



Tasty

A stylized pink icon of a taco with a bite taken out of it, positioned at the end of the word 'Tasty'.

JULIA KENT

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Tasty

JULIA KENT

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Contents

[Tasty](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Little Miss Perfect](#)

[Other Books by Julia Kent](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Join My Substack!](#)

Tasty

How do you top the perfect wedding to the perfect man in the best hometown with the greatest best friends ever?

With an even better reception.

And how do you top the best reception ever?

With the picture-perfect honeymoon in Fiji.

Except...when our past comes back to haunt us, things don't go quite as planned. I wanted hot sex on my honeymoon.

Not hot sex being *filmed next door*. On the deck.

With a cringe-worthy view that makes me feel inadequate.

How do you bend like *that*?

Anyhow...

Will and I met on an adult film set (it's not what you think...), so when those two worlds collide again, the perfect honeymoon becomes the perfect nightmare.

Between a lascivious film crew in the adjacent beach house rental, a didgeridoo that doubles as something else that starts with D, an unexpected altercation with the police (again...), and some old friends (er, can I call them that?) from my fluffer days (again, not what you think), our extraordinary honeymoon has devolved into a fight for boundaries and — in the end — a stroke of genius.

Which is not the kind of stroke we had in mind, but it'll have to do.

Because by the time we're done untangling this mess, we find perfection again.

On our terms.

Just like love.

Tasty takes place after Chapter 15 in the book *Hasty*, in New York Times bestselling romantic comedy author Julia Kent's Do-Over series. Join Mallory, Will, and all their friends and family as they celebrate their wedding... and the outrageous honeymoon antics that follow.

Chapter One



"You look extraordinary," Will whispers in my ear as the slow, sensual lyrics taper off into the final notes of a beautiful love song. We're dancing, my cheek against his shoulder, and I am breathing all the breaths.

Every woman should have this at their wedding. Their *perfect* wedding.

"I do?" I ask, smiling against his shoulder.

"That's what you said earlier today." His thumb caresses my ring finger.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For saying yes. Saying I do. Being my wife."

"Why would you thank me for that?"

"Because I'm grateful that life gave you to me."

See? *Perfect*.

As he kisses me, slow and deep, I am two of me. Mallory who is lost in the kiss, and Mallory who is gleefully cheering on her own achievement.

And both of me reign victorious.

We've pulled it off, Will and I. Five bridesmaids, five groomsmen, one mother of the bride, one father of the bride, one mother of the groom, one father of the groom – and one big, new extended family.

Not a single error happened today.

Color coordination to the point of perfect alignment.

Ratios of food that create culinary masterpieces in each individual mouth.

My sister's artisanal Manchego cheese.

My best friends, all happy, all at peace with their perfect partners.

This wedding couldn't be more exquisite, and now the ante is about to be upped because the reception is almost over and it is time to head to our

cottage rental.

A gift from one of my best friends, Perky, who booked it for us before our flight to Los Angeles.

No, we're not honeymooning in L.A. That's just a pit stop, an overnight before the real deal.

Fiji.

That's right. We're spending our honeymoon in Fiji paradise. Halfway across the world, on sandy beaches and breezy cabanas, we'll make love in the tropics and leave all our cares behind.

Me and Will, alone for two weeks, living in a magical wonderland, having so much sex I packed two tubs of chafing cream.

And that's just for him.

As I lean into the kiss, his hand on my ass caressing me with intent, Will's steps shorten, his grip tightens, and I feel how eager he is for the wedding night.

A rush of desire, a loose feeling that belies my careful control to exact this exquisite day, feels so good. Will does that to me. Takes me out of my carefully-drawn boxes and blurs all the lines.

Mostly with his hands, tongue, and body.

"You," I whisper, turning blurry in all the right places. Our sighs mingle, the sound like sex. If he keeps breathing like that, almost like a lion's purr, I might yank him into a supply closet and have my way with him.

"Need some water?" he asks, one fingertip stroking my cheek, making me smile as I nod, because he's tracking me. Watching out for me. We're in symbiosis mode, and it's a delight to have someone who cares so much that he notices my state. As he walks a few steps over to the bar, I watch, mesmerized.

He's mine.

All mine.

Forever.

"You mean because I'm about to spontaneously combust? Flames are pouring out from between my legs," I joke, but... not joking.

"You need a firehose," he said, deadpan, nudging me with the one he has in his pants. "A big one. The kind that can go nice and deep wherever you need it. How badly do you need me, Mallory?"

Hello, Supply Closet. I mentally calculate where I saw one, over by the

“SQUUUUUUEEEE!”

That’s Perky, drunk and screaming in my ear now, honey-colored hair loose from her earlier up-do, the hem of her bridesmaid’s dress torn and her lipstick long gone, probably all lost somewhere on her boyfriend Parker’s cock. He is coming up behind her with a look of embarrassed amusement on his face.

It’s a look he wears often with her.

“You did it! You bagged the quarterback, Mallory! The nerdy valedictorian got the jock!” One arm goes around my shoulders, her breath against my ear. She smells like limes crammed into a frat boy house.

“You keep saying that, Perk.” The more she drinks, the more she turns into a high school freshman, minus the braces and bad hair.

“Because it’s true!”

I start breathing through my mouth. “Just because it’s true doesn’t mean you need to keep repeating it.”

“Maybe if I say it enough it’ll stop feeling so *impossible*.” Her smile is deep and infectious, glowing with genuine happiness for me. “You deserve all the goodness he gives you, Mal. Every drop. You’re building a life with Will Lotham. *The Will Lotham!*”

“You’re a *The*, Will,” Parker calls out, pretending to be serious. The man’s dimples have dimples, and he’s commanding and charming at the same time. “What do I have to do to become a *The*?” He asks her, his hand on her hip, fingers tapping on her ass.

“You’re a congressman, Parker. You seriously need another title?”

“Yes,” he whispers, loud enough for me and Will to hear. “How about you call me Sir in bed?”

“I could just call you Skip,” she says, making Parker cringe. It feels like forever ago, but at our rehearsal rehearsal dinner for this very wedding, Parker re-entered Perky’s life after five years of pain. Will knew Parker from grad school, and a case of mistaken identity turned out to be the best coincidence ever.

Because it brought Perky and Parker back together. My bestie is weird as can be, and Parker’s from old money and even older connections, but just like Perky’s happy for me, I’m ecstatic for her.

All my closest friends have their true loves. What could be better?

“If you call me Skip,” Parker says, pulling her close giving her an ass grab that makes her squeak, “I’ll have to spank you.”

“Okay, Skip.”

“You think that’s going to deter her?” Fiona says as she and her boyfriend, Fletch, join us. Some part of me relaxes again. My two besties are here with their guys. Tracking people is a gift and a curse. A receiver inside my neurons makes me aware of every person I love, and homes in on their emotional state.

It’s much like interior design and Feng Shui. I feel the flow of energy, and if it’s stuck, I have to change it.

Emotions are just another kind of energy.

“No,” Parker says simply to Fiona. “I just want an excuse to spank her.”

“As if you ever need one,” Perky shoots back, pulling him close for a kiss so deep I’m pretty sure it’s illegal in seventeen states.

Will comes up from behind me. I smell him before I feel his touch on my shoulder, his scent imprinted on me, as if my limbic system now has a category labeled Will and a complete neural-olfactory bulb devoted to him.

And only him.

“The impossible part is that she chose me,” he calls out, handing me my water and then kissing me breathless as everyone claps, a few half-hearted clinks of silverware on glass adding to the din.

Fletch chugs his beer and slings his arm around Fiona’s shoulders. Fiona beams at me, her entire countenance all softness and light. How lucky am I? All my friends are paired with Will’s friends. My hometown is like one big hug.

Will and I get to spend the rest of our lives together with the people we adore the most in the world. Pinching myself to make sure this is real doesn’t seem like enough.

We’re married. We’re joined together forever. We get to build a life rooted in love.

And that life as Mr. and Mrs. Lotham starts now.

Technically, the reception ended seventeen minutes ago, if you go by the wedding invitation. No one here at the castle we rented is kicking us out, of course, but the DJ is playing slower music, the crowd is down to only twenty people or so, and – is my dad asleep on that little chaise longue near the foyer?

He never could hold his liquor.

My mother is talking to Will’s mom, the two of them gesturing at my sister, Hasty, whose incredible sheep’s milk cheese is the talk of the

gathering.

Other than me and Will, of course.

The bride and groom should always be the center of attention at their own wedding. If there's any day we're socially sanctioned to be selfish, it's this one.

Will's tongue tastes like fine brandy and something sweet, the feel of him against me warm and full of so much anticipation. Sex is a given tonight, and while we're not virgins (that ship hasn't just sailed – it crashed, sunk to the bottom of the ocean, and cannot be found with submarines and advanced sonar...), this will be our first time making love as husband and wife.

So surreal. So wonderful.

My thumb goes to my ring finger, playing with the two bands. It took me long enough to get used to the engagement ring, and now I have my wedding band, too. Tickling the bare skin under the metal with my thumbnail has become a ritual, and I've only been wearing the new band for eight hours.

Mallory Monahan Lotham.

It has a nice ring to it.

"You are so hot in that dress," Will murmurs in my ear, his aftershave blending in with his breath, spicy and warm. We're still in our wedding clothes, my gown tailored nicely, his tux adorable as he's undone the tie, and his jacket's somewhere back at the wedding party table. My high heels were discarded long ago, and the white sparkly tennis shoes Hasty insisted I get for the reception have turned out to be, well...

Perfect.

Leave it to my cranky sister to save my arches.

"Literally," I whisper back. "I think my back sweat has mingled with all the hairspray in my hair and glued the top half of my dress to my skin."

"I will lick the glue off personally if that's what it takes to undress you."

Whoa boy. How much brandy has he consumed?

"I know we've talked about dirty talk in bed, but this doesn't make the cut, Will."

"I'll have to practice more."

"You will?"

"How about we start now. Looking at you all day has me desperate to be between your legs. I want to lick you until you come all over my face."

"Will!"

"What?" His chuckle rumbles through a happy chest, one I can't wait to

have naked, pumping away over me. Plenty of alcohol has loosened us up, but relief is part of it all, too. Relief, exhaustion, and pride.

We did it. We pulled it off. We're married.

And so, so happy.

"Save the dirty talk for later, *Sir*."

A gleam I've never seen takes over his gaze. "That's a loaded word."

I stare him down, feeling bold. "I've been a bad, bad girl."

"How about I carry you over the threshold of a small coat room and go at it right here?"

"As long as you don't accidentally record us on your iPhone and mistake my buttocks for a spider..."

He grimaces. "Way to kill the mood, Mal."

I reach down to stroke him. "I feel plenty of mood right here, Mr. Lotham."

"You are one letter off."

"Huh?"

"Replace the M in mood with W."

There is nothing like having your hand on your husband's crotch and being interrupted by your dance instructor.

Clap clap!

"Mallory!" Philippe glides over, the man's feet more like hovercraft than flesh. In a sense, Will and I are together because of him. I was lured by an unscrupulous salesperson masquerading as a date on a dating app to come join him for dance lessons at the local studio near our hometown. Will was there for the same dance lesson to prepare for his sister's wedding.

Philippe was the dance instructor.

Now he's practically family.

Kissing me three times on the cheek, he holds me at arm's length and grins. "The perfect bride! What a wonderful reception. Though it is painful to watch so many people with two left feet, it is less painful doing so in the presence of so much love. A river of it runs between you two."

Will shakes his hand. Philippe makes a face and pulls him in for a big hug. "Will," he says in as gruff a voice as I've ever heard, his Spanish accent deepening. "You are my brother now. No handshakes."

They embrace as if Will is being inducted into a secret society.

Behind us, one of the bartenders removes his apron, tossing it into a laundry bin. The lights are slowly being turned up, our magical wedding

reception merely a series of processes to be managed for the folks running this shindig behind the scenes. As Philippe and Will make small talk, I look around again.

It's over.

My one and only wedding is *over*.

Is this how architects feel after their building is done, finalized and approved, and people start moving in? The masterpiece becomes nothing more than part of normal life, the carefully-managed world of effort and calibration all set aside – because you succeeded?

For years, I imagined this. Spun the whole dreamworld out of my mind's eye. Each color on the centerpieces was evaluated and studied, pattern-matched to make certain it fit in with the other objects in the room. People – those I couldn't control (well, not all of them...), but the dynamic interplay between each precious human being and the layout of the room, the intuitive design that created harmony meant that all of the love I feel for the world was connected today.

And that's what I mean when I say *perfect*.

Perfect, connected love.

"Congratulations!" Philippe calls out as he leaves, the catering staff now openly clearing tables. Dad's awake, drinking from a bottle of sparkling water, and Mom's talking with someone on staff. Hasty looks weirdly repressed, as if something's gone wrong.

That's when I realize her date, Ian, isn't here.

