily made up, giving them a sexy, smoky effect I would enjoy on any other woman’s face. “Does that surprise you?”

Hell yeah, it does. The temptation to challenge her, a woman who keeps a slinky in her purse, on her love of pro sports is mighty. Instead, I gently plant a palm on her shoulder and shift past her. The warm expanse of her skin affects me in a way I’m not proud of. “Here, take this seat next to your friends.”

Her chest brushes against my solar plexus as we switch places, and I get a lungful of her perfume. As ever, she smells like a tropical wet dream: sweet coconut and citrus. Damn near edible. After three exposures, it’s officially a scent memory.

I plop into my seat, dread welling in my gut.

Another night with Mia.

She sits in slow motion, like a queen lowering into her throne, and crosses her smooth legs. I follow them all the way from the frayed hem of her skirt to her black-and-white Jordans. It’s a different pair than what she wore to the office.

Since it’d be inappropriate to ask this woman if she’s ever worn actual pants a day in her life, I point at her feet. “You collect sneakers?”

“My one expensive indulgence.” She laces her fingers in her lap. “Where’s your guest, anyway?”

I steal one more look at her. No bright lipstick tonight. Her lips look naked after seeing them such a bold red on our last not-date. “Don’t have one. Ezra’s with your girl.”

“Almost every night this week, apparently. We’re going to have to pry them apart if we ever want to get them alone again.”

“It’s a lost cause. Which sucks, because Ezzy and I were just getting into a weekly tennis routine. I’ll have to switch to racquetball so I can play with myself.” I clear my throat. “Play racquetball with myself, I mean.”

She peers sideways. “Understood. You want to play with yourself.”

“Very mature.”

She leans in an inch. Our arms are flush, and she makes no effort to remedy this fact. “You started it.”

“Well, consider it finished.”

“Someone is in a mood. What’s wrong? Did someone tie your telescope in a knot?”

“Clever.” I bite my tongue for all of three seconds before adding, “You look festive tonight. I appreciate the continued commitment to the ponytail.”

Her voice is low, presumably so Christos doesn’t hear. “What’s wrong with the ponytail?”

“Nothing.”

“Then why point it out?”

Because I want to see your hair down. Maybe run my hands through it.

“Because.” I stare at it as I bury the thought. “It’s there.”

She presses her tongue inside her cheek as her gaze rakes me over. “You’re *there*, too.”

And with that, we’ve reached an impasse.

I graduated from Vanderbilt, made huge career moves at a young age, and now hold an esteemed leadership role where I interact with people every day. And yet I cannot convincingly converse with this woman.

I glance beside me at the two remaining empty seats, ready to slide down and put us both out of our misery.

“So Alex,” Christos says, leaning forward in his chair. “Is the Hawks your team, or is this a conflict of interest for you?”

So much for moving seats. But I’m not about to reject a conversation with Christos, especially on a topic I enjoy. He’s one of the few longtime employees that’s unfailingly polite to me.

It’s a game. People socialize. I shouldn’t have to move just because Mia

crashed this event. Or because of how much her nearness gets under my skin.

Eleven

MIA

The worst thing about Alex’s living, breathing, overwhelming presence is that I can’t relax and enjoy a game I was really looking forward to.

I suspected he’d be here. I just didn’t anticipate we’d be anywhere near each other. I figured I’d sit with Christos and Jameson, and *if* Alex showed up to this thing, he’d be too busy with his plus-one or other employees to notice me.

Instead, I’m forced to endure his spirited cheers. When he claps, his hands draw my traitorous eye every time.

Fortunately, the game is entertaining enough that my attention mostly stays on the court. Even Jameson, who in his words “has few cares to spare” for the sport, seems to be enjoying himself.

Near the end of the second quarter, my phone vibrates in my pocket. Probably a text from Harper asking how the game is going. I wiggle it out of my pocket.

Not a text. An alert from the dating app.

Two New Messages

I dive straight into my inbox, where the messages from someone named Brody are waiting.

Mia means mine in Italian.

What do you say we make that true?

“Mia means ‘my’ in Italian, actually.”

I startle, nearly dropping my phone at the sound of Alex’s voice.

“Uh, pardon you.” A hit of anger replaces the adrenaline sparked by being hit on by a handsome—albeit cheesy—man online. My low grumble is

almost lost in the frenzy of the cheering fans. “That is *none* of your business.”

“Pick-up lines are basically public domain. I wouldn’t have read it if it was a text,” he says as the crowd erupts into cheers for a basket I’ve now missed.

“How’d you know it was the app in the first place? Snooping, that’s how.”

“The app interface has that bright orange background. It’s pretty damn distinctive.” He slumps in his seat and points at my screen. “Let’s take a look at his profile, see if he’s any better than that shitty line he used.”

“We’re not doing that.”

“Don’t you want the male opinion? It’s valuable to have that insider perspective.”

I hate that this tempts me.

And as if he senses my flicker of interest, he leans the rest of the way into my personal space and presses the dude’s picture to blow it up in size.

His disappointed *tsk* scratches my ear. “Holding a bottle of Jack in his profile picture. That makes an obvious statement. I don’t even need to see the rest of his profile. No way you’re going after this guy.”

“You’re fixating on the alcohol. What *I’m* noticing is a perfectly fine man who is dressed up for what is clearly a wedding, which means he has friends or family who are willing to invite him. That’s a good sign.”

“His loved ones invited him to a wedding and that *excites* you?” His lips press into a line, but a laugh bursts through. “That’s bleak.”

I elbow him, and he barely flinches, which makes me madder. “The bar for men is in hell, Alex. It’s rough out there. Why do you think I clicked *your* profile?”

“Because you think I’m hot.”

I let out a noise that was supposed to be a dismissive laugh but gets lost in transit.

His answering smile is electric. It’s cocky wrapped up in a cockier box and tied with the cockiest bow. “Tell me I’m wrong.”

I stroke the side of my phone with my thumb. “You’re as hot as you are humble.”

“So very, then.”

He nudges me when I don’t immediately fight back. “It’s kind of fun, making you blush.”

The smart watch on my wrist lights up.

Autodetect:

Cardio.

My heart started beating fast enough, for long enough, my watch actually thinks I'm exercising.

Horribly embarrassing. My hormones are out of control.

I bury my wrist so he can't see the cardio alert. But the widening of his eyes confirms I was too slow.

He saw it, all right. As if he needed any more confirmation that he's getting a rise out of me.

I drop my attention to my lap. With a jolt of horror, I discover our knees are pointing at each other like they are about to joust. Like we're actually engaging in some kind of intimate conversation instead of just harassing each other.

I angle away from him and point at the court. "Oh look, a basketball game. Much more interesting than my dating life."

"Dating *life*?"

My gaze snaps back to his. His eyes are like tea and honey, rich and warm. "Yes. I aim to have one of those. Is that a problem, boss man?"

His face is still too close to mine for my heart rate to settle down. "How much dating we talking, here? Have you been out with anyone since we met?"

My stomach lurches. "Why?"

"Just making friendly conversation." His gaze flits across my face, drawing heat over my skin.

"That's highly classified information," I murmur.

"Mhm." His focus drifts lower. My lips sting from the heat of his stare. "So we agree that it's a *no* on Jack-Daniels Man?"

"What if it's a maybe?" Talking to him is like fighting quicksand. I try to break away and wind up deeper. "A girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do."

He shakes his head, as if it's in his jurisdiction to reject this. "Don't sell yourself short, Mia. *Look* at you. Your bar for men needs to be in fucking space."

My heart vaults into my throat.

Look at you.

Until about three seconds ago, I didn't know he'd given me more than a passing glance. My blood hums in my veins. "I— It should?"

My question hangs in the air as he breaks eye contact. A muscle in his jaw ticks as he watches a player sink a shot. "Sure. Yeah. Objectively speaking.

I'm going to go find food. Want anything while I'm up?"

I'm not ready to change the subject. Not by a long shot. "Objectively speaking, you think I should raise my standards."

He gestures at me like I'm a fly in his wine. "C'mon. You know exactly what I'm talking about. Now: nachos or a hot dog? Water or soda?"

"Do I know what you're talking about?"

His smile is serene in an unsettling way. "Fine. I'll choose, then."

After not nearly enough time has passed, he returns with two bottles of water and two hot dogs. One is smothered with tomatoes.

Without a word, he forks over the tomato-loaded dog and a water.

"I— *What?*" I tilt my head his way as I trap the bottle between my legs and rest the paper bowl on my knees. "What's all this?"

"Dinner."

"Thank you, but I didn't ask for dinner. You did not have to buy me a hot dog covered in tomatoes."

His gaze is challenging. "You said tomatoes were your favorite food, did you not?"

"Yes, but—"

"So pick them off if you don't like the hot dog."

Resigned and kind of hungry, I sigh. "How do I pay you? I didn't carry cash. Wait, what's your Venmo?"

"Don't have one."

I stifle the urge to grab his chin so he'll look at me again. "You are a menace."

He turns his head my way as if he can hear my thoughts. I expect a joke or a barb but find something probing in his stare. "So are you. Bon appetite."

"*Mia*," Jameson says, reaching over Christos to wave his hand in my face. "Look."

I startle, and my hot dog almost falls to the ground. "What?"

"Kiss Cam!" He points at the JumboTron hanging above center court.

Alex and I are on the screen, in all our megawatt glory, framed by a red heart.

My stomach drops and drills through the arena floor as Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On" launches its melodic attack.

How?

How, of *all* the people in this packed house, did the camera find us?

Christos shoots me a curious look.

“It’ll move off us!” Alex yells, competing with the choral chant of *kiss, kiss, kiss*.

I look around in a panic. Notably, none of my father’s coworkers are chanting for us to kiss.

New plan. I point emphatically to my left to inform the camera man there’s a couple there, prime for the filming.

The camera jumps to Christos and Jameson, who share a kiss to great fanfare.

My relief has about four seconds to settle in when the camera jumps back to me and Alex. *Gah*, this camera man is out for my blood.

The crowd gets even louder.

My and Alex’s heads turn in panicked unison.

“They aren’t gonna stop,” he all but hollers.

Inspiration strikes. I thrust my hand in his face with the intention of securing a kiss of the knuckles. Proper, innocent, and enough action to get them off our backs.

But at the same moment, he moves in, head tilted.

My hand strikes his face as the crowd shrieks in shock.

I gasp. My hands fly to my face in real life and on the hi-def screen.

I’ve just punched Dad’s boss clean in the jaw in front of more than fifteen thousand people.

• • •

I am out of my seat a few minutes into the third quarter. It’s going to be a runaway win for the Hawks, and I need to get out of here and away from Alex.

Plus, I’m exhausted. I should’ve known the Friday after a busy week of *Magic School Bus* auditions was the wrong night to attempt a social outing.

The concourse that leads to the exit is mostly empty still, which makes it all too easy to hear when Alex yells my name.

“Mia, wait up.”

The exhaustion intensifies. The man puts me on edge. I slow down until he’s by my side.

“Why are you leaving?”

I pivot to face him. His head is haloed by a lit Chick-Fil-A sign. “Plumb tired.”

He comes to a stop and plants his fists on his hips as he looks down at me.

“You ran out without a goodbye.”

“Is that a thing we do now? Goodbyes?”

“Almost everyone on Earth does—”

“Were you going to kiss me?” I blurt, my heart hammering in my chest.

He scoffs, as though kissing me is a fate worse than taking a punch.

The night already careened off course, might as well lean into the skid. “Be honest, Alex. You were leaning in. Your mouth—”

“—please leave my mouth out of this—”

“—was kiss-shaped.”

“I was going to kiss your forehead to get the camera off of us.” He lifts a finger. “Until you punched me in the face, of course.”

“I was giving you my knuckles.”

“Felt that, yeah.”

“To kiss,” I hiss. “Knuckles to *kiss*.”

“Forgive me for putting my face where you wanted your knuckles.”

I suck in all the air the concourse has to offer and expel it slowly. “I’m sorry I hurt you. I was...”

He crosses his arms as he waits for me to finish my sentence. “Go on.”

“Caught off guard.”

We stand in silence.

“By the kiss cam,” I add weakly.

“What’s done is done. I rarely use my jaw, anyway.” He nods toward the exit, that worry groove between his eyebrows making an appearance. “It’s dark out there. There could be weirdos out there lurking. Let me walk you to your car.”

“I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m not. If something happens to you, the last thing the world will know of you is that you punched me in the face. They’ll think I kidnapped you in retaliation, which sounds like a lose-lose for both of us.”

“I don’t like you.” I rub my tense neck, wondering at what point that stopped being true. “You stress me out.”

“Really? You hide it so well.” He gestures for me to walk. “If that whole teaching thing doesn’t work out, you have a future in secret-keeping for the American embassy.”

The part of me that is too tired to fight actually laughs at this horrible joke.

We walk through the massive parking lot—which, to his credit, is kind of creepy and dark—and Alex doesn’t speak until we reach the side of my car.

“Venus,” he murmurs, his head tilted back as he appraises the sky.

I slide my hands in my back pockets as I search the stars. “How can you tell so quickly?”

“She’s pretty bright. If you’re interested, there’s a great app that helps you learn.” He fishes his phone from his pocket, taps an icon, and points it at the sky. A crisp, 3D view of the night sky with stars and constellations labeled lights up the screen. “It tells you everything you’re looking at. And when you move it, it changes. See?”

I move closer to him and squint at the screen. “Wow, that’s really impressive. And there’s Venus! You were right.”

“I often am.”

I push him and he sways, laughing under his breath. He pockets the phone. “Kind of incredible, isn’t it?”

“What’s the draw for you? What got you into this space stuff?”

He’s quiet for a few moments. “When I was younger, I spent a lot of time outside. I’d lay on picnic tables in our complex or take long walks through the neighborhood. It became sort of a comfort, staring at the stars.” He rubs the back of his neck. “It was calming when life wasn’t.”

I want to know more about what stressed him out as a kid, but I temper the urge to push. If he wanted me to know more, he would’ve said more.

“Sounds like a good way to find tranquility after a hectic day,” I say after a breath. “I’ll tuck the idea away for a rainy day. Or a starry night.”

“You should.” His eyes meet mine, and a tickle skitters down my spine. “It’s served me well.”

I lean my hip against the car and cross my arms. “We’re doing the *Magic School Bus: Space Adventures* for our preschool musical this year. I’ve been thinking about space, too, lately.”

I do not add that “thinking about space” in that context means considering what Walmart paint color would best work for each planet, because I’m pretty sure this man with his giant telescope potentially worth more than my car would find it pedestrian.

“A musical.” His lips twitch. “Do you sing?”

“I teach the kids how to sing. And dance. Though most of the time they end up teaching me new moves. Shows are stressful, but they’re my favorite. I love the chaos of it all.”

He smiles, returning his attention to the sky. “Sounds cute.”

“They are.” I hug my chest. “Anyway, thank you for the escort. I better get

going. Want me to drive you back to the front of the stadium?”

Twisting, he peeks inside my SUV. “That’s okay. I don’t mind walking. Plus, not to alarm you, but there appears to be a giant trash can on your front seat.”

“Oh...that’s not a trash can. It’s a plastic tub filled with used paper towel tubes.”

His smirk is a lot, even for him.

“It’s for a project! *Not* trash.”

He steps closer, and my entire body tenses. He holds my eye captive as he grasps the handle and opens my door. “A rose by any other name.”

A few seconds take their sweet time crawling past. The sounds of highway traffic fill our pause, cars braking, motorcycles zipping, and mufflers muffling.

“If history has anything to say about it,” I say evenly, “I’m sure we’ll see each other again. Whether we like it or not.”

He lingers in my personal space. His attention is like the wind: intense in fits and bursts. Right now, it’s a full gust as he looks me up and down. “Next week is the company picnic.”

I clasp my hands. “It is.”

“So you’ll be there.”

“My family never misses it.”

“Good.” His gaze flits between my eyes. “And I’ll also be there.”

My skin grows hot at the way he says *good*. “I’d expect so.”

“Saturday,” he murmurs, as if that settles something. He walks backward, holding my eye. “See you then.”

Twelve

MIA

I groan, switching my headband for the third time. Stripes are cute, but solid colors are better. I think.

Accessorizing for an outdoor outing should not be this hard.

With Dad's frequent check-ins to see if I'm ready yet, I regret asking him to pick me up so we could ride together to the lake. My cramped studio apartment feels smaller than ever. It'd help if I sold the whitewashed armoire I fixed and refinished last month, but I can't bear to part with something so pretty, so it's awkwardly wedged in the corner.

He eagle-eyes me from his perch on my new to me/old to the world green velvet chair, which doubles as a dresser or table depending on the day. "On time is late. Early is on time."

Yup, Verge of Lateness Dad has usurped Richard Madden's body.

"These rules apply to a *picnic*?" I press.

"With corporate in attendance, absolutely."

"Okay, okay. I'll throw my makeup in a bag and do it in the car."

His head shakes as he takes stock of the space. The walls match my bodysuit: a shade of red that looks great with my skin tone but overwhelming for an entire room. The floor is wooden, but you wouldn't know it because it's covered in boxes of materials I need to haul to school.

"I don't like this building," he tells me not for the first time as I pull on my shoes. "Those trains are going to do permanent damage to your hearing with the tracks that close. And you're on the ground floor, which is less safe. You can't possibly like it here more than at home."

"It's fine. The place is cheap, and I'm not trashing your house. I don't even notice the trains anymore."

It's a bold-faced lie, and we both know it. I notice them all night every

night when they rattle me out of REM sleep. I will move someday, but I'll still feel those freight trains in the marrow of my bones.

Every time my father comes over and projectile vomits his opinions on me, I'm reminded of the months I lived back at home after my wedding. He'd hover just like this as I went about my day, but I was sad enough about Mason that I didn't mind the company.

By the end of my time there, though, Dad's opinions about how I structured my day (poorly, I love to procrastinate) and my messy tendencies (my entire domicile is a craft station and my laundry lives in baskets) started to stress us both out. When I came home one afternoon and found him folding my laundry, I figured it was best for my dignity that I get my own place. It was fine when I was a kid, but as an adult, it's too much. I don't need to be taken care of, and he doesn't know how not to caretake.

My buying-a-house plan has been moving slower now that I pay rent, but it's worth it to preserve my great relationship with Dad. At least while living in this apartment, I can proudly say I'm independent. That's something I never felt—with sisters ushering me through life, or my dad lovingly taking control, or with Mason calling the shots for our future.

"How do you think straight with all this stuff around, Mia Girl? Doesn't it distract you?" Dad gestures at the macramé art hanging over the tiny television, the shoe pile that has nowhere else to live but beneath the window, the overflowing clean laundry basket, and then at the colorful curtains I snagged from Goodwill. He'd have a coronary if he saw my classroom. This apartment is empty, comparatively.

"It was a long week at work. Cleaning isn't a priority." Understatement of the century, but we're in a time crunch. "And it's not as if it's all junk. Look, I'm making party favors for your big birthday party!"

He tracks my pointer finger toward a pile of crocheted koozies. "Hey, that was thoughtful of you."

"I do what I can. Now why don't you start the car? I'll be right there as soon as I step into the bathroom."

And stuff three bottles of champagne in my tote. But he doesn't need to know that.

Secret drinking at the company picnic is a time-honored Madden girl tradition, started by Mom. She'd get tipsy on her purse stash and pull the brim of her straw hat over her face every time she laughed. It was the ultimate tell.

Does Dad know that we, his adult daughters, drink? Absolutely. Has he seen us consume alcohol at just about every holiday meal? For sure. But tradition is tradition. We do it for Mom, and each other.

Dad peeks at his phone. “Lucy’s asking if we have sunscreen. You’re telling me she doesn’t have a lick of sunscreen in her entire house? Not even a zinc stick? Where’s your medicine cabinet? I’m going to—”

“Dad. Start the car. I’ll grab the sunscreen. I know you’re antsy, but we’ve still got plenty of time before it officially starts. The bounce houses and KFC buckets won’t even be ready if we race there now.”

“Corporate is getting a caterer this year for the new location. New location, new picnic, new, new, new,” he mutters.

Alex’s face barges into my mind, the shadowed version from the stadium parking lot. I wish I could forget the way he looked when he learned I’d be attending today. Or the way he smells. It’s like he’s hovering here and now, smothering me with his warm, woody scent.

I adjust my headband and imagine it’s a television antenna to change the station in my brain. “Fancy that. Hope they still have the bounce houses, though. I do not wish to see the look on Lucy’s face if she has nowhere to toss her kids. The baby included.”

“Guess we’ll see when we get there. Preferably this calendar year.”

I toss my brush on the vanity. “Okay, okay. Meet you in the car in two minutes. Promise.”

The drive to Lake Lanier is a breeze. Georgia’s getting greener by the day, lush through the rainy season. It’s perfect convertible weather, and my dad’s midlife crisis mobile makes for a pleasant ride.

We’re right on time, which has Dad launching himself out of the car.

Lucy will already be here and in full Mama Bear mode with her three little ones, but it’ll likely be an hour before Harper and Marcelle waltz in, because Harper hates being first to an event.

A bright banner with *Georgia Sweet Solutions* lets us know we’re indeed in the right place as we walk toward the park’s entrance. Peachtree Tech isn’t the only office here, which explains all the traffic in the parking lot.

Coincidentally, the words *Peachtree Tech* now spark a very confusing sensation between my ribs. They stir thoughts of a man who puts my body on edge with a single comment or look.

Any idea I had that today could be relaxing with him in the vicinity is a foolish one.

My limbs buzz with unnatural energy as we hike over to the main area where throngs of people are already recreating. A volleyball game is in full swing, frisbees are flying, people are pacing near the caterers as they set up under a lakeside pavilion. Dad excuses himself to hobnob.

I wander around in search of my people.

Lucy's white bucket hat catches my eye across the crowd. Her long, strawberry-blonde hair is straight and loose, perfect for her toddler to yank. She's in seersucker shorts—almost assuredly from J.Crew—that are just short enough to offer a peek at her watercolor thigh tattoo of a lighthouse at sunset. Frankly I think she should display the whole thing, but she's embarrassed of it ever since Harper made a joke that the lighthouse was “delightfully phallic.” They didn't speak for three months.

Ever dependable, Lucy is all set up and ready to accommodate our family on the world's largest blanket. She's flanked by two of her kids, Clara and Cooper, sitting cross-legged with tablets in their laps while her two-year-old, Carolina, rains holy hellfire on her husband. Jace is on his back as Carolina treats his taut stomach like a trampoline. It's the most literal incarnation of *Hop on Pop* I've ever seen. Or maybe she just really hates his Braves shirt and wants to trash it with her jelly sandals.

“Someone vomited in the bounce house,” Lucy says in lieu of a formal greeting as I approach. She eyes me, then looks over her shoulder. “You got the stuff?”

I kneel beside her on the quilted blanket. “Of course.”

“Where's Dad?”

“He was making the rounds.” I scan the crowd until I find him. He's telling a story to a rapt audience of people in matching polos and athletic shorts. They look very corporate.

While he's occupied, I free a bottle of champagne and my monogrammed thermos.

I'm mid-pour when Alex emerges from behind a huddle of people. Something zips in my blood, a fleece-blanket-out-of-the-dryer shock. He's wearing Lady God's clothing gift to humanity, a black T-shirt that clings to his lean form.

And, I note as my gaze moves lower, he's also wearing Lady God's stocking stuffer: joggers. Perfect length, perfect fit. The way they hug his thighs does very confusing things between mine.

What a terrible day to be a leg girl. I bet those calves he's hiding with pants

are so toned—

“Mia, the blanket!” Lucy cries.

I startle, jerking the bottle upright. My grip on the neck tightens as I curse under my breath.

“My thermos runneth over.” I force a laugh. “Sorry. It’ll evaporate quickly.”

“Oh joy, a puddle for the baby to jump in.” She cranes her head to look past me. “What were you looking at?”

“The lake. It’s especially blue today. Carolina, come see me!”

I open my arms for my niece, eager for a distraction from the unsettling awareness of Alex in my periphery.

My niece toddles straight past me, launching her freckled self into her mother’s arms. She gives me a death glare before burying her face in the crook of Lucy’s neck.

“She’s temperamental today,” Lucy explains, stroking her daughter’s tiny back. “Don’t take it personally.”

In so many ways, Lucy has been a pseudo-parent since long before she had her own kids. I was fourteen when Mom died, Harper was fifteen, and Lucy was seventeen. Lucy stepped in to fill in the gaps Dad couldn’t. She held my hair when I had period cramps so bad I threw up, picked us all up from every basketball practice my freshman year while Dad worked, made excuses for me with Dad when I was caught sneaking out to meet Mason. She scolded me in private for that last one and shoved birth control down my throat—coincidentally helping with the cramps.

She still mothers me and Harper now, if we let her.

Harper’s distinctive cackle carries across the lawn, carried by the same breeze that has her red-streaked hair plastered across her face. Beside her, her husband Marcelle has a monogrammed thermos in each hand as he leans in to steal a kiss.

They make quite the pair; her, an intimidating and leggy gazelle who always wears the least amount of clothing possible, and him, cozy personified and always in layers. Today she’s in a cute crop top and shorts, while Marcelle is in a matching honey-colored sweatsuit that compliments his dark features. Harper is a few inches taller, but Marcelle’s box braid bun puts them at the same height.

“Who peed the blanket?” Harper throws herself on the quilt beside us as Marcelle sits down next to Jace.

I lift my drink. “I spilled.”

“Ooh, Messy Mia is already out, and it’s only two p.m.” Harper’s shit-stirring smile widens. “It’s been so long since we’ve seen her.”

“Bring back Messy Mia!” Jace yells playfully. “Get toasted like you did at Harper’s wedding!”

“Do it, you coward,” Harper goads.

“Be nice to your sister, Harps,” Marcelle says. “She knows all your secrets.”

I shoot him a smile. “Thank you.”

No one is as nice as Marcelle. For a while I thought he was just trying to earn the Madden sister seal of approval, but we eventually learned it’s just who he is. He’s Southern charm in human form. I once told him my favorite Starbucks drink is a Zelda Frother with Mild Cream and he said, *Sounds good, want me to put in a mobile order?*

“No Messy Mia today.” I take a bubbly swig. Since I’m no longer mourning a breakup while single at my sister’s wedding, there’s no need for mess.

When we settle in, sisters and partners and kiddos all enjoying each other’s company, a pleasant warmth washes over me. All of us together is like a latch sliding into place. A pop of warm, fizzy magic.

Dad wanders over, grinning widely as he takes in the sight. He folds his body in a pretzel to fit in the middle, groaning about his old bones, but that smile never leaves his face.

My heart fits on an oversize quilt.

My sisters and I surreptitiously sip our champagne as the group tells the same stories we’ve always told. We even add a few new ones to the mix, recounting Harper and Marcelle’s wedding, cementing it in family lore. Today feels every bit like a holiday. When I press my eyes shut for a few lingering moments, I can’t visualize a more perfect afternoon.

“Afternoon, Madden family.”

I startle like I’ve been doused in ice water. I open my eyes to an eyeful of Alex’s legs.

My family sings a chorus of *hellos*. Dad’s is a flat baritone.

I’m aggressively busy smoothing a puffed chunk of quilt beside me when Alex further addresses the group in his bullhorn managerial voice. “Rumor has it you’re a basketball family.”

My gaze snaps up. Small wonder where he heard *that*.

No faster way to get Dad's attention than to bring up basketball. "Damn straight we are. Harper and Lucy both made it to state their senior years of high school." He jabs a thumb at Harper, who is devouring the contents of a charcuterie board. "Harper here went on to play two years at Georgia State."

"Dad's burying the lede," Harper insists around a mouthful of cheese. "He played, too."

"I was decent. My Mia also played for a few years." Dad slaps my back. I nearly drop my drink. "Tried to talk her into keeping it up, but Little Miss couldn't be convinced."

Pretty sure he just deducted ten years from my life with that childhood endearment. My nose scrunches in objection. "I was too short."

Alex's eyes meet mine. His mouth twitches. "Is that so?"

I return to the important work of paying him no attention. This quilt isn't going to flatten itself.

"A few of us are organizing a game," Alex continues. "Christos already volunteered you, Richard, to play against Timothy and me. But if anyone else would like to join, we could use a few more players."

Dad perks up, looking around at the troop for reinforcement. "What do you say? Anyone up for a game?"

Marcelle lifts a full Corona in the air, procured from Lucy's cooler. "I never say no to a chance to watch Harper do her thing."

Jace rises to join, matching beer in hand. "Basketball isn't my sport. I'm down to spectate. Lucy, are you gonna play or watch?"

She grabs her thermos. "I could play— Wait, what about the kids?"

Jace musses his ginger hair, which he lovingly bestowed on all his kids. "I think I can handle our kids for the length of a game."

Several sets of eyes pin me down.

"I should help Jace with the kids." I point at my oldest niece, who is effectively a wax statue when she plays on her tablet. "They're a handful!"

"What are you talking about? You love to play," Lucy says with an air of suspicion as she wipes her palms on her shorts. "The kids are handled."

"I didn't dress for a game." I extend my legs out in front of me to showcase my shoes. The sun gleams off my skin.

"You're in sneakers and shorts," Harper counters.

"Yeah, but these are like...fancy sneakers."

"Nonsense. It'll be fun," Dad commands with the levity of a drill sergeant.

I hazard a look at Alex, whose roving gaze burns a path up my body until

his eyes meet mine. “It’s okay. You’re scared of the competition. Can’t say I blame you.”

“I’m not scared,” I scoff, pulse surging. “Especially not with *my* team.”

He smiles like he’s closed a sale. “Excellent.”

“Great attitude, Mia.” Dad claps his hands twice. “That’s what I like to hear.”

I push up onto my feet, the thrill of a challenge pooling low in my gut. Dad is *competitive*. I’m not sure his cardio is up to snuff, but he’ll put his whole Madden ass on the line to win, and he’s a good shot. Put him, any of my sisters, and half-marathon racer Christos together and it’s a recipe for a spirited game.

I’m happy to coast on the court next to the greats if it means wiping the smug smile off Alex’s face.

...

A crowd of onlookers gathers as we stretch. Dad grumbles that everything hurts while shooting Christos a shit-eating grin when the other team isn’t looking. Dad’s already hard at work with the mental play, putting on an old-man front.

Christos, Dad, Harper, Lucy, and I will face off against Alex, two corporate employees named Timothy and Reginald, and two engineers named Anish and Darian.

Nothing like a group of unreasonably good-looking people probably pulling six figures each that makes me feel every bit the frumpy, broke teacher I am. Reginald, specifically, is at least six-and-a-half feet of pure, lean muscle.

Dad calls a huddle.

Our group links arms and leans in, Lucy to my right and Christos to my left. Harper and Dad close it off.

Dad’s low tone is lit up with purpose and vigor. “What do you say we show them the Madden way?”

“Plus Christos,” I add.

Dad rubs Christos’s bald head. “He knows he’s as good as family. Now, let me handle that little corporate brownnoser Conroy. The rest of you can pick your target. Let’s do this thing.”

Adrenaline surges through my legs, preparing me to move.

Harper gets the ball first and coordinates with Lucy to run to our first

basket. Lucy sinks the shot with finesse.

I don't think Alex's team was expecting us to be quite *this* ready. Anish lets out a low whistle as he gives Lucy, and then Harper, twice-overs. The thing about being a five foot ten, outrageously talented woman is that you are never *not* being looked at. They inherited Dad's height.

That leaves me the shortest Madden girl by six inches. A Subway sandwich's worth of lacking on this and every basketball court. But I'm just tipsy enough not to care that I'm clearly out of my depth with these people. I jog for the middle, guarding Darian.

The footwork she displays when she dodges me and catches a pass from Timothy gives away her experience.

I jog toward our hoop, positioning myself in shooting range. At least I've got good aim on my side.

As Dad and Christos go toe-to-toe with Darian and Timothy center court, Alex steps in my path to block me. He moves with me as I try to slide past, his body flush with mine. My blood pumps hard and fast, surging forth as if to meet his.

I fake left and run right, maneuvering past him.

Christos passes the ball my way as onlookers cheer from the sidelines.

Alex's arm hooks around me and bats the ball out of my grasp. He intercepts it and takes off down the court.

"Atta boy, Alex. One for the money," Timothy yells.

With a frustrated huff, I jog into the fray.

I need that ball in my hand so badly my palm itches.

Every player picks up in speed and precision at once, as though someone flipped the varsity switch. Dad is winded but skillful as he works the court, sticking close to Alex as promised. He may be fifty-nine, but bitterness seems to fuel his natural athleticism.

The more we play, the less we laugh. The less we say anything at all. I'm conscious of the massive crowd now watching, loud enough I can't even hear Jace or Marcelle anymore over the bustle. A lot of them are from Avondale, but there are plenty of people from other branches and assorted family members I don't recognize.

The crowd is particularly loud for Dad and Alex, depending on who has the ball. They ratchet up the intensity with every shot. For a few plays in a row, it's like the rest of us aren't even on the court.

I clutch my knees, my palms fighting for purchase on my sweaty skin as I

take a chance to catch my breath.

“You good?” Harper asks, hands on her hips.

“How many”—I say between pants of air—“points are we playing to? I feel like I’m going to hurl.”

“Probably shouldn’t drink and play.”

A scowl feels right, but it would require too much precious effort. “Unhelpful.”

She jets off to join the action. Or at least stand closer to it.

I force myself to do the same, limbs heavy.

Dad catches a pass from Christos and dribbles down the court. Alex is on him, unrelenting until he steals the ball.

A shout carries from the sidelines. “Come on now, Big Rich!”

Age has robbed Dad of agility. My breath catches as he stumbles over his own legs as he attempts a hairpin turn. He’s tiring out.

And he’s getting frustrated that he’s tiring out, judging by the way he’s swearing.

I want to tell him to stop and rest, but I know him far too well. Nothing would upset him more than being told to slow down.

Despite my own body’s disinterest in movement, I recommit to giving this game my energy for his sake. Champagne sloshes in my stomach with each step. How I’ve not sweated the alcohol out already is a betrayal of science.

Dad receives a pass from Lucy, takes it down the court—

Shot blocked by Alex. His feet might as well be spring loaded for how high he jumped to smack down the ball. Timothy’s cheer is loud and smug.

This pattern repeats a few times, the men taking turns blocking each other at the net. But the third time, when Alex shoots, Dad falters. His extended arm snaps back down to clutch his ribs.

“Rich, you good?” Christos calls.

Dad nods, tries to wave it off, but his arm returns to his middle. “Keep going.”

Alex catches the ball that just earned his team two more points. He jogs up beside Dad, his voice low. I can’t make out what Alex is saying, but Dad replies with a curt, “I’m fine.”

“Nice work, Alex,” Timothy calls, clapping his palms together at center court. “Show ’em what we do. *No prisoners.*”

It’s confirmed: Timothy grows more obnoxious with each passing second. I’m glad he works at the corporate office and not the local branch because his

voice grates.

My temper flares. I know it's not fair, and I shouldn't expect Alex or Timothy or anyone else to go easy on us. I want to win on our own merit.

But more than that, I don't want Dad to hurt himself in the process.

Thirteen

ALEX

Mia sprints toward me and attempts to block me. Sweaty and panting, we circle each other. A standoff.

My blood feels electrically charged beneath my skin. If her blocking tactic is to distract me by brushing her chest against mine, it's working. She looks like a ripe cherry in that tight shirt. My adrenaline-fueled need spikes as she leans into me. I grit my teeth.

These feelings have no business on this court.

I look over her head at one of her sisters taking on Anish as Richard gets open down court.

As if magnetized, my gaze drops right back to her face. The sun lights up her smooth, exertion-flushed skin.

"Go easy on him," she murmurs, her eyes finding mine. "Please."

I'm too busy drowning my filthy thoughts about her mouth to process what she's saying. "Sorry, what?"

"My dad will play himself to death trying to beat you. You don't have to win this, too."

Her words sting like a slap.

That's what she thinks? That I'm just some dickhead trying to take down her dad to prove I can win?

Shit, *is* that what I've been doing?

Maybe that extra hustle in my game was to beat Richard. To vent my frustrations with *his* frustrations, at least.

I don't know if that's better or worse than wanting to show off for Mia, which I've been trying to do since we stepped foot on this court.

She's in my head.

"Mia, get open!" her sister yells.

Mia dodges past me, jogging sideways with her arms outstretched. As she lunges for the ball, Timothy rams into her from out of nowhere, his momentum sending her sailing. She tumbles to the ground, her body sliding across the court as he recovers her fumbled catch.

Shit.

I'm on the ground beside her in the span of two breaths. "Are you all right?"

Her hands and torso press into the cement, like she's attempting a yoga pose. Her lips twist in pain as she slowly moves into a sitting position. "I'm okay."

As she turns over her shaky hands, we both spot her bloody palms at the same time.

I'm on my feet in a flash. Irritation explodes into full blown anger as I wheel around. "What the hell was that, Timothy?" I wipe the sweat from my brow.

I may be playing an intense game, but not like *that*. I don't play dirty. And to body slam the weakest member of their team like an unleashed bull on a tear is poor form.

"My bad. Got a little carried away." Timothy steps toward Mia, hinges at the waist, and offers her a hand. "You okay, Miss?"

She squints toward him as the sun beats down overhead. "I'm fine—"

"Her palm is bleeding." I gesture at the very obvious evidence. "You shouldn't take her hand."

"Easy, Conroy, just trying to help."

"It'd help if you didn't clothesline her in the first place. It's a friendly game, not the NBA finals."

"Alex." Timothy's disapproving glare is like water splashed in my face. He's my superior, and I need to care a hell of a lot more about that than I do at this moment. "She said she's fine. Take a breath."

Richard steps up at just the right angle to block the sun from Mia's face. "Both of you back off and let her get up."

Mia scrambles to her feet. "It's okay. I just need to stop playing and wash my hands. You should keep going, though. I'm barely useful out here, anyway."

"Let's call it," I say curtly, my pulse refusing to come down. I steal a look at my smart watch. "Game over. Food's ready, anyway."

Timothy glances at his own watch. "Agreed. Good game."

For a while, it was.

Grunts of assent ripple through both teams. We lost, and I suddenly couldn't care less.

As Timothy alerts the sideline crowd that food is available at the lakeside pavilion, I realize just how many people were watching us play. People I was too distracted to notice.

And the reason for that distraction is walking off the court, flanked by her sisters.

I crack each of my knuckles at my side as I take a breather. Anyone would've reacted similarly if they'd seen a six-foot-something dude with a linebacker's build body-checking a woman. No one can fault me for what I said.

Timothy's nod before he joins the great migration heading toward the food calms me a little. Unsportsmanlike conduct or not, I'd rather not go toe to toe again with anyone from corporate. Since that incident clearly rolled off his back, I should let it go and go bury my face in the buffet.

Maybe food will put me in a better mood.

...

I polish off a full plate of Babe's Fried Chicken while comfortably seated at a table with Anish, Darian, and their guests enjoying an open view of the lake with a cross-breeze cooling my skin.

This is good. This is better than basketball.

A boisterous laugh carries through the air, interrupting my peace.

Richard's.

I glance over my shoulder. Across the pavilion, his family overflows a table. Kids have to sit on laps to allow them all to fit. They're laughing and socializing with the two tables on either side of them, filled with long-time Avondale employees and their families. I'm sure they're all old friends.

Hand gripping a water bottle, I wait for the strange ache in my chest to subside.

It's hard to fathom what it would be like to spend time with my family at this stage of life. Quality time isn't something mine did, even when we lived under the same roof.

Meanwhile, Richard's kids are grown and voluntarily showing up for him at this thing.

My Aunt Tonya and Uncle Tom were never the gathering type. We didn't

go places as a family unit. Their “socializing” was drinking or smoking on the porch with whatever friends they were connecting with at Summerfield Park, our development located south of Philly. It was a transient housing community for most families, but we never left. That two-bedroom trailer was home until I left for college, a move that royally pissed off my cousin Derek.

He felt betrayed that I, a man he calls his brother when it’s convenient, left him behind. I felt frustrated that he’d spent a lifetime watching his parents begrudge me or ignore me and still expected me to stay close.

Stay close for what? There was nothing in Summerfield for me. And it didn’t have to be his end game, either. That was his choice.

Yes, we were there for each other in the sense that we shared a room and went to school together. He paid attention to me. He invited me along in whatever he did. I had no one else and no car, so it was often my only chance to get out of the house. And the only thing worse than riding along with Derek was being trapped in that house and listening to Tom and Tonya fight.

But Derek also often used me, borrowed what little money I made at my odd jobs, tried to force me to do things I never wanted to do with him and his shithead friends who ratted him out to the cops on more than one occasion.

Yet *I’m* the betrayer for going to college. For taking control of my future and doing what I needed to do to ensure a better life for myself.

Makes sense.

I shake my head, trying to bring myself back to the moment.

I fucking hate this part of myself and reject it at all costs, the tendency to look at Richard’s family and feel a sharp pain in my chest as if I was owed something and deprived of it. The universe owes me nothing. Certainly not a different family. All things considered, I’m lucky Tom and Tonya took me in at all.

I have no right to wonder how much better things could’ve been when I know damn well things could’ve been *infinitely* worse. And everything I went through motivated me to chase the life I have now.

A life, I’m realizing, I’ve spent largely alone since graduating college—work notwithstanding. And for a long time, that’s how I liked it. The absence of noisy fights was my favorite sound. My quiet, predictable house was my favorite place.

Now? I’m not so sure.

All of these unsettling thoughts and impulses belong in their designated

locked box.

Mia's unfettered laugh draws my attention, and I give in and look. As she recovers from whatever amused her, gasping for air and shaking a drumstick while the kid in her lap swats at it, the pain in my chest fades.

I should *not* be soothed by the sight of her. Shouldn't even be looking at her, because then I'll have to reckon with how unsettling and infuriating it felt to see her shoved to the ground, and those feelings also belong in the designated lockbox.

As though she can hear me thinking about all the ways in which I *shouldn't* think about her, she catches my eye across the pavilion. Her bright smile dims, and her eyes widen like she's been caught doing something wrong. Her eyes flit to her dad, who is distracted holding a baby, and back to me as a red flush colors her skin.

And then she breaks away, burying her face in the crook of the child's neck.

I wish I'd known the very first time I looked at her that it'd become a hard habit to break. Maybe I would've been smart enough not to start.

