

# STING OP

# ~~FUN~~ *at* 41



"I think my husband  
is with your wife."

*Forty-something*  
**SINGLES**  
*in Virginia Beach*



# KIMBERLY KREY

# STING OP FUN AT FORTY-ONE

"I THINK MY HUSBAND IS WITH YOUR WIFE."

FORTY-SOMETHING SINGLES OF VIRGINIA BEACH

BOOK ONE



KIMBERLY KREY

Candle  
House  
Publishing


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Sting Op Fun at Forty-One: Forty-Something Singles of Virginia Beach

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## CHAPTER 1



S eptember

*Kirsten*

Jack flings open the passenger side door as soon as I pull beside the soccer field. He flips his growing bangs from his face and leans forward to adjust his shin guards, which sends his hair back over his eyes once more.

“Wanna know something weird?” he asks.

I survey my fourteen-year-old son, realizing this could veer into territory I’m not prepared for. “Sure.”

“Every time Dad comes to my games, he sets his chair up next to Parker’s mom, Trish, and they talk the whole time.”

I shrug. “So?”

“So, it’s like, they’re not even watching the game.”

“You know Dad’s not into sports—”

“It’s not that,” he interrupts. “They’re both married to other people. It’s weird.”

I shake my head, recalling how high the jealousy factor is at his age. Early teens who were “*going together*” couldn’t look at another person without a hallway drama unfolding after school.

“Jack, when you’ve been married as long as your dad and I have, you

learn to...not look into things too much, you know? We'd make ourselves crazy."

He climbs out and closes the door. Seconds later, the hatchback opens. "Whatever. And I also think it's weird that every time *you* come, *she* doesn't. It's like she knows he won't be here, so she sends Beau instead."

Normally, I might ask how he knows the name of Parker's parents, but in this case, there's no need. Everyone knows Beau and Trish Wheaton by name. They're abnormally attractive and richer than everyone, too.

I climb out of the car and meet Jack around back. He hands me my tote bag before grabbing a lawn chair, then flings the net bag filled with soccer balls and cones over one shoulder.

"You don't have anything to say to that?" he prods.

I take a sip of my matcha tea and slip the tote bag onto my shoulder. "They probably just switch off every other game like we do."

"You only *think* you do that," Jack says. "But the schedule gets messed up all the time. Dad came two times in a row—do you remember that? And she was here for both of them. And while it would have been *his* turn the week following, *you* came since you'd missed the last one. If they were trading off, it would have flipped to her coming when you do and Beau coming when Dad does. But that didn't happen."

I blink, feeling as if I've just lost one year of my life listening to this.

"I bet you twenty bucks Beau's here today instead of Trish."

My head falls heavily to one side. "You don't *have* twenty bucks, Jack."

"I won't need it," he assures.

I don't say anything. There's no need. I trust Greg. I *have* to; his job as a public accountant has him traveling so often, I'd make myself crazy if I didn't. Besides, the chances of a woman like Trish cheating on her husband with a guy like my adorably geeky Greg are about zero.

"*When* Beau gets here," Jack persists as we near the field, "sit by him. Set up your chair and talk to him like Dad talks to Trish."

"Parents don't play little games like that, Jack. We don't have time for it. Besides, how would that make your dad jealous when he's not even here?"

Jack glances over his shoulder. Since he's the co-captain of the team and in charge of setting up today, we're the first ones here besides poor Lenny Walker, who seems to have not found a life outside soccer.

He continues in a hushed tone. "I don't want you to sit by Beau to make Dad jealous. I want you to sit by Beau so you can ask him if he knows his

wife flirts with Dad every chance she gets.”

His eyes are fueled with enough fury that I know he believes what he’s saying. A knot of discomfort wriggles through me.

Jack has a level head, so I can’t dismiss him entirely, but I have to remind myself that he is, in fact, a teenager. He’s in that season when hormones have their gritty claws in every aspect of life. He might not be seeing things through rose-colored glasses, but by no fault of his own, the kid *is* viewing things from a magnified lens—everything is blown right out of proportion at this age.

When I don’t reply, Jack tsks in apparent disgust, hands over the collapsed chair, and strides onto the field.

“So, what?” I ask, rushing toward him to close the gap. I glance over at Lenny who doesn’t appear to be close enough to hear. I keep my voice low anyway. “Are you saying Dad flirts back?”

His face changes into an expression I don’t recognize on him. I can see in his eyes that he’s deliberating. Struggling with himself to say what he wants—or perhaps doesn’t want—to say. At last, he nods.

“Sorry to break it to you, but yeah. He does.”



## CHAPTER 2



*B* eau

“This is going to be awkward,” I dare myself to say as I unfold a lawn chair beside Jack’s mom. “But apparently, my son and your son think our spouses are hooking up at their soccer games.”

The woman—pale-skinned with strawberry blonde hair—shifts her sunglasses to the bridge of her nose, her large, hazel eyes widening. “Oh my gosh, I *know*,” she says, laughing and sliding the sunglasses back in place. “What the crap?”

It’s a dismissive tone, which is good. I’d never believe it myself—trust me, I’ve seen the guy—so at least we’re on the same page.

“I don’t know about Jack,” I say, “but Parker is paranoid. Is this the sort of thing they teach in school these days? How to make unjust assumptions about your parents’ social life?” I move to stand in front of the chair, looking out over the field until I spot Parker guarding the goal as the practice kicks pummel in. He easily swats one and then another away from the goalbox net before diving across the length to block a low kick aimed for the back corner.

Parker clobbers it beneath his weight.

“*Nice!*” I say with a clap.

“It’s a good thing they have Parker,” Jack’s mom says, smoothing a hand down the length of her ponytail. “He’s incredible. Did *you* play?”

“Jack’s great too,” I tell her. “We might be biased, but I’m sure you and I could agree that without our boys, this team would be screwed. And yeah. I

did play.” I’m sure this woman—like every other soccer mom here—already knew that; I didn’t get the name *Wheaton Weapon* for nothing.

Parker misses the next two shots, one of which was from freaking Lenny Walker, who might just be the worst player on the team. Granted, Parker has more than one teammate taking their aim at him at once, but *sheesh*. I walk around to the back of the lawn chair and pace. I never can sit during a game. Heck, even the practices make me anxious.

Jack’s mom hollers something over her shoulder, but I miss it, so I stride closer and lean over her chair. “Huh?”

She looks up at me over her shoulder and toys with her visor before smoothing her hair yet again. She primps a lot.

“Greg never played,” she says.

I furrow my brow, irritated that I’m missing some of the pre-game action. Parker better not let Lenny get another one on him, even if it *is* just practice. “What was that?” I urge.

She waves a dismissive hand. “My husband, Greg. He never played soccer. He’s not a sports fan.”

I nod, not saying that I could have told her that by looking at him. “Yeah, Trish isn’t either.” Now that we’ve got that out of the way... “Hey,” I say, “how about we tell the boys we discussed it, thank them for their concern, and tell them we agree that they’re overreacting and there’s nothing to worry about. You good with that?”

“I’m *great* with that.”

I nod. “Good. Now, let’s see if these guys can make it to finals.”

## CHAPTER 3



*K*irsten

I'm surprised to see Beau show up to Jack's next game. Despite what Jack told me, I assumed Trish would be here; it's technically the other spouse's turn.

I sigh and glance down at the extra matcha tea I picked up at the Coffee Loft. I figured it'd be a nice gesture. Trish is used to talking to my husband during the games; I figured I'd be the perfect shoo-in. In fact, during the opening practice, I initially planned to thumb through the dozen library books I gathered to select some Halloween reads for story time at work. But again, I assumed I'd be chatting with Trish, so I didn't bring them.

As Beau approaches in all his man-bun glory, I shove my chilled hands into the pockets of my jacket and glance away from the practice on the field, which, so far, consists only of Jack and Lenny. Parker's walking alongside his father. The two seem to be arguing by the look of their postures.

Parker reaches out and gives Beau's shoulder a push. Beau returns the gesture and the two laugh. *Okay, so maybe they're not arguing.*

Before I can tear my gaze off the pair, Beau's eyes find mine across the field. I'm quick to dart my focus back to Lenny and Jack. Jack's giving Lenny some tips on his drive shot.

I was hoping to put Jack's silly suspicions to rest when I relayed the news Greg shared last night. *'Due to a last-minute out-of-town work trip,'* I'd told him, *'your dad won't be able to attend any of the next three games.'*

If these games are the supposed rendezvous place for Greg and Trish, I doubt Greg would have been so anxious to leave town. Still, I really did expect to see Trish today. I was planning to prove Jack wrong. But now, the *one time* I replace Greg, expecting to see Trish like Greg would have, Beau shows up instead.

Probably because Trish weaseled her way out of coming. It's a miracle she came to any of them, as prissy and pampered as she is. She probably still brings that stupid fan I saw her with at practice a few times. I hate admitting to myself that I spent an hour and a half looking for this pair of earrings because I wanted Trish to know she wasn't the only girl in town who owned Gucci.

Ugh. I hate me sometimes.

You know who else I don't like? Beau. He's short-tempered, standoffish, and just as snobbish as his wife is. If I'm being honest, I feel like I can't be myself around people like them. I feel like I have to sit up straighter. Look prettier. Sound smarter. And as a woman who hit the big four-oh last year, I don't have the energy for it. I outgrew this insecure and unsure stage in life, so why now is it creeping back, making me focus on superficial crap I don't usually think of?

"Sup?" says Beau as he plunks his lawn chair on the grass beside me.

"Hey." I keep all levels of energy from my tone because I don't want him to think I'm excited to see him. I'm not. Most women would be as ridiculously attractive as the man is, but he should know that not every single woman in the world is ready to fall all over themselves at his feet. Especially *this* happily married woman who got the cold shoulder from him last week after their *our-spouses-aren't-cheating* chat.

Lenny puts Jack's lesson to good use by driving a straight shot right past Parker and deep into the corner of the net.

"Parker," Beau yells. "Are you *freaking kidding me*? What did we just talk about?"

I roll my eyes. "It's a *practice*," I can't help but say.

"So what?"

"So, just be glad that Lenny's getting better. They might make it to finals after all."

From my periphery, I see Beau roll his shoulders back in irritation before he breaks into a pace behind me. I don't know why he even bothers bringing the chair. It's not like he ever sits on the thing. Unless Trish came too.

Perhaps she stayed back in the car to finish painting her nails or something.

“Is your wife on her way?” I ask, purposely not using her name. The guy didn’t know *my* husband’s name, so why flatter him?

His face scrunches, but he doesn’t take his gaze off the field. “No.”

“I thought it was her turn,” I say.

When he doesn’t reply, I lift my tea and take a sip. After I set the warm cup back in place, I glance at the opposite drink holder in the collapsible chair; I hate that I picked up an extra one for Trish, and she’s not even here. I’m more agitated than I should be, I know that, but the acknowledgment doesn’t change anything. I’m just really bugged all a sudden.

“Why isn’t Craig here?” Beau asks.

I lift a brow. He means Greg, but since it’s close enough I don’t correct him. Honestly, I’m impressed he remembered the general sound of it. “Work trip,” I say.

“Does he have those often?”

I snatch the extra tea from the drink pouch and lift it over my head toward him. “Yep. And you might as well have this. I brought it for Trish.”

When he doesn’t take it from me, I glance back to see him staring at the cup like there’s vomit inside.

“What is it?”

“Matcha tea from the Coffee Loft. My sister owns the one on—”

“No thanks.”

Agitation revs hot in my blood. So hot that I suddenly pry off the lid, dump the tea onto the grass beside me, then shove the lid into the cup. I stuff the empty container back into the cup holder and bring mine back to my lips, eyes fixing back on the field.

Beau doesn’t speak to me again, which suits me just fine.

And though Jack’s team takes the win once the game is said and done, my mood doesn’t lighten.

## CHAPTER 4



*B* eau

“Jack’s mom’s a freak,” I say as I cram into the driver’s seat behind the steering wheel.

Parker glares over at me. “That’s rude.”

“Might be rude, but it’s true. I said I didn’t want her tea, and she made a scene of ripping off the lid and dumping it out right in front of me. Didn’t say another word.”

“You were probably rude about it.”

“I said *no thanks*.”

Parker puffs out one of his exhausted sounding breaths. He does a lot of those lately. “You’re ruder than most men, Dad. You know that, right?”

“I doubt it.”

“No, it’s true. You just get away with it because you’re better looking than most of them too.”

I shoot him a look, but he doesn’t return my gaze. Just keeps his sights outside the window.

“You really think that?” I ask.

“I *know* it.”

I laugh a little. “Sheesh. Honest much?”

“Just with you. You don’t believe in lies. Not even white lies.”

“Right, I don’t.”

Parker shifts in his seat. “You don’t get it. The whole world functions on

white lies. If everyone acted like you, we'd all kill each other."

I laugh again. I can't help it. Where is all this venom coming from? "If everyone was like me, no one would be raising this...snowflake generation, I'll tell you that much."

"I'm not a snowflake," he says.

"You can thank *me* for that." I shake my head and turn on the radio. My son thinks I'm a jerk, huh? I'll show him I'm not. "That was a nice win today."

"Thanks."

"You and Jack carry that team."

"Lenny's getting better. Did you notice that?"

I decide not to tell him that Jack's whacko mother is the one who pointed that out to me. "Yeah, I did."

It goes quiet until we're almost home.

"Are you thinking about it?" Parker asks suddenly.

"Thinking about what?"

There went that annoyed exhale again. "About Jack's mom. What you said to make her dump out the drink in front of you like that."

"Parker, I'm telling you. She held it up, said she brought it for Mom, and that I might as well have it. I asked what it was, she told me, then she started talking about her sister who owns some coffee shop, which I really don't care about, but that's when I remembered what matcha was—it's that nasty-looking green stuff, so I said no thanks. The end."

"Did you acknowledge what she told you about her sister owning the Coffee Loft?"

"How do you know what it's called?"

"It's a really cool hang out, Dad. The fact that Jack's aunt owns the one right on the beach where the old train station used to be—that's really cool. I heard she's gonna expand by adding train cars where you can hang out and study—it's bad-A."

"Hmm."

"So maybe instead of making assumptions or calling people names, you should stop and think about your own behavior."

Only *this* generation of kids lectures their own parents. I never lectured my old man. I'd have probably gotten a taste of his fist if I had.

"I've never heard anyone else call Jack's mom a B-word," Parker continues.

My eyes widen. “Whoa, whoa. I never called her a B-word. I called her a freak.”

Parker shakes his head. “Same thing.”

“Nope. Your generation needs to learn this. They are absolutely *not* the same thing. A B-word I can handle. But when some chick pulls out the freak card...” I suck air through my teeth. “Yikes.”

We’re at the iron gates leading to our private drive, so I roll down the window and wave my card over the reader. The ocean roars from the other end of our property; it’s louder today. We’re probably approaching a full moon. The gates retract, and I drive through, nodding at a couple of guys from the landscape crew. See—I’m a nice person. I always nod at these guys.

As I pull the Benz along our circular drive, I spot Paige’s artwork in colorful pastels on the sidewalk, the driveway, even the fountain.

“Good thing Mom’s out of town,” I say. “She’d be livid.”

“Don’t you think it’s...*odd* that she’s suddenly taking all these girls’ trips?”

I catch him putting his hands down. “Did you just put *girls’ trips* in finger quotes? Dude, being a full-time mom is hard work. She deserves to get away and have a little fun, don’t you think?”

“I didn’t know full-time moms had nannies and house cleaners.”

“Not *all* do. But that shouldn’t minimize your mom’s contribution. This is a big house. It’s a lot to take care of.”

As soon as we step inside, we’re rushed by our nanny, Polly. One thick braid hangs at either side of her head while her fists rest on her hips. “If Paige’s mother is going to insist on being gone so much, you might need to bring on a second nanny.”

I look around the house for any evidence of distress. “What’s the problem?”

“Paige is angry, and she’s lashing out. She does not like it when her mother is gone.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s only been gone a day.”

“Yes, but the trips are increasingly close together, and Paige is really starting to act out. I’ve never known a woman who needs this many nights away, especially one who has a full-time nanny and a housekeeper to boot.”

I can’t help but shake my head. It’s the second time I’m getting attacked over Trish’s stupid girls’ trips. “You know what, Polly?”

“Molly.”



“Oh.” I frown. “Is it your sister who’s Polly?”

She shakes her head. “That’s Holly.”

What kind of lunatic names their kids Molly and Holly?

“I’m waiting...” Molly taps her toe to prove it.

Parker cracks open the French doors and steps onto the patio with a Gatorade in his hand. I want to tell little Ms. Molly not to bother coming back because I don’t like her tone, but after Parker’s sermon on kindness, I decide to proceed with caution. Even *if* the chances of him hearing me over the ocean are slim.

“What time do you get off today?” I ask her.

She glances at the microwave. “Seven. I was supposed to start making supper an hour ago, but...”

Parker lifts his nose to the breeze. He’s not looking, but I know he’s listening. Or at least trying to.

“Why don’t you...take the rest of the evening off, *with* pay. I’ll take it from here.”

“*Thank* you.” Only it doesn’t come out sounding appreciative. It sounds like what she’s really saying is ‘*that’s the least you can do.*’ Already, she’s gathering her things and grabbing a jumbo-sized key chain that probably weighs more than her head.

“Sure,” I say. “Enjoy your night.”

She looks over her shoulder as Paige bursts into song from her way-too-loud karaoke mic upstairs. The song is *Since You’ve Been Gone*, and seven-year-old Paige sounds every bit as pissed off as Kelly Clarkson herself.

“You too,” Molly says and rushes out.

## CHAPTER 5



O ctober

*Kirsten*

I glide my *Neatly Nude* lipstick over my bottom lip, trace up and along my cupid's bow, then rub my lips together as I step back to eye the results in the mirror.

"Please tell me I won't still be doing this for my own husband one day," my sister Maggie says from the edge of the tub. "It's hard enough to find a good one in the first place."

I roll my eyes. "I'm not doing anything *that* special."

She gives me that I-call-BS look through the mirror. "Oh, *please*. You're dressed in pleated slacks, high heels, and Gucci earrings that look heavy enough to rip your earlobes. And with the hair and the smoky eyes and the nude lips...are you trying to be a Kardashian? Because that's what it looks like." She waves a hand toward me. "This is not how you typically dress. Do you think he doesn't like you the way you are?"

I pace my exhaled breath through pursed lips as an image of Trish sears my brain. "You're a lot younger than me, okay, Mags? You have no idea what it's like to be married to a man for over fifteen years. He stops looking at you. Stops thinking of you. Stops talking to you like you're someone he's

interested in. You're just...*partners* in parenting."

Maggie's shoulders slump. "That's depressing."

"It's partly my fault too." I sigh and lock eyes with her in the mirror once more. As she holds my gaze, emotion grips hold of me. I look away as my eyes well with tears. I don't want her to see how I'm hurting. Heck, I didn't realize I was hurting this bad until I tried to reverse the downward direction my and Greg's marriage took somewhere along the way.

Maggie hurries over to me and rests a hand on my back.

"He's just been gone so often," I say, "and when he *is* home, I keep thinking things will be different. That I'm going to make them different somehow."

"It can't be all one-sided, Kiers," Maggie says.

I nod and sniff. "I know, but I'm a *librarian*. I rarely do more than pull my hair into a ponytail and wear jeans and a T-shirt each day. Maybe if he sees me wearing something out of the ordinary like this, he'll..."

"He'll what?"

*Be more attracted to me because I'll look like Trish, and she's the type of woman every man secretly dreams of.* I shrug. "Start making efforts of his own."

"If you say so." She wraps her arms around me and kisses my cheek. "You look incredible. Greg's lucky to have you. He married *up*, you know?" She strides out of the bathroom but hollers over her shoulder. "And I mean *way up*."

I laugh. My friends said the same thing when we first got married. Greg was so serious-minded, which put him on the nerdy side in the social scene. "Bye, sis! Oh, have fun on your date tonight. What did you say he is? A plumber or something?"

"An electrician," Maggie answers. "But he sent me the cheesiest pun about our date, so I'm already second-guessing it."

I lean my head over the railing. "What was the pun?"

"He said he hoped his height wouldn't *shock* me and that I should count on plenty of *electricity* between us." She rolls her eyes, and I can't help but laugh.

"Okay, so those *are* pretty lame. What did you text back?"

Maggie sneers. "See you in a *latte* hours."

"Ha, ha," I say with a wave. "Love you! Let me know how it goes."

"Will do," Maggie says. "Love you too."

I hear Jack come in from the patio.

“Hey there, Jackman, you got any fun plans tonight?”

Jack, who’s taken to mumbling recently, replies only loud enough for Maggie to hear. Not that it matters. I already know what his plans are for the night.

The garage door opens. It’s either Maggie leaving or Greg is home.

A rush of adrenaline shoots through me as I rush back into my room to check my reflection. I hurry into our closet, spray Greg’s favorite perfume into the air, and walk slowly through the mist. The bright fragrance reminds me of the time we first fell in love. I hope it’ll do the same for him. I want to be *more* than Greg’s parental partner. Jack will be grown soon, and then it’ll be just me and Greg again. What then?

The sound of his voice sends a thrill through me. He’s home. I bite my lower lip as I hear Jack talk about the upcoming soccer tournament in Richmond. I’ve been looking forward to the weekend getaway. One we get to take as a family.

I nod, back straight, shoulders poised, ready. I barely make it to the staircase as Greg jogs up to the top, his travel bag clutched in his fist.

“Hey,” he says as he passes me. “I put my laundry stuff down there by the washroom. I’m going to hop in the shower if you don’t mind.”

“You look nice, Mom,” Jack says from the bottom of the stairs. He turns his gaze to Greg, but he’s already disappearing into our bedroom.

“Thanks, Jack.”

“Mind if we just stay in tonight, babe?” Greg calls. The shower flicks on. “I’m just too beat.”

Jack gives me a sad smile that makes my chin quiver.

“Sure,” I say loudly so Greg can hear it over the shower. “I’ll order something in and toss your clothes in the wash.” I clear my throat, praying the tears will stay at bay in front of Jack. My mind scrambles for a pleasant distraction as I take the stairs in my heels. It feels nearly foreign to me now, being in heels. Meanwhile, Trish probably wears hers to bed. Making sure her feet permanently hold that feminine arch.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Jack asks. “You look sad.”

I sniff and cover my face. “It’s just hormones.”

Jack comes up and gives me a hug. “I’ve got to learn to deal with them sometime,” he says, gingerly patting my back.

“Yeah, I guess you do. Thanks,” I say against his shirt. I sniff again and

pull back. “Is that cologne?”

He grins and slaps his jaw. “It’s after shave.”

I try to keep the surprise off my face as I study his. “Ah. And how did you get so tall all of a sudden? I thought I’d tower you in these heels.”

Jack straightens up and puffs his chest. “Red meat. Lots of it.”

Yes, he *is* on a red meat kick. “I told you those steaks would do it,” I say.

“You were right.”

I look at my handsome, growing much-too-quickly son. “You look very nice tonight, too. What time does Parker’s party start?”

“In like an hour, but they’re coming to get me early.”

*They*—as in Trish and Parker? Beau and Parker? Beau and Trish? I want to ask who he means by they, but I resist. “And did you say it’s a boy/girl party?”

He nods.

“Will Lydia be there?” Lucky for me, Jack has been telling me about his crushes at school this year. Probably because Greg’s been gone so often.

Jack’s cheeks turn pink. The cutest, shyest grin pulls at his lips. “Maybe...”

I nod and suck in a breath. “Okay. Just...be good.”

“I will.”

“No spin the bottle.”

“Mom!”

A knock comes to the door.

“Or truth or dare,” I add as I stride over and pull it open.

“There won’t be any truth or dare, I promise,” says the far-too-full-of-himself man standing at my door.

“Beau?”

“Hi...Mrs. Hill,” he says, eyeing me up and down, which is a lot more than Greg did.

My face flushes. “Kirsten,” I say, holding out my hand like I’m in a business meeting.

Beau looks at it for a blink.

*Please just shake it so I don’t feel dumb.*

He does, and his hand feels like solid steel. “Kirsten.” He turns his dark brown eyes on Jack. “You ready, man? Sorry Parker couldn’t come with me. We lost our housekeeper recently, so Parker is making the place shine like the top of the Chrysler Building.” Beau shoots me a look to see if I catch the

reference.

I do. "It's a hard knock life," I say.

Beau grins. "Exactly! Have a nice evening."

"Thanks, you too."

Beau, who's halfway down the driveway, spins on one heel. "Wish me luck. The wife gets home any minute, and she doesn't know there's about to be a party at our place."