Mom waves me over, her hand wrapping around my waist, her cool kiss on my cheek making me smile and sigh.

"You did it, kiddo. Mission accomplished. This was a wonderful wedding."

Hasty gives me a wan smile and continues packing up her cheese in special white paper, some of the wheels cut neatly, looking like organic Pac-Man figures.

"Where's Ian?" I ask. Mom flashes me a *Do not ask* look, but too late.

I asked.

Hasty lets out a long sigh. "He's... he had a business trip."

"This late?"

"Private jet. Australia."

"Wow."

"Yeah."

I take Mom's covert eye-spy advice and don't ask anything more. My poor sister has gone from negotiating a nine-figure venture capital deal to being charged with securities fraud, divorcing her criminal ex-husband, and is now dating her billionaire rival, Ian McCrory.

I am not letting Hasty's mess ruin my perfect day.

And surprisingly, she's not trying to contaminate me with her misery. Not one bit. Which is huge, *huge* growth for her.

"Your cheese was extraordinary," I tell her, Hasty's hobby turning out to be one of the biggest successes of the night.

My word choice makes her beam, a real smile that's only sad at the far edges. "You are extraordinary, Mal."

For a sister who has spent most of our lives treating me like a wart you can't get rid of, even if you burn it off, her compliment is earthshattering.

"HASTINGS!" I cry out, lunging into her arms, my embrace met fully by her. We start crying, the kind of giggle-sob you really only do at big events.

And major milestones.

"I'm so h-h-happy for you," she says, her hair messier than I've ever seen it, her makeup less than perfect. We're sweaty and flushed and full of alcohol and overwhelm.

Which makes my sister the perfectionist as normal as I'll ever find her.

"Thank you! I want you to be happy, too."

She pets a package of her cheese. "Getting there," she murmurs. "Do you know why cheese is better than men?" she begins, the joke one I've never heard before.

Hasty sounds just like Dad before he starts in on one of his Dad Jokes.

I don't want to know the punch line, but I don't have a choice, because Hasty says:

"Because cheese is good whether it's hard or soft."

I let out a groan.

And then:

"But more importantly, unlike men, cheese gets better with age."

"Hasty. It's my *wedding*," I hiss at her, trying to be sympathetic. "Whatever's going on with you and Ian is going to be fine in the end. I know it."

Her face is a tight contradiction, hopeful and scathingly condescending at the same time.

"Uh, we should get going," Will says diplomatically, saving me from

Hasty's comédie à fromage.

Narrowing her eyes, she peers at my husband with skepticism.

"Your parents are alive?" she asks him.

"You were just talking to my mom," Will says slowly. "How much have you had to drink?"

"And your money is all stashed in legal bank accounts, all in the U.S.?" she grills further.

"Hastings," I prod her. "Don't do this now."

"Protecting my baby sister. That's all."

"I'm not a spy. Not a con man," Will assures her. "Just crazy in love with your sister."

Hasty bursts into tears.

"Oh, shit!" Will hisses. "What did I do?"

"Nothing," I tell him, sighing against his chest as Mom soothes Hasty. "You just *are*."

"I can't change that without dying."

My chest aches at the thought. "Don't you dare die!"

"I will eventually."

"Not before we have sex!"

"Oh?"

"We have to consummate this marriage. I refuse to be part of the sixty percent of people who don't have sex on their wedding night!"

"Where did you find that statistic?"

"And did you know," I inform him, "that twenty percent of all guests *do* have sex after going to a wedding?"

Hasty overhears me and starts sobbing loudly. My heart goes out to her, truly. It must be hard watching me find so much happiness in love after her marriage fell apart and now something's clearly gone wrong with Ian.

"Shhh," Mom chides me. "You're upsetting her."

"Ian left before we could have sex!" she groans.

"Ouch," Will blurts out. I cringe.

Dad's right here and shudders.

As if.

"Pfft," I say to him. "Newsflash, Dad: your little girls are banging. Been banging since –"

"Time to go!" Will announces loudly, as Helen brings him his tux jacket. "And no more wine for Mallory."

“I can do what I want, including banging you!” I inform him.

“Oh, God,” my father groans as Mom pats his back and murmurs something that makes him chuckle, the sound something almost sensual, but that can’t be right because Roy Monahan is anything *but* sensual.

Eww.

I tug on Will’s collar and say, “And I never took a vow to obey you!”

“How about you just respect me,” he replies with a sweet kiss.

“I can’t argue with that.”

See?

Perfect.

Mom and Helen usher us off as Dad comforts Hasty, and by the time we collect our things and head out to the parking lot, where Parker and Perky are waiting for us in his car to take us to our cottage rental, I look back at the moonlit castle.

It is a fairytale.

Fiona and Fletch are standing by her car, his arm around her waist, hers raised as she waves. The diaphanous sleeve of her bridesmaid’s dress makes her look like a real, actual fairy.

I’m enchanted, aren’t I? My whole being is nothing but gratitude right now.

Gratitude and good wine.

“Thank you,” I whisper against Will’s mouth as Perky leans on the horn and screams, “GET A ROOM!”

“For what?” he replies, pointedly ignoring her.

“PERKY!” Fiona shouts, so loud poor Fletch flinches and lets go of her. Never underestimate the pipes on a preschool teacher. “QUIT RUINING THE VIBE!”

“Mallory doesn’t need a vibe anymore. She’s got Will now,” Perky informs her, as if Fiona is the stupidest person on earth.

My poor dad overhears *that* and his head drops into his hands.

“What does that mean?” Fletch says, louder than I think he realizes, turning to Fiona. “We use a vibe together. It’s not like — ”

“ENOUGH!”

It’s hard to tell, but I’m pretty sure Dad, Mom, and Helen all shout that at the same time.

“OMIGOD FLUFFY YOU CAN BOINK HIM ALL HONEYMOON! PARKER HAS A PLANE TO CATCH! PLEASE DON’T BLOW WILL IN

THE BACKSEAT BECAUSE WE DON'T WANT STAINS.”

Perky’s half out the passenger-side window, banging on the roof of the car as she bellows.

“What was that about a perfect wedding?” Will laughs, his breath against my ear.

I sigh. “It’s Perky. This *is* her version of perfect.”

Chapter Two



“What is *this*?” I gasp, the tantalizing scent of cumin, oregano, garlic, and paprika filling my nose until my stomach lets out an intergalactic roar.

Parker and Perky have just dropped us off at the tiny little cottage in Burlington that Perky booked for us as a wedding gift. It wasn’t our only wedding gift from her, of course. When your best friend has a trust fund because her parents won the lottery years ago, one gift isn’t enough.

I’m not the one who thinks that one gift isn’t enough.

That’s on Perky.

“Smells like tacos,” Will says as he finishes opening the door and walks in, plunking our carry-ons down by a small coat rack. We’ve already had most of our clothes shipped ahead to Fiji, so all we need are the light bags. It was hard deciding how much to bring, but in the end, I decided it was my honeymoon.

Clothes? What clothes?

A greeting card is on the kitchen counter next to a series of small aluminum foil catering containers, each with a clean serving spoon on top. Will picks up the note and reads it. “Start your life together as a married couple with the perfect ratio.”

Next to the catering containers is a small, wrapped gift. He reaches for it and frowns.

“Mallory,” he says slowly in a voice filled with concern, looking around in the shadowy room. His spine straightens and his legs tense, like a private investigator who has stumbled across more than he bargained for.

And is about to get caught in a trap.

“Yes?”

His even tone creeps me out even more. “Could you go turn the lights on in the living room and kitchen?”

We are in dim light with just emergency lights shining from behind furniture and the diffuse glow from the kitchen. I look around and find wall switches closer to the door.

From the outside, the cottage is an adorable little Cape attached to a large inn that rents out three or four of their smaller properties, all stretched along the coast of a tiny lake. Tomorrow, a shuttle will take us directly from our rental to Logan Airport, where we’ll fly to Los Angeles nonstop.

As I flick on the switches, I gasp. The room has an interesting aesthetic.

“Interesting” is an understatement.

“Interesting” is code for what. fresh. hell. is. *this*?

Interior design is my field. Arranging space and objects within it to elicit emotion is what I do for a living. It’s not just a profession; it’s a calling.

And this room is calling, all right. It’s crying out for mercy.

Begging to be put out of its misery.

Hard.

“Is that a water fountain in the corner of the living room?” Will says in a weak voice, as if trying to catch his breath. A former high school quarterback, he’s broad and tight in all the right places, with a baritone voice that can be bracingly authoritative when needed, which is why the soft, reedy tone he’s putting out is alarming.

I follow his gaze, then gasp. “Yes.”

“And the chair next to the fireplace? Am I seeing what you’re seeing?”

“Uh....”

He clears his throat. “It looks like a metallic series of bent knives turned into a throne, like something out of one of those shows you like, like *Game of Thrones*.”

“I see it,” I acknowledge, struggling for words. The seat and the back are made of flat pieces of metal that rise up, easily a foot above even the tallest person seated in the chair, but the tips, well... the tips are, um, *tips*. Metal mushroom caps.

Phallic.

“And that chandelier?” He points up, my gaze following.

Crystal elongated shapes with two spheres attached to a shaft dangle from gold chains, illuminated by light bulbs that mimic the crystals that hang down.

Will stops. He looks at the countertop covered with tacos. He looks at the card from Perky. He takes the wrapped gift and hands it to me.

“I’m sensing a theme,” he says flatly, mouth turning into a line.

“Tacos?”

“Different theme.”

Will points toward a Greek sculpture standing on the other side of the fireplace. It’s naked, the male physique rather exaggerated in the genitalia department.

Let’s just say the ratio is *waaaaay* off here.

Taking three steps across the small living room, he finds a fireplace poker and holds it aloft.

Incontrovertible fact is waved in front of my face, and for a split second, Will annoys me.

Because if I’m going to have a dick waved in my face tonight, it should be *his*.

The iron is long and thicker than a normal fireplace poker, with a rounded cap at the end, and I’m imagining Will poking a flaming fire with it, as if he’s making love to the logs.

I shudder.

“That’s a penis,” I announce. There is no question. A flashback from a couple of years ago slams into me, the intrusive memory the last thing I want.

Eastman.

Eastman and his coconut-oil-covered shaft. The last time I said, *That’s a penis*, I was about to run into Will for the first time in ten years.

And be arrested.

He points to the water fountain. “So iss that.” He points to the rather strange metallic sculpture chair covered in what I now see are—

“Penises!” Will calls out. He points to the chandelier. “Penis, penis, penis, penis, *penis*.”

“I get the point, honey,” I say, hoping to stop hearing the word *penis* from my new husband’s mouth. “Perky rented us a cottage devoted to penises. A *cottage d’ frottage*.”

Will’s eyes narrow, dark brows smoldering with creeping suspicion. He flips on more lights. On the ground there is a beanbag – yup, shaped like a penis. I am trying to imagine the piecework sewing job some poor person had to endure to make *that*.

He marches into the kitchen and opens the cupboards. Every cup and mug

is shaped like a penis. Venturing down a small hall, I hear a door open. The cottage is a two-bedroom, and he calls out, “The bedspread has penises on it, honey!”

I reach for my phone. I pull up Perky’s contacts. *Did you seriously give us a night in penis hell?* I text her.

Three dots appear instantly. *I’m so sorry to hear Will’s that bad in bed. That’s not what I mean,* I text back.

She replies with an eggplant emoji. *Have fun, you two!* she texts back. *I’m getting you back for this.*

What? she replies. *I gave you a taco bar.*

You gave me a taco bar in penis hell.

At least you’ll have the perfect ratio before performing fellatio.

I’ve never been closer to blocking her.

Will wanders back from the bedroom with a dazed look in his eyes. “I’ve heard of mirrors on the ceiling, but this place has mirrors *in* the toilet bowl.”

“Why would you—” I hold up my hand. “I don’t want to know.”

“I don’t want to know, either,” he says.

Our eyes meet. I’m holding Perky’s present and wondering what to do.

Will leans one hand against the counter. We’re both still pretty tipsy. His shoulders start to shake.

Oh my God, is he crying? Has Perky really ruined what had been the perfect wedding with what is now a colossal phallic mistake?

Emphasis on *colossal* and especially on *phallic*.

Laughter pours out of him, deep and heavy. He wraps his arms around his belly and folds over, chuckling so hard I start to worry that my husband is going to have a heart attack in front of me before we even manage to have sex on our honeymoon.

And we *will* have sex on our wedding night. I will not be on the sad side of statistics.

“She got us, didn’t she?” he gasps between laughing.

“I half expect Beastman to come around the corner,” I say as I laugh with him. “The whole thing is ridiculous.” My eyes adjust to the light. I see the old-fashioned dogs-playing-poker picture on the wall over the dining table.

Except the dogs aren’t playing with playing cards. They’re holding dildos instead.

“I’m not sure I can measure up to this cottage now,” Will gasps. “I’m starting to get performance anxiety.”