Fourteen

MIA

Three-day weekends mean sleeping in on a Friday, sipping ceramic coffee from a colorful mug, and catching up on all the things I've been neglecting. Or the things I can't catch up on no matter how hard I try—grades, documentation for parents, lesson plans, and so much more.

I've just nestled into bed, fresh brew in hand and ready to work, when my mind wanders to the one place I've expressly forbade it from going.

Alex.

I can't make heads or tails of the look on his face when I caught him watching me across the pavilion last week. All I know is I can't stop thinking about that picnic.

His proximity makes me tipsy. He's like a wine in the barrel still aging, gaining strength, and if I'm not careful, he's going to get me plastered.

Thus I will nurse that picnic encounter like a bad hangover and avoid him until the end of time.

My phone rings.

I roll sideways and pluck the phone off my nightstand. A text from Dad.

You still got my credit card from when you pumped gas after the picnic last week? Went to pick up the monthly Friday lunch for my team and a gift for a colleague and noticed it was missing. I need that card for double points cash back!

I whine into the empty room. So much for my plan to get stuff done.

Reluctantly suited up in jeans and a tank top, I slip into the shoes nearest the front door and cast one last longing look at my duvet before setting out.

As soon as I hit Peachtree Tech's lobby, bustling with frenetic energy, I hang an immediate left and hit the stairwell. I have one singular goal, and it's

to avoid common areas so I don't accidentally run into Alex.

By the time I've climbed to the fourth floor, my legs burn from the effort. The tired, unfed, under-caffeinated shell of my body moves through the office, head down.

I all but throw the credit card at my dad while he's on the phone and high-tail it to the elevator. Once was enough with the stairs.

"Hold it!"

I thrust my hand to trip the sensor so the doors re-open. Two people amble into the elevator.

Followed by Alex.

Luck be a lady, but that lady isn't me.

We lock eyes in the mirrored door. His hair is mussed more than usual. It's not behaving today, not beaten into submission like it was the last time I unwillingly saw him at work. His ensemble, however, is the run-of-the-mill "I'll burn out by forty" starter pack: tight black dress pants just short enough to flash a hint of his socks, a sky-blue button-up, and a tie begging to be loosened.

It's exhausting trying to convince my vital organs he's not attractive, that I'm not stirred into heated awareness when he's close by. That if he wasn't *Alex Conroy* with his name on a door in this building and complexly linked to more than one important person in my life, I wouldn't fantasize about unbuttoning that starchy shirt and smoothing my hands over his abs to feel the muscles bunch beneath my fingertips.

He'd watch my hands as they drifted lower, tangling his fingers in my hair. I'd watch his face, drunk on power as I toyed with his belt buckle. The metal would be warm from the heat of his body. And then he'd say my name, begging me to move faster so he could feel—

Ding. First floor.

I wipe my hand down my face. What has gotten into me?

He says nothing until the others clear out. I'm almost convinced he's not going to address me at all when he jerks his head toward the door across the lobby.

With a sigh, I head in that direction. He follows one step behind me like some kind of creeper.

We both throw ourselves into the revolving door at the same time, accidentally trapping ourselves in the same wedge. It ushers us forward and spits us onto the sidewalk.

“Pretty sure those are one at a time,” I mutter, taking a large step away from him.

“I’m glad you’re here.”

My stomach turns over. “You are?”

“Yeah. I need help, and the other women in the office are too busy.”

“Ah.” My stomach rights itself immediately. “You need the help of any random willing woman.”

He taps his temple. “Exactly.”

“Well, surely there’s *someone* that can assist you in that crowded building where it is everyone’s job to do your bidding. I’ve got to get home.”

“Home? You don’t work today?”

I lift my chin in stubborn defiance of the question.

His lips lift into a wolfish smile. “So you *are* free, then.”

“Not really. I have plans.”

“To do what?”

“Work from home.”

“Or...” He fishes in his pocket and retrieves a key. “You could give me thirty to forty-five minutes of your time. Ezra’s sister is getting married and is also pregnant, so they’re doing this last-minute combination baby and wedding shower. I need a gift, and I have no idea what to get for them.”

“What about cash?”

He waves this off. “They’ve got a ton of money.”

“Excellent. So they’ll know exactly what to do with more of it.”

“I don’t just want to throw money at them. I kind of want to do something more thoughtful than that.” He scratches the back of his neck and looks toward the bank across the street. “I don’t know. Maybe you’re right.”

The sheepish look on his face softens me. “Are they registered?”

His gaze boomerangs back to me. “Like...to vote?”

“A *shopping* registry.” I laugh in spite of myself. “Hopeless, aren’t you?” I retrieve my phone. “What are their full names?”

“Rachael Greenfield and Morgan Atul.”

I search every iteration of their names until I find one registry. Amazon. “Oh, good. Here we go. You can pick anything you want on here and have it delivered.”

“The shower is tonight.”

I lower the phone. “*Tonight?*”

“She’s having a baby in like three weeks, Mia,” he says in a tone that

suggests I should know this very personal tidbit about Rachael Greenfield. “Time is of the essence. I told you this was all last minute.”

“Fine,” I say before I lose my nerve. Space from Alex will have to wait. Any sister of Josie’s boyfriend is a friend of mine. Or something. “Let’s get this over with. There’s the Regency Mall about ten minutes north of here. Williams Sonoma, Baby Depot, all that jazz. We’ll get a gift that won’t embarrass you. What were you going to do if I didn’t come up here?”

“Show up at Ezra’s house after work, extricate him from Josie’s clutches, and make them both join me at the mall right before the party.”

“You are an agent of chaos. You should’ve shopped sooner. What have you been doing?”

“Curious about my schedule? We never did sync our Google calendars.”

“Forget it,” I grumble, decidedly not preoccupied about what this man does with his time. “Walk please.”

We step inside the parking garage, falling into the shadows of cold, imposing cement.

“That’s me.” A burgundy GMC truck lights up at the press of his key fob, all shiny planes and silver curves.

Now I’m ogling his truck. Wonderful.

The inside smells new, the brown leather seats barely broken in as I wiggle to get comfortable. The quiet is way too noisy in this extended cab.

To quell the nerves suddenly frothing in my stomach, I point at his overwhelming console. “What’s that?”

He drifts his fingers over a large dial. “The AC knob.”

“Right. Got it.”

This is ridiculous. There is no reason to be antsy right now.

As he pulls out of the garage, I shift in my seat to face him. “Saturday was fun, yeah?”

“It was.”

I fiddle with my bracelet. “I didn’t get to thank you. For the basketball game.”

His hand tightens on the wheel. “No need to thank me. Timothy was behaving like a dog off his leash.”

“I know, but I was out of my depth trying to play with you all, so it’s partly my—”

“You were great.” He rubs his chin. The barest hint of stubble darkens his skin. Heat snakes through my veins as I imagine how it’d feel against my

fingertips. “I asked you to play. I wanted you to.”

The ensuing silence smothers me like a weighted blanket. It’s the kind of statement that both does and does not demand a follow-up.

He adjusts his rearview mirror. “What were you doing with the chicken?”

“What?” We jumped from *I wanted you to play* to *poultry*, and I’m trying to catch up. “What chicken?”

“You were sitting with your family with a kid in your lap, and it looked like you were making your drumstick dance or something.”

I chew the inside of my cheek. “You really want to know?”

“God help me, but yes.”

“I was pretending it was a rhino, because rhinos are my niece’s favorite.”

“Rhinos are mean as hell.” We idle at a red light, and he peeks at me. “What’s her name? Your niece?”

“Clara.”

“Which ones are her parents?”

“Lucy and Jace. Lucy is my oldest sister. Works for an insurance company. Jace was a professional benchwarmer for the Braves and is now a stay-at-home dad.”

“And your other sister? What does she do?”

I bite back a smile as I ramble about Harper, giving way too much detail because he keeps coaxing me on as if he’s actually interested in knowing where she went to college or where Marcelle sells real estate.

Talking with him in a real way feels like hitting snooze on an alarm, borrowing a few minutes against our usual push and pull. We need to get on with the errand and with *not* sharing personal things with each other.

The snooze button is a fun indulgence, though, when used sparingly.

I lean my elbow against the center console. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Only child, technically, but I have a cousin I grew up with. Raised by my aunt and uncle. Haven’t really talked to them in”—he *hmm*s while he thinks—“months? Maybe over a year.”

Curiosity gets the better of me. “What do your holidays look like, if you don’t talk to them anymore?”

“Last few years, most holidays look like me at a bar or working from home. I did spend a Thanksgiving with Ezra’s family, though.”

“Oh gosh.” Someone so successful with no one to brag to? I hate that the idea makes me sad. “That must be so lonely.”

“Nah,” he says with a playful shrug. “Bars are always packed around the holidays.”

“Sure, with bodies. But that’s not quite the same as connecting with people, though, is it? Sitting around a table, sharing stories, breaking bread. All that cliché stuff.”

He shoots me a look I can’t decipher. “I connect with *plenty* of people. Trust me.”

My eyes widen. “Are you talking about sex?”

A laugh darts out of his mouth. “I meant I talk to all kinds of people.”

“Of course.” Heat floods my cheeks. “That’s what I thought you meant.”

“Though *now* I’m inclined to talk about sex. Since you’re so eager to know —”

I gasp. “I am *not*.”

“—I *definitely* connect with people I meet at bars. Several of them I’ve connected with more than once. Maybe in this very car. Christmastime, in particular, is a wonderful time of connection—”

“Okay, okay. I get it. You plow your way through the holidays.”

“You asked.” He slides his hand over the wheel, a smug smile tugging at his mouth as he stares straight ahead. “If the topic makes you uncomfortable, I’ll stop.”

My pulse thunders in my ears. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t curious about his life outside of being a walking premium stock photo drenched in the most addictive cologne I’ve ever smelled. “I’m not uncomfortable. Though I have nothing to contribute on the topic because I haven’t *connected* with anyone in a while.”

His playful edge fades away. “Me either. Haven’t even been to a bar since before I moved here.”

“Yeah?”

His gaze meets mine for the briefest pulsing second. “Yeah.”

My breath catches in my throat. “You should go to a bar, then.”

After a lengthy pause, he murmurs, “Maybe I will.”

“Or not,” I blurt. That familiar tipsiness I felt at the picnic grips me again, knocking me off-kilter. The thought of him pursuing someone at a bar makes me want to claw a hole in his leather seat.

This is what I get for hitting the damn snooze.

He strokes the dip beneath his bottom lip. “No?”

“I don’t know. Do what you want.”

His expression is a vault, hiding anything of value. I no sooner could guess what he's thinking than break into Tiffany's. "I'll take that into consideration."

The watch on my wrist beeps of a dying battery.

Before I can turn it off, he taps my forearm just above the strap without taking his eyes off the road. His thumb moves over the glass screen. "You can charge it on the wireless port."

That touch when I'm already mid-spiral sends me reeling even faster. "Got it." I pop the watch off and throw it on the charger in his too-fancy car. "Thanks."

"My pleasure."

His pleasure is, unfortunately, now at the forefront of my mind. All thanks to my big mouth.

More troubling? Last night when I was seeking my own, it was him I thought about in vivid, insuppressible detail. How his rough hands would feel skimming my body, settling on my hips as he walked me backward toward his hypothetical bed. His mouth and what he might do with it if I gave him free rein. Those assessing eyes drinking me in as he undressed me. The imaginary parade of his touches and sounds drove me so hard and fast over the edge I didn't even have time to reach for a toy.

It wasn't the first time.

And if I don't find a way to stay away from him, I know it won't be the last.

Fifteen

ALEX

Only one thing on the planet could stop me from thinking about Mia probing about my sex life and all but directly asking me not to fuck anyone else, and it's a giant baby depot.

Which means I have the length of the sidewalk between my truck and the front door to rehash the sound of her voice when she told me to *go to a bar* and then the backpedaling when she told me not to and the subsequent warring with herself out loud.

I have precious few seconds to think about the way that hearing her admit she hasn't been with anyone in a while made me ache to lay her down and take care of her with my hands and mouth.

But by opening the door even an inch to those thoughts, I'd be inviting a flood. Because when I let myself want something, I want it to the point of distraction. I can't afford to be consumed by an untouchable woman.

So from that standpoint alone, I'm grateful for the gust of cold recycled air in this warehouse as we step through the glass doors. Because that signals the end of thinking about Mia and the start of figuring out what the hell Rachael would want.

"This place is huge." I point to the end cap of the first aisle we pass. "What's that?"

She barely has to look. "Bottle cleaning and sterilizing tools."

I point vaguely toward another end cap. "Those?"

"Pacifiers."

"And that?"

She grabs a tube and tosses it toward me. "Nipple cream."

I place it gingerly back on the shelf.

"Let's get to the back of the store," she continues, walking in front of me

like a woman on a mission. I concentrate on not staring at her ass in that tight skirt.

Mia peeks over her shoulder. “How much do you plan to spend in total?”

I shrug. “However much you think is appropriate for the sister of my best friend.”

“You’re giving me a lot of power here, Conroy.”

“Don’t let it go to your head.”

She turns down an aisle and takes a strappy thing off a hook. “Too late. Arms out.”

I hug my chest. “What is that?”

She lifts a shoulder, a coquettish grin on her face. “Put it on and find out.”

With a sigh, I extend my arms. She steps closer, brown eyes alight with amusement as she slides it into place. Her arms skirt my waist, snaking to my mid-back. The buckle closes with a quiet click. She stays nearly hugging me as she buckles the other straps between my shoulder blades, gaze burning a hole in my throat.

“I put it on,” I grumble, my skin prickling from her nearness, “and did not, in fact, find out.”

She doesn’t back up, instead staying close as she admires her handiwork. “It’s a Baby Bjorn.”

I peer down at the sturdy black fabric. “That doesn’t clear it up.”

“It obviously holds a baby.”

“No, it’s *obviously* a laser-tag vest.”

She tugs on it with a rough jerk. “Baby goes here, in the gap. Right next to your chest.”

“False. That’s where the battery pack goes, powering the lights and score-keeping functionality.”

“Hilarious.”

“I thought so. Can we get this thing off me?”

She reaches around and undoes my shoulder buckle with one hand. The same hand moves to my low back, and I wait for the release of the tight strap wrapped around my already tense body.

Face crinkling from the effort of wrestling with the second buckle, she adds her other hand to the mix. Both of her arms tighten around my waist as she struggles to release it. “Dang thing”—she gives me a good jostle I enjoy way too much—“is *stuck*. This is a tired parent hazard—”

“Mia,” I say quietly.

Her gaze darts up and her lips part in surprise, as if she didn't realize just how close we are with her arms around me as she manhandles me. That must be one difficult and distracting buckle because I feel the nearness of *her* like I'm submerged in boiling hot water—everywhere, all at the same time, until I can't stand it. In my efforts to avoid looking at her mouth, my attention falls there, tracing the shape of it. I didn't know lips could be perky, but I'm cursed to never forget it at this rate.

My gaze bounces back to her eyes. "Let me."

Her arms fall away, and she runs both hands through her hair, angling away from me.

The buckle is difficult, but I manage. The apparatus falls off me, and I hang it back on its hook. "So am I getting a carrier? A stroller?"

"You should do one baby gift and one wedding gift. If you want to do a carrier, there are alternatives to the Bjorn, like an Ergobaby, Lilliebaby, or even a soft sling. Ergobaby is the best bang for your buck, but she may like something unstructured, especially for an infant."

"How do you know so much about this?"

"I'm a very involved aunt. I threw all three baby showers and a bunch of kid birthday parties, because I throw the coolest parties. And I never break the bank to do it."

"Teacher, aunt, world's best party host... Got it. Pick whatever carrier you like best."

A smile sneaks over her face. It shines a lot like pride. When she said on our first date that she likes being close to her family and having parties, she meant it.

I'm overcome with a nagging curiosity to know more about her. The things I could've learned on that date if it went another way.

"What color would Rachael like?" she asks, skimming her finger down the aisle.

"I don't know."

"Of course you don't. Black Ergo it is."

I stick close beside her as she hunts for her brand of choice. "Besides throwing parties and spinning toilet paper tubes into gold, do you have any other hobbies?"

She stops and looks my way, letting the foot of space between us simmer. "Making things is pretty much my only hobby, other than pretending I'm a yoga pro."

Forcing myself not to imagine her in any yoga position whatsoever, I ask, “What other kinds of things do you make?”

Her gaze roams my face, hesitation visible in the subtle shift of her expression. “Random stuff, depending on my mood. I build and make things for my classroom and to sell on Etsy, as I’ve probably mentioned. I also repurpose furniture, salvage old things I think could be pretty or useful. Oh, and I crochet at night. Keeps my hands busy so I don’t doom scroll on social media.”

“Wow, that’s a lot.” I step a little closer. The sweet smell of her shampoo reaches me, which is how I know I should take a step back. “What’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever made or fixed up?”

She purses her lips, but now *she* steps closer, moving in millimeters that feel like miles. “You’ll make fun of me if I tell you.”

“Me? Never.”

“Liar.” She laughs under her breath. “Fine. I scored some old materials from a garage sale and tried to turn them into this lovebug wall art for my niece Clara. Lucy calls her Lovebug, so I thought it’d be cute. But when I gave it to her at her birthday party, she was horrified. Apparently, one of the kids at the party told her why love bugs look the way they do—because they’re mating. Let’s just say she no longer goes by that nickname. And it wasn’t her favorite birthday to date.”

My booming laugh reaches the rafters. “You made your niece mating lovebug art. That is certifiably weird.”

She pushes my chest, and I catch her wrists. Our laughter falls away all at once. My thumbs slide over the warm flesh of her healing palms, landing in the center. I trace circles over her skin, waiting to see if she’ll pull away. One of us should. “But I bet it was cute.”

Her breath hitches, and I steal the sound, storing it out of reach so she can’t take it back. She stares at our hands, and her cheeks turn a perfect shade of pink. “So that’s me and my hobbies. What about you?”

“Not sure I have many.” I fight the ever-growing urge to touch more of her. “Maybe I’ll try my hand at gambling.”

“Very healthy choice,” she all but whispers.

Our hands shift, lining up as if we’re comparing size. “Deep-sea diving.”

Her eyes search mine. “Not many oceans nearby.”

“You’re right,” I murmur, shifting closer. “That one’s off the table.”

“Alex?” My name is a question as she slides her fingers between mine. The

tickling sensation scatters across my skin. Her touch is so soft it's agonizing, her voice a sweet whisper I want to turn up to full volume. I wish she'd yell, or push me again, because I don't know what to do with this kind of softness. I've never seen it before, not with women I've dated and not anywhere else. I'm used to raised voices, not lowered ones.

I release her hands and step sideways, dragging my hand across my face as panic spreads through my sternum. Touching her at all is a mistake. It's a gateway to all the other things I can't do with her.

This isn't going to happen, and I need to stop testing my own ability to resist.

"Carrier." I grab something off a shelf. "This one?"

"Yes. That one." Her voice holds a similar hint of distress. "Let's get out of here."

She plucks it from my grasp and leaves me in her dust.

Sixteen

MIA

I approach the entrance of Williams Sonoma with a plan: no chit chat, no lingering, and for the love of God, no more touching.

Late-night fantasies that spiral out of control are one thing. *Actually* touching him—succumbing to the heat of the moment and forgetting why this is all wrong—is another.

He started it, but I didn't stop it. Now I have to answer to the electric current beneath my skin and the fact that I enjoyed every last second seeing him flounder in a Bjorn.

He's being...nice. That's not good. I preferred seeing him as my dad does: as a person to be tolerated.

I'm doing a lot more than tolerating Alex.

We step into the store, keeping as wide a berth as the doorframe allows. The smell of cinnamon and cloves is thick in the air, like Christmas in the middle of spring. Oh, to be wrapped in faux fur, lounging next to a fir tree without a care in the world.

With its overpriced artesian fruit preserves, copper Bundt pans, and expensive cookery, there's no shortage of wedding gift options in this place. He just has to pick one. Or I do. One of us has to end this outing by making a swift decision.

I gesture toward a Cuisinart coffee pot. "Something like this?"

His shoulder lifts and falls. "Rach isn't the type to make coffee at home."

"She probably will be once she has a baby."

He doesn't look at me. "Nah."

I take two more steps, past a soda maker no one would ever want, and jab a finger at some other monstrosity. "What about whatever this is?"

He hovers just behind me as he reads over my shoulder. The warmth of

him sets my body on edge, but he doesn't make contact. "The GE Profile Opal 2.0 Nugget Ice Maker with Side Tank and Wifi. Only six hundred dollars. A steal, really."

"If ice isn't nugget shaped, what's the point?" I say, my skin hotter than it has any right to be while discussing ice. I put another foot of distance between us. "Okay, let's think: What's her personality? Or their personality as a couple? Weddings are a little harder to shop for than babies—give me something."

"I don't know her all that well, beyond events at Ezra's house, but from what I know of her, she's"—he waves his hand in the air as if summoning the words—"prissy. Reminds me of you, actually."

Eyes narrowed, I wheel on him before I can start my perusal of the overpriced spatulas. "*Prissy?*"

He plucks one from the display. "You're dressed up twenty-four seven, Mia."

"Prissy means high maintenance. Expensive taste. It's not a compliment."

"This is the least dressy you've been, and that includes when we played basketball and you had the headband and the jewelry and that tight"—his gaze stays low as he gestures at my torso—"red shirt."

"Bodysuit," I say. My blood heats a few substantial degrees. "You have a very detailed memory."

"Teachers used to tell me I'm a visual learner."

I don't know what to respond to: the admission that he's paying attention to what I've worn down to the jewelry, or the fact that he's calling me prissy because of it. I step closer into his space and try to force him to look at me so I can figure out what's going on in his head. "I thrift almost all my clothing, other than my shoes. That *bodysuit* you are remembering cost me three dollars. And I don't hear most people complaining about what I wear. Especially on dates."

"Date. Singular. The rest were coincidental hangouts."

I barely hear the last word of his sentence as he takes off.

My temper flares as I trail him around a corner. "Why are you being like this?"

"Like what?"

"Hot and cold! We were having a nice enough time and now you can't even look at me."

His body comes to an abrupt stop and wheels around. His hand closes

around my bicep and tugs me behind a product display.

“What—”

“*Shh.*” Alex traps me between his body and a ten-foot tower of boxed Le Creuset Dutch ovens. “Jameson is here.”

My stomach sinks. “*Jameson.*”

“Christos’s husband.”

“I know who he is.”

“Obviously.” Alex pokes his head around the display and jerks it back. “Yup, definitely him. I do *not* want him to see me with you.”

A flare of anger almost drives me to shove his chest, which is an inch from my face. Any whisper of fond feelings that might’ve surfaced earlier disappears in an instant.

“That’s a horrible thing to say,” I rage whisper, voice shaking.

“What, you want him to go and tell Christos we’re shopping together—in a home goods store, no less—who will then tell Richard? *That* sounds good to you?”

What I *want* is Baby Depot Alex back. The one who had me melting in the aisle with his sweetness.

Actually, I shouldn’t want that, either.

The internal scream trapped in my body would shatter the glass jars of hot sauce inexplicably displayed next to the blenders on the wall behind Alex. “Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you forced me to go shopping with you just so you could play games with me.”

His chest rises and falls as his breath fans my forehead. He leaves no breathing space between us. “*I’m playing games?*”

“Don’t play dumb, *Conroy.*”

He tips my chin up with his fingers. His touch shoots hot, fiery sparks across my skin, which only serves to make the frustration coursing through me that much more violent. The need to rip something in half with my bare hands has never been so potent.

Our breathing is audible as I wait for him to speak. His voice is dangerously quiet. “I shouldn’t have touched you in the other store. This is a bad idea.”

But his hand lingers on my face.

His hooded gaze is aimed at my mouth as his thumb runs the length of my jaw. It moves lower, ghosting my neck until I shudder. I try to take a deep breath, but my body is strung tight everywhere, even my chest. “Then why

are you touching me now?”

“I don’t know,” he all but grunts. “I have no idea.”

My hand moves as if controlled by a motor. “This”—I close my fist around the silk knot at the base of his neck—“is too tight. You’re choking yourself. That’s probably why you aren’t thinking straight. Suffocation.”

I yank on it until it loosens, pulling his face even closer to mine. He smells good enough to taste. His heady gaze pins mine, and contrary to everything I thought I knew about him, he doesn’t look put together or in control at all.

He looks *stressed*.

“That’s not why.” His fingers leave my face bereft and find my hip. Our chests brush together as I cling to his tie. We’re as close to kissing as we could be while still maintaining plausible deniability.

“You and your little outfits *are* prissy,” he says, hovering his mouth near mine. “And I like that.”

I exhale in a gust, anger and something more dangerous I don’t want to name competing for dominance inside of me with flamethrowers and sharp words. I *like* that he likes that, and I hate myself for it. “This is a problem.”

“We need to stop.” He tightens his hold on my waist instead, his fingers firm and possessive.

I nod toward where he’s still touching me. “You first.”

He releases his grip and steps backward. After one last miserable look thrown my way, he peeks his head around the display of boxes. “He’s gone.”

“Great. I’ll go first, just in case. Straight to your truck.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“What are you going to buy?”

“I don’t know.” The warmth bleeds out of his tone as he stares at a point somewhere above my head. “I need to think.”

Think. I should try that sometime before I make an Alex-size lapse in judgment.

When he emerges from the store with a three-hundred-dollar espresso machine minutes later, I don’t even question it. Looks like it’ll be bougie homemade coffee for Rachael and a silent ride home for us.

• • •

Weekly family dinner is off to a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad start.

Okay, it’s not that dire. But I cannot get my head in the game. I’m so off-kilter I’m making simple cooking mistakes.

“What happened here?” Dad eyes the scorched pot in the sink as he sets his briefcase on the granite island and shrugs out of his suit jacket.

“I burned the rice,” I mutter in shame as I gesture at the stove. “Ruined the pot. And the chicken was underdone, so I put it back in the oven for another fifteen minutes, and then it tasted like a hunk of tire. Basically, I did everything in my power to ruin Friday night dinner. PF Chang’s delivery will be here any second. Lucy’s bringing dessert.”

“Supper is supper, wherever it’s from.”

I arch a brow. No playful roasting of my cooking skills? No story time about how he and Mom made a Beef Bourguignon–level meal without breaking a sweat to impress one of his clients in their heyday?

Dad’s been abducted. He loves poking fun at my attempt at cooking before he fires up the grill or the wok.

He paces the kitchen, cranking the faucet’s handle tighter so it stops dripping. He then pulls out some cleaning supplies. When he doesn’t immediately ask Alexa to play old rock radio, my concern is heightened further.

Feels like a teatime is in order.

I position the kettle over the burner and switch it on. Perhaps I can manage to boil water without burning it. “How’s it going, Daddo?”

He scrubs the island with Clorox wipes. “Rough day.”

“I’m sorry. What happened?”

“Being almost sixty in a workplace that only values *young talent* happened. Conroy happened.”

My stomach takes a nosedive at the sound of his name. It’s been mere hours since I gripped his silky tie, and I’ve been plagued by thoughts of him since. Hence the burned rice.

I shake my head more aggressively than the situation warrants, as if it’ll rid me of the memory of his hands on me. “What are you talking about?”

“Conroy hired someone from outside the company for something I asked for clearance to do. In our last meeting, I requested the chance to travel for Peachtree to expand our sales reach, which he didn’t have to go for, but then he turned around and hired a ‘company liaison’ to do the same damn thing.”

“Wait a second. Does this liaison person make sales?”

“Yes. As Conroy explained it, that’s not all they do, but what could they possibly do that I can’t?”

“And you’re sure Al—er, Conroy knew you wanted to do this?”

“He knew I was interested.” He wipes his chin, his voice taking on a distant edge as he trashes the used cleaning wipe. The metal trash can rattles. “The kid they hired is twenty-three years old. Younger than you, even. I feel like the Crypt Keeper.”

“Oh, Dad.” My heart squeezes for so many reasons at once. He’s mentioned his age a few times in passing lately since his sixtieth birthday is coming up, but never in the context of feeling old. “You would’ve been great at that job.”

“I need to go for a run. Hey, you want to come? When is the food supposed to get here?”

“It’s not a great time for a run, Dad.”

“Nonsense. It’s always a great time for a run.”

Flashbacks of his erratic behavior after Mom died float into the room like ghosts. He’d run, pace, complete projects around the house, do our homework for us, literally *anything* but deal with his feelings.

And when he burns out on productive worry, he winds up despondent. A shell of himself.

I grip the cold edges of the countertop. That version of him won’t come back again over this, right? Over a work issue?

Even as I think it, I know it’s a founded concern. Work is his whole life outside of me and my sisters, and we aren’t around most of the time. And with this “Crypt Keeper” talk, I can’t help but wonder if he’s worse off emotionally than I thought he was.

“Please don’t let this get you down,” I say firmly. “This is just a weird and annoying setback, but you are a valuable asset to Peachtree.”

“Tell that to Conroy.”

I grow a notch queasier. “Are you sure it wasn’t corporate’s decision? Are you sure this was his call? Surely he doesn’t make all the decisions unilaterally.”

“He gets the last say. Corporate may have veto power, but this is Conroy’s show.”

A few rogue grains of rice wedged in the burner coil start to smoke. A stream of black smoke rises in the air. I switch the kettle to a different coil and ratchet up the heat. “I hate that this is happening to you.”

“Cost of doing business,” he says, a distant sheen in his eyes. As I open my mouth to offer a few silver linings about how overrated traveling is, he lifts a hand. “It’s okay, Mia Girl. Just needed to get it off my chest.”

“I know, but—”

“No more worrying about me. Your water’s boiling. What’s the status of the tires, by the way?”

The tea kettle isn’t hissing, but I pour myself a full mug and throw a tea bag in, anyway. It hardly seems like the time to argue. “I scheduled an appointment for after the *Magic School Bus* show wraps when things calm down.”

He frowns. “That’s still weeks yet, isn’t it?”

“I’ve got it under control. No need to concern yourself with my car. Or work. Promise me you’ll do something fun and relaxing this weekend.”

His eyes light up. “What if we hit up some estate sales and look for pieces you can flip?”

I sweep all my Saturday to-dos in the proverbial trash.

If that’ll cheer him up, so be it.

Seventeen

ALEX

Thanks to Josie via Ezra, I'm able to locate Mia's school on Monday.

As soon as I reach the double doors of the room where she's alleged to be, my nerves ratchet up to a ten. I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. I'm acting like a kid with a goddamn crush. This is ridiculous behavior. I'm here to drop off the watch she left charging in my car, and that's all.

Noise and music spill into the hallway as soon as I crack the door. A sped-up cover of Frank Sinatra's "Blue Moon" mixes with the sounds of children squealing.

On stage, a bunch of tiny bodies jump up and down. Behind them, unfinished wooden planks form some kind of backdrop. Mia stands in the center of the chaos in a red dress with white polka dots with her back to the empty cafeteria audience. She appears tall for once in her life when compared to all the little ones.

I step sideways, resting my back against the cold brick wall. This place is terrifying, but I came all the way down here. I'll just wait until she reaches a lull in the action.

That might be never, judging by the scene in front of me.

Her voice, more conductor-like than usual, cuts through the noise. "Rebecca, when you hear the words *blue moon*, that's your cue!"

A black-haired girl who appears older than the rest materializes from off stage in tap shoes. She starts a dance, tapping up a storm.

"Remember, when you're holding your moon prop"—Mia works her arms in a circle—"you'll move it like this. Practice with your arms so you get in the habit. Now, Pre-K friends, when you see Rebecca start her dance, that means it's time to run, run, *run* to your places! Show me how fast you can get on your square of tape!"

Children disperse in the least organized fashion imaginable. They bump, hit, roll on the ground—anything but run as instructed.

One boy appears to have gone rogue.

“KC, we do not hit our friends,” Mia calls over the music. “That is *not* a good choice.”

A scrawny kid with white-blond hair flies around the stage, arms outstretched like a human jet plane. He does not break for traffic but instead rams into any pedestrians in his path.

“KC, this is your second warning.”

He waits until Mia looks away to resume his destruction.

A shrill cry pierces the music as a kid tumbles to the ground. KC dashes across the stage, dropping his wings.

“Miss Madden! KC hit me.”

Mia bends over and presses a button on a large black speaker. The music cuts off. As she begins a polite but firm tirade, KC points my way. “Stranger danger!”

A slew of tiny faces turn my way.

Mia glances over her shoulder.

I offer a sheepish wave. Probably could’ve just left her watch in the front office, come to think of it. Maybe I’ll just—

“Hey-hey-Pre-K, catch a bubble while I talk to an adult. Fifth grade cast, can you watch and see which friends are following directions?”

Three other tall kids emerge from stage left—there’s clearly a clown car of children waiting in the wings—to help the police the littles.

Mia hops off the stage. I meet her halfway.

Her eyes are red, her makeup smudged, and the bun on her head lopsided. “What’s up, Alex?” Her raspy voice prompts her to clear her throat.

“Are you all right?”

She grips the back of her neck. “Long day.”

I remove her watch from my pocket and offer it up. “You forgot this in my truck. Thought you might be missing it.”

“Thanks, I—”

“KC, Miss Madden said *catch* a bubble. And hands to yourself.”

Mia’s eyes flit shut for a second.

I recognize that face. It’s the portrait of every teacher I pushed to their limit when I was little.

She takes a deep breath before opening them. Her eyes are pained like she

could cry at any second, but her voice betrays only exhaustion. “I gotta get back.”

If she’s this tired on a Monday, it doesn’t bode well for the rest of the week. Something inside me pulls so tight it aches. “You look wiped. How much longer do you have here?”

“Forever and a day. The kids leave in thirty minutes, then I have to start painting sets. My parent volunteer bailed.”

I’d feel complicit in a crime if I walked away with her looking so pitiful. Especially since I have no plans but to go home and watch TV. “Let me paint.”

“It’s okay.” She casts an anxious look over her shoulder. “This whole thing isn’t your scene, believe me.”

True, but I’m not about to let her work herself sick when I’m perfectly capable of throwing some paint on a piece of plywood. “Mia, you are dead on your feet. I can paint a backdrop.”

“Why would you do that?”

I shrug. “I need the volunteer hours for work. I made a goal for all my employees to get at least ten per calendar year, and I like to lead by example. This helps us both.”

She walks backward toward the stage, eyes fixed on me as the chatter of the students informs us we’re out of time for this conversation. “Please go home and enjoy the quiet. Spare your nice clothes a disastrous fate.”

Yeah, right.

Without arguing, because she won’t acquiesce anyway, I walk to the stairs leading to the stage. Scooting behind the cluster of seated children, I do my best not to garner any attention while Mia explains what they’ll be doing next.

She’s got everything already set up for the no-show parent volunteer, right down to the hand-colored drawings of how she wants each backdrop to look. Of course she does. She doesn’t miss a beat.

I move to my knees to pry open a bucket of paint. The shade name is *Midnight Blue*.

“What are you doing?”

Startling, I drop the lid on my leg. My khakis now have a planet-size blue orb right above the right knee.

KC’s owlish eyes are on me.

He nudges the paint bucket with his tattered sneaker. The rubber has almost

fully separated from the cloth. “That’s not what color space is. Space is black.”

I look from the paint, to him, to Mia—busy hugging a little girl—and back to the paint. “You’re right.”

“It’s going to look stup— What?” His hair flops as he looks my way.

“I said you’re right. Space isn’t this color.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

I kneel beside him so we’re almost eye level. “But can I tell you something, man to man?”

He responds with a solemn nod. His face is round, his cheeks ruddy like he’s been playing in the cold. I have credit cards in my wallet older than this kid.

“This is the color Miss Madden sees when she looks at space.” I steal a look at Mia, and fuck, it’s a lot to see her in her element, shining like the sun even when she’s burned out. It hurts me in a way I don’t understand. “And *she* likes the color. And you like her, correct?”

“I love Miss Madden.” His voice holds the reverence of a secret that would ruin every ounce of his street cred. “She’s my favorite teacher I ever had.”

I swallow. “Good. So we won’t say anything about her paint. And maybe we won’t kick or punch anyone while she’s teaching, yeah?”

That head of his nods in earnest.

“Because she’s trying to teach your class to dance, and probably a lot of other things, and it’s hard when you’re running around and hurting people. But she knows you’re a good kid. That’s why she says your name so many times. Every time you hear it, I want you to imagine she’s saying, *KC, you’re a good kid. Act like one.*”

His face screws up in determination. “Okay. I’ll try.”

It’s the best answer he could’ve given. *I’ll try.* He knows better than to promise the world and therefore is more self-aware than a lot of adults.

Mia’s gentle voice causes us both to jump. “KC, are you ready to join us and let Mr. Conroy get back to painting?”

KC shuffles back to the group as I start painting. My mind wanders between my old classrooms, reliving many occasions where I, myself, should’ve tried harder. The havoc I wrought on certain teachers haunts me, all because I knew no one would pay attention to me otherwise and I decided to make that everyone else’s problem.

If I’d believed I was a good kid, maybe I would’ve acted like one.

Regardless, I shouldn't have been such a little pain in the ass.

The sound of Mia's voice as she coaches the kids through a song and dance lulls me into a hypnotic state of productivity. By the time she calls the end of rehearsal and returns from standing outside at the pick-up loop to see them off to their parents, I've finished one full set. The easier of the two, admittedly, because it's just space. The other, a cityscape, would take another hour at least.

She materializes on my left as I drag my brush across Saturn's ring. When she moves close to me after not being close to me, I have to recalibrate.

I'm not nervous. Just overly aware of every inch of her, including the air that surrounds her.

Her hand slides over mine as she removes the brush. I feel that touch everywhere, like she's dragging the bristles down my spine. "That looks amazing. Thank you. You've done more than enough. Please stop."

I surrender the brush and turn to face her. "What if I don't want to stop? What if I intend to paint an entire cityscape this evening?"

"Then you will be lonely, because I am beyond ready to go."

"Got it."

Those dark lashes flutter as she drops her attention to the six or so inches between our toes. The Williams Sonoma moment, while an outlier, confused my body into thinking that it's normal for us to stand this close.

"I heard what you said to KC."

I wince. "Yeah, sorry. Probably wasn't my place to say anything."

"No—don't apologize. It totally turned him around. KC doesn't have a great home life, so he tends to respond well when adults give him any sort of attention. He immediately liked you and responded to you." Her eyes meet mine. "Thank you. For the painting. I still feel bad you had to—"

"Don't. I wanted to." It's not well lit on this part of the stage, just enough that I could see what I was painting but not enough that I trust myself not to do something foolish in the near-dark, like lean forward and flatten the hair next to her temple. "You deserve a little help with all this. It's too much for one person."

"I *do* have help—my fifth-grade cast members are my little assistants, in addition to having the biggest speaking parts."

"Why don't any other teachers help? Maybe you could create a document where teachers or parents can sign up for an hour of participation in rehearsal or set decoration or whatever. That seems like an easy fix, right?"

She attempts a laugh but tires out halfway through. “Oh, I’ve tried to elicit participation. But people all have their own extracurriculars, families, and lives to contend with. It wouldn’t be so bad if this wasn’t the week grades are due. I was up until two.”

“*Grades?* These are miniature humans who can barely walk a straight line. How do you go about giving them grades?”

She massages her neck as her eyes fall shut. “Pre-K report cards are based on a wide variety of skills and *very* tedious to fill out, but we do what the state tells us to do. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

I shake my head. “There’s impossible, and then there’s you. Why can’t you just admit this is too much?”

Her shoulders rise and fall. “Because what’s the point of that? It doesn’t change what needs to be done.”

“But if we can just—”

“Alex. I’m good, I promise. And you *did* help me, so thank you again.”

Her tone says *good*, but I’m not convinced. “You mentioned wanting to open your own school. If you’re the one in charge, could you offload some of the red-tape parts of your job to make room for the good stuff?”

She waves this off. “Opening my own school is just a dream. I don’t think I’d ever actually *do* it. Wishing for a smaller class size and less paperwork is just a teacher coping mechanism.”

I open my mouth to challenge her, but her thumb brushes my cheek and my mind goes completely blank.

“Paint.” She pulls back to show me the splash of blue on her finger. Our eyes lock for a breath when she steps backward. “I need to lock the speaker and the paint in the storage room so the kids don’t mess with it tomorrow during school hours.”

Grateful for anything at all to do, I lunge for the paint. “Let’s get it done.”

I follow her off stage into an even darker wing, a bucket dangling from each hand. She leads me through the door to a modest-size space and flips a switch. Round bulbs surrounding a large mirror cast the space in a soft glow, like this is intended to be a dressing room.

“Here is fine.” She sets down the speaker and bends over to push it beneath a counter. I immediately turn away so as not to glimpse her ass as her dress rides up. I’m tired of knowing the shape of this woman’s body. I yearn to forget.

Twenty-four hours ago, she was pressed against me, coaxing my dick to

life with her hand around my tie. I lost sleep fantasizing about how her kiss would taste. And though I shouldn't think about those things at any point, I *really* shouldn't think about them here.

Even if no one would come looking for her backstage.

We are completely alone. Which is why I need to get the hell out of here, and fast.

Eighteen

MIA

I fiddle with my rings so he won't see my hands are shaking.

When I woke up this morning, I was annoyed at him on Dad's behalf. I *am*, present tense. He could've given Dad the courtesy of an interview.

The problem is it doesn't feel like the man standing in front of me, with paint on his pants and a patient but hungry look in his eyes, is the same man I'm annoyed at.

Alex and Conroy are not the same man.

At least that's what I have to tell myself. Otherwise, the heat pumping through me and the way my skin feels too tight when he's within ten feet of me don't make sense.

Nothing makes sense. My brain is offline. There is only a hot, greedy pulse in my core as Alex steps closer to me.

"I better get going." I stifle the urge to lay my hands on his chest. Not here. Never here. And while I'm at it, *not him*.

His voice is thick as his gaze falls to my lips. "Can I help you tote anything to your car?"

He hasn't shaved in days, it seems. I suspected I'd like his face with more scruff, and I'm horrified to learn I was right. I like it so much I want to test it against my hands and thighs.

"My laptop bag is awfully heavy." I point at the doorway, even though I can't drag my eyes off his hooded stare. "Just out there."

I hold my breath as his hand lands near, but not on, my hip. A ghost of a touch. "After you."

On stage near the stairs, he slings my computer backpack over his shoulder with ease as I gather the rest of my things.