"You're kidding." I laugh.

He shakes his head. "Serves her right for running off for a girls' trip."

Something disruptive slithers through my center. "Right," I say.

"Bye, Mom. Hope you and Dad have a nice night."

"Thanks. Love you."

I watch, waiting to see if he's too cool to say he loves me in front of his friend's dad.

"Love you too."

My heart melts a little. Today, I needed that more than ever.

## CHAPTER 6



*N*ovember

*Beau*

Chlorine, you've got to love it.

I spent my childhood summers at the city pool since we didn't live close enough to the beach. First as a daily patron—we had a pass—then as a lifeguard during my teenage years. Being in the hotel pool now with Paige, Parker, and a few of his friends from the team is a crisp splash of nostalgia.

I burst through the surface of the water and roar like the sea creature I'm supposed to be. Paige lets out a shriek.

"Where's her surviving rescuer?" I growl. "Only one remains who can save her."

"That'd be me," Lenny says from the edge of the pool. "But I'm not feeling well."

I'm about to get annoyed at the kid—we're in the final stretch of the game, after all—when Jack speaks up.

"Slap my hand, and I'll switch you out," he suggests, leaning far over to make it easy. "Hurry, man, you can do it. We've gotta save her."

Lenny actually does it, theatrically reaching out in slow motion like it's sucking the life out of him. I watch while the awkward kid grins as Jack

rushes toward Paige with the pink unicorn tube.

“I’m coming, princess!” Jack hollers.

I shake my head. Lenny is as socially inept as it gets. Yet Jack has a way of taking the edge off, making him appear normal almost. Jack’s a better person than I was at his age. Than I am now, actually. Parker’s been telling me I should let up on the guy when I gripe about his performance in games. He’s nice to Lenny and all, but no one goes out of their way like Jack does.

Jack’s a good kid, I decide as he crosses the golden floating finish line with the princess at last. Safe from enemy territory. “You might have defeated us this time,” I snarl, wiping the water off my face. “But we’ll be back.”

Paige giggles and pumps a fist. “We did it,” she says, giving Jack a high five.

Parker rolls his eyes. I know he’s getting old for games like this, but Paige is at the perfect age for them. I’m glad he’ll still suck it up and play along.

“Okay, guys,” I tell them, “you’ve earned yourself two hours of freedom. Go to the outdoor hot tubs if you want. Pick up chicks. Kick back Cokes. Just be in front of the hotel ready for practice by four. You got it?”

Lenny, whose folks didn’t come, nods, climbs out of the pool, and heads for the stack of towels nearby. Parker and Jack say their goodbyes to Paige, sending her floating back toward me on the unicorn floatie.

Inwardly, there’s a puzzle I’m working to solve, but I’m just not sure what it is. Whatever’s bothering me is sitting someplace beyond reach. Dangling in the fray. I’m in sales, which means I make a habit of figuring people out. They’re like puzzles to me at first; I collect pieces at a time through Zoom calls, dinner parties, and drinks at the clubhouse. All the while, I’m searching for that one key to unlock their need for one of our plans.

Yet before it strikes, before I crack someone’s specific code, I get a sensation that feels just like this. Only this time, I have no idea what puzzle I’m trying to solve. What answer is floating beyond my grasp.

“Are you upset, Daddy?” Paige asks, her tiny toes dangling off the edge of her floatie.

“No,” I say. “Why?”

“You told Mommy you were mad she wasn’t coming.”

“I wish she *had* come,” I say. “And I thought you were singing when



Mommy and I were talking.”

“I stopped so I could hear you guys. It’s mean of Mom to stay home.”

“She doesn’t feel well, Pumpkin.” I reach out and secure her withered, waterlogged feet in my hands.

“She said you’re only mad cuz you can’t *pump iron* in the hotel gym now.”

I roll my eyes, not liking how much Paige had overheard. The fact is, since Parker and Paige’s nanny griped about Trish’s girls’ trips, I’ve been bothered by them myself. I’ve been skipping the gym more than ever; at least one of us should be at the crossroads with our kids, and that’s what I thought Trish wanted, too. To be there before they went to school. And when they got back. Is that too much to ask? I feel like I’m juggling it all by myself lately. And when Trish is home, she’s racing from one appointment to the next. Tanning, nails, hair, lashes, waxing. Not to mention shopping.

I never wanted her to feel trapped or resent parenthood by being a stay-at-home mom, but I had no idea she’d want so little to do with our kids.

So, yeah, forgive me for thinking I’d finally get to have a couple of hours to myself at the gym without making our kids feel like they’re being raised by nannies. Forgive me for thinking I’d actually get a sliver of vacation time for myself while Trish lounged in the pool with Paige. It feels like I’m both the stay-at-home parent and the breadwinner. It’s exhausting.

I wonder why Jack doesn’t have any siblings. Kirsten Hill seems like a good mom. One who’s actually involved in her son’s life. Heck, before I knocked to pick him up for the party, I actually heard Kirsten ask him if Lydia would be at the party. I, of course, know who Lydia is. She’s Jack’s mega crush, who also happens to be besties with Parker’s mega crush, Angie. I know because Parker tells me stuff like that when we shoot hoops or play video games. But would Trish ever know that? No.

I fling myself onto my back, extending my arms and pulling Paige along with me as I kick us across the pool. It comes to my attention that I’m nearing that mental fray. The spot that’s been pestering me for I’m not sure how long. It involves Trish.

“Boop,” Paige chimes. “We’re at the edge.”

I spin us in the opposite direction and kick again. Maybe I just feel guilty for being so...disappointed in Trish. I should have known a woman who was so obsessed with all those things before I married her wouldn’t suddenly change after we had kids.

I need to try harder with Trish. I should send her some roses. Send her some dinner. I bet she hasn't fixed herself anything. I laugh as I picture what she's probably doing at this very moment. Soaking in the tub with a bottle of wine at her side while she catches up on episodes of her favorite drama.

"Hey," I say to Paige as I come to a stand and grab a few towels. "Let's go back to the room and call Mom. Maybe we can even send her some flowers and food. Do you think she'll like that?"

Paige claps her hands together and pulls that cheesy wide grin I love so much. "Yes! Yay! She will love that!"

As we dry off, gather our things, and slip into our slides—mine with the Seahawks logo, Paige's with mermaids—I feel better already. That's all I needed to do: show my wife some love. It feels good to do things for her.

"Hi there, you guys," comes a familiar voice, pulling me out of my musings. I glance up to see Kirsten Hill walking into the pool room in a coverup with a book in her hand.

"Hey," I say, smearing a towel over my head before tossing it into the hamper.

Paige jumps up and down. "We're going to send my mom flowers and food."

Kirsten's eyes flash to me. "Lucky mom," she says. "Is she...not here?"

I shake my head. "Backed out last minute. Sick," I add weirdly. I clear my throat. "She felt kind of sick. Headache." *Shut up. Why am I losing my cool here?*

My gaze darts to the book in Kirsten's hand, and suddenly, I'm reading the title out loud. "How to *not* raise a snowflake?"

She twists the cover so it's against her chest. Her cheeks flush red. "Don't judge. You should know I also read one called How Not to Raise an..." She covers one side of her mouth and whispers, "*A-hole*. Greg hates that I obsess over parenting so much. I just don't want to mess up, you know? We love our kids, right? But that doesn't mean we can do everything for them or give them every little thing their hearts desire. It's tough terrain."

I look at her and blink, feeling as if she has somehow crawled into my headspace. "I'm with you on that," I say. "Probably why our boys get along so well."

"Right," Kirsten says. She gives Paige a wave. "Have fun sending your mom stuff."

"Thanks," Paige says with a single hop.

I head toward the exit, Paige's pruned hand in mine, that sinking feeling flooding back in with a vengeance. It's like a game I used to play with Parker when he was young—I'd hide something, and as he looked for it, I'd tell him whether he was hot—getting closer, or cold—wandering far away from the hidden object. If his favorite army truck was tucked beneath the throw pillow, I'd tell him he was getting warmer as he neared the couch.

This conversation with Kirsten has me feeling like my hand is hovered over the very throw pillow, hiding that evasive morsel. At least, I think it is; there's only one way to find out.

"Hey," I holler, spinning in place to see Kirsten. "Where's Glen? I thought he was coming."

"Greg," she says. "Yeah, we were so excited because he was finally going to be able to join us..."

The sensation heightens, spiking into prickly territory. The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand like lightning's about to strike. I'm lifting the pillow. Peeking beneath.

She pulls a half smile that manages to look even sadder than a frown. "But..."

"But?" I prompt.

"Work." Her gaze locks on mine as that unreachable object slides right into my grip. It's razor blade sharp and already cutting into me with one, warning nick—'*This is awkward, but apparently our sons think...*'

It was the first conversation I had with Jack's mom. At the time, neither of us thought it could be true.

But as I stand here looking across the pool, I don't see Jack's mom anymore. The fear-filled face of denial, the uncomfortable shift in posture, the averting glance toward the pool, toward the puddle-ridden floor, toward anything that won't make that blade sink any deeper.

I don't only see her; I see myself.

"Well," I finally manage as Paige pulls my hand. "Have a nice dip in the pool."

She skims her gaze past me to land on Paige and gulps. "Thanks."

## CHAPTER 7



*K*irsten

This is not a good idea. In fact, it's a very, very terrible idea. If I have one ounce of common sense, I will not knock on *that* door at *this* hour.

I lift my arm, stare at the hair ribbon peeking from my fist, and give the door three small taps. So small that probably no one will hear them. That's fine. If no one hears, then no one will open, and if no one opens, I can go back to my room and get some—

It opens. Beau is standing there in the wedge of light from the hallway, a very dark hotel room at his back. He squints at me.

My heart feels like it's about to implode. "Hi."

Beau smears a hand over his scruff-covered jaw and rumples his hair which is, for the record, not in the usual man bun; it's hanging at his shoulders in thick, dark, waves, making him look like some sort of sea god. If Trish has this guy, who is obviously her exact type, she should leave my goatee-wearing, sweater-vest-loving, geeky-in-the-most-adorable-way husband alone. He's mine.

Beau must read that something's not right by the look on my face because he steps into the hallway and lets the door all but close.

I glance to my right, then to my left. There's no one. "Are the kids asleep?" I ask.

He nods. "Zonked out since they played so hard."

I nod too. "Same with Jack and Lenny. Did you know Lenny's in our

room? Well, we got two joined rooms since Greg was supposed to come, but...yeah.”

“Yeah.”

I strangle the life out of the ribbon in my grip. “I’ve been thinking.” I jump ahead to the heart of the matter because if we’re going to do what I want us to do, then we’ll have to get moving.

Sadly, it only comes out in pieces. “What if we...” I nod, wondering if that’s enough for him to catch onto my idea. The way I look at it, it’s obvious.

“What if we,” he urges, so I give him a little more.

“Drove back home...”

Beau is lifting and lowering his chin to follow my eyes as I nod.

“And...” I add. “If we leave now, while the kids are asleep. Of course, you’ll tell Parker so he’ll know he’s in charge of Paige and I’ll tell Jack so he doesn’t wake to find me gone and panic.”

Beau starts waving his rather big hands in front of him. They’re hooked to even bigger arms, his muscles bulging in the shadowed light. “Could you try finishing a sentence, please?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says through a yawn before toying with his hair and rubbing his face again. He’s tan. Naturally. Probably Italian. “Well?”

“Huh?”

He huffs out a breath. “What is it that you’re trying to tell me?”

I release a trapped breath and nod, twiddling the ribbon I found in Greg’s garment bag while sorting his laundry. I can do this. “You’re not going to want to hear this,” I warn. “But I’ve been suspecting it for a while now, so...”

His eyes, once dazed, seem to zone in all at once, coming into full focus on me. “Go ahead,” he urges.

“Do you already know?”

“I might.”

It feels like my heart might beat itself to death. “Maybe you should say it.”

“I’m not going to say it. You’re the one who showed up here at midnight.”

“Yeah, but I ran out of bravery on the way here, I guess.”

“You can’t run out of bravery.”

“You can too. It’s a thing.”

“It is *not* a thing.” He steps forward the slightest bit, and the door comes to a full and final close. “Great, now I’m going to have to wake them up to get back in.” He looks at me like this is all my fault. It’s not. But if I’m right, we do have someone to blame.

“Okay,” I say, pumping myself back up. “It’s coming back. I’m working up the courage again.”

“Good, nice.” He rubs his hands together. “You can do this.”

I pictured myself saying this one line all the way here. And for two entire hours before working up the nerve to shuffle through the hotel halls to get here. I open my fist and glance down at the ribbon wadded in my palm, the gold Gucci logos plain to see.

I glance back up in time to see Beau glaring at it.

His expression drops. “Not yours?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

Beau lifts his gaze until it meets mine.

I gulp, level a look at those deep brown eyes, and frame the forbidden sentence with my lips at last. “I think my husband is with your wife.”

## CHAPTER 8



*B* eau

Streetlights drag across the windshield as dawn peeks beyond the horizon. I adjust my cramped legs and roll my stiff neck as I steady the wheel.

“I feel dumb,” Kirsten groans from the passenger seat.

“It’s fine,” I grumble, even though it’s *not* fine. I just missed out on an entire night’s sleep and suspected my wife of cheating with some computer geek who—five years from now—will look exactly like Elmer Fudd.

“I don’t know why I was so positive that she would be there,” Kirsten continues.

“You had *me* convinced.”

“I’m not the only one who thought they were cheating,” she says. “Our sons are the ones who said it first.”

“They’re kids.”

She huffs out an exasperated sigh that sounds a lot like Parker’s. Quiet fills the car as she stares out the window. We’re about forty minutes from the hotel, but I’ll probably have to stop for gas before we’re there. A fact that only pours gunpowder on my already explosive mood.

I replay the scene I stepped onto in the quiet house after disarming the alarm and entering through the downstairs patio door.

The flowers I’d delivered were sitting in a vase on the table, still in plastic but at least they’d found water. The food I’d sent was in the fridge. Barely touched, granted, but that was Trish. She ate like a bird most days. And Trish,

my adorably pampered wife was lying primly in place, poised like a mummy on her back with her silky sleep mask covering half her face.

Guilt fans the irritation I feel toward Jack's mom for putting me through this and getting into my head. Sure, Trish is spoiled, and yeah—she's been taking a little more *girl time* than she probably really needs. But she is not cheating on me with Elmer Freaking Fudd.

"Not to be rude," I start to say.

"Which means you're about to say something rude—" she interrupts.

"But I don't want you to bring this up to me again. I don't care if you find *shoes* that look like my wife's, *perfume* that smells like my wife's, or hire a P.I. that finds Craig with a woman who *looks* like my wife. Unless you catch the two of them naked together, I don't want to hear it."

Silence fills the cab of the Benz, so thick and potent, it seems to swallow my words with one, muted gulp.

In the moments that follow, the space seems to slowly regurgitate what I said, word for bitter word. I don't let myself think of what I sound like. Trish isn't cheating. Which is more than I can say for Jack's dad. I don't have proof of anything; once we found Trish at home, Kirsten decided not to check things at hers. What was the point, she'd said. But I think she was just chickening out. Running out of bravery, like she'd said she sometimes does.

That guy is probably a slimy cheat who doesn't appreciate a good woman when he has one. Not that I'd be into Kirsten myself; she's not my type, and she's too tightly wound.

Still, she seems to have a level head where parenting is concerned. And look-wise, let's face it, her husband married entire grade-levels up.

If I was a nicer person, I might tell her that, but I'm too ticked off and tired to say one more word.

Kirsten stays silent too. I'm not sure if she's too angry or too exhausted, like me. Perhaps what I said has her pitying me, thinking I'm the one stuck in some world of denial, too blind to see the truth. I'm not, but if Kirsten is convinced her guy is walking the straight and monogamous line just because he's not with Trish, she's the one in denial.



## CHAPTER 9



*M*arch

*Kirsten*

Things are good. Better than good, they're perfect.

Those are the words running through my mind as I stand safely behind a netted overwatch bridge. Beyond the paint-splattered net, an array of mock dugouts and massive blowup cones create the perfect playground for the twenty brave participants below.

Most are Jack's friends, a few are neighbors, and because Maggie loves Jack so much, even *she* agreed to participate, but only because it's his birthday. His friends think she's hot and cool; they're not wrong. And she's taking to the sport like a champ. Who knew the barista-turned-cafe-owner was made for combat?

I'm happiest to report, though, that Greg is in the trenches too. A dart of warmth wiggles deep into my heart as I replay the conversation Greg had with Dino, the owner/operator of the place.

'*I'm sorry,*' Dino said while flexing his oversized pecs; I'm not sure if it's intentional or spontaneous. '*Did you say you don't even own a pair of contacts?*'

'*No,*' Greg had said. '*I own them, but I don't like to wear them.*'

*'But you knew you were going to wear goggles the whole time,'* Dino pointed out.

*'The website said I could wear them overtop my glasses.'*

*'You can.'*

Greg shook his head. *'Then why are we having this conversation, buddy?'*

Greg had a point. I've seen it throughout our marriage more times than I can count. Some beefy alpha type comes along and tries to prove their manliness by giving Greg crap. It was Dino's way of calling Greg a geek for showing up in his glasses, spraying himself with half a bottle of mosquito repellent, and taping a sign to his coat that says, *'EpiPen in pocket'* if needed.

But the fact is, I am head over heels in love with Greg. What men don't realize is that most women find those quirks adorable, irresistible, even.

I should applaud myself because it takes at least thirty whole seconds for my subconscious to summon the line *even women like Trish*.

Okay, so I'm not fully convinced things are good and perfect. But today, they are. Can't I just enjoy today? Jack is having the best birthday party ever. He's doing one of his favorite things with some of his favorite people. And next week, he'll even get his driver's permit.

The wobbly bridge bounces beneath my feet, letting me know someone else has stepped onto the overlook. Someone *big* by the feel of it.

I glance over to see Dino coming my way. Arms bulged, chest puffed, muscles popped.

"Not to come off slimy or nothin'," he says.

"Which means you're about to come off slimy," I say.

"But how did a guy like that score a chick like you?"

I shake my head and stare blankly ahead. Blankly, that is, until I see Lenny come up behind Greg and pummel him with a round of fluorescent pink paintballs.

Even over the rapid, repeat blasts, Greg's voice rises as his hand lifts. "I'm hit, I'm hit."

A hot wave of irritation flashes through me. I'm protective over Greg, and I hate bullies. "You want to know what did it?" I ask. "It was the glasses. They accent his smart, sophisticated side." I drag my gaze up Dino's beefy figure and glaze-eyed face. "Women find that incredibly sexy."

A quick glance at the time clock says there are only nine minutes left. Parents will start showing soon.

"How you doing, man?" Dino booms, letting me know someone must

already be here.

I feel the weight of the new man on the bridge but don't bother to glance over my shoulder until I feel him walk right beside me.

*Great*, it's Parker's dad.

"You think this is, like, low-key prepping kids for war?" he asks, eyes homing in on the action.

I glance over. "Did you just say '*low-key*'?"

"Tsk, they wear off on you."

"Tell me about it," I say. "You should have heard Greg yesterday. Said that someone was being...what's the term..." It was just on the tip of my tongue, so I search back for the stereo-teen term until it comes back to me. "Oh! *Sus*—for like, suspicious."

My triumph at placing the word is squashed beneath the meaning of that word. It's a pie in the face moment; only *I'm* the one who threw the pie. In my own face. Greg has been acting *sus* for months now, and even though I tell myself things are better, I worry I have a bad case of denial. And now, to utter that word in the presence of the second suspect's husband—ugh, kill me.

"Can you believe these not-so-little outlaws are going to be driving soon?" Beau asks, easing the awkwardness in a blink.

"It's crazy," I say, glancing past Beau to see if his daughter is standing by. "Is Paige in the car? She's welcome to come watch."

He shakes his head. "She's having a pedicure day with Trish," he says proudly.

"Good," I say. "Nice. Greg's out there on the field with the boys." There's pride in my tone too. Not denial, just...pride.

"He was until he got pummeled by the *second* biggest geek in the game," Dino mutters, proving that he's not only listening in but also as big a bully as I suspected.

Beau chuckles wryly under his breath.

"Not to be *rude*," I say pointedly to Beau, "or *slimy*," I add, glaring in Dino's direction, "but Lenny happens to be a textbook *genius*. And if you two knew what he was dealing with at home, you'd want to strangle anyone who picked on him." I walk off toward the steps but spin on one heel to say one last thing. "By the way, we're not in middle school anymore. Did anyone ever tell you that?"

## CHAPTER 10



*A* pril

*Beau*

I'm not surprised to see Jack's mom at the Driver's Ed pre-class course instead of weaselly Greg. And as I catch eyes with her across the auditorium, a knowing look flashes over her face. She makes a point to not only avert her gaze but also to crane her neck so she's facing decidedly away from me.

My insides are electric with the worst kind of buzz. That disrupting chaos that shatters through me every time I entertain the growing suspicion that Trish is stepping out on me. I know I told Kirsten not to utter another word about it, and she hasn't, but that fact only makes my jealous mind spiral and spin, paranoid with possibilities. What does she know? Has she found anything new?

At Jack's paintball party, I attempted to make amends with the woman. I was hoping to apologize for lashing out at her on the drive back to the hotel and add, ever so slyly, that she should feel entirely welcome to share any and every ounce of evidence she's got stacked against Greg and see if it lines up with the growing list I've got on Trish.

The truth.

I chase it.

I run from it.

I know I can't handle it, but deep down, I know it will never go away. I've done difficult things in life like anyone else. Burying my younger brother three years ago—that one sits at the top of the list. My heart nearly died the day I heard that Blaine's had stopped beating. Trish was there for me. She was there for the kids, too, giving them what they needed when I couldn't peel myself out from under the sheets. I remember thinking how lucky I was to have her. I told myself that—so long as we had each other, we could face anything. Get past the toughest of toughs.

Who knew my next toughest thing would be losing her entirely? To a betrayal, no less?

An army of termites once ate our wooden shed out back. Hollowed it from the inside out. That's just how this feels. Trish's betrayal—if she really is cheating like I suspect—is a squirming body of termites, feasting on things like sanity, peace, and affection for my wife of eighteen years.

I am wrecked, and I don't even have proof that she's cheating.

Yet.

My knee bounces as I glance in Kirsten's direction once more.

“Dad?” Parker says under his breath with an elbow nudge. “Can I go sit with Jack and Lenny?”

I shoot to my feet before the answer even comes. “Yeah, I'll come with you.”

We zigzag our way toward the front of the auditorium. Parker shuffles along the row until he's seated next to Lenny. Jack sits on the other side next to his mom. I take a seat beside Parker and lean forward enough to prop my elbows on my knees. Chin down, head lowered, I turn to give Kirsten a we-need-to-talk look.

Her chin is high, and her eyes are set on the screen up front. I don't buy that she's actually interested. The same five slides have been playing on loop since we arrived: A flyer for suicide awareness, an ad for the city's upcoming musical, and a warning about teen drinking. The other two slides are similar, depicting totaled cars with a note indicating how many lost their lives in the carnage due to texting and driving.

I keep my gaze on Kirsten for longer than is natural, but she keeps her eyes pasted ahead. At last, I straighten up and roll my shoulders back. Why did I have to say that to her on the way home? Unless you find them together naked—sheesh! She probably thinks *I'm* the freak now. And after that

tongue-lashing at Jack's party, she likely thinks I'm a bully too. I'm not. All I did was laugh at what the guy said, sue me.

"Thanks for coming to our pre-driving parent night," a woman with a mic says from the stage. "And thank you for taking an interest in this important step in your teens' lives." I consider the fact that Lenny doesn't have anyone here showing an interest except Kirsten. I feel guilty for worrying when Parker started to befriend the guy, fearing he'd get mingled into the nerd herd somehow. I'm a shallow man, if I can even be called a man.

Then again, how shallow can I be if I at least acknowledge that I was wrong? And a man takes good care of his family. I do that in spades. So why is it I keep wondering how to compete with guys like Greg?

The termites inside multiply as if they've just unleashed a second legion.

"I'll be right back," I tell Parker as I shoot to my feet. I can't stride out of that stuffy auditorium fast enough. Once I hit the lobby, I pull in a deep breath of air, glad I'm not that close to the one outside source that confronts me. Too bad I can't escape the truth so easily.

## CHAPTER 11



*K*irsten

Jack grins as he brings the Volvo to a stop alongside the drop-off curb.

“Nice,” I say, unbuckling the passenger-side seatbelt.

“I didn’t bump the curb this time,” he says, “but I’m close enough that cars can pass us in the turning lane.”

“Exactly,” I applaud. “How does it feel, driving yourself to school?”