“You? Performance anxiety? The man who can get an erection from just walking past a heart-shaped candy?”

“That’s not my fault. Turn it upside down and it reminds me of your ass.”

Maybe some of the alcohol is wearing off, or maybe reality is just intruding, but the longer we stand inside this bizarrely decorated cottage, the more I feel like every single one of my orifices must be carefully protected.

But not from my husband on my wedding night.

“You okay?” he asks as I stare around the room. All of my empathy centers are vibrating. The lamps are penises. The area rug is shaped like a penis. Everything in this room is a penis.

Even the houseplants. I look around, desperately seeking any sign of Georgia O’Keefe, and instead all I get is Judith Bernstein.

“If Perky thought she was doing us a favor by giving us a sexy wedding night cottage that would get us in the mood, *boy*, did she mess up,” I inform my husband.

“I don’t think her goal was to get us in the mood and — are you telling me you’re *not* in the mood?” Fear flashes in his eyes.

“I wouldn’t say that. It’s more that I’m not in the mood this cottage is supposed to inspire.”

He closes his eyes and inhales deeply. “Tacos could get you in the mood.”

I follow his lead, the scent hitting the arousal centers in my brain. “You may be onto something,” I whisper as I run my fingers through my long hair. Earlier, back at the reception before we left, I combed the craziness out, excited by the thought of coming back to our little rental and taking a nice soak in the hot tub, then showering together, washing away the day’s sweat and makeup and ushering in a new era.

“Is there a hot tub here?” I ask as Will begins pulling the foil tops off of the taco bar.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Take a look around.”

“I’m afraid that if I walk into the wrong room I’ll get impaled.”

He laughs.

I’m not kidding.

Behind the dining table there’s a sliding glass door. I flip on a light switch and illuminate a small, private deck, so private there’s an awning that completely covers what appears to be a steaming hot tub. Before I even look, I know what I’m about to find.

You guessed it.

A hot tub in the shape of a penis.

With a small fountain at the tip.

Will appears behind me, his hands on my shoulders. He shakes his head. "They really went all in on this theme." His fingertips smell like Mexican food. I lick his thumb. He takes his hand and gently presses the thumb deeper in me. I suck it in, running my tongue around the circumference until his eyes turn darker.

"You're making promises."

I pop his thumb out of my mouth. "Promises I plan to keep."

He kisses me, and it's clear he's been sampling from the taco bar, which means he hasn't accomplished the perfect ratio in his mouth.

I'm willing to let it pass this one time.

"Tacos first," I murmur. "Sex second."

"You're going to need all the sustenance you can get for the night I'm about to give you."

"Give me? I thought we were in a partnership. What am I supposed to give?"

"You already have, Mallory. You've given me the greatest gift a man could ask for."

"What's that?"

"Your whole heart. I love you."

"I love you, too." My stomach growls. "But right now, I love tacos more."

"More?" His hand goes to his heart, the security light outside illuminating his brand-new wedding band.

That's *my* wedding band. That's *my* husband wearing the twin to the band that rests on my finger now. We're in a penis cottage about to eat a taco bar after the most exhausting, and also the best possible, day of our lives.

Life is good.

Life will be even better with the perfect ratio of salsa, sour cream, and guacamole.

I go to the cabinet and find plates, every single one of them shaped like testicles and shaft.

"This is perfect for burritos," Will comments, pointing to the six-inch rectangular portions of the plates.

"And look," I point out, "at the mushroom cap. You can just get the right

glop of sour cream to go there.”

He gives me a wicked look. “You like sour cream, huh?”

“I like exactly the right amount of sour cream, salsa, and guacamole on a taco with the perfect amount of shredded lettuce and cheese and—”

His hand goes over my lips. “I know, Mal. I know.”

I try to talk around his hand, but I can’t. Instead, I suck that thumb back in my mouth, and he groans.

A-ha! Subversion. I’m learning his weaknesses.

Sure, we’ve been together a few years, and that’s long enough to figure out some of this, but there’s a whole other layer when you *marry* someone. I’m storing away information that will help me to please him for the rest of our lives.

And provide ammunition for future arguments.

For the next few minutes, we both stop talking and just eat. Perky’s taco bar is outstanding, although the paprika is a bit too sweet and the guacamole lacks enough lime.

Close, but not perfect.

“I didn’t realize,” he says in between bites, “how hungry I was. I barely ate anything at the reception.”

“Same here!” I take a big swallow of water. “My mom warned me that I needed to eat, that we’d be too busy taking pictures and dancing and cutting the cake and shoving cake up each other’s nostrils to be able to get enough sustenance for the day.”

“Speaking of which, was that cake dusted with cayenne pepper? Why do my nostrils burn?”

“Peppermint accents in the marzipan.”

“Ah.”

“I thought that I had it all planned out, but it turns out I’m just like every other bride.”

He clutches his heart. “You mean, you’re not perfect?”

I give him a funny look.

“This is so good. Perky got half of this gift right, at least.” Will holds up a serving spoon shaped like a penis. “The theme’s growing on me.”

“Yeah.” I look at his crotch. “Literally.”

Soon we’re both full, and I force myself to stop because the last thing you want to do on your wedding night is have sex with a full stomach. I look outside at the penis hot tub. “Want to go for a dip?”

His hand slides between my legs. “I thought you’d never ask.”

“I meant in the hot tub.”

“Oh. Well, I’ll take that dip, too.”

When he kisses me, it tastes like space and eternity, like laughter and ideas. His hands slide up behind me, nimble fingers beginning to unbutton the eight-thousand little ones that live along my spine.

“Who designed this wedding dress? A nun?”

“It’s beautiful!”

“It’s a groom IQ test.”

“You’ll pass.”

“How about I just rip it off you.”

“You can’t!”

“Watch me.”

“No, I mean – you *can’t*.” I twist and tug a bit of the fabric along my neckline, where all my hair spray has mixed with sweat and dried out on the collar. “See? It’s adhered to me. Unless you’re into flayed women, you have to remove this the hard way.”

Continuing to unbutton me, his mouth tightens, eyes doing that thing he does when he’s thinking.

“You’re formulating a plan.”

“I am.”

“A scheme.”

“A solution,” he insists. “What are you going to do with this dress after we leave?”

“Mom’s coming tomorrow to grab your tux and the dress. Having them professionally dry-cleaned.”

“Aha!”

“Aha, what? What possible good can come of that kind of *aha*?”

Abandoning my buttons, he grabs his phone.

“Who are you texting?”

“Your mother.”

“How romantic. My husband is texting my mother on our honeymoon.”

Squinting, he waits for a reply.

“Hold on. Why are you texting her?”

“You’ll see.”

“You’re getting sex advice from my mother?”

“Of course not.”

“Good. Because Sharon and Roy haven’t had sex since 1991.”

“Damn,” he says with a light grunt. “There goes that plan.”

“What plan?”

“I thought it would be funny and romantic to toss you in the hot tub in your wedding dress.”

“You what?”

“It would help you soak off that wall of glue you call skin.”

“My dress would be destroyed!”

“That’s what Sharon says.”

“What else does she say?”

“She recommends I take a warm, wet washcloth and meticulously dampen the edge of your dress, getting the –” he clears his throat. “– ratio just right, so we can peel you out of it without causing skin or fabric damage.”

“That is very sensible.”

“Not nearly as much fun. You really want to save your dress?”

“Of course!”

“Why? We watched all those ‘Trash the Dress’ videos on Instagram for months.”

“We did. And I considered it. But now that we’re here, and the wedding is over, I want the dress preserved.”

“For our daughter?” Will moves into the kitchen, pulling on drawer handles shaped like thick, veiny members, until he finds a red checkered kitchen towel and dampens it.

Oh, the way those words roll so casually off his tongue.

Our daughter.

Our *daughter*.

Our future children, so wanted, so planned, are another extension of our love. How much more beauty and happiness can we create out of something so ephemeral as connection?

We have our whole lives to find out.

“Maybe. I mean, I want her to have her own choice. You only get one wedding, right?”

“We do.”

His reply makes me smile, and as he comes up from behind, the warm washcloth isn’t nearly as comforting as his attention to detail, the tender way he dutifully helps me.

“This is working fast,” he marvels, peeling the offending strip off me

quickly. Soon, my dress is loose around my shoulders and chest, and Will is back to the button brigade.

“Whew. I was worried I’d be stuck in my dress all night,” I joke.

“It lifts up,” he says, motioning with a lascivious look.

“So romantic.”

“I try.”

“Now what?”

I stretch, my shoulders tight. “You have to ask? I thought we were getting naked to go try out that hot tub.”

“Just clarifying the plan. So, we are having sex?”

“Was there ever any doubt? Because I was prepared to sacrifice the dress for sex, to be clear.”

“Hah.”

“Sorry, Mallory, but I have to exert my authority.”

“What authority?”

“My authority as your husband.”

I laugh. Oh, how I laugh. And laugh and laugh and –

“By the power vested in me as the only man who knows all your quirks and how to align them to calibrate your world, I now,” he says, pulling my dress down, making fast work of my strapless bra and panties, “pronounce you naked,” he says as I kick off my shoes and he strips in ten seconds flat, “my very, very wet wife.”

Before I can escape, I’m in his arms and he’s pulling back the sliding glass door.

“You wouldn’t just drop me in a one-hundred- and four-degree hot tub!” I squeal.

Setting me down, our bodies shivering lightly in the chill of the night, we kiss, his tongue deep and sweet, our hands roaming wherever they damn well please because we just took a vow to be together forever.

That gives us roaming rights. Mineral rights, even.

“You’re the best thing that ever happened to me,” he whispers as he kisses my neck. “I was too stupid to see you in high school but thank God for that porn movie filming at my parents’ house.”

“That is the strangest expression of gratitude ever, Will.”

And super weird that I just thought about Beastman and now he’s mentioning the porn movie, but whatever.

“Then let me make up for it,” he says as he kisses a line down my body,

before moving my ass to the edge of the hot tub. “By showing you how grateful I am without words.”

And then he does.

Chapter Three



This isn't my first time flying first class, but it is my *best* time flying first class because I'm Will's wife now.

Once we were engaged, whenever we traveled, he insisted on first class. I feel like I'm getting away with something when I fly in front of the plane. Imposter syndrome kicks in, and I immediately feel the need to donate an enormous sum of money to starving children in other parts of the world, or to a homeless shelter, or to an animal rescue foundation to balance out my undeserved luxury.

First class is *decadent*.

There is no other way to say it and no way to get around it.

The airlines divide a metal tube into real estate that is worth more than other airplane real estate as you fly thirty thousand feet in the air, where real estate doesn't even exist.

Years ago, some executives decided that three square feet of space around a seat had more value if you included hot, wet washcloths, silk blindfolds, warmed mixed nuts in a cruet, sushi, and champagne.

And you know what? They were so right.

"Legroom," Will sighs as he stretches in the chair, his fingers twirling the stem of a champagne glass. Flying Boston to L.A. is a six-hour ordeal, but not when you fly first class.

Same six hours, very luxurious experience.

"Sparkling or flat?" the flight attendant interrupts, holding two water bottles aloft and looking at my barely empty glass.

"Oh, sparkling. Thank you."

"Can I get you anything else, Mr. Lotham? Mrs. Lotham?"

I choke. *Mrs. Lotham.*

Helen is Mrs. Lotham, not me. Will's mom is amazing, but I've known her for half my life. And now she's my mother-in-law, and we share the same title.

Mrs. Lotham.

Will squeezes my hand and grins at me as I freeze, my thumb worrying my wedding band.

"I think we're good," he tells the attendant, who gives us a cheery smile and moves on to the next couple behind us, who have also paid more for eighteen square feet of real estate in the air than my dad did for his first car.

"If you broke it down," I whisper in his ear, "each of those nuts that we've been eating are worth about six dollars."

He plucks a Brazil nut out of his bowl and starts chomping on it. "Mmm. Six dollars tastes good."

"Will!"

"I don't want you to worry about money."

"I'm not worried about money. I'm just noting a detail."

"When you go into the detail side of your brain, it shuts off the sex side of your brain."

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does. Stop worrying about details." His hand slides up from my knee to my inner thigh. "And start using the side of your brain I like more."

"You just married me. You're supposed to like all of the sides of my brain."

"And I do," he says diplomatically. "But I don't have to like them all equally at the exact same time." That hand moves even higher.

"Will!" I nudge him. "Not here!"

His eyes dart to the bathroom door.

"Will!" I'm genuinely outraged. "That's vulgar."

"They don't call it the 'mile-high club' for nothing."

"That is so cliché!"

"They don't call it a cliché for nothing."

"I am *not* having sex with you in an airplane bathroom in first class!"

He looks back behind us. "So economy's on the table?"

"How can you be so horny? We just had sex *four times* last night!"

"I don't understand what those two sentences have to do with each other," he replies, his eyes bouncing around my body as he looks at me.