Since I was running late to work today and the teacher lot was full—

because I'm always one minute away from being truly tardy—I was forced to park in the gravel overflow lot that Cake My Day shares with H&R Block. The overcast sky makes it feel later than it is as our steps crunch against gravel.

My nerves are frayed as he takes me all the way to my door at the end of the row. Other cars dot the lot at unevenly spaced intervals, but none I recognize. Josie's van isn't here.

After chucking my things in the back, I slide into the front seat of my SUV, knees pressed shut and pointed at him. My feet dangle as I lean my head sideways on the rest.

His attention drops to my legs, those cognac eyes blazing something fierce. The way he's looking at me is enough to fuel another fitful night of self-indulgence.

I used to fall asleep to thoughts of sweet, chaste kisses and a grand proposal in the Avondale square at Christmastime in front of friends and family. My idea of a fantasy was locking down a quiet, doting man who would worship me and our family. A soul mate. The Luke to my Lorelai, with access to a diner with unlimited coffee as a cherry on top.

Ever since Alex started steamrolling my dreams, there is nothing sweet happening in my subconscious. I wake up sweaty, heart racing, urgently seeking his touch.

After a few seconds of letting his wandering eye roam free, he massages the area above his brows and releases a frustrated sigh. "You're not leaving."

My body tenses in anticipation of contact that might never come. "Neither are you."

His fingers grip the top of my doorway as he notches between my knees. He smells expensive, like leather and woodsmoke. Rich and ruining. "Tell me to go and I will."

"Hug me goodbye?" I peer through my rearview mirror to make sure there are no close-by customers or, worse, people I know. This area of town is crawling with parents of current and former students. Optics aren't great with a man between my legs. "Please?"

He twines a finger in the tie of my wrap dress. My breath stalls in my lungs. One tug would undo the whole thing, but he toys with it instead. "A hug."

I nod, the word *yes* too sticky in my throat to break out.

He shifts closer, his body spreading my legs wider. I try to hide my gasp,

and the result is a whimper. His arms circle me, and we hug so tight every hard inch of his chest and abs imprints on me.

Our breathing grows ragged the longer we hold each other. My ankles cross behind his back as his face falls to my shoulder. His lips ghost my skin as his mouth glides toward my neck.

I tip my head sideways to give him better access. He drags that sandpaper skin over mine, and it scratches all kinds of itches while creating new ones. His breath warms my ear, and I clench, waiting for him to speak.

Say something. Anything.

Instead, all I get is a low, slow inhale.

A labored exhale.

An adjustment of his hold that aligns my aching core with his belt buckle through my underwear. I groan at the press of metal and release my hold on him, pulling back to catch my breath.

My dress draped over my lap appears innocent, but it's not so long as he's still standing between my legs.

He traces the V-neck of my dress over the swell of my chest. The only saving grace is the tank top I layered underneath so as not to flash cleavage at work. I'm grateful for this clothing chastity belt; if his finger touched my bare skin, I don't think I'd be able to stand the teasing.

He coasts his finger lower, toward one of two very stiff, achy nipples pressing against the fabric. His gaze flits to meet mine as he strokes it. I nearly cry out, not just for the sensation—though, *yes*—but for that look on his face, that *I know just what to do with you* stare-down.

I believe it. I believe every last promise his eyes are making me right now, and he hasn't even kissed me yet. I'm already antsy at the faintest of touches outside my clothes.

"Hugging is a bad idea." I take a deep breath that only serves to push my boob harder into his hand.

I track the trajectory of his hand as it moves to my jaw. "Probably so." He glides a thumb beneath my chin in a light stroke. "You do not hug fair."

"Neither do you." My lips are hot with anticipation. "Would a kiss be safer?"

His eyes darken as he tips my chin. Heat tears through me as he hovers his lips near mine. I want so badly for him to close the gap between our mouths.

He toys with my lips. Still not giving me what I want. "Nothing is safe with you."

The sound of voices that aren't nearly far enough away floats through the air. I should close my legs, close my door, and drive away before I lose control.

Maybe I'm a little tired of being in control.

"You're going to make me say it?" I grip his waist and squeeze. "Kiss me."

His eyes flash hunger at my demand. "Kiss you here? With people walking by?" He dips down and drags his lips over my collarbone until I shudder. As if he cares who sees us, with that evil, torturous mouth of his already hard at work.

I let out the most pathetic, wanting sound until he digs his hand into my hair and tilts my head. His lips latch on to my jaw, applying the lightest pressure as he sucks.

I grab his face in my palms and guide his mouth to mine.

Every pent-up frustration, every amorphous feeling I can't name, every dizzying sensation in my chest and lower, I pour into a kiss. His lips are soft as they play against mine, like the pillow on your bed you dream of all day and can't wait to sink into.

He's gentle with me, coaxing my mouth open. His hands, though, are anything but gentle as his fingers dig into the place where my neck meets my shoulder. The touch is urgent as we wrestle for control. I take the kiss to a ten, stroking his tongue with mine until he groans into my mouth. I want to break him in half and glimpse what he's hiding so I can be sure I'm not alone in this.

What is this? The part of me that demands his hands stay on me and the part of me that needs to pump the brakes are the same exact size. Formidable opponents.

My knees hug his waist as he steps forward, invading the threshold of my car, his teeth grazing my bottom lip. It takes everything in me not to collapse backward and pull him on top of me. At least the center console is saving me from public indecency.

He moves his hot mouth down my neck as his hand circles my thigh. As though to stop himself from sliding it higher, he tightens his fingers into my flesh. "My place isn't far."

I arch into him, willing that mouth lower. Or higher. My restraint so badly wants to break its tether, every inch of me aching for him. "Your place?"

"Well, we can't stay here." His gaze meets mine in a challenge, his hand sliding an inch higher. "Right?"

My pulse explodes for a different reason as I pull back, turning my head in the direction of the parking lot.

Damn it, no. We can't stay here. Not in this parking lot.

Not in this *place* we've been in. This limbo.

He plants his hands on top of the car, creating distance I don't want but desperately need. They land with a soft *thud*. His shirt comes untucked, drawing my attention to his hips, his waist, lower to where he strains against his tight pants. "It's your call, Mia. All of it."

Nineteen

MIA

Our eyes lock. The weight of what we're doing lands on my shoulders in a rush. Or what he's proposing we do.

His house.

Whatever this moment is, at least it wasn't premeditated. Making the choice to go home with him is another beast entirely. I know exactly what will happen the second I walk through his front door.

It'd be something I can't take back.

"I can't." My body immediately hates me, desire surging hot and heavy. "I'm meeting Josie to shop for her birthday."

He pinches my chin lightly between his thumb and forefinger, forcing my attention back to his face. "One hour. I live ten minutes from here. You can shop with Josie after."

One hour.

That's all this could be. A one-off, hour-long sprint to a finish line. I could forget our bad dates and the inevitable awkward goodbye for one hour of good and much-needed sex if those were the only things standing in my way.

But even in my lust-addled mind, I'm not sure I could forget he's Madden public enemy number one. I'll look at him after and feel guilty.

And he'll look at me after and feel nothing. He's asking for casual sex. Why that bothers me, when I'd be using him much the same way, is an entire train of thought I don't want to board right now.

"And even if I wasn't shopping, we still shouldn't." I hold his eye, searching for an excuse to say yes. "Right? Do you really think it'd be a good idea?"

Tension invades his features. "That feels like a no-win question."

"Because it's a no-win situation, Alex."

And that's the truth.

Because Option A, this is a meaningless hookup with a man I can't escape for the foreseeable, inescapable future. And as such, I'll have to think about it every time I hear his name or see him in passing. I'm already going to have to scrub my brain of this memory as it is, and we haven't even done anything.

Or, Option B, it's something more.

Something more, like a fluttering in my chest when I hear him talk to a struggling student or a flare of possession when I see his face magnified on a kiss cam. A stirring of regret that saying no to him today means this—the nothing that's starting to feel like something between us—would be over. Definitely.

Something more would be substantially worse. It would mean I've caught feelings, that I may want to see him again. I have no business catching a single feeling for this man.

I need an Option C: fling myself in a cold pool and forget this happened.

"The situation isn't ideal." His hands land on my thighs. I hate that I relish their return to my body. He shakes his head as his rough palms slide higher. "But I can't help it. I won't apologize for wanting you. And, *fuck*, do I want you, Mia."

I drag my hand down his hard chest, slowing to enjoy the topography of his abs. "So we'd have sex and it'd be as if it never happened? You'd go back to work tomorrow, and it'd just be business as usual? I don't want to complicate things even more than they already are between you and my dad, especially with the latest situation."

His hands go still at the edge of my dress. "What are you talking about? What situation?"

"Just addressing the elephant in the room. You hired someone else for a job that was his idea. The traveling salesperson."

Confusion clouds his expression. He steps back. "You mean the liaison?"

"Yes, that."

"The position I hired for is an emerging tech liaison. I hired the best person for the role as I envision it. Yes, it's a sales job. But it's also a ton of marketing, which I tried to explain to Richard." He shakes his head, a flicker of disappointment in his eyes. "It's business, Mia."

I stiffen at his tone, my knees pressing shut in the absence of his body. "Right, but he suggested the traveling part to you, and he's your head sales guy—"

“You’re hearing his side of the story.”

“What other side is there?”

His voice is firm, but there’s something else there, too. Sympathy, maybe. “Your dad is a fantastic salesman. His customers are intensely loyal. But they are his longtime customers, and they aren’t interested in new technology. I need whoever is in the field to relate to new stakeholders in the hospitality space.”

“So they need to be young?” I mutter. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“They need to be not only open to evolving technology but *buzzing* to sell hotel management on new products. To build relationships and get people excited. I need my field liaison to be selling the value of things Richard doesn’t even know if he believes in.”

I open and close my mouth twice. “He offered to get his MBA. He’s... buzzing. Did they tell you that?”

He takes a long breath. His face falls.

My heart drops right along with it.

Yeah, Alex knew my dad offered. And it didn’t make a lick of difference. Dad never stood a chance.

“These choices aren’t easy.” He drags a hand forward through his hair, wrecking it. I’ve never seen him like this, so bent out of shape. “I don’t love the situation we’re all in. But it could be easier if you’d both stop acting like my decisions come from a personal vendetta.”

I lift my hands in surrender. He’s offering logic I can’t argue with about a topic that is obviously more complex than I realized. “He’s upset that he doesn’t feel valued, but why do *you* seem so upset? Because you discovered an employee isn’t thrilled about your choices?”

He shakes his head, incredulous. “Because *your* father doesn’t like me, and you live and die by his opinion. And *that* is what upsets me.”

My whole body tenses. “That’s not fair. Of course I care what he thinks. I value his opinion. But that doesn’t mean I can’t form my own.”

“You’re going to sit here and say your opinion of me doesn’t hinge on his? I was one second away from putting my hands up your skirt and *still* all you could think about was fighting someone else’s battles. You’ve cast me in the heartless boss role, and you refuse to see me any other way.”

“*You* only wanted an hour to get me out of your system, Alex. Now suddenly you care what I think of you?”

He points right at my heart. “Despite what would be convenient, I care

what you think. A lot. And if you could put all the other noise out of your head, we'd be having a very different conversation."

My mouth snaps shut.

He doesn't look me in the eye as he mutters his goodbye. I get the message loud and clear that I just ruined something I wasn't entirely sure existed.

I slam my door shut and retrieve my phone before I have even a second alone with my thoughts. The Bluetooth picks up my call.

Josie answers on the third ring. "Hi! Are you already on your way?"

"I'm about to leave my school." Her breathlessness gives me pause. "Sorry, did I interrupt you on a run?"

"No. Are you okay? You sound overcaffeinated or something."

Oh, how I wish that's all it was. Alex won't let me be "okay." He's got me twisted in a knot.

"I think I messed up, Jo," I blurt. "Alex and I— I hated him, remember? Our dates sucked, we aren't a good match, all that stuff. Except now I'm wondering if I really know him well enough to know that for sure. Did I judge him prematurely?" My head falls against the steering wheel as I groan. "I'm so attracted to him I can't even see straight when he's around. But worse, I'm afraid I may actually *like*—"

"Should I leave for this?" Ezra's hushed voice crackles my crappy speakers.

"Ezra?" Mortification chokes me. "Oh my god. You heard all that?"

A pause. "Yup."

Wonderful.

Alex's best friend now knows I'm lusting so hard I can't function.

"I'm so sorry!" Josie laments. "Once you got going, I didn't have time to get out of bed before you started talking. But Ezra was just leaving so we can have our girl time."

"It's fine." I wave my hand as if she can see the gesture. At this point, I should expect Ezra around twenty-four seven. I'm shocked he's not coming shopping with us for our outfits for Josie's birthday party.

"Want me to talk to him, Mia?" Ezra offers gently. "See where his head is at?"

Alex's head was in *I need to touch you* territory, same as mine. But now that I've questioned his character, he's surely lost whatever fleeting interest he had. But I'm not about to involve Ezra and make this more complicated than it already is.

“No thanks.” My voice is firm. “This isn’t even a big deal. I’m not seeing him again.”

Josie makes a sound of dissent. “We’re not just going to forget. Plus, you’re going to see him on the booze cruise.”

I pinch my eyes shut and exhale. *Of course he’ll be there.* “There will be tons of people on the boat. We probably won’t even cross paths. And that’s weeks from now. Surely we will have forgotten about each other by then, right? Problem solved.”

“Mia...” Josie says in that *I’m about to drop some wisdom you didn’t ask for* way. “You like him. What’s so wrong with admitting it?”

I glimpse myself in the rearview mirror and sigh. My cheeks are still flushed. Someone should really spray me with a water bottle. “He’s my dad’s boss, remember?”

“Is that really such a big deal?”

“If Alex and I ever became a thing, it’d change the dynamic in our family. Dad would feel betrayed.”

“So? Listen, I know you’re a daddy’s girl and all, but the rest of us have been pissing off our parents since the dawn of time. They get over it.”

I pull out of the parking lot and start the drive to Josie’s condo. “He’s been through so much. I have to look out for him, and that includes not going out of my way to make his life harder. If he ever knew Alex and I...”

I remember Ezra is still listening on the other end. This is more than I want to admit in front of him, out of respect for my family.

As if he could sense it, Ezra pipes up. “I’m going to go.” A loud kissing sound attacks my eardrum. “You two have a great night.”

Josie rejoins the conversation. “I humbly request that you stop ‘looking out for your dad’ by worrying about his job, which you have no control over.”

“He’s already having a hard time with everything at work. Alex and I dating could be the thing that sends him back over the edge.” Just saying *Alex and I dating* sends my pulse on a rampage. “What if we become something real and it drives a wedge between me and Dad? He’s not going to want Alex around the house. There go our hangouts. No more family dinners, goodbye holidays at home—”

“Easy, doom caster. Christmas isn’t cancelled yet. Let’s take it one step at a time.”

“This is serious, Jo. I’m freaking out.”

“I know, babe. I’m just trying to keep you from spiraling too hard over

something that hasn't happened yet. You need to figure out what's going on with you and Alex before you let yourself entertain worst-case scenarios."

I chew the inside of my cheek and let her statement breathe.

"You're probably right," I finally say as I arrive at a red light. "It's just ever since this work stuff began, I've seen glimpses of the old dad. The guy he became after my mom died. It scares me, you know? To think he could go back to that place. I don't want to make it worse."

"Believe me, I get it. I still worry constantly about my mom and her grief. For years, I was terrified if I didn't spend time with her, she'd be even more sad. Like I could be a human Band-Aid to her missing my father. Clearly, I still have work to do in that department, since I live with her. But you have to stop putting all this pressure on yourself to protect his feelings. I'm sure what he wants more than anything is for his daughters to be happy."

The word *grief* is like a ripcord; any time it's pulled, I feel even more panic, like I have to spring into action to make sure Dad's not getting pulled under by it again. The only thing that came close to the pain of losing Mom was the constant panic and fear of watching him suffer after she was gone. Josie having lost her dad makes her uniquely equipped to understand me, and me, her.

My eyes burn from exhaustion and a decade of emotional vigilance. "Logically, I know you're right. But Alex represents everything bad in his life right now, and I could—*should*—just walk away."

I nearly cry those last two words. I would love so much to move past this. Today could be a blip. Touching him, tasting him could be a memory only.

But I can't stop thinking about him. I don't think I'm strong enough to walk away. And where exactly would I walk to, since he's everywhere I freaking go?

Her voice is uncharacteristically hesitant. "Are you sure this is just about your dad? Because I know this is the first time you've really liked someone since Mason, and that's probably scary."

We aren't going down that road. Not tonight. "This would've been so much easier if I liked *anyone* else," I add. "Why can't I just meet an Ezra of my own? No parent on Earth could dislike an Ezra."

A rather dark laugh slips from her mouth. "My mother is trying her best, believe me. But if you're serious about that, Ezra *does* have a single brother. Max. He'll be on the booze cruise, too. That boy is more than ready to settle down. Wants to get married yesterday. Partly to appease his mother, but

mostly because he's ready to have an army of Greenfield children. I think you'd like him."

I shouldn't feel panicked at this, but my pulse decides to quicken like I'm about to step into traffic anyway. Alex's face burns bright in my brain, a fire drawing me closer.

I'll have to see him again, and it's going to be a long two weeks with that knowledge hanging over my head.

"A brother," I say, mustering up as much enthusiasm as I can. "I don't know. Maybe."

"*Maybe*," she says with a snort. "You can't even pretend to be interested in someone else. Oh, girlie. You've got it bad."

Don't I know it.

Twenty

ALEX

The sky is painted orange as Ezra and I approach the gaudy Margaritaville “luxury vessel” for Josie’s birthday cruise.

Ezra’s brother Max is waiting for us on the deck next to the entrance to the boat. He perks up when he sees us and struts forward. “Evening, gentlemen.” His smile is good-natured as he ropes his brother into a hug. “Do you even own a pair of dress pants, my guy?”

Ezra claps him on the back twice before releasing. “Not for a booze cruise, I don’t.”

“Not for anything, he doesn’t,” I correct.

Max turns to me. He’s exactly as I remember him from Seder dinners years ago: warm, friendly, and impeccably dressed. A walking Ralph Lauren ad.

“Alex Bartholomew Conroy.” His booming voice somehow fills the boundless outdoor space. “It’s been forever.”

“It has. And that’s not my middle name, but I’ll take it.” I extend my hand, but Max envelops me in a hug, anyway.

“How’s life?” he asks.

Let’s see. I’m taking a sunset cruise on a lake I never would’ve chosen in a million years due to the spooky history Ezra filled me in on during the drive over, and I’m about to see a woman I’m damn near certain doesn’t want to see me.

“Great,” I lie.

Ezra leads us on board. Judging by the rowdiness of the people already at the bar, the darkness of nightfall will suit this event much better than daylight would. It’s sure to be a wild night.

For these other people, at least.

Meanwhile, I can’t stop dwelling on the inevitability of seeing Mia.

I've been replaying our last encounter—the incredible way it started, and then the crappy way it ended—for two painful weeks in my head. Every time I successfully bullied myself into not thinking about her for more than a few hours at a time, Richard would call me into his office to discuss a client, thus forcing me to see Mia's picture, or have a loud call on speakerphone with her in the breakroom about their weekend plans to go estate sale shopping. Her voice had me crawling out of my skin with curiosity and wanting in seconds flat.

Big Rich is a big reminder of the woman I'd like to forget.

Tonight ought to be fun.

Max vibrates with energy as he claps his hands together. "We can work with this."

I scan the bar, the bolted-down cocktail tables surrounding an already crowded dance floor, and booths lining this interior room. A dull disco ball hangs overhead.

"Nice, sizable bar," he continues. "Once people actually start drinking and dancing, it'll feel like a real party in here. I hope they lower the music, though. I already can't hear myself think."

"It's a party boat," I point out. "It's only going to get louder."

He nods toward a staircase. "Should we check out the top deck?"

Ezra points toward the bar. "There's Josie. Let's say hi first."

I crane my neck to see over a group of women in matching white clothes.

And then I spot her.

It takes an entire pep talk from my nervous system to get my lungs to work again when I lay eyes on Mia. She's laughing it up in a short, strapless red dress that leaves so little to the imagination I want to fling a coat over her. Her hourglass figure could stop time. And the dress has a *zipper* in the front, which is an invitation for sin. Her exposed collarbone is a reminder of where my mouth once was. And to add insult to injury, her dimples pop out as she smiles at something Josie says.

And fuck me, no ponytail tonight. Her hair is down, a silk curtain over her shoulders, begging me to run my fingers through the strands.

It's clear she intended to stop my heart tonight so she could be rid of me once and for all. I despise this woman for dressing like that when I'm trying to be a mature, level-headed adult and not pursue her without some sort of boundaries. Or even just *one* boundary—she can't hold work stuff over my head while I'm feeling her up.

Being mature is a real damn shame.

“What are you staring at?” Max, a few inches shorter than me, attempts to follow my gaze.

“No one. Nothing, I mean.”

Ezra snickers. “Keep it in your pants, Conroy. That’s somebody’s daughter you’re ogling—”

“Shut up and walk before I make you regret inviting me.”

He smiles as he slings an arm over my shoulder. “I already regret inviting you.”

Max is the first to reach Josie and her crew at the bar. Ezra breaks away to greet Josie.

I hang back behind them, hands in my pockets.

“Evening, boys,” Josie says with a tip of her imaginary hat. She gestures at four women all clutching drinks. “I don’t know who’s met and who hasn’t...”

I try and focus as she introduces her cousins from somewhere or other, but I’m distracted by Mia’s, well, *everything*.

Max goes down the line, shaking hands with the women like a politician. “Max Greenfield, pleasure to meet you. Max Greenfield, pleasure to meet you...”

When he’s done, I give a curt nod. “I’m Alex.”

Mia is too preoccupied with trying to capture her drink straw with her mouth to pay me any mind.

Fine, then. Two can play at that game.

I order a round of drinks for the men and engage Josie’s cousins in a conversation about the intricacies of developing a sourdough starter without so much as another attempt at eye contact with Mia. The chatty cousins lean against the bar, and I stand a foot back, arms crossed over my chest.

On my right, Max wheedles closer to Mia, wedging himself next to her at the bar. It’s difficult to hear them over the music piping through the speakers and with Ezra and Josie moving and talking right next to me, but not impossible.

“What are you drinking, Mia?”

He says his name like he knows her. With an intimate familiarity he hasn’t earned.

“Long Island Iced Tea.”

I almost fall out of the seat I’m not sitting in. That’s a strong drink.

Max’s hand goes in the air. The bartender hurries over.

“Hi there! Can the lady get another Long Island?” asks Max.

“Oh, actually”—Mia scrunches her nose—“I should switch to something that won’t knock me out. Can I have white wine? The cheapest one?”

Weirdly, this comforts me. At least she’s not aiming to be wasted within the hour.

Max smiles as if utterly charmed. “The drink’s on me, of course. Are you sure you want the cheapest one?”

“After one Long Island, I can’t tell the difference between white wines. But thank you for buying, Max. You didn’t have to do that.” She squeezes his arm once and drops her hand.

She might as well have reached inside my body and squeezed my stomach instead.

Max is on the prowl for a wife. How does she not see he’s going to do whatever it takes to impress her?

Watching this is going to drive me to drink, and I’d rather not start the night that way.

I duck out to explore the top deck and stay long enough that night claims the sky. The moon is nearly full and bright overhead. I lean against the railing, the wind rippling my T-shirt as I stare at the sky. Anything is better than watching Max pursue Mia.

That plan is short lived.

Mia materializes at the top of the stairs. Her eyes meet mine, and she lifts her hand in a tiny wave. My stomach churns as the boat lurches on choppy water.

What the *hell* does this woman want from me?

Her approach seems to take a hundred years. She comes to a stop beside me, letting her forearm fall flush with the railing.

I mimic her posture, resting my left arm along the metal.

“Hi?” Her word is upwardly inflected like a question. She flashes me her profile as she stares at the lake.

If I didn’t know any better, I’d say she was nervous.

I stare over her head so as not to get sucked in by how gorgeous she looks as the balmy breeze ruffles her hair. “Hi.”

“I’ve been wanting to talk to you,” she admits. “Will you come down with me?”

Wanting to talk to you shouldn’t be a hot press to the groin, but here we are. “Why not talk to me here?”

She bats her lashes my way. "I have a thing. You'll see."

"A thing?"

She extends her hand but seems to think better of touching me and drops it to her side. "Please?"

"Fine." I gesture straight ahead. "Lead the way."

I follow her downstairs, thoughts running a mile a minute. The dance floor and bar teem with life. The disco ball casts the floor in speckled light, while a neon runner above the bar gives the space a club atmosphere. After enjoying fresh air, it smells like sweet, potent liquor and too many people in here.

Mia takes me to a booth as far away from the dance floor as possible.

On the table, six tiny shot glasses sit in a row. She extends her hand, a delicate silver bracelet dangling off her wrist, gesturing at the set up. "It's come to my attention that perhaps we don't know each other all that well, and maybe I've been judging you a bit harshly. Or at least biasedly. So I have a proposition for you."

"Oh yeah?" I cross my arms. "What's that?"

She lifts a quarter. It appears to be the same size as the moon visible through the window to the observation deck. "Friendly game of quarters. You try and bounce the quarter into the glass. If you miss, you take the shot and answer a question of my choosing. And vice versa on my turn; if I miss, I answer a question of yours." She bites her lip. "One rule: moratorium on work talk. Let's pretend, just for tonight, that none of it exists."

Relief and a fresh wave of anticipation shake hands in my chest. I'd love to spend an eternity pretending my work and Mia have nothing to do with each other, no affiliation whatsoever, but I'll settle for tonight only. "You got yourself a deal."

She drops into the booth, the leather bench hissing at her impact. I slide into the seat across from her. Her knees brush mine under the table, sending heat surging through me.

"For what it's worth, these shots are mixed with soda water so they're less strong. In case you are a lightweight."

"Noted." I push the shot glasses together so they're touching. "Quarters 101: You want the glasses touching to increase your chances of sinking a shot."

Her eyes glimmer in the near darkness as she works to suppress a smile. "What's it like knowing everything?"

I shift forward, threading our legs further, because I can't seem to resist. A

heady thrill shoots through me when she lets me. “Ladies first.”

Her smile is wicked as she slides a quarter across the table. “Oh no, I insist you go. I’ve got *lots* of questions ready.”

I bounce the quarter hard. It ricochets off the table and misses all six glasses by a longshot. “Would you look at that? Massive fail.” I down the shot. The vodka has a bite, even cut with soda water. “What’s your first question?”

“When was your last serious relationship?”

“Define serious.”

“The absence of laughter.” She snickers at her own joke, which distressingly, I find endearing. “I mean more than just a fling.”

“I dated a woman named Lizzie. She was divorced and wanted something easy and uncomplicated. I gave it to her. We ran our course after about two months, though I wasn’t in town for one of them.”

“Who ended it?”

“She stopped calling and texting. I took the hint. I was already in talks with Peachtree—sorry, no work talk—I was already ready to move on at that point, so I didn’t push it.” I drop the cold metal in her palm. “Your turn.”

She bounces the quarter so hard I have to block my face. “Wow, that was a close one. Close to bruising my eye, I mean.”

With a self-deprecating head shake, she plucks the shot from the table, removes the quarter, and downs the liquid. “Your question.”

“You miss your ex? The one with the eager parents from the restaurant?”

“No. I miss having someone to sleep with, though.”

I voluntarily take a shot to counteract the visual of her in bed. “So you miss knowing where your next orgasm is coming from. Got it.”

“Oh, I always know where my next orgasm is coming from, and that person is me.” Her lips lift in a coy smile, but it doesn’t catch hold. “I meant sleeping. Having someone beside me when I wake up in the morning.”

“I imagine that would be nice.”

“*Imagine?*” Her eyes widen. “Haven’t you ever slept with someone?”

I consider how much to admit. When I said Lizzie was my last serious relationship, I should’ve specified she was my *only* and that “serious” simply means we saw each other more than twice. And we didn’t do sleepovers. It never came up, just a foregone conclusion that like every other hookup I ever had, she went back to her life when it was done, and I resumed mine. She liked sleeping in her own bed but never invited me there.

In a flash, I imagine Mia, sprawled out in my bed, the sun drenching her skin, her fancy little dress in a heap on the ground. Thinking about how I'd peel the fabric off her body keeps me distracted from the fact that I've never once imagined a scenario like this—actually waking up next to a woman.

The unanswered question hangs between us. I bid her a coy smile of my own. "That'll cost you a quarter."

"You're an expensive date."

I spin an empty shot glass in a slow circle. "Is this a date?"

I wish the moon were brighter so I could catch her smile and all the other subtle shifts in her expression. She's stunning in this shadowed booth, but she's a woman made for the light.

Yeah, morning would suit her just fine.

She takes a deep breath as she breaks eye contact. "My turn." She flicks her wrist and shoots her shot. The metal plunges into liquor.

Her smile is full of secrets. "Looks like I don't have to answer."

"Fair enough." I take the quarter and miss on purpose. This shot tastes like pure soda water. "To answer your earlier question, no, I've never spent a full night with a woman."

Her gaze pins me. "What if I was going to change my question?"

"Then I guess that answer was free. Ask another."

She lowers her voice as if anyone on this boat is paying attention to two people hiding in a booth. Something caresses my ankle in a slow and intentional way. "Best and worst sex of your life?"

The word sex on her tongue as she touches me under the table is a hot arrow slicing through me. "This feels like a test. A gentleman would pass on that question."

"Yeah." Her smile is a teasing dare. "A *gentleman* probably would."

My fingers drum against the table. "That's a tough question. I'd never say something was the worst, but for best, probably my first time. I never in a million years thought I had a shot with the girl, but she took pity on my poor virginal soul, and the rest was history. I liked her."

"That's surprisingly cute. How long did you date?"

"About four minutes." With a flick of my wrist, I bounce the quarter so it lands at the edge of the table. "Look at that, you missed. Same question, except I want to hear about the best sex you've had with yourself."

Since my eyes are on her mouth, I don't miss the way her lips part. Whether it's because she's surprised or scandalized, I can't tell.

Those lips turn up into a sneaky smile. “You stole my turn, mister.” She lifts the quarter and shoots for herself.

It sails past the glasses.

I arch a brow, awaiting her response to my question.

She takes the shot, wipes the vodka from her lips with one finger like a seductress, and shrugs a bare shoulder. “Pass.”

“Of course you do.” I divvy out the remaining shots and cast the quarter aside. “New question, then. Where do you see yourself in five years?”

The boat rocks to remind us we’re at the mercy of the water.

Her eyes flicker as if she’s looking me up and down. “I want to buy a house in a year, I know that much.”

I furrow my brow. “You sound sad about that.”

“Not sad. Just antsy. It’s taking longer than I’d hoped to save up a good down payment and fix my credit. Life gets in the way, you know? If it’s not unexpected bills, it’s car maintenance or insurance rate increases, blah blah blah. It’s hard to live a full life as a single person in a punishing economy, and we all know teachers aren’t making bank. But I’ll get there, and it’ll be so satisfying when I do.”

“Where do you live now?”

“A small apartment that is basically on top of some railroad tracks. Not great for entertaining. Not that I can fit people inside it.” She winces. “It’s fine. Cozy. Currently filled with furniture I need to fix up and turn over.”

“Estate sale finds?” No sooner do the words leave my mouth do I realize that I’ve admitted that I heard that conversation between her and her dad. That I was paying attention.

Hell, that I was desperate for any crumbs as to what she’s been up to.

Understanding flickers in her eyes. “Yes.”

I lean forward on my elbows. Our gazes tangle, and the buzz of her attention warms me from the inside out. “You’ll get your house. I’ve heard there are great incentives for first-time buyers.”

“There used to be.” She circles a finger over the rim of her still-full final shot. “It’s more than just the house itself, though. I’ve always wanted to have *that* home where everyone hangs out. I want to be the hostess with the mostest, just like my mom was. I grew up with people and activity, and that’s what makes a house feel like home to me.”

I can practically see the heart beating out of her chest. “You want to be a nineties’ sitcom house with everyone coming and going at all hours of the

day?”

She hits me with my favorite of her smiles: a little shy, and a lot pretty. “Yup. Good company and good times. A permanent, happy place I can make my own.”

“And does this future house include a family of your own? Would you want a husband, kids, all that?”

“A husband, yes. Teaching kind of changed my perspective on having kids, though. I’ve taught kids from a lot of really heartbreaking situations, so I’d consider fostering or adopting. I’m not sure about bringing more kids into the world yet, though. Not when so many are already here and don’t get the love they deserve.”

I nod, struck by something that makes it hard to speak.

She raises her voice and shakes out her hands as if to re-start the conversation. “Okay. Enough about me. Your turn. Five-year plan?”

“So with Peachtree Tech’s expansion plans—”

“Uh-uh.” She wags an admonishing finger. “Moratorium on work, remember? You’ll have to talk to me about your actual personal life.”

I exhale. “It *is* my personal life. It’s been everything to me when I had nothing. I need to know what I’m doing professionally before I can plan my life around it.”

“But what else do you want?” she asks pointedly. “All I know is you’ve got your travel bucket list and you’re doing that race in the fall. No other plans?”

A burst of heat moves through my limbs. I started running on my lunch breaks with Darian and Anish two weeks ago to train for a half marathon in the fall, and somehow, Mia knows it.

Looks like I’m not the only one who has been keeping tabs.

With effort, I push the thrill of that aside. “I don’t know what I want outside of my career, honestly. I’ve never been in one place long enough to figure it out. I don’t date because I move, and I move because it gets me ahead. That’s all I’ve cared about since I was old enough to make my own decisions. Being able to support myself.”

“I get that. Completely. But from where I’m sitting, you’ve got the career now. You’ve made it.”

“I’m not sure you ever really make it. There’s always more you can do.”

She looks at the moon for a few seconds before turning her attention back to me. “Do you want a family? Marriage, kids, a hamster farm?”

I drum my fingers on the table, slouching under the weight of that question

as it hangs over the table.

Family doesn't mean the same thing to me as it does to her. All I ever wanted growing up was the bare minimum, and even *that* was too much for my aunt and uncle to give. I was barely theirs, bound to them by a temporary decision they made when I was born that ended up being permanent. There were no family meals, unless Derek and I hoovering Salisbury steak at the same time in a room we happened to share counts. There weren't inside jokes or parties or enjoying each other's company. I don't even know what Mia's describing looks like up close. People existing together day in and day out, no one fighting or throwing remotes at TV screens? Suspicious.

Discomfort flares like a hot rock lodged in my stomach, but I can't just ignore the question.

"I think I'm scared to be responsible for anyone but myself in case I mess it up. I don't know how to be a partner. I've never been anything to anyone, let alone everything to someone. I'd probably be a terrible parent because I'd live in constant fear of letting the kid down. Haven't had a roommate in years, since Ezra. I guess you could say I don't have a lot of people to fill a house with. I never have."

I leave it at that and take my last shot. Vodka-Soda Mia has me admitting all kinds of things tonight.

Gaze softening, she opens her mouth to speak. But I suddenly can't bear to hear it. My life is not fun boat banter.

"And I'm not a hamster guy, historically. They are nothing more than chubby mice that are well marketed."

My attention moves to her mouth as she laughs, and *damn it all*, it takes me straight back to kissing her in the parking lot, her hands gripping my hair, claiming my face. Now that I've felt her tongue against mine, I'm not sure I can go back to pretending it's not all I think about.

"But hey," I say, a new edge to my voice. "Maybe I'll change my mind. Never say never."

Her nod is slow. Thoughtful. "Never say never."

We size each other up in the dark, a current of energy flowing between us as the boat thrums with life. Fire sears through my veins as her gaze roams my face.

I take a steadying breath. If I don't touch her, I think I'll start pacing the boat like a caged animal. "Mia?"

"Yes?"

My hand covers her knee under the table. You'd think I just licked the inside of her thigh for the molten look in her eye. I watch her eyes fall shut as my fingers dig into her skin. "I'm all out of questions."

Her hand covers mine and slides it an inch higher. Her skin is hot beneath my palm. "Me, too."

The table is small enough that we can tease each other's legs, but it's still too big. I can't get more than halfway up her thigh.

By all accounts, I should be running for the hills, but all I can think about is ripping this table from the studs, tossing it in the lake, and pulling her into my lap. The memory of her ragged breathing when I teased and kissed her in the parking lot makes me want to see what other sounds I can coax out of her. "If I was smart, I would've fucked you in that parking lot."

"Alex."

"What?" My voice is nothing but a rasp. It's too dark to see her blush, but I feel the heat of it in my cock as I slip my hand between her knees. "Should I stop?"

Her legs part just enough to accommodate me. "No. Don't stop anything. I've just never had someone speak so frankly to me."

"Do you like it?"

"Yes." She looks down at the table as if she can see straight through to where we're touching. "A lot."

I grit my teeth and count to three so I don't climb across the cock-blocking table. "Come over here and sit on my side."

She peers over her shoulder at the crowd as music and laughter blur together, stroking her bottom lip. "Isn't that a little obvious?"

"Don't care." I stare at her mouth, imagining those lips all over my body as my hand glides as high on her leg as I can reach. "I want to feel just how much you like this."

She shifts her weight back, allowing her hips to slide forward on the seat to give me more access. It's the equivalent of a woman arching off the bed, pleading with her body to be stripped.

I bite back a groan. My patience snaps when I reach the hem of her torturous dress. "Let's go find somewhere—"

"Mia, where the hell are you? Is that her in that booth over there? It's so dark I can barely see."

I jerk my hand away and fall back against the seat. Mia jolts upright.

Josie slingshots off the dance floor, Ezra and Max on her heels. Her gait is

clumsy as she nearly crashes into a metal support beam.

“Oh, she’s *drunk*,” Mia whispers. “Buckle up. Josie is a wild child when she drinks liquor.”

“Max, I found her!” Josie slurs, toppling into the booth beside Mia.

Max’s laugh is light and easy as he and Ezra hover at the edge of the booth. “I see that.”

“He was looking for you. So was I.” Josie loops her arms around Mia. “Come dance with us.” Her head turns my way, and she startles like she’s noticing me for the first time. “Alex! How long have you been sitting there?”

Ezra shakes his head with a fond grin. “He’s been there the whole time, babe.”

“You come dance, too!” Josie insists.

I’m still stuck on the *Max was looking for you* thing. I swallow a swell of irritation.

Josie all but drags Mia out of the booth.

I know what I want to do right now, and it sure as hell isn’t dance with a hundred drunk people. Or dance anywhere, ever. But I’m not going to sit here and let the world’s most affable Greenfield show Mia a good time. I like Max too much to hate him.

Even if Max has a lot more in common with her than I do. The man spent all of Rachael’s wedding shower talking about how ready he is to settle down. And speaking of that shower and all its many guests, the Greenfields are a sitcom family that Mia would fit right into, complete with more nieces and nephews to make lovebug art for and parents who will adore her. Ezra could be her brother-in-law, so in a roundabout way, she’d end up with Josie as a sister.

I bet Richard would love Max.

Misery propels me out of the booth. I want her to be happy, but I physically can’t stand to think about her with anyone else.

The choice is hers, but I won’t sit back and let it happen without making it clear where I stand.

Twenty-One

MIA

I'm playing with fire tonight.

The last two weeks have stockpiled the kindling—the glimpses I've had of Alex through the window of the conference room or his office when he didn't know I was passing through, the stories my dad unknowingly tortured me with about what *Conroy* has been up to, the updates I didn't ask for casually dropped by Josie, the dreams of his mouth and hands and tongue—and one look at him tonight dropped the match.

My attraction to him is like a fist closing tighter and tighter around my middle, a clawing hunger that threatens me every second we're alone together.

Either I dance or undress him.

It is *Georgians Gone Wild* on the dance floor. Half the crowd is swaying and chugging from plastic Margaritaville cups while the other half grinds like teenagers at a homecoming dance. And if homecoming was a person, it would turn up its nose at what the bachelorette party girls are doing with the dudes in the Wells Fargo Columbia fleeces. Dancing isn't a strong enough word.

Josie has a skip in her step as she moves toward her cousins in the center of the crowd. Ezra follows, ever dutiful, or perhaps just scared to leave Josie to her own devices. Max is at my side as the thumping bass vibrates the ground.

A rap-tastic song blares as I sidle up next to Josie, limbs buzzing, decidedly *not* thinking about Alex's palm on the inside of my thigh in that booth so I don't turn around and do something I might regret.

She dances on me like I am a pole and she's paid in tips. With her eyes closed, I'm fairly sure she thinks I'm Ezra, so I move her hands to his chest.

The pours are heavy at the bar this evening.

Max moves in front of me, a disarming grin on his face. “The kids are crazy.” He jabs a thumb over his shoulder at the crowd. “Hooligans. It’s like spring break out here, am I right?”

“So true!” I follow it up with a polite smile. He’s being kind and friendly, but all I can think about is Alex’s hands on me—

Max’s dance moves are just enough of all the best things, equal parts cheesy and smooth. The guy is perfectly nice, seemingly interested, and actually has game.

I feel nothing. Not even a blip of romantic interest.

My mind wanders back to a wicked smile, a practiced flirt, eye contact that feels like foreplay—

“You look beautiful this evening.” Max steps closer. “I’m not sure this is the best environment to get to know someone, but if you were interested in chatting more, I’d love to take you out.”

A breath gusts down my neck as fingers skate up my arms. Alex’s deep voice enters my ear and goes straight to the deep recesses of my chest. “Hi.”

On instinct, my body moves toward his. “Hi.”

“Mind if I steal her?” Alex asks, his eyes never leaving mine.

The hunger matches my own. I drag my focus back to Max, trying to remember where I am, who I am, what I’m doing here.

Max nods slowly, understanding dawning. “Of course. You two have fun.”

I want to tell him there’s no “you two,” but that would be a filthy lie. Alex’s hands on me tell the truth.

Pivoting, I’m confronted with Alex’s chest. My heart flutters like I’m seeing him for the first time, as if I wasn’t just melting for him in that booth three minutes ago.

In my wedges, I’m closer to his face than usual. I don’t know the rules of what I’m allowed to touch, but a taut rubber band of desire pulls me closer to him until my nose is inches from his collar.

Late-night magic hums in the air between us, or maybe that’s just the lust we’ve let get out of control, a nearly tangible thing that makes my senses more attuned to the distance between our mouths. “You dance?”

His right palm finds my lower back as our chests align. He leans into my ear. “With you, yes.”