He nods. “Nice. It’ll feel better when I…” He glances at me, and I can sense that he doesn’t want to hurt my feelings.

“When you don’t have your mommy with you?”

“A little.” He laughs, flicks his bangs from his eyes, and unfastens his seatbelt. “But I’ll miss talking to you on the way to and from, for real.”

“I’ll miss it too. For real.” My eyes sting with the sudden emotion the topic stirs in me. “Well, you’re stuck driving with me for another ten and a half months,” I tell him.

“Yeah.” Jack climbs out and snatches his backpack off the back seat. I climb out too, meeting him in back of the car.

“Love you,” I say. “Have a good day.”

“You too.”

I spot Lenny heading up the walk. He lives across the street from the school, which would make picking him up pointless. But inwardly, I wonder how I can help him get his driving hours before he turns sixteen.

“Hey, Lenny,” I hear Jack holler as I climb in behind the wheel. “*Dude,*

here comes Parker in his fancy Benz!” he says next.

I shoot a look at the rearview as a dart of discomfort rips through me. *Not today, Wheaton.* I reach for the pedals but fail since Jack has the seat back. Curse him and his long legs at this moment. I hunker down, lift the lever, and fling myself as far forward as it goes which is, as it turns out, way too far. Who cares? I just need to fasten my seatbelt and—

A round of knocks rap on my window.

A curse slips through my lips.

I glance up to see a hulking Beau standing outside my car. I give the down lever for my window the teeniest tiniest tap. It cracks open the slightest bit.

“Hmm?” I urge.

Beau gives me a flat look and tilts his head to one side. A minivan maneuvers around him. “You’re supposed to drop them off and leave,” a woman yells from her cab.

Beau blinks, refusing to speak until—I assume—I roll my window down more.

I do. “Yes?”

His brow furrows as his gaze fixes on my chest or the steering wheel; I can’t tell which.

“Can you even breathe with the wheel that close?”

I fish for the seatbelt but keep coming up short. Beau snags it and puts it in my hand.

I don’t thank him, only shift the clip to my right hand and attempt to shimmy the strap between my chest and the wheel. Trish’s double Ds wouldn’t allow her to even get this close. I manage to fasten my belt, but since I’m too proud to scoot the seat back in front of him, I look up like everything’s normal.

Beau leans down a little. “There’s something going on with your brake light. Pull into Sliders’ parking lot, and I’ll take a look at it.”

I give him a questioning look. “Why?”

His nostrils flare. “Because.” And then he gives me the eyes. The eyes that say you-know-why.

*Oh, yes, I suppose I do.* It’s a guise. Beau knows something, and he wants to talk. It feels like my insides are bathing in a blender. “Okay.” I roll the window back up and wait for him to walk back to his car before securing the lever beneath my seat and sliding back a few notches.



I put the car in drive, lift my foot off the brake, and ease away from the curb. I barely turn the wheel when the blast of a horn makes me jump. I glance over to see an SUV in the passing lane.

“Sorry,” I call lamely through the glass.

The mother sneers at me and shakes her head.

“Why the face?” I ask louder than I mean to. “I said I was sorry, lady. Calm down.”

I watch the woman’s vehicle as she passes and spy a toddler in the back seat throw his sippy cup at a mounted, fold-down TV screen. It’s playing a cartoon, so loudly the driver couldn’t have heard me. That’s probably for the best.

As I pull into the slow-moving traffic, and wait at the crosswalk while kids with backpacks and jackets head toward the school, I imagine myself getting arrested for fighting with a fellow parent in the school pickup lane. I’m volatile lately. Unstable and almost always trying to mend the ever-growing gap between my comfortable lie and the unfathomable truth. It’s the hot potato from that stupid game; I don’t want it. I don’t even know what I’ll do with it once it’s in my hands. Let it burn me? Or let it drop to the ground where I can bury it beneath flimsy explanations that get harder to conjure every day.

When I pull into Sliders, I opt for the first parking spot I see.

Beau pulls his black Mercedes into the stall beside me and rolls down his window. “Over there by the wall,” he says, pointing toward the brick wall behind the establishment’s seating area.

I do as he says, put it in park, and watch as Beau pulls up behind me. I stay put as he grabs a blanket from his trunk and heads toward the passenger side rear of my car.

He drops the blanket and moves to open the passenger side door. It’s locked, so I hit the lever, and he tries again.

*Is he going to sit in here with me?* That would look weird. We’ll be the ones looking like we’re having the affair.

But Beau only cracks open the glovebox, digs around a bit, then snags a small package in his grip. “Come on.”

So he really *is* fixing the brake light. I step out and join him next to the rear passenger side of the car.

“Go ahead and sit,” he says, motioning to the blanket.

I glance over my shoulder; the seating area is vacant for now since Sliders

doesn't open until ten. Between our two cars and the brick wall, Beau and I are mostly hidden from the outside world, which makes me feel shifty. I don't want it to even look like I'm hooking up with another man.

Still, I lower myself onto the blanket, and Beau hunches beside me. I hadn't noticed, but he's holding a small screwdriver in his fist. He sticks it into a small hole in the red, plastic cover and starts to twist.

I sigh. Maybe this is the extent of it, and I got myself worked up over nothing.

"Trish got an extra phone," he says without looking at me. "When I confronted her, she said it belongs to her friend, Sheila, whose husband is an abusive d-bag and that she's holding it for her."

"Do you believe her?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "No."

"Did you tell Trish you don't believe her?"

Beau shakes his head again. "No."

"Do you know the number to her extra phone?"

Beau pulls the screwdriver out of the hole and motions toward my hand. "Take this."

I pry the tiny screw off the tip, and Beau moves the screwdriver to yet another hole in the cover. "She said it was locked, so no."

"Hmm. Greg keeps his locked too. But I got into it the other night. I checked the calls during times he was away, and while we were at the hotel. The same number shows up during those times, some incoming, but most outgoing."

He pulls the other screw out, and I take that one too. "Is Greg leaving town tomorrow?"

"He left this morning," I say.

"Where?" He hands me the plastic cover.

"Not far this time. He flew into Lewisburg."

A small pop sounds from Beau's fist. He curses, shakes his head, then curses again.

The blades of my internal blender go wild. "What?"

"Trish flies into Lewisburg tomorrow. She's headed to Hot Springs. Some fancy resort, I guess."

My mind jumps to the obvious. "Yeah, but if she doesn't leave until tomorrow," I say. "Greg probably isn't lying about meeting a client down there. Or about staying in a hotel—he said he has enough travel points that

this one's free."

"He's staying there tonight, I'm sure. But I bet you anything he'll be hauling his bags into the resort I'm paying for after that. Trish said it was just her and the girls. She ordered a handful of new swimsuits for the occasion."

*Swimsuits?* I groan because who can compete with that woman's body?

The package in Beau's fist falls to the ground. "I'll buy you a new one." He holds his hand out expectantly, but I don't exactly know what he wants until he gingerly tugs the plastic cover out of my grip.

And that's when I see it—the shattered bulb on the ground, its shards trapped between the plastic, bulb-shaped cover and the thin, cardboard back. I hand him the tiny screws in turn, feeling angry and desperate and...and so miserably sad I want to burst into tears.

What about Jack?

What about our home? I didn't want Jack to have divorced parents like I did. I don't want to trade off holidays, tell him goodbye for days at a time during the last few years I'll have him at home.

And would Jack even *want* to switch off? My friend Linda's teenager said he only wanted to live with his dad, and the judge let him, saying he was old enough to decide for himself.

I want to cry. To give in to the stinging in my eyes, and the quivering of my chin and the deep, dreaded emptiness taking over my soul.

"I spoke with an attorney," Beau says.

His statement rips me out of the pity zone in a blink. "What? You did?"

"He says if *I* want to get out of paying alimony, and if *you* want to receive any, we need cold hard proof that they're cheating."

I shake my head, still too stunned to process what he said. "You spoke to an attorney? Already?"

He sits back on his foot and plops the small screwdriver on the blanket. "One of my brothers is a lawyer. He went through an ugly divorce himself a few years ago."

I recall the way Maggie asked about Beau after Jack's birthday party, wanting to know if he was single. I didn't bother pointing out the age gap; Maggie knows she's as close to Parker's age as she is to ours. I simply told her that he was still married to Parker's mom. That's when she asked if he had any brothers.

I'd rather think about that than the trainwreck of my marriage. I'd rather play matchmaker to my single sister than deal with the fact that my husband

prefers Beau's wife to me and that he's probably been sleeping with her behind my back for months now.

My gaze drops back to the shattered bulb resting in the package. "How would we ever get proof?" I ask.

When I lift my gaze, I see a flicker of something in Beau's eyes. A flicker that tells me he has a plan.

A sudden wind picks up, swirling until the tips of my hair tickle my nose. I tuck the wandering strands behind my ear, but the wind only whips them free once more. A wild howl echoes off the wall like a war cry. Chimes sound in the distance, and the American flag waves rapidly from its pole nearby. The onset fans the sensations stirring inside me. New ones, fueled with fresh possibilities and a rare sense of empowerment.

It's like the feeling that coursed through me before I marched to Beau's hotel room with a plan in my head and determination in my heart. I was ready to take action then, and I'm ready for it now.

Beau's watching me, seeming to sense that I feel it coming too. Our comeback. Our moment of vindication.

"Two words," he says with a dangerous look in his eye. "Sting op."

## CHAPTER 12



*B* eau

Jack’s mom mentioned a slang term for suspicious when she caught me saying *low-key*. Sus, that’s the word, and that’s exactly how I feel as I watch Kirsten Hill, dressed in black from head to toe, dart glances over her shoulder before exiting her Volvo in the parking lot of the Dollar General. I thought the idea of a *sting op* might appeal to her, but I had no idea she’d go all *Mission Impossible* on me.

Just outside of town lies a plaza that most locals turn their noses up at. It seemed like the best place to meet, considering we’re in broad daylight and all. She and I—unlike slimy Greg and my lying wife—will not be traveling by plane. But we will, however, thanks to the Cadillac CT5-V I rented—be traveling in style.

Kirsten tugs a gym bag—black like her leggings and long-sleeve top—from the passenger side of her car before heading my way. I can’t help but grin as she strides determinedly in my direction without so much as looking at me.

Closer, closer still. She’s just about to the passenger side door when she passes me altogether.

“*What the...*” I lean forward to glance at the rearview, then startle as she appears in my periphery beyond the driver’s side window. She takes quick paces, looking decidedly away from me while circling around the front and to the passenger side where she started. Just when I think she’s about to circle

the car again, she pries open the door and slinks inside, stuffing the bag at her feet and closing the door.

Without a word, she reaches for the buckle, pulls it across her body, and clicks it in place. “Hi,” she says breathlessly, still not looking my way.

“You know, not looking at me doesn’t make this look any less *sus*,” I tell her.

She glances over at last. Her cheeks are flushed, and her grin is triumphant, like this is a game and we’ve already won. “Let’s do this.”

Her energy is contagious. I guide the car onto the main street, check the traffic, and rev the engine as I tear onto the open road. This bad boy has one heck of an engine. I pictured buying one once I hit my midlife crisis, but since Trish has triggered an early onset, I might just get one sooner.

“You’re feeling good today, are you?” I ask as I approach the light.

“You know what?” she says. “I *am*. It’s like, I can’t control freaking Greg, right?”

“Right.”

“Guess what I’ve been obsessing over the last few years of my life.”

I wait for her to tell me, but the pause goes on forever. I glance over. “You want me to really guess?” I ask.

“Yes.”

The light goes green.

“Oh, do you mind pulling up to that gas station up there? They have stuff to make the *best* dirty Diet Coke. Do you want one?”

Man, she is all over the place today. “Nah, but I could go for a Red Bull.”

“Perfect. What else do you want—snack-wise? Chips, donuts, beef jerky, candy...” She keeps listing things as I pull into a parking stall.

“... dried fruit, nuts, protein bars.”

I shut off the engine.

“Well?” she persists. “What snack items? My treat.”

I used to watch a show called the Twilight Zone. Each episode was a trip into bizarrely twisted territory, like entering a different realm of the world where normal rules didn’t apply. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I entered that zone the moment Kirsten slinked like a night robber into my car.

But her eyes are so wide, and her face is so expectant that I don’t have the heart to say how crazy it is that she’s thinking about gas station goodies at a moment like this. Eighteen years of marriage has taught me that when a woman’s in a good mood—you don’t question it.

So, I utter the first thing that comes to mind. “Sunflower seeds. Pickle flavored, please.”

That grin spreads over her face once more. “You got it. Anything else? Something sweet, maybe?”

“Surprise me,” I say before she recites the entire candy aisle in alphabetical order. *Sunflower seeds*...I used to love eating those things on road trips, but since Trish always complained about the crunching sound, I gave them up.

It’s not long before Kirsten strides out of the station with a fountain drink in one hand and a grocery sack dangling from the other.

She climbs into the car, rests her cup in the drink holder, then fishes into the bag and pulls out a bottle of Gatorade. “I got you a Red Bull, too, but if you hurry and drink this, you can spit your shells into it.”

I stare at it and blink. “Oh, the sunflower shells. Yeah, thanks.” I crack open the sugar-free grape-flavored drink and take a swig. It’s cold, refreshing, and tastes surprisingly like my childhood; I used to love grape flavor. I feel my mood lifting already.

“What do you want to listen to?” I don’t picture the school’s librarian to be the pop princess Trish is, but the woman *is* full of surprises.

She shrugs, but then her eyes go wide. “Let’s do flashback music—like angsty, alternative rock. Do you like that?”

“I do,” I say. Yet another surprise. Since I already have my phone hooked up to the rental’s screen, I tap on the music app. “I have the perfect playlist for that if you want to scroll down while I drive.”

She scrolls, tilting her head, and mumbles different titles as I pull out of the lot.

“Pumping Iron Beast Mode,” she says. “Wonder what music you have on that.”

I chuckle wryly. “Death metal.”

She laughs too. “Oh, here it is—alternative rock 2000s. Kind of a boring name after the beast mode one.” She gives it a tap and a familiar intro kicks up.

We glance at each other while bobbing our heads. “Kryptonite,” we say in unison.

“I love 3 Doors Down,” Kirsten says.

“You’ll like this mix then. It’s got The Killers, Gorillaz, Green Day, Offspring.”

“I’ve seen most of those guys in concert,” she says.

We pull onto the freeway while I ask her which year and venue she saw each artist. We find that she and I were at many of the same concerts back in the day—yet another surprise. Trish and I have completely different tastes in music.

“Does Greg like this genre too?” I ask as a song from the Foo Fighters comes on next.

“Some of it,” she says thoughtfully. “He’s in love with Beyoncé. Not just music-wise. She’s his celebrity crush.”

“You guys don’t have that rule that if you get the chance to make out with your celebrity crush, then it’s okay, do you?” I ask.

Kirsten grins. “We do, and he even sent his business card to her, but I feel pretty confident that—even if she *did* make him her new accountant—the chances of Beyoncé making out with him are slim.”

I don’t want to think about the fact that the guy’s done more than make out with Trish, so I skip to the obvious question. “So who’s *your* celebrity crush? Wait, let me guess. Leonardo Di Caprio? Brad Pitt?”

She shakes her head. “Jude Law.”

“Ah,” I tip my head back. At least she’s consistent. Jude Law isn’t exactly a beefcake type of guy, and neither is Greg.

“Who’s yours?” she asks.

“Catherine Zeta-Jones.”

“Oh, she’s gorgeous. If I was a guy, she’d be on my list for sure. What about Trish? Who’s hers?”

“She’s into all the obvious ones, but Zac Efron is her favorite.” Unless that’s changed. Perhaps she’s into actors that play dorky characters now. I want to know what that wimpy accountant has that I don’t. What’s the appeal? The question reminds me that Kirsten asked me something earlier.

“You wanted me to guess what you’ve been obsessing over the last few years of your life,” I say with a glance in her direction.

She takes a long sip of her drink and lifts a finger as she gulps. “Right,” she says. “My marriage, that’s what. Of course, I’m always trying to be the perfect parent, but I’ve been hyper-focused on becoming the perfect wife, focusing on all of Greg’s needs, trying not to guilt him for working so much and being gone so often and missing out on so much of Jack’s life.

“Turns out all I *really* needed to do was get a smaller waist, bigger boobs, and three-inch nails that make it hard to wipe my own butt.”



I picked the wrong time to tip back my drink because that final comment makes me spit out a mouthful of Gatorade.

“Sorry,” Kirsten says. “I don’t mean to be crude.”

Which means she knows it was crude.

She lets out a huge sigh, and I can almost feel the motivation seep out of her.

“When did I turn into someone he didn’t want anymore?”

It’s a question that grips me to the core. I don’t have an answer for it, but I desperately want to know when Trish decided Greg was more interesting than me. Worth risking our marriage and family over. My body aches when I think of how this will affect the kids. The topic has me recalling Parker’s reaction to the news that I was leaving for the night.

“How’d Jack respond to you leaving?” I ask.

“Good. He loves my sister Maggie. They’ll be at the Coffee Loft until closing, binge whatever series they’re both into now, then he’ll camp out on her couch and sleep in while she wakes up to run the shop.”

“It’s nice that you have her,” I say. “She’s not married?”

Kirsten shakes her head. “My parents got divorced when I was young. It was ugly. They both married other people and divorced them before hooking up several years later.”

“No way. Did they get married again? To each other?”

“Nope. Just stayed together long enough for my mom to get pregnant in her early forties, if you can imagine. I had Jack when she was thirteen, and she became like an older sister to him, as involved as she was.”

“That’s cool.”

“What about Parker and Paige? Where are they for the night?”

“With my parents. They’ve been married forty-six years, if you can believe it.”

Kirsten twists in her seat. “You’re kidding. That’s amazing!”

“Yeah, it is. And they’re not the sort that just puts up with each other, you know? They *love* each other. I mean, my mom makes him crazy with her figurine collecting and her obsession to have scented candles burning from dusk ‘til dawn, and my dad makes her crazy with his collection of old cars and parts. He loves working on cars. But I think they secretly love that about the other too. I mean, what do you think my dad gets my mom on holidays?”

“Candles and figurines?” she guesses.

“Yep. And Mom gets him stuff for his workshop. A new tool chest.

Lockers to store his grease-stained coveralls. Dang, I admire them.” What I don’t add but think inwardly is how much I wanted that myself. I really wanted that with Trish.

“So let’s go over the plan,” Kirsten says, pulling me from my musings. “We’re going to scout out the area surrounding the springs and see if we can set up someplace where we have enough of a view to record.”

“Right. My guess is they’ll head out to dinner first, then hit the springs at night. Trish prefers night swimming. I’m sure we’ll catch them curling up to each other in one of the pools.”

“Or making out while wrapping each other in towels when they’re through,” Kirsten adds. “I really hope we can catch them doing *something* besides entering the Resort. Greg will just say he was giving her an accounting consult or something.”

Anger flares hot in my chest. “Trust me,” I say. “By the time we’re through, we’ll have cold, hard proof. Lots of it.”

“Heck yeah,” Kirsten says.

My chest puffs. My confidence lifts. I empty the bottle of Gatorade, and, before I can ask for the sunflower seeds, Kirsten tears them open and hands them over.

“Enjoy,” she says.

I imagine finally having the proof I need to show that I’m not crazy. To show that this is not all in my head. To finally be able to move on with my life once and for all.

“Thanks.” I toss in the first sunflower seed, relishing the familiar flavor as I crunch into it. “I will.”

## CHAPTER 13



*K*irsten

Beau and I scout the parameters of the resort before deciding the best view of the hot springs is from a campsite bordering the property. We snag a pup tent, along with an array of bug spray, from a local supermarket and rent the perfect spot. Not that we'll sleep here. Once we have what we need, we'll head back to Virginia Beach.

Since Trish is where she told Beau she'd be—the Hot Springs Resort—Beau has rare access to her often-blocked location. Currently, she's at the Waterwheel Restaurant, which, according to one online article, is among the county's most romantic—not to mention expensive—restaurants. *Isn't that special?*

We don't risk being seen at the restaurant; our efforts are best focused on setting up for the perfect footage of the springs from the campsite. This is where the action will be.

*The action:* those two words trigger a visceral response that spreads like a virus. It's like walking through a wall of webs naked, taunting images of Greg and Trish cling to every nerve and fiber no matter how hard I try to shake them. After today, they won't be imagined anymore. They'll be real, undeniable, and impossible to erase.

That knowledge sinks like boulders into my gut. I fear I'll never feel pretty again. I'll never feel cute enough, cool enough, stylish enough, *shallow, and worldly enough*. I hate Greg. I love him. I want him out of my

life, but I never want to let him go. He once made me feel cherished and loved and important. He used to love the way I cared for Jack. The way I ate all the right things during pregnancy. The way I nursed him until he was a year old. He was proud of me once. And now all he can think about is a woman who happens to be my opposite in every way. It's a slap in the face. A kick in the gut. An incinerator to my increasingly fragile ego.

"You okay over there?" Beau asks. It's not enough for me to fix my face, which is probably flat and lifeless and—heaven forbid—even less attractive because of it. Who cares?

"No. I just really wanted that happy ending, you know? As a school librarian, I've been reading fairy-tale endings to kids for years, telling them how life offers a series of happy endings, not just one. But this ..."

"He's a jackhole, you know that, right—for doing this to you?"

Tears sting my eyes. I cover my face as my emotions, hot and raging, get the best of me. "We made it *this far*," I say through tears. "I get a few more years with Jack at home, and now, because of selfish nasty greedy, greedy Greg I'm going to get half of that. And Jack will be devastated. What if *this* is what sends him spiraling into a world of alcohol and drugs? Or what if he becomes a cheating D-bag like his father?"

"Neither of those things are going to happen," Beau says. "But if they did, that wouldn't be your fault. Or even Greg's. Ever hear about the twins with the alcoholic father?"

I glance over. Beau's not looking my way, just setting up the telescope as he speaks.

"One became an alcoholic, the other refused to touch the stuff and went on to be a huge success. When asked why they ended up the way they had, each twin produced the same answer with a different explanation. My father was an alcoholic. One let that catapult himself in the opposite direction; one chose to repeat the pattern."

"Hmm." I nod as I process the tale. "That's really insightful." I don't mean to sound surprised, but the truth is, I *am*.

"But honestly, whatever you're doing with Jack—it's working. I'm impressed by the kid. He's confident enough to befriend a less-popular Lenny and cool enough to pull it off and make the others want to follow suit. I admire that."

I recall the tiny capsules we bought when Jack was a kid. The way they transformed when we dropped them into the sink, absorbing enough water to

morph into something new and unique. It's been ages since I've heard a compliment about my parenting from someone other than teachers or youth pastors. Jack's on his best behavior at school and church, but to hear it from the parent of one of his friends—that's different.

"Thank you," I say. "Parker's a great kid too. I'm glad he and Jack have been hanging out more this year." I consider how nice it is that the two got voted into office together. Teenagers who are respectful and kind, great examples to their school class. It gives me confidence in his generation.

"I'm glad too. Especially since it got him to finally stop hanging out with Griz. That kid was trouble."

I let out a humorless laugh. "Seriously. I texted his mom for their address so we could send him a party invite, and guess what address she gave me."

Beau squats down to check the view from his iPhone, which is, with the help of an attachment, mounted against the lens of the telescope. "Where was it?" he asks.

I give it to him in one word. "Juvie."

Beau barks out a laugh. "Juvie, oh man. Do people still use that term?"

I shrug. "I have no idea. I hope he turns his life around, though. He could really be something, you know?" I think of the magnetic spark Griz carries when he enters a room.

"Now I see where Jack gets it," Beau says. Before I can ask what he means, his phone chimes. He narrows his eyes at the screen. "She's leaving the restaurant."

"Your phone alerts you?" I ask.

He nods. "If I ask it to, yes, so long as she doesn't block me. I've been questioning her more than usual, which I think encouraged her to be honest about *where* she was going this time. She's trying to earn a little good faith. Of course, she's never admitted to blocking me in the first place, but I know better."

The light is fading quickly. The warmth from the sun is too. I untie the sweatshirt around my waist and shrug into it.

Beau has me check out the view he set up. I'm impressed by how well we can see the pools from this angle. Right now, it seems that families with little ones are packing up and calling it a day. Soon, the crowd will likely look very different. An older, more adult crew coming for an evening of relaxation, drinks, and lounging in the moonlight between dips in each pool.

Beau tracks Trish's trip to the resort, much closer now.

I'm an electric bundle of nerves. My anxiety cranks up a notch with every minute that passes by. I'm about to see what I do not want to see. Or maybe I'm not. Maybe we've been wrong all along.