“We. Had. Sex. Four. Times. Last. Night,” I repeat slowly. “Twice in the hot tub, once in bed, and then once up against the kitchen counter before we checked out of the cottage this afternoon.” I wince. “And if you’d thrust a little bit harder, that penis-shaped spoon holder was a little too close to going into my no-entry zone.”

“It’s our honeymoon. There are no ‘no-entry’ zones.”

“There are for kitchenware!”

“Fair enough.”

“Four times in nine hours should satisfy you.”

“That is an accurate inventory. But what does that have to do with the rest of what you just said?”

“How can you be so horny?”

“Right.”

“Aren’t you sated?”

“I still don’t comprehend what you’re saying, Mallory.”

“I feel like a pumpkin the week before Halloween, during a carving session after everything we did yesterday. And you’re still interested?”

“Are you really comparing sex to carving a pumpkin?”

“Well...” I slump in my seat. “Fine. I’ll give you that. Terrible analogy. I’m still not having sex with you in that bathroom.” I point toward the door in question.

He starts to turn around in his seat. I point my thumb back. “Or in that one. Or in any public bathroom...*ever*.”

“Scratch that fantasy off my list,” he says, raising his hand to catch the attention of the flight attendant. “Forever.”

“You have a list of fantasies?” I sputter. “And public bathroom sex is on them? Will, do you have any idea how *dirty* public bathrooms are? That airplane toilet seat probably has Ebola on it.”

His arm is still in the air as the attendant gives him a sign that she’ll be with him in a moment. He leans close. “But my dick doesn’t have Ebola on it.”

“*I should certainly hope not!*”

“Excuse me, Mrs. Lotham. Is something wrong?” The attendant scurries over after hearing me raise my voice.

“I’d like a double brandy,” Will says.

I look at him in horror. “We’re on a redeye. You don’t want to drink that much.”

He gives me a flat look. “I see the nagging part of being married has kicked in.”

The flight attendant presses her lips together and tries to stay professional. “Can I get you something to drink, Mrs. Lotham?” she asks.

I’m not really mad. And I know Will isn’t really upset with me. But for a moment, the world tilts slightly.

The plane is steady. Our trip is planned. And we’re in good hands with the pilot and the co-pilot. The surreal element here is *me*. My reactions, my projections, my sense of self.

I’m married now. The wedding is behind us. The honeymoon is laid out for the next two weeks, a joyous, relaxing, incredible journey of a lifetime that will bond us together. What happens over the next fourteen days sets the course of all our memories.

Fifty years from now, we will look back on the life that we built together, and it will all have started with these touchpoints in our lives. That day during high school senior final exams when we first connected in the parking lot. The moment I was on a porn set—accidentally, of course—and Will stormed in to have me arrested (accidentally, of course).

Reconnecting later and being hired by him to work for his family’s company. Going to our ten-year high school reunion and realizing that we had fallen for each other. His very public proposal at the annual Dance & Dairy festival on the town common in our hometown. Getting married, and now going on our honeymoon.

Someday we’ll tell our kids all about this.

But I’ll leave out the part where their father wanted to *schtup* me on top of an eighteen-inch-wide toilet.

As the attendant walks away, Will reaches for my hand, threading his fingers in mine. Good Lord, he’s handsome. Our faces are inches apart, our bodies separated by the large console that is paradoxically part of first class. If space is at such a premium, why would they waste four inches between seats? I guess it makes sense if you’re flying alone, but for couples like us, those four inches could come in handy elsewhere.⁴⁴⁴

His dark hair is tousled, unlike yesterday, when he had it styled for all of the pictures, and he has a perpetual smile on his face. He is casual in a white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up mid-arm. Beautiful warm eyes meet mine with an expression I know he saves just for me.

The rest of the world gets a more shut-off version of Will—always polite

and jocular, but with the shield around him. You know it's there, but you never see it.

It goes away with me.

"We'll have plenty of sex in L. A. and Fiji," he informs me. This isn't a question. He's laying out plans.

I have plans, too, for our honeymoon. We are only in L. A. for two days, just enough time to recover from the cross-country flight before heading out on the enormous halfway-around-the-world trek to get to the island.

But two days is more than enough to make sure that we go to the Griffith Observatory, see the Hollywood sign, go to Grauman's Chinese Theater, and - all of the other L. A. sites that are on my wish list.

My bucket list. My I've-never-been-there-list-but-we're-going-to-cross-them-off so that my color-coded spreadsheet of things I've never done gets crossed off.

I guess I have my own fantasy list, too, just like Will.

Except *mine* doesn't involve collecting microbes in public bathrooms.

"We're going to have so much sex," I whisper back. "All the sex you want."

"That's a *lot*, Mallory." He stares off into the distance, deep in thought. "That's just so much sex."

"I have to be able to walk, though," I inform him, taking my index finger on my left hand and enumerating the rules that he knows apply to our honeymoon.

He knows because I've now texted them, emailed them, and sent them as an attachment to show him the plans for our fourteen days in paradise.

Perhaps I should have designed an infographic.

"I have to be able to walk." I tick off the next finger. "We cannot get dehydrated." I tick off the third finger. "Birth control is in place. We are not going to be *that* couple who gets knocked up on our honeymoon."

He shudders. "I'm not ready for kids yet."

"Me, neither. You know that doesn't happen until Q3, year four."

"I'm assuming this is all being project-managed in Trello?"

I sniff. "More like Click Up."

He closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

I tick off my fourth finger. "We have to have sex on the beach at least once, but always with a blanket."

"Mal." His voice holds an edge of warning.

“I am just saying. There’s only one more rule.”

“Why do we have to have *rules* for how we’re having sex on our honeymoon?”

“Rules clarify everything.”

“Rules ruin everything.”

“Like what?”

“The spontaneity,” he responds.

“Spontaneity is overrated,” I inform him as the flight attendant brings our drinks.

“I think you’ve just given me a new mission, Mallory.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to spend the next two weeks convincing you that spontaneity is definitely *underrated*.”

“How? And more importantly, why?”

He says nothing, sipping his brandy, taking the stem of my champagne glass out of the hands of the flight attendant and pivoting to give it to me. “Drink up, honey. Just drink up.”

A warm wave of relaxation crawls from my aching arches up through my sore calves into my knees, along the delightful terrain of thighs that are chafed by my husband’s five o’clock shadow from last night.

Up comes the feeling over my belly, between my breasts, into my ribs, through my collarbone, until finally the flush fills all of the spaces on my skin that didn’t know they needed this.

With my free hand I reach for him, clutching his knee as he turns. His right hand holds his drink, and his eyes comb over me, looking like sea glass, such a stark contrast from his dark hair. “That’s more like it. Look at you.”

I close my eyes. “Look at me *what?*”

“Look at you relaxing.”

My fingers flutter to the base of my throat. “Am I? Is that what this is? It’s a new feeling.” I sip my drink.

A million wedding details rush through me, like a firehose being turned on, except — the wedding is over.

Other than Thank You notes, we’re done.

Done.

All the hard stuff is behind us now.

He squeezes my knee. “I love seeing you like this.”

“I relax all the time.”

“Not like this.”

“No,” I have to admit. “Not like this. Not in years. All the wedding planning. It had to be perfect, Will.”

“No, Mallory. It didn’t have to be perfect. It was always going to be perfect – because of you. Because of us. Everything is perfect when I’m with you. That’s all that matters. I don’t care that your nail polish matched your lipstick.”

“What?” I gasp.

“I don’t care that the caramel sauce for the gluten-free cheesecake used the same syrup as the coffee bar.”

“That was a very important detail!”

“I don’t care that your mascara was the same color brown as the leather on the lectern where the guestbook was situated, which also matched the brown ring around my irises.”

Real rage begins to build in me. My shoulders instantly knot up.

He squeezes my hand, laughing. “But I do care that the entire time we’ve been together, that *you* care. That you invest so much of yourself into these special moments where everyone we love and everyone who loves us comes together and experiences time in a shared space, and in a space filled with so much love. You are a walking chamber of love in human form, Mallory Monahan Lotham,” he finishes, leaning across those four inches of coveted air real estate to kiss me, and kiss me hard, his hands curved around my neck, fingers warm and searching.

Solid and confident.

I’m fumbling to make sure I don’t spill champagne down his back as he kisses me so deeply I lose myself in my new husband.

He breaks the kiss, those blue-green eyes boring into my soul. “You’re going to drink that champagne, you’re going to lay back and relax, we’ll sleep through this redevye, and then, Mrs. Lotham, when we get to our beach house in L. A., we’re going to have so much sex.”

I look at him, I smile, I chug my champagne. I lean back and close my eyes and whisper, “Damn right we are.”

“There she is. The woman I married.”

As I finish the drink, the attendant removes all the empty glasses and we prepare for takeoff, seatbelts fastened and emergency exits viewed. Airplane takeoffs are the same whether you’re in first class or coach: a little anxiety-inducing, but much easier with a drink inside you.

We're in the air, the seatbelt signs come off, and suddenly, a wall of cumin and garlic assaults me enough to open my eyes, let go of Will's hand, and look around, instantly excited.

"What is that?" I ask him, sniffing over his chest.

His nose brushes against my hair. "Did I forget to wash properly? Do I smell like sex?"

I sniff his collar. "You smell like cumin."

"I'll turn it into my new cologne if it means you'll eat me more often."

Before I can hit him, the flight attendant appears with a tray, setting it in front of me. She brings Will one, too, then asks, "Sparkling again?"

I nod, and she hands us each a glass bottle, moving on to the others in first class before disappearing behind a white curtain, then emerging with two trays, one for Will, one for me. On each new tray I see metal covers, a large rectangular white ceramic dish underneath.

"This looks interesting," I tell Will, looking at our dinner. "It smells like _"

A full mariachi band begins playing as I lift my tray cover.

No, not really, but it's like being back at my favorite Mexican restaurant in Anderhill and eating at Taco Taco Taco.

"Did you order tacos just for me?" I ask Will, whose stunned expression reveals that no, he did not.

This really is pure coincidence.

The plate before me is a study in ratios. A mathematical mouth masterpiece. I nearly cry with joy.

Three mini tacos. Spiced ground beef. Shredded cheese, presumably Monterrey Jack. Fresh salsa, made with tomatillos. A cruet with shredded lettuce.

And three perfect little pyramids of sour cream, flanked by three perfect balls of guacamole.

"It's like they know me!" I gush, though the real test here is all about my mouth.

Kinda like the first time you sleep with someone.

"I couldn't have booked a better flight," Will jokes, though we both know his new assistant handled everything, with my input.

Intent on my food pursuit, and a bit woozy from Champagne and all that sex earlier, I take a taco, layer the beef, the cheese, lettuce, salsa, sour cream, and guacamole.

“Behold, my honeymoon taco,” I whisper reverently.

“I already had your honeymoon taco, honey. Mmmm. Tasty.”

Will is not allowed to ruin my moment. I shudder at the Dad Joke and let it slide.

This one time.

As my teeth hit the hard shell and my tongue tastes the burst of flavor, I involuntarily moan, chewing nearly an afterthought.

The air in the cabin changes, gentle music playing in perfect melody, a song that seems like a third voice from heaven.

“This is it,” I moan as I chew, then swallow. Another bite confirms it.

Soon, I’m swooning, and Will is giving me eye signals that say I’m embarrassing him.

“It’s just so good!” I groan.

“You sound like you’re having an orgasm.”

“Because I am! It’s a tacogasm.”

“You don’t sound like that when you come from sex.”

“Because sex doesn’t taste like cumin and heaven!”

“I’ll have to start eating more cumin, then. Can’t do anything about the heaven part,” Will says before sighing, then shoving an entire mini-taco in his mouth.

Uncouth.

My husband is *uncouth*.

I touch the back of his hand. “Don’t just shove the whole thing in there without using your mouth first!”

Someone behind us hears me and mutters, “That’s what I said on my last Tinder date.”

Will chews, giving me a cocked eyebrow of judgment that I do not like. Finally, he swallows and says, “If you keep moaning like that, Mal, I absolutely will haul you into the bathroom for a quickie!”

“Why do I need to join the Mile High Club? This taco ratio is better than sex!”

Will’s hand flies to his chest, eyes wide in shock.

“Impossible.”

“Are you eating the same taco I am? Because mmm, mmm, *mmm*.”

“Food is never, *ever* better than sex!” he says loudly.

“Someone isn’t frequenting the right restaurants,” a woman behind us chortles.

“Maybe,” says a man’s voice, “someone isn’t having the right kind of sex.”

Suddenly, first class becomes a verbal throw-down, with Team Sex arguing with Team Taco, and I finish my food, eyeing my husband’s plate.

Two tacos remain. They deserve to be treated with dignity and reverence.

I point. “Are you going to...”

He moves his plate atop my empty one, then closes his eyes.