We find our footing to a Latin-pop crossover that plays constantly on the radio. He moves just enough, and in just the right ways, to head off any doubts that he has rhythm.

His hand skates all over my back, glancing the nape of my neck, eventually settling on the curve of my hip.

Bongos, timbales, and synth emanate from the speakers, working together to compliment the robust voice of the singer. The music gives me an excuse to move, to offload the tension brewing beneath my skin.

Alex shifts back, one hand still gripping my hip, drinking me in with a heated glance from top to bottom. When he's had his fill, he spins me around and brings my back to his chest, keeping me close with his arm across my waist.

Back-to-chest is pure seduction.

His skin is warm and his heart thumps a steady rhythm as if keeping time with the music. The back of my head falls against his chest as his chin tucks into my neck.

"You're beautiful," he whispers into the shell of my ear as his hand drags an inch across my torso. The pressure of his palm makes the zipper's teeth bite the skin above my belly button.

He runs his lips subtly up my neck, tickling my jaw. I turn my cheek and nearly catch his mouth with mine.

We pull back an inch. His gaze flickers between my mouth and my eyes. Music pulses in the background in time with my raging heart. Our hesitation says *maybe not here*, but our mouths come together, magnetized.

His lips are soft as they brush mine. No pressure, no teeth, just a sweet, cotton-candy kiss that melts at the first brush of our tongues.

Our lips stall as I search his gaze.

We make it two seconds until our mouths meet again, pressing harder. If that first kiss was a whisper, this is voiced. His tongue slips over my bottom lip. My lids flutter, and I almost close my eyes, lost in him.

This is happening.

He pulls back, gaze ravenous. His restraint is evident in the tremble of his hand still pinning me against him, the choppy breaths peppering my lips.

And then he spins me to face him, stealing my lips again, deepening the kiss, urging my mouth open wide with a hand to my jaw.

Ache bleeds through me as he feeds me his tongue, his thumb caressing my cheek. I can feel his groan without hearing it as the music bears down.

I can't take the wanting anymore.

"Please." I tug his bottom lip with my teeth. "Let's go."

He's a few feet behind me as I exit to the deck, turning left. The lake laps

at the boat as I search for an alcove, a single stall bathroom, something—
I stumble on a door labeled *storage*. It opens with an easy tug.

Alex is right there, stealing the door from my grip, ushering me inside a tiny room filled with life jackets hanging on hooks.

The door shuts behind us, plunging us into complete darkness. He smacks the wall until he hits a light switch. It's bright enough that I wince.

"How do I lock this thing?" he says with a dissatisfied grunt.

"I don't think you can. That'd be a safety hazard."

"We'll have to be fast, then." He hoists me off the ground and spins so he can perch on a giant black storage container. I fall in between his legs. Our mouths collide, mine greedy as I take the brunt force of his tongue, inhaling his sounds, taking everything he's been holding back.

His fingers fumble over my chest until they pinch my zipper. He stops kissing and looks down, eyes on fire as he unveils me.

I'm hyper aware of the light shining on my skin as I come into view inch by inch. The pale swell of my breasts, my paler stomach, the sensitive skin above the waistband of my thong. "It's so bright in here. I'm used to the dark."

"That"—he lowers the zipper another inch, stopping when he reveals white lace—"is a fucking crime. This red flush here?" He draws a V between my cleavage, his exhale ragged. "It's my favorite color. I want to see it everywhere."

"Faster." I work the dress the rest of the way off and toss it on the storage container beside him.

His fingers make quick work of my strapless bra's front clasp. I spring free, the cold air chilling my skin as my bra joins my dress in the pile. He lets out a tortured growl as he jerks me closer. That first hit of his tongue is a shock of pure bliss. He plumps me with a firm hand and sucks hard, flicking his tongue over the stiff peak. When he bites, I clasp a hand over my mouth.

He breaks away. "Too rough?"

I lower his head to the other side. "More."

He laughs into my skin.

A noise rattles overhead. My gaze snaps up. "What was that?"

"Just the pipes."

"I'm afraid someone is going to walk in." I grasp the hot skin on the back of his neck. "Can we get arrested for this?"

"I've got an idea. It'll buy us a few seconds if someone tries to get in here."

He releases me, hops up, and slides the storage container in front of the door with Hulk strength and Flash speed.

“Problem solved.” His hands move to my ass, pulling me close. “If they knock, we stop immediately.” He runs a thumb over where I’m soaked for him, underwear visibly wet in the harsh light.

I go to work on his waistband, working his pants and boxers down enough to free him. He juts out, hard and ready as I guide him to sit down with a hand to his chest.

As I stroke him base to tip, we alternate soft nibbling kisses and deep, dirty plunges of our tongues. “I wish we had more time so I could get you good and ready.”

He twitches in my palm at the sound of my voice. Triumph reverberates between my legs. “You like that? What else can I say to get a rise out of you?”

“With my dick in your hand? You can say just about anything and I’m going to react.” He moves my panties aside, toying with the slick, sensitive skin, before sliding a finger deep inside. “Believe me, I’m ready.”

“Oh.” My smile falls away. I straddle him, pinning my knees on either side of his hips to give him easier access. “That feels good.”

He increases the tempo until he thrusts a steady rhythm. The sensation is bliss in measured fits and bursts as he moves in and out. I bury my face in the crook of his neck and inhale the spot he puts his cologne, intoxicated by him. He could turn me into a biter; there is no doubt in my foggy, lust-drunk brain that I would leave my mark. I suck his hot, salty skin until he groans.

I fight the urge to move up and down, to take from his hand, but I just *want* so badly.

I can’t help but move once, circling my hips, pushing back against his hand. It’s so damn good. I’ve been touch-starved for too long, and now I’m greedy.

He adds another finger and adjusts to hit me from a new angle. It sends a shockwave through my core, and then another, building toward that sensation I would chase to the ends of the Earth.

“Oh.” I begin moving in earnest, still stroking his solid length trapped between us as I fuck his fingers. I no longer have the capacity to care what I look like. I’m fully out of my head and in my body. “Don’t stop.”

“No chance of that. I could watch you all day.” He takes the cue and gives me harder, faster, grazing my chest with sloppy kisses on his way to my face.

I bend and close my mouth over his. We don't kiss so much as lick and suck each other's lips. I feel his affirming grunts in my own throat, and his need makes me squeeze him tighter, work him faster.

His thumb strikes my clit, and I cry into his mouth. He works small circles over me as heat builds and *builds*, the only thing holding me back a fear that he'll see everything in my face in this bright light when I let go, secrets I haven't even told myself yet. That he makes me feel out of control.

But then he says my name and his tone is so loaded, so wanting, the fears scatter and there's only us. I tense as the sensations all combine: the rhythm of his thumb, the pressure of his fingers deep inside, his stuttered sounds as I stroke him faster. Light bursts behind my eyes as my grip on him falters. My orgasm steals my body and seizes my breath. It lasts and lasts, coaxed by his rough *yes*.

I pull off his hand and press his length against where his fingers just were, soaking his tip, stroking him all the way down with my wetness.

"Mia..." His voice is strained. "My wallet."

"What?"

He chuffs out a breath as I hold him captive at my entrance. "Get my wallet from my pants pocket."

I locate the condom in record time and snap upright to unwrap it. He strokes himself, staring down the tunnel between our bodies, a tortured look on his handsome face as he waits for me to put it on. If I wasn't so ready for him, I'd stall so I could watch him work his hand up and down, but I can't wait any longer.

It's on, and I place a palm between his pecs and lower over him an inch. The rumble in his chest vibrates my hand. He shuts his eyes and takes a deep, fast breath, then mutters, "Fuck," under his breath, a concession, or maybe a plea.

A needy gasp leaves my mouth at the delicious way he stretches me. As I take him all the way, letting gravity be my guide, his eyes flutter back open and meet mine.

Lightning strikes at the place where our gazes meet.

I mean to look away, to cut it off, but I can't drag my eyes from him, my gaze sloping down his tan cheek, over his cupid's bow, across his lips, back to his amber eyes.

I lift and lower over him, circling my hips, fisting his shirt as I find the bouncing rhythm that makes him mutter obscenities under his breath. Every

time he bottoms out, we exhale, our breaths in sync.

Pressure builds, a low drumbeat of need and satisfaction, two sides of the same coin. I could do this a thousand times and it wouldn't be enough. This is why people talk and moan and yell.

"You feel so good I can't stand it." He tugs my hair and holds it, baring my throat to kiss a path to my ear. When he lands at the hollow beneath, his voice lowers. "I'm close. Can you get there one more time?"

I drag my thumb across his bottom lip, turning it out as my nipples brush against his chest with each bounce. "I will later tonight, thinking about you."

His body tenses. He tries to say my name as he comes, but all that leaves his mouth is a strangled sound as he throbs inside me.

Our foreheads fall together as our breaths mingle in rasping pants. His hand cradles the back of my neck, a thumb stroking the nape.

The captain's voice comes over an intercom to announce our fifteen-minute warning, so loud in this tiny room we jump apart. I drop back into my body, into the moment like a wrecking ball, moving off him as he rises to his feet.

We need to get back. Fast. I trip over my own feet to get out of his way so he can clean up.

"Are you okay?" He hands me my dress. "Talk to me."

"I'm good. Great."

Except maybe for the part where I told him I'll fantasize about him long after this casual, moratorium-on-work-talk hookup. I should've kept that confession to myself.

But I *will* think about him, just like I have been for weeks. I'll think about him in my bed, as promised. And when I'm driving and I pass the places we've been.

I can't stop.

How brow furrows. "You sure?"

"Really. That was..." I let out an appreciative whistle as I fumble with my zipper. "Thank you."

He tips my chin up. "Why are you thanking me?"

"I don't know. I thank baristas for coffee and that was a heck of a lot more energizing than a latte."

His laugh is unhurried as he strokes the sensitive skin next to my mouth.

Languid fake-stroking is not hook-up behavior.

He leans in and presses a kiss to my cheek.

I hate that it soothes me. I crave even more closeness. A long hug until my heart rate calms down.

“We have to go.” I move past him, panic welling in my chest.

“Right.” He gets to work sliding the storage box back to the other side of the tiny room. “They’re probably wondering where we are.”

“Josie’s probably wondering where the nearest horizontal surface is so she can sleep off the festivities, actually.” I push open the door and pin it with my body. “But the point remains. You go first.”

He pauses in the doorway, still close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his body. “Next Saturday, there’s a volunteer event at an animal shelter. None of my employees have signed up. You should come be an upstanding citizen.”

My eyes must be quarter-sized. “But what if they *do* sign up?”

He shrugs. “It’s a public event. It’s for a good cause. I want to see you again. Don’t overthink it.”

“Aren’t you underthinking it, just a little?”

“I thought we were taking a break from worrying about your dad and work stuff,” he says carefully. “I’m not going to touch you at a public event, unless you ask nicely and there’s a dark corner to hide in.”

Oh, he knows how to torment a girl. “We gave ourselves tonight. Hanging out with you and your employees next week might be a little bit of an overcorrection.” I point behind me at the room we just maxed out like an AmEx. “I’m confused. I thought this is all you wanted. Easy, unattached, *one hour*, no one sleeps in anyone’s bed. This is your ideal, isn’t it?”

His face betrays nothing. “If you don’t want to see me again, own it. But don’t put words in my mouth.”

“But they were *your* words. You make your decisions based around work, relationships haven’t been a priority, all that stuff we talked about. So why spend time with me again?”

“Because I want to. I like you.”

I soften, but my better judgment doesn’t want me to.

He may think he likes me. We just did the most intimate thing two people can do, and in the heat of the moment, people trick themselves into thinking all kinds of things.

The problem is I *know* I like him. Enough that I kissed him in public. In front of a dance floor full of drunk people, but still.

He’s a commitment-phobe workaholic who said, and I quote, “I don’t

know how to be a partner.” Wanting more from him is a surefire way to ensure I get hurt.

The first time I let a man hurt me, I didn’t know better. This time, I don’t have an excuse. If I move forward in any way with Alex, I’ll only have myself to blame if it doesn’t end well.

And yet it doesn’t change how I feel.

Need lingers in my heart and in my body. I can’t shut things off as fast or easily as I wish I could. And I can’t seem to stop myself from touching him.

“I like you, too.” I run my hands down his chest. “But this is a bad idea.”

He cocks his head to the side. “I’m hearing you hate community service.”

I laugh in spite of myself. “You’re ridiculous. I’m not going to that event.”

“Okay, so I’ll see you after, then.”

Damn, he’s charming.

I yank him down by the collar and catch his mouth with mine. As my hands land on his cheeks and slide to the back of his neck, he sways into me with the momentum of the boat. The door swings the rest of the way open to crash against the exterior metal wall, and we go with it.

I don’t know how hookups are supposed to end, but this one is a mess; he laps up my confused groan-giggle with his tongue, we help each other recover our balance, and he murmurs, “Okay, I’m going, I’m going,” into my mouth just seconds before Ezra emerges on the deck in search of us.

Twenty-Two

ALEX

I spent a large percentage of the last week replaying the highlight reel of what Mia and I did on that boat, thinking about the taste of her kiss, the smell of sweet coconut in her hair, and the echoes of her little moans. And if I'm brutally honest, the transcendent feel of her as she rode me. I have to actively force her out of my head unless I'm alone and ready to reckon with what those thoughts do to me.

But beyond all that, I've also been thinking about whether she had a hangover. If she stayed at Josie's or went home that night or if she ever finished painting those sets. The cityscape would be easier to complete with a flat brush, and is *anyone* at that school helpful or involved enough to tell her that? Why is she shouldering all the responsibility for a show when the school is massive?

Thoughts I have no business entertaining.

I'm on edge. Burning out the rubber on my desk treadmill, off my usual focused game, three seconds behind in every conversation. For the life of me, I don't understand why I'm preoccupied with her. It's like having sex with her opened up a portal in my chest, and at random, when I'm brushing my teeth or leading a meeting, I'll wonder where she is, what she's up to, if she's okay.

I once lost control of my truck in a surprise Denver storm and hydroplaned. This is kind of like that, but she's holding the wheel.

I'm trying very hard to care that we're a bad idea, but when she stared me down as she took me inside of her, need and fondness shining in her eyes, something either broke inside of me or found redemption. I don't know which one, but I would've handed her my soul on a platter if she'd asked for it.

She tried hard to shutter that fondness, but eyes don't lie at close range. I know what I saw as we moved together: feelings she doesn't want to have. It's a miracle she admitted to liking me at all when she was content to push me away the minute we finished.

But then she kissed me on the way out the door. She tagged a giggle onto her breathy goodbye and seemed okay until she saw Ezra coming. Then she all but launched herself off the boat, and that was that.

I poached her number from Ezra, but I don't want to push her.

That night tied up no loose ends and instead created new ones. But I've got my future to think about, even if I only want to think about her.

A day of volunteering is just what the doctor ordered to get my mind right.

Corporate agreed to incentivize volunteer work after I suggested it in my interview. Our company-wide goal is five hundred hours served by year's end. It makes them look good when they can report an involved staff to press outlets, it makes employees feel more connected to their community and workplace team, and the organizations we partner with benefit.

Triple win.

I peek at the company portal to see if anyone finally signed up for today's opportunity. Five people, including Richard. Good thing Mia refused my invitation to join.

Not too shabby of a turnout. There were *zero* sign-ups until I increased the amount of Peachtree Tech Points for anyone who committed. A thousand points gets them a day off, and this four-hour volunteer shift gets them two hundred. Whatever it takes to motivate this staff.

The Homeward Bound Sanctuary is a new animal shelter in North Georgia, so they don't have a big volunteer network yet. I'm hoping that by choosing them instead of the bigger Sweet Whiskers shelter near downtown Atlanta, I can bring awareness to their growing organization. They rehabilitate injured animals, take in strays, and generally do the most noble work anyone can do in giving these animals temporary refuge while networking to find them a "Forever Home."

I let myself in the front door, greeted by warm interior air. A woman in a Homeward Bound apron sweeps the floor around three messy desks.

"Good afternoon. I'm with the Peachtree Tech group, here to clean the kennels or whatever you need."

"Hello there— Oh, hold on a sec." She bends down and scoops up a tiny, mewling kitten. "C'mere, Alaska."

The kitten is so small it doesn't even look like it should be separated from its mother. Surely Alaska needs some kind of protective bubble, something to keep it safe from people like me who waltz in without looking down. But since this place isn't within my jurisdiction, I swallow my suggestion. The woman—Laura Sue, says her nametag—knows what she's doing.

"She thinks I'm her mama." Laura Sue tosses an adoring yet harried glance at Alaska nestled in the crook of her arm. "I let her follow me around. Anyhow, y'all's group will be helping with the dog adoptions today. If you want to head into the playroom, we're set up. Fair warning, there are a lot of pups. Many wound up with us during the February hard freezes, so it's been almost three months of trying to rehome them. And at the end of that month, someone dropped off a pregnant retriever, so her puppies are just now reaching adoption age. Bottle fed some of those babies myself—they're little bits of me, but I can't take them all home, you know?"

I want to have a trophy made for this woman. "You've been busy."

"Big time. Folks will come in and see the dogs in the corral, where they'll be able to play with them. They can read about each of them and their backstories at the tables along the wall."

I eye the broom in her hand. "How can we help?"

"Your group will help keep the corral clean, take dogs out back for breaks, keep them happy. I'm asking each volunteer to sort of take ownership for one or two pups while you're here to make that easier. They've got nametags. That's about all I can think of at the moment."

"You got it. And if you need anything else, other than just keeping the dogs company, please let me know."

"Keeping them company, exercising them, and giving cuddles is a great help to us. My crew doesn't have enough arms for it on the average day. And it makes the dogs happy and gets their energy out, which in turn leads to more adoptions. Everyone wants the playful, happy pup—but not too wound up. Folks are fickle that way. C'mon, just through here."

Heaviness settles on my shoulders. It's a rough landscape if dogs have to be perfectly behaved at all times to be adopted. If I had land, I'd take them all home and let them run, no matter how hyper they are.

The puppies are already active inside the corral, a large pen enclosure with shoulder-height walls, when I cross into the playroom.

My gaze lands on a woman's ponytail I would recognize in the middle of a blackout.

Mia actually came.

A buzzing in my legs lightens my step. Damn it if I'm not thrilled to see her.

The feeling lasts three seconds until I recall Richard will *also* be here, any minute now.

Letting myself in the corral, I exchange hellos with two of my accountants, both sitting cross-legged as two small-breed dogs play between them.

A chihuahua yips at my ankles and calves as I approach Mia on the other side of the enclosure. I've heard chihuahuas are temperamental, so I pause to give him extra pets.

When I reach her, she's busy playing with two golden retriever puppies fighting over ropes and other assorted toys. I drop down beside her, leaving a foot between us. "You know your dad signed up to come here today, right? I increased the incentive points, and now he's on the list."

"Good morning." She rescues a golden puppy off the ground and places it—a female, judging by the pink collar—in her lap. "Always a pleasure to see you, too."

"Good morning." I lower my voice. "I'm glad to see you. You *do* know your dad is coming, right?"

She casts a look over her shoulder. "Yup. He's on his way, I imagine. I had a busy morning between yoga and some errands, so I haven't seen him."

I perform a scientific analysis of her jeans, tank top, and neatly styled wet hair to determine she's showered. Recently. I allow myself a few heated seconds to wonder whether she's a washcloth girl or if she rubs soap directly on her perfect body before my focus swerves back on track. "You showed up."

"I love community service."

"You're not on my payroll. What reason did you give Richard for coming?"

"I have to be on *your* payroll to give back to the community?" She bends her head to plant kisses on the puppy's furry head, then casts me one hell of a side-eye. "The ego on you, Mr. Conroy. I told him I'd tag along because *I* want to. He didn't question it. We're dog people."

A heady sense of satisfaction works through me. I lean in, not that anyone could hear me over the barking. "You're here for me."

Still hinged over at the waist, she nuzzles her cheek against the puppy like she's testing the softness of the fur. "Doesn't sound like something I'd do."

I bite back a laugh. “You know, you could always text me if you miss me that bad.”

“And why would I do a thing like that?”

“Same reason I got your number from Ezra. So we could see each other again.”

I wondered for days if seeing her again would be a good idea or if we were on the same page. But now that she’s shown up, all I can think about is continuing this conversation with my mouth on her neck while I pin her to a mattress.

Her eyes flash something I can’t interpret. “You say that like it’s simple.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

She lifts her chin. “You didn’t use my number.”

“And if I had?”

“Guess we’ll never know.” Those pretty eyes narrow, even as her mouth twitches from stifling a laugh or smile. It is now a pressing goal of mine to make her flash those dimples. “And that’s a real shame.”

I pull my phone out of my pocket and fire off a text. The first one she’ll ever get from me outside that godforsaken dating app.

Admit you came to see me so I can tell you I’m glad.

She frees her phone from the pocket of her jeans. Pink spreads across her cheeks, and a smile transforms her face as she reads.

Yeah, that’s what I thought.

Her answer pops up on screen.

Maybe I just really like puppies.

Smirking, I send my reply.

Had to buy concealer to cover up the mark on my neck after the booze cruise. Puppies aren’t the only thing you like.

Satisfied at her sharp intake of air, I cast my attention on the pups.

Another text from her trickles in.

I like you in red. You look nice.

I work to keep my expression neutral as I type my response.

You’d look nice in everything. And in nothing—

“How’re we doing?”

I jump at the voice. A quick peek behind me reveals Christos, Richard, and Darian strolling toward the corral.

“Hey there. Thanks for coming. Means, uh, a lot you’d support the initiative.” I hit send and fumble the phone as I shove it in my pocket. There will be no punctuation at the end of that statement, just my appreciation of Mia’s naked body.

“Here for the dogs and the Peachtree Tech bucks or employee points or whatever they are,” Richard all but grunts. His voice lifts an octave as he halts to greet the accountants. “*Hey*, some friendly faces, how’s it going, team? Great to see you both.”

They look positively overjoyed to see him. It’s a real Richard fan club here today.

Mia doesn’t lift her eyes from the phone as she reads and responds to my text. When my thigh vibrates, I’m so curious as to her response I almost can’t stand it.

And *not at all* willing to read it when her dad is in the vicinity. I’d prefer him in another country when I continue this conversation with Mia.

A dog with gray patches in his otherwise brown fur catches my eye. I try to get his attention by patting the ground next to me and whistling, and about four thousand other dogs stampede our way.

“Didn’t think that one through, did you?” Mia says as we’re overrun with pups. It’s like *The Puppy Bowl* on our side of the corral. Our laughs blend into one as furballs nibble at our limbs and lay paws all over us.

Christos and Darian take a seat on Mia’s left as Mia and I work to extricate ourselves from the playful mob.

Richard inserts himself right in the middle. “Mind sliding over, boss?”

I scoot to accommodate him. The Maddens proceed to chat about Richard’s cat allergy and how *brave he is* for coming to a shelter with feline dander.

Great. His inevitable discomfort will surely be my fault, somehow.

Christos and Darian quickly claim their “dog for the day,” like Laura Sue suggested. Christos chooses a bulldog and Darian claims a spirited male terrier whose legs may be spring-loaded with the way it jumps when Darian dangles a toy over his head.

Richard summons the graying chocolate lab. “Come here, old man. You don’t get enough love, do you? Not interested in learning new tricks, just want to rest.”

Mia and Christos exchange a look.

I swallow down a surge of irritation. A little on the nose, even for Richard.

“Right. Dog for the day.” I reach forward and interrupt a retriever puppy’s battle with a Kong toy. “Come here, you. Oh, she’s a tiny one. Smaller than her brothers and sisters.”

“Must be the runt of the litter,” says Richard.

I peek at her name tag as I hold her up to my face. Her little arms and legs stretch out as she relaxes into my hold. She can’t be more than two or three pounds. “Dandelion. Kind of a mouth full, wouldn’t you say?”

Dandelion stares back, tongue lolling.

“Cute, right?” Mia says, cradling her own puppy.

I think I’d probably strangle someone with my bare hands before I let harm befall the tiny animal in my grasp. “Yeah, I guess.”

Her dimples look awfully smug today. “You guess?”

I ignore her goading and lower Dandelion—a terrible name, really—into my lap.

“So, Alex, how’d it go on Friday?” Christos asks, slowly winning the affection of his bulldog companion with head scratches. “You had that meeting at corporate, right?”

“Good. Finalized plans for the Hospitality Summit next month.”

Richard snuffles aggressively.

“Dad, they probably exercise the kittens out here,” Mia interjects. “You should be careful.”

He waves this off. “I’ve got Benadryl if I need it.”

“Please don’t feel pressured to stay because of us. Your health comes first,” I insist.

“Not a chance. I’m here and ready to serve.” He dry-coughs for a full fifteen seconds. “And frankly, with my daughter in tow, you should count me for double points.”

I’d probably pay him double points to stop coughing in my ear at close range.

The start of the adoption event is slow, which gives us all time to play with the animals and wear them out. We take our first shifts in the outdoor play area, one or two at a time.

Puppies go outside first because of their tiny bladders. I take Dandelion outside and walk her around the perimeter of the grassy yard, taking the smallest steps imaginable as she scurries to keep up.

The sky is cloudless and the sun so bright I have to squint when I finally

get a chance to check Mia's text.

Dad's here.

I laugh under my breath. All that excitement and curiosity over her text for a formal declaration of what I could already see with my own eyes.

I kneel in the puppy's path, my knees touching down in the grass. It's overgrown enough that it lies flat like a combover. "Are you done?"

Dandelion stares at me, her black eyes perfectly forlorn. Must be hard to be an adorable puppy.

"Your name is ridiculous." I lift my chin, daring her to challenge me. "I'm going to call you Andi."

She puts her paws on my knees, falling into the shadow created by my body. I close her tiny face between my thumb and forefinger, and she nips me with her sharp puppy teeth. "I think you like that name."

We mosey back inside to the pen. Two of Andi's litter get adopted in the first hour. A dull ache radiates through my chest on her behalf when her siblings get taken by their new owners. Those puppies have never been apart a day in their lives.

The longer I play with her, the more dread I feel. She might not get picked at all. Then what? It's not like I can take her.

Admittedly, Peachtree Tech is a low travel gig compared to my past jobs. I'm home by five many nights. An empty house doesn't sound like the sweet bargain it once was. It doesn't quite feel like freedom anymore.

Frustration trapped in my body escapes in the form of a grunt. This is not going to happen. I can't adopt a dog.

Batting away the thought, I scoop Andi off the ground and put her on my shoulder. "Don't try to change my mind," I mutter.

A sandpaper tongue licks my jaw.

Twenty-Three

MIA

In the final hour of the volunteer session, Dad's geriatric labrador is chosen by a woman looking for a companion for her older collie. My heart soars thinking about those two dogs living out their final days together, lazing about, loved and cared for.

This place is making me even softer than usual, and I'm a woman who cries at every Pixar movie. If I get any softer, I'll melt, and they'll have to mop me off the floors. As it is, I have to work hard not to wither every time Alex talks to his puppy like he's talking to a coworker in a negotiation.

Andi, what are your thoughts on the Kong?

Would your interest in the rope supersede your interest in the squeak toy, given the squeak toy has been mostly torn apart?

A large man in possession of a tiny, feisty puppy should be illegal in all fifty states. It's so hot and precious I can't cope, so I mostly just try not to look at him.

I scan the group. Dad, Christos, and Alex are all quiet.

The quiet is making me antsy.

"Dogs are so incredible, and the only ones who don't know it are the dogs themselves," I inform whoever is listening, which is probably no one. "They should be the smuggest animals on earth but instead just radiate joy."

This earns me a few feeble nods from the men. Those three are radiating something, but it isn't joy.

Dad and Alex continue to only speak in jabs—albeit clever ones—and Christos keeps making jokes that don't land.

And when Christos isn't making jokes, he's tossing me curious, probing glances, which he then follows up with a text when we have fifteen minutes left in the shift.

Everything okay?

My mood takes a turn for conspiracy town. What is this? What is he fishing for?

I respond fast.

Yes, everything is great!

Of course it is. Because there's no way Christos could have any idea that seeing my dad and Alex in the same room is way more uncomfortable than I anticipated, that my heart won't stop racing every time they fire shots or even interact, or that it somehow feels like my job to manage them.

Except...

Christos was at the Hawks game, where Alex and I both disappeared at the same time when he walked me to my car. And the company picnic, where—and I'd never admit this in a court of law—I ogled Alex hard. It's not as though I was being careful since I wasn't aware enough of what was brewing to hide it.

As if on cue, Alex catches my eye from five feet away and hooks a half smile.

No, no, no.

There is no world in which I need my dad's closest friend suspecting I'm not totally swell, single, and celibate.

I flew too close to the sun coming here today. I penetrated the fiery star. Letting my desire to see Alex override my better judgment was a mistake.

Sweat blooming in my palms, I scan the ground for a dog to take outside. "I'm going for a—"

"Where's Dandelion?" Laura Sue's voice carries across the playroom. "Should be in the corral somewhere. Oh, I just know you'll love her. That litter was near and dear to our hearts. That's the mama over there, Cinnamon. She's going home with our employee Marcia now that the puppies are on their own. There she is, there's our girl!"

The life force drains from Alex's face. His gaze falls to the puppy in his lap.

"She's our last golden puppy left," Laura Sue explains to a somewhat bored-looking teenager, flanked by her parents. "Do you have other animals at home?"

"Not really an animal person," the teenager says with a shrug.

"Don't be silly," her mother interjects, warning in her tone. "Pets are a

delight. You always wanted a puppy.”

The teenager rolls her eyes so hard I feel like Mia from the past is about to be punished. “Yeah, when I was *five*.”

“It’s a great way to learn responsibility,” the dad adds.

Between the caretakers’ visible grays, the deep wrinkles around their mouths, and stern countenance, they may actually be the teen’s grandparents.

“I’d rather have a ferret,” the girl quips.

“Right...” Laura Sue hedges. “Well, if you’d like to get to know her, she’s right over—”

“No.” Alex tucks Dandelion into his chest. “She’s spoken for.”

Several heads turn his way, including mine.

“What are you doing?” I blurt.

He doesn’t lift his gaze from the puppy. “I want this one. I’m adopting her.”

“Alex.” I work to keep any familiarity out of my tone, even though I want to yell, *What happened to what you said on the boat, that you only want to be responsible for yourself?* “You can’t adopt a dog on a whim.”

Though I don’t think that teenager should have her, either. I understand his impulse.

“I can, and I am,” he insists, avoiding my eye. “Laura Sue, I’d love to start the paperwork.”

Dad looks like he was just forced into a game of *Jeopardy!* without his consent—baffled and annoyed. “A dog, Conroy? You told me you weren’t a pet person when I pointed out how depressing your office was without photos.”

Alex’s sharp tone cuts me even though it’s not directed at me. “I said I didn’t have them, not that I didn’t want one.”

Dad casts a worried look at Dandelion. “Dogs are a passion of mine, so you’ll have to excuse my interest. But how often are you home?”

“I’m home enough. It’ll be fine, Richard.”

“You’ll have to set up your house,” Dad continues, using the same voice he employs on me and my sisters when he thinks we’re making a bad decision. “That one you’ve got is *young*. They’re a lot more work than you think.”

“It’s a big responsibility,” Christos adds gently. “Jameson and I had a really hard adjustment with our dog Merlot, as he’d never had a pet before and didn’t understand the level of commitment. It was a wakeup call.”

Alex’s lips pull into a tight line, the usual shimmer of amusement in his

expression gone without a trace. “All due respect to you both, but I’m capable of handling a commitment.”

“Sure,” Dad continues, shifting into the Jedi-mind-trick phase of his attack. “Just because you’ve never had an infant of an animal doesn’t mean you can’t. You’ll figure it out with your schedule.”

Alex’s glare would be a lot more intimidating if he wasn’t sitting crisscross applesauce. “Exactly.”

Dad lifts his hands, the final dismissal, as though absolving himself of culpability when Alex’s choice bites him in the ass.

“Brooks boarded his shepherd when he went to see his sick mom in New York last week. People board dogs, as needed.” Alex pushes to his feet. “And if I travel somewhere close, I’ll get a pet-friendly hotel. Problem solved.”

My voice holds none of Dad’s threat but all of the concern. “Are you sure?”

He shoots a look my way, and it echoes in my bones. “Yes.”

Christos’s chipper voice feels out of place. “You’ll need puppy pads, toys, and a veterinarian’s number. I’ll give you the one we use.”

“Do you have carpet? A yard? Anything she could chew up?” Dad blurts, like he actually *can’t* resist staying involved in this conversation. “How will you train her?”

“Not sure yet, but I pride myself on my ability to handle any and all challenges,” Alex says, almost goading.

“Dad, he’s *got it*,” I snap. Bossy people need to be saved from themselves.

Though for the life of me, I don’t know which bossy person I’m saving. They’re two peas in a pod.

“Mia, I’ve got to get to Cooper’s game or Lucy will kill me.” Dad struggles to his feet, waving off my help. “Take this guy to PetSmart and help him get everything he needs, would you? I won’t be able to sleep tonight knowing that puppy isn’t set up for success.”

I do a double take. “Me? Go with him? *Nah*. No. He’s probably got it.”

“Nope. I don’t, actually.” Alex’s mouth curls into a wicked smile, as though *this* is the way he can stick it to my dad for questioning his competence. “I’d welcome your help so I don’t accidentally deprive the dog of essential supplies. I’m totally, completely incompetent.”

“Your words, not mine!” Dad says with a shit-stirring grin.

Alex and I stare at each other for about three seconds—a billion heartbeats, in other words—before I answer. “Fine. I guess I can spare an hour.”

The reluctance in my tone should serve triple duty: head off any suspicion from Dad that I would voluntarily spend time with Alex, knock any suspicions out of Christos's nosy head, and communicate to Alex that it'll be *just* an hour—just PetSmart and nowhere else.

Today was risky enough.

Twenty-Four

MIA

I pull into Alex's driveway three seconds after he does and launch myself out of my car. I cannot be alone with my thoughts anymore, as I've just spent the entire drive telling myself not to come here.

The backseat of his extended cab and half his truck bed are filled with dog supplies. Andi is snoozing in a puppy bed on the front seat.

Alex unclicks his seat belt as I pull open the passenger's door. "She just passed out after yipping like crazy."

"They'll do that." I circle Andi's bed with my arms and lift her. "You bring in something heavy while I carry her."

"Good plan." His gaze flits between Andi and my face. I blink away and start for the front door, following a stone path.

As soon as he comes up beside me and types his entry code into his front door, the reality that I'm at the place where he *lives* strikes me in full force.

"This is a cool old neighborhood." My voice betrays my nerves. "I don't know what kind of house I expected you to live in, but it wasn't this."

"Been thinking about me, eh?"

"You wish." Our sneakers squeak against the floor as I steal a look around. The house, while probably thirty or so years old, appears to have been renovated and painted recently. The floors are a buffed light maple, the walls a warm white.

"Where should I put her?" I ask.

"The couch or the bed."

Floating shelves with decorative figurines line the hall leading to the living room. The decor and furniture remind me of a show room at a furniture store that doesn't allow drinks inside. "It's very put together in here."

"Hired someone. Hence all the stuff I never would've thought to buy in a

million years. She just finished adding everything last week. I'm still getting used to living in a page of Better Homes and Whatever the Hell, but it's better than voices echoing all the time with all the tile and wood flooring."

Voices.

He lives alone. My mind journeys down an annoying path imagining *whose* voices—

"Like the TV, or Ezra, or whatever," he adds. "I'm going to grab the rest of the bags."

I circle a toffee brown sectional that faces a fireplace and mounted TV and place Andi's bed dead center of a leather ottoman she will assuredly chew up if Alex doesn't get her trained. "You probably should make a training plan."

He places the folded metal crate on the ground behind the couch and circles it to join me. "Okay, Richard Junior."

I wince.

"That was a joke. Though technically you *are*—"

"It's fine." I hug my chest, and my gaze falls to my arms. "Man, puppies and pet stores are dusty. I look like I went for a roll in the hay."

His lips twitch as if he's trapping a laugh.

"Not that kind," I add hastily, heart pounding.

"You're welcome to clean up. My bathroom is through there; guest bathroom is down the hall next to the front door. Whichever you want."

Apart from beating my clothes against a rock, I'm not sure there's anything to be done on that front. But I'd like to get myself clean.

Without overthinking the choice, I opt for the guest bathroom. It's nicer than it has any right to be. After a quick rinse in his shower with lavender "body gelato"—lush choice, person who shopped for this house—I return to the living room re-dressed to find Alex waiting for me. His clothes are different. Lucky him.

Upon further examination, his hair is wet.

I won't be overthinking that, either. Because then I'd start concocting visuals of him in the shower. Or *us* in the shower.

Did he want me to use his shower *with* him? Is that why he offered his bathroom first?

I banish the thought and perch on the couch, running my hands down my jeans. He sits down beside me, leaving almost no room between us. It does not go unnoticed by my alert body.

"You moved Andi," I say.

“I figured she’d be more comfortable in my bed. And less likely to roll off while I showered.”

“I’m sorry we came on so strong about her.” I scratch the back of my neck. “I can’t speak for my dad—he enjoys giving his opinion, I’m sure you know that—but *I* was surprised you wanted this. You said you’ve never even had a pet.”

Light streams in from floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the stone hearth. Through clean glass, I glimpse the yard where Andi will play and what looks like a sliver of pond a half-acre back on his lot.

“I didn’t expect to want her, either.” His gaze tracks mine to the window, then sweeps the living room as if it’s unfamiliar to him in a slow appraisal that ends with his attention back on me. “And then I did. And then I couldn’t imagine leaving that place without her.”

My throat tightens. “She’s lucky to have you.”

“You think so?” He rubs his chest and casts an adoring look toward his bedroom, eyes shining. My own chest expands until I lay a hand over my heart, taming it with a press of my palm. “Hope she’s happy here.”

Never in a million years would I have expected this out of him. Though if I think backward, one encounter at a time, I could stack the ways he keeps surprising me and reach the freaking moon. He’d probably see me there through his telescope and wonder how I got there.

My exhale is shaky. “She will be.”

He spreads his legs until his knee knocks mine. His grin, playful with a hint of devious, stirs something low in my core.

“But you should still figure out a training plan,” I continue.

“Rumor has it *you’re* a teacher.” His gaze rakes me over, and he makes no attempt to hide it.

Heat flourishes at the base of my neck, spreading up, down, out. I turn sideways on the soft leather so I can face him fully. “And?”

“And how much do you know about training a puppy? I’ll pay you the same way I’d pay a trainer to help me with her.”

The question presses my panic button. “I’m not even supposed to be here right now. How am I going to train your puppy?”

He lets out a dismissive noise.

“Be serious, Alex. It’s a recipe for disaster.”

“For one afternoon of training?”

“You think it takes *one afternoon* to train a dog? Oh honey, do I have news

for you.”

He swipes hair off my eye I didn't even know was there. “Good thing I have such a wise puppy teacher to tell me the error of my ways.”

My gaze lands on his mouth. “I'm not training Andi. I'll fall in love with her and be forced to steal her. It'll be a whole thing. It's just a bad idea all around.”

“I'm not scared of a *bad idea*.”

Somehow, we've drifted together like snowflakes. He extends my legs one at a time until they're slung over his lap.

“Alex...” I groan as he scoots closer, enveloping me in his delicious scent. “You don't want my clothes on you right now. Let me go home and change.”

“I have a better remedy.” He pinches the hem of my crop top.

Goose bumps ripple across my skin as he peels off the lightweight fabric. I'm in my nicest blue bra underneath, and I'd like to keep pretending it's a coincidence that I wore it on a day I knew I'd see him. “As nice as that sounds—”

“How nice does it sound?” His eyes darken. There's no mistaking the hunger as he examines the lace. “On a scale of one to ten.”

A groan builds in the base of my throat as he shifts his weight toward me. I fall onto my back.

His fingers waterfall down my stomach, ever so light in their touch.

“It's a high number,” I admit in a breathy rush. “But Andi might wake up and need attention.”

“And we'll hear her if that's the case.” He positions his head over my stomach on the massive couch, crinkling the leather when he plants his hands on either side of me. His hot breath fans my skin as he dances his lips past my belly button. “I think *you* need some attention.”

Father, son, and unholy spirit, this man is sexy when he's trying to seduce. The air around me thins out as he unbuttons my jeans.

“This is not why I came here today,” I say, though my weak voice couldn't even convince the most gullible man alive.

“Of course not.” He tugs the pants down, down, down and peels them off.

“You take something off, too,” I say as I sit up to watch. “Tit for tat.”

He drags his shirt over his head, mussing his hair as he tugs it off. “Take off your bra. Tit for...tat.”

“I'll reward your restraint in not making the obvious joke.” My fingers toy with the straps of my bra as his hot stare melts me into oblivion. I drag it out,

teasing him by nudging them off my shoulders one at a time before reaching for the clasp. “So we’ll do this one more time, set up for Andi, and then I’ll be on my way.”

“I’m flexible on the number of times. Off with the bra.”

We stare at each other in the light of day as I cast it aside, a metaphysical charge in the air between us.

A tiny grunt leaves his mouth as his palms meet my skin. He leans closer as if to kiss me but hovers at my mouth instead. His voice is a hoarse whisper. “Goddamn gorgeous girl.”

Gaze locked with his, I swerve to kiss his neck. I take all the time I didn’t have on the boat to savor his racing pulse beneath my lips, to suck and sample his skin until he pants with impatience. He tastes like someone designed in a lab to get my pheromones drunk.

I kiss my way toward his mouth. Our lips meet, and any tenderness incinerates at once as he lays me down.

With a knee between my legs and one hand twisting my ponytail around his fist, he sets the pace. Our tongues tangle and retreat, giving and tasting until the throbbing between my legs is too much to ignore. I start to move against his firm thigh.

Breaking from my lips, he starts a slow tour down my body, lavishing my neck, the swell of my breast, my solar plexus with an open mouth. “You smell so good. And your skin is so soft—*Christ, Mia.*”

I add “lavender body gelato” to my mental shopping cart.

My hips lift off the couch when he passes below my belly button, sucking the soft skin hard enough to mark it.

He licks a line parallel to the waistband of my underwear. His finger traces down over the lace before switching to light, circling presses. The featherlight scratch of fabric against my clit provokes a tandem ache in my nipples, a rippling of deep, unsatisfied wanting in my core.