*We haven't.*

"Where'd you get the telescope?" I ask. I've been wondering since he set the thing up because he looked very comfortable with it. Pulling it from its case in pieces, deftly fashioning it together, tipping it right toward the stars, and taking a look.

"I've had it since I was ten. Was a gift from my father. We'd stargaze, he and I. I'm the only kid who took to it. Parker liked it better when he was young. Paige can't get enough. Especially when we climb onto the roof of my office building."

The image his words paint in my mind go straight to my desperate, aching heart. Greg used to spend time with Jack. "I love that," I can't help but say.

Beau shrugs. "It never did impress Trish. I took her to my favorite outlook one night. Think it was like our fourth or fifth date. I had a picnic set up too. When it was dark enough, I had her check out some of my favorite constellations. I started telling her the story behind Orion's Belt, you know, and before I could even get into it, she put her hand up to stop me. 'Sorry,'" he says, employing a nasally female voice, "*but I'm already tuning you out. I don't have the headspace for things that don't interest me.*"

I pull a cringe face. "And you still married her."

He laughs. "She has a lot of good traits too. But yeah, that was...not a good moment for me. In fact, I was tempted to just take her home and call it a night. But then she opened up about the crap she had going on at home. She wasn't afraid to be vulnerable with me. And for a woman like Trish, that meant a lot. It woke up my protective side." He shrugs. "Besides, she claimed to love everything else about me, so who could complain? That was one thing I just...couldn't share with her. But, you know, we shared a lot of other stuff, so..."

"Yeah," I say.

"Oh," he says while tapping at his screen again. He tips his head and strides to the other side of our campsite. "They're close now. In fact, they're in the parking lot."

I don't miss the fact that he says *they* this time. He's that sure that Trish and Greg are together.

No matter how many times I tell myself I've accepted the idea, it's like diving into a cold plunge every time. Shocking enough to take my breath and painful enough that all I want is out.

I cannot believe that this is actually my life. *This* is where I am at forty-one years old. I'm living out a wayward version of *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*. I'll call it, if you suspect your spouse of cheating. In the tale, you leave a teenager at home with your sister while you spy on your husband with his mistress's spouse from a campsite with a pup tent as a prop.

"I think the buffalo fries were a bad idea," I say.

Beau shoots a leery look at me. "They coming back up on you?"

Heat burns its way up my throat. I gulp. "No, I won't let that happen. I'm okay." Suddenly, my body retches. I dry heave enough to barely taste what's to come if I can't get it under control. My eyes go wide with worry.

Beau's do too.

"Maybe I need to sip on something."

At once, he scrambles through the items in sacks around us, producing a bottle of Diet Coke I didn't know we had; Beau must have grabbed it for me.

"Here," he says, twisting off the cap and thrusting it into my hand. The sticky liquid sloshes over the rim, but I ignore the splatter and lift it to my lips. I take one gulp, two, and sense that things are heading in the proper direction. I decide to take one last swig for good measure and instantly regret it.

At once, my body is doing something I didn't give it permission to do. My hand hurls the drink in who-knows-what-direction while my throat unleashes the fury of twenty dams in one massive gush. Luckily, my feet have a good mind of their own because they spin me away from Beau and toward the wooded area at my side.

Wiping my chin, I stare into the dimly lit mess and spot two tiny eyes shining back at me. I can barely make out the vomit-covered creature in the low light.

It blinks at me, stunned, miffed, and rightfully pissed.

"Oh my gosh," I say. "A squirrel."

Maybe I'm meant to write the book after all. *If You Give the Squirrel Some Vomit*. Hmm, doesn't quite have the same ring.

## CHAPTER 14



*B* eau

It feels like there's a dumpster fire in my gut as Trish steps out of the door labeled *Lady's Quarters*, her scarlet string bikini leaving little to the imagination. The outdoor lamps give me a clear view.

Any minute now, Greg will exit the *Gentleman's Quarters*, though he's far from holding the title. Of course, if Kirsten and I are wrong, Trish's friend will join her instead.

So, what's it going to be?

My throat is closing. Or maybe it's just too dry to swallow. Kirsten wasn't kidding when she said the adrenaline would suck me dry.

"Do you see anything?" she asks as she paces behind me.

"I see Trish so far."

"Alone?"

I try again to gulp but fail. "Alone."

Kirsten groans. "It's recording, right? You already hit record?"

Thanks to the adapter I ordered, my phone screen shows the exact, magnified view captured by the telescope.

"Yep, it's recording now," I assure, "which means it's also picking up audio, so..."

"Oh yeah?" Kirsten says with an edge to her voice. "Hey, Greg, if you're watching this, that means we're about to watch your sorry butt stride out that door to have a romantic, hot springs date with your little girlfriend. I hope



your junk catches a disease and falls off.”

I twist my head, still hovered over the screen, and give Kirsten a warning glare. “You saying my wife has a disease?”

“I’m saying I hope the *water* has a disease and that they *both* catch it. I hope all their...stuff shrivels up and falls off.”

I bring my focus back to the screen. “Okay, can we just...stick to narrating what we see?”

The men’s door swings open. I wave Kirsten closer and shuffle over a bit.

I’m staring, barely breathing, as Kirsten nudges up beside me and hovers over the screen as well. A trio of teenage boys piles out of the door.

I exhale.

Kirsten does too.

Yet just as I’m about to shift my gaze back to the lady’s side, a tall, pasty man with a receding hairline glides out. A light blue towel hangs over one doughy shoulder. A pair of sunglasses sits stupidly on his head. Not that he needs them at night. It’s probably an attempt to cover his balding scalp.

Greg strides right over to a grinning Trish. Trish loops a hand around the guy’s flimsy-looking forearm and leans into him.

“Oh my gosh,” Kirsten says under her breath.

I know what she means. I feel like I’m going to pull a Kirsten in reverse. Like mine’s going to come out the other end.

Greg and Trish stand in the fray of light, pointing at pools and deciding where to go first. I know where I *hope* they’ll go. The hottest pool there. We have the best view of that one.

As soon as they pick a direction, they step out of the porch light. It gets harder to see them, but not impossible since strands of lights hang throughout the entire park.

“You guys are idiots!” Kirsten hisses. “Grossest, trashiest, nastiest behavior ever.”

“Yeah,” I add as Greg helps Trish into the second hottest pool. It’s the next best option from this angle. His knobby fingers move over *my wife’s* lower back, grazing her barely-there bikini. “Thanks for touching my wife like that,” I hiss. “I hope when you watch this, it makes you cry like the big bald man baby you are.”

“He’s not all the way bald,” Kirsten defends. “Yet.”

“Once he gets his eyes on this footage, what’s left of it will fall right out, I guarantee it.”

“Yeah, well...Trish is...probably going to poke her own eyes out with those claw paws of hers.”

“Claw paws?”

“She looks like a wild animal with those nails,” Kirsten continues. “A raccoon. No,” she amends as Trish tips her head back to cackle a laugh at Mr. Funny Bones. “A hyena.”

Once the two are thigh-deep in the steaming water, Greg takes a seat along the edge to immerse himself to his shoulders. Instead of sitting beside him, like I hope she’ll do, Trish takes a few paces toward the center of the pool, then turns to face Greg where he sits. She slides a silky scrunchie off her wrist and proceeds to make a show of gathering her platinum hair into a heap on top of her head.

I manage to get the backside of Trish and a view of half of Greg’s face as he pops his brows like a pervert. At once he stands, closes the distance between them, and slides his hands over my wife’s hips. She wraps her arms around his shoulders, and suddenly, they’re kissing.

And kissing.

And kissing some more.

The dumpster fire flares hotter.

“I thought you hated kissing, *Greg*,” Kirsten snaps.

“He doesn’t kiss you?” I say, hoping I don’t pass out or punch a tree trunk.

“Nope,” she assures.

“You should be the one who doesn’t like kissing *him*,” I say. “Look at him.” Figuring he’ll watch this one day, I decide to address the scumbag himself. “Look at you, man. You’re a pathetic excuse for a husband, a father, and a *man*.”

I’m so pissed I want to shoot or strangle the guy, but it’s Trish I’m angriest with. I’ve given her everything. *Everything!* This guy is not better looking; he’s not richer, and he sure as crud isn’t cooler than me. But even if he was all those things and more, that’s not what marriage is about. We took vows, promised to stick it out, even through the tough times.

I curse under my breath. Now Paige and Parker are going to have divorced parents. I’m going to have to fight for custody. Or maybe I won’t. I don’t know what’s worse—having to divide my parent time with the kids’ mother or having their mother say she doesn’t want parent time at all.

This can’t be real. Inwardly, I start to scramble the way I do when times

are tense. When I'm about to lose a close game or a big sale, then come up with something that turns it all around and saves the day. I get the sale. I win the game. I...but there's no undoing this one. No fixing or changing what is.

My intuition told me we'd get footage like this if we came. It's why I risked talking to Kirsten and planned the whole operation. I figured I'd catch *something*. I figured I'd catch *this* so I could accept the facts once and for all.

So why is it that, now that I've confirmed what I've probably known all along, it still doesn't seem real?

## CHAPTER 15



S eptember

*Kirsten*

I spin full circle in the refurbished train car, which happens to be Maggie’s newest addition to her beachside coffee shop. She plans to feature different eras or themes and rent the space out for get-togethers. To start, she chose a theme for people, as my much younger sister phrased it, “my age,” adding that anyone who graduated between 1990 and the early 2000s would appreciate today’s theme, which she portrays with the several album covers lined up along the wall, a visual to accompany the tunes playing overhead. Framed articles of significant events from that decade rest in easels on the corner shelf. And in case we didn’t notice how quickly the prices of things like gas, new cars, and groceries have risen, there’s a printout for comparison.

A new song plays, surprising me with a flashback that sends me—not to my youth—but to the past all the same. *Kryptonite*. I picture the way Beau and I cranked up the volume and shouted along with the angsty song. It’s stupid, but it’s actually a pleasant memory. Mentally, I’ve split that entire day into two parts. Part one was filled with excitement, empowerment, and drive. We were on a mission, and there was no stopping us. We stocked up on

snacks, belted out songs, and set up camp to do what needed to be done.

Part two starts around the time I threw up on the squirrel. It all went downhill from there. It was like a game of sorts—doing what it took to secure the missing piece. The proof we needed in order to move past the terrible place Beau and I were in. But once we got it, once we finally had what we needed, what we'd worked very hard to get—I think we both sort of wished we hadn't gotten it at all.

On the drive home, I remember wishing that my brain could throw up the way my body had. I wanted to purge all the stuff that was causing me so much turmoil and pain. But there was no undoing it. No possible way to free myself from such a burden. I had to move forward, so move forward, I did.

When Beau dropped me off at my car, it was dark out. The drive back was like a funeral, both of us silently grieving what we stood to lose, what we had already lost—our spouses' affection. Trust in the ones we'd sworn our lives to.

“Hey,” Beau had said as I cracked open the door to exit the car, “this isn't your fault, okay? It's neither of ours. Come here.” He motioned for me to come in for a hug. When I did, I sensed the same trapped energy beneath his skin. As if millions of tiny cells were running a frantic race, looking for ways to heal the hurt coursing through him, coursing through me.

As I caught the scent of his spicy after shave, I was struck with an odd sense of vulnerability. And of longing, too. How easy it might have been to clamor for an escape from the pain. Or to lash out. I pictured pulling back enough to look into his eyes, seeing a similar longing there. I pictured him confirming it, rushing in to kiss me the way Greg kissed Trish. I'd have done it, too. To get even. To get away. To get validation that *someone, somewhere*, would like *me*, the rejected woman left behind.

In sleep, I've had similar dreams. A handful of them. Beau and I are sitting on a couch, talking about how much it sucks to be single, and suddenly he looks at me like he's only just then figured out that we're both free to explore things. There's an attraction there, on my end. But I know I'm not Beau's type. Forget the fact that I rarely dated guys like Beau back in the day; it'd be foolish to claim the guy isn't *my* type. It's like someone saying Brad Pitt isn't their type. *Yeah right.*

I've spoken to him a few times over the last few months. At the school drop off, parent events, or when I take Jack to see his father since Greg and Trish have—get this—moved in together. According to the decree, they each

have the kids every other weekend and on Wednesdays, meaning both Beau and I have them full-time. Jack claims that the only reason he agrees to go is because Parker's there, and the only reason Parker agrees to go is because he doesn't want Paige to be alone. And Paige, he says, really misses her mom.

I move those thoughts aside and glance about the charming addition to Maggie's shop. Maggie, bless her, is stuck behind the counter this morning and probably dying for me to head back and tell her what I think of it, but I decide to take a rare moment to sit a little longer with my thoughts as the U2 song, *It's a Beautiful Day*, drifts over the space.

It is a beautiful day. And boy, is it cozy in here. It smells amazing too, like rich, roasted coffee with hints of spice. I've been good all week, so perhaps I'll treat myself to a caramel macchiato. I've been doing things like that lately. Taking time to be nice to myself.

Without Greg around, I actually feel less self-conscious than I have in years. I don't have to impress him. I don't have to compete. I can just be me, and it turns out I actually like who I am most of the time.

That's not to say the insecurities don't come back. I have scars. Deep ones. But as I give myself space, as I meditate, pray, and stay focused on the good things in life, like Jack and Maggie, I sense the wounds slowly healing. I'll never be who I was before all of this happened, but I'm okay with that. I'll be a new me. A wiser, more compassionate me. I am determined to grow, and thrive, and live a happy life.

First order of business—get the coffee I'm craving.

I shoot a text to Maggie, telling her how much I love the new addition and add how much better it would be if I had a mug of macchiato warming my hands.

School started last week; Jack drives while I sit in the passenger seat, and then we switch places, and I tell him to have a good day. In a matter of months, he'll get his license, and I won't get that time with him.

Just as I'm about to get into my feels over it, Chantel, Maggie's shift lead, shuffles in with my drink. The mug is a rustic-looking red, like a weathered barn or a crisp autumn apple. Specks of cinnamon decorate the gorgeous dollop of cream on top, tempting me to lean down and take a taste.

"You are an angel straight from heaven," I tell her.

"Or the devil herself," Chantel says with the lift of her pierced brow. She rests a fist beneath her chin, revealing a thorny rose vine tattoo along her forearm. "How you doing? I heard everything's final now."

I nod. Yes, the divorce is now final, and I am, in fact, single. Only for some reason, I don't get to call myself that. I have to go by *divorced* instead. There was no saving the marriage, sadly; Greg claimed he was irrevocably in love with Trish. In fact, he almost seemed glad to get caught, like he couldn't wait to move on with his new, exciting life.

"I'm doing all right," I tell her, and then add, "most days." Because let's face it—Chantel, who's just a couple of years older than me, has been through it as well.

"I think the best thing I did after my divorce," Chantel says, "is expand my friend group. I had dwindled down to just two besties while I was married. They were married too, had kids the same age, husbands who worked a lot. After the divorce, I felt alone and out of place. Until I found this um..." Her lips twist as her gaze darts to an upper corner. "*Support* group of sorts. The big group—I'm talking, all of Virginia Beach—gets together once a month. Our smaller, more local group, has weekly meetups."

Already, I'm leery. "Is it a *real* support group? Like specialists are there and everything."

She gives me a sheepish grin. "Okay, so it's for singles. Forty-something singles, more specifically."

I groan. "Sounds terrible. What are there—a whopping ten of us in town?"

"No, even in the smaller one, there are like, a few dozen regulars. If you come, I can introduce you to some good ones."

I already know I'm not going to, but just for the heck of it, I ask, "Where's it at?"

"We pick new places each month: restaurants, rec centers, the beach." She points toward the refurbished floors and nods. "But this time, the Coffee Loft's newest and greatest addition gets the honor."

Maggie didn't mention this, which means she was hoping to spring it on me. She's sneaky like that.

"You going to come?" Chantel asks, her dark-lined eyes locking on mine.

"I don't see me doing that, no."

She glowers at me. "You're no fun." But then something flashes through her eyes, that stark blue growing brighter as her dimple shows. "The Wheaton brothers usually come."

My cheeks flush with heat. I set the mug down and pretend that that detail didn't just send anxious spasms throughout my entire bloodstream. Jack told

me about a new term recently, *FOMO*—which stands for the fear of missing out.

He said it was a real thing, but I argued that point. Only now, just picturing Beau Wheaton at some singles meetup, looking to fill the void in his life, my fear of missing out is concrete-heavy and undeniably real.

“You said the *brothers* go,” I say, catching onto her terminology. “Which ones?”

“The twins,” Chantel says easily. “They’re both divorced. And though Braxton’s in his thirties, he’s come to a few of them as well. Guess he wouldn’t mind scoring himself a cougar.” She makes a claw and slashes through the air.

I hate how disappointed I am that she didn’t mention Beau. Has he already found someone else? The two of us barely make it beyond small talk when we bump into each other. Prior to our divorces, there was more to discuss. Stuff about the proceedings, how things were coming along. But now...now I catch myself thinking about him. Wondering about him. Missing him now that our contact has dwindled.

“Beau never goes?” I ask as a moment of bravery sweeps in. Who cares if I give myself away?

“He hasn’t come yet,” Chantel says, “but his brothers say they’re working on him.”

Hmm. If they’re working on him, he must not be serious with anyone yet.

“Come on, just come. Expand your friend group.”

My insides turn electric as I consider. I don’t want to go if Beau won’t be there. But if he starts going...“Maybe one day I will,” I say.

“Yeah, but if you come *this* time, you’ll be supporting Maggie’s new venture.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “You know what, you’re right.”

“I am?” She looks genuinely surprised.

“Yes,” I say after taking a sip of my heavenly drink. “I think you just might be the devil herself.”



## CHAPTER 16



*B* eau

“What does it say about us that we’re all divorced or single?” my brother Luke asks as we head to some Forties meetup at the Coffee Loft.

Luke’s twin, Liam answers. “It says women suck.”

“Or that *we* suck,” Luke says.

“You *do* suck,” I tell Luke. “But Liam doesn’t. And neither do I.”

“You two suck at picking women,” Luke jabs.

“Touché,” I say, because he’s right about that. Trish cheated on me, and Liam’s ex treated him horribly. Luke, on the other hand, lost a good thing when Meg left him.

“Whatever,” Luke says. “At least I’m working on myself.”

“By bingeing Ted Talks?” Liam razzes.

“At least I do something besides go to the gym.”

I know Luke’s comment is a jab at both Liam and me, seeing that we spend twice the amount of time weightlifting than he does, but my thoughts are pulled out of the conversation as soon as I lay eyes on the beachside Coffee Loft. Am I really about to do this? Walk into a place and survey the stock like it’s some sort of meat market?

Nearly a year ago, Kirsten offered me a drink from this place, mentioning that her sister owned it. I grin as I recall the way she tore off the lid and dumped it out when I declined the offer. I told Parker she was a freak, which makes me smile again. And then frown as I remind myself what she’s going

through.

I can't help but wonder if she'll be here tonight; it's her sister's place, after all. I'm not sure how I feel about the idea. Kirsten's been distant lately. I get the sense she's avoiding me. Maybe it's because I remind her of the way her life was ripped into shreds. Maybe it's because I made fun of Greg a few too many times, picking on his cartoonish appearance. She was married to him once, after all.

Or maybe it's me. I feel bad for the night I told Kirsten never to voice her suspicions again unless she caught the two of them together naked. Fast forward a few months of me turning a blind eye to Trish's behavior, and Kirsten and I both catch the two half-naked together.

The singles meetup isn't in the Coffee Loft's main shop, which is large, rather spacious, and filled with customers young and old. Our meetup is in a nearby hi-roof train car not far from the shore. From the outside, the cab looks like a typical train car, rustic metal painted a pale, grayish blue. Inside, it looks like a laidback coffee house with furniture tucked against the edges and corners. Loveseats, beanbags, and barstools.

There's a coffee bar in the corner. A serve yourself station with more than just sugar and cream. It's intimidating enough that I take mine black and walk the length of the train car, eyeing the albums hanging on the wall.

"Beau," Liam says as he heads my way with a rebellious-looking woman on his arm. "This is a friend of mine, Chantel. Chantel, this is Beau. He's new to the club, so be gentle."

Chantel grins wryly and reaches out to shake my hand. "So *you're* the one she was asking about." She hands me a sheet of paper and motions for me to pick a pen from the solo cup she's holding.

I do, ready to see who's been asking about me, when Chantel points at a square on my paper. Along the top, the words *Get to Know Bingo* are printed in bold. Below that, small boxes hold phrases that, at this point, make no sense. Chantel is pointing to one that reads, '*has a piercing someplace that's hidden.*'

"You can go ahead and mark that one off since *I* have such a piercing. Now," she says as she gives a paper to my brothers in turn, "go mingle and mark off more squares. Whoever gets a Bingo gets a prize. Oh, and it has to be a different woman for each box."

Ah, there's a bit of instruction in the upper corner. "*Find someone who...*" I glance at the other boxes. *Is vegetarian or vegan. Still drives a*

*minivan*. That one makes me chuckle. It assumes that most of us here have, at one point, owned one. I actually might have if Trish weren't so dead-set against them. But I didn't argue when she refused. I considered myself lucky. *Yeah, not so much.*

"Would you look at that, there's a blank one," I hear a familiar voice say. I glance up to see none other than Kirsten Hill holding a Bingo sheet beside me.

"So this is what we've been reduced to," I say to her. "Get to Know Bingo." I have a blank one, too, so I use the plane of my thigh as a table and write in a prompt. "This is going to be a hard one to find, don't you think?" I finish scribbling it in and then show her. "Find someone who..." I start, then grin as she reads the rest aloud.

"Who has projectile-vomited on an innocent woodland creature." Kirsten swats my arm and laughs.

I lift my pen ceremonially, ex out the box, and say, "check."

"Oh yeah?" Kirsten begins scribbling on her own page. "Find someone who..."

"Whose ex is sleeping with your ex." I scratch my chin and look around the room. "Good luck finding *that*."

"Ha, ha," she says and crosses that prompt off her own list. "Well," she says with a sigh, "since I doubt you have the same shoe size as me, and I don't think you own more than two cats, I should probably keep on mingling, I guess."

She looks pretty tonight. Her strawberry-blonde hair has grown out over the months. I think she usually wears it straight, but tonight, it's wavy. And the reddish tone accents the pink in her cheeks.

Warmth stirs low in my belly. "Good luck," I tell her.

During the next hour, I mingle like I was born to mingle. I'm one of the Wheaton brothers, after all, and we have an image to maintain. Besides, it's like being at a high school reunion, in a way. Most people remember or at least know of you, if they don't know you, they know of your family, and you're all close to the same age.

It's not until I watch Kirsten talk to the other guys that a knot of something unpleasant weasels its way into my night the way somebody has slipped brandy into the coffee brew. She's funny, flirty, and rather confident, it seems. I don't know why this surprises me, but it does. She's not flirty like that with *me*. Of course, we were both married when we first met.

Oh no, Luke's heading over to get in on the action. Everyone wants a piece of the new girl, huh? I had assumed that's why the women were all over me tonight—I'm the new guy; it's how it always was back in the day.

I glance down at my page to see that I've crossed off quite a few. Izzy, the giggly, rather loud brunette from Alabama, has eaten crawdads before—check. Micky, the skinny blonde who keeps bathing in disinfectant—she's vegetarian—check. Jessica, who my brothers refer to as Jessica Rabbit, claimed I checked off one of her boxes—*has kissable lips*. She's hot, flirtatious, and, in my estimation, interested in me. But since she reminds me too much of Trish, I asked her if she had any grandchildren yet since that would check off a box as well.

She eyed me for a very long time, probably warring with herself. If she said she was offended by the question, she'd be saying she wasn't possibly old enough to be a grandparent. But the fact is, any of us here, if we got started young, are old enough.

So she pointed at a different box. *Has owned a motorcycle before*. “You're welcome,” she purred, brushing my arm as she strode proudly away.

I glance over at Kirsten again. Now Liam's over there, too. And why the crud is Luke getting so close? Jeez, in her space much, buddy?

A quick glance at my page says I need just one more to get a Bingo; not a total blackout or anything, but enough to cross off one diagonal row, which means a prize when this is all said and done. And as luck would have it, it's got Kirsten's name written all over it. *Is a Soccer mom*. Chantel said we shouldn't use the same person for more than one square, but that probably didn't include the blank one.

“Hi,” a woman standing close by says. “I'm Annica.”

“Hey,” I say. She's cute. Shiny black hair, a soft smile, and a nose that summons the word *button*. “I'm Beau. How you doing on your sheet there?”