“Go ahead, Mal. I wouldn’t want to ruin the ratio.”

I love how well he knows me.

Chapter Four



“Right there!” a woman shouts, the sound of her voice muted and distant.

We made it here to the beach house in L.A. after the most amazing taco dinner on the plane, a limo ride that was cushy and fun, and after a night of even more sex in this California King bed (see what I did there?) – none of which involved airplane bathrooms or tacos – we’re breathing Pacific Ocean salt air and, apparently, hearing the neighbors shouting next door.

“Ohh, yeah!” she cries out.

It shakes me from my slumber and makes me look toward the window. The words themselves aren’t remarkable.

It’s the *tone*.

“Mmm,” Will says, his hand on the small of my back. We’re naked in bed after a raucous night of fun after so much wedding and travel stress, and this time, no wedding dress to unpeel.

I slowly breathe in from my nose, letting the morning seep into my bloodstream. Next stop: caffeine. But that warm hand my husband runs up my spine makes me smile.

He’s using his left hand, which has his new wedding ring on it. I close my eyes, imagining it there, running a line up the fine bones of my back, as if claiming me.

“Oh God, *yes!*” the woman cries out again, her voice very distinct. “Ram it harder!”

Will’s hand stops at my shoulder blade. I hold my breath, waiting for more. Maybe she’s just really excited about moving a couch? I can’t blame her. As an interior designer, I understand that the right feng shui can be incredibly, deeply arousing.

Will shifts his knee, the thick hair on his legs rubbing against the back of my thigh. He continues his journey up my shoulder, hand stopping at the base of my neck, rubbing lightly. Then he stills, his ribs relaxing, his steady breath slowing.

That's right. *He's* right. We should just go back to sleep.

"You're so big! It's not gonna fit! Oh, my God! Fill me! Fill me *now!*" the woman calls out. "Make me a pussy volcano!"

Will sits up in bed quickly, pulling me along for the ride, half of the covers sliding off. We're in L.A. at a beach house with the window wide open. This isn't Massachusetts, where I'd be cold.

Instead, I'm quite hot.

And getting hotter.

"Do you hear that now?" Will asks, rubbing his eyes as if *those* are what he's using to hear this.

"The woman?"

We both turn toward the window. My hand is on his thigh, and it's sticky. That's *our* sticky.

Our husband-and-wife stickiness.

"Yeah. I swear I hear someone—"

A man's voice cuts him off. "Babe. You're so tight. You're so fuckin' tight. It's like you got a warm, moist vise inside you."

"Fuck me!" the woman calls out.

"Did he say 'moist'?" I ask, shuddering.

And that's when I grab the covers, pull them up to my neck, and look at my husband, who is gape-mouthed, wide awake now, and blinking slowly.

And who would never, ever use the word "moist" during sex.

"Sounds like someone's having some fun next door," Will says slowly, with a head tilt that says he's assessing the situation while being insanely curious at the same time.

"What do we do?" I hiss.

"*Do?*" He laughs. "What're we supposed to do? They're next door, having sex, having fun, doing their own thing. There's nothing *to* do."

"But that's soooo..."

"So *what?* I mean – we left the window open. Maybe they heard *us* last night."

"We don't talk like that during sex!"

He gives me a questioning look. "Maybe we could."

“Will!”

“What? There’s nothing wrong with what they’re saying.”

“Slap my ass! Get out the beads!” she screams from next door. “I want the pineapple butt plug this time!”

A cold flush ripples along every bit of skin that I have.

“Hey!” This is the voice of a different man. “What’s going on here? What the hell are you doing to my *wife*?”

I have never seen Will’s eyebrows hit the ceiling, but apparently that is a physiological skill that my husband possesses.

“*Wife!*” we both gasp in unison.

I grab the covers and wrap them around me, scrambling over to the window because while the in-flight movie was an Academy-award winner, whatever’s going on next door is *far* more entertaining.

“Get down!” Will snaps at me as I drop to my knees, lifting my eyes up carefully. Will’s next to me, completely naked and not caring as we look from under the windowsill and out the window.

Sure enough, on the balcony next to ours, we can see just the corner, enough of a sliver to get a visual on what’s going on over there.

Because of the way the oceanfront property is situated, their deck is lower than ours by about fifteen feet. We have the perfect view.

For once, I’m not so sure I want *perfect*.

The couple having sex are on a piece of patio furniture. She’s on all fours—with a beautiful view of the ocean, I might add.

It’s better than your typical headboard view.

There’s a guy behind her, clearly going at it doggy style. We can only see his back. He’s completely naked and so covered in hair, he might as well be a bear.

A man in a suit is standing just at the edge of our range of view. His hands are on his hips, and he is angry.

“Mallory,” Will says to me. “Are we really watching this? We should walk away. This is so rude.”

“You’re right,” I whisper back. “This is really transgressive. We should not be invading their privacy like this.”

Neither one of us moves away.

The man in the suit just stands there. A weird shade of light changes the whole scene, and then it shifts away.

Gone.

“Dude,” the naked man says to the guy in the suit, “I can’t stand this much longer.”

“Oh!” I hiss to Will. “Maybe they’re best friends? He feels guilty! Remorse!”

“Shhh.”

“Sorry,” the man in the suit said. “I’m just—”

“Poor guy,” Will whispers in my ear. “Can you imagine walking in on your wife like that?”

“No!” My hand goes over my heart. “I really feel for him. Walking in on your her cheating on you, and in that position?”

“Sorry, man,” the guy in the suit says to the man screwing his wife. “I lost my line.”

Will’s eyes shift left and right. He’s just as confused as I am.

“Keep going,” the guy in the suit says to the naked man. “You’re doing a great job.”

“Who tells the man screwing his wife that he’s doing a *great job*?” I whisper to Will, who grimaces.

“Maybe he’s a cuck.”

“What’s a cuck?”

“It’s where...” Will looks really uncomfortable.

“What? What is it?”

“Mal. Do I really have to explain what a cuckhold is to you?”

“I don’t know what that is?”

Will takes his hand and washes his face with it. “Of all the things to have to explain on my *honeymoon*.”

“DP!” the woman shouts. “I want DP! Get your ass back here, Tom, and come help me finish off!”

Will’s eyes get huge. He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Cuckolding means—”

“*Shh!* Don’t talk!” I tell him. “Something more’s going on. You can explain that later.”

“I’d rather not.”

Except now I’m confused. “Wha—what’s DP?”

“Oh God, no,” he mutters. “Why does our honeymoon have to turn me into an Urban Dictionary translator?”

“Layla!” some guy we can’t see calls out.

Now there are *three* men over there?

The man's back is in view. "You said your line too early."

My spine starts to tingle. That voice is really familiar. How would I know the voice of some man involved in an orgy next door to our rental in L.A.?

"Layla, you weren't supposed to say the DP part until Tom finished his line first."

"Beastman, you're supposed to—"

"Beastman!" Will and I shout at the same time, standing up quickly.

No.

No way.

No how.

This can't be happening.

We gawk at the scene before us. Beach houses in L.A. are tight on the shoreline. Most of them have a privacy fence, but for some reason we're up high enough that we can look down on the deck in the house next to us. There's a naked couple on a small loveseat on the deck, a man in a suit standing closer to the sliding doors off of the house.

Strangely enough, the couple continue going at it unabated, despite his outrage.

And then we realize there are cameras (two of them), lights (three of them), and that hairy naked guy on the loveseat, currently embedded deeply in someone named Layla? That's Beastman.

"Is that Beastman?" I ask, my voice going high.

"I think so."

"Our Beastman?"

"What does 'our' Beastman mean? Is that like having 'our song'? We have our very own sentimental porn star?" Will chokes out, crossing his arms over his bare chest and glaring at the actors.

"Come on," says the third man, who's wearing a baseball cap. He walks over to where the naked couple is situated and reaches for the woman's hip. "Move it over here. The light's not right. We've gotta get the penetration on camera. And Tom, your line is, 'Whatever you're doing to my wife, I can do better.'"

"Right! Right!" Tom says, smacking his head with his palm. "Sorry." He twitches in the suit and sniffs and rubs his nose fast.

"Coke," Will mutters to himself as I realize he's truly naked, completely confident, and my eyes really should be on this glorious piece of manhood standing next to me.

Not on *them*.

“What are we watching? Is this what it looks like, Will?”

“You mean, does it look like they’re filming a porn movie next door to us? Yes.”

“And is that Beastman and Spatula?”

Will looks at me. “Beastman.” His head recoils in shock as his jaw tightens, fists forming. “Oh, geez. That’s them. *Them*.”

We both step away from the window and sit on the edge of the bed. I’m still covered in the comforter, but Will’s completely naked. We slump, staring out into space.

“Did we just rent a beach house for our honeymoon that’s next door to where Beastman and Spatula are filming a *porno*?” I ask.

The words are redundant, because that’s exactly what is happening, but somehow saying them aloud helps me to understand that this surreal moment is real.

“Apparently.”

I look at him. “I have so many questions.”

“Me, too.”

“But first, Will, what *is* a cuck?”

“EWWW!” a woman screams.

“Hey!” Spatula shouts outside. “You fuckin’ seagull! Get the hell out of here!”

I can’t help myself. I have to know what happened. I jump up and look.

“What’s that on my back?” Layla complains, a bit of white glop oozing down her ribs.

A mousy young woman appears, running out from the house with baby wipes in hand, quickly cleans up what is obviously the seagulls’ contribution to this porno, and runs back into the house.

“Dude,” Beastman announces, “I’m losin’ my boner.”

“Call in the fluffer!” Spatula shouts toward the house.

My whole body turns into a red, flaming mess as I turn away and go back to the bed, sitting down, trying not to hyperventilate from a flashback.

Will’s hand goes to my knee, and he looks at me and says, “Sorry, honey. You’re not allowed to work on our honeymoon.”

“That’s not funny!”

But he’s laughing. Laughing so hard that his abs start to curl in, the bones of his body, so masculine, so familiar, so *hot*. I feel the arousal forming in

me, mingling with disgust at the same time, and the sense of disappointment and heartbreak.

How could our perfect honeymoon be ruined by the reminder of the horrible way that Will and I reconnected years ago?

We met when I accidentally applied for a porn fluffer job, thinking it was a house fluffer job. Yes, there's a difference. I learned all too hard that there's a *big* difference.

A Beastman's worth of difference.

Will is laughing to the point where when I shove him away, he falls on the ground, cackling, ass in the air, ribs heaving with huge laughs.

"This is not funny!"

"This is so funny!" he counters.

"Our honeymoon is ruined! *Ruined!*" I stand up and let the covers drop. My hands are in the air, flailing, because I have just lost all control over everything, so why not lose control over my body, too?

I begin to pace, running my hands through my hair, hating every minute of this. "I cannot believe that the two people who ruined the beginning of our relationship are here. How does this happen? Did Perky rent us this beach house, too, and set all this up?"

He stops laughing. "That's not out of the realm of possibility, Mal."

"I'm going to kill her."

"You can't kill her. We're on our way to Fiji."

"I will take delayed gratification in killing her after our honeymoon."

"She's your best friend. You're not killing her."

"I'm going to ..." I'm so frustrated that I can't even come up with a good way to punish my best friend for ruining my honeymoon by playing this kind of prank on me.

"I don't think this is a prank."

"The penis cottage certainly was."

"It would take a next level effort on Perky's part to set something like this up."

"You think she's not capable of it?"

"She's a lottery winner trust fund baby. She's got more than enough money."

"I'm going to text her right now."

"Mal, it's 6:30 a.m. there."

"Even better. Wake her up nice and early." I pull out my phone. I text

Perky. I stop. I go back to the group text that I share with Feisty and Perky, and I text:

Did you set me up for this horrible beach house mess in L.A.?

I send it. I'm being vague on purpose to see what Perky's response will be.

Fiona replies instantly. She's a preschool teacher, so she's up nice and early. *What are you talking about?*

I'm here in L.A., and I think that Perky has pulled another prank on me, I type back.

But I mutter the words as I'm typing them.

Will puts his hand on my back and says, "Perky pulled another prank. Perky pulled another prank. Say it five times fast."

I whack him. "Cut it out."

"Perky pulled another prank on Parker's prick," he muses.

I would rather he said "moist" in bed.

I whap him.

"Hey!"

Three dots appear. Will's peering over my shoulder now.

I have no idea what you're talking about, Perky writes.

What're you doing up? both Fiona and I instantly reply.

Parker has some thing, and we have to be on the plane in half an hour.

Her boyfriend, Parker, is a member of the House of Representatives and is always going on a *thing*.

Will and I are in a beautiful beach house in L.A., and next door the people in the house are filming a porno.

Perky responds with a series of plants, creatures, and howling faces.

Fiona replies with: *If you tell me it's Beastman and Spatula, then you have to admit the way I read your tarot cards last month was right.*

For some reason, I don't tell her *that* detail. It's too spooky. Too close, as if her energy work is true.