The light, teasing massage is unbearable. I need to feel some kind of skin-on-skin relief.

I can participate in this.

He glances up from his low perch, eyes ignited as he catches me rolling a nipple between my fingers, pinching myself as I stare at him.

“Fuck.” His voice is like gravel. “Keep touching yourself.”

“Get this underwear off me.” I add another hand to the mix, doubling the sensation. “I need to feel you for real.”

He traces the outside of the triangle of fabric.

I'm beside myself as he rubs and sucks me through lace, crawling toward a confusing orgasm that feels diffused through my whole core. I've never known need like this, nearly intolerable as the world liquefies around me.

But then, he slides the fabric aside and greets the swollen skin with a firm swipe of his tongue. The jolt of heat and wetness after only feeling the hint of it through fabric is so strong it's dizzying.

And then he *gives*.

I grasp the back of the butter-soft leather couch like it can keep me from blasting off. The tip of his tongue flicks me so fast and precise I can't even get the words out before I'm thrust to the edge. I can't keep still, my lower half completely off the cushion seeking the mercy of his mouth.

He drives two fingers inside. I moan, not for him, but for myself. Not because I have to teach him what feels good, but because it already does. I don't think I'm prepared for the sensation barreling toward me as his fingers hit, and hit, and *hit*—

My mouth stays open in a wordless scream, one hand gripping his hair as he gets me close. When I think I'm coming, he sucks my clit into his mouth, and the thing I thought was an orgasm is overshadowed by a powerful burst of sensation outside, inside, *everywhere*. It lasts an eternity. Or seconds. I can't begin to guess.

I push on his shoulder when the sensation is too much to bear, and he releases me, crawling up beside me as I come down.

Come down, I now understand, is a phrase that exists for a high I didn't know before.

His body prevents me from rolling onto the ground, which three seconds ago was a real possibility. I'm perfectly nestled with the couch at my back and him at my front. My pulse is still dangerously fast, my chest expanding against his with every exhale.

"Now I know why you're so cocky," I murmur, his mouth close enough to kiss.

Half his mouth lifts. Beams of sunlight toy with the tips of his hair, painting them caramel. "It's easier when I'm, ah, *inspired*."

I smooth his eyebrow. "You like doing that?"

He takes my hand off his face and places it over where he's deliciously hard. "I *love* doing that."

"*Mm*." An ache blooms between my legs. "Should've known you'd like a

tough job.”

“That wasn’t work.”

I grip him outside his smooth joggers. A pang of fear shoots through me as I pluck up the courage to ask the important question. “One quick thing…”

“Am I the quick thing or—”

“Are you sleeping with anyone else? Or have you, since the boat?”

It comes out in a rush as panic wells in my chest. This is an inopportune time to learn that the thought of him with someone else makes me want to bolt off this couch and puke in the nearest trash can. That’s not fair, and not a reaction I want to have since we aren’t exclusive, but the truth of it struts right in and takes residence in my heart. I don’t want to share him, and I have to be careful in more ways than one so long as we are doing this.

Even if it’s the last time, I need to know.

His answer is fast and resolute. “No. There’s no one else.”

I exhale in a gust, eyes closing as I let it sink in. “Okay.”

“Have you?” he asks.

“No.”

“Good. And for the record, I wouldn’t have initiated *this*”—he guides my knee over his hip—“if I had been. Or I would have informed you up front.”

“Okay. That’s nice to hear.” Strange that this conversation makes me shyder than coming on his mouth did, but here we are. “I’m glad we clarified that.”

“While we’re on the subject of clarifying, we should probably talk about what *this* is.”

I grind against him. “You know what this is. I can feel the evidence.”

He groans and nuzzles my neck. “That’s not what I mean.”

My heart ties itself in a knot at the question in his tone. Talking doesn’t feel like the smartest idea right now. Words are bulldozers that could break the surface of this moment and reveal our faulty foundation. I need him to touch me or I’ll spiral thinking about all the reasons we shouldn’t do this even one more time.

“*This*”—I press my lips to his once—“is me asking you to take your pants off.”

His laugh tickles my mouth. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Yes. Let’s just let today be today.”

“What if,” he says, tone measured, “it’s not just a *today* thing?”

I pull back to look into his eyes as my heart shoots into my throat.

That is a tempting dessert of an idea. I want to down it in one bite, lick the

frosting off my fingers, and stay full on it. Of course I want to keep doing this, but then I'd be all-in until it bites me in the ass. Until I fall head over heels for a man whose singular focus is climbing the same corporate ladder that led him to me, who doesn't fit in a boyfriend-shaped box.

Who I can't bring home.

I want it to be casual between us so I don't have to care about those things, but one look in his eyes and I know it'll never be that. Not with us.

The truth is tangible in the spark between us, begging me to heed it: I'm going to hurt myself, or other people, if I don't set a boundary with us.

But today will not be the day I find out, because it feels too good to stop.

"Today's not over yet." I shimmy down his body, holding his gaze as I pull down his pants. "Let's see how it ends first."

With one languid stroke of his tight, fevered skin, he surrenders the point.

Twenty-Five

ALEX

It escalates fast.

We move together as she takes me in her hot mouth, peeking up at me in a destructive way as I hold her hair with one hand and fondle whatever I can reach with the other. Anything is fair game; even her shoulder blade feels good to my greedy palm.

Every time I think she's taken me as far as she can, she adjusts, and I plunge deeper. Her nails dig into my thigh. The sting makes me throb and gives me terrible, wonderful ideas.

“Use your teeth.”

The light drag shoots straight through me. It's just enough. My answering *fuck* is so desperate I should be embarrassed, but it only encourages her, and every third stroke of her mouth, I almost lose it at the feel of her teeth gliding up my shaft.

I endanger myself by hovering at the edge. But I'm not stopping until I have her every way I can, so I breathe to pull myself back, thinking of the worst possible things to delay the inevitable.

She changes her grip on a whim and I get way too close, my abs clenching.

Yanking her up with a hand beneath her arm, I flip her backward into the couch. She giggles at the force of my handling. I trap her wrists with one hand and pin her arms up above her head. That laugh morphs into a gasp.

Her nipples are so hard they must hurt. I soothe one with my tongue and then the other. I take one in my mouth and suck until she arches off the cushion.

Pulling back to watch her face, I move my fingers to a pebbled bud and pinch. Just like she did to herself earlier. Her eyes fall shut as she starts to pant. Alternating between rough hands and tongue and suction, I work them

over until her skin is flushed red, and her sounds are needy and unrestrained. They're marked and slick all over, and the sight of it sears into my brain. Part of me wonders if she could come like this.

Her wrists wiggle against my hand, disrupting the thought. I release my hold.

Gaze cast down, her hand moves to cup one breast, and then the other, pressing them together. "Alex..."

If she knew the filthy, vile thoughts the sight of her holding herself inspires, she wouldn't be sweetly saying my name. I draw a line between the constellation of my hickeys and bite marks with the tip of my finger.

"Do it," she whispers, a devilish flicker of desire in her eyes as she peeks up. "I want you to."

Christ.

I tip my head back and expel a trapped breath before moving up her body as she scoots down the cushion. This can't be real, but it is. I take the deepest breath anyone has ever taken and count to a number no one has ever reached to keep myself from coming prematurely and soaking her skin as she unlocks this fantasy.

My hips rock forward, testing the tight trap of her cleavage. Her gaze is focused on where we're touching as she gives a nod of encouragement.

My testing gives way into full steam ahead. Her skin is wet from me, rewarding my devotion to licking every inch of her chest.

Heat surges beneath my skin as I thrust. Static gathers at the base of my spine, threatening to end everything. I can't tell her she's the most beautiful goddamn girl in the world because I can't breathe. I can't tell her that she's the dream I didn't even know I had come to life because I can't think. Her flushed lips are parted, and her eyes are hooded the same way they were when I was touching her, like she's genuinely enjoying this, maybe even gets off on it—

I pull out of the hot haven of her chest and move down her body. Circling her entrance, I groan at how much she liked that.

She lifts her hips. "Now. Please."

I sheath myself in a flash and drive inside where she's hot and wet. As I find a rhythm, my mouth seeks hers. She skips the sweet kiss and goes straight for the dirty, tongue-fucking bliss that I've been desperate for since the second she stepped foot in my house. Our heads move as we try to find the angle that lets us go the deepest. Her body slides against mine. Our

breathing grows louder and erratic. She breaks away and buries her face in my shoulder, scraping me with her teeth.

Every thrust is a slice of nirvana. Heat climbs up my spine as her broken sounds urge me on.

After one more frantic minute, I start to stall. I'm so achingly close, but in a way that feels like running circles in front of the finish line instead of heading toward it. All I can think about is that I'm burying her in these cushions. Her sounds are fewer and farther between, so she must be uncomfortable—am I crushing her?

She grasps the back of my neck. "What's wrong?"

I sit up, taking her with me. She cradles my face as she lowers over me, leaving no gap between our chests, no distance between us except the thin slice of air separating our faces.

My thoughts quiet down as her forehead rests against mine. Our lips are close but not touching as we breathe together.

It's that moment when you're driving through a storm and pass under a bridge; for a flash of a second, everything is quiet. Still.

And then we move. One of my sweaty palms grips her ass and the other her shoulder, keeping her close as she rides me.

The friction, her nipples dragging over my chest, her hands gripping the back of the couch for leverage, takes me right back to throbbing for release. I drive into her, she pushes down, both of us taking just as much as we give, like we're owning each other in equal measure. She took control on that boat, no doubt about it, but today she's sharing it, her body pliable and pretty eyes wide open as she stares into mine.

Her mouth flirts with mine, urging it wider. With the first plunge of her tongue, my vision blurs. It's just the hazy outline of her haloed in sunlight until my eyes fall shut.

And then it's an onslaught of sensation: the hot grip of her as she takes me hard and fast, my skin too tight everywhere, the fresh memory of fucking her chest, the slap of skin against skin, her shallow breaths—

The orgasm wins. It throttles me. I groan into her mouth as pleasure wracks my body in drugging waves. Seconds stretch on until every part of me stills.

Her hands on my face bring me back to the present. The blood beneath my skin rises to meet the brush of her thumbs over my cheeks. It's so damn soft I shudder.

A kiss lands on my lips, sweet and easy. I force myself to let her go so I

can clean myself up.

My leaden limbs twinge with the need to get her back in my arms as fast as possible. I want it so much it knocks the wind out of me.

When I emerge from the bathroom, she's in her thong, so I tug on my boxers in solidarity before settling beside her on the couch. With a coy smile on her face that stabs me right in the chest, she crawls toward me and perches on my lap.

I exhale in relief at the weight of her against my legs. "Stay for dinner."

Her fingers curl behind my neck. "Dinnertime isn't for hours."

I kiss the landing pad of her dimple. "And?"

"And all we'll do is have sex and play with the puppy."

"Wow, what a hardship."

"And in however many hours"—she straddles me carefully, laying her head on my shoulder—"it'll be harder."

Those words gut me and soothe me at the same time. If a marathon of sex is what it takes to get her to admit I'm not alone in wanting more than just *today*, then that's what we should do. It's what I want to do.

I speak into the crown of her head. "I don't want you to leave, you don't want to go... Can we stop pretending this isn't real?"

"I'm not pretending anything." Her lips touch my bare shoulder. "I'm confused."

My eyes fall shut as my hand drifts down her spine. I may be confused as to what comes next for us, but not about the fact that I want her. That part is out of my control, and it's terrifying.

My doorbell sounds, scaring a bark out of Andi.

Looks like time's up.

Twenty-Six

MIA

I clamor to my feet, covering my important body parts Birth of Venus style.

Alex sighs. “It’s probably just Ezra. I texted him from the shelter and told him I was getting a dog, and I guess he thought that meant *come over*.”

“Put on your pants, please.”

Alex lazily pulls on his joggers like this isn’t a crisis.

I glance at the foyer. “Oh God, Ezra saw my car, didn’t he?”

“Sure.”

I emit a sputtering sound. “That’s a problem.”

“Why? Ezra won’t be surprised.” He lifts a finger. “Reminder: we kissed on the dance floor of that boat.”

“Knowing we kissed one night isn’t the same as finding me naked on your couch. This looks like...”

He lifts a brow. “Like what?”

Like we’re together.

The doorbell rings again. Andi’s tiny, squeaky bark fills the living room.

“Get your dog before she falls off the bed.” I race to the bathroom, my clothes tucked under my arm, and slam the door shut.

When I emerge minutes later, skin warm and heart racing out of my chest, the men are on the ground with Andi between them.

Time to rip the Band-Aid.

I side-step past them, channeling my best nothing-to-see-here tone. “Hi, Ezra.”

His smile is polite, if not amused. “Hey there.”

It’s clear he knows too much.

I put my hands in my pockets, as one does when they’re unsuspectingly leaving the scene of a crime. “Okay, well...my inspection is all done. You’ll

want to set up the puppy pads, the water bubbler, and the crate in your room. Which I was scoping out for the purpose of knowing whether the crate would fit next to your bed. Obviously.”

Silence befalls the group.

“Her dad asked her to come over,” Alex says abruptly. “Weird, right?”

I attempt a murder with my bare glare. “Why would you bring that up?”

Alex lies back on the ground and places Andi on his chest. “I mean...he did.”

“It paints a very strange picture of what’s happening here,” I say. Turning to Ezra, I add, “I was helping Alex set up the house for Andi. It was an unexpected adoption, as I’m sure you’ve figured out.”

Ezra’s gaze flits to the mountain of unpacked PetSmart bags next to the unassembled crate. “Sure. Makes sense.”

Maybe this whole thing is objectively funny. It’s so blatantly obvious what we were up to. Alex is still shirtless; his tee was mixed up with my clothes, and I ran off with it.

Yet nothing feels funny. I feel like I was dragged under by a crushing wave when I was aiming for a fun swim in the ocean.

I wasn’t prepared for the exponential growth of my feelings today.

It’s not just sex; it’s being with Alex. It’s being held and handled by his capable hands, kissed by his confident mouth, lost in his eyes. I was so wrapped up in him Ezra could’ve walked in and yelled my name and I wouldn’t have noticed.

Whatever shield I had against developing real feelings for him disintegrates a little more with every minute we spend together.

I need air. Distance.

“Andi went outside, right?” I ask, buying time as I locate my purse. “She needs to go outside frequently, especially after she sleeps.”

“Got her nice and acquainted with the yard while you were getting—” Alex snaps his mouth shut.

“Measurements for the crate?” Ezra offers wryly.

“Yup.” Alex pets Andi’s tiny head. “What do you think of the accommodations? Will this house suit your needs?”

Ezra reaches over and steals Andi from Alex’s chest. “I hope it’s okay that I’m here. Alex texted me a few hours ago that he was getting a dog, and I couldn’t believe it. Had to see it for myself.”

Alex sits up, eyeing his friend. “Well, believe it. She’s not going

anywhere.”

“Wait, I thought you were going to Europe for a week in August.” Ezra cradles Andi like a newborn. “What are you going to do with her? I’d offer to watch her, but I’ve got a graduation trip with my family in the works.”

Europe in August. He’ll be sipping espresso in Florence or surrounded by ritzy Parisians while I’m decorating my classroom for the new year without AC, because they don’t turn it on until the day before kids come. Lovely.

“Shit, I forgot about that.” Alex scratches the neck I sucked no less than ten minutes ago. “It’s fine. I got insurance on the flight. That was a whim of a plan, anyway, and I think I’ll reschedule that vacation week and use it to train Andi. She’s a priority.”

“You’ve got that trip in June, too,” I add, my unease intensifying. “The hospitality thing you were talking about in Boston.”

Alex’s frown deepens. “I guess I’ll have to board her. I hate that. I’m going to have to figure out a list of pet-friendly hotels in Georgia for my winter work stops, too, while I’m at it.”

“I can take her in June,” Ezra offers. “Man, this is wild. Never thought I’d see the day you got another roommate that isn’t me.”

“No one will ever replace you and your snoring,” Alex deadpans.

“Just wait ’til she wakes you up seventeen times a night. You’re in for a treat.”

And on that note, I grab my purse and walk backward toward the foyer. “I’ve got to head out. Alex, I’ll, um—good job. On the dog. See you guys around.”

“Hey, wait a second.” Alex climbs to his feet, jogging across the living room after me. He snatches a jacket off a hook next to the door and zips it over his bare chest.

My stomach is made of lead as he follows me out the front door. The humid spring air is dense, holding the smell of freshly cut grass.

“Come here.” He gathers me into his arms. “Why are you rushing off? What about dinner?”

I sag into his embrace, counting three inhales before I force myself to pull away.

It’s not supposed to be a disaster in my chest when we say goodbye. I need to get it together.

Stepping back, my calf butts up against a Sago palm lining his walkway. “Hang out with your friend.” I wince at the prod of a sharp frond. “Today

was fun. Text me. Or don't. Whatever!"

"What is this?" He gestures at me as I back away slowly. "What are you doing?"

"I'm leaving." I arc my hand in the air like I'm tracing a rainbow. "See ya later, alligator!"

My insides fold in on themselves. I have not one single morsel of cool left in my body. Maybe he'll just lose interest as he gets to know me better—*this* version of me: smitten, nervous, sweating in places that aren't cute.

His grin is devastating. "I'm going to text you. Count on it."

"Uh-huh." *Another step backward.*

He widens his stance as he crosses his arms. Hot hero pose in yoga, probably. "And when I text you, I'm going to ask you on another date, so we can figure this out."

My heart thunders as his eyes hold mine. "I don't know if I'm free."

"Didn't mention a time or place yet."

I nod, lips pursed to keep from beaming. "This isn't me agreeing to anything."

He points behind me. "You're going to want to veer to stay on the path."

"Okie dokie." I step sideways. "Bye, then."

"Bye, Mia." His lips press together for the *M* and gently part as he releases the rest, my name a kiss in the air.

I throw myself in my car, still tasting him on my lips.

...

One day after I fell into bed (couch) with a man I can't stop thinking about, I pull into the Costco parking lot, grateful for something else to focus on.

My sisters and I converge on the store like those men from *The Hangover* entering Vegas. With Lucy rocking a Bjorn and my youngest niece riding shotgun on her chest, we almost match the movie poster.

"It's go-time, baby!" Lucy flashes her membership card to a door monitor. Her hair is in a tight bun, and she's in a tracksuit, lest there be any doubt she's ready to ransack this place.

Harper, in contrast, looks sleepy. She's still in pajama pants.

I didn't have to work hard to convince them we needed to come here as a group. Bargain shopping is a Madden daughter unifier, a drug, our benediction. Dad's sixtieth birthday party has been on the books for months, and we've each taken responsibility over one facet of the party.

I'm in charge of cleaning the house and preparing the Costco appetizers and desserts. Lucy will stock the bar and invite people, which Christos is helping her with. Harper is dealing with caterers.

Voila: a party is born.

Basking in the rare gift of us sisters together, I push one buggy toward the food section as Lucy pushes the other. I'm reading out loud from the master grocery on my phone when Harper's voice cuts in.

"Hold that thought." She jogs into the first aisle and emerges with eye drops, men's multivitamins, and contact lens solution.

"I know, right?" She drops the stuff into a cart. "I'm such a good wifey."

Lucy shakes her head. "*Wifey*. That's still so shocking. How has it already been a year since your wedding? It's like you just started dating."

Harper narrows her eyes as if she's been wounded. "I know it's hard for you to conceptualize since you've basically been married since the first time Jace smiled at you in algebra class."

"Shots fired." Lucy covers Carolina's baby ears. "I miss the pre-kid romance phase sometimes. How's it going? Still feeling like a honeymoon?"

"It's so great," Harper replies. "I like Marcelle more now than ever before. It's weird."

Despite internally committing not to involve myself in marriage talk, since no one cares about the thoughts of a single woman, I offer up a question anyway. "Did you expect to cool on your feelings the very first year? It's *supposed* to be hot and heavy."

She shrugs. "You never know. But I'm glad to report we're better than ever. I'm more in love than I was on *I-do* day. Though I must admit, I'm touched out, physically. We have sex like ten times a week. Sometimes in the middle of other activities. I had an orgasm while Jimmy Fallon did his opening monologue a few nights ago, which was very confusing. I hate that guy."

"Who among us hasn't climaxed to a late-night talk show host?" Lucy deadpans.

"Not *to* him. He was just in the background."

Lucy shrugs this off. "All I want is a date, personally. Away from the kids. Sex optional."

The word *date* raises the hair on my arms. Dates make me think of Alex, and thinking of Alex makes my legs wobbly.

It hasn't even been twenty-four hours since I left his house. It's too soon to

think about him, let alone miss him.

“Consider this Costco trip a date,” I say. “You’ve only got thirty-three percent of your kids, and you’re doing something you love.”

“What does it say about my marriage that this sounds better than dinner and a movie?” Lucy asks.

“I think it says more about your feelings for Costco. All right, here’s the master list if you want to start on the first aisle.” I force my phone into Lucy’s hand before setting off in a backward walk. “I’m going to grab a hot dog. Anyone else want one?”

Harper rejects this with a shudder. “Thanks, but I’d rather eat my own fist than a hot dog.”

“Judgmental much? Lucy, what about you?”

Lucy stares at me with thinly veiled disgust in her deep brown eyes.

Hands raised, I back away slowly. “Fine, snobs. Your loss.”

I procure my lunch and make sure not to eat a single bite of it until I turn the corner to rejoin them on the first aisle. They need to smell and see firsthand how wrong they are about this delicacy. “Watch it and weep, girlies — Wait, what’s everybody looking at?”

They’re huddled around my phone like vultures.

Lucy lifts her head, brow arched. “You’re seeing someone and you didn’t tell us?”

My pulse leaps as I lunge toward them. “*What?*”

Harper lifts my phone and clears her throat. “*I can’t stop thinking about yesterday, gorgeous girl.*”

I almost drop my hot dog in my haste to snatch the phone from her hand. Never mind that my heart wants to claw its way out of my body by way of my vagina. “Reading my messages? Isn’t that beneath you all?”

“Harper read your diary pretty much nightly for two years,” Lucy says. “No different, really.”

“I didn’t know about the diary thing until it was too late.” I cradle my phone to my chest.

Harper cocks her hip to the side. “Mia, cut the crap. Who were you with yesterday that *can’t stop thinking about you?*”

I blink toward a shelf of granola. “No one.”

Her accusatory finger comes to hover near my hot dog. “You have no poker face whatsoever. Whoever it is got you *good*. This is amazing. You don’t even have their number saved. Hit it and quit it, just like I taught you.”

“What are you talking about?” I scoff. “You’re obsessed with your husband. The only thing you’re quitting is *The Tonight Show*.”

Harper’s smile is a threat. “You’re *blushing*. What’s his name?”

“You know James and Dave Franco? One of their brothers. Big-time celebrity family, so we have to keep it discreet.”

She snickers. “You are such a liar.”

Obviously it’s a lie. But I can’t have my sisters suspecting anything. They can’t keep secrets worth a darn.

“Leave me in peace.” I stuff the end of the hot dog in my mouth and wheel around. Cheeks flaming, I scoot around the corner to respond to his text away from prying eyes.

My heart tap dances in my chest as I type and erase a series of increasingly worse responses. I stress-eat the whole hot dog in the time it takes to decide. The bulk jars of trail mix on this aisle end cap stand in judgment as I crumple my empty, ketchup-smearred tinfoil.

I have to say something. He can see I’ve read his message, and I don’t want him to think I don’t like it.

How’s Andi?

There. Innocuous. Playing it cool. Can’t go wrong with a friendly warm-up question.

The three dots that indicate he’s typing poke me one at a time, spurring my nerves. I might as well be a teenager holding her breath waiting for her crush to respond.

You mean other than when she maimed one of my shoes while I was on a call? She made noises all night and has been sleeping most of the day.

Before I can respond, he sends a second text.

Is that bad?

I chew the inside of my cheek, struggling to suppress my smile. It’s seriously precious that he wants to be good to this dog.

She’s not used to being alone, I tell him.

His answer to this is immediate.

So I should get a second dog?

NO, I type quickly. *This is your first pet. Start slow. Where in the house did she sleep?*

Her crate. The internet said they need to start in the crate or they'll never get used to it.

Lucy rounds the corner, almost mowing me over. “Mia, what does P-P-S mean on the list?”

I shift sideways so my herd can comfortably circle the end cap with our carts. “Puff pastry shell. That should’ve been in the freezer part of the list.”

“Oh, still texting the guy you’re *clearly* banging?” Lucy asks, craning her neck my way.

“No,” I lie, still typing.

She needs something cozy in her crate. Put her bed in there.

He’s already responding.

Speaking of beds, how do I get you in mine tomorrow? I’d say now, but I’m on a video call with a Chinese hospitality company later, and I doubt they want to see what I’m hoping to do to you over their Monday morning coffee.

I have the good sense not to react to this even though my insides are now a raging inferno. So much for my sweet thoughts about Alex and puppies. Now it’s thoughts of Alex and what he might do to me.

“Mia, I forgot to ask you—Christos thinks I should reach out to the Larabees about the party. Is that cool with you?”

My insides are molten as I re-read Alex’s text again. And again. What *exactly* does he want? If I ask, will he tell me—

“Mia.” Lucy raises her voice. “Are you listening?”

“Yeah. Totally. Whatever you want to do is fine,” I mumble, muscles humming at the thought of Alex prowling over me on his couch or in his bed.

Harper’s voice is a shout as she reads my text over my shoulder. “*Speaking of b—*”

I elbow her and shove the phone inside my bra to prevent her from seeing the rest. “Oh look, s’mores stuff on the next aisle!”

“Give her privacy,” Lucy says, tone resigned. “She’ll tell us if and when she’s ready.”

Harper’s lip juts out in a pout, but she obliges and shuffles past.

I don’t peek at Alex’s second text until the girls are distracted looking at graham crackers and bickering over the best s’more-making form.

But can I see you another day this week?

I suck in a breath. It's the question I've been yearning for since I left his place yesterday.

Unfortunately, I have to clean Dad's house for the party, and I only have today to do it. And I work all week, with musical rehearsals lasting until six p.m. every night.

I tell him as much, and my mood takes a turn for the fraught. Everything feels so fragile and undefined I'm scared one wrong word or move will end with one or both of us snapping out of this trance. What if I suggest a quick coffee date and that's not what he has in mind? We know the sex works between us, but what about merging our daily lives?

If he were my boyfriend, I'd bring him into the fold and invite him to come entertain my dad while I clean and decorate, AKA keep Dad occupied so he doesn't try to help. This is for his birthday, after all.

But that's not on the table. Obviously.

Alex's response to my stream-of-consciousness "here's why I can't see you this week" text comes through, heading off my spiral.

Enjoy your family. I'll be here when you're ready.

I clutch the phone to my heart. It's exactly what I want to read, and also what I feared the most: a reasonable, patient answer that only makes me ache to see him more.

I'm in trouble.

Twenty-Seven

ALEX

The conference room door slams shut, rattling the glass beside it. Christos, Richard, and I exhale in unison as rain beats against the window. The gloomy, gray day is fitting.

Employee terminations are the worst part of any job, and this was the worst one I've ever led. Griffin, a longtime employee of Peachtree Tech before the reorg, went down swinging.

I'd like to say some of his parting jabs at me didn't land, but that would be a lie.

Richard runs a hand through his hair. "That was brutal."

"It's out of our hands, Richard." Christos shuts his computer and leans back in his chair. "Griff's been on thin ice for years, and this was the final straw."

"I understand that, but the man has a family." Richard turns his gaze toward the window. "You heard him. The braces, his wife's surgery, his son's tuition. What's he going to do?"

"Unfortunately, we can't fix that for him. He'll have to bounce back on his own." Christos's calming timbre almost puts me at ease, even though it's not intended for me. "He was given warnings about his performance, he's been unaccounted for ten out of the last fifty workdays, and his emails are indisputable. He put the company at risk by sharing proprietary information with clients."

I take a sip of my bitter coffee, ordered at triple strength. This jet fuel is the only thing getting me through today after waking up to take Andi outside every two hours last night. "Not pressing charges is the best thing we could've done for him. The severance package is very generous, given the circumstances."

“He shouldn’t have shared company info. But I think it’s confusing that you also cited being absent from the office as the reason for his termination.”

“Why?”

“Because you just hired a salesperson who works from his house.”

I level him with what is probably a dead-eyed stare. “Remote work doesn’t mean disappearing and ignoring emails and calls. We couldn’t *find* Griffin half the time. My new guy has already closed two massive sales and takes all my calls.”

“Never answers my calls and I’m supposed to be his team leader.”

“Do you have documentation of missed communication?”

“How would I document that? Don’t you trust my word, Conroy?”

I squeeze my coffee cup so hard the plastic lid pops off. “Screenshots.”

“What the hell is a screenshot?”

“Emotions are high,” Christos warns, lifting a hand. “Maybe we circle back to this. Richard, don’t you have a call at two?”

Richard presses the heel of his hand to his eye. “They teach you ‘circling back’ in HR school?”

“Sure did,” Christos says with a jaunty smile. “Along with the sacred creed: *TGIF*.”

“Sorry if I’m short today. Trained Griffin myself fifteen years ago,” Richard says, expelling a long sigh. “Hard to see him go.”

A mournful tone settles over the room. I didn’t want Richard in that meeting for this very reason. I knew it’d be hard on him to lose a member of his team, even though he swore up and down he understood the rationale. “I’m sorry.”

Pushing up from the table, Richard signals for the end of this hell fest. “I appreciate that. I’m going to take a few minutes.”

With that, the heavy door latches shut behind him.

I circle my shaky hand around my phone and flip it face up on the table. A couple of clicks later and my bedroom fills the screen. The Doggy Day Cam app has effectively taken over my life, and I’ve only had it five days.

In case the stress of work this week wasn’t enough, Andi is making sad noises every time I check on her.

Hiring a dog walker put me slightly at ease. She gets taken out twice a day while I’m at work, but as soon as the dude leaves, the crying and whining start up in earnest. It’s not as though I can get another dog to keep her company when I’m already unsure if I’m giving *this* one enough attention.

But if she's lonely, it's because I've left her alone too much. Even getting home at five feels too late.

The Griffin situation didn't help my terrible mood, but couple that with the sinking feeling that I'm failing the first living thing I've ever had to care for, and today is one of the worst I've had since moving to Avondale.

And it *really* doesn't help that I'm missing Mia as though she's mine to miss. I would give just about anything to hear her voice.

"You all right?"

I glance up from my phone, fully shocked to find Christos still sitting there. "Hm?"

His hands are clasped on the glass-top table as he studies me. "You're staring at a whimpering phone. Is it your dog?"

My chest pulls tight. "She's unhappy when I'm not around."

"Got my Merlot when she was three months old, so a little older than yours. She wanted constant attention. Didn't mean she got it, but she certainly angled hard for cuddles."

Throat dry, I attempt a swallow. "I've never had a pet. Was someone home all the time with her when you first got her?"

"My partner works from home, so we were lucky. But it's not reasonable that everyone with a young pet has someone at home twenty-four seven."

"I didn't expect to feel like shit that I'm not there. Maybe..." I trail off, rubbing my tired eyes. This man doesn't care about me or my problems.

"Maybe what?"

Maybe I'm in over my head with Andi and should've listened to Richard's annoying warning at the adoption center, for starters.

"Nothing. Sorry to have kept you." I rise from the table like I'm wading through water. "I'm sure you have plenty else to do before you head out for the week."

He doesn't and is apparently content to watch me have a minor nervous breakdown. "You can't be home every second of the day. It's not fair to put that pressure on yourself. You saw the shelter. Animals need a home, and you're providing one. You're going to be a great dog owner because you care. If you need anything, let me know."

What I need right now is a solid eight hours of sleep, and if I'm honest, three hours of Mia's time. But since I can't have either of those things, talking this out actually helped.

"Thanks. I appreciate the talk."

“What else is on your agenda today, boss?”

“Two more meetings.” And scarfing down half a jar of peanut butter before I pass out from low blood sugar, but I’ve told this dude enough already.

Finally gathering his things to leave, he clears his throat. “I’m sure you saw the email invitation for Richard’s birthday tomorrow.”

I raise a brow. “No. I didn’t.”

“Strange.” He evades my eye. “I’ll resend. I think it’d be good for you to come. Most of the office will be there. It’d serve you well to get more rooted in the community. If nothing else, maybe you’ll find yourself some dog sitters.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t—” I cup the back of my neck, pressing into the tight muscle. “I’m not sure of my plans.”

“Well. Once you *see* the invitation and determine you don’t have plans at the specified time, be sure to RSVP to Mia. Her number is on the invite.” This time he catches my eye. “You know Mia, of course.”

My gaze darts to the ceiling. His tone is a little loaded for my liking. “Oh, I—maybe. I’ll let you—*her* know.”

“You do that.” He hovers at the door, his computer bag slung over his shoulder. “Be sure to find Jameson and me for a drink, if you come. Or Mia. It’s nice to have an *in* at a party, wouldn’t you say?”

I nod, muscles still tight.

It’s the first social offer I’ve ever had from a colleague, sad as that is. Sure as hell didn’t expect that the day I was actually invited somewhere would involve a party at Richard’s, but at this point, after months of constant office tension, I’m just desperate enough to say yes. Maybe if he sees I’m not a heartless monster out to ruin his workplace when he sees me in a setting outside this office, he’ll finally see me as worthy of respect.

And with Mia whispering she’s confused in my ear before bolting out of my house last week—and playing it confusingly cool in texts ever since—I can’t help but think that Richard’s respect could make or break me in more ways than one.

Twenty-Eight

ALEX

The parking situation is that there's nowhere to park within a half-mile radius of Richard's house. The entire block is lined with cars. When I finally claim a slice of curb, I tuck a box of Johnnie Walker Blue under my arm and begin the hike to the party.

The homes are widely spaced in this older neighborhood. Established elm trees line the sidewalk, creating a leaf tent over the cracked gray street.

It's exactly the kind of neighborhood a kid like me only saw in Clark Griswold's *Christmas Vacation* movie, or when I'd ride along with Derek's friend group when they were out to cause trouble. Mostly low-tier, jackass offenses like wrapping mailboxes in saran wrap that left me feeling like a jerk by association, but the fact remains.

A few people who arrive just before me walk through the side yard of the large craftsman house. I don't need to be told twice to skip the awkward doorbell ringing part of arriving at this particular party.

I follow the curving driveway. An old basketball hoop with a cracked plastic backboard hangs above a three-car garage. It's all too easy to imagine Richard and his girls shooting hoops on a lazy Sunday afternoon ten years in the past.

As soon as I pass through the fence to the backyard, I'm greeted by an explosion of noise and activity: a glistening aqua pool with a volleyball net, an outdoor kitchen boasting a margarita machine, an outdoor stone fireplace, and a playground teeming with kids in what must be at least an acre of backyard that stretches toward a tree line.

I spot her.

The prettiest girl in the state of Georgia, standing next to Josie and a Madden sister near the playground.

My chest aches seeing Mia glowing in the sun, dimples out in full force, hair loose in the breeze.

Unsuccessfully, I try to soothe my growing nerves as I approach.

Of course she's beautiful. This isn't new information.

Of course you want to take her in your arms. You haven't touched her in a week.

Of course—

“Alex?” The smile drops off her face.

“Hi.” I lift the Johnnie Walker box. “I’m ready to pay the entry fee.”

“You came to the party.” Her cadence is a slow, meaningful code I can’t decipher. “At the house.”

I try to match it. “I RSVP’d to the party.”

My text said, *Can't wait to see you Saturday*. And since I wasn’t supposed to see her until Sunday initially, I thought it was clear what that meant.

“Alex, was it?” Mia’s sister extends her hands. “Thank you so much for coming and bringing a gift. I’ll take that for you.”

I relinquish the liquor. “Thank you. I’m sorry, I don’t think I got your name at the picnic.”

“Lucy.” Her smile is measured, like she doesn’t give away as much for free as Mia does.

Josie punches me in the arm. “Hey, you should’ve told me you were coming. I would’ve dragged Ezzy out of his study cave.”

A buffer between me and Richard’s entire network would’ve been most welcome. “Damn. I should’ve.”

My attention snaps back to Mia. Pink dusts her cheeks and mostly bare shoulders, like she’s been out in the sun most of the day. “Do you need help with anything?”

Her lips lift just enough to mollify me. “Relax. You’re not on the clock. Want to play a game?”

I peer past her at wild children throwing tiny bean bags. “A game?”

“Or you can grab something to eat inside.” Her gaze darts between her sister and me. “Whatever you want. Happy party.”

Is she wishing me a happy party or saying this is a happy party? Jury is still out. “I’ll investigate the food, thanks.”

Her lashes flutter as she looks everywhere but at me. She finally gives up and meets my eye. “Good.”

It’s been a week since I’ve fallen under the spell of her presence, and I’m

suffering from it everywhere—in my hands that want any part of her they can get, my insides that twist at not knowing how she’s feeling, my brain that does not wish to connect the dots that I’m at her *dad’s* house and shouldn’t be thinking about peeling off that sundress, and my mouth, which has not nearly enough to do.

“Well,” Lucy says, yanking my attention off Mia and back to reality. “That’s my husband Jace over there”—she points to a circle of men clutching beers, *King of the Hill* style—“if you’d like company.”

“Or you can play cornhole with Mia.” Josie sips from a cup.

“I promised Clara I’d play with her.” Mia glances over her shoulder at the playground. “You could both join us for a game?”

A young boy with a bowl cut races up beside us. “Mommy, Daddy taught me a joke!”

Lucy eyes the circle of men. Her husband must be the one watching us with a shit-eating grin on his face. “Oh yeah? What is it?”

“What goes in stiff but comes out soft?”

I choke on a breath as Josie guffaws, arm clutching her stomach. Lucy’s jaw drops, fury welling in her eyes—

“Spaghetti,” Mia blurts. “It’s spaghetti. That one already made the rounds at school.”

“Go play, Cooper.” Lucy turns to us as he runs off, dangerously calm in her delivery, still hugging the box of Johnnie Walker. “Alex, forget what I said about joining him. He’ll be grossly injured soon. Pardon me.”

As Lucy storms off, Josie chugs over half of a margarita in one gulp. “Looks like I need another drink. You two kids have fun.”

And then it’s the two of us.

Mia’s eyes, brandy as ever when hit with the stark afternoon light, hold mine like a secret she doesn’t want to spill. “Hi.”

That *hi* is an angel and a vixen, fingers stroking the nape of my neck and a hand shoved in my pants all at once.

I risk a small step closer. “I thought you were expecting me.”

Her eyes soften, and her tone slips into an intimacy that puts me more at ease. “I thought you just meant to type Sunday and not Saturday. I didn’t know Christos invited you.”

“Oh.” I try to hide my disappointment. “Should I go?”

“No, of course not. It’s a party. My dad is likely well on his way to a good buzz, and half the office is here, anyway. You should make the rounds.”

A drunk Richard may be even scarier than a sober one. “Should I say hello to your dad?”

Her expression takes a turn for the nervous. “I think they’re sitting by the fire. Maybe you could join them? That seems like a reasonable thing for you to do, right?”

Reasonable? Maybe.

Fun? Absolutely not. The last thing I want to do is chat with Richard with all his people around to bear witness. But it seems important to Mia, so I swallow down a surge of bile. “Sure. I’ll catch up with you later.”

Her cheeky smile drives all the blood in my body south. “If you make it out alive.”

My face must betray my horror because she laughs under her breath. “You’ll be fine.” She crinkles her nose and looks away as a breeze stirs her hair and shakes the tree line in the distance. “It’s weird not touching you.”

I mask my relief with a slow exhale. At least we’re on the same page with that. “Well, if you fall in the pool, someone’s going to have to rescue you.”

“*Huh.*” Her hands press down on the tops of her thighs, holding the sky-blue fabric to her body as the wind tries to lift it. “It’s very possible with how strong Josie makes my drinks. You better keep an eye on me just in case.”

As if I could look anywhere else. My gaze skims her body. “I’d rescue you so hard and fast it’d make your head spin.”

“Oh yeah?” One hand drifts to her neck. She trickles her fingers down the curve of it. I’d like to replace those fingers with my tongue. “How hard?”

I drive my hands into my pockets. “We could play show and tell. I show you, and you tell me if it’s hard enough.”

Her gaze has mine in a tight grip as she lowers her voice. “You’re trouble —”

“Auntie Mia!” A blue-eyed girl runs up, breathless. She throws me a critical look that mirrors the one Lucy leveled at her husband. No doubt whose daughter she is. Her attention leaves me and returns to Mia. “Aren’t you going to play with us?”

Mia jumps a foot backward. “Sorry, of course. Yes. Let’s do that.”

“I’m going to get a drink. Have fun.” I shoot Mia a smile before traversing the yard.

Josie is still in the kitchen when I arrive. Once I am equipped with a vodka tonic—declining her insistence that I drink a margarita—she joins me near the pool. Having her here gives me an excuse not to approach the circle of

people holding court next to the outdoor fireplace just yet.

My gaze travels as if magnetized to Mia as she plays with the young girl and a few other kids who have shown up at her side.

Josie nods toward the yard. “This is Mia’s shit. The girl loves a party. Did you know she has approximately seven hundred relatives in the state of Georgia?”

“She mentioned that, yes.”

Josie’s attention wanders. I choose not to follow it toward the fireplace. “She’s a package deal.”

Unease washes over me. “I’m gathering that.”

“Richard is tough on the partners of his kids. He had a perfect marriage and thinks everyone else should, too. No one is ever good enough for his daughters. The only one Rich was ever sold on was Mason, and that blew up in his face.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“What are you going to do?”

I’m tense enough to feel my teeth. This conversation is taking a turn I wasn’t prepared for. “I’m already at a deficit with that man.”

“Yeah. But as long as you’re trying, that’ll mean something.”

“This is still brand new,” I counter, chest tightening. “I don’t know that Mia wants me to ‘try’ anything.”

“Oh, sweet summer child. Bless your heart.” Josie’s hand lands on my shoulder. “You are fooling yourself if you think Mia isn’t all the way in this. But if *you’re* not, then I guess I’d say tread lightly—”

“I’m in this,” I interrupt before she gets any further down that train of thought. I don’t know *how* I got in this, but I’m awash in rightness just being in her orbit, so it seems pointless to stand here and deny it to her best friend.