She bats her lashes. “Well, that's actually why I addressed you. I'm guessing I could cross this one off the list with you?” She rests the tip of her pen next to the *frequents the gym* square.

I extend my arms, feign a yawn, and make fists while flexing both biceps. “Why, yes. You've come to the right place.”

“Oh, and lucky you,” she says. “Because I'm one of the only people in here who can cross this one off your list.” She points at the *never been married* square.

“You're kidding. Never?”

Annica shakes her head. “Never ever.”

“Hmm.”

“Don’t look at me like I’m broken,” she warns playfully. “I happen to be very career-oriented.”

I feel caught, so I put my hands out in surrender mode. “Hey, nothing wrong with that.” And then my eyes do what I’ve been telling them *not* to do since Annica approached me. They look right over at my doofus twin brothers, who are still talking to Kirsten.

The sound of her laughter hits me like a drug, going straight to a deep, penetrating place. Why is that? I barely know her. I’ve never been attracted to her. Except, I’d never say she *wasn’t* attractive. Just...a different type than what I’ve gone for.

But what is my type now? I’m older. Wiser. And surprisingly not terribly attracted to Jessica Rabbit like my twenty-year-old self would have been.

My eyes trace the length of Kirsten’s ivory-like neck, the length of her exposed collarbones, the delicate hollow of her throat. She holds herself well. Better than I realized. Or maybe this is a new her. A less anxious, more confident her.

“Well,” Annica says. “See you at the next one maybe? Or did this one scare you away for good?”

I clear my throat and shift my gaze back to the brunette before me. “Did this one scare me away?” I repeat so I can process the words. “No, of course not. Maybe.”

She laughs. “I hope not.” With that, the woman trails her fingers gently up my wrist, catches my gaze, and then walks away. Annica is interesting and beautiful. She doesn’t have an ex-husband to deal with, which is also a plus. Heck, I decide as I glance down at my list once again, thinking back on each woman I met. There are a lot of great women here.

My eyes dart straight to the box I filled in myself, taking the chance to tease Kirsten about her moment at the campsite. She’s like the dark horse I didn’t see coming. The one you discount until they break away from the pack and come into their own. Is it possible I’m really getting feelings for her, or am I just in my head?

At that moment, Kirsten glances over and catches me looking at her. Since I’m already busted, I hold her gaze, searching, testing, dissecting. Is there something here?

Another round of heat stirs low in my belly as she holds my gaze. And

heaven help me, but I'm almost certain she's wondering the same thing.

## CHAPTER 17



O ctober

Kirsten

I stare at the heap of clothes I removed from my closet and shake my head.

“Wow,” Maggie says, “who knew you had hoarder tendencies.”

“I do not have hoarder tendencies,” I defend, nearly shocked when I look back at my nearly empty closet. Now, it’s not just Greg’s side that’s vacant. Most of my shelf area is bare, too, save a few blouses, tees, and pants I decided to keep.

Maggie clears her throat, causing me to glance over. She holds an old concert tee up to her. It’s my Dashboard Confessional tee-shirt.

“This is old. I was like...” She looks at the date on the back. “Ten years old when you got it. What do these guys even sing?” But she hurries and shakes her head because she already regrets asking.

“Oh, I’ll show you what they sing.”

“I don’t want to know,” she says, “I already changed my mind.”

“Too late,” I say, flicking past the songs in my playlist until I get to one of the all-time best songs that has ever happened. I’m quick to connect it to the big speaker as the song *Vindicated* kicks up with its rocking beat. “You better say you know this one,” I warn, lifting one arm and banging my head

to the beat.

Maggie rolls her eyes. “Sorry, but I don’t...oh, wait,” she says as it nears the chorus. “Ooh, this one’s good for you right now. Turn it up.” She starts jumping in place to the beat like she’s in a mosh pit. We sing it loud and proud. And when the lead singer belts about that sweet vindication, I scream it right along with him.

We sigh and laugh when the song is through.

“Okay,” Maggie says, her cheeks pink from exertion. “You were right. That one’s a classic.”

“Yeah,” I say. “In fact...” I stride to where the concert tee rests on the top of the clothes pile and snatch it from the pack. I tear off my current tee and shrug into that one instead, smiling in satisfaction as Maggie chuckles under her breath.

She walks over to me. “Here,” she says, motioning for me to lean down. “Your bandanna got twisted.” She fixes it, steps back, and sighs. “You’re gorgeous, you know that?”

I laugh and wave a dismissive hand.

“No, I’m serious,” she says. “There’s something new about you. You’ve like, shed all those layers you were hauling around, trying to be someone you weren’t. Probably for Greg.”

I nod. Maggie’s insightful, and I feel in my heart that she’s right.

“It’s like, he trapped you in this cocoon when he stopped noticing you. When he gave all his love and attention to another woman. But now that you’ve managed to break free from that, you’re a bold and beautiful butterfly. Strong, confident, and ready to fly.”

The words melt through me like an inner hug. Tears sting my eyes. She’s right, I think. Even if I’m still a work in progress, I’ll make sure those wonderful words hold true.

At last, I sniff, stretch out my arms, and flap my hands. “Huggy, please. Now.”

She laughs and steps in, letting me toss my arms around her and pull her in for a big hug. She hugs me back and sighs.

“Thank you,” I say. “I can’t tell you how much that means.” I kiss her cheek only to hug her tightly once again. “*You* are beautiful,” I add, “you know that? And talented and ambitious and creative.” I pull back to look at her face. “The rebuilt train cars...” I say.

“Yeah?”



“Genius!”

Her grin widens, and she squeals. “Yeah?”

I nod hugely. “Yeah. What’s going on there tonight?”

“Fifties night. Not singles in their fifties,” she amends, “but it’s a group of senior citizens who wanted a throwback to the fifties. I did the same thing I did for your generation, replacing the albums and articles, and I was dying when I looked at the prices back then.” She whistles and shakes her head.

“I bet,” I say.

Just then, my phone rings. The unique ringtone tells me that it’s Jack calling. He’s spending the night at Parker’s, and I can’t help but wonder if Beau is home too. Or is he going out for the night and letting Parker and Jack babysit Paige?

“Hi,” I say.

“Hey, Mom,” Jack says, voice exuberant like he’s having a great time.

“Jackman,” Maggie blurts.

“Oh, hey, Mags! You hanging out with my mom tonight?”

“I was, but I’m about to head out. I’ve got a date with a James Dean lookalike.”

“Awesome,” Jack says. “He better be nice.”

“He seems to be so far,” Maggie says with a shrug.

“Well, Mom, remember how you said I could watch *Silence of the Lambs*, but Dad said no.”

I nod. “Yes.”

“And you said that as soon as I turned sixteen, we could watch it together while Dad was out of town.”

“Right.”

“But we haven’t yet, and Beau says that when Paige goes to bed...”

“Which isn’t for a long time,” Paige blurts in the background, making me chuckle.

“That we could all watch it together, if you’re game.”

I pause for a moment, not sure exactly what he’s asking. “You mean if I’m game to let you watch it?”

He laughs. “No, if you’re game to come watch it with us. You said you wanted to watch it with me because it’s a classic.”

“It is a classic.”

I try to ignore the fact that Maggie is jumping up and down and gasping with excitement. “You better do it,” she mouths at me.

“Jack?” I say, making sure he’s still there.

“Just a second, Mom.” His voice gets distant. “Okay. Beau says if you hurry over now, you can have pizza with us before Paige goes to bed.”

“And I can sing for her!” Paige volunteers.

“What do you say?”

The butterflies in my stomach are saying it all. I’m nervous at the thought of being over there with big, strong Beau and all of his glory in their huge and perfect house. But as Jack would say, I have a strong case of FOMO, and I do not want to miss out.

“Sure,” I say, trying to squelch my inner squeal.

“Nice! See you soon.”

As soon as he disconnects the line, I let that squeal loose and clasp my hands together. “I guess I’m going.”

“Can I give you *one* piece of advice?” Maggie asks as she eyes me up and down. “Don’t change even one thing about your appearance right now. In fact...” She puts up a finger, darts to my makeup drawer, and retrieves just two items. Blush, which she swirls over my cheek with the brush. And lip gloss, which she also insists on applying.

When she’s done, she steps back. “Do you trust me?”

I glance down at my red converse shoes, tattered old jeans, and concert tee. Strands of hair have escaped my ponytail and the bandanna alike, hanging loosely around my face.

I know what she means by her question. She’s asking me not to look in the mirror before I go. If I do, I’ll get critical and obsess over what I look like and waste a lot of time I could be spending with the boys and Paige. And the fact is, Maggie has made me feel beautiful. And the beauty of it is, it’s what I’m most comfortable in. It’s me being me. And there’s something liberating about that. I have wings now, do I? Maybe it really is time to fly.

“Yes,” I say at last. “I’m ready.”

## CHAPTER 18



*B* eau

Paige clutches her pink microphone like a rockstar as she belts out a Taylor Swift number, karaoke style. The words play on the screen behind her, but Paige doesn't need them. She's too busy performing.

I don't know if she rehearses this stuff or just studies what the performers do, but I could swear it's choreographed. Staring into the distance for dramatic effect. Sweeping her arm over her head before bringing it down with a fist over her heart. I swear she's about to produce real tears. I'm simultaneously impressed and terrified; she's growing up too fast.

My eyes dart in Kirsten's direction for the millionth time since she arrived. Over the last month or so, I've tried dissecting my feelings for her; was it something akin to a crush, or was it just a case of trauma bonding? But as she walked in looking the way she does tonight, the answer hit me with a vengeance—I like her. I *really* like her.

It's been an intriguing process, really, watching her morph into a more confident woman. The Kirsten I first became acquainted with was vying for her husband's affection. Feeling less than enough. Of course, things only got harder from there. Kirsten admits to enduring sleepless nights of wondering, worrying, and denying, the way I did. In retrospect, it took a toll on her. Physically, with the wilted posture and tired eyes, but in other ways, too. She presented herself differently. Tentative, unsure, bruised.

But the woman I saw chatting with my brothers at the singles night—

she's different. And I realize now, as I watch her clapping for Paige's performance, a wide, gorgeous grin on her face, that this is the *real* her.

"Attention, everyone," Paige says once her audience is done clapping. She grins the cheesiest grin in Kirsten's direction before looking at me. "Kirsten and Dad are going to sing a song together next."

"*What?*" I glance over at Kirsten, who's already climbing off her chair.

"Let's go," she says with the wave of her hand.

"Did *you* do this?" I ask.

Parker is typing a new prompt into the queue, which means he knows about it, too.

"Maybe," Kirsten says. "Come on, it's a good one."

Since Jack and Paige sang a duet earlier, we already have the second mic hooked up. I grab the pink, sparkly one, naturally, and Kirsten gets the standard metal mic.

Instead of standing with our backs to the screen like Paige, we split and stand at either side of it so we can see the words and face our small audience at the same time.

I know from the very first beat that it's *Chemicals Between Us* by Bush. Such a great song. Not that I'm surprised; Kirsten has great taste in music.

The thing is, as I read and sing every word, I become more aware of the literal chemicals between Kirsten and me. Alive and electric, breathing life into emotions I haven't felt in years. The budding hints of attraction—new, exciting, potent enough to ignite a fire in me. I bask in the familiar heat of it, remembering things like my first crush and those hard-to-get girls I had to work up the nerve to approach.

As soon as the song is through, I start musing on ways I can sit next to her during the movie. I'm so preoccupied with the dilemma that I miss the fact that Parker's been reading Paige her bedtime story and is almost through. It's one of her favorites—*Runaway Pumpkin*.

Soon, Paige is in bed, the popcorn is popped, and the screen is paused at the opening scene of *Silence of the Lambs*. Parker's making his way from the kitchen to the family room. Before he can sit, I say, "You can have the recliner if you want, man."

"*Nice!*"

"Which means I get the loveseat to myself," Jack says, plopping onto it like a bed and propping his ankles on the rounded edge. "Ah!"

Kirsten brushes my arm as she comes up beside me, a bottle of Diet Coke

in hand. Even through the savory aroma of popcorn, I detect hints of something floral, like a rose. It's soft, and feminine, and alluring.

I glance over, and her warm, hazel eyes lock on mine. A new flash of heat surges through me.

"Guess that leaves us with the couch." I don't sound sad about it, either. I just hope I don't come across as too eager. I decide to let Kirsten take a seat first. That way, I can make a point to sit next to her.

She picks a corner seat and slides her drink onto the end table at her side. I sink onto the middle cushion, careful not to crowd her, and glance over as the lights dim. "How long has it been for you?" I ask under my breath.

Her cheeks flush red. "Huh?"

I grin, realizing the question came off more insinuating than I'd meant it to. I glance toward the screen. "Since you've watched this."

"Oh, gosh, geez, I don't know." She is adorable when she's flustered. I make a note to tease her more often. "I don't think I've watched it since Jack was born."

"Good," I say. "Maybe it'll feel like the first time."

Her eyes go wide, then narrow, as she shoots me an accusatory look. She's onto me, and I'm just fine with it. So long as she and I are in the same place. The look in her eyes tells me we are.

Parker clears his throat. "You two ready?" He has the remote pointed to the screen.

Jack flicks off the lamp nearest him, and my awareness of Kirsten's proximity piques. I blow out a slow breath, reminding myself that we're in a room with—not my parents like when I was young—but my own kid. And hers too. That's a good thing, I decide. No need to come on too strong.

As the movie plays, Kirsten seems to relax. Sinking deeper into the couch, allowing herself to first graze my arm and then lean gently against my shoulder. I suck in a greedy, rose-scented breath and let her warm presence bathe over me like some sort of elixir. When the movie is through, we turn on the second one.

Kirsten gets closer as the boys doze off one by one. And soon, Kirsten's breaths become slower and deeper, falling between the rhythmic sound of Parker's soft snore. Her head rests on my shoulder, and as I turn to look at her, I'm shocked by how close her mouth is to mine. I take in her features, illuminated by the glow from the screen. Her pale lids are makeup-free, and I feel the odd desire to press kisses to each. And to her flushed cheeks, a soft,

pale pink. But as I breathe in that floral scent once again, my focus drops to her plump, rosebud lips.

My mouth actually waters at the thought of locking lips with her. Temptation flares hot and low in my belly, urging me on. It wouldn't hurt to reach out and give her one innocent kiss, would it?

Carefully, barely moving, I glance in Jack's, then Parker's direction. They're out like lights. I set my gaze back on Kirsten's pretty mouth, daring myself to move in. I'm aware of how very real the friend zone is. That's just where she and I began. But if we want to see if there's something more between us, at least potential for something more, we've got to test the waters.

So I lean in slowly, tilting my head until our lips are in line, and move in for a soft, tantalizing kiss. *Mmm*. I pull back as Kirsten sucks in a breath. Her eyes flutter open, and her gaze fixes on mine, questioning. Curious. Soon, her gaze drops to my mouth, and heaven help me, but she's the one moving in now. Lifting her chin slightly, making her intent clear.

I happily oblige, moving back in to sample the velvety warmth of those petal-soft lips. Once, twice. I tilt my head to deepen the kiss, stifling a groan as her lips part in favor of more. *Yes*.

Suddenly, a loud screech sounds from the TV, reminding me that the movie is playing on. We pull apart, each of us glancing in the boys' directions to make sure they haven't seen us. Once we confirm that they're both still asleep, Kirsten gives me a knowing smile.

"That was close," she whispers.

I nod and chuckle under my breath. "Yeah, it was." And with that, I wrap an arm around her shoulders, and she nudges back into me. I decide that if the boys see me putting an arm behind her, it's okay. If we hit it off, we have to tell them sometime.

But then Kirsten speaks up. "I should probably get going."

I want to audibly groan at the comment. I'm pretty sure it means she regrets kissing me. Maybe she's not into me like I think. Or maybe she is, but she doesn't want to upset the boys. I don't think they'd be upset; I think they'd be thrilled.

"I'll walk you out," I say.

At the door, Kirsten looks down at her feet and drags her shoe over the tile. "Thanks for having me over tonight," she says shyly.

I shift my weight. "I'm glad you came. We should do this more often."

Her chin lifts. Her gaze settles on mine. “Definitely.”  
I grin. *Good answer.*

## CHAPTER 19



*K*irsten

I don't know how else to say it, but I made out with Beau Wheaton all night long. In my dreams, that is. I wake up to visions of him leaning in, pressing his strong and encouraging lips to mine, urging me into deeper levels of bliss.

I fling my arm across my empty bed and stare at the ceiling as the morning light spills in. "I cannot believe that happened last night," I say to myself. The night went better than I could have imagined. I wasn't sure what to expect when I walked into Beau's home. Their property is like some massive estate in a gated community with a fountain out front. I've seen maids coming and going while I was dropping Parker off.

I wondered if it was one of those places you can never quite get comfortable in. You're too worried about making a smudge or smear someplace, so you just fold your arms, try not to touch anything, and hold your breath until you leave.

But no, from the moment I stepped inside, the home was warm, welcoming, and surprisingly homey. Beautiful, yes. Skillfully designed by an interior decorator—guaranteed. But still inviting. I'm sure the family had a lot to do with that too. Paige was thrilled that *Jack's mom* had come to hang out and eat pizza and do karaoke with them. It reminded me of that youthful excitement. I miss the days Jack had such exuberance over a fun day ahead.

And seeing Beau in his home like that was nice too. He's a great boy-dad, I knew that much. But he's an adorable girl-dad too. Letting her paint his



thumbnails with sparkly pink polish. Helping put her hair in curlers before she went to bed because she has some recital today; Parker helped with that too.

It took everything in me not to pull out my camera and snap a photo of it. *How could someone walk away from this?* I asked myself. Trish was a fool. And Greg was, too. I doubt Trish will be as good to Greg as I was. But in the end, I'm glad to be where I am. I didn't choose it, but I am choosing how I respond to it.

My phone lets out a buzz from the nightstand.

Jack: *Beau's asking if you want to come to brunch and Paige's recital with us.*

My eyes widen. Jack and Parker are going to Paige's recital? I bet that makes Paige feel like a million bucks.

I text him back: *Sure. What time and where?*

Jack: *Now. We're coming to get you.*

My eyes go wide as I type back: *No, I'll meet you there. I'm not ready yet.*

Jack: *It will be more fun if we all ride together. You've got exactly eleven minutes. Go!*

I roll my eyes because that's what I've said to him his whole life. He slept in—fine, he has exactly six minutes to make magic happen. I end off with an encouraging *go!*

I ask one last question: *I don't have to dress up, right?*

Jack: *Nope.*

I can insist on going separate, but then I'll get stuck in front of the mirror obsessing about my clothes, and my hair, and my makeup. I should just keep it easy. It's a Saturday brunch and a morning recital—nothing fancy. I won't overthink it.

And though overthinking things has been my middle name for the last dozen or so years, I don't. Just like yesterday; Maggie encouraged me to be my natural self, and I felt confident that way.

I brush my teeth, gargle, then rush into my closet. I opt for black jeans this time, pull on a snug, white tee shirt, and shrug into my leather jacket. I've had the thing since high school, but since it was hiding in the deep darkies of my closet, I forgot I even had it. I brush through my hair, pull it into a bun on my head, and tie a red and white bandanna around it for a splash of color. A bit of blush, lip gloss, and I'm good to go.

Except...I race back into my closet, squirt a spray of tea rose in the air, and slowly walk through it. There.

Moments later, a knock comes to the door. I picture seeing Jack on the porch, but when I crack the door open, I see Beau standing there in black jeans and—I'm not even kidding—a white tee shirt. He's missing the leather jacket, which would look very good on him, I muse, but we're just about twins.

He eyes me up and down, causing heat to spread over my cheeks. "You look nice," he rasps. "I missed the memo."

My brow furrows as I step out and reach to pull the door behind me. "Memo?"

"About the leather jacket. Mine's back at home, feeling all left out, I bet."

I grin. "I bet it is."

He nudges my shoulder as we walk, and I nudge his back, feeling like I'm about twelve years old again. Until I spot the kids in the car. Paige is waving so wildly and happily I feel her joy clear to my toes.

"Hi, Paige," I say, waving back as Beau opens my door for me.

I try to pretend I'm not swooning from that fact and climb on in. "Hey, boys," I say with a wave over my shoulder.

"I can't believe we fell asleep during number two last night," Jack says.

"Seriously," Parker adds. "Embarrassing."

I feel Beau's eyes move to me at the stop sign. The look in his eyes speaks of the delicious secret we share. The spectacular kiss he gave me while the boys snoozed nearby, completely unaware. I can't help but wonder what it would be like to kiss him when the boys weren't around.

"I'm so happy that you're coming to my recital," Paige says while clapping her hands.

"Me too!" I glance over my shoulder to take in her lovely blonde locks. "And your hair looks so pretty. Who put those ribbons in for you?" I'm asking because the truth is, it could use a little touch-up. While it *is* pulled into two ponytails, and they *are* mostly on opposite sides of her head, one side has much more hair than the other. And the one with less hair is seriously higher than its counter.

"My dad," she says. "But I brought a brush cuz he said maybe you could fix it."

"I'd love to."

"I was thinking," Beau says, "maybe tomorrow afternoon we could go to

Spicer's Orchard." He goes on to mention some of the fun activities they have while Paige squeals and claps.

"Oh, yes, yay!"

"And they have fresh cinnamon donuts and cider," Parker adds. "Remember that, Jack? You went with us one year."

"Right, it's awesome," Jack says. "Mom, do you think you could make a pie? You've *got* to make a pie."

"Dude, your apple pie is *bomb*," Parker adds. "Dad, you have to try it."

The conversation goes on like this all through brunch, which consists of hot coffee for me and Beau, warm cocoa for the kids, and an array of pancakes, eggs, and breakfast meat. When Beau and I put both ketchup and salsa on our eggs, the boys fake gag and say our generation is whack.

Amidst it all, I feel happier than I've been in ages. And more hopeful too. Being with these guys brings one word to the front of my mind.

We've got love, encouragement, laughter, and a fair bit of teasing too. We have the ease and joy of being together, our energies merging, fusing, creating something that's better than we are apart. Something I feared we might never have again—family.

At the recital, I'm surprised to see both Greg and Trish. I hadn't given it any thought, really, seeing that both flopped out on the soccer games at the end of Jack and Parker's season. As surprised as I am to see them, Trish and Greg look absolutely gob-smacked when I walk in with the family and sit next to Beau.

He leans over and whispers something in my ear. "*Jealous much?*" He pulls back and grins. I'm way too distracted by the feel of Beau's hot breath on my skin to say anything back.

The truth is, I'm not so sure they *are* jealous. I know Greg's not. It's not long, however, before Trish is casting nasty glares in my direction. She is definitely jealous.

The satisfaction I get from that is short-lived. What if Trish decides to go back to Beau? He'd probably take her back in a heartbeat. They have history, they have a family, and let's face it, Trish is exactly his type. I'm not even in the same ballpark. I'm in a different park completely.

But for the first time in a long time, I don't feel like one is better than the other. I don't feel less than, just different, and that's fine by me. If Beau likes me as I am, and so far, he seems to, great. If not, then I guess this won't last.

Paige plays a song on her flute, making little to no mistakes. Beau

whistles like he's at a ballgame while the rest of us clap. Trish shoots eye-daggers at him over it, but Beau doesn't pay any mind.

After the recital, Beau and I make niceties with Greg and Trish while we wait for Paige and the boys to finish their refreshments.

"So," Greg says, eyeing me from bottom to top. Compared to Trish, I'm incredibly under-dressed. Good thing the other guests are in casual attire as well. "What brings you here today?" He says it like I shouldn't have been invited.

Beau slips his hand along my lower back. "We all like hanging out," he says. "Paige is crazy about Kirsten." He meets my gaze before looking at Greg again. "We *all* are."

Greg's jaw goes tight.

Trish rolls her eyes. "Whatever, we're leaving. Have fun putting away the chairs." She loops a hand around Greg's arm.

Greg glances between me and Beau before stepping in line with Trish.

"What does she mean about the chairs?" I ask.

"They always ask families to stay behind and put the chairs away. Trish tries to leave before they start doing that, but I usually stay behind anyway while she sits on her phone in the car."

Beau takes me and Jack home afterward. Maggie has us over for dinner and tells us all about her chaotic date with the electrician and his nonstop puns, saying it was most definitely not a love match. Jack tells her about the great time we had with the Wheatons. Everything from our karaoke movie night to the morning brunch and recital. Maggie's giving me eyes the whole time, and I know she's dying for details I can't exactly spill in front of Jack. At least not yet. That's something I'll have to talk to Beau about.

"Looked like Dad and Trish were *pissed*," Jack says with a laugh. "I bet they were shocked to see you and Beau together."