You said that everything in my life would come full circle.

That's riiiiight, Fiona types back. She doesn't say it that way, but I hear it that way because I know her taunting little voice.

There was no tarot card with Beastman on it, I type back. A rush of vibrational rage is running through my body.

"Beastman," Spatula says from next door, his voice catching my attention. "You need to make the sucking noises. We're doing special audio

on this for that ASMR stuff that makes us extra money on YouTube and TikTok.”

“The longer we take breaks,” Beastman replies, “the drier everything gets. You want it nice and sucking wet? You gotta respect my artistic needs, man.”

“Audio?” Layla says, looking back over her shoulder. “You do an ASMR audio? Is that what that pinching feeling is? A microphone?”

“Yeah,” Spatula says to her, walking close and reaching under her body to adjust something.

“Hey!” she screeches. “That pinches!”

“It’s the special mic. We make two grand a month off of people who just like hearing the suckin’ sound.”

A horror I did not know could inhabit my nervous system takes over. “Most people try *not* to make those kinds of sounds during sex,” I say tightly as Will adjusts himself and gives me a surprised look.

“You care about sounds during sex?”

I pause, unsure how to answer that.

“‘Cause *I* don’t,” he says. His fingers reach up to my neck, tickling lightly in the spot under my earlobe. “I think the sounds you make are really sexy.”

“Are you hitting on me?”

He looks at our bodies and says, “We’re naked on our honeymoon. Of all the times to be able to assume that sex is on the table, it should be now.” He kisses me lightly on the jaw. “How about literally on the table downstairs? They’ve got a big farmhouse-sized one. I’m sure we can get enough pillows and—”

“I’m not having sex with you right now, Will.”

“What?”

“I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you *can’t*?”

“They’re filming a porno next door. Eww!”

“What do the two have to do with each other, Mal?”

“Seriously?”

He takes in a deep breath and puts his hand over mine. “How about we have some coffee before we continue this conversation?”

“Kiki!” Spatula shouts toward the patio doors. “We need more of that bee cream! It’s not glistenin’! Maybe some coconut oil, too!”

Will's eyes close. He grimaces. Then he stands up, walks out of the bedroom completely naked, his fine, muscled backside a beautiful work of art I admire at a distance, and heads downstairs as I sit and stare out the window.

"Will!" I call out. "Put on some clothes!"

"Why?"

"They're making a porno outside!" I hiss, trying not to yell.

"So? I'm on my honeymoon. I'll do whatever I damn well want."

I'm not looking at the scene.

I am staring at the pool of despair where my honeymoon has drowned.

My phone buzzes.

Mal? It's Perky. You can't leave us hanging like this.

I sure can, I type back.

Perky replies with: *What kind of porno? Professional crew or just some Craigslist set-up? Amateur age gap or cosplay hentai?*

She leaves a string of emojis I'm not going to try to decipher.

And what the heck is hentai?

Fiona adds: *Come on, Mallory. Have a Facetime with us. Tell us what's going on.*

Do a tarot card reading to find out what's going on, I type back. *And you, Perky... this is payback for the penis cottage. Suffer not knowing.*

Come on, Mal, Fiona types. *This isn't fair.*

I reach for the Power button, turn my phone off, and stare at the window again. "You want to talk about fair?" I mutter in my empty bedroom. "That —" I point out the window. "*That is not fair.*"

The hiss of a coffee machine downstairs hits my ears. It's *waaay* better than the sound of those actors down there doing what they're doing.

And thankfully it does not involve sucking sounds.

Somewhere on the ground are pajamas that I put on last night. Will laughed when I did because they were off within three seconds.

I throw them on and walk downstairs, holding a pair of underwear for my husband. He's in the kitchen, still naked. Our patio door is wide open, the ocean breeze coming in. At least it faces the ocean and not the house next door.

There is nothing like the scent of salt in the air. We live on the other coast of the United States, and while the Atlantic has its own charms, the Pacific is warm with a healing tone to it each time I inhale.

Whoever decorated this beach house did a phenomenal job. It reminds me

of something out of the set of *Grace & Frankie*, and I pause for a moment, wondering if we *are* on the set of *Grace & Frankie*.

No. The design elements are different. It's just California beautiful.

Speaking of beautiful, my gorgeous, naked husband is working on coffee number two in the small, artisanal espresso machine, his hand surrounded by steam. I dangle his underwear in the air like a bizarre version of a hello wave.

He frowns. "I thought this honeymoon was clothing optional."

"It is." I neatly fold the underwear and set them on the kitchen counter.

He looks at my state of dress with sadness. "Promise me that after we have the coffee, you'll take all that off."

I sip and smile at him. Breathing in through my nostrils and holding for four seconds, then breathing out through my mouth, I let the ocean air calm me. Our eyes meet as he waits for his cup of coffee to finish brewing.

"I'm worried about you, Mallory."

"Me? Why are you worried?"

"Ten minutes ago you were in bed next to me, smiling in your sleep."

"How do you know I was smiling in my sleep?"

"Because I was watching you."

"You were?" My heart melts. "That's so..."

"In the past," he says flatly, looking toward the house next to us. "You've gone tense."

"Tense!"

"Yes, tense. When you get tense, you lose interest in sex."

"I do?"

"Mallory. I know we were taking things easy before the wedding so that our honeymoon would be a sex-fest, but we were so uptight about every detail of the wedding that I'm pretty sure I re-virginized."

"Say that again?"

"You know what I mean."

"That is medically impossible." Do I have to explain how hymens work? Men don't have one. I'm having a flashback to our first day in the office together a few years ago, when he asked me what a clitoris was, and I took him seriously.

"Your state of tension defies physics, Mallory."

I peer at him, my inner emotional state roiling at his words. "Why didn't you say anything sooner?" I hear my voice shake and hate how I sound.

"Honey." He crosses the kitchen and reaches for my shoulders, rubbing

his palms up and down my arms, mussed hair and alert eyes making it hard to stay upset. “I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want to add to your stress.”

“But you’re my person. And if I’m tense and it upsets you, then that’s not fair, because you’re *my* person, and I’m *your* person, and we’re each other’s person. And...”

I haven’t had enough coffee for this conversation. I take another sip. He lets go of my arms and turns around to grab his own coffee.

“I don’t want to fight, Will.”

“We’re not fighting.”

“It feels like we are.”

He looks at the window, his jaw growing tight. “We’re definitely not letting *that* –” he gestures toward the porn house “ – turn into an argument between us.”

“That’s how it feels.”

“Oh, Mal. No, no. That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what *did* you mean?”

Our eyes lock, and I see his analytical brain skipping into overdrive. We’ve been together for a few years, but there’s still so much uncharted territory between us. What I’m hearing from him is that all of the careful, meticulous work I did to make our wedding perfect turned me into a tense ball of frigid sex denial.

Great. Whee! I created the perfect wedding and alienated the perfect man in the process.

A part of me knows that’s not what he’s saying. Another part of me is ready to start throwing things at him, because while Will definitely helped with the wedding, the vast majority of the work fell on me. So what if it made me a little less interested in sex? How am I supposed to relax when the wrong balloon ribbon arrives?

How am I supposed to decompress when I’m juggling ten thousand details in my mind, including the fact that the chef had to use red onions instead of Vidalia onions for one of the side dishes, and my allergen survey of all of the reception attendees showed that three of them were allergic to red onions?

But *nooo*. Will was more worried about orgasms than about the origami crane display.

“I like you loose,” he says softly. “Flowing. I like you in bed with me, so relaxed that the curves of your arms blend into the spill of the sheets against

our bodies. I just want to be with you, Mallory. I don't need perfect. I don't need a perfect wedding, I don't need a perfect honeymoon, I don't need a perfect taco ratio."

"You always say that you like everything that I do that makes things perfect."

"Of course I do. And I know that that perfection is important to you. So I love you for what you accomplish, but I don't love you *because* of your accomplishments. You can stop doing all of that, and I would, to my core, love every part of you. And I *do* love every part of you. When you're stressed, it makes me think you're unhappy. And when you're unhappy, it feels like I failed you."

I'm so startled that I bite my lower lip, just enough to make a tiny swollen spot appear in front of my front teeth.

"What? *Failed?*" As I drink coffee, the hot liquid hits the new little cut. It makes the moment even more stark.

"I don't want to be a source of tension for you. I don't want those assholes next door to be a source of tension for you. When I said that I'm worried about you, that I'm worried about sex, it's not that I only care about the sex. I care about the intimacy with you. If I could bury us in each other in bed for two weeks and just get takeout sent to the door, that would be an amazing honeymoon. We don't need flights and fancy houses and beachfront views for me to enjoy *you*."

"So," he continues, now embracing me, his mouth inches from mine as I scramble to put my coffee mug on the counter and not drop it on our feet, his fingers embed themselves in my loose hair behind my ears as his palm cradles my jaw. "Let go of the porn site next door."

As he bends to kiss me, we're both startled by the sound of a chime.

That must be the doorbell.

I jolt and Will stumbles slightly, stepping back, his ass hitting the granite kitchen counter. We turn in surprise when we hear a knock on the glass. There's a side door off the kitchen, with a large, uncovered window.

And there stands an oddly familiar man with beady eyes and a baseball cap.

"Hello? Anyone in there? Hey. We're neighbors. We need to run an extension cord. Just need to use one of the outlets out here, man. We keep blowing a circuit. Any chance we can use it? We're, uh, doin' a construction project next door." He cups his eyes over the bill of his baseball cap and

looks in through the window.

Our eyes meet.

I didn't know beady eyes could turn that wide.

"Holy shit," he shouts. "It's the worst fluffer ever and the asshole!"

Chapter Five



“Ain’t this the fuckin’ craziest shit?” Spatula declares as we step onto the deck of their rented house. After the shock of realizing Spatula himself was at our door, looking at me in my pajamas and Will just hanging around (pun intended) in his birthday suit, we let him in.

Or, rather, *I* let him in while Will scrambled upstairs to get dressed, modesty finally triggered by shock, I guess. Spatula might work on a porn set and see naked bodies all day, but he doesn’t need to eye Will like he’s auditioning.

Don’t get me wrong. Will could totally audition and win any coveted spot as a star in whatever adult film he wanted to be in. No question about it.

Wait. Why am I pondering this? I am about as interested in having my husband headline a porno as I am in, well...

Being a fluffer.

After the surprise of it, Will had returned in his pajama pants and flatly declared we were busy, but Spatula had begged us to come over “for old times’ sake” and so, here we are.

On their deck.

Watching out for seagulls.

“It’s definitely a coincidence,” I respond as politely as possible, trying to control my wandering mind, which is now imagining it was Will, and not Beastman, who was covered in coconut oil that day a few years ago when I thought my new fluffer job was as a house fluffer, not a one-eyed snake fluffer.

A strong wind whips my curly hair against my eye, shaking me out of my squirrel mind. Last night with Will was hot, horny, and way better than any

porno set-up I could possibly imagine, so why was I suddenly imagining one?

Someone clears his throat.

A man I don't recognize is sitting there in a Pima cotton polo shirt, oiled-up biceps bulging, the baby blue highlighting his eyes. He has curly hair, the kind that spills over his brow as the breeze blows it, and he looks like he's been molded into his jeans. Big, tree trunk-like thighs rest on the narrow patio furniture, and he's holding a beer in an amber bottle, the sun glinting off the glass like it's art.

"Hey, Mallory," he says.

I do a double take and walk closer to him, my hand outstretched for a shake. "Excuse me. Have we met? I'm Mallory Mona—" I pause, looking at Will. "Mallory *Lotham*. And you are...?"

He bursts into laughter and stands, towering over me. As he bends to the right to set his beer down, his shirt pulls up over the back of his jeans, showing his butt crack.

Now I recognize him.

"Beastman!" I squeal, my voice clearly unsure which emotion it's supposed to use. "I didn't realize who you were. I've never seen you dressed!"

"Yeah!" he says. "Gimme a hug for old times!"

I do not point out that in the "old times" we never hugged, and at best, my body contact with him was limited to his oiled-up nude body flattening me to the ground as the cops busted our porn set, but let's not get caught up in semantics.

Giant, bear-like arms wrap around me, his oiled forearms brushing against my bare shoulder. He smells like coconut. There's an underlying scent as well, but I'm struggling very hard to convince my olfactory nerve not to name it.

It's sex, okay? It's sex. He smells like sex.

Adult film sex.

I remember it from our encounter back in Anderhill, when they rented Will's parents' house and now I'm having an olfactory flashback. Let me tell you, live porno film sex has a distinct odor.

It's so distinct, someone should make a candle scent out of it. That would sell like hotcakes.

Or... like porn.

"Of all the *co-inky-dinks*," Spatula says to Will, elbowing him. "You

want a beer? I'll make sure you can see me open it so you know I'm not drugging you."

"Why would you drug me?" Will says, instantly standing taller, looking around suspiciously.