She elbows me in the ribs gently. “Good boy. I’m going to go play volleyball in the pool. Unless you want me to run interference and break the ice with you and Rich? Not to brag, but he pretty much treats me like one of his daughters, so a vouch from me could help.”

Tempting. “This is probably something I need to do on my own. But thanks anyway.”

“Suit yourself.”

After a few stilted hellos with colleagues, I step off the concrete and approach the chairs forming a large circle around the outdoor fireplace. The chimney is at least one story tall.

Richard sits to the left of the hearth, an ankle resting over his other knee and a cigar tipped out of the corner of his mouth.

The man from Benihana—Chester, I recall—sits next to him with an open box of Cubans on his lap.

I freeze, unblinking. What is he doing here? I thought he and Richard weren't friends anymore.

There are people in the six other chairs—several men Richard's age, Christos, Harper with a cigar in her mouth to match her dad's—but I can't get past Chester's presence.

"That's not the king of the ball busters I see!" Richard's voice booms as he lifts a rocks glass from the ground near his seat. "How's it going, Conroy?"

I have never known regret as potent as what's swirling in my gut right now. Richard is drunk, and I'm crashing some sort of cigar circle time.

This was a bad idea.

"Hey there." I lift my hand in the air. "Just wanted to say happy birthday. I'll leave you—"

"I know you," Chester says, waggling a cigar in the air, a glazed look in his watery eyes. "Why do I know you?"

My pulse quickens. "Don't think so."

He lifts a glass off his arm rest. Time stands still until he mutters, "Must've seen you on the links."

I exhale in a relieved gust. He seems too drunk to explore the issue. Crisis averted.

One of them, anyway.

"Alex, have a seat," Christos says, rising to his feet. "I was just getting a drink."

"What if I get you that drink?" I level him with a look I hope he interprets correctly as, *Please don't leave me*. "What are you having?"

"Don't be silly. Harper, keep Alex here company, would you?"

Harper puffs her cigar. "My pleasure."

I drop into the chair, grateful for the drink in my hand. I'd like to be half as drunk as anyone in this circle seems to be right now.

"You smoke, kid?" Chester asks.

Richard lifts a dismissive palm. "I doubt Conroy partakes. It's a dying art. People lump it in with cigarettes, assuming it's trash like that. It takes a sophisticated palette."

This feels like a litmus test of some kind.

“I’ve dabbled,” I insist.

Dabbled, meaning I smoked hookah when I was fifteen because Derek all but forced me and I didn’t have the energy to fight it.

Surprise drags Richard’s bushy eyebrows to his hairline. “Oh? You got a preference?”

“Uh—preference? In terms of flavor, you mean?”

Harper side-eyes me as I flounder. “What’ve you got left, Chester?”

“How about a cherry bomb?” Chester extends a hand.

I work to keep the disgust off my face as I take the cigar. “Thanks.”

After I stare at the thing for a few seconds, Harper gently removes it from my hand and sets to work trimming and lighting it. She’s quickly securing her spot as my favorite of Mia’s sisters. Admitting I don’t have a lighter or my own trimmer might be a sign of weakness to this crowd.

I can treat it like a hookah. It can’t be that different. It’ll be an easy way to grease the hinges on this whole *trying for Richard’s approval thing*.

My first drag leaves me lightheaded, but it’s worth powering through a little discomfort.

Twenty-Nine

MIA

“Hey.” Josie’s voice startles me as I’m rummaging deep in the fridge for extra ketchup. “Have you talked to Alex recently?”

I nearly bump my head as I emerge. “Not in the last thirty minutes or so. Why?”

“I saw him wander down the hallway toward the bathroom on your side of the house, and he was doing that drunk thing where you pinball off the walls. I don’t know how he’d get that drunk if he wasn’t doing shots, but I was swimming so maybe he was and I missed it.”

“*Drunk?*” My eyes widen as I push the fridge shut with my elbow. “Can you take this to Lucy outside, please? I’m going to go check on him.”

“My side of the house” used to be “the girls’ side of the house” when we all lived here. I pass by the doors of bedrooms long since converted until I hit the bathroom.

The door is closed.

I knock three times. “Alex, are you in here?”

After a lengthy pause, I hear a croak of a voice. “Mia?”

“Yes. Are you all right?”

“Yes.”

It is the single most unconvincing yes I have ever heard.

“Are you decent?”

“Let me die in peace, woman.”

I close my hand around the knob. “Let me in.”

After a pause, the cold metal rattles under my hand. It turns with ease, allowing me inside.

His back is against the striped wall, and his forehead rests on his knees. My gut takes a beating seeing him like this.

Maneuvering into the narrow room, I shut and lock the door behind me. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

“Just dizzy.” His eyes are closed. “I’m fine. Go back to your party.”

I drop down beside him and slide my hand behind his neck. His skin is clammy. “Were you drinking?”

“Not really. I was with your dad, and they were all smoking cigars, and I, uh, tried to keep up.” He traps my hand against his nape. “Your cold hand feels good.”

He looks so weak and vulnerable I want to gather him up and hold him. “Why would you do a disgusting thing like that? Cigars are heavy.”

“The smell hurts my head.”

“Here, let’s get you out of the hoodie.”

After wrestling with his hoodie, he hands it over. My attention stutters briefly on his Hawks shirt. Judging by the crisp lettering, it looks like it could be brand new. The thought of him potentially buying it after we saw that game together and then choosing to wear it to my dad’s house makes my stomach flip.

The hoodie smells strongly of tart woodsmoke as I run it to the laundry room, drop it into the washing machine, add half the contents of a dirty clothes basket, and start the load. It’ll be done by the time he’s ready to leave the party.

When I scoot back to the bathroom, he’s massaging his cheeks. “You should really go. I don’t want you to miss your party.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” With my free hand, I pat his short’s pocket.

“It’s flattering that you still want me like this,” he says after a weak laugh.

“I’m looking for your phone.”

He surrenders it.

I type *cigar sickness* in his browser’s search bar and scan the results. “Wait, it looks like this is very common. Dizzy, nauseous—the nicotine hit you too fast. It suggests an easy remedy. I’ll be right back. Hang tight.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Trust me.”

After dodging my cousins in the kitchen, I return a minute or so later with a half-full bag of sugar and a cup of water. He eyes me warily as I notch into place beside him.

I soften my voice. “Open your mouth.”

“What?”

“Sugar on the back of your tongue is supposed to help.”

Resigned, he extends a hand. “Okay. Where’s the spoon?”

I offer up the goods. “Maybe let it linger for a few seconds before you swallow.”

He eats a lump, downs the cup of water, and slides both across the tile. “That should do it, right?”

“Right. Now you just wait.”

With a nod, he presses his back and head to the wall, letting his eyes fall shut.

I rub my hand up and down his leg, scratching lightly, soothed by the quiet after being in the throes of the party. We sit like this for long enough that I relax into him, my head falling against his shoulder. His hand moves to my knee, holding it like a handle.

There’s a quieting inside me like I’ve never known. For once, I don’t want noise and bustle, I don’t want the party, I just want to sit in silence with *him*.

He looks over at me and offers the softest smile, barely a glimpse into his usual winning grin. “I’m feeling better, but I can still taste it. Do you have any mouthwash?”

I lean for the vanity and rummage in the bottom drawer until I find a packaged toothbrush. “Here’s this, and you can use my toothpaste and mouthwash on the sink.”

He accepts it with an arched brow. “You just have these laying around?”

“Family crashes here fairly often. It’s good to be prepared.”

“Ah. Gotcha.” His gaze falls to my mouth. “Have I kept you too long?”

I blink toward the door. “No, I don’t think anyone is missing me.”

“I *highly* doubt that’s true.”

“My sisters have their people with them, Josie is swimming, and my dad has everyone he’s ever known to hang with—”

“Including Chester,” he says, pushing up to his feet. “He’s here.”

“Yeah.” I slide over to the tub and perch on the ledge as he unpackages the toothbrush. “He accepted the invite from Christos and wants to bury the hatchet, I guess. I was trying not to think about that.”

Alex focuses all his attention on squeezing the Colgate bottle. “Not think about it? Why, because of your ex?”

“No. Because Chester might recognize *you* and tell my dad he saw us out.”

“He didn’t recognize me. Or, rather, he did, but he thinks he golfed with me. He’s also drunk. So that solves that problem.”

“Oh.” My stomach slithers. It doesn’t *really* solve anything. Chester may

not have known enough to blow my and Alex's covers, but it brings up a conversation I'm not sure we're ready to have. "That's good."

He sets to work brushing his teeth. It lasts a comical amount of time. He's so thorough brushing, mouth-washing, and brushing again I have no doubt his mouth is minty fresh.

His hand finds mine when he's done, spinning me gently to face him. The air all but shimmers between us as he takes my necklace between his fingers, examining the butterfly hanging on a delicate gold chain. "Ready to go back?"

"We probably should."

Neither of us moves.

"You know, I used to have the best room in this house. Direct bathroom access." I lean sideways and open the pocket door. "Want to see?"

He plucks the sugar and water cup off the ground and follows me inside. Probably smart we don't leave that there for people to wonder about.

I lock the bathroom door and my main door. When I wheel around, he's taking in the space with a curious look on his face.

"Welcome to my teenage time capsule." I sweep my arm overhead. "Fun fact: my apartment isn't much bigger."

He deposits the sugar and water on my end table. "It's a great room. Other than that giant window."

"What's wrong with the window?"

"It has no curtains or blinds, Mia. What if someone sees us in here?"

"No one can see in that window. It's high up there. Practically a skylight."

He scratches his chin. "Is it overlooking the backyard?"

"Side yard. And the fact that you can't tell proves my point." I position myself in such a way that he's not staring at the old photo collage on my wall when he looks at me. He can see the room, but he doesn't need to see my awkward teen years up close. "So...how do you feel?"

"Good as new." His hand slides around my waist. My head falls against his chest like we're slow dancing, the peachy inklings of sunset coloring our skin. "Just don't make me put that hoodie back on so I never have to smell smoke again."

"Don't worry, it's in the washer." I take an audible breath, stroking his cotton shirt as I tilt my head. "This still smells good."

"Oh yeah?" He points to his neck and leans down. "How about here?"

I bury my face in his neck, scratching my nose against the faintest hint of

stubble. I want to lick him, kiss him, hold him—my body is hungry in too many ways at once. “So good.”

“And here?” He taps his lips. “How do I taste?”

I trace his bottom lip with my tongue as my hands snake behind his neck. “Good enough to eat. All mint.”

“Excellent.” Our mouths hover close. “No more cigars.”

I pull back an inch. “Why’d you do it in the first place?”

The muscles of his neck tense beneath my palms. His gaze hardens. “It seemed like a thing he’d respect.”

“My dad?”

“Yes. The way they were talking about it, it made it feel important that I try. If I’m ever going to win him over, I’ve got to make an effort.”

My chest aches. “You made yourself sick trying to impress him. Don’t you ever do that again. It’s not worth finding you on the bathroom floor.”

“You don’t think I’m going to do whatever asinine thing it takes to prove myself to that man? How else are you ever going to feel good about this thing between us?”

His words knock me out so thoroughly I’m surprised I’m still standing. I wrap my arms around his neck until our foreheads meet. “Alex...I don’t want you to suffer because of me.”

“It was worth it.” His voice is low and gruff, his breath a warm assurance on my face. “For this.”

“No more talk of my dad. Let me worry about him, okay? Right now, I just want you.”

Heat bleeds across my lips as he teases me in an almost-kiss. “I *always* want you. It’s ridiculous.”

I go whisper-soft everywhere at his words. “Here I am.”

His hands thread my hair as he takes possession of my mouth. It’s as though I’ve been underwater and this is the first gulp of air. Our sighs merge as his warm lips slide over mine. His soft nibbling kisses give way to the lap of his tongue, a growl in his throat, a hand cupping my ass.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the second I saw you.” He pushes me backward into bed and covers my body with his. “I missed you so fucking much this week.”

My limbs and bones hum with need at the delicious weight of him. This is the moment I’ve craved every second we’ve been apart, when everything else falls away and we’re consumed with each other. When our wanting is made

tangible.

He seals his *I missed you* with a deep, greedy kiss. A hollow piece of my heart fills as he hitches my leg around his waist. He's so assured in everything he does, so confident in the way he touches me. I can't help but believe that if we jumped off a cliff together, he'd handle the air and the ground on our behalf and bend them to his will.

"I missed you, too." I slide my hands up his back and tug his shirt off. "I wanted to text you a thousand more random thoughts throughout the days, but I didn't want to scare you off just yet."

"Text me all your random thoughts." His tongue plunders my mouth, but he breaks away long enough to add, "I love your thoughts."

I love yours, I tell him with my teeth as I tug his bottom lip.

He trails open-mouth kisses down my neck and slides the strap of my dress down my shoulder. The featherlight brush of fabric measured against the wet, hungry work of his mouth sparks shivers down my chest and arm.

He pauses to glance at the window again and then over his shoulder at the door. "You locked that—"

"Alex"—I roll my hips against him to get him back on track—"we don't have long. Put your hands inside this dress before I rip it off." I grasp the neckline. "Please. I can't take the wait."

He bunches the bottom hem, working the fabric up my hips. "I didn't bring anything. Let me taste you."

"I want *all* of you," I blurt. "I'm on the pill. Are you good with that?"

"*Good* with that? You have no idea how much I fucking want that. But you're sure you want to do this here and now with half your family roaming the house?"

I gasp through a breath as he shifts to press his length against me. "If you stop, I'll cry." I wince. "That sounded bad. I'm not *begging*, I just—"

"Go right ahead and beg." He feeds me a long, drugging kiss while we work his shorts and boxers down his legs in tandem. "Makes me feel better about how much I need you."

Those words scoop my beating heart right from my sleeve.

"That was too much, wasn't it? Damn, you're like a human truth serum." His gaze captures mine, a warm embrace. "But it is the truth."

The photo on his dating profile doesn't tell the whole story. He's more than cologne-model handsome. He's a goddamn revelation when he lets you get close, a Roman candle waiting to pop off and ignite the sky.

I think about what he told me on the boat, his gaze cast down. *I've never been anything to anyone, let alone everything to someone.*

“You’re something to me, Alex.” I shimmy out of my underwear and line us up, desperate to feel him. It’s the only way I can manage the free fall happening inside of me, the tumbling, hurtling-through-space feeling that scares me as much as it thrills me.

He’s about to flay me open, and I’m about to let him.

Thirty

ALEX

I intend to lavish her with fingers and my tongue. But all that evaporates as my hips shift forward, and she whispers my name into my mouth. I rock into her with force, like it's the last time I'll ever get to.

Don't like the thought of that.

We don't even bother to get her dress off all the way. I use it like a handle. I think the fabric might incinerate in my hand as I grip it tighter and tighter as I drive into her. She spills out of the top, the barest hint of pink nipple peeking out on each side, the most glorious fucking tease.

Soon the hint isn't enough. I fist the neckline of her dress and drag it down, groaning as she spills out. I grasp and pinch and pluck until she's clasp her mouth shut to trap a moan.

We should be moving a lot faster for two people who have a party to get back to, but every thrust is deep and slow. Her gaze holds such palpable heat, all smoke and molten embers as she moves beneath me. Desire is written all over her face, but there's something else there, too. As she lifts her hips to take me deeper, I glimpse something like disbelief.

That makes two of us. I never knew this was how it was supposed to be, that I could feel so deeply for a person that it would make me want to slow down. Savor everything.

She sucks and bites a line up my neck. Her teeth graze my neck in a spot that I'm learning is her favorite. She really can't resist, and I love it.

"Who's trouble now?" Driving my knee into the mattress for leverage, I startle a gasp out of her as I change the angle. "You're going to get us caught, leaving a bite mark."

She arches her back, begging.

I'd tell her everything I'm feeling if I had the vocabulary to do it justice.

But since I don't, I can only show her.

She grapples for me as I pull out of her. "What are you doing?"

I duck down, hoist her legs over my shoulder, and drag my tongue over her swollen skin. Her legs tense, and she lets out a strangled moan. I drive a finger inside, then another.

Her hands fly forward, gripping my hair like reins. I work her until her breathing is frenzied, every perfect little sound out of her mouth coaxing my throbbing cock. This might be the only thing I like more than being inside of her, but it doesn't stop the ache. And yet I'd do this all damn night if she'd let me.

Her quivering body goes taut. "I'm so close."

I give her everything, every trick until she tightens around my fingers, moaning until she can't. Gasping, she comes on my tongue.

I plant a light kiss inside of her thigh and steal a little bite as her breathing slows just slightly. And then another kiss inside her hip as I move up her body. As I kiss her neck, her impatient hands dig into my waist.

"That was too good." The desperate earnestness in her voice spears me through the heart. "Do you want my mouth now?"

I brush her flushed red lips with my thumb. "Yeah, I want your mouth."

Just not how she means.

I cover it with mine, kissing her softly as I nudge her legs open and ease back inside of her. She reaches behind her to grasp the fluffy pillow, gaze pinned to me as I fill her to the hilt. She watches me like I'm something worth seeing.

Missionary was made for a moment like this. I want to spoil her lips with kisses as badly as I want to fuck her until she screams. We can do both. It can be soft and hard, adoring in her bed and lust-drunk on a boat.

We could be everything for each other.

I can't stop kissing her even as my orgasm grips me, squeezes me, steals my breath. The finish is a dangerous loss of control, like I'm physically handing her every ounce of power to destroy me.

She could. As I regain my sensibility, all I can think is, *This woman could hurt me.*

I didn't expect to need her. A living, breathing, unpredictable person who may not want what I want or feel as strongly as I do.

People are risky. But this girl has my heart in her palm. I don't know what happens next, but I know I'm not going to be able to turn off these feelings,

and I don't want to fight them anymore.

I head to the bathroom to clean myself up, thoughts consumed by what we just did. When I return, she's perched on the bed waiting for me, her dress fixed.

I pull on my boxers and pants and lay down beside her. "Two more minutes?"

She shifts to settle on top of me, her head resting against my still-bare chest. "One, tops, and then we have to get back."

"Just long enough to tell me about any of those pictures." I point over at her photo collage. "Start with the red wig one."

Her laugh tickles my face. She paints a vivid picture with her memories of costumed sleepovers, hip-hop dance-offs with her sisters, scavenger hunt outings in Avondale. The topic lands on homecomings and proms, and when she tells me her ex invited half their senior class to a raucous afterparty at his family's lake house, I get irrationally annoyed. On a night where he could've enjoyed Mia wearing a life-ruining dress and a stunning smile, he spent the evening doing keg stands.

"I only cared that he had a good time," she insists, drawing a heart in my chest hair with her finger. "Though it wasn't such a great time when he was hungover for the next two full days." She puts a finger over my lips just in time to trap my *what a fool*. "No more of him. Tell me about your senior prom."

I nip her with my teeth. "Didn't go."

"Junior prom?"

I tuck her hair behind her ear. "Didn't go to that, either."

"Why not?"

The memory is about as good a summation of my early life as any. "I couldn't afford it, and I wasn't about to ask my aunt and uncle for the money. They did enough for me by giving me a roof and were already pissed they had to pay so much toward my cousin Derek's prom. No need to pay for two."

Her hand drifts over my heart. "I'm sorry."

I let out a dismissive sound, because the last thing I want is for her to feel sorry for me. "No apologies necessary. Believe me, I had no business attending my prom. Do you know how many women would've fought over me in a suit? It would've been a liability."

"Would it help if I told you Avondale's prom was in the high school gym

because the town didn't have a fancy hotel at the time?"

"Yes, actually." I weave my fingers through her soft hair. "I'm healed."

Her body quivers as she laughs. It fades into a soft sigh. "Do you talk to them often? I know you said you don't see them on holidays."

There's no good way to explain that my aunt and uncle couldn't care less if we ever communicate again. It's nearly impossible to explain apathy to people who haven't ever experienced it. "Derek keeps in touch."

So in touch he just Venmo requested me a hundred dollars last week, in fact. But Mia doesn't need to know that.

"That's good, right?" she asks. "My cousins and I were always close. It's a special bond."

"It usually is, I'm sure. But Derek can be...difficult."

Her brow furrows. "Difficult, how?"

Selfish. Aggressive. Overly obsessed with "blood loyalty" when he wants something. He's a human Mad Lib, really.

I settle for something simpler. "Big personality."

"Gotcha. What happened to your parents?" she asks carefully.

"I was adopted, more or less. My mom was a teenager when she got pregnant and in no position to raise me, and my aunt and uncle did me a favor taking me in. I'm grateful."

She tilts her head, and her eyes search mine. "You don't have to give me a pageant answer if it's not the truth."

For a second, I'm frozen in the spotlight of her eyes. It never feels like the right time to have this conversation.

But she is the right woman to have it with. "The truth is, when their screaming fights about money or whatever else echoed off the walls and there was nowhere to hide, and they turned on me—the extra mouth to feed—it didn't feel like they were doing me any favors. But luckily, that was rare. Most of the time they ignored me completely. Of the two, I'll take being ignored to being outright hated." I expel a long breath, strangely relieved. "I've never told anyone that."

Her stare is measured. "You didn't deserve to be treated that way."

I regret sucking the lightness from the room. "Meh."

"Don't *meh* me." She pinches my chin between her fingers. "Repeat after me: my presence is a gift."

"Your presence is a gift."

"*Alex*. Incorrect. Try again."

“You’re bossy,” I murmur. “No wonder you’re such a good teacher.”

Her eyes narrow. “I sense that you’re trying to change the subject.”

“Good teacher *and* a smart woman. Speaking of, how did rehearsals go this week?”

She shifts, catching my eye. “I’m so exhausted right now from show stuff and actual teaching stuff I’m passing out by eight most nights. It’s kind of scary how much it tires me out at age twenty-four.”

I reposition her so I can get a better look at her. “What can be done? Do you need to see a doctor?”

Her breath is almost a laugh. “No, I don’t think so. Just have to think long and hard about whether or not I can keep taking on extra stuff, like shows. Even though that’s a part of the job I enjoy.”

I trace a line over her cheek with my thumb. “Maybe it would help to start making a career plan. A list of what needs to be done to get where you want to go with your new school. It doesn’t have to stay a dream. It could be your reality.”

“Now’s not really a good time. I’m going to focus on the house for now and pour everything into that, which means I can’t just turn around and spend money to invest in a school.”

Before I can disagree with her self-assessment, the door to the bathroom rattles. Josie’s voice sneaks in through the cracks. “Are you two decent?”

Mia launches off my chest and fixes her dress. “Yes!”

I scramble for my shirt. As soon as I’m fully clothed, Mia pulls open the door.

Josie waltzes in, hands clasped behind her back. “Lucy was looking for you, Mia. I covered for you, but you should probably get back.”

Mia casts her anxious glance on me. “You go first. Cut through the bathroom.”

“Why do you have sugar on your end table?” Josie strokes her chin. “Doesn’t that burn your—”

“*Josie!*” Mia cries. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

I tug my shirt on and give Mia my last hug of the night, putting my mouth right on her ear so only she can hear. “Would’ve put it everywhere *except* there and licked it off, making you wait. A patience game.”

I take the snapshot image of her blushing cheeks with me as I return to the crowd outside. I’ll ride out the party until it’s socially acceptable to leave.

Though as I join the crowd growing livelier as night falls, I’m not all that

sure I want to go home.

Thirty-One

MIA

As soon as Alex is gone and Josie shuts the door behind him, I pluck underwear out of my dresser drawer and tug them on.

“Now that is un-Mia-like behavior, running around without underwear in a dress.” Josie’s eyes practically well up with prideful tears as she lifts her glass in the air. “I’m so proud of you.”

“I had on underwear, for the record. Before.”

“*Before* he taught you a new language.”

“What?”

“Language. New tongue. Keep up.”

I take a fortifying breath, even as heat floods my cheeks. “I regret opening the door to this conversation.”

She rubs her hands together like a raccoon outside a dumpster. “So? *How was it?*”

I massage the skin that guards my heart. I’ve always told Josie everything, almost compulsively. The urge to protect this thing with Alex like a precious secret is confusing. She already *knows*. And my sisters already know something is up. They don’t know who it is, but those bloodhounds will sniff it out soon enough.

We can’t sneak around for long. I’m terrified once we let people in this private bubble, it’ll burst.

Normally, I can tune out their opinions when I disagree, but I’m not sure I could bear to hear they think this thing with Alex is a bad idea. And them finding out would be one step closer to Dad finding out, and that’s too much for my brain to handle right now.

But this is Josie. I can tell her anything, even the things I’m not ready to tell my sisters. She won’t try to stop me.

Though what would I even say? Alex and I haven't defined what we are.

I could tell her we've blown past a crush or a fleeting attraction and stumbled on something very real. That I thought I was lonely for anyone but I was actually lonely for *him*. And maybe I could spill the other stuff, too—that I want to be fluent in his skillful tongue, that he touches me with the hunger of a man denied sex for years, that he makes me feel so confident in my body. She would love the details.

Just not right now. I've been MIA from this party for a hundred years.

"Soon we'll talk about everything." I put my hair in a high bun and start for the door. "But we really need to get out there. I have no idea how long I've been in this room."

"Fair. It's getting good out there. Jace is half in the bag and telling all of Lucy's secrets. Did you know where Carolina was conceived?"

"Something tells me it's the Carolinas."

"Okay, but do you know *where*, specifically?"

I spin her body around. "Walk please."

"A *jet ski*. They were on Jordan Lake, and he bent her over—"

"*He told people that?*"

I trail her down the long hall until we hit the living room. Light pours from the loft.

No one should be upstairs right now since it's just Dad's room, his study, and a tiny living room space that wouldn't be nearly as fun as anything happening in the backyard.

"I'll be right out," I tell Josie. "Make me a drink?"

She dismisses me with an eager nod.

The stairs creak underfoot as I climb. When I reach the landing, Dad's study door is ajar. Through the crack, I can only see his tan arm and a framed photo in his hand.

I knock on the door. "Dad?"

His arm springs to life, placing the photo back on his desk. "Come on in."

I move inside the room. It's like slipping into a different universe entirely, where people still use paper maps and read dusty, leather-bound books.

"What are you doing up here? Last I saw you, you were outside having a grand ol' time."

He lifts a rocks glass and swirls the dark liquor. "Just needed a break from the crowd for a minute."

My teasing smile drops off. "Oh. Should I leave you alone?"

“No, not you. Never need a break from my girls.”

My gaze travels back to the photo he was holding. I know it inside and out: an old hotel lobby with an ornate staircase, Dad in a royal blue suit, Mom in a fitted sheath dress she likened to Audrey Hepburn’s in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

I felt like a Hollywood starlet, she’d always gush when me or my sisters would ask about the wedding. You would’ve loved it. It’s so weird that you girls weren’t a part of that day. We’ll renew our vows and you’ll be my three little maids of honor.

Never in a million years did we guess she wouldn’t be a part of our weddings, either. But like so many other moments before this one, and for so many more that will come, I don’t fight the sadness. I stay still in it until I float.

But if Dad is holed up in here staring at a picture of Mom when he should be enjoying his party, that’s a red flag I can’t ignore.

“One of my favorite photos,” I say with a nod of my head.

He smiles fondly as he adjusts the angle of the frame. “She was the life of the party. Would’ve loved what you girls organized today.”

“A man deserves to be celebrated for tolerating this Earth for sixty years.”

“It’s great.” He sips his drink and sighs.

“Is it?”

He rolls in his chair, angling toward a window that overlooks the backyard. The blinds are closed, but he stares like he’s seeing through them. “Seeing all my colleagues here tonight, especially the new young guns, I can’t help but wonder if maybe this party feels more like an ending instead of a birthday.”

“*What?*” My blood turns to ice as I take a step closer. “What do you mean ending?”

He lifts a hand, but his gaze stays fixed on some indeterminate point. “I just mean maybe my time at Peachtree Tech has come and gone.” He swirls his glass. “Not even a year ago, I was thinking about MBAs and hopeful about the future. Now? Maybe I’d be better off switching my focus to my retirement goals.”

“Dad.” My voice is stern, but I’m too panicked to draw any sort of weapon in this fight. *Endings, retirement, time come and gone.*

His eyes—brown, like all us girls—find mine. “There’s only so many ways a man can hear the boss say he wants *new* and *fresh* before it starts to sink in. I’m not in the prime of my life anymore.” He clears his throat. “Career, I mean.”

We both know it wasn't a slip of the tongue. He *did* mean life. And that pumps me with dread so strong I can't bear to keep it. Not about this infallible, tougher-than-nails man who I plan to drag to age one hundred and beyond by sheer force of will.

He's only sixty.

I repeat his age in my mind like it's a mantra.

All these changes to his workplace may have prompted him to reconsider his plans, and maybe even have him feeling less than prime, but this is just a transitional phase as he adjusts to a career hurdle. I've seen him survive so much worse than this.

Once he gets past the company's changes and Alex's decisions...

I suck in a breath. Even thinking about him makes me feel bad right now.

I told Alex to let me worry about my dad. The full truth is I *always* worry about him, and I know I always will. But the gargantuan heap of guilt I'm experiencing over this thing with Alex isn't sustainable.

I'm going to have to tell Dad.

Soon.

But how can I? How can I ever bring that man into my father's life in a permanent way when he's damn near driven Dad out of the only career he's ever known and has him thinking about endings? How can he move on from this feeling—whether that's by quitting, retiring, or something else—if I'm with the man who upended his life?

No, it's not Alex's fault that this is the way the world, and business, works. But that doesn't lessen the emotional toll it'll cost when I finally come clean.

Damn it if the man I'm falling head over heels for doesn't represent everything my dad rallied against and now feels bested by.

Not tonight.

There's no use entertaining these thoughts when I'm clearly not telling him at his own party. And not until after I talk to Alex. There are two of us in this equation now.

I pinch the pressure point at the base of my thumb. My words sound hollow, even to me. "Maybe in a few weeks you'll get into a new groove."

His smile is wry, a non-verbal *yeah right*. "Enough about your ol' man. I feel like I haven't seen you all night. You having fun?"

Nice of him to add brass knuckles for the second gut punch. I'm having more than enough *fun*. I flick Alex's face from the forefront of my mind. "I'm having a nice night. But you're the one we're here to celebrate. Have

you eaten? Oh, have you tried the cake?”

“I’ve eaten plenty.” He rises to his feet, tall as ever. He’ll always be larger than life to me, even if he doesn’t feel that way. “Thanks for checking up on me. What do you say we get back down there?”

I swallow thickly, unease brewing. “I say lead the way.”

Thirty-Two

MIA

All week I've worked up the nerve to have *that* conversation with Alex. The one where we broach what we are and decide when we're going to tell my dad.

But other than a stolen coffee break in Peachtree Tech's parking garage on Tuesday that involved not nearly enough kissing or talking because Alex was on a call for most of it, I haven't seen him since the party. Our plans to meet up on Sunday were thwarted by Lucy's need for a post-party recovery babysitter since she and Jace both were so hungover they were "hearing color and seeing sounds."

Tonight is the night. He planned our whole date and wants it to be a surprise, but I think I'll be the one surprising him when I lay out my talking points.

I swallow down a surge of nerves as I ring his bell.

Alex greets me at his front door with a pout. God, he's got a great mouth.

"I had it all planned out." His bare feet touch down on the welcome mat. He greets me with a quick kiss before guiding me inside his house. "We were going to a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains."

"What?" I pause in his foyer. "We were going on a *trip*?"

"Yes. You said you wanted time to talk, so that's what I came up with."

I can't suppress my smile. All my nerves wash away at the nearness of him. "I had paint and sip scheduled with Josie tomorrow. Were you going to make an enemy of her to ensure this surprise?"

"Josie was in on the ruse."

"I knew it was suspicious when she agreed. She *hates* painting."

He removes the two bags slung over my arm and lifts me off the ground. I wrap him in a koala bear hold as my giggle rings through the air. "We were

going to relax with a gorgeous view from the deck”—he kisses my cheek —“hike in the woods”—he nuzzles my nose—“destroy the bedroom beyond all conceivable recognition.”

I groan, the idea a tempting tease. “And you’re sure we *can’t* go?”

His lips find my ear. “Nope. But now you know why I kept sending those memes all week. They were hints.”

“The Blue Steel memes?” I grasp his hair. “I thought you just liked Ben Stiller.”

“No, it was a whole thing. *Blue Ridge Mountains, Blue Steel.*”

“Very clever.”

He walks me into the living room. “That’s your suitcase next to the ottoman. Josie packed it.”

“You two did all this just to preserve a surprise?” I sigh into his mouth between two kisses.

He really took charge and planned an entire getaway. No one has ever done anything like this for me before.

His hand squeezes my ass. “I can’t make any promises as to what’s in the suitcase. I did add a swimsuit to the mix when I figured out our mountain dreams were dashed. Picked it up on my way home from work.”

“Wait, you have a pool?”

“Hot tub. Haven’t used it yet, so we’ll break it in together.”

“Oh gosh. I hope the suit fits,” I admit.

“I hope it’s too small so it rides up, personally. You can try it on for me after dinner.”

“And you can take it off me after we swim.” I tighten my legs around him, and he grinds out a feral sound of need. “Who needs a cabin anyway? Though I am curious what happened to your plan.”

He deposits me on the back of his couch. “Turns out the *one* unit I booked doesn’t allow pets. Just my luck.”

“Ah, the struggles of pet ownership. Don’t worry, I’m more than thrilled to stay here.” My feet dangle from my perch. I peer over my shoulder. Andi is sprawled near the roaring fireplace, chewing on cardboard and ignoring all the suitable toys scattered around her.

“I got you a present.”

Alex perks up. “You did?”

“Not you. Andi. It’s in the rainbow bag.”

He jogs back to the foyer and lifts the tote bag from the ground. With a

flourish, he pulls out an ombre pink blanket. His expression is unreadable as he turns it over in his hands.

“It’s for her crate. To make it cozier.” I purse my lips for a few seconds. “Is that okay?”

His eyes meet mine. “You made this.”

It doesn’t sound like a question, but I answer it anyway. “Yes.”

“It’s amazing.” He closes the distance between us and presses a soft kiss to my lips. “*You* are amazing.”

My heart rights itself as he hops over the couch to give it to her.

“She can get used to it right here and now,” he announces, draping it over her body.

She immediately shimmies out of it and starts pawing. I’ll have to tuck it into her crate at some point before she destroys it.

He flashes me his yummy back as he heads for the kitchen. It’s nicely hugged by his tight white shirt. “I’ll cook for you tomorrow. Tonight, I thought we’d order something. What do you like? Thai? Indian? Italian?”

I hop off the couch and march into the kitchen. “*Hmm*. What’s the best first-date food?”

He has a buffet of take-out menus spread out on his counter and one pulled up on his phone. “This is hardly our first date.”

“Our first *real* one.”

“Our first real date was at the food truck courtyard. I don’t want to rewrite our history. You looked cute as hell that night, even if you tried to bathe me in purse wine.” He lifts a flimsy tri-fold paper with an oil stain. “The Spice Delight is a gem. I’ve ordered from there several times.”

The butterflies in my stomach breed more butterflies. “So we’re counting them all as dates? All the times we’ve been together, even when they were questionable?”

He flicks the menu back to join its brethren and circles the kitchen island. Reeling me in with a hand behind my back, he pulls me tight to his chest.

“Just because they weren’t perfect doesn’t mean they don’t count.” He levels me with a look that could melt a glacier. “Perfect isn’t real, but this is. And every day with you gets better and better.”

My heart is dangerously close to combusting. “To think we almost missed each other in that parking lot.”

“I would’ve found you some other way. A freight train wasn’t stopping this, even though I was in denial for a while there.”

I lay my cheek against his chest. “Me, too. I’m glad I came to my senses and kissed you first.”

He laughs into my hair. “I teed that kiss up for you. Now tell me what you want to eat.”

“Okay, mastermind.”

We debate food, settling on Indian.

Andi keeps us plenty entertained as we wait for the delivery, sprinting between us and demanding belly scratches.

We eat at the ottoman like it’s a table. I get tipsy on the warmth of the fire, the earthy tang of Saag Paneer, and the half-bottle of Pinot Noir I inhale as we talk over dinner. So much so that I’m not worrying about dinner bloat or anything at all when he asks if I’m ready for the hot tub.

I drag the suitcase into the bathroom and unzip it. I spy a lot of silk and lace considering I was going to the mountains.

And then, a scrap of red fabric.

“Alex! This is not a bikini,” I yell from his bathroom, which might as well be the Palace of Versailles with its heated tile. “This is dental floss.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Suited up, I step into his bedroom. He’s seated on the edge of his bed in his swimsuit, hands clasped and elbows perched on his knees.

His gaze shoots up, and then so does he. He approaches with a hand over his chest. “Goddamn, you can’t be real. Spin so I get the whole picture.”

“Floss,” I remind him, turning on the ball of my feet. I make it a hundred and eighty degrees when he gathers me against him, hands roaming over my fire-warmed skin. He bites the curve of my neck and mumbles something that sounds suspiciously like *straight to bed*.

“Once we get in the bed, we will never leave the bed,” I say, nearly breathless as he cups where I’m already damp for him. “Let’s relax in the hot tub first.”

“You expect me to relax while you’re wearing that in my hot tub?” he asks gruffly.

“You can watch *me* relax, then.”

He groans and slaps me hard enough on the ass to leave a mark.

“I’ll need you to do that again later,” I say over my shoulder as I drag open the sliding glass door to his back deck.

“You are an evil woman.”

My laugh rides away in the breeze as my feet touch down on grainy

concrete. The air is thick with the scent of jasmine. I close my eyes and inhale.

Alex follows me outside with a bundle of towels he deposits unceremoniously on the ground next to the water.

“You didn’t tell me it was *below* ground.” I pinch his arm. “You’re so fancy.”

“Basically, it’s a small pool.”

He hits a switch on the wall, and the water turns an electric purple as it stirs to life. He dips to kiss my forehead before stepping in the water.

My muscles sing as I slowly submerge in the hot water. When I’m chest-level, I break away from the stairs and float to the other side.

We face each other like opponents in a ring. I can’t help but answer his smile with one of my own. “What are you thinking about?”

“Exactly what you’d imagine with you in that suit.”

If I wasn’t already hot, I’d start steaming as he floats toward me with a devilish look in his eye.

I need to stop stalling and say *the important things*. “Before you flirt with me any harder and render me senseless, I have a question.”

He pulls me in his lap. “I have an answer.”

The press of his chin in the crown of my head and his broad chest curving around my back tethers me to his body. I’m trying to get the words out—*what are we*—when his phone rattles and rings against the deck.

He goes rigid behind me.

I crane my neck to look at his face. “Need to get that?”

“Nah. It’s just Derek.”

I float off his lap. “Really, I don’t mind.”

He glances between me and the phone, frowning, but reaches over the side of the hot tub. Water droplets sluice down his back as he fumbles with the phone.

“I rejected it,” he says.

It goes off again the second he submerges himself, as if to say *fat chance*.

With a sigh, he looks over his shoulder. “That’ll be his follow-up text, asking why I’m ignoring him.”

I stay on my side of the hot tub so as not to distract him. “As long as you aren’t avoiding him because of me. I’ll feel bad.”

“No, I’m avoiding him because of *him*.”

Three seconds later, he snatches the still-chirping phone off the deck.

Settling back in his seat, he hovers it above the glowing water as he presses buttons. “How about I turn it off...”

He trails off, brow furrowing.

“What’s wrong?” I slide beside him on the built-in seat.

“He’s, uh, gotten himself into some trouble.” He pauses to clear his throat. “More than usual.”

I only catch the most recent screen message before Alex obscures it with his thumbs as he types something back.

If I don’t pay this guy by Monday, I’m fucked. He knows where I live.

About a thousand questions form in my mind, but I start with the most pressing two. “Are you okay? What is he asking for?”

“He owes five thousand dollars to his weed supplier who fronted him inventory, which was a foolish move on his supplier’s part. But Derek is convincing when he wants to be, so I’m sure he promised he’d be good for it. This kind of thing happens all the time, but it’s not usually this much money.” His exhale is shaky. “And usually whoever he owes money to doesn’t know where Derek lives, which is at my aunt and uncle’s place. That’s a fun new bonus stressor.”

I wince, running my hand in small circles over his back. “What do you usually do when he asks for money?”

His lips press into a line as he stares at his phone. “I give it to him. Not always at first, but then my uncle gets involved because *he* doesn’t have the money to loan Derek, and it turns into an ordeal. It’s just easier to take care of it than dealing with the guilt.”

My brain does a double take. “Why would *you* feel guilty? And why does he just assume you have five thousand dollars lying around?”

“They deduced that I make pretty good money ever since I was featured in *Business Today* two years ago. It was a profile for up-and-comers under twenty-five. I made the rookie mistake of putting it on my social media, and Derek saw it. He’s never let me forget it, either. So even though I have zero desire to enable Derek’s shitty behavior, I don’t really feel like I have a choice. If it wasn’t me helping him, it’d be my aunt and uncle, and I don’t want that.”

I’m about to gently suggest that *no one* has to help clean up a mess Derek created, but then Alex rests his hand on my knee.

His tone is so unlike him, so defeated when he adds, “They took care of me when they didn’t have to, so this feels like a way to pay them back.”

A dull pain hits my heart as I rest my hand on top of his. He's trying to pay back the bare minimum attention he got as a kid with cash, and it's obviously not the first time this has happened. It makes me sick to my stomach that he feels he has to do this.

"You're not saying anything." He looks at me for the first time since he got the text. "What do you think about all this?"

"Do you really want to know?" I ask, squeezing his hand. "You may not like it."

"I do."

"Okay. I think if the money were going toward something positive or something you believed in, it would be a kind and very generous gesture. But since you mentioned bad behavior and enabling, maybe that means you don't actually want to support that. It sounds like he'll just keep doing things like this so long as you're helping him."

He nods, his gaze moving back to his phone. Maybe that wasn't the answer he wanted.

"But it's your choice, of course," I add in a rush. "You know the situation better than I do. What do *you* think?"

"Derek will be upset, and I'll worry something is going to happen to him. Or my aunt and uncle, with all that 'he knows where I live' stuff. I said no once before when he needed bail, and he didn't talk to me for almost a year he was so mad. But back then, I didn't have any to spare. Even though I'm not in a hurry to shoot the breeze with him, he's still family. Maybe it's just easier to spend the money to solve the problem."