"Ooh," Maggie chirps. "Do tell!"

I do, though there isn't much to say in that department. The bigger news is that we already have plans for tomorrow.

"Wow," Maggie says, giving me those eyes again.

"Hey, Mom," Jack says, "do you think you'll still hang out with Beau next weekend, like when we're gone?"

Now, it's my eyes that are going wide. I pat my chest and cough. "I don't know."

"You should," he says. "You guys are so alike, seriously. Parker and I

laugh about it.”

“Hmm.” I smile, realizing that Jack’s okay with the idea. In fact, he’s encouraging it.

“So, what do you think?” he prods.

“Yeah, Kirsten,” Maggie adds with a laugh. “What do you think?”

I shrug. “I guess we’ll see.”

## CHAPTER 20



*B* eau

There was a handful of things I got depressed about while Trish and I were finalizing the divorce—most were annual events: holidays, birthdays, summer vacations, and our annual day trip to Spicer’s Orchard.

While sitting at my office desk, I scroll through the photos we took on Sunday. Having Kirsten and Jack come along was a stroke of genius. As the end of summer neared, I kept picturing me taking the kids, everyone feeling this massive void where Mom used to be. Heck, we’ve taken a picture in front of their giant apple sign every year since Parker was five.

Having Kirsten and Jack there took the sting right out of it. In fact, we stayed longer than we have in years. Trish always got fed up with being there. She’d start threatening an hour into it, saying we had to choose wisely what we were doing next because she wasn’t staying much longer. Meanwhile, the kids and I still had a list of things we wanted to do. It’s a once-a-year type of deal. Couldn’t she just stay off social media a little longer and try to have fun?

Irritation roars hot at the recollection, but as I roll my shoulders back and remind myself that that’s all in the past, it falls right off.

Man, I miss a few things about Trish, of course; I really did love her, and I’ll always care about her. But I’m surprised by how much I *don’t* miss. By how many things are actually better without her there to gripe and moan.

I’m not going to feel guilty for feeling that way, either. I also refuse to

feel guilty for enjoying Kirsten's company so much. And man, I seriously do. She is a breath of fresh air. Up for adventure and fun. She's just so easy to be around. So far, we've only done stuff as a group. Now it's time to see if she's up for a little alone time, just the two of us. A date.

That kiss we shared on Friday night was, as Parker or Jack would say, *fire*. I want more, and I hope she does too.

There's only one way to find out.

I scroll through my contacts until I get to Kirsten's number. So far, I've had Jack do most of the inviting. He was a good buffer and, honestly, harder to say no to; I'm no dummy. But now for the test. Wednesday night is fast-approaching. If we can get together while the kids are gone mid-week, we might just decide we want a whole lot more while they're gone over the weekend.

I type out a text and read through it while my thumb hovers over the send button: *Hey, got any plans this Wednesday? I'd love to take you out to dinner to thank you for coming to Paige's recital. And for making our trip to Spicer's this year so special.*

Is it a cop-out to say it's to thank her? She'll just say it's her pleasure, and then I'll have to say that I'd still like to take her or that I insist and that could get awkward. I tap the delete button until only part remains:

*Hey, got any plans this Wednesday? I'd love to take you out to dinner.*

I hit send before I can chicken out, then drop the phone on my desk and smear my palms over my slacks. *Sheesh*, I'm like a kid again.

My phone lets out a buzz.

Kirsten: *That sounds fun. I'd love to.*

"Yes!" I pump a fist and shoot to my feet, pacing the office like I do every time I close a deal. I rush back to my phone and text her back:

*We both have to drop our kids off at Greg and Trish's. Actually, you're probably doing what I'm doing and letting the kid with the driver's permit drive on the way there. Should we say seven o'clock just to be safe? I've gotta make sure Parker finishes his essay first; homework enforcement isn't Trish's forte.*

"Hit send, Beau," I tell myself, so I do.

She's quick to text back. Probably doing voice to text.

Kirsten: *What a coincidence. It's not Greg's forte either. Sexting is perfect.*

My eyes nearly pop right out of my face when I read it. My phone buzzes

again in my hand.

Kirsten: *Not sexting. Sexting is not perfect, but seven is. Sheesh!!!* She adds faces in agony to prove her embarrassment. I decide to have a little fun with it.

Beau: *Are you sure?*

Kirsten: *I'm sure.*

Beau: *Because I don't condone that type of thing, you know. It's...icky.*

I chuckle and hit send.

Kirsten: *Noted.*

My eyes go wide again. It's not what I expected her to say at all. I thought she'd ramble on and on about how she thinks it's icky too. I've met the woman—I already know that's how she feels about it. She's just flirting with me.

I like that.

Kirsten: *What should I wear?*

I know exactly where I want to take her, so I type back.

Beau: *Business casual, bring a jacket.*

A knock comes to my door a second before it flies open.

"What the heck?" Luke says. "Are we going to lunch or not?"

"Yeah," Liam adds, "I'm starving."

While my brothers and I have different jobs, we all lease offices within the same building. I sell programming plans to large corporations on the twelfth floor, Luke's law firm is on the eighth floor, and Liam, who's a broker, has an office on floor number three. We usually meet on Liam's floor, but I'm late.

My phone buzzes. I'm quick to hurry and shove it in my pocket. I do *not* want to get the twins' two cents on my love life.

"Who's that?" Liam asks with a nod to my pocket.

"I saw that too," Luke says.

"Get out of here," I say, shooing them out of my office until they start to move. "Where we going for lunch?"

"Yeah," Tina from administration purrs as she slides up behind us. "Where are we going?"

I thank the heavens for the distraction and glance at my phone while the twins cozy up to Tina.

Kirsten: *Can't wait.*

My heart thumps out of beat. Me neither.



## CHAPTER 21



*K*irsten

Our date starts with a gorgeous rooftop experience. Picture dinner in an old greenhouse with glass walls on a rooftop, string lights glowing against the star-lit sky while the ocean roars in the not-so-far distance. Between the magnetic company, the flirty banter, and the unbeatable view, it's the perfect recipe for romance.

When the waiter asks if we'd like to order dessert, I recall the bananas I have at home and offer to make one instead.

We waste no time heading to my place where we suit up and get cooking. Bananas sliced, butter sizzling, sugar crystals melting. I inhale the sweet aroma wafting from the pan.

"Smells incredible," Beau says while hovering over the pan as well. "Amazing what you can do with bananas."

I grin. "Right? I'm surprised you've never had bananas Foster before."

"Never had it, and definitely never *made* it. After today, I can say I've done both." He leans against the counter, looking scrumptious in the lacy apron I tied onto him. "I've seen it on menus," he says, "but I just couldn't see how bananas and nuts would make an entire dessert."

"Don't forget the ice cream," I add.

"We're putting ice cream on this stuff?"

"You better believe it." Having Beau in my kitchen is like exposing a new, private side of myself. The domestic me who takes pride in cooking

nourishing meals, who actually found joy in canning the peaches we grew in the backyard, and agonized her way through finding the best method to cook a pot roast. I've officially nailed that one, by the way.

Just being in here with Beau, having him join me at the stove, breaks a barrier of sorts. You can't claim you don't know someone after he's joined you at the stove top, shamelessly donned your frilliest apron, and swatted you on the butt with the wooden spoon you handed him.

Tonight, we've talked about everything from horror movies we watched as kids to the woes of watching our youth slip away with things like sunspots and crow's feet, which happen to look unfairly good on him. From the moment he showed up at my door, handed me a blush-colored rose he'd picked from his garden, and escorted me into the car, our conversation has been fluid, flirty, and engaging.

When we're with the kids, it's plain to see Beau and I are compatible in all the practical ways. We parent similarly, which I like, and we both want to spend time with our kids, and spend time as a family. It's one of my favorite things about him.

But ever since he kissed me on the couch, I can't stop thinking about the other ways we're compatible too. The romantic sparks that sizzled through me during that kiss were off the charts. Over the weekend, there was a fair amount of flirting going on, but nothing like tonight.

I snag the ice cream out of the freezer, grab two forks, and lead him to the breakfast nook in my kitchen. We set the skillet on a hot pad between us, plopp scoops of ice cream on top, and take our first taste with a fork-tine cheers.

"Holy..." Beau mumbles. "I can't wait to show Parker and Paige. Think I can replicate this at home?" he asks while scooping a second bite onto his fork.

I eye him up and down. "Only if you don the apron."

He shrugs. "Naturally."

When I hop up to put the ice cream away, I flick off all the lights but the lamp next to the breakfast nook, something I've enhanced since Greg left. Beside the small table and barstools, I dragged over my favorite comfy lounge chair and added a miniature bookcase that also serves as a table. I settle into this spot every morning with a cup of joe, pull out a book, a devotional, something that settles my soul and starts my day right.

It's another intimate piece of me, and I'm sharing it with him. I feel both

excited and vulnerable at the same time. Beau makes me feel interesting, intelligent, and attractive, all things that give me butterflies and make me want to spend even more time with him.

Once we've devoured the dessert, we talk in the low light for over an hour. It's late, and we both know it. The sleepy haze falling over the room clouds my inhibitions, allowing me to hold his gaze when our eyes meet in the quiet pause. My insides whirl with tingles and heat and all the feels I felt as a crushing teen. His eyes are a deep and wonderful brown, a complement to his dark hair and the short scruff accenting his chiseled jaw.

He reaches out, and I hold very still as he pins a lock of my hair between his finger and thumb, slides down the length of it, and then wraps the tips around his pointer finger, twirling up one twist at a time. The sensations cause pleasurable chills to ripple all the way to my scalp.

Slowly, then, he unravels my hair, slides his warm hand along the column of my neck, and glances down at my mouth. I feel myself leaning in, lured by his seductive draw, drunk on the chemicals between us, desperate for another taste of him.

Our lips meet at last in a hungry kiss that shoots a thrill right through my core. His lips are strong and certain as he tilts his head, deepening the kiss and showing me exactly what I've been missing all these years.

When we caught Greg kissing Trish, I couldn't help but comment on the fact that he never wanted to kiss me. Beau had said something about Greg being a fool, but in these moments, with this unparalleled kiss, he's *showing* me what it's like to be kissed by a man who desires me.

We shift into slower, lingering exchanges, tasting, teasing, breathing each other in. Beau finds another strand of my hair as he pulls back, toying with it as he did before, and gives me a wink. "I think I like you."

I laugh and blush. "I think I like you too."

We spend the weekend together while the kids are away, and once they're back, we do things as a group. A family. Soccer season is running full throttle, meaning Lenny is back in the picture, so he joins us sometimes too. Things with Greg and Trish are amiable, albeit awkward, but they seem to have accepted the fact that Beau and I are dating, and there's nothing they can do about it.

It's not until I'm gathering lawn chairs after one of the games that Trish shimmies over in her high heels, Gucci visor, and sunglasses filling more than half of her face.

“I hope you don’t think this is going to last,” she says in a classic mean-girl tone.

I glance to where Beau is helping the boys stack cones and round up the balls, then shift my gaze to where Greg is refilling his water bottle at the drinking fountain across the field. When my eyes settle back on hers, I lift one, barely interested, hopefully bored-looking brow.

“You know why he’s going after someone like you, don’t you?”

A dose of discomfort seeps in. It’s like pulling on a thread of a sweater. You know that if you keep on pulling, the entire thing will unravel one layer at a time. She’s found the one thread that could unravel a woman like me. Especially because we’re talking about a man like Beau. One who’s probably been attracted to the Trishes of the universe since he hit puberty.

It never made sense for him to like me. And though he’s made me believe that he genuinely does, though he’s made me feel confident and beautiful and desired, the thread that Trish threatens to tug is capable of undoing it all.

“It’s all about stability for the kids. He cares about them more than he ever cared about me. But if you think he cares about *you*...if you think he’s actually *into* women like you...you’re mistaken. I know how he really feels.”

My hands ball into fists. I cannot believe this is coming from the very woman who stole my doofus husband from me. I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes as Trish wraps a frail-looking hand around the strap of her designer bag, revealing those ridiculous daggers attached to her nails. In a loose fist, her thumbnail, which is chipped, hovers clear over three of her knuckles.

“You know what?” I say, tipping my head. I blink twice and grin. “I *love* your nails.”

## CHAPTER 22



*N*ovember

*Beau*

It's been weeks since I had a Wheaton brothers boys night, and as I eye the array of bowling balls around the dispenser, looking for the blue-marbled one I favor, I grin at the sounds of their razzing.

They're talking about last night's singles meetup. I hadn't gone, of course, but they tell me this time it was combined with the thirties group, which, if you ask me, sounds risky. It makes me picture men close to fifty hitting on the barely thirty-year-olds, hoping to prove that they've still got it.

I shiver, feeling grateful that I'm not in the singles game anymore. Neither Kirsten nor I have the desire to date anyone else. And since being together feels so good, we're rarely apart. I always hoped Trish would start to enjoy family time more as the kids got older and less demanding. When that didn't happen, I loved her despite her aversion to hanging out with the kids and doing stuff they wanted to do. It's how she was, and she couldn't exactly change it. Besides, I loved her; I'd taken vows, we were in it together.

But man, it feels good to have someone who enjoys that time as much as I do. And our alone time... Heat flares low in my belly at the mere thought. Things are incredible in that department too. She's a great kisser, and every

time I sample that mouth of hers, I'm turned on by all the witty, sarcastic things she shares with those petal-soft wonders.

Like clockwork, a disruptive force wriggles its way into my mind, threatening to put a serious damper on my parade. The words *too good to be true* taunt me as I consider the years it takes most people to move on after divorce. I fear that all of it will come crashing down. That I'll be left brokenhearted all over again.

"Braxton is seriously a cougar chaser," Luke says, smacking my arm with the back of his hand to get my attention.

I pull out of my stupor and grab the nearest ball. It's Liam's, which makes me smile because he used to hate it when we used his ball. Superstitiously, he thought it disrupted his mojo. I hoist it into place and set my gaze on the pins.

"Oh yeah?" I say before nearing the lane and letting it fly. It crashes into them left of center, taking eight of the ten down.

"Yeah. He's come to the forties group a few times, right?" Luke continues.

"Only because you guys dragged me there," Braxton hollers from the seating area. Half-empty bottles and snack trays litter the table before him as he grabs his drink and takes a pull.

"You were *begging* to come," Liam interjects.

"And then," Luke continues, "we finally get a bunch of women closer to your age, and you still approach all the forty-somethings."

Braxton rolls his shoulders back. "You guys are just jealous because I'm competition."

Liam and Luke bark out a laugh. "You wish," Luke says.

"Seriously," Liam adds before glaring at the ball that flies from the chute. "Hey, that's *my* ball."

"Yep," I say, snatching it up once more. "It's lucky." I approach the glossy lane with my aim set on the remaining pins, swing back, and let it go. The fast-moving ball smacks both pins, sending them flying into oblivion. "It's even luckier now," I say, spinning around to face Liam.

He rolls his eyes. "Now I have to find a new ball."

"It's coming right back," I tell him.

"I don't want it anymore." When he storms over to the selection of balls, I eye Luke and Braxton in turn.

"Sorry," I say. "I thought he outgrew that."

Luke's eyes widen as he shakes his head. "He's gotten even more superstitious since the divorce."

I groan, tell the boys I'll be back, and head over to grab an extra bottle of beer.

"Sorry, man," I say as I offer it to Liam. "I promise not to use your next one."

Liam eyes the beer before taking it from me. "I know you're happy right now and everything, but we can't *all* move on as fast as you did." He takes a swig.

So is that what's really bothering him—the fact that I found someone so quickly after the divorce?

"Luke says you don't like her the way you think you do. And that it won't last."

*Whoa*, where did *that* come from? The disruptive energy I was trying to keep at bay comes on full force. It's hot and prickly and filling me with fear.

I grit my teeth. "Luke doesn't know what he's talking about." I glare at the guy as he gets a strike and breaks into a strut like the peacock he is. "Besides," I say louder now as we near the group. "Luke's just jealous."

"Jealous of your fake, rebound relationship?" Luke says. He's the instigator in the group, always was, so I shouldn't be surprised that he's doing this.

I try my best to look unfazed. To pretend that I'm not feeling what I'm feeling inside.

"It's so obvious that you guys are just trying to stick it to your exes," Luke says. "You're trying to make them jealous."

My eyes double in size, and I can't help but let out a humorless laugh. "You are *way* off base. I'm not even touching that one it's so far out there." And since that much is true, I almost start to feel better. Luke's totally wrong about that. At least, on my end, he is.

"Oh yeah?" Luke says. "Liam has a different theory."

I glare back at Liam, whose bottom lip gets suctioned into the bottle as his eyes bulge.

He tugs it away and throws a look at Luke. "Thanks a lot."

"*You're* the one who started it," Luke reminds him.

I hate how it feels to have someone challenging my relationship with Kirsten, especially since I already fear the idea of losing her. As far as I'm concerned, she's a Godsend. "What's your stupid theory, Liam? Let's get it

all out there so we can move on.”

“Well, it’s Liam’s turn to bowl,” Braxton says.

“Too bad,” I growl. “Spit it out.”

Liam sets his ball down and clears his throat. “I think you’re drawn to Kirsten Hill—not because you’re attracted to her, but because she represents security, which is something you didn’t have in your relationship with Trish.”

My face scrunches. While part of his point hits close to home, others totally miss the mark. “You think I’m not attracted to her? You guys saw her yourself. She’s gorgeous. In fact, you two were all over her at the Coffee Loft. You’re probably just jealous that she wasn’t into either of you.”

“No one’s denying that she’s pretty,” Braxton chimes in, revealing that they’ve *all* been talking about my relationship behind my back. “But face it, dude, she’s not your type.”

“You’re a Trish-chaser through and through,” Luke says confidently. “You’ve never gone for any woman who doesn’t look like her, act like her, and *spend* like her.”

“I was in my *twenties* when we got married. Don’t you think I’ve grown up since then?” I look from face to face, stunned by their silence, their stupid glances at the floor, at the waiting pins down the lane, at anything except for me.

Liam scratches the back of his head. “Sorry it came out like this, but we think you should just...be careful. The last thing you want to do is hurt a woman who’s already been hurt once before.”

That idea is the sound of screeching brakes in my head. I’ve been worried about me getting hurt in this, but what if they’re right? I absolutely don’t want to hurt Kirsten.

“Her husband left her for a woman like Trish,” Liam continues, “and if you’re going to go off and do the same...”

“I won’t,” I say, my jaw tightening over the words.

“You *might*,” Liam counters. “And if you did...”

“It would probably break her,” Braxton fills in for him.

The mere words make me shudder. I think of how satisfying it was to run into Trish and Greg at Paige’s recital with Kirsten at my side. And of how many times I tell myself that someone like Kirsten would never cheat on me the way Trish did. What if they’re right? What if I’m in some rebound phase?

“Just think of how many girls you dumped before you married Trish,” Luke says. “You’re a numbers guy. What are the odds that it works with the



first woman you date after divorce?”

Braxton steps closer. “You should at least throw it out there and see what she thinks.”

I shake my head. I’m so pissed I want to punch all three of them one after the next. Instead, I yank my wallet from my back pocket, throw a stack of bills on the mess of napkins on the table, and shake my head.

“Thanks for the game. I’m out.”

## CHAPTER 23



*K*irsten

My family room is packed with more progesterone than it's ever held. I glance at the group gathered on the floor. It's a carpet picnic—a few tablecloths spread over the floor, charcuterie boards aplenty, and sparkling drinks in glass flutes we keep finding reasons to clink for yet another toast.

Chantel, who's among them, was right; it feels fabulous to have so many girlfriends around. To share highs and lows, thrills and woes, and to laugh at this thing called life, together.

“That woman is just nasty,” Izzy says in her thick southern accent.

“Trust me,” Jessica says with the wave of one hand. “I've met Beau. You don't lose a guy like him and not regret it. His ex wants him back in the worst way, and that's why she's trying to get in your head.”

Of all the women here, Jessica is the most Trish-like, in appearance anyway.

“She's right,” Maggie agrees.

“I'll third that motion,” Annica says as she plucks a strawberry from the dessert tray. She dunks it in sour cream, rolls it in the brown sugar to coat it generously, then moans while taking a bite.

“Thanks, ladies,” I say. “I wish I hadn't let her get in my head like that. But it's something I'm insecure about already. I'm nothing like Trish.”

“And he's nothing like Greg,” Maggie points out.

“Thank *heavens*.” Izzy bursts into giggles. For a woman who's dealt with

as much as she has, her ex being an addict throughout most of their marriage, she sure knows how to laugh and have a good time. I admire that about her.

In fact, as I eye each of the women in turn, I think of ways I admire each of them. Jessica, who rarely gets taken seriously because of her bombshell appearance which is only accented by the way she dresses, is a force to be reckoned with in the bank and loan industry. Annica, who's never been married, is a businesswoman herself. But she's not shy to admit that it got in the way of relationships. Now she's ready to change that.

And, of course, Chantel is snarky and strong, not afraid to say what she wants and to hold out for the right one. And she rocks those youthful tattoos and piercings like a teenager.

And then there's my Maggie Magpie. Young, ambitious, driven, and determined to keep order in the most chaotic of times.

Still, as the topic shifts to talk of the latest meet-up, I can't help but think I should address my concerns with Beau, just in case. I don't think he'll tell me I'm right or anything...at least, I hope he won't. What I need from him is to tell me that Trish is crazy. That she couldn't be more wrong. He's crazy about me, and it goes far beyond my being a stable option for his kids in the wake of divorce.

He and I have plans for tomorrow night, but I suddenly wish I could see him tonight instead, after the gals head home. Just then, a phone buzzes.

"It's not my phone," Izzy says.

"Mine either," says Maggie.

I pat the floor, trying to remember where I set mine, and discover it tucked beneath the edge of one of the blankets.

I grin at the preview of the text.

"Who's it from?" Annica asks.

"It's from *him*," Maggie says confidently. "Her face says it all."

"What'd he say?" Izzy asks.

I unlock my screen to see the full text.

Beau: *Had fun with the boys, but dang, I miss you. Can't wait for tomorrow.*

I read it aloud and grin as the ladies gush and swoon. "You are so lucky," Jessica says.

"He's a keeper," Chantel adds.

"Yeah," I say as I nod in agreement. "He sure is."

It's enough to make me shelve my concerns and enjoy the thrill of

romance.

For a while.



The boys kill it in soccer, going to finals and taking first place in the end. I finally have someone joining me, showing interest and support in not just the kids, but in me too. At the poolside, I glance up from my book to watch Beau play water games with Parker, Jack, Lenny, and Paige. Watching Lenny respond to Beau's fatherly encouragement is remarkable; it makes me like Beau even more.

But I still can't force the fears from my mind. They sit there, lingering, nagging, like a nail in a tire, destined to destroy it. And as Beau hangs out in my hotel room after the final game, I sense that something is bothering him too. He seems distant and distracted. We're cozied up on the couch, his fingers threaded through mine.

"Parker and Jack have a camp-out party in two weeks," I say.

"I know," he groans. "Do you believe them? That there aren't any girls invited?"

I consider that. "The guy throwing it is a senior," I say.

"And he's Griz's cousin," Beau adds.

"Yikes." I hate that I can't control everything in Jack's life, though I know I'm not meant to. And even if I did, how much would I mess things up for him? "I just don't want them to get into trouble," I say.

Beau nods. "Same. It's tough."

"Too bad we can't spy on them and see."

Beau chuckles and pulls an evil grin. "Can't we?"

I sense that he's about to lean in for a kiss and take both of our minds away for a time, but he pulls back instead and then gets to his feet. I stay in place as Beau moves over to the bed and flops onto it, and stares at the ceiling. It's not an invitation.

Fear and dread tear through me. "What's wrong?" I say, not really wanting to know. Not if it means this is about to end.

"My brothers really ticked me off at the boys' night."

My brow furrows. "When you went bowling? That was weeks ago."

"Yeah, but it's still bothering me."

I resist the urge to join him on the bed. What Trish said, close to that same time, hasn't stopped haunting me either.

"What did they say?" *Please don't let it be what Trish said.*

"They don't even have a straight story. They all just think that...that you and I aren't going to last. That I'm just going to end up hurting you. Or vice versa," he adds halfheartedly.

My body reacts before I can fully process the words. A flash of heat across my face, a blast of cold up my neck, a wave of nausea in my gut. I thought I was getting stronger, more confident. I thought that—independent of Beau's affections—I'd come to a place of stability.

But as I replay his words, I feel wrecked. If Trish's comment was the pull of a thread, this is tying that thread to a rocket ship as it blasts off. The entire sweater is unraveling at warp speed, and I'm left feeling vulnerable and bare.