"That's a joke, man," Spatula says.

"I don't know," Beastman says slowly, giving me an earnest look. "Boncho Rodman roofies the chicks he likes when they come into town for cheerleader competitions and gets some damn fine shots that way."

Will and I both start gasping.

"He stopped when the cops got him," Spatula says in an arch tone. "I've never done nothin' like that. I hire my actresses the good old-fashioned way."

"Through Craigslist?" I joke.

"Nah. The methadone clinic."

Everything about that exchange offends me, but because I don't know where to start, I just shift my weight from one leg to another and wish for an earthquake.

He hands Will a beer and a bottle opener. I swear, my husband perks his ear to make sure he hears the reassuring hiss of a fresh bottle cap popping up.

Or maybe that's just me.

Spatula adjusts the red baseball cap on his head, smirking at us. "They swear they ain't undercover. You know what I mean, Beastman?" The two share a side-eyed glance that makes it clear they've engaged in extensive debate about whether we are, indeed, undercover cops.

"I always knew she was good people," Beastman says, grinning at me like a benevolent older brother.

Older brother? Younger brother? I can't quite gauge his age. The fact that he's a walking carpet makes it a little difficult. In street clothes, he could be a little league dad. A guy going out for nachos and beer to watch a Dodgers game. Some man at Home Depot collecting a U-bend to repair a sink.

Everyman. Beastman could be everyman.

But in adult films, he's known as The Tenderizer. I only know this because Perky googled him extensively last year, and now this is his new nickname.

She tried to explain what that meant, but Fiona and I shut her down. I get the general idea.

"Thanks," I say weakly. "You're good people, too."

He beams. I get the sense the words "good people" and "Beastman"

never, ever are used together around him.

“Drink?” Spatula asks, motioning toward a cooler filled with nothing but beer and spiked seltzers. “I’ve got stronger stuff in the house if you want to see. Some good vodka, tequila—”

“Tequila sounds great!” I say, adding with a nervous laugh, “I don’t normally drink at 10 a.m., but today’s a perfect day to start.”

“There’s that word,” Will mutters. “Perfect.”

“It’s five o’clock in the afternoon somewhere, right?” Spatula says as if it’s the most original line in the world.

“Côte d’Ivoire,” Beastman replies instantly. His eyes turn up to the right, and he goes, “And I think Ghana.”

“What?” Will asks him, perplexed like me.

“Five o’clock. It’s five o’clock there. Safe to have a drink in Western Africa,” Spatula cackles. “Beastman may be dumb as a post, but he’s got this one trick: he can tell you all the time zones in the world. Go ahead, try him.”

“What’s eleven hours away?” I ask, hoping Spatula coughs up that tequila sooner rather than later. I start eyeing the spiked seltzers in the ice cooler. Maybe something I open myself is better than a shot poured out of a larger bottle.

“Abu Dhabi.” He thinks for a second. “And Azerbaijan.”

It’s a good thing we have a private tour of L.A., complete with a driver coming at noon. Will and I are definitely going to need someone other than us at the wheel, because I am fully prepared to get drunk right now.

As Will quizzes Beastman on time zones, I check out their rental, walking into a spacious kitchen with a huge U-shaped kitchen island in the center of a white, pale gray, and teal open concept area.

There are no film cameras. No bowls of coconut oil packets and ibuprofen.

And no crew.

“You’re shooting everything outside?” I ask, startling poor Spatula, who jolts and claps his hat to his head, whipping around.

“Man, you scared me. So quiet. Kinda sneaky.”

I hold up my palms. “I wasn’t trying to be!”

“Right. Sorry. Nerves on edge.” He’s holding a bottle of tequila. It’s empty. “We’re out.”

“I’ll just have a spiked seltzer.” I look at the ceiling. Soaring beams go up to wide skylights, the sun lending so much character to this modern space.

“Whoever books your house rentals for you has a wonderful eye for light.”

“I’ll let Rocky know.”

“Rocky?”

“Beastman.”

“His real name is Rocky?”

“No. His real name is Stone.”

“Stone?”

“Yep.”

“Which is why his nickname is Rocky?”

“I guess. Huh. Never put them two together.” Spatula taps his temple.

“You’re smart like that, Mal. Real smart. I noticed it back when we met. You have an eye and a brain.”

“Uh... thanks.”

“You know, our industry is growing by leaps and bounds.”

“I have zero interest in growing anything in your industry.”

He gives me a blank look, then rolls his eyes.

“Not hitting you up for money, Mal. I know Will’s got plenty, but I ain’t hard up. Just saying that smart people can make bank running things on the project management side.”

“I’m an interior designer, Spatula. Not a porno project manager.”

“You could be a producer. Make a cut off every production.”

A tap on the doorway makes us turn. Will’s expression makes it clear he’s heard part of the conversation and does not like one bit of it.

“She said she’s not interested.” He’s holding a spiked seltzer in my favorite flavor. “Here.”

As I take it, I notice it’s still sealed.

“Thanks.”

Spatula’s hands are up in supplication. “Letting her know how lucrative our business really is.”

“My wife will never, ever be a porn star.”

He snorts. “I wasn’t talking about being on-camera talent.” He eyes my chest, opens his mouth to say something, realizes Will is glaring at him, and wisely shuts it. He pauses, then says, “I meant in the back office. Smart woman like Mal could do well.”

“She does just fine as my partner in *my* office.”

“You still in real estate?”

“Yep.” A possessive arm goes around my waist as I take a sip. The last

time the three of us were in the same room together, I was on my hands and knees, coated in coconut oil, holding a string of anal beads.

I much prefer *this* position.

Pivoting away and ending the conversation, which shows me Spatula might not be business smart, but he's street smart, he pulls an enormous slab of bacon out of the fridge.

"What's that?"

"Beastman wants to grill some."

"You *grill* bacon?"

"Sure."

"In L.A.?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"Isn't everyone here vegan?"

"Plenty of vegans eat bacon, Mal," he says as we all walk back outside as Spatula hands off the raw bacon to Beastman.

Will pulls on my arm and whispers, "Ten minutes? Then we leave?"

I hiss back, "But bacon!"

"It's a lure. First, you eat the bacon. Then suddenly, you're getting bukkake from twelve guys named Steve."

"Bacon is the gateway to porn stardom," I say sadly. "And what's bukkake? Is that some kind of new Japanese drink, like sake?"

Why does Will pinch the bridge of his nose like that?

"Is your name really Stone?" I call out as I see Beastman/Stone/Rocky using a grill fork to transfer raw slabs of thick-cut bacon onto a beautiful steel grill.

"Uh huh. Stone Cole."

"Stone Cold?"

"No. Stone Cole. My parents thought it was close enough and funny. Luckily, they didn't add my mom's maiden name to mine." He finishes layering the bacon on, the high heat instantly releasing an odor that is pretty close to better than sex.

Not First-Class Taco level but getting there.

"I'm afraid to ask. What's her maiden name?" I do, in fact, ask, then drink the rest of my seltzer.

"Justice."

It takes everything in me not to spit take. Will's eyes go big, and he sighs, giving me a look as he mouths, *Seven minutes*.

I'm a people pleaser. Can't help it. Politely, I ask, "But then they called you Rocky? As a play on Stone?"

"Huh?"

"You know," Will says, smiling at Beastman. He'll forever be Beastman in my mind, so I'm sticking to that. "Stone. Rocky."

"I don't get it."

"Your name is Stone. Someone nicknamed you Rocky. Stone. Rock. They're similar?" If Will has to break this down any further, he'll need to use a whiteboard, dry erase markers, an English Language Arts workbook and a stuffed shwa plush toy.

"OH!" Beastman says with a laugh. "Huh. Nope. My nickname is Rocky because I fell off my bike onto a bunch of gravel and a piece got stuck in my knee. I was four. My parents thought it was funny."

Will leans in and whispers, "I will DoorDash five pounds of bacon to our rental if you leave with me now, Mallory."

"SHIT!" Spatula screams from kitchen. We turn and I realize he's left us and is now leaning against the counter. The mousy woman I saw earlier – Kiki? – is cowering before him.

"How long's he been on the antibiotics?" Spatula moans. "And can those lesions spread stuff onto the rented suit?"

"Oh, boy," Beastman says softly. "Poor Lance."

"Lance?"

"The cuck from our earlier shoot."

Smug doesn't wear well on Will's face, but he's radiating it as he looks at me.

"Cuck?" I ask sweetly.

"Beastman," Will says with a smile. "Mallory doesn't know what a cuck is."

Out of spite, I turn on my phone, prepared to Google it. Powering up takes longer than expected.

Beastman looks Will up and down, toe to head. "Really? I'm surprised."

As Will turns fifty shades of pissed off, Spatula starts bellowing at poor Kiki, who is trying to placate him, mumbling things like "Board of Health" and "virtual doctor's appointment" and "outbreak."

"We should go," Will insists.

Bacon seduces me.

"But –"

“This is some awesome stuff from up in northern California. All natural, hickory smoked, with a touch of New England maple. Thick cut, nice and solid,” Beastman explains as he flips the pieces over.

“We could be having coffee at that little shop near Grauman’s Chinese Theater that you planned, Mallory,” Will hisses. “The driver can come early.”

Will.

Bacon.

Will.

Bacon.

This shouldn’t be so hard.

“HE INFECTED ALL THREE?” Spatula screeches as Beastman’s brow knits and the three of us look toward the kitchen.

“Aw, man. Poor Lance. He shouldn’t’ve relied on those fish antibiotics.”

Will winces like his finger has been shut in a car door and he’s just noticing how painful it is.

“Don’t,” he rasps. “Don’t ask.”

Remember that people pleasing part inside me? She’s a serious problem.

“Fish antibiotics?” I inquire. I’m actually just stalling until the bacon’s done, but let’s just allow Will to think I’m clueless.

“Yeah,” Beastman explains. “Lance doesn’t have health insurance. So he bought fish antibiotics off the internet and tried to self-dose by using advice from a prepper subforum on Reddit. With fish, you just add it to the tank, so he emptied several capsules into the bathtub and said it was feeling better after a soak. Turns out the post was being ironic. Who knew?”

“Who knew?” Will mutters.

“That’s so unfair!” I reply, dragging this out.

“I guess the antibiotics didn’t do their job and now poor Spatula’s got a problem on his hands.” Beastman looks at his palm. “Not, like, on hands. That’s not how chlamydia works. It gets on your –”

“We know where it erupts,” Will says tightly.

“Oh.” Beastman’s entire demeanor shifts to one of pure pity. He places a comforting hand on Will’s shoulder. “Sorry, man. That shit hurts.”

My husband has been accused of being a cuck and of having chlamydia in the same five minutes. I still don’t know what a cuck is, but I can tell Will is about to lose it.

“Uh, my mom,” I stammer, trying to come up with an excuse, pulling my phone out of my pocket, “is, uh, upset about something, and we have to go.”

“But the bacon’s just about done!”

I look at Will. “The bacon is almost done.”

“I am almost done.”

“But... can you wait?”

I have never heard Will growl before.

“Bacon versus my sense of dignity? You’re picking bacon?” he asks, as if I’m supposed to have a crystal-clear answer for *that*.

When I hesitate, he acts. Instantly, I’m airborne, in his arms as he carries me out to the deck and up the stairs.

“WILL!” I shriek.

“Bye, guys. Gotta go fuck my wife on my honeymoon!” he shouts back to Beastman. Spatula appears on the deck, waving and giving a thumbs up from what I can tell as my vision field bobs up and down, Will’s steady, tense steps making it clear that arguing is futile.

“What about the bacon?” Beastman shouts. “I have a whole plate for you. I made extra!”

“I’ll eat plenty of vertical bacon on this honeymoon,” Will whispers in my ear, walking straight into the house, plopping me on a couch, standing over me with his hands on his hips and an outrageous boner poking hard against his inseam.

As I sit up to protest, my phone rings.

Rings!

It’s Perky and Fiona. A Group Facetime call.

“It’s them!” I groan.

“Answer it. I need to go source you some bacon,” he mutters as, to my surprise, I’m allowed to take the call. Before either of them can say a word, I take the lead.

“You are not going to believe this!” I hiss into the phone.

“What?” they both gasp.

“Beastman!”

Silence is all I hear. Then Perky clears her throat. “Um...good for you?” she says, her voice going up at the end, as if she’s asking a question.

“What do you mean, ‘good for me?’”

“Well,” Feisty says, “sounds like Will took care of you on your wedding night.”

“When you say ‘Beastman’,” Perky says, “like, are we talking kink here, or—”

“Beastman!” I say loudly. “Beast. Man. Remember Beastman and Spatula?”

“Of course! We were joking about them with you earlier.” Fiona sounds like she’s chewing on something.

“The porn guys?” Perky snaps.

“Yes, the porn guys.”

“Why are you talking about them on your honeymoon?” Perky asks in a disgusted voice.