I plant my chin on his shoulder, choosing my words as carefully as I can. "Money runs out. If he doesn't want a relationship with you outside of what you can do for him, that's unsustainable. And horribly unfair to you. But whatever you want to do is the right thing to do. I support you."

The words simmer between us.

He kisses my temple, and then my cheek, followed by my jaw. "You know what I really want?" He sets the phone on the deck and pushes it out of reach. "To go back to our night."

I shudder as his mouth finds my neck. "It's okay to deal with real-life stuff."

"I don't have to decide anything tonight." He pulls me onto his lap again, my back to his chest, arms twined around my middle. One of his hands moves to my hair. He wraps my ponytail around his fist and tugs it to see my

face. “And I don’t intend to. I’ve got other things on my mind.”

“Oh? Like what?”

His lips find mine. At first his kiss is rough, biting and licking inside my mouth, like he needs to release pent-up frustration and this is the way he intends to do it. But as we breathe together and his hand roams my body, his touch is tender. It’s as though whatever irritation or hurt he felt a minute ago is forgotten at least temporarily, floating away with the steam as he remembers that no one can get to us here.

We are blissfully alone.

Our breathing grows ragged as my heart rattles against my rib cage.

The heat is getting to me. The intimate stroke of his fingers against my stomach, beneath my breasts, grasping my thighs, is getting to me. He’s learning how I like to be touched and handled, what makes me gasp and move. It’s like he’s breaking me in so I’ll only fit him.

I wanted to ask him what we are, but I think he’s trying to show me.

Thirty-Three

ALEX

Mia's kiss is as greedy as I feel. It's exactly what I need.

I never should've brought my phone out here. Hell, I should've kept it off all weekend. I finally have Mia to myself for an entire weekend looking like the best present I could ever receive, all tied up in a string bikini bow, and I opened the door to a bad mood by checking my phone.

All of that can wait until Sunday. Or forever. This weekend, I have to show Mia the best time so she wants this as much as I do. I need her to see how well we fit together. And starting off with Derek's drama is not setting the stage.

Time to focus on her. Which is so easy with her writhing in my lap as I touch and tease her everywhere except the places I know she wants to be touched.

She tries to turn around for the second time.

I make a sound of dissent, anchoring her to my lap with my hands on her legs. "So needy." I guide them open like I'm offering what's mine to the rest of the empty hot tub.

"*Please.*" Her lips slide against mine. She arches her back, driving her ass into my lap harder, her tits on tantalizing display. "Turn me around so I can kiss you for real. Can your neighbors see us?"

"No one can see us." I hook my finger inside the tiny triangle of fabric that covers a fraction of her right breast and slide it aside, exposing her hard nipple to the night air. Goose bumps ripple across her skin that I'd like to smooth with my tongue.

Taking my sweet time, I do the same with her left side. Her wet chest heaves, and I stifle the powerful, gripping need to take her in my palms and then my mouth.

But I don't touch her right away, even when she angles toward my hand. I place my mouth next to her ear. "Close your eyes and relax."

"No relaxing. I want you now."

I dip my hand in the water to get it wet. She whimpers as I dance a wet finger over the hard peak of one nipple. The sound is fuel for my already charged cock. "Can you trust me?"

"Reluctantly," she says, but it's all breath and no bite.

I set to work, rolling her nipples between my fingers, massaging and pinching the way I'm learning makes her impatient.

She tugs at the bow at her hip until it unties.

Very impatient indeed.

I let her untie it, and then the other side as I continue my steady work on her chest. She slings her bottoms off the side of the tub, and I'd laugh at her eagerness if I wasn't concentrating with every fiber of my being on not bending her over the side and fucking her right here and now.

But I've waited too long to have her here, with no other demands on our time. I'm not rushing for nothing.

We drift sideways as she settles her bare ass against me. She twists her body to solicit my mouth, hand plumping herself in offering. I oblige, giving her tongue and teeth and suction.

She reaches between her legs. I steal her hand and interlace my fingers with hers.

"Trust me," I remind her, dragging my lips over her perfect tit. "I can get you there just like this."

If my neighbors were on their porch, they'd probably hear her moan. "I can do it. I'm so close already."

I back off the teeth and give her only tongue, flicking like I would lower on her body, the same rhythm I'll give her later in my bed, and then maybe again on the couch, wherever she wants me, because I'm utterly wrecked for her.

My tongue is steady, and then faster, and then it's back to sucking—

Almost panicked, she lets out a string of obscenities. "I—*oh wait*, maybe I —"

Her body rocks in that *almost there* way as she grasps for something to hold on to. The movement drives me sideways, and my hip hits a nozzle.

An idea strikes hard and fast. I pivot our bodies, lining her up with the steady stream of water from the jet, close enough for her to feel the pressure. I shield her with my hand from the blast. "How badly do you want it?"

“Please.”

I move my hand, and it hits her full force. She gasps my name, spreading her legs to position herself just right. My hands slide all over her slick body as the water works her over. I could come like this, too, *fuck*, I might with the way she’s moving against me as I hold her in place.

She tenses, and her mouth falls open. I’ve never heard the sound she makes before, but I’m certain I’m going to hear it every time I’m alone in bed and missing her. Every time I stroke myself, I’ll hear that cry of relief. Her legs snap shut like she can’t take another second of it, and I fall backward into the seat.

Her body softens and her head falls back against the crook of my neck as I wrap my arms around her.

“If I didn’t trust you before, I do now,” she murmurs. “I didn’t think I could do that. I was so close, it felt so good being teased like that, and then you added the jet...inspired idea.”

“Stick with me,” I say, mustering a cocky smile when all I want to do is luxuriate in her words. In her trust. “I’ll never leave you wanting.”

She turns around and lays her palms on my chest. “Now I’ve got some things I’d like to try.”

As I look into her eyes, I have no choice but to tell her the truth. “You can do whatever you want to me. I’m all yours.”

“Yeah?” She plants a kiss on one cheek, and then the other.

I cup my hand around hers, holding it against my racing heart. It must be written all over my face, how much I feel but can’t put into words. “Yeah. Get used to these weekends. There will be more of them.”

Her smile is brighter than the moon.

• • •

I might as well add Mia to my lease because come Sunday afternoon, there’s not one surface of my house we haven’t carved a memory into. I’m never going to be able to dine at my kitchen table without thinking about losing to her at card games while our eggs burned on the stove top.

I’ll never be able to watch a movie without thinking about her head on my shoulder and her tears hitting my skin. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* got us both good. I pretended not to cry. And when I forced her to watch my favorite stand-up comedy special, she gave up pretending it wasn’t funny.

And I’ll *really* never look at my bed the same way, now that we’ve slept in

it together. Waking up at random in the middle of the night to find her face buried in my chest, our warm and clingy bodies illuminated by the low light of my television home screen was the thing I didn't know I needed most in my life.

Our parting hug next to her car is forlorn. I linger in her arms, dread welling deep in my chest. "There's no rush, you know. You can stay for lunch."

"I wish I could. But I've got so much to do to prepare for this week." She rubs my back, always so quick to soothe. "Sunday work scaries are very real."

I laugh into her hair. "Yeah. It's gotta be the Sunday work scaries and not that I've gotten used to having your cute ass around all day."

"Why is it so hard to let go of you?" she murmurs into my chest.

Cleverness evades me as she squeezes me like she needs me. All I can manage is one whispered comeback. "*Same.*"

With mumbled reluctance, she breaks away and climbs into her car.

It shouldn't sting to close her door. It shouldn't concern me that we don't have a firm day that we'll see each other next yet, due to our schedules. This is normal. This is what people do. They continue living their lives as they date.

But this isn't *my* normal. The sensation coursing through me is completely foreign.

The hammering in my chest as she adjusts her rearview mirror and readies herself to drive, as though a part of my heart is about to launch into space, the already-missing-her longing in my gut, and the swell of heat and need and pure *affection* when she blows me a kiss knocks the wind out of me.

I lunge for the car as she starts to back up. It lurches as she stomps the brake and rolls her window all the way down.

"What's wrong?" Her bright eyes scream, *Have you lost it?* "Did I forget something?"

My hands curl around the window frame. Something rears inside of me, desperate to escape.

I love you.

No. I can't let those words out when there's no chance they're reciprocated. Maybe someday, but surely not this fast. It hasn't been long enough for that.

At least, I don't think it has. This is not my field of expertise.

“I don’t want you to go,” I finally say.

She throws the car in park, and her mouth meets mine in a soft brush, and then another, until it spirals into a frantic confessional of a kiss.

When not nearly enough time has passed, she breaks away, her hands still cupping my face. “I can’t get out of this car or I’ll never go home.”

I like the sound of that.

Get it together, dude.

“I guess you’ll have to,” I say after a long breath. “Who else is going to cut twenty-four butterflies out of posterboard for the kids to decorate? No normal person.”

Her laugh is a revelation. I’ll do anything to hear it again and again. Her giggle and those dimples will be my vices. “I never claimed to be normal.”

With that, we finally say goodbye. When she’s gone, I drift inside, limbs still electrified. It takes me a few seconds to figure out what I’m supposed to be doing.

I’ve never been one to dread a work week because I start them Sunday afternoon. I’m always at my home desk or couch, plugging away at projects by three p.m. Today I can’t bring myself to do a lick of work. I take Andi on a walk and watch another movie and later text Ezra a picture of my dinner because he loves wings and I enjoy how excited he gets, as if he can’t drive himself to Buffalo Wild Wings and eat the same exact thing.

It’s peaceful. Turns out I like taking days off.

As I eat my last wing, my phone lights up beside me. A quick peek lets me know it’s just Brooks adding a meeting to my schedule for tomorrow.

I consider toggling over to my calendar to get mentally prepared for the week ahead. But I want to hold on to this good feeling a little while longer.

Because tomorrow means dealing with Derek. Mia was right when she said it’s unsustainable for me to keep giving him money whenever he comes calling. I need to tell him it can’t happen, even if it’s tough.

I lean back in my seat, sauce burning the insides of my cheeks.

So much for my short-lived peace. The real world always has a way of crashing back in.

Thirty-Four

ALEX

Monday is so busy and draining I don't even break for lunch. By the time I cross the fourth floor at 4:28, I'm in full Garfield mode, fantasizing about lasagna.

The conference room is empty. I pull out my phone to check the calendar, confirming the four thirty hasn't cancelled.

But no, the meeting is still there.

With Richard.

Guess we'll be in his office, then.

I knock on his door twice and let myself in at the sound of his voice.

"Good afternoon." I slide in and close the door behind me.

"Have a seat, Conroy."

No pleasantries, then.

His office is stiflingly hot. I place my laptop on his desk and pull out a chair.

"You won't be needing your computer." He levels me with a probing stare as I lower into the seat opposite his desk. "I'm not here to talk shop."

My internal sirens blare. "You're not?"

"No." He folds his hands on his desk. "I'd like to know how long you've been seeing my daughter."

A swell of adrenaline and then fear wallops me. The one-two punch. "Excuse me?"

"No use pretending, Conroy." He leans back in his chair, his words sharp. "You've lied to my face. Disrespected me. Hell, you came to my *house* and sat among me and my family and never said a word. Now's your opportunity to own up."

Inside, I'm frozen. Outside, I try to keep my voice as calm as possible. "I

really don't think we should discuss this here. Not without Christos, at least."

"This isn't a matter for Christos, Alex. You can't talk to me without HR present?"

I deflate at the derision in his tone. "I didn't realize Mia told you."

"She didn't. When Chester sobered up, he put two and two together as to how he knew you. Wasn't hard to figure out the rest."

It takes every ounce of restraint not to drop my forehead into my palms. Benihana Chester ruined it in the end, just like I feared he would. I should've fled that party after I left Mia's room so he wouldn't have time to recognize me. Instead, I lingered for the company. I tricked myself into thinking I belonged there, with her family and friends.

"So you two have been running around for weeks, out in public, and I'm the only schmuck in town who didn't know it?"

"No. We have *not* been running around. We were barely dating at that point when Chester saw us."

"Is it *because* she's my daughter? Is this some sort of ploy? I don't know what you stand to gain—"

"No." My temper flares as I grip the arms of his chair. "It's not a ploy. I didn't go seeking her out. I met her on an almost blind date before she ever stepped foot in this office. I tried *not* to date her from the second I knew who she was, even though quite frankly, there's *nothing* prohibiting this kind of relationship. This isn't in the goddamn handbook."

His finger lifts in admonishment. "Don't raise your voice to me."

"I will not sit here and listen to you question my intentions on a topic you know nothing about."

He points at the photo on his desk. Oblivious Mia smiles back at both of us. "This isn't some bullet point on an agenda. This is my daughter we're talking about. You may be king of this castle, but when it comes to my family, it starts and ends with me."

"Daughter or not, she can make her own decisions. Does she know you know about us?"

"I'll have my talk with her soon enough." He lifts the photo of Mia and her sisters from his desk and stares at it for what feels like an eternity. "Do you have any idea what she's been through? That girl had hell handed to her. She was humiliated and abandoned the day of her wedding."

"I understand she's been through a lot. It's horrible what happened to her. But that has nothing to do with—"

“No, you *don't* understand. Until you've watched your baby girl sob on the bathroom floor, sick from the sadness, crying *why me*, you can't possibly understand. If I could've prevented her heartache, I would've done anything. Which is why I'm not going to stand by and allow you to come in and play the same kind of game with her.”

“This is not a game to me.” I push up from my seat and point directly at her photo. “I love that woman, and I won't sit here and listen to this. Especially when she's not here to speak on her own behalf. You don't get to make decisions for her just because you are her father. This is her choice.”

His anger fizzles into an exhausted sigh. “Love?”

I lower my hand as defeat hangs in the air. Fuck, I said it out loud.

When I clam up so thoroughly I can't answer, he closes his eyes for a beat and gestures to the chair. “Sit down, Alex.”

My legs don't want to sit. My brain doesn't want to comply.

I drop into the seat.

“You may have strong feelings for her, but I know exactly what you're about. I've had a front-row seat for three months now. Once upon a time, I *was* you. A workaholic. Addicted to the job, trying to build something for myself. I figured out my priorities before it hurt my marriage, but I understand it. The allure of the climb. The thrill of accomplishment. Being everything the people at the top want you to be. You're an opportunist—you have to be to hack it at the top. But so long as you only care about furthering your career, you can't be available for someone else.”

As if he understands why I do the things I do. Or *why* I care so much about bettering myself. He calls my career a climb. I call it clawing for survival at all costs. I spent the first seventeen years of my life with no control over anything. But instead of letting my circumstance win, I figured out how to make it better. How to thrive.

I've always been proud of that. But the look in his eyes makes me think he sees it as some kind of weakness.

“I'm good at what I do,” I say through gritted teeth. “That's not a crime.”

“Yes, you do your job very well. But it's your whole life. You live and breathe it.”

Mia's face sneaks into my head. Even here in the middle of this fight, the thought of her calms me.

My career *was* all I had, until I met her.

“It's true that it's important to me,” I say. “But it's not everything.”

His voice lowers a notch. “As a father, I’m going to do anything I can to protect my daughter. You’re going to be successful, no doubt about that. But life is about more than money and prestige. Are you really ready to be the man she needs?”

My chest tightens. “Yes, Richard. I am.”

He looks unconvinced. “What’s your plan here? You own that house of yours? Is Avondale your end game? What about when your headhunter calls you up and tells you there’s another company that needs fixing? That’s your path. Are you going to sit out those opportunities, or are you going to ask Mia to give up her entire life here to follow you?”

My body tenses. “We’ll make it work.”

“She deserves someone who can take care of her and make her a priority, wouldn’t you agree?”

My mind reels. Is that really what Mia wants? To be taken care of? She won’t even let me help her paint sets unless coerced.

But if it’ll make her happy and make her father see I’m serious about this, then I can do that. I can take care of whatever she needs. “I will make her a full priority. I’m not going anywhere.”

Richard studies me as if he’s searching for answers. “Relationships are wonderful and terrible, the best and worst days of your life experienced with the same person by your side. They’re in health and in sickness. No one wants to believe the sickness part, they gloss right over it in the vows, but it’s there for a reason, because real life can be ugly. Relationships are sacrifice and always, *always* showing up for the other person no matter what you’ve got going on. If you want to conquer the corporate world, go do it. Just don’t open the door to a life with my daughter unless you’re sure you’re ready for all that and can see it through to the finish.” Something raw and soft shines through the expression he usually keeps shuttered. “Because I cannot see her hurt like she was again.”

My head hangs. Hurting her is not an option.

Mia wants marriage, the house, the socializing, a big, happy family running around, and whatever else she had growing up that was so idyllic. She wants everything I taught myself how to live without.

But I want her, whatever that entails. If she wants a house, I’ll get her a house. If I don’t make a commitment that proves I can be more than my job, I’m going to lose her the second her father sits her down and talks her out of this.

I can be what she needs. I will be. Problem solved.

A plan takes shape in my brain as Richard continues to speak.

“You’ll thank me in a few years,” he says with confidence, like we’ve settled this. “You’ll get to the top, Alex. Your future is bright. All the money, all the prestige, whatever you want—it’ll be yours. I have no doubt we’ll be in your rearview soon enough.”

I rise to my feet.

Ever the salesman, dangling shiny things in front of my face. He thinks it’s that easy to sway me.

Before Mia, it would’ve been. That stuff was all I cared about before her.

“Thanks. That means a lot, coming from you. But I’m not going to stop pursuing Mia.”

He stiffens. “What—”

“Call me an opportunist.” I lift a hand. “Call me naive to relationships or anything else you want. But you’re not going to scare me off of being with her. Like me or not, I’m going to be with her as long as she’ll have me.”

He crosses his arms, sizing me up. “Hell of a way to ask for my blessing.”

I shake my head on the way out. He’s lost it if he thinks I was asking. I’m going to handle this my way, before I lose her.

And I don’t need his permission to do it.

Thirty-Five

MIA

“I think I love him,” I blurt as I burst into Cake My Day’s empty lobby.

Josie pauses, pink rag stalling on the countertop near the register. “Come again?”

Her confusion is warranted. After holding in the news for twenty-four hours because I wanted to tell her in person, I raced here after work without warning her I was coming.

“You think it’s too fast.” I throw my backpack, purse, and thermos on the part of the counter where customers could sit and eat, if there were any. “Oh my gosh, you’re judging me so hard right now.”

“The L-Word,” she says evenly. Her yellow shirt is cheerful and effervescent, a sentiment I’d like to see reflected in her reaction to my news. “Whoa.”

“You and Ezra say I love you.” I pace a line, my reflection moving in the gleaming glass. “I’ve heard it.”

“Sure, but we’ve been exclusive since our first date and spend almost every night together. We had a little more time to get there.”

“I’ve spent plenty of time with Alex. Technically, we’ve been dating for months. And we just spent the whole weekend together, which changed pretty much everything in a way I can’t really explain.”

“You’re explaining it with *I love you*.” Her smile lines come out like the sun breaking through clouds. “That says a whole lot.”

I ball my sweaty hands into fists at my side. “Please tell me your thoughts before I explode. Also, friendly reminder that you encouraged this. You told me to go for it with him. I need you to tell me this isn’t a huge mistake.”

“Calm yourself, Iago. I think it’s *fantastic*.”

My sigh of relief could fill a small balloon. “Why didn’t you *open* with

that?”

“It’s fun watching you sweat. But you have my full support. I hope after all these years of friendship you know I just want what’s going to make you the happiest. Alex makes you happy. I can feel the energy when you’re in the same room.” Her eyes soften. “My precious Pisces went and fell for a Virgo.”

“If it’s a bad cosmic match, don’t tell me,” I say with a laugh.

“I’ll send you a compatibility write-up. I think you’ll be very pleased. Have you told him?”

“Not yet.”

“Ooh, I love knowing things first.” She drops her rag and laces her hands together under her chin. “You realize what this means, right? We’re going to have so many double dates in our future.”

I perk up even more. “We have to try more escape rooms. Or bowling, or rock climbing. Heck, all of the above!”

She squeals and claps. “Yes to all these things and more. So when are you going to tell your dad? Probably should rip that Band-Aid, right? Get the truth out there so you can stop being sneaky.”

My answering sound is that of a leaky hose.

“You have to tell him eventually,” she argues. “The sooner you do, the sooner you can get the awkwardness out of the way and start a real relationship.”

Awkward would be the best-case scenario in telling my dad.

“I don’t want to think about that right now. Can you just live in the happy bubble with me for a minute? Literally for one minute because I have to run by CVS and pick up Dad’s blood pressure pills, and they’re ready now.” I lift a finger. “He’ll need those for tonight’s game. We’re watching the Hawks and the Celtics at his house.”

“He’ll also need those for when you finally tell him about Alex.” She kneels behind the display case to get eye level with her creations. “What do you think? Should I package something for you to drop off at Alex’s house on the way to your dad’s? It’ll be a cute little drive-by. What’s his dessert of choice?”

“A pop-over with dessert? And scare him off? Absolutely not. I’m trying to play this whole thing cool.”

“Sure, because nothing says *playing it cool* like banging him beneath a One Direction poster in your childhood bedroom during a family party because you just can’t help yourself. You two are so dramatic.”

“You love that poster.” I fail to hold on to my faux rage as I meet her eye. “This feels good. Kind of scary how good it feels, actually.”

I stop before I mention the rising tide of nerves because I know they’ll come and go. They are the leftover nerves you can’t scrape out of the bottom of the jar so you just get used to them being there. I think love will always make me nervous. The better it is, the scarier it is because you could lose yourself to it if you aren’t careful.

Her charcoal-lined eyes narrow in curiosity. “Scary? Why? Love is a certifiably *good* thing.”

I glance down at my hands. “I don’t want to hand over my heart to Alex and merge our lives only to have it all fall apart. I worked so hard to not need anyone the last year and a half. Mason leaving proved that you can’t depend on people. It’s terrifying to give someone the power to change your life. In some ways, I feel like Alex already has. In little ways, like the way I want him at all the places I used to enjoy going alone. I don’t want to become the same naive girl I was the first time I was in love, totally dependent on someone else to feel whole. I don’t want to need someone unless I know *this is it*. And how can anyone know for sure?”

Her expression is stern. “You cannot let Mason take one more thing from you, Mia. He robbed you of six years and then gave up when he figured out you weren’t going to be the kind of wife he could control. He *wanted* you to need him, but you never truly did. Don’t let him prevent you from loving again. Alex is not him. He’s not going to steamroll your life and make you feel small only to break your heart. When you love the right person, they make it safe to need them.”

A confusing mix of hope and fear blooms in my heart. I brace myself against the glass counter, staring at my clasped hands.

It *can* be different.

I’m different now, aren’t I?

“Start small,” she continues, lips lifting in a patient smile. “Start with going to Alex’s house and saying those three little words out loud, and everything else will fall into place one piece at a time. There’s no rush.”

I peer up at her through my lashes. “How do people willingly enter into relationships knowing how much it hurts when it doesn’t work out? Feels like jumping into a bonfire in a flammable polyester jumpsuit.”

Her smile is as warm as a high-noon sun. “You take the risk knowing the alternative of life without the other person is *far* worse. No fire involved.”

She waves off my fear like she's dispelling a fog. "I won't let you be scared of love. We're in this together. Strength in numbers." She removes a snickerdoodle cookie from the case and takes a bite. "I love Ezra so much I want to cry and curl up in the fetal position. Who would've guessed I'd turn into such a sap?"

"Couples trips," I say in a reverent hush. My eyes feel like they've been replaced with hearts. "We could go somewhere we love with the boys, enjoy it through their eyes."

"You mean the Denny's on Forsythe?"

I cackle. "I was thinking more like Disney World. Road trip and all."

She feigns suffering with a hand over her heart. "You really want the first thing Alex learns of you now that you're exclusive is that you're a Disney adult? He may change his mind."

"So I shouldn't tell him about the sequined collectible Minnie Mouse ears? Or of my elaborate ranking system for animated movies? Gosh, there's probably a lot I should've divulged *before* I love-trapped the man." I peer over my shoulder at the door like he might be listening at the entrance.

"I'm kidding, Mia. You should tell him everything." As my gaze snaps back to her, her lips lift at the corners. Something like the *L-word: friend edition* sparkles in her eyes. "The right one will love it all."

...

Dad is nowhere to be found when I get home from the bakery. I spend the rest of the afternoon and early evening lounging in the quiet. The game is starting soon, and the dinner I ordered is now cold.

The quiet nips at my heels.

I shoot Dad a text thirty minutes before it's scheduled to start. Maybe he got held up with a client.

I'm holding a bottle of wine and a canister of loose-leaf tea, debating which one feels right on a Monday evening, when the front door finally creaks on its hinges.

"Hey there! I was about to send a search party," I yell.

Dad doesn't say anything back like he usually does.

"I hope that's you and not an intruder. I've got a stainless-steel frying pan and I'm not afraid to use it."

He passes the doorway to the kitchen but doesn't enter. His shoulders are slumped and everything in his gait screams *dead on his feet*.

Just as he's about to disappear from view, he comes to a stop and turns his head toward me. From his reddened nose, wind-stung cheeks and messy hair, I'd bet money he's been sitting at his favorite table on the patio at Creekside, nursing a drink since leaving work.

"Are you—"

"Of all the men you could've chosen," he says, voice low and hollow, "why did it have to be him?"

My grip on the bottle and the canister tightens.

Him.

Every good feeling in my body grinds to dust.

I try to speak, but nothing comes out as Dad disappears from view.

"Wait." I drop my things onto the counter, and the bottle topples sideways and starts to roll. I catch it with a clumsy hand and right it before bolting through the living room after him. "Don't walk away."

He climbs up the stairs, not even bothering to look over his shoulder. "I have nothing to say, Mia. Nothing you want to hear."

"That's not true. I always want to know what you're thinking."

At this, he pauses and looks down over his shoulder. I already feel small, and standing at the base of this staircase makes me feel no taller than an inch. Suddenly I'm five years old again, caught red-handed stealing snacks from the pantry. I'm nine, busted for sneaking out my window after I saw Lucy do it. I'm twelve, groveling because I got in trouble at school for the first and only time in my entire life.

"I think you're making a childish, short-sighted mistake going after that guy," he says. "And after what you went through with your last relationship, I can't believe you don't see it, too."

I startle at his sharpness. "I didn't go after him! It just happened."

"These things don't just happen. You've heard my stories about him. He cares more about the bottom line than people." He exhales, and it only seems to make him angrier. "You want a family with that man? He needed to hire help just to keep up with a dog! And yet you still engaged in whatever this... this *fling* is, and that's a *choice*."

The fear of being found out transforms into frustration. "He hired a dog walker, not an in-home caregiver. Andi is a puppy, and he has a job. And yeah, I'm sure he does care about the bottom line. It's his job to make Peachtree successful at all costs." I throw my hands up. "You know what? It doesn't even matter. It's not a *fling*." My heart squeezes. "I love him, Dad."

His expression ices over. “And you’ll regret that. All he cares about is getting ahead, and you’ll be collateral damage. Don’t come crying to me when it all falls apart. You know where I stand. I want nothing to do with this relationship.”

Those words land a mighty blow. I force myself to swallow down the hurt. “*Fine*. You want to draw that line in the sand, that’s your choice.” A lump lodges in my throat. “He’s more than just his job, but you’re too stubborn to see it. You’d really rather not see me at all than see us together?”

“You’re not going to listen to me, so there’s no point in continuing this conversation. Goodnight, Mia.”

His eerily calm voice is followed by the *snick* of a door.

No, not eerily calm. Disappointed. And it crushes me.

Every curse word under the sun marches through my brain as I retrace my steps in search of my phone. I finally find it on the edge of my bed.

Alex told him about us. *When* did he tell him?

I have no missed calls, no texts, no hint that he blew everything up without consulting me after I *told* him I’d worry about my dad. He should’ve let me take care of it.

Instead, he had that conversation and, what, went to the gym? Kept going about his day like it wasn’t a huge deal?

I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes so I don’t have to see my reflection in my vanity’s mirror. If Alex didn’t think it was important to tell me, then I don’t want to talk to him right now, anyway.

My thoughts whir a thousand miles per hour with my dad’s words.

You’ll be collateral damage.

Don’t come crying to me when it all falls apart.

He couldn’t even look me in the eye.

I know he’s trying to protect me. Doing the thing fathers are supposed to do, even if he’s wrong about Alex. But what hurts the most is that he doesn’t trust me to make my own decisions. It’s as if it never occurred to him that I know what’s best for me.

A hiss creeps in the crack of the door, growing louder.

The kettle.

I tear down the hall. It’s screeching by the time I reach it. The handle scorches my palm as I lift it off the burner and I drop it. Tears spring to my eyes as I shake my hand. I left it unattended so long the heat seeped through the old handle. Maybe I deserve that for keeping secrets.

Though right now, I wish we'd kept it even longer.
Forget the tea. I need to get out of here.
My phone vibrates against my legs. A text from Alex.
I'm outside.

Thirty-Six

ALEX

If I wait any longer, I'll lose my nerve.

Mia marches down her dad's front yard barefoot in a loose dress, hair wild in the wind. She pulls open the door with such force I'm afraid she'll rip it off. "What are you doing? You can't be here right now. You ignited World War III. Wait, how did you even know I was here?"

"I asked Josie where to find you when you weren't at your apartment." I start to get out of the car. "We need to talk."

"Sit back down," she urges, peering over her shoulder. "We need to get off my curb before he sees your car. Do you want to go for a quick drive?"

I twist sideways and pluck an envelope off the backseat, the words threatening to explode out of me. "I applied for a mortgage today. For us."

She goes shock still. "What?"

"I'm buying my house. I talked to the owner today to feel him out, and he's willing to sell for the right price. I think I'll get a great interest rate; my credit is impeccable."

Her arms cross over her chest like she's hugging herself. "Why would you do that?"

"Because you want a house," I say. "I want to get it for you. Sorry, for us."

Her mouth falls open. The distress in her eyes is not what I was expecting.

"Okay, slow down. You decided this today?" she asks. "Are—are you okay?"

"Yes. You don't seem happy."

She opens and closes her mouth a few times before speaking. "Because I'm in shock."

Andi's sleep whimper makes Mia jump. Her gaze moves between me and the backseat where her travel crate is buckled in.

I shrug. "I couldn't just leave her at home."

She drops into the front seat and shuts the door. "People don't just buy houses on a whim. Especially without talking to their girlfriends. Which...I guess we're safe to use the word girlfriend now, right? If you're proposing *a house*."

"I'm proposing a hell of a lot more than that." I reach into my pocket and pull out the box. It took me less than thirty minutes start to finish to find her the perfect ring. It's unlike I've any I've ever seen, the same way she's unlike anyone I've ever known.

Her hand closes over mine before I can open it. "Wait. Stop. I need a second. *A lot* of seconds."

I wince. That's certainly not the enthusiasm I hoped for, but I did spring it on her. I just assumed she wouldn't want a mortgage-size commitment if we weren't at least engaged, but it's possible this is too much to cram into one evening.

"Can we just drive?" Her voice cracks. "Go to the end of the road and turn right. Park next to the boat ramp."

Silence expands between us as I take us to a small gravel lot with a sloping boat ramp. Moonlight pools on the choppy river in front of us as I throw the car into park.

"What happened with my dad that has you acting like this?" She turns sideways in her seat, stare probing.

"We had a conversation."

She gestures for me to keep going. "About houses and marriage?"

"We talked about our relationship. He shared his thoughts." My stomach twists as I add, "Sounds like he talked to you as well, since you all but dragged me off his curb."

"He sure did," she mutters. "And he had plenty to say."

Great.

"Why didn't you let me tell him about us?" She rubs the space above her left eyebrow. "Or we could've at least done it together."

"Chester told him." I drag my hand down my face. "He didn't recognize me at your dad's party initially, but when he sobered up, he remembered seeing me with you."

She blinks upward and lets out a slow breath. "Of course. If there is a way for a Larabee man to screw me over, they'll find it. Now what exactly did my father say to you?"

I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter. It obviously got in your head if you’re buying houses and whatever is in that velvet box.”

“I love you, Mia. That’s what’s in my head, heart, and every other part of me. That’s what’s important. The conversation with Richard may have been the catalyst, but the house and all the rest is inevitable, don’t you think? We’ve been inevitable since the start.”

“Alex.” Her eyes soften. “I love you too but *this*”—she gestures between us and then all around the car, as if to say *this mess*—“is impulsive. Being with you feels right, but you taking it upon yourself to make decisions for the both of us about the future does *not*. What if I want to be on the mortgage?”

“You can be. I just got the process started.”

“Without asking.”

My brow furrows. “You like my house, don’t you?”

“Sure, but that’s not the point. What if my credit is terrible and gets us rejected? It isn’t great, nor is my income. And is that why you were going to propose? Because it makes more logical sense to be married if we’re going to make a purchase this big? Or is it because you *actually* want to marry me?”

“I wouldn’t buy a ring if I didn’t want to marry you, Mia.” I rack my brain, trying to make sense of her reaction. “I’m just showing you I can take care of you.”

“I’m not asking you to take care of me.” She shakes her head, her gobsmacked expression lit in silver by the moon. “Is that what you think I want from you?”

“You told me you wanted a house, a marriage, and your own school. I can make that happen. Which reminds me”—I retrieve my phone from the center console—“I also reached out to an old employee of mine. Remember I told you several of them are former teachers? Well, one of them actually went on to open a charter school. I’m not sure it’s exactly the same as what you’re wanting to do, but I set up a call next month so you could pick her brain.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “You did *what*?”

I show her the webpage of the charter school. “See?”

“Yes, I see the phone.” She lowers my hand. “Alex, I’m not actually opening a school. Even though I believe in the Montessori methodology, I’ll have to treat it like a business to get it off the ground. That feels like a hurdle I can’t jump. I’m a teacher, not a businessperson. When I told you all those things I wanted, I wasn’t saying *you* had to provide them for me or I’d walk

away from our relationship. I was saying I was going after them myself. And by trying to do all this for me, it makes me feel like you don't think I'm capable of doing them on my own. But more to the point, you didn't ask me about any of it, and now I'm left playing catch-up." She rubs her forehead. "I have so many thoughts, but now I feel like you've made up your mind and don't really want to hear them."

Her words hang in the air, and my stomach sinks.

Fuck. I grossly miscalculated this situation. Richard *did* get in my head, and he was completely wrong about what Mia wants.

Mia doesn't need anyone to swoop in and take care of her or make decisions for the both of us. I didn't need to ambush her with a house to prove my love. I should've just *told* her I loved her and that I'm committed to her and proposed any other day. Perhaps not inside my car.

"Listen, I overstepped. I see that now. Your dad— No, it doesn't matter. This is on me. I didn't think about it from your perspective. This is stuff we should've talked about. Of course I want your thoughts."

Her brow furrows. "My dad what?"

I shake it off. "The talk did get in my head, that's all."

"Please just tell me what he said. I don't understand how you talking to him led to the rest of this."

I try not to show my reaction to this question, because it's all grimace. "He doesn't like me, and he doesn't want me to be with you. That's the gist. Not a huge surprise. But I wasn't about to let it stop me. I'm not."

Her lips tip into a frown. "I'm sorry he made you feel like he doesn't like you."

"It's fine." The words come out clipped. "He doesn't have to."

I'd like to steer this conversation somewhere more positive. I cradle her face, and she leans into my touch. But when I shift forward to capture her mouth, she pulls back.

"It's not fine. He's only seen bits and pieces of you," she says. "He doesn't have the full picture. I need him to see the incredible man I see."

I sigh as my hand drops away, a long-buried shame clawing its way out of hiding. "But he doesn't, Mia. And we have to figure out how to live with that reality."

When I think maybe that's the end of it, she sits up straighter, determination etched in her features. "What if you spend more time together outside of work?"

It won't help, I almost snap. But I manage to keep my voice steady, even though the truth stings. The truth is nothing I do will make him like me. Nothing I say is going to make him think I'm a good person, let alone good enough for Mia. In the worst twist of fate, the one thing I'm actually good at—doing my job—is the thing he hates most about me. No amount of success or money is going to help me win over Richard. In fact, it's made it all worse.

And on a personal level, my own mother didn't want me, my aunt and uncle barely tolerated me, so why would Richard want me dating his daughter, or as part of his family?

I've accepted that it's not going to get better. But Mia clearly hasn't.

"He's never going to approve of me." I turn toward the windshield and stare at the horizon. "He'll never accept me into your family. And I'm not going to grovel. He wouldn't respect that."

I hate how pathetic it all sounds spoken aloud. I wish I could reel the words back into my mouth.

"You can't just give up on him," she says, getting worked up all over again. "He *will* approve of you if you put in the time and make an effort. It may not be easy, but it's important, Alex."

"To be honest, I don't particularly care about your dad right now. I thought we were talking about *us* and what we're going to do next now that we're out in the open. Our plans have nothing to do with him."

She stiffens. "I would like you to care. I need you to care. Because no matter what we do next, my family will still be a part of our life."

We've hit a wall.

The hope drains from my chest. I can't believe we're having this conversation, but maybe it was another inevitability I was content to ignore. "I love you, Mia. And I think it's pretty clear I'll do anything within my power to show you that. But Richard's opinion isn't something I can control. So if this stuff with your dad is a dealbreaker, then everything else is irrelevant."

Even saying the word dealbreaker makes me sick. We went from "marriage" to "maybe" in the span of one hellish conversation.

Far too many breaths come and go in the quiet car. She curls up in a ball on the front seat, staring into the night as the river grows more turbulent.

"I'll talk to him," she finally says.

Those four words cut me one at a time.

I want to hear *it's not a dealbreaker* in no uncertain terms. I want more

than anything for her to love me so much nothing else matters, the same way I love her. I'm no relationship expert, but I think if we're going to work, we need to put each other above everyone else.

Andi stirs in her crate. Naptime's over.

I reach for the gear shifter. She covers my hand with hers. I risk a look in her eyes and damn near crumble at the hurt in their depths. "I don't want the night to end like this."

Me, either. I want to kiss this stupid night away, but that wouldn't do either of us any favors. There was always going to be a reckoning, where our future was concerned.

She's in control now. She knows where I stand, and she will have to decide what happens next.

I know she's upset that I'm not the man she imagined bringing into her family. Hell, so am I. But I have to protect myself, too. I put my heart on the line tonight, went out on the longest limb imaginable, and I need something in return.

We don't say another word as I drive her home. Panic is a third person in this car that I try to ignore. She doesn't even look at me as she exits the car with a jumbled goodbye and jogs up her yard.

When she shuts the front door, I'm so miserable I want to claw my way out of my own skin.

Now all I can do is wait.

Thirty-Seven

MIA

I can't be in this house right now.

My panic carries me all the way to my car. I clutch the wheel and try to slow my racing heart before I leave the driveway.

The man I love is offering me the world, but for all the wrong reasons. He did it because he thinks that's what I want from him, that if he doesn't give me a house and a ring, he'll lose me. As if I want him to prove he loves me by making all these major decisions on his own.

Why on Earth does he think that? Do we not know each other as well as I thought? I don't need him to make overtures like this without talking to me or buy my love like he does his cousin's. I need him to tell me he loves me and wrap me in his arms and ask me what I want to do next. I want to curl up beside him and talk about the future and our fears, not be told they are all taken care of or, in the case of my dad, they can't be helped so we just have to deal with it.

My dad must've said something else that triggered this that Alex isn't telling me. Because if he simply said, "I don't want you with my daughter," making all these grand gestures feels like an act of rebellion, not love. Or maybe just pure fear.

If Alex and I buy a house, I want it to be because we can't face another sunrise without each other. If he proposes, I want the words steeped in love, not fear.

And if he loves me enough to move in with me and marry me, why is it that the one thing I want the most—him to fix this thing with my dad—is the one thing he's unwilling to do?

This is all proof that we need to slow down and get on the same page. Once we go down that road, there's no going back.

Fresh fear floods me. Does he know that once we merge our lives and go all in, it could still fall apart? Does he understand relationships can fail no matter how in love you may feel at the start? We could give each other everything and wind up with nothing when it's all said and done.

And we have a very real problem that could get in our way.

It scares me that Alex believes that a relationship with me won't include my dad. His words were, "Our plans have nothing to do with him." How will our life together work if he's content to avoid my family until the end of time? If they can't find a way to get along, it'll be that *thing* we always fight about the way some couples fight about money or household chores. We won't make it.

Things were so tense when he dropped me off. I'm not even sure where we stand.

My stomach churns as I drive the path to Josie's. I'm so distracted I almost miss the turn-off into her neighborhood. A flickering streetlamp brings me back to the road.

Stomping the brakes, I cut the wheel to get in the turning lane.

The cut is too sharp, and I jerk sideways, bumping the curb with the right side of my car. I straighten out and wait for the car to correct course.

My hands clench as I hold the wheel steady. I've hit a few curbs in my day, and it didn't feel like this. The car shouldn't vibrate unevenly like a roller coaster on a wooden track, should it?

My tire.

No, no, *no*.

I pull into the first safe place I can get to, the parking lot of a leasing office at an apartment complex.

With a slow breath, I climb out of the car. I already know what's coming before I circle the vehicle.

Sure enough, the front passenger's side tire is flat.

Damn it all. I never did replace those things. They were just waiting for the smallest provocation to give out.

My eyes fall shut as I take a breath.

I can't stay here. I can't call my dad to help me. And I can't call Alex. Those conversations would go about the same. *I can't change a tire, so even though you don't want to see me, can you help me?*

Not happening.

I peer up at the starry sky as the night air holds me in a tight embrace. I

could call AAA, but a strange sense of calm and determination works through me.

I have the tools to do this and a spare in my trunk. I'm sure there are videos on the internet on how to change a tire.

This has to get done, and I have to be the one to do it.

...

Ezra and Josie's cars are in the driveway when I pull into her condo an hour later, sweaty and streaked with weird car juices.

I didn't expect Ezra, and I don't want to interrupt, so I send a text from the front seat.

Can we talk? I'm outside.

Josie's at her front door in less than a minute. One look at my face and she starts mother-henning me, taking my things from me so I can walk inside unencumbered. The smell of her favorite gardenia candle helps center me.

"What's going on? What happened?"

Everything I want to tell her overwhelms me at once. I swipe above my eyebrow. "I had a breakdown. And then I changed a tire."

"What? All by yourself?"

"Yep, had the breakdown all by myself," I joke numbly as I move into the living room. "And the tire thing, too. It was my first time."

"Good on you. I'd one hundred percent call AAA or Ezra to do it for me. You should be proud of that!"