"What do *you* think?" I ask, realizing it's not so much that his brothers said what they did; it's the question that follows. *Why is he telling me this?*

Because he agrees with them. Because it's making him face reason. This is all too good to be true. He's realizing he doesn't want me for the long haul, even if he wishes he did, me being so '*stable and family oriented.*' But what he really wants is someone like Trish, so he can go off and repeat the cycle again and again.

He exhales a deep breath. "What *I* think," he says, "is that I like you. And that they're wrong."

I feel it coming. So much that I almost say it myself to coax it out of him.

Yet Beau beats me to it. "But..."

"But?" *Ouch, ouch, ouch.* I'm already hurting everywhere, and I don't even know where it's going. It can't be anywhere good. I know that much.

"But I want to make sure."

I don't even know what that means, but then I have to wonder if perhaps he's been listening to someone other than his brothers. Someone he used to be married to. Someone who already whispered bitter somethings into my ear at the soccer game.

I shake my head and turn my gaze out the window. It's dark, save for the streetlights and traffic. "Trish said you'd do this," I say. "She says you only want me because I'm stable. Did she tell you that too?"

I sense Beau shift on the bed before he answers. "No, but who cares what she thinks?"

"Maybe you do. Especially if your brothers feel the same way." Tears

sting my eyes. My chin starts to quiver.

Suddenly, Beau's sliding onto the couch and gliding a hand up my arm. "They're wrong," he coaxes, but a deep, dark ache in my heart says they're not.

"But you want to make sure," I remind him.

He sighs and pulls a sad grin. "I'm just trying to dissect things. We fell into this pretty quick, you know? The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt you."

I nod, sensing that it's time. He's working his way out of the relationship, trying to ease his way so it's not too painful or cruel. "Yeah. Why don't you take some time then, okay?"

Beau's face scrunches. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I think you should go to your own hotel room now. We'll drive home tomorrow with the kids, be polite and all, and...take some time apart so you can figure out if they're right or wrong."

"Kirsten, I don't need—"

"Clearly you *do*," I challenge, shooting to my feet and striding quickly to the door. "I'm not your type. If you're going to go off to find another Trish, I don't want to stick around for it."

He follows me to the door but pauses in the doorway and checks over both shoulders. "I don't want to stop seeing you."

"Please just don't, Beau, okay?" It comes out louder than I mean it to. And angrier, too. I'm so hurt I want to kick and cry like a child. "Stop trying to do this in some...gradual, low-key way. If you don't want to date me anymore, just say so."

"I *do*," he persists.

I put my hand on his chest, meaning to push him back, wanting to pull him in. The ache in his brown eyes causes tears to fall down my cheeks. I can't let him leave me gradually. To slowly, ever so slowly, decide he wants someone else, like Greg did.

"Well, maybe I don't want to date you right now, okay?" I force my fingers to extend, urging him to step back and clear the way. With that, I close the door, sink to the floor, and give in to the sorrow at last.

If Beau is going to leave me anyway, then at least it won't be drawn out as he tries to let me down easily. As he tries to stop what he started.

I told him to take time, to give it some good, hard thought, which means I didn't shut him down completely. What I *did* do is something they say you're

supposed to do. It's the butterfly coming into play once again, only now Beau is the butterfly, and I'm setting him free. If he comes back, Beau's mine to move forward with. If he doesn't, he never was.

## CHAPTER 24



*B* eau

“Talk about the stupidest breakup in history,” Parker groans from the passenger seat.

I narrow my eyes as I spot a post off the windy canyon roadside. “Can you see what that sign says? It’s covered by that freaking branch.”

Parker leans far over before straightening back up as we pass it. “Nope. Was covered by a freaking tree branch.”

This kid is determined to make me lose my crap today. I’ve summoned the patience of a dozen saints, but if he doesn’t stop egging me on, I’m going to drive his butt back home instead of drop him off at this sketchy party I don’t feel great about him going to in the first place.

“I thought you said you guys were just taking a break,” he persists.

“So?” I clench the wheel harder as the next sign comes into hindered view. I curse as we pass it. “I have no idea if we’re going to find your little party, Park.”

“It’s not my fault the navigation gave us the wrong route.”

“Some of these dirt roads don’t get factored in,” I say. “The further off-grid, the harder it is to find.”

“You know what’s going to be harder to find?”

I grit my teeth, my nostrils flaring as I suck in a breath and beg the heavens for mercy.

“Finding another woman like Kirsten, that’s what.”



“Would you just stop it? I didn’t *want* things to end.”

“That’s not how *she* sees it. She told Jack you did. You were worried that you didn’t like her for the right reasons. Did you tell her that?”

“No.”

“So she’s lying?”

“She’s making assumptions, Parker. And can we *not* talk about this right now? I’m struggling to find this place as it is.”

“That’s it up there,” Parker says, pointing out his side of the window. A bouquet of balloons floats from a tree branch. Not cheery looking birthday balloons either. Black ones with white skulls and cross bones.

“You’re not going to do any séances out here, are you?”

“No, and I’m not the only one who misses her. Paige is upset, too.”

“Yeah, we all miss her.” I glance at the rearview, making sure I’m over far enough, and wonder if Kirsten has already dropped Jack off. Hopefully, she doesn’t get lost out here and get stranded with no service.

When Parker doesn’t open his door yet, I resign myself to confiding in him. Who else do I have who knows both me and Kirsten?

“I mainly got scared when your uncles were bugging me about the relationship. Luke said we were just trying to make Mom and Greg jealous —”

“That’s stupid.”

“I know.”

“Why would you be together when they weren’t even around if that was the case?”

“Exactly,” I add. “But then Liam’s like, I think you’re with her for a *different* wrong reason.”

Parker tosses his head back and groans. “Why do they care?”

“We’re brothers,” I say. When I remember that he doesn’t have one, I add, “picture Jack saying this to you. Times three.”

“Braxton said something, too?”

“They were all saying they were worried about it. Liam said I was just picking Kirsten because she was stable and consistent and family-oriented.”

“She *is* all those things.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the problem with that?”

“The problem is that she’s not the type I usually go for. I wasn’t necessarily into girls like Kirsten back in the day. I was always attracted to

women like your mom.”

“But you *are* attracted to Kirsten, right? She’s really pretty, Dad.”

“I know, yeah, I am. Definitely, she’s gorgeous. But I got scared that... that maybe it really *would* be a temporary kind of attraction. Like some knee-jerk reaction to being hurt by Mom—what if it’s some internal defense mechanism? Trying to save me from getting hurt again by drawing me to someone who’s like, her total opposite.”

“Wanna know how to tell if it’s really love?” Parker asks.

I look over. “According to who?”

“According to James,” he says.

James is the kid’s youth pastor from church. I shift in my seat, wondering if I’m about to get lectured. “Okay.”

“He says you’ll know if you really love someone if you like, want to pick their brain, you know? You want to keep figuring out what makes them tick. You want more than just their body, you want to know their thoughts and... what’s going on inside too.”

Ah, a lesson on lust. I’ll have to thank James for that one. Parker’s probably more apt to take advice from him than his ornery old man.

“I don’t even have to think about that,” I say. “I’m definitely fascinated by her. We don’t stop talking when we’re together. I always want to hear what she thinks about the latest news, the new conspiracy theory, or her thoughts on a parenting issue I’m facing.”

Parker shrugs. “So, what’s wrong? You don’t have the other part?”

I look at him, as lost as I was, while we were looking for signs back there. “What do you mean.”

Parker plays with a thread from his ripped jeans. “You know...” His chin is ducked, and his gaze is determinedly set on that thread. He’s about to choke out the tip of his finger; it’s going so red.

“Just say it, please, before you decapitate that digit.”

He throws his head back. “You’re attracted to her mind but *not* her body?” he guesses.

“Oh. *No*, I really like her that way. Really *really*—”

“Then you like her, Dad. You probably even love her. You shouldn’t have let her go.” He cracks open the door and steps out.

I do the same, meeting him at the trunk as it pops open. Parker secures his sleeping bag and pillow. “Admit it,” he says, face going hard with determination.

The fact is, I think the kid might be right. I was scared of hurting Kirsten; that much was true. And I was caught off guard by how refreshing it was to be with her instead of Trish. That doesn't mean I was trying to get even or just choosing the safest choice. It means we're compatible on a deeper level than Trish and I ever were.

I recall the way Trish shut me down when I tried to share the telescope with her. She didn't want to know what was inside. Maybe both of us were more driven by lust at that age. But while I do long for Kirsten in that way, it's not without all the unique things about her that drive me mad. Her mind, her words, her thoughts, and passions are just as sexy as the rest of her.

I grab Parker's head with both hands and grin widely into his eyes before pressing a kiss to his forehead. "You, my man, were right. You were very right. And I think I'll do something about it."

Parker pumps a fist. "Really?"

"Really," I assure him.

He rushes in to hug me. The sleeping bag gets squished between us, but I only pull him in tighter. "Now," I say, "before you go—three things."

He nods.

"If it gets unsafe, you call or text me. Got it?" I pull my phone out to make sure there's service here. There is. "Even if you have to walk out here to get service."

"Gotcha."

"Do not drink or take *anything* illegal for your age."

"Tsk. Not even tempted. Jack and I never touch it."

That tidbit makes me respect Kirsten even more.

"Lastly, no doing stuff with girls that goes below the neck. I mean it."

He nods. "I won't."

I lift a brow. "I thought you said there won't *be* any girls here."

"There won't," he blurts. "But if there were, I wouldn't...do anything with parts below the neck."

I scrutinize him, not fully convinced that what he's saying is true—about the girls being there. "Okay, have fun," I say with one last look into his eyes. Dang, he's growing fast. Fast enough he'll be driving himself to things like this soon.

"Oh, and now it's your turn to admit that *I* was right."

He's already starting to walk away from me, but he turns on one heel and walks backward instead. "What?"

“About getting here?”

He laughs. “Oh, yeah. I never could have handled the stick shift in the canyon like that.”

“Not yet,” I say, emotion catching in my throat. “I’ll make sure that one day, you can.”

## CHAPTER 25



*K*irsten

I sigh as Jack pulls up to the skull-bone balloons and puts the car in park.

“Don’t be depressed, Mom,” he says. “I don’t know what’s going on, but Parker is determined to find out.”

“No, don’t...don’t have him do that. That’s embarrassing. If you love something, you let it go. If it comes back—”

“I know about the butterfly thing, Mom. Parker thinks maybe he just got scared or something. If I find anything out, I’ll let you know.”

I roll my eyes because if he really *did* find anything out, I actually *would* want to know. I’m miserable. I miss Beau like crazy, and I keep hoping he’ll call or text or show up. I want to hope that I was wrong about his lack of attraction for me. Or the misguided reasons he was drawn to me in the first place. But each day that goes by says I was probably right.

That idea is a porcupine in my chest. It’s popping out spikes on loop, making me wince in pain. Losing someone hurts. Really hurts.

“You want me to stay home tonight?” Jack offers.

I glance toward the hidden campground, swearing I hear female giggles. “Yes,” I say, “but I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He grins, then gets serious-faced. “You really going to be good?”

“Of course,” I tell him, unbuckling my belt and opening the passenger side door. “Good job driving, by the way,” I say as he tugs his stuff from the trunk.

“Thanks,” he says.

I haven’t exactly let myself have a good cry since the night I broke down in the hotel room. I was raised by a Boomer; I know how to suck it up. But I can tell—while I’m hugging Jack goodbye and forcing him to recite the rules—that I am going to bawl my eyes out all the way home.

I climb in behind the wheel, watch Jack disappear at the entrance of the woodland path, and let the tears come. It’s a combination of things, I realize on the drive home. I’m sad that Jack will be graduating in a few years and going...he hasn’t decided where, but he is shooting for some of the top dogs out of state.

It also tears my heart to see Jack worried about me, volunteering to stay home when he’s been talking about this party for weeks. Yes, I’m proud I raised such a kind kid, but I do not want him to ever feel like he has to fix me or do anything out of guilt.

And who even knows what’s going to happen at that party tonight? I don’t feel great about it, but Jack is a really great kid. He’s honest, he’s respectful, he gets great grades. And if he was determined to do stuff he shouldn’t be doing, he’d find a dozen ways to do it, camp-out party or not.

And now that I’ve skated around the biggest hurt of all, I allow myself to dwell on what I lost. How else can I accept it? I replay the beginning, when Beau broached the object of our sons’ concern. I examine the way my view of him changed over time, as if I started seeing him through a different scope.

“He cracked that bulb in his hand,” I say aloud with a laugh. “Ordering Trish flowers and food from the hotel...” I say next. “She didn’t deserve him.”

I move on to the way he thrust a Diet Coke in my hand to keep me from barfing and the horrific aftermath. I’m laughing and crying at the same time, believing what they say about love. Better to have had and lost it than not tasted it at all.

I’m hurting, I’m hurting *bad*, but that doesn’t mean I’d take any of it back. I wouldn’t trade that first kiss for anything. Or how beautiful he made me feel after we fixed dessert together in the kitchen, toying with my hair while he gazed into my eyes.

A rush of warmth floods my body at the recollection. It was magic, and even if it’s over, I’m glad that it happened. We had so much fun together with the kids, going to Spicer’s, belting karaoke tunes, and supporting Paige at her recital. We were a family, and I know it helped the kids heal. It gave them

hope for the parents who'd been left behind. I'll make sure Jack doesn't lose that hope.

I'll make sure I don't lose that hope. Somehow.

To play my part, I decide to treat myself to something special. Maybe I'll have food delivered and binge a new series. The idea throws water over the burning flames.

"Yes," I say loud and proud to my empty house, raising my arms triumphantly over my head. "I'm doing it! I'll keep spreading my wings no matter how much it rains!"

Feeling empowered, I flick the phone screen and see a notification pop up along the top as it chimes in my hand. I must be delusional because there is no way I just saw what I think I saw, which is Beau's name attached to a text notification.

I exit out of my current page and click on my text app.

Beau: *Are you home?*

Another pops in.

Beau: *You should know that I already know the answer to that.*

My eyes widen as yet another one pops in.

Beau: *Because I can see you. Not my fault. Your window is open.*

Beau: *You're cute, by the way.*

"What is happening?" I can't help but blurt as I hurry to my front door and pull it open. Beau is truly a sight to behold. He's in all black from head to toe, including the leather jacket he mentioned not long ago. Dang, he looks good in black.

"I figured it out," he says, hands splaying before him. "See, the biggest concern I had when my brothers all said what they did, was the idea that I could hurt *you*. Feelings change, things don't always work out, and they were right that I was loving all the things about you that...that make you someone I can respect and look up to and parent a blended family with." He gulps and gasps another breath of air before continuing, the words coming out like rapid fire. "I wanted to dissect how *I* felt and let you dissect how *you* felt, in case you were doing the same thing because I didn't want to get hurt either, right?"

I nod, though I'm barely keeping up and praying he'll get to the bottom line and that it won't break my heart once he does.

"But then Parker's all like, if you love *more* than her body, like, if you love her mind and her thoughts, and you basically stay up at night wanting to

ask her if she ever saw Brother Bear. Have you?”

I shake my head. “It looked too sad.”

He grins wide. “See? I thought so, too. What about that other saddish one...”

“Up?”

He laughs now, gesturing toward me like I’m amazing. “Yes. Did you guys see that one?”

I nod.

“Us too. But what I’m saying is that not only do I love the look and the feel of those gorgeous lips of yours, but I also love listening to every word that they frame. And what that all means is that my brothers were wrong. I’m sorry I got in my head and everything, but...” He stops there and eyes me for a blink. “But do you feel the same way? I mean, what they said doesn’t apply to you, does it?”

I shake my head. “Not at all.”

“I want to keep dating you, spending time with you, and figuring out everything I can about you.”

My insides are doing flips. “I want that, too,” I say.

“Then get over here,” Beau says in a rebel voice. He pulls me into his arms and kisses me like we’re at the closing scene of a romance film.

“Jack’s at the camp-out party with Parker,” he says.

I nod.

“I felt like it was a little...sketch. Did you?”

I nod again.

Beau grins wide. “I’ve got two words for you.”

A wind picks up, sweeping my hair into my face and giving me that familiar zing of anticipation.

At last, he says the words I know are about to come. “Sting op.”

“Okay,” I say through a grin. “Let’s do it.”

He shoos me back into the house. “Grab your things. This time, we’re staying the night.”

“What?”

“No funny business, I promise,” he says as he follows me upstairs. “At least, nothing below the neck.”

I spin around and lift a single brow. “But we *do* get the neck?”

He inhales his breath so his chest puffs, then nods as he exhales a slow breath, giving me those eyes. “You better believe we do. And I plan to take



full advantage of that. So long as everything at the party checks out,” he adds.

Ten minutes later, we climb into his car in matching leather jackets, ready for the mission ahead. We start catching up on everything we’ve missed as we head into the next town. Suddenly Beau flicks on his blinker and turns into the gas station with the best dirty Diet Coke in town.

“Now, what do you want, snack-wise? Chips, donuts, beef jerky, candy...” He keeps listing things as he pulls into a parking stall. “... dried fruit, nuts, protein bars.”

I look over at him and grin. “How about we go in there together this time?”

Beau tugs the key from the ignition. “Great idea.”

“Where’s Paige tonight?” I ask as he opens the door for me.

“Ah, I’m glad you asked. I had three volunteers come forward, saying they’d gladly stay at the house with her tonight.”

My eyes widen. “*Three?*”

He flicks his fingers as he counts them out. “Luke, Liam, and Braxton.”

“Which offer did you accept?” I ask.

“All three of them,” I say. “They owe me. I told Paige to pull out the mic and be ready to rock it with her uncles until the break of dawn.”

I laugh. “Do your brothers like karaoke too?”

He nods. “They’ll see it as their chance to brush up on their skills. The next singles meetup is at a karaoke beach bar.”

“No way, that’s hilarious.” I can’t say I’m sorry I’ll be missing out on it. As fun as it was to sing with Beau and the kids at his place, I have no mind to do such a thing in public. We grab a grocery basket and pick up a grape Gatorade, a Red Bull, and some pickle-flavored sunflower seeds for Beau. As I settle in front of the fountain drinks, Beau sets down the basket and wraps his arms around me from behind, burrowing his face against my neck.

“I really missed you,” he croons.

Delicious chills ripple up my arms. “I missed you too.”

“I told you how the next meetup is at the karaoke bar,” he says, “but I didn’t tell you the best part.” He encourages me to spin with the alternate press and pull of my hips.

“What’s that?” I say once we’re face to face.

“The fact that we don’t have to go.” And with that, amidst the gas station goodies and strangers passing by, Beau gives me another fairytale kiss, inspiring the name of a new book—*If You Build the Caterpillar a Cocoon*.

# EPILOGUE



## CHRISTMAS

*B* eau

I glance around my dining room as satisfaction swells in my chest. Sitting beside me is Kirsten, who's tipping her head back in laughter as Parker and Jack show her funny online Christmas pranks just for the occasion.

"Why don't we cast them to the TV so everyone can see them at the same time?" Jack asks while shooting glances toward a bored-looking Greg and Trish across the table.

"That's a good idea," Kirsten says.

"But then it's karaoke," Paige belts from the adjacent family room. She's already setting the stage down there. Microphones, speakers, and the laptop are ready to go.

My brow furrows as I inspect the floor for the Christmas jammies she had on moments ago. Must be on the bathroom floor, I decide, eyeing the poufy-looking gown she's donned for her performance.

Those of us at the table make our way to the seating area. Parker and Jack get the pranks playing from the big screen once we've all taken a seat. I catch myself cracking up at some of the goofy pranks. Everything from shaving cream in the palm of a sleeping teen and plastic wrap stretched across a doorway to pranks with props like fake spiders and fake poo. When the artificial vomit comes into play, I resist the urge to retell the tale of Kirsten's projectile performance in the woods, but once Trish and Greg are gone, I'm letting that baby loose.

Still, what makes each clip all the better, is the laughter of Parker, Paige, and Jack. Kirsten's laugh warms me, too. Makes me glad I'm not with the ornery woman in the corner seat tapping on her phone screen with a set of wicked icicle nails.

I watch a second longer to see Greg reflexively tug his phone from his pocket and shoot a look at Trish—who's sitting right by his side—after peeking at the screen. He rolls his eyes, reads the text, then leans over. His lips are easy enough to read. Heck, I could have said it along with him, I know Trish so well.

*"We'll go in a minute."*

The truth is, we're supposed to switch off with the kids for holidays, and it's my and Kirsten's turn. But we figured we'd spread a little goodwill and invite Greg and Trish for a Christmas brunch. Okay, so it was Parker and Jack's idea. They're better peacemakers than we are, but we're learning.

Trish endures a few moments more to watch Paige sing two of her songs. She's determined to leave after that, which is probably for the best. Kirsten and I plan to sing *Somewhere Only We Know* by Keane. It's a winner, and it reminds me of the crazy way Kirsten came into my life. When we're together, it truly feels like we're in a place all our own, far from the past and hurt we left behind.

Once we say our goodbyes to Trish and Greg, we hurry into the kitchen for cleanup duty. Paige pulls on a pair of elbow-high dish gloves for kids, complete with pink hearts and sparkles, and joins me at the sink. Parker clears the table while Jack sweeps the floor. Kirsten wraps up the food, setting some aside for when my family and Kirsten's sister come by later.

Kirsten and I are sort of hoping that Maggie and Braxton will hit it off. We have the perfect plan to arrange it, too. Maggie is looking for someone to help build another addition to the Coffee Loft, and Braxton happens to be in construction. What could go wrong?

Once the kitchen's cleaned up, I spot Kirsten heading into the washroom with a stack of placemats in her grip.

"I'll be back," I tell Paige as she bites the tip of her glove to remove it.

I'm quick to follow Kirsten into the washroom and close the door behind us.

At once, she spins around and gasps, letting me know I startled her.

"Sorry," I say with a grin, "but I've been trying to get you alone all morning."

“Oh, yeah?” She backs her way toward the washing machine until her shoes bump the bottom edge.

“Yeah,” I assure her, taking the placemats from her grip and tossing them into the nearby bin.

She looks gorgeous in the green sweater I bought her, the color accenting her hazel eyes in a way that almost makes them look gold.

“What can we possibly do alone that we can’t do with everyone around?”

I grin triumphantly and press a sample kiss to those heavenly lips of hers. “I’ll show you.” I kiss her again, reveling in the passion behind her heated, silky lips.

It takes a moment before I recognize the song coming from Paige’s microphone. It’s a nursery rhyme, actually, one that’s cycled through the decades, clear back to when I was a kid.

I pull away with a groan and sigh. “Do you hear that?” I say against Kirsten’s mouth.

“I’m trying not to,” she says, then laughs.

Paige starts up again. “*Kirsten and Da-ad sitting in a tree. K-I-S-S-I-N-G.*”

We’re behind closed doors, like we usually are when our lips lock, but the kids are onto us.

Parker and Jack sing along. “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage.”

“Okay, they *do* know we’re not going to be having kids together, right?” Kirsten says with a laugh.

But she doesn’t say anything about the love and marriage stuff. Already, I have ideas in mind of how I’d like to propose to Kirsten when the time comes. And while I can’t wait to make that a reality, we plan to take our time and do things right. Don’t want to go messing up a good thing.

In the meantime, we’re going to enjoy being together—with the kids as a family, without the kids as a couple—I look forward to all of it.

Maybe one day Luke and Liam will find what I found in Kirsten. Maybe Braxton will find that in Maggie. All I know is that whatever our family, our exes, or even our kids choose, I hope Kirsten and I will be together for the rest of our days. I think we’ve found a place that only we know, and that’s just where I plan to stay.

Coming in January 2024, find out how Maggie, owner of the Coffee Loft, finds her maddening match in Java Hearts and Cupid Darts.

Then, stay tuned for more forty-something singles with the next book, Back with You at Forty-two. Also coming in 2024.

## SAMPLE CHAPTER FROM MY GRUMPY CHRISTMAS CAMPANION

Cold. Unwelcoming.

Those are the words I'd use to describe the foyer of Billings Financial.

To start, it's December, and there's not so much as a wreath in sight. No garland or festive lights to reflect the season of cheer. A fact that's made all the more apparent after my time spent in the cozy cookie shop preparing for this meeting.

When I meet with a potential client for the first time, I always find a nearby café or coffee shop where I can sit, prep, and unwind. Frost It was the perfect location for today since the owner is already a client of mine.

Ideally, I arrive at or very near the meeting's location a full ninety minutes early. If a particular drive happens to be stressful—like there's an unexpected traffic jam or I can't find a place to park—there's no need to panic. I avoid rushing into a meeting with anxious energy pulling my thoughts away from my purpose.