“Because they’re *here!*”

“They’re...with you, on your honeymoon? Did Will invite them or something?” Perky asks, terribly confused. “Like a wedding present? A fetish?”

“No! Will would never do anything like that to me. Of course not!”

“Then why are you in L.A. with a porn star and his sleazy porn director?”

“Because God hates me.”

“Oh, come on, now,” Fiona says lovingly. “God loves all his children. He just decides to play practical jokes on some of them a little more than others.”

“This has nothing to do with God,” Perky inserts. “This reeks of a practical joke. It sounds like something Parker would do to them.”

“Parker? Why would a sitting U.S. House of Representatives congressman send porn stars on the honeymoon of his best friend? Perky, come on,” Fiona admonishes. “This is some weird convergence in the energy of the universe bringing them all together. Think about it. It’s how Mallory and Will reconnected. And now they’re off on their happy life.” She sighs. “It’s as if energy on a different plane decided that it was going to—”

“Oww!” Fiona cries out. “Perky! That was my foot!”

Chewing noises fill the quiet space. “What are you two eating?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

They both say it so quickly and in unison that I know the answer immediately. This Facetime call is a closeup, so I can’t see the décor behind them. “You’re at Taco Cubed, aren’t you?”

“Yes.” Perky’s tone is defiant. “We are.”

“You know that I don’t like it when you go there without me.”

“You don’t like it when we go there without you because you know that we’re going to eat however we want and not do your perfect ratio. By the way, how was the taco bar that I sent as part of my present to you?” Perky adds.

Then all I hear is chewing.

“It was wonderful. Could have done with fewer penises.”

Fiona lets out a weird, strangled sound. “Perky. Did you send them penis meat?”

“No!”

“Then why is Mallory talking about penises in her tacos?”

Now I have an image of a penis *in* the taco. And what the heck is penis meat?

“Thanks, guys. Now I’m imagining penises in tacos while I’m on my honeymoon as porn stars sit out on the deck next door on the beach, drinking beer with my husband.” He was, at least. Not sure where Will went. He was supposed to be getting me bacon.

“What kind of ratio would a penis taco require?” Fiona asks, sending Perky into giggles.

“I hate you both.”

“You love us, and that’s why we’re calling,” Fiona stresses. “Now, how big a problem is it that Beastman and Spatula are there?”

“It’s my *honeymoon!*”

“Okay,” she says in that preschool teacher’s voice that I hate. “Just because they’re porn stars doesn’t make them bad.”

“They were led out of Will’s house in Anderhill in handcuffs.”

“So were *you*,” Perky points out helpfully.

“Because of a big misunderstanding.”

“Because you mistakenly thought that you were going for a house stager’s job and instead you found yourself arranging Beastman’s—”

“I know how I ended up on a porn set, Perky, thanks.”

“I still don’t see what the problem is,” Fiona says. “Other than making it so that you guys can’t have sex.”

“Not specifically,” I stumble.

“Wait.” Perky’s chewing comes across the phone, then a swallow. “How would they interfere with you and Will having sex?”

“They’re in the house next door and—well, it’s just weird. Don’t you think it’s weird?”

“Sure, it’s weird. But it’s not interfering with you guys. How long are they there?”

“Two nights, same as us.”

“How do you know that?”

“I overheard Spatula snapping at the crew that they couldn’t afford a third night.”

“If you tell me they’re getting on the plane and going to Fiji, then that—”

“No, they’re not going to Fiji,” I interrupt Perky. “Apparently, after the whole fiasco at Will’s parents’ house a couple of years ago, they decided that they would rent Airbnbs for shorter periods of time, so now they rent a place for two days, do what they do, and get out as quickly as possible.”

“I think you mean ‘pull out’,” Perky says in a deep, fake voice.

“This isn’t funny.”

“Yes, it is,” Fiona says, giggling with Perky.

My two best friends are laughing at what is obviously a nightmare situation for any woman on a honeymoon – and especially *me*. Everything’s been perfect up until now.

Even the penis cottage I can set aside. But not only are they laughing at me, they’re eating my favorite tacos without doing it right.

Second favorite tacos, now, I remind myself, wondering how I can spend the rest of my life flying First Class once a week so I can like in Perfect Taco Ratio Heaven.

“What does Will think?” Fiona asks. I watch her take a long drink. Bet she’s having one of those new virgin mint mojitos Taco Cubed debuted.

Suddenly, I’m homesick.

“What do you mean, what does Will think?”

“He’s your husband. Doesn’t he get an equal say in whether this is a troubling development or not?”

“I...well...” She’s got me there. The shock of seeing them has me processing my own reactions, but I’m ashamed to admit to myself I haven’t even thought about what Will thinks. I’m not about to admit *that* to the two of them.

Raucous laughter, all male, comes from the house next door. I look out the window to find an impossible sight:

My husband drinking a beer with Spatula and Beastman. In his hand, he holds a plate with bacon. He gestures with his beer as he says something, and they double over laughing.

“Mallory?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong?”

I’m speechless, I want to say, but instead I say, “He’s having a beer on

the deck with them.”

“What’re they talking about?”

I walk over to the sliding glass door and stand out of sight, listening.

“Show us!”

“They appear to be talking about Sierra Jamison in detail. Do you guys know someone named Sierra Jamison?”

Perky sounds like she is spraying whatever she’s drinking all over Fiona, who shrieks.

“Gross, Perky!” Fiona shouts. “What was in your mouth?”

“Nitro Brew,” she says sadly.

“Why did you spit that all over me?”

“Because Will Lotham is talking about Sierra Jamison with two porn stars.”

“Technically,” I correct her, “a porn star and a porn director.”

“Do you want to know who Sierra Jamison is or not?”

“Yes! Of course I do.”

“Your husband is having an in-depth conversation with them about her?”

“Yeah! He keeps talking about some sequel, and some guy named Trey Mulligan.”

Perky clears her throat again. “Not Trey. *Tri.*”

“Tri?”

“Tri. As in T-R-I.”

“Tri? That’s the guy’s first name?”

“Yeah.” Perky goes quiet.

“What kind of person has a first name like Tri?”

“It’s short for Tripod.”

“Tripod? Boy, he had some strange parents, huh? Were they photographers?”

“That’s not—”

“Shhhh!” Fiona stops Perky from talking. “She’s not going to understand, Perk.”

“What am I not going to understand?”

“Will is having a conversation with a porn star and a porn director about one of the most famous female porn stars in the industry, and if they’re talking about Tri, they’re talking about a movie called *The Sounding of Music.*”

“You mean *The Sound of Music*, the movie?” Fiona asks, confused.

“No. *The Sounding of Music*.”

“Perky, you’re not making any sense.”

“Mallory, do I have to spell this out with tortilla chips and glops of the perfect ratio of sour cream, salsa, and guacamole?”

“Spell what out?”

“Your husband watches enough porn that he can be conversant with a porn director and a major porn star about other porn stars. That’s not obvious to you?”

“WHAT?”

“Go get your man. What’re your plans for the day? Humping?”

“We took care of that this morning. In thirty minutes, a driver is taking us on a private L.A. tour.”

“Nice.”

“Maybe Will’s next door foraging for bacon and that’s why he knows so much about porn stars. They just filled him in.”

Perky snorts as Fiona mutters, “Filled *who* in?”

“Give it up, Mal,” Perky declares. “Go have fun. Don’t say a word about this to him.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s your honeymoon. Why ruin perfection?”

“YOU ruined perfection with your penis cottage and telling me Will is a secret expert on porn!”

“Pffft. Knowing who Sierra Jamison is just makes him a heterosexual guy,” Fiona draws.

“Does Fletch watch porn?”

She goes silent.

“Oooo,” Perky says in a taunting voice. “The spotlight is on Feisty now.”

“Shut up,” Fiona says in a decidedly un-preschool-teacher voice. “If you have to know, we watch it together.”

The collective gasp between me and Perky has the suction power of an HVAC team cleaning ducts.

“NO!” I finally sputter. “You do not.”

“Everyone does. You and Parker do, right?” she asks Perky.

“Sure. But I never imagined you two did!”

“Well,” Fiona says in a quiet voice. “We do. And Sierra Jamison is fine and all, but I could do with a little less choking and a little more focus on clitoral stimulation in her videos, thank you very much.”

I am agog. Stuck on my phone and agog. My two best friends are dissecting porn while an actual porn movie is being filmed next door.

And I dread what's coming next.

Zero pun intended.

But no one asks. Silence reigns.

"You're not going to ask me?" I finally demand, breaking through the painful quiet.

"Ask you what?" Perky clears her throat.

"Whether Will and I watch porn together."

Have you ever been deeply humiliated by your besties as they mock you mercilessly for something that's true about you?

If not, bear witness to my hell.

Laughter goes on and on and *on* until they are wheezing like my dad trying to play pickup basketball at the YMCA and finally realizing that good old Roy is more old than good and needs to borrow one of the middle school kids' inhalers to avoid a heart attack.

I swear to God, Perky sounds just like that.

"You. Watch. Porn. Will." I'm not sure whose voice says which word, but it's easier to hang up on them than defend myself.

So I do.

It's my honeymoon. I get to choose what I want to do.

As I fume while staring at the infrared gas broiler, Will walks into the kitchen, his eyebrows knitting with concern as he sees me.

"What's wrong?"

"I just hung up with Perky and Fiona."

"And..."

"And how do you know so much about Sierra Jamison?"

He reels back, resting his ass against the edge of the counter, folding his arms over his chest. "How do you even know who she is?"

"I overheard you talking to Beastman and Spatula. Perky and Fiona said she's a porn star."

"She is."

"So you watch porn?"

"You know I do, when I travel."

"I know you watch a little. Not enough to be conversant with porn producers!"

"Mallory, what is this really about? What happened on that call?"

“Fiona admitted she and Fletch watch porn together, and then so did Perky about Parker, and they didn’t ask me about us and when I pointed that out, they turned into hyenas and mocked me so I hung up on them. I will not be mocked on my honeymoon!”

A gleam in his eye turns smoldering. “You realize we *do* watch porn together.”

“We do not!”

He takes my hand and walks me over to the window facing the deck next door. Beastman is naked again, munching on a piece of bacon, lounging on the deck couch with a casual affect that makes it clear work is play for him.

“We do. We did. This morning.”

“That’s not the same! That was an accident.”

“We can make it intentional.”

“You want to stand here and become voyeurs???”

“That’s.... the whole point of watching.”

He’s behind me, his arms wrapped around me, and it’s very clear this conversation is arousing him. I look at the clock.

“The driver will be here in twenty minutes!”

“I only need seven.” He turns me around and leads me by the hand to the couch.

“Seven??? What can we do in seven minutes?”

He shows me.

We still make our tour.

Chapter Six



The doorbell rings promptly at nine a.m. and Will groans.

He groans because he's *in* me.

"Go away," he mumbles as I press my hands into his shoulders, then slump forward. I'm on top. I'm rarely on top, because who wants all your skin sagging down at your lover? It's like letting them have sex with a shar pei.

The ding-dong of the door came just as my husband's ding dong shot off like fireworks.

I've already come twice, and now our perfect simultaneous orgasm has been destroyed by a chime.

"Will? Mal? It's Spatula. Hey," he calls out, making Will roll his eyes. My core muscles are so tight I've got him pulled inside me like I'm a Dyson, and the shock of being interrupted during phenomenal sex makes us both startle.

I let out a little shriek and fall on him, my legs going flat. He groans in pain and lifts me, angling our hips so I can just slide off instead of bending him.

Panting, we're post coital but no cuddle.

BANG BANG BANG.

"Will? Mal? I know you're in there. You left the window open, and you were having sex. You gotta be done by now. Real life orgasms take seconds."

"What the fuck," Will grunts out as he furiously sits up, grabs his underwear, jams his legs through the holes and stomps downstairs. I forage on the floor for my pajamas and while I'm slower than he is, I get dressed and run down the stairs.

To find Will standing in front of the front door, hands planted on his hips in an angry, testosterone-fueled rage, and Spatula on the stoop, holding an enormous gift basket.

“Heya, Mal. Nice note you hit there when you come. Can we record that and use it to dub over some of our orgasm whiners?”

Will lets out a growl.

Spatula squints at him. This morning, he’s wearing a black baseball hat that says *Ptown is for Lovers* and a concert t-shirt so faded the lettering is gone, but I get the sense it’s from a heavy metal band.

“Is that a no?” he asks Will. “Or an offer for that sound? Because you could –”

“Why are you here?” Will snaps.

I don’t know what to do with myself, but it’s early morning and we haven’t had our dose of caffeine yet, so I start making coffee.

“To give you this.” Spatula thrusts the enormous cellophane-wrapped basket into Will’s arms. The crinkling sound mutes against Will’s bare chest.

A chest my hands were on seconds ago.

A sticky chest, because we were –

Sniff.

Spatula