I chew this over, willing my body to feel pride. Or anything at all. Truthfully, it didn't feel nearly as satisfying as I expected. Yeah, I'm glad it got done, but it wasn't easy. I cried in frustration at the rusty jack, fumbled my phone flashlight, cracked my screen, and got a blister trying to work off stuck lug nuts. Now my body hurts.

Doing things on your own is great, but it's also hard. Maybe harder than it needs to be. And the very first thing I wanted to do when I was done was not celebrate how great it feels to change my own tire. I wanted to call Alex. Maybe send him a picture of me sending a thumbs-up next to my handiwork looking like a street urchin.

I unconsciously reach for my phone and physically stop myself from texting him.

"Where's your mom?" I ask.

“She’s at her sister’s house in Macon. Ezra’s upstairs. I’ll tell him to go home so we can talk properly.”

“No. He can stay.”

This earns me a confused look. “Okay. Do you want a drink? A charged crystal? What kind of crisis are we dealing with?”

“I don’t know that a crystal can fix this.”

She places my things on the kitchen counter as we move through the narrow ground floor of her condo. “What happened?”

Ezra jogs downstairs. Seeing him makes me feel like a little piece of Alex is here.

I brace myself with a steadying breath as I slip off my shoes and sink my feet into the carpet. “Alex wants us to buy his house. He also almost proposed.”

Ezra comes to a dead stop on his way to the couch, almost knocking over a fake plant. “*Proposed?* As in marriage?”

I nod.

“What in the cinnamon toast fuck?” Josie shakes her head in disbelief. “You two just became official! When did this happen?”

“About two hours ago, I don’t know. My dad found out about us and confronted him earlier today. They had a fight. Thus a panic proposal was born.” I press the heel of my palm to my eye. “I have no idea what to do right now.”

Her brow furrows. “You said ‘almost.’ Does that mean he didn’t officially do it?”

My shrug is sheepish. “I slowed down the conversation, and it never came back around.”

Ezra drops onto the blue velvet couch and perches his elbows on his legs to stare at the ground.

No one is talking, and it’s making me filter all my words through the *am I lucid?* lens.

Josie sits on the edge of the coffee table instead of the couch, which I appreciate because otherwise I’d feel like I was performing for the two of them as I pace the living room. At least they’re staring at me from different angles.

“Back up,” Josie asks quietly. “Start at the beginning. What happened with your dad?”

“For starters, he told me he won’t have anything to do with us if we date.”

Josie's lips twist in a sympathy grimace. "Oh, babe. I'm sorry. But you know that's not true, right? He was probably just surprised and needs time to adjust to the idea."

Tendrils of hurt wind around my heart. "But he still *said* it. He was so upset, Jo. And a few minutes after that fight, Alex came to the house and ambushed me with all these seemingly wonderful decisions he'd made about our future. Talk about whiplash." I press my lips together for a few seconds as my fear takes hold. "I can't help but wonder if Alex truly *wants* marriage and the whole kit and kaboodle, or if this is all just a knee-jerk reaction to their fight."

"First of all, Alex wouldn't buy a ring or make plans unless he wanted those things," Josie says.

"She's right." Ezra lifts his gaze from the ground. "He doesn't take that stuff lightly."

"Plus if Big Rich gave me a stern talking-to about dating his daughter, I'd probably run out and buy her a house and a ring, too," Josie adds. "He wants to prove that he's serious about you."

I turn this over in my head. "Alex swears he doesn't care what my dad thinks, so I don't think he's worried about proving himself."

Ezra meets my eye across the room. "Believe me, Alex cares what your dad thinks. So much."

My pulse quickens. "He told you that?"

"No, he wouldn't admit it outright. But I know the guy." Ezra watches me carefully. "He spent half his life being ignored by his own family and convincing himself he doesn't need people to care about him, but he does. And he has *you* now, but you come with an entire close family attached, which he's not used to. He's going to do whatever it takes to get that guy's approval by proving he can take care of you, making commitments, showing he's serious about joining your family... It's clear as day he cares."

I blink too fast. My heart aches thinking about Alex putting himself out there in a way he never has. "Clear as mud, since Alex said...not that, in the car."

Ezra's laugh is sad. "His actions speak louder than his words. He's trying to show you both how he feels."

These insights paint everything in a different light.

These gestures weren't just for me. He was signaling to my dad that he's serious about this, too, that he's not going anywhere, that my dad is wrong

about the kind of guy he is.

It wasn't an act of rebellion. It was a commitment.

"Crap." I let out a long groan. "And I harped on how Alex needs to try harder to get along with him, when he's trying so hard in his own way. I don't want him to feel like he has to *prove* himself to anyone. Yeah, I want them to get along, but it's not going to change my mind one way or another. I'm with Alex. That's not going to change."

"Does Alex know that it's not going to change your mind?" Ezra asks. "Did you make that clear?"

I try and rehash the conversation in my head. "He asked if it was a dealbreaker, and I didn't have a good answer because I do have concerns. Like, what if this is the thing that makes us fail? It feels like our first hurdle is a pretty dang high one."

"They are grown men. Let them deal with the discomfort at family functions," Josie says. "Your relationship doesn't have to fail over anything without your consent. If you're looking for reasons not to move forward, you'll always find them."

"I'm not looking for reasons." I avoid her eye. "Well, I don't have to look. It's there."

This coaxes a maddening laugh out of her. "My mom doesn't want me to marry Ezra, did you know that?"

I do a double take. "What?"

"He's not nearly Catholic enough for her liking."

"That's one way to say I'm Jewish," Ezra says. "My mother has similar... concerns. But love is love."

"Do you think they can stop us?" She shoots Ezra a look so fond I'm tempted to leave the room. "No way in Hades."

"Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" I press. "In all these conversations about my dad, this could've helped me!"

"Because I don't think this has much to do with your dad at all, babe." Her gaze is pointed. "It's always been about you looking for a reason not to take the leap again."

The silence that follows lasts a lifetime. Another flipbook of memories activates in my head, but this time it's me over the last year and a half. Crying on the bathroom floor the day of my wedding. Rejecting hangouts with my sisters and Josie for weeks after. Making it whole days without feeling the crushing sadness of rejection. Revisiting my own memories and

piecing together where it all went wrong, long before it finally ended. Enjoying my hobbies again and discovering new ones. Daydreaming about things I never thought possible.

Deleting dating apps as soon as I download them.

Looking for reasons why not to like every man I meet.

And then...

Healing.

Unfurling like a sunflower since meeting Alex. Feeling bright and happy in his company.

Feeling fine without him, but infinitely better with him.

I know how to be alone. I know how to fix myself when I break. If I ever had to do it again, I could.

But more than anything, I want to try life with him by my side.

I don't know how long Josie has been talking, but I catch the tail end as the room comes back into focus. "This is your first challenge as a couple, which means it's your opportunity to decide how you'll handle things."

Exactly. "I want to handle things together. That's what I was so upset about in the first place tonight. I want us to be equal partners."

Josie takes her time crawling beside me on the carpet, stretching out on her stomach. She takes my hand and studies my oil-streaked knuckles. "The hot, nice man wants to show you love. He wants to do things for you." She pokes me in the shoulder. "Maybe it was a little much, because, again, you two are dramatic, but it's nothing a little talking won't solve."

Ezra's smile is wry. "Alex is new to this relationship game, but you'll teach him."

"Sounds...simple." Happiness works its way in, forcing out my fear. "Nice, even."

Josie's eyes twinkle. "Love, actually, can be pretty simple when two people are on the same page and assume the other has the best intentions."

"You're making some serious points."

"Of course I am. I've been dating Ezra longer than you've been dating Alex, which makes me an absolute authority on love."

I laugh, and she laughs at my laugh, and soon we're gasping for air as my breakdown is fully eclipsed by my breakthrough. I love him. I'm learning that we show it in very different ways—I want to do the hard work of building a foundation before we get swept away, he wants to call Rocket Mortgage—but at the end of the day, the love is what counts.

I think of him, his face, his smile, of what it will feel like to say *yes*. Not to one specific question, but to *him*. To a life together, without a hint of hesitation.

The feeling in my chest is not butterflies. It's elephants on a rampage. My heart has already said yes.

I force myself into a sitting position as Josie does the same.

"So do we know what the ring looks like?" she asks.

"No. I just saw the box, which means *technically* it could've just been a new collar for Andi with my phone number on it or something."

"Unhinged of him to already have a ring on standby. I wonder when he got it," she says, ignoring my alternate theory.

Ezra leans back in his seat, amusement playing across his features. "Like I've told you, when Alex wants something, or likes something, he goes all in. Remember: telescope in a dorm room. More recently: a dog he's now treating like a duchess. Makes perfect sense to me that he'd propose to you. You're what he wants."

I fight a grin. "Again, he didn't propose. And he may never try again since I panicked so hard."

"What are you going to do now?" Josie asks. "Are you going to his house?"

I pick at the nylon carpet. "Alex did all this nice stuff for me tonight. I need to think of a gesture comparable to a ring and a spontaneous mortgage so he knows I'm all in, too."

"We can help you surprise Alex, if you want," Ezra says, eyes alight as if this thrills him.

My brain is already hard at work thinking of options. "I've got the *Magic School Bus* dress rehearsal this week, then the shows. I've just got to get through that so I can give him my full attention and make this right. He deserves it."

"When is the show?" Josie asks. "I want to be front row center. Well, I guess not *front* row—I'll leave that to the parents."

"You are not contractually obligated to come to this show, but I love you for offering."

She flashes me her fist. "I asked what day, Madden."

"Friday." I stretch my arms overhead, exhaustion settling in my limbs. "I'm going to have to talk to my dad first. He needs to know this is real and that he needs to get on board. It will not be fun, but it's necessary. Maybe if

he understands I've made up my mind, he'll come around. And if he doesn't, I'll have to adjust."

"He'll be okay." Josie pushes up from the table. "Big Rich always bounces back. If not, he can join my mother in the denial lounge. She found out I'm not a virgin last week."

I narrow my eyes. "You haven't been a virgin for eight years."

She scratches the back of her neck. "Well, she got some, uh, proof of it when she came to work early last week."

"*In the bakery?*" I screech. "How is that legal! I'm calling the FDA."

Ezra, unruffled, says, "No food prep surfaces were implicated."

I lift my hands in surrender. "I don't even want to know."

"Don't be such a prude, Mia. You almost banged Alex on the dance floor of that booze cruise. At least that's what all the more sober people told me." She pushes up from the table. "Ezra, enjoy the couch. Mia and I are claiming the bed tonight."

"Don't be ridiculous. That's Ezra's bed now. You two clearly can't keep your hands off each other. Give me your cashmere throw and we'll call it even."

Her expression suggests she's ready to go to blows over this, but something in mine must give her pause. Her honey-toned eyes soften. "You sure?"

"I'm sure. It's enough to not go home to an empty studio tonight, and we can have breakfast in the morning." I tap my temple. "Can't feel lonely if you're never alone."

She taps hers.

It's hard to feel lonely when you've got a Josie. And a bonus Ezra, too.

...

Adrenaline surges through me as I pull up to Dad's house on Thursday after dress rehearsal. It doesn't help that he's in the driveway dribbling a faded basketball and spots my car.

No turning back now.

Abandoning all of my things on the front seat, I approach him like I'm wading through molasses. I do not look forward to upsetting him, but it's time I tell him the truth. And the truth is that I love Alex whether he likes it or not. That doesn't mean I want to lose the bond we have that has only grown stronger in the last year and a half, which is saying something, because I've always been a daddy's girl.

But now, it's time to grow up.

"May I?" I extend my arms.

He bounces the ball my way.

We shoot in silence for a little while, mostly bricks. The only comforting thing about this interaction is that he continues to pass to me instead of icing me out.

"I said a lot of things the other night," he finally says. "I'm sorry for how it all came out. I was surprised."

The neighborhood trees sway in a soft song. "I'm sorry, too. We both said things. I'm the one who started this by not telling you about Alex sooner."

His next shot is all net. The ball hits the concrete with a rubbery *ping*. "Then the sorries would cancel each other out, wouldn't they?"

So many memories exist on this stretch of driveway. A thousand rubbery *pings*, cut-off curse words, celebratory cheers. Lessons on how to shoot and share and be a good teammate. Games that stretched past sunset when the mosquitos would come nibbling.

Someday soon, this moment will be a memory, too. It's the best and worst gift to be so aware of time.

I'm already struggling to find the words when he speaks again. "It's been ten years since we lost your mom. When the management job came open, I thought it was a sign that it was time for me to take on something new. My kids are grown and have moved on, and I felt like I needed *something*. Some symbol I'm not stuck in the same place I've been in since she died. A new chapter. It's possible I took out—er, *continue* to take out—my frustration on not getting the job on Alex."

I hold his eye across the court. Dad isn't one for confessionals. This is uncharted territory.

"I talked to Christos," he adds in response to my tentative stare. "He's a smart man. Smarter than me when it comes to this stuff. Sometimes you need someone who can kick you in the ass a little bit when you're out of line."

I squeeze the ball, eyeing the swishing net. "Christos is good people."

"So is Alex. He has to be if you'd go for him."

My shot barely makes it in as his words sink in.

He recovers the ball. "Nothing happens by accident. I met your mother on an elevator in a city we didn't even live in, going to the top floor of a tourist trap I never intended to visit."

The warm embrace of this well-loved story surrounds me. "But you found

that ticket on the sidewalk and went anyway. And there she was.”

“There she was.” His smile is faraway, like it’s just for her. “What’s meant for us *always* finds us, Mia. I want you to be happy. If the kid is going to make you happy, then that’s what’s supposed to happen. I won’t stand in your way.”

My throat is too dry to swallow. “But you said—”

“I lashed out in the heat of the moment.” He holds the ball like he’s holding the world in his hands. “I’m human. I make mistakes. You’re the last one who actually values my opinion. I never would’ve wished for what happened to you with Mason, but selfishly I’m grateful you wanted me around a little while longer. We got more time together because of it, and time is all we’ve got. But your future is yours, and you don’t need me anymore. Everyone deserves what I had with your mother.” He chokes on his words, grunting through them as he shoots a basket. “Doesn’t mean it’s easy to let you go.”

I blink toward the sky, eyes burning. “This isn’t goodbye. I’m not going anywhere.”

“You can’t promise that. And you shouldn’t have to. The kid—*Alex*—is smart, and motivated, and has a world of potential. If you’re with him, you should open yourself up to the idea that there might be more out there for you to conquer, too.”

I came here with an air of defiance in my step to tell my father that I love Alex and that I want to be with him no matter what. That we’d prove him wrong.

But there’s no fight to be had. And we both seem to know it.

“You want me to leave you here looking like Eeyore in the driveway, playing basketball all by your lonesome?” I joke, throat tight. “What kind of daughter would I be?”

“Doesn’t matter where you go.” He puts his hands on his hips, flashing me a grin. Not the one that gets him the sales or flatters his friends, but the one he saves for us. “You’ll still be the best kind.”

I swipe beneath my eye, staining my finger with mascara. “Maybe it’s time we get you on a dating app. I hate to think of you withering away in this big ol’ house while me, Lucy, and Harper are on triple dates.”

He laughs, a booming hug of a sound. “Be reasonable. We know technology is not my friend. I’ll have to meet someone in real life. Know any single lookers?”

“Dad.” I squeal. “You really want me to be your dating fairy godmother? I could barely find myself a match.”

“If the shoe fits.” He winks, and I snap a mental picture. Moments don’t keep. But memories do.

Thirty-Eight

ALEX

“Sit.”

Andi walks in a circle, tail in the air.

“Sit.”

She lifts a paw, batting at the air.

“Fine. Stand there and look cute. Makes no difference to me.”

She plops her bottom on the ground.

I roll my eyes, stalking toward the kitchen. Training is going about as well as every other area of my life.

What are the rules about drinking at 2:37 p.m. on a Friday?

My doorbell sounds. I ignore it. Only solicitors and scammers come by unannounced on weekday afternoons. Unless it's after four p.m., in which case it's probably a Girl Scout cookie saleschild. I'm more than open to Thin Mints.

“Watch the credenza!” Max's voice carries through my house, winding around the corner to meet me in the kitchen.

“It smells like lavender masking trash in here,” Ezra replies.

I glare at the doorway, waiting for them to materialize. “Excuse the fuck out of me?”

Ezra and Max freeze as they pass the open doorway on their way to the living room, mismatched Rubbermaid storage tubs in each of their hands.

“You're home,” Ezra says carefully. “Didn't see your truck.”

“It's in the garage. What are those?”

Ignoring this, they keep walking until they hit my bedroom.

Two *thuds* let me know those storage boxes are now part of the flora and fauna of my home.

“Ezra.” I charge toward the living room to meet them. “What's going on?”

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” Max informs me.

“I’m having a mental health day from work,” I mutter.

And the last two days, I worked from home. Maybe I’m not handling this brief limbo situation with Mia as well as I thought I would.

Max nods, a sympathetic smile on his face. “Good for you. Use those days, buddy.”

“You were planning to visit my house *without* me here?” I press.

“Please. I visited Andi twice last week while you were at work. At your insistence. Let’s not feign outrage.” Ezra smacks my shoulder. “Your front door was open, by the way. And maybe put on some pants?”

I look down at my black boxers and hairy legs. “Fair enough.”

The brothers disappear down my hall toward the front door.

“Wait, where are you going?” I yell.

Ezra doesn’t slow down. “To get the rest of it.”

“The rest of what?”

This goes unanswered.

In their absence, I enter my bedroom, feet sinking into the carpet as I approach the teal Rubbermaid.

I crack the lid. My breath stalls in my lungs.

It’s...clothes.

Girly, frilly, lacy clothes. Prissy clothes. A damn smorgasbord. I dig through the box, my chest painfully clenching.

I lift out a worn Avondale Elementary T-shirt.

Mia.

A box of Mia’s clothes, in my bedroom.

Before I let my mind run away from me, I check the second box to confirm this isn’t some fever dream.

This one is *all* sneakers. My frugal woman must have a grand’s worth in this one container.

Ezra and Max wordlessly drop off a painted blue dresser as I pull on a discarded pair of jeans off the floor near my closet door.

“Furniture,” I say at their retreating backs.

She’s sending her clothes and furniture *here*, when she thought I was going to be at work.

I tell her I’ll get us a mortgage, and her answering play is to move all her crap in to surprise me.

It’s perfect.

I love her so much I want to build a shelving unit for her sneakers. I want to buy stock in Nike in her name and take her to the flea market. I want to kiss every inch of her, feed her every meal, and feel her beating pulse against my chest as I hold her in our bed.

I've got a crush on the cute teacher, you could say.

Andi nips at my ankles as I storm the living room in time to find Ezra and Max lowering a small desk to the ground behind the couch.

"She told you to do this?" I clarify, needing to be double *certain*. "You didn't rob her, right?"

Ezra's lips twitch like he's been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "I'm not allowed to answer your questions, dude. I'm just the muscle."

"You weren't supposed to be home," Max repeats.

"She wants her stuff here? *All* her stuff?"

I can't even bring myself to care that I sound as eager as Andi's yipping bark.

"Let me tell you what *I'm* up to today," Ezra says, dragging each word out for emphasis. "I've got a few more things to bring inside. Then Max and I are going to go eat Pho while I wait for my girlfriend to attend an important show for her friend." He pauses. "You are not invited to Pho. Unless you are an absolute idiot, then yeah, I guess you can come."

I check my bare wrist for the time, come up lacking, and turn to my wall clock.

I've got a few hours until her show starts.

Clapping my hands together, I lead the men down my hall, a new spring in my step. "Let me help you get the rest. Three movers are better than two."

Ezra lets out a sound of defeat. "Are you going to call her and tell her you know? I'm trying to gauge whether I'm somehow in trouble for ruining a surprise, here."

"Oh no. We will be having this conversation in person."

I'm going to surprise the surpriser.

...

"Kids are so wild," Josie yells in my ear, competing with the noise of the show's closing number. "I can't believe this is Mia's *job*. I'd need a strong sedative to deal with this."

We're all the way in the back, standing-room only, trying to stay out of everyone's way. As charming as the high-pitched performance is, we're here

for Mia.

She did an incredible job.

The raucous applause of this cafeteria filled with parents, siblings, friends, and family members as the kids take their final bows is kind of like a drug. I wish I could bottle it up and save it for Mia's next bad day on the job when a kid, or twenty of them, is driving her to tears.

As the fanfare dies down, Mia steps out from the shadows and approaches center stage. She starts her closing remarks, but the kids don't wait for their cue before running off the stage to join their families. Even with a microphone, it's hard to hear her over the chaos of families reuniting.

"I obviously know," Josie says as we hang back and wait for the noise to die down. "About all of it."

I side-eye the brunette. Her usual airy temperament has solidified into something more substantial. "I'd never trust Ezra or Mia to keep a secret from you."

She nods toward her best friend, who is currently descending the stage's stairs. "This is really it? You bought her a ring?"

Mia makes her rounds. It's like watching a comet streak the sky as she laughs and hugs parents and kiddos. Her dimpled smile plucks at my heart.

"I will not confirm nor deny the ring," I say, resolute. "I don't care when we make it legal. She's it for me either way."

"Fine, keep your secrets. Feel free to ask for my help with the proposal when the time comes." She sighs, but a smile breaks through. "Congrats on your new roommate."

"Speaking of roommates, when can I expect to move *your* furniture in the middle of a weekday to an unsuspecting Ezra's house?"

That smile widens, but a hint of wistfulness sneaks in. "As soon as I know my mom is good on her own, I'm there."

As the crowd thins out and Mia finally makes her way toward the back of the cafeteria, her attention lands on us. Our eyes lock, and it feels like it's been three months since I've taken her in my arms instead of a few days.

My pulse beats like a drumline as she closes the gap.

"You both actually came?" Her pretty eyes widen as they flit between me and Josie. "To *this*?"

Josie thrusts the bouquet of flowers I bought into Mia's arms and proceeds to crush them when she hugs her. "Never change, Mia. If you ever figure out how much people love you, you'll be insufferable." She blows her friend a

kiss, shoots me a wink, and scoots through the crowd, leaving us alone.

“Congrats on a great show.”

“It turned out okay, didn’t it?” She beams with pride. “I’m really glad you came.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” Fighting the urge to tackle my girl where she stands and claim her lips, I settle for dragging my fingers lightly down her ponytail, feeling the silky strands. “The most unexpected thing happened today. I was enjoying my day off, totally relaxed and not at all miserable, when a team of uninsured movers started loading up my house with boxes of lady belongings.”

“Huh.” She steps closer, tipping her chin to get a good look at me. “That is unexpected.”

“It was, actually.” I hold her gaze. “I didn’t see it coming at all.”

“I wanted to wait until this weekend, but Ezra and Max had today free for the heavy lifting.” Her eyes sparkle, even in the low light. “And maybe I didn’t feel like waiting anymore. After a night like this, all I want is to go home. To you.”

I want her to repeat it, to roll that tape again and again. Instead, I cup the side of her warm neck, where I plan to put my mouth later, and study her. “Mm. Is that right?”

She shudders gently at my touch. “Yes. You okay with having a roommate?”

“A second roommate, you mean. Andi won’t take kindly to feeling replaced.” I stroke her skin with my thumb. “The show was incredible. Your hard work paid off in a major way. This is where you belong.”

“About that.” She peeks over her shoulder at the stage. “That old teacher friend of yours...you think she’d still talk to me? I have a few questions for her.”

I perk up even more than I’m already perked. “Yeah?”

She nods. “I have so many things I want to do with my career that it’s intimidated me. Maybe I was a little afraid that I’d crash and burn if I stepped out of my element. But I’m not scared anymore. Turns out, I fell in love with a man who’s *great* at business and can help me if I get overwhelmed.”

“That is *great* news. My girl is going to do big things. And when you’re feeling overwhelmed, know that I’ve got you.” I dip my head to kiss her as pride swells in my chest. “Always.”

“Miss Madden?”

We turn in unison toward the source of the sound. *Kiss interruptus*.

KC is eyeing us with suspicion. "He came back. Is he your boyfriend?"

A few other students nearby close in on us, edging us closer together. Their families watch on with idle curiosity.

She smiles and shrugs a coy shoulder. "I certainly hope so."

"He is." I clear my throat. "I am."

And I still intend to be her forever. But what's the rush? We've got plenty of time for formalities. As long as we have each other, we have everything we need.

The kids titter and disperse, amused for the length of their five-second attention span that *Ms. Madden has a boyfriend* before growing bored of it.

Not me. I think I'll keep staring at her, stars in my eyes.

Thirty-Nine

MIA

Alex presses a string of kisses against my lips and down my throat as his body pins mine against his front door. “Welcome home.”

The sentiment is as warm and sweet as the Georgia summer night. My head tips back to let his mouth roam my neck. “This is the most perfect place.”

“Our stoop is the most perfect place?” His fingers find the hem of my dress and slip inside of it to trace the warm skin of my thigh. “Give the rest of the house a chance.”

“*Our* stoop is amazing,” I murmur dreamily. “I’ve always wanted one of these. Kind of a dream come true.”

“You’re easy to please. That bodes well for me.” He lifts me with one strong arm, just enough that my toes brush the ground and I’m forced to cling to him as he unlocks the door. “Just wait ’til you see what else comes with the house. Pretend you’re seeing it for the first time, would you?”

I already love this game. “All right, then. Show me all the amenities.”

He carries me inside and kicks the door shut. “This is our foyer.” He spins to give me the full effect. “Best foyer in the neighborhood, no doubt.”

A photo of me and Josie in a rustic frame I’d packed and sent over is already hanging on the wall, totally at odds with all his trendy modern art.

I smile into his neck. “Fantastic. This will be great for all our foy-ing.”

He sets me down, and our fingers twine together.

“And straight ahead,” he says, a smile bleeding into his voice, “you’ll find our living room.”

A lump forms in my throat as I take in the visual disarray of my knitted throw blanket on his sleek couch and my half-refinished desk pushed against a crisply painted wall.

“I love the living room,” I say quietly. Seeing my things in his house

makes the idea of *us* feel so utterly real, as tangible as the walls or the furniture or his palm against mine. My voice takes on a nervous edge. “But my stuff doesn’t match yours. It looks out of place with all your new things.”

“Who cares? Your stuff is better than my stuff. It’s got character.”

I frown. “You sound like Josie when she doesn’t want to hurt my feelings about how *fugly* something is.”

He grunts in disapproval. “Nothing you have ever touched or made could be *fugly*. My girl has great taste.”

My girl. I can’t help but beam at that. “You may rethink that compliment when you see some of my attempts at homemade clothing.”

“I’m sure I’ll like stripping you of your homemade clothes just as much as I like stripping you of anything else. Now, you’ll note our kitchen on the right over there, nothing much to see in there until you have your way with it.”

“I’m not a great chef, especially when it comes to meat,” I remind him. “I make a better five-finger construction paper turkey than an actual turkey. Thanksgiving will be bleak. But I will decorate the heck out of that room.”

“Then I’ll handle Thanksgiving dinner, and you handle the decor.”

“Deal. And desserts. I’ll handle those, too. If Josie lets me.”

“Fantastic. Now, through those windows on either side of the fireplace, you’ll note the backyard. It already belongs to a hellion puppy, but the hot tub is most definitely ours. You may find you like it even more than the stoop.”

Heat stirs low in my core at the memory of our last hot tub escapade. “That is a very real possibility.”

He takes a sharp left, and his hopeful eyes meet mine. “What do you say we take this tour to our bedroom?”

My heart flutters, and the air leaves my lungs in a gusting exhale. “Definitely.”

It’s a blip of a moment, but it’s achingly perfect in its simplicity: me and him, hovering just outside an open door, agreeing to walk through together. I want to paint or draw or sculpt the way he looks right now, so handsome and earnest, so I can frame it or keep it safe on a shelf and never, ever lose it.

Hand clasped around mine, he guides me inside the gently lit space. Andi is nestled on Alex’s pillow, because my boyfriend is completely whipped and lets her do whatever she wants, and all my storage boxes are neatly stacked near the closet door.

“Hung up most of your clothes already, hope that’s all right,” he says. “And I trashed all your mismatched hangers because they were giving me a headache. Ordered more so I can finish the rest of the job later. It was tough to color coordinate your clothes because *everything* is a different color. I had no idea how many shades of pink there were. Some are more like red, some are more like orange, and what I’m saying is I think I’ll need a sedative every time I do laundry.”

I imagine him alone in his closet, swearing up a storm as he tried to make order out of my chaotic clothing. I squeeze his hand, resisting the urge to tackle him to the bed and shower him with appreciative kisses. “Don’t worry, I’ll do all the laundry. That was my job growing up, and I’m great at it.”

He scowls at me. “Like hell you will. We’ll share the load. We’re a team.”

I glance up at him. The only sound between us is the whisper of efficient fan blades and gentle puppy snores.

Besides a marriage proposal—which I hope still happens down the road—Alex offering to share *work* with me might be the most romantic gesture I never dared to want or wish for. “Okay, then. We’ll share it.”

He perches on the edge of his expensive-looking bed. I straddle his lap and search his rich brown eyes as our bodies fall flush.

“That cute dog over there,” I say softly, stroking his cheek with my thumb. “Can she be *ours*, too?”

His chest rises and falls in sync with mine as his hands cradle my jaw. Something raw in his gaze pulls me deeper until I’m lost there. “I think she’s always been a little bit yours, because *I’ve* been yours for a long time. Whether we were ready or not.”

Oh, do I want to be his.

“I’m ready now. I want everything with you, Alex.” I don’t know how to make my words match the urgent, bursting feeling in my chest. “I don’t care if you own this house alone, or we rent it, or we buy it together. You have my love, wherever we are, whatever we own. As long as we’re together, I have everything I need.”

I settle fully into his lap as our lips meet. The relief of his kiss is quickly chased away by need. His tongue is sure and hot as it probes my mouth, his low groan a question I’m growing desperate to answer.

He removes the scrunchie from my hair and tosses it aside. My ponytail falls out as his fingers plunge through the loose strands. He tugs hard near the root, eliciting my sharp cry. “I think I’ll mess this up, if it’s all the same to

you.”

I trail kisses over his scruffy jaw, landing on his neck. “I think I’ll mess this up, then. A little bruise for you to wear.”

“Mark me anywhere you want, baby.” He tips his head back and groans as I taste his skin. “I’ll wear it like a badge of honor.”

“You can show it off to the town this weekend.”

“Oh yeah?” He gathers my dress in his fists to get it up over my hips. “Where are you taking me, Miss Madden?”

“I thought we’d hit the flea market.” I take his chin between my fingers and drink in his heated gaze. “Then maybe come home and break our bed?”

He flips me on my back with one rough jerk. “You’ve got yourself a date.”

Epilogue

MIA

One year later

“This is stressful. I’m *never* coming to another game,” Josie laments, quite literally on the edge of her seat as the Hawks duke it out with the Raptors on the court.

“Relax, honey,” Ezra yells, even less relaxed than his girlfriend. “We’ve got two more quarters to go, and Hawks are predicted to take it!”

“Don’t jinx it,” my father interjects. He’s wearing the same tattered black Hawks shirt he always wears to games out of fear that changing his wardrobe will singlehandedly ruin the trajectory of this season.

Alex and I exchange a secret grin, trapped between our people. I can’t speak for him, but there’s no place I’d rather us be than sandwiched between my dad and sisters on his left and happily-in-love Josie and Ezra on my right, enjoying our favorite sport. The fact that Alex is seated next to my father and they aren’t talking shop (or, rather, arguing shop) is icing on the cake.

Tonight is the perfect night.

But it might also become an embarrassing night if the next few hours don’t go my way.

Jitters overtake my body when I think about it too long. As we close in on half-time, my nerves explode into *does this count as exercise* territory.

Alex slings his arm around me. “You okay? You’re more quiet than usual.”

“The crowd is loud enough without me!” I say, or maybe squeak as the buzzer rings.

He scratches his jaw, disbelief etched in his eyes. “Okay...”

It’s halftime.

Any second now.

Lucy rises to her feet. “Who’s thirsty? I’m going to hit the concessions.”

Dad yanks her arm. “Wait a minute for me and I’ll walk with you. Need to stretch first.”

Lucy eyes him suspiciously. “You need to stretch while sitting?”

“Yes,” Dad grunts.

Alex’s hand touches down on the back of my sweaty neck, massaging my skin. “Nothing for me, Luce. Thank you.”

Am I thirsty? No.

In need of oxygen, yes. I’m all but hyperventilating, which is silly, because it’s just a kiss cam. I’ve kissed Alex thousands of times, and plenty of those were in public.

Less so in front of my family, but still. The kiss cam felt like a cute dating-anniversary gift until I actually *got* here.

All right, where’s the song? The man told me as soon as halftime started, Marvin Gaye would begin, and we’d be the second couple on the screen.

My fingers tremble. Maybe the magic of the kiss cam is not knowing when it’s coming.

There were a lot of presents I could’ve given Alex to celebrate one year of loving each other. Socks because he’s obsessed with them, a watch for the same reason, a gift for Andi, or something homemade because he proudly displays everything I make for him. And I *did* make him a colorful picture frame for his desk at work. He’s already printed a picture of the two of us from our Christmas cruise to display.

But I knew I also wanted to make a gesture. I want him to feel as wanted as he makes me feel every single day when he tells me he loves me with and without words, prepares my coffee before I’m awake, kisses me like it’s the answer to life’s greatest question, puts gas in my car when I’m low, tells everyone within a five-mile radius when we go out that he’s off the market, whether they ask or not.

When I’m sure I’ve been conned by the alleged “kiss cam operator” and that I’ll never see the money I paid him again, the trademark Marvin Gaye melody starts.

The first couple on screen resists, batting their lashes and rolling their eyes.

Alex snorts and leans in, his warm breath on my ear soothing my fraying nerves for a blissful second. “That was us, once.” He kisses the tender spot beneath my temple. “My jaw is healing nicely, in case you were concerned.”

I bark out a laugh.

The screen people finally give in. They share a rigid peck, like two gummy bears smushed together by a kid yelling, “Now kiss.”

And then, it’s us on the screen.

According to the operator, I have exactly five seconds before the words *Happy Anniversary* will flash on the screen.

I beam, nerves fading as I look in his eyes. “Alex, watch the—”

“Hold that thought.” He rises to his feet in one fluid motion.

“Wait,” I scramble to stand up beside him. “No, sit back down and look at the screen!”

The words *Marry Me* flash beneath our JumboTron faces.

My stomach drops faster than the Tower of Terror.

That is *not* what I paid for. I’m not proposing to Alex.

Did I check the wrong box on the form?

I make the ix-nay gesture so the audience doesn’t get confused, but I think it only confuses them more. “That’s not—”

Alex drops to his knee. “Look at me, Mia.”

I freeze, peering down.

His amber eyes find mine, and the noise of the crowd fades to a dull roar. His smile wraps around me and holds me in place. For a few racing heartbeats, it’s just us. Just me and him, alone somewhere, tangled up in each other. “You know I love you more than anything, right?”

“Oh my god,” I cry, pressure and warmth blooming in my chest.

“Oh my *god!*” Josie yells.

The demanding crowd screams and hollers.

“*Marry me*, Mia. Date me for the rest of our lives. Make me happier than I dreamed possible.” He squeezes my shaky hands, his gorgeous face shining with hope and tenderness. “Please.”

He frees a ring from his pocket and lifts it as Josie shrieks.

The noise fades until it feels like we’re alone and suspended in time. Just him, staring up at me with adoration in his eyes. Every inch of my body yearns for every inch of his. I’m ready to belong to him in every way I can.

“I— Yes. Of course I will.”

My mind swims as he slides the ring over my finger.

Applause swells as he helps me to my feet and plants a kiss on my lips. He tastes like home, and his hands on me feel like a promise he’ll fulfill later.

We kiss for so long Harper yells, “Get a room!” and Dad hacks a loud cough.

I take a step back and release Alex, though part of me wants to drag him to the parking lot so we can process this together in private. It's utterly surreal experiencing the most intense, wonderful, and *overwhelming* moment of my life with an audience.

But there will be time for privacy.

As the kiss cam mayhem comes to a close and the JumboTron goes back to showing the court, I peek at my hand. The sunny yellow stone is big and bright, but not nearly as bright as Alex's eyes as he watches me take in the sight.

"What do you think?" Dad asks.

I peek his way as my pulse finally slows down. "Think of what?"

"What do you mean *of what*," Dad blusters. "Of the proposal! I told Conroy to take you to a nice dinner and propose with the ring in a dessert or something, but he insisted this would be better. Who was right?"

"I was obviously right, Richard," Alex argues. "She loved it."

A smile tugs at my lips. "Wait, you knew about this, Dad?"

"Course I knew," he says, pride infiltrating his tone as his chest puffs out. "We had to discuss it, didn't we?"

Alex shoots me a wink because, *no*, he didn't have to ask my father's opinion at all, and we both know it. But he did anyway because he knew it'd mean something to me. And my dad.

Josie narrows her eyes toward my fiancé. "Well, *I* didn't know. Very rude of you to keep this secret."

But within seconds, her big, beaming smile is back as she launches herself at us, somehow managing to pull Alex and me into a hug at the same time.

From there, time is smudged; it might be seconds or minutes as my family—*our* family—squeals and celebrates, each taking turns to congratulate us.

Ezra hugs Alex for a long while and only gives him a medium amount of shit for keeping this a secret from him.

"You would've told Josie, who would've told Mia," Alex says as they let each other go.

"True," Ezra and Josie say at the same time.

My dad is the last one left to give his congratulations. He levels Alex with a formidable stare as he extends his hand.

"Welcome to the family, Conroy. Officially."

Alex's doesn't move, his eyes pained and warmed in beautiful contradiction. I'm not even sure he breathes until I place my hand on his

lower back and give him a light shove.

He takes Dad's hand.

"Thank you," he rasps. "I'm honored to be a part of it."

My eyes burn as these two ridiculous, wonderful men open their arms for a proper hug.

We take our seats, and I gaze fondly at my ring.

Alex takes my hand and runs a finger over the stone. "You like?"

"Are you kidding? I *adore*. It's the prettiest thing I ever did see."

"It's a yellow sapphire." Alex's proud grin sears right into my brain. I'll remember every detail of that smile when I think about this night. "I saw it and could instantly picture it on your hand. It looked like you."

I hum thoughtfully. "Because I'm shiny?"

"Because you're stunning. And rare. And you wore yellow the night we met." He lifts my knuckles to his mouth and brushes a kiss over my skin. "I love you. You were the first person I ever said that to, so you're going to hear it a lot. I plan to make up for lost time."

My heartbeat is tangible in every inch of my body. I hold his eye as his words sink in. "That was..." I rest my head on his shoulder. "What could I possibly say to top that? I love you isn't enough."

"*I love you* is more than enough for me."

I try and focus on the next quarter of the game, but all I can think about is Alex's fingers toying with my ring, his mouth near my ear as he whispers how much he loves me, how beautiful I look tonight, how I was made for him.

This man is some kind of wonderful, and I get to keep him. Cherish him. Kiss him senseless.

His mouth finds my ear again at the end of the third quarter, and I assume it'll be another sweet nothing. I lean in to listen, a smile already on my face.

"I'd love to taste my fiancé on this side of midnight. What do you say we get out of here?"

If I had a drink, it'd be on the floor.

I rise to my feet, an excuse on the tip of my tongue with several more in the wings. I'll tell everyone I'm tired and need to let Andi out, and if that doesn't work—

"We're going home," Alex says smoothly, grabbing my hand. "Night, all."

Mercifully, we're gone before I can hear any commentary. My entire family knows exactly what's about to happen, but I can't bring myself to

care. I let him drag me all the way to the parking lot with his hand clasped around mine, refined caveman style.

When we find his truck, he all but shoves me into the passenger's seat with a hand on my ass and runs around the front to get to the driver's side. As soon as he's seated, he presses a button, and the engine surges to life.

I place my hand on top of his on the gear shifter before he can reverse. "Slow down, Mr. Conroy. We're not leaving this parking lot until you give me a proper *fiancé* kiss. I've been waiting an hour."

He leans in, pausing just shy of my mouth. "If I start kissing my fiancé right now, I'm not going to stop there."

After a peek out the window, I reach inside my shirt and remove my bra with a flourish. "Great. We're on the same page. Don't stop there."

"You're evil. You know there are too many security cops in this lot for me to take care of you properly." But he stalls, gaze exploring my body. "Give me something else to get me through the drive."

Obliging, I shimmy out of my lace underwear and tuck them in his pocket.

I don't mean to get sentimental while doing this, really I don't, but I notice the ring box in his pocket and get sentimental all over again.

My voice is loaded with a million beautifully tangled emotions. "I love you so much. This is officially the greatest night of my life."

"It's just getting started, baby." He feeds me his best, most winning smile as his hand lands on my thigh. "We've still got forever to go."

Forever.

I like the sound of that.



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Acknowledgments

This book was really some kind of blunderful to write.

Mia and Alex showed themselves to me slowly, as did their friends and family, in a delightful game of character peek-a-boo. But once we turned the corner, there was no looking back. I fell in love with their love, their people, and their sweet Georgia world. Alex, you can buy me a house. I accept, no questions asked. Mia, you can decorate it and bring Josie and her cakes around for girl chats and game nights. You're all very real to me.

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And lastly, thank you to *The Office*. I dedicated this book to the show that taught me a lot about the magic of the mundane. As Pam says in her famous last line of the series, "There's a lot of beauty in ordinary things... Isn't that kind of the point?" Going to Costco, buying baby shower presents, running into someone at a company picnic, desperately wanting your date's parents to like you, hanging out at basketball games, enduring awkward Hibachi dinners...love exists in those ordinary places as surely as it does on a five-star fancy date. Romance doesn't have to be perfect; it just has to be real. To me, that's the point.

About the Author

Romance author Livy Hart has two children, too many Funko Pops, and a husband who's workin' on the railroad—literally. She currently resides in Dallas, Texas where she enjoys long walks on the concrete and people-watching at malls so big they have their own zip codes. When she's not writing, she's bickering with her KitchenAid stand mixer, road-tripping to her sleepy Florida hometown, or sipping espresso on her Nonna's porch.

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In the span of three months, I lost my husband, my NYC apartment, my money, and frankly, my dignity. And then the only person who ever understood me died and left me her house in the burbs. First rule of surviving suburbia? There's nothing that YouTube and a glass of wine can't conquer.