This practice is not only good for business, but it's a self-kindness thing, and I thank myself for it each and every time.

Just today, I had an ugly encounter with some jerk in the parking garage. It didn't *have* to be ugly. In fact, my racing imagination—combined with my affinity for chick flicks—said it might have even been a real-life meet-cute—you know, the amusing first encounter between two main characters before their story takes an unexpected, romantic twist. The handsome stranger ends up being the love of her life.

But that image was shattered rather quickly. The guy insisted on *backing* his precious car into a slot with a packed house and a line of traffic behind him. That alone should have tipped me off that we'd never be a match. But

then he proceeded to pester me about the space when it was obvious I had no other choice but to take it and get out of the way. Dense, rude, and anal. No thank you.

Good thing I had time to shake that off, enjoy a warm chai latte, and a delicious snickerdoodle cookie. As my top advertisement for Frost It states, *'there's no bad mood a good cookie can't crack.'* Though I'm not sure it'll work for the *Beamer Boy*. He probably tore up the card in a tantrum and grumbled his way to a spot he was forced to—gasp—pull forward in like the rest of society.

For the meeting itself, I like to arrive ten minutes early. It gives me a little time to take in the surroundings and get an in-person feel for the place I've usually only researched online.

This is definitely a nice office. It has a sleek, contemporary feel with high ceilings, polished finishes, and a color scheme—if you can call it that—of black, white, and gray. But the massive wall in the foyer is begging for a warm piece of art. The far corners of the room could use a pair of green, succulent plants instead of the monstrous marble vases that stand taller than me at five-foot-three.

The front desk is as cold and sterile as the rest of the place, and so is the receptionist who's busily clicking at her keyboard. Even the marble floor is bare. No rug to speak of; unless that weird thing by the front desk counts as a rug. It's made of what looks like a million stubby twigs, creating more of a roadblock than an entry point to the hallway. Whatever it is, I doubt my stilettos will fare well against it, so I make a note to approach with caution.

Of course, interior designing is not my forte; I'm a marketing specialist, here to meet with the father/son team behind Charlotte's top wealth management corporation, Billings Financial. Still, the skills I've acquired in that department apply to the brick-and-mortar appearance of the business itself. What message are they trying to send? Can their clients expect a cold, robotic exchange or will they experience something more personal?

Heck, why not display a family photo since they're a father/son team? A framed picture where happy wives and growing, toothless grandchildren show that they're just like everyone else. Common ground, that's what people are looking for when trust is concerned.

*You over-analyze everything, Pyper.* The intrusive thought is, of course, played out in my ex-boyfriend's critical tone. Troy was wrong though. Compared to most people—pretty much anyone besides him—I'm a proud



member of the *carefree camp*.

I'm a fun-loving, party-going, creative type who doesn't mind taking center stage now and then. Marketing is the perfect set up. I get to use my creative side and set my own hours—two things of the highest value for someone like me. But that doesn't mean I don't take my job seriously. My one-woman marketing business is the one aspect of my life where I buckle down, work hard, and exercise the discipline I lacked during my school years.

I think back on the sample ad I ran for these guys to demonstrate what I can do for them. I've been checking the stats religiously because Billings Financial, if I'm able to score the job, will be my biggest client to date.

I lift my shoulders at the recollection of those stats—one-hundred-and-seventeen website clicks in the first seventy-two hours. Not bad. I wouldn't be surprised if the company has already booked a few appointments off those leads.

That fact fills me with a blend of excitement, confidence, and nervous energy as ten o'clock approaches.

When Randal Billings emailed me last week, he gave me a brief rundown of their situation. Twenty years ago, he ran this very office with his father; now he works with his son, Kenneth. Every year since Randal Sr. founded the company, they've enjoyed a steady, impressive incline, no matter the financial climate. It sounds like that won't be the case this year; according to Randal, if trends continue, the office will be lucky to reach last year's numbers. They face their first graphic plateau or, worse yet, their first dip in the charts.

Randal wants to tap into the next generation. Namely, the innovative youth with its, in his words, "little education, high influence, and mountain-deep bank accounts."

I'm qualified for the job and I've got the data to prove it, but there is one thing puzzling me. While researching the business, I discovered the son, Kenneth Billings, is thirty years old—just one year ahead of me. Shouldn't *he* be the one contacting the marketing specialist for ideas on how to reach that younger generation? More often than not, men Randal's age reject the changing ways of the world.

My guess is that Kenneth is likely the driving force behind the pursuit. Perhaps he's been pleading with his father to bring on a marketing specialist for years.

An image of Kenneth Billings barges into my mind. It's not an image I

welcome with open arms; the picture unsettles me for a reason I can't pinpoint. The guy used the same studio-type image for all three profile platforms, which isn't unseen in his occupation. It is, however, less common among men his age, especially ones so handsome.

In the photo, Kenneth boasts thick dark hair, a strong jaw, and a rebellious look in his eye, like he dares someone to even try and boss him around. He looks wealthy, of course, with his polished appearance, a pressed suit, and a million-dollar grin I can't help but think doesn't come out to play very often.

In a world where few situations or people intimidate me, that photo alone manages to do that very thing.

A quick glance at my phone says the meeting will start in just three minutes. I let the receptionist know that I was here when I stepped inside. If she doesn't call me back soon, I'll walk over and observe one of the monster vases to remind her that I'm here.

With that in mind, I check the buttons of my silk blouse, smooth a hand down my skirt, and eye the three-inch heels I strapped on in the parking garage. All is in place.

"Ms. Fay," comes a male voice. His tone matches the atmosphere—curt and cold.

I pull my gaze off my heels and look up to see a live depiction of the photo in my head: Kenneth Billings.

Squared jaw? *Present.*

Thick, gelled hair smoothed back to perfection? *Also present.*

The smile I'd assumed didn't show itself often? *Absent,* of course. In fact, the guy is wearing more of a scowl.

Despite that, it's easy to see that he's even more handsome in person. Flames of heat flare low in my tummy as his hazel-eyed gaze meets mine. There's something familiar in that gaze, which sends my mind racing through the possibilities. Maybe this is how I finally meet my person. It's the part where the guy *seems* rude and rigid, but then when he reaches out to shake my hand, our eyes lock, and sparks of chemistry burst through me from head to foot.

The fantasy is interrupted as the shock of cold realization jolts through me. I know why he's so familiar. It's not because I've simply seen his face in the photo, it's because I saw that very face this morning in the parking garage—after I took his spot.

*Kenneth Billings is Beamer Boy?*

*Crap.* My shoulders slump. My insides feel like they're caving in on themselves. If he'd been wearing his suitcoat in the garage I might have recognized him sooner. It's like I already messed up this meeting before I even got here. How fair is that?

Kenneth is quick to tear his gaze off me and glance around as if he hasn't made the connection. Of course, he's made the connection. I'm standing right in front of him, aren't I? Well, actually, I'm still sitting.

"Hi, there," I say quickly, coming to a stand. Is this a good time to mention the parking garage mishap? Just get it out of the way and move on? I consider doing just that as I stride toward him. I assume he means to shake my hand and introduce himself—this is business after all—but as I get close enough to reach an arm out, the man angles his body away from me.

"This way," he mumbles.

That's two strikes. First, his unforgiving manner in the parking garage, and now his unwelcoming approach in his very place of business. It's fair to say this was dislike at first sight, and I can tell the feeling is mutual.

I'm in such a rush to follow him and to pretend I didn't just reach for his hand, that the toe of my shoe catches on the glossy floor. My heart skips at least three beats as I glance down to steady my step. *No, Pyper, you can't—as in cannot under any circumstances—trip right now.*

I'm pretty sure I can save myself if I can just catch my footing with my next step.

I frantically throw one foot in front of the other, moving my gaze to the spot I want to land, and notice that stupid out-of-place rug ahead of me. Quickly, and rather stealthily I might add, I shift to avoid it, but as soon as I land, my foot slides off the edge of my shoe.

*You're still upright, Pyper, you can do this.*

Outwardly, I display no such confidence. I'm flailing, desperately willing my other foot to spring forward before my knee buckles and sends me crashing to the floor.

I've spent my entire life preparing for a meeting like this. I've practiced poise, demonstrated polish, and mastered the art of friendly ease, all to abandon any ounce of elegance in this clumsy stumble over an impractical rug following an ill-behaved man? *Nope. Not today, Kenneth.*

I become Elastigirl from *Incredibles*, or at least my arms do; because suddenly they're stretching impossible lengths to grasp onto the *one* thing

within reach, which also happens to be the one thing I'd rather fall than reach for—the Beamer Boy himself.

It's like there are two of me: *Life Preserving Me*—the one desperate enough to stay upright that she'll reach for a man who refused a handshake—and *Pride Preserving Me*; the one who would rather fall on her face than get help from him.

Yet as I slip, skid, and eventually tumble toward the floor in a tangle of leather purse straps and twisty elasti-arms, I realize that neither of us wins. Because I don't merely attempt to reach him and fail; I barrel right into him.

My uncle used to have this obnoxious dog named Monster who'd pounce on me from behind every time I stood in the kitchen; thick paws jabbing into the crook behind my straightened knees. Each time, the result was the same—my legs would buckle, my weight would drop, and my knees would smack against the cupboard door.

Sadly, my flailing hands become Monster's jabbing paws—taking Beamer Boy out at the knees and sending him down with me like a fellow pin in a bowling alley. Only we don't scatter the way pins do. There's no mechanical arm to sweep away the stragglers before the new pins come. He's on the floor, I'm half-way on top of him, and my face is planted very close to his buttocks region.

“Sorry.” I hear myself utter the apology, but it feels like an out-of-body experience. I don't want to be where I am, so I've mentally checked out.

“Whoa, ho ho,” comes an exuberant cheer from an older male. “Looks like our ten o'clock is here.”

It's as if *Simon said* to shoot to a stand like a jack-in-the-box because that's just what Kenneth and I do. Or at least, that's what we attempt to do. Frantically, I'm backing away from *the Netherlands* as quickly as my body can take me. He's taking a different approach, scrambling for something to hold on to while he tries twisting his way out from under me.

I watch in horror as his massive hand, shaped like a claw, reaches blindly, and approaches my left breast.

I know it's not on purpose since his face is still flat against the floor, but my instincts take over. I reach out and smack his hand so hard it echoes down the length of the hall.

“Ouch, what was *that* for?” he mumbles.

“Sorry.” I scramble to my feet and, as he does the same, take a few seconds to fix my blouse and twist my skirt back into place. I glance down at

the straps of my heels to make sure they're still intact. They are, so I timidly lift my gaze at last.

Kenneth is looking at me like I'm an attack dog that just bit off his right thumb.

"Sorry," I say again, not sure I actually mean it. "I lost my footing."

He lifts his arm and inspects the backside of his hand where I slapped it. It's definitely red in that spot.

I don't want to offer an explanation in front of his father, who I can only see in my periphery, and the woman who's probably stifling laughter at the desk behind me, but since he won't stop staring I spit it out.

"You were reaching for," I nod to my chest. "Accidentally, I assume," I add.

His cheeks flare with color that reflects his wounded hand. He flattens a palm over his suit coat and clears his throat. "Oh."

Another chuckle comes from the man in the hallway. "Boy, was that a show or what?"

I follow Kenneth's lead as he turns his eyes to his father at last. The man is an older version of Kenneth, tall, broad-shouldered, and handsome. Yet he seems to show that generous grin more often than his son. The gleam in his eye helps me see how humorous the situation is.

I sigh an embarrassed laugh. "Yeah, nothing like falling on your face to keep you on your toes," I say with a shrug.

He chuckles deep in his throat and reaches out to shake my hand. "I'd say so," he booms. "You must be Ms. Fay."

"Please," I say as I shake his hand. "Call me Pyper."

"Okay, Pyper. I'm Randal. I'd introduce you to my son here, but it appears you two have already gotten rather...cozy."

The words plant an image in my brain that I'll never fully delete—my face on Kenneth Billing's rear end. "You could say that," I allow, but I'm tempted to tell Randal it'd be cozier to warm up to one of the man-sized vases in the foyer than with his son.

"Follow me this way." He smacks Kenneth on the shoulder. "Come on, son. Dust off those knees and get moving. You don't need a Band-Aid for your boo-boo, do you?" He chuckles some more, and the sound of it helps put me at ease.

I follow him around the bend in the L-shaped hall and see a spacious area with glass walls and windows of plenty. Much better. Since I can see directly

into the first room we pass, I glance at a guy seated on a leather armchair.

“Wait,” I say aloud, stopping right in my tracks. “Is that Yuri?” The wild, nest-like pile of hair on his head, combined with the ever-peaceful look on his kind face says it all. His gentle eyes meet mine from the other side of the glass.

“Yuri Your Way?” I say, my voice tainted in disbelief.

Yuri comes to a stand and bows. His mouth moves in what I read to say something he always says on his show. *Hello, fellow being.* But the lack of sound says these glass walls must be sound proof.

“Hello,” I say with a wave.

Yuri gives me another polite nod before returning to his seat, folding his legs beneath him as he does.

I continue down the hall with a wide grin on my face.

“Glad to know you’re acquainted with Yuri, Pyper,” Randal says as he leads us into an adjacent room. He motions to a table with half a dozen chairs. “He’s actually here as a result of *your* ads.” He closes the door. A clear, rubber flap sweeps along the bottom of the door and along the seam too, a detail I notice since I’m curious how they made glass-walled rooms soundproof.

“You’re kidding.” I clear my throat since I didn’t mean to sound so exuberant. But seriously—*Yuri Your Way?* “That’s...he fits the *exact* profile type I was hoping to attract for you guys.”

Randal motions to the table before circling around to the adjacent side and pulling out a chair. I reach for the one closest to me and slide it back as well.

Kenneth remains standing.

“Bravo to you, young lady,” Randal says. As soon as I lower myself into the chair, he does the same. “That proves that you understood our goal.”

“Not *our* goal,” Kenneth corrects. “It’s *your* goal. And it’s a foolish one if you ask me.”

My eyes probably double in size at the comment, and since I don’t mean to be so transparent, I narrow my eyes instead. Sadly, my gaze is stuck ping-ponging between Randal and Kenneth because I’m not sure which one is going to speak up next and it does not feel like a good time to insert myself. I heard it was arrogant to assume another’s actions are because of me, but that doesn’t keep me from wondering if this is still about the parking garage.

*Get over it,* I want to say. *Go get the free, freaking cookie and move on.*

“Forgive us,” Randal says with a nod in my direction. “Kenneth and I don’t exactly see eye-to-eye on the topic...” He shoots his son a warning glare. “But he *will* behave like the gentleman I raised him to be.”

Kenneth ducks his chin and glares at me beneath an angrily furrowed brow.

My insides explode with heat. The word seething comes to mind. Is that what he’s doing? What the Darcy is happening right now? This guy can’t be real.

But as he folds his arms over his rather broad-for-a-business man’s chest and breaks into a pace, I realize that he really is pissed and he’s trying to calm himself down. The oddest part of this equation is that he seems to be ticked off at *me*.

I follow his movement, back and forth, back and forth, my jaw dropped in amazement. Every minute I spend in this man’s presence only adds to the intrigue. The cold introduction, the seething glare, and this tantrum-looking pace along the boardroom.

Each action has kindled a fresh fire of fascination, and my mind is feasting on the flames. I don’t even know the guy, but I can already say with certainty, I’ve never met anyone like him. He’s the spoiled rich kid in the movies that you love to hate. He’s the entitled jackhole at the restaurant who insists on having bottled water brought to the table and poured over filtered cubes of ice because he’s too good to drink the rest of the crap everyone else at the table drinks.

It occurs to me, as my mouth runs dry, that my jaw is, in fact, still dropped. Despite that, I’m sporting an amused grin; I can feel it in my cheeks. I work to wipe all expression from my face. A task that proves challenging since I can’t wipe the amusement from my mind. This is hilarious and horrible all at once. Hilarious because I’ve never seen anything like it, and horrible since it will likely interfere with me getting the job.

Randal keeps a stone-faced glare on his pacing son. It’s the ticked-off parent at a grocery store who—rather than rescue the child from his embarrassing behavior—steps back and says, *‘keep it up and see where that gets you.’*

When it becomes clear that Randal and Kenneth are silently warring with energy and body language alone, I decide to ask a question that is screaming in the back of my mind.

I clear my throat to gain the floor. “I’m sorry,” I say to start, “but can you

tell me why you're unhappy about attracting a client like Yuri? He's only twenty years old and he's a multi-millionaire."

"Because this new...retro hippie generation isn't interested in growing wealth; they'd rather *philanthropist* it all away!"

"*Philanthropist* is not a verb, son."

"*Philanthropy, then.*"

"Still no."

"You know what I mean." Kenneth stops pacing and pins a nostril-flared look at me. "People come to us because *we're* the experts. We've had enough years in the business to spot a good investment from a mile away. High risks are even easier to spot, but do you think that punk is interested in hearing it? No, he's going to do what he wants regardless, so what does he need me for?"

*Punk?* Okay, clearly this goes far beyond his precious little parking spot, but Kenneth's rant upsets me in an entirely new way. I feel responsible for the way Yuri is being perceived since *my* ad is what brought him here.

"So you've already been talking to Yuri?" I ask.

Kenneth erupts into a pace once more. "Yes, and it was extremely unproductive and a far-cry from any potential client interview we've had to date."

"Speak for yourself," Randal grumbles. "We had clients like this before. You just weren't here to see it." The man turns his attention to me. "You'll have to forgive my son. He might have turned thirty-years-old just last month, but he's never been a day under fifty."

Kenneth doesn't respond, simply continues pacing back and forth across the head of the room.

"Did you do your research before meeting with Yuri?" I can't help but ask.

He stops walking and looks at me over his shoulder. "Why would I need to do that? Billings Financial has a reputation that speaks for itself."

"What Kenneth doesn't understand," Randal says, looking at me rather than his son, "is that we started this business by doing exactly what he's refusing to do. His grandfather and I went out there, we hustled, we schmoozed, we networked. Once our first wealthy client more than doubled his investment in a week flat, he threw a party, invited us, and we brought on half-a-dozen of his wealthy buddies, just like that."

He spins in his seat and pins a look on Kenneth. "From there, we built up



an incredible clientele, but that group is, sadly, dying away. It's time to get out there and grow the business with some fresh faces."

I glance at Kenneth to see a blend of irritated resignation on his face. "I swear the guy doesn't even..." he pauses there and shakes his head. "He speaks English, but it may as well be a foreign language. He's got all these wild ideas in his head, and he talks in these twisted riddles."

I smile because I know exactly what he means. But only because I've watched Yuri's YouTube channel.

"I glanced over his application," Kenneth continues, "so I know the guy's loaded, but I can only guess that he's a wealthy heir who sits around reading poetry and making little videos all day since that's his..." he puts up finger quotes, "full-time job."

"You're wrong," I say, yanking the phone from my purse and coming to a stand. I am not about to sit here listening to this guy's pompous, biased, off-the-mark judgments about a client *my* ad brought in here. "The *kid* you're talking about deserves respect. Anyone who puts their time aside and considers hiring *your* company to help with their investments deserves respect no matter how much money they have or how they earned that money."

I unlock my phone and start scrolling. "But to show you something you should have found for yourself before even meeting with him..." I tap the search bar, type in Yuri's name, and click on his top video. "Do you see how many views this has?" I ask, turning the screen toward him as he meets me in the middle.

Kenneth squints and searches the screen with a scowl on his face. A scowl that transforms into wide-eyed surprise. I watch the expression morph into confusion next as he looks at me, then back at the screen. "Seventeen million views?" he says like the numbers are rigged. "How?"

I grin. "People like him."

"Because he has money?"

I shake my head. "He has money because people like him. They're fascinated by him, so they watch his videos and buy his merch."

"You're saying he's not from money."

I shake my head. "He's not. Yuri is self-made. And believe it or not, there are several wonder stars out there who've managed to make millions with the platform they built. And the top ones like Yuri get together, they network, and they collaborate. Which means if you score him as a client..." I drift off

there.

Kenneth moves his gaze to his father. “We might just bring in a dozen of his wealthy buddies.”

Randal shoots to his feet. “Precisely.”

A knock comes on the glass door. It’s so unexpected there’s a collective startle in the group as we look over. The receptionist stands on the other side of the glass, an envelope in her hand and a worried expression on her face.

Her lips move slowly as she mouths something.

“Oh, go open the door for crying out loud,” Randal says impatiently. “We don’t have time to play games.”

Kenneth hurries over and pulls open the door, allowing the words “went home” to drift into the room.

“What?” Kenneth says, turning an ear in her direction.

“Yuri went home,” she explains. “But he left this.” The receptionist turns to look at me. “He left something for you too,” she says. “And since you know who he is and everything—I overheard you talking to him in the hallway—I gave him your name. I hope that’s okay.”

He left something for *me*? I cover my surprise with a shrug. “Sure.”

Kenneth tugs the envelopes out of her hand. “Thank you, Penny.”

Penny nods, but she doesn’t step away. Instead, she keeps her eyes glued on Kenneth as her cheeks turn pink.

*Of course, she has a crush on him. Some people are gluttons for punishment.*

Suddenly Kenneth’s face scrunches. He glares down at the receptionist’s hands. “What in heaven’s name are *those*?”

Penny flinches. Her shoulders wilt as she makes fists to hide her fingers, but then extends them to show her bright nails.

“It’s the *All-Things Christmas* manicure,” she explains. “So they’re all different. Reindeer, a sleigh, Santa, a tree, stocking...” She dies off as Kenneth begins shaking his head.

“Good gracious.” He shivers, then nods toward the door. “Thank you, Penny.”

I can barely believe what a grinch this guy is. “Hey, Penny?” I holler as the secretary rushes toward the door. “I *love* your nails.” I glare at Kenneth. “This place could use a little Christmas cheer.”

Penny’s face brightens. “Thanks, that’s what I say.”

Kenneth rolls his eyes as he strides back toward the desk. He hands me an

envelope with my name on it and begins tearing his open.

“You don’t exactly have to read that now, do you, son?” Randal says.

Kenneth tugs out a card. I recognize the symbol on the front since Yuri uses it on his merchandise which, coincidentally, includes stationery. Yuri often suggests carrying blank cards and leaving notes of inspiration or gratitude when the notion strikes.

Kenneth reads over the note, his eyes moving frantically from one side of the page to the next.

“What is it?” Randal asks.

I fiddle with the envelope in my grip, anxious to discover just what sort of message he left for me. Still, it wouldn’t be professional to open it here and now.

Kenneth’s shoulders stiffen as his arm falls to his side. I glance down at the card, hoping to read even a part of it, but it’s closed between his finger and thumb. He sighs out an irritated breath. “This generation kills me.” The room quiets as Kenneth closes his eyes and stretches a hand across his entire brow, thumb on one temple, middle finger firmly on the other.

“Did we lose him?” Randal urges.

“No,” Kenneth grumbles.

Randal tosses up an arm. “Then what?”

Kenneth’s face scrunches a moment before his eyes pop open. He pulls his hand away and glares down at me. Realization strikes—he doesn’t want to answer with me in the room.

But suddenly his gaze narrows in on the envelope in my hand. “What does *your* card say?”

My eyes widen. *None of your business.* But since I can’t say that, I state the obvious. “I don’t know yet.”

Kenneth rolls his eyes. “I know you don’t know *yet*. I’m asking you to open it so we can see.”

“Well, you haven’t told me what *yours* says,” I point out.

“Fair enough,” Kenneth says. And just when I think he’s about to hand his over or read it aloud, he slides the card through the front opening of his suit and tucks it into an inner pocket. “Now,” he says with a wave toward the seating area. “Let’s proceed.”

I picture a rag doll the wild, two-year-old next door, Lacy, carries about. The way the poor doll’s body flings this way and that beneath the power of Lacy’s grip. I relate to that ragdoll at this moment. Kenneth is a man-sized

Lacy, and I'm the doll caught in his clutches.

Yet as Kenneth takes a seat at last, Randal shoots me a satisfied, conspiratorial grin. It's a look that says, *we did it, or, you're in.*

"Please," Kenneth says with a nod in my direction, his composure settling back into place. "Tell us what we must do to secure your services."

This ends the sample from *My Grumpy Christmas Camp-anion*. To keep reading you can buy or borrow it in KU [here](#).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



*Writing Romance That's Clean Without Losing the Steam!*

USA Today Bestselling Author Kimberly Krey specializes in writing 'Romance That's Clean without Losing the Steam'. She's a fervent lover of Jesus, family, and cheese platters, as well as the ultimate hater of laundry.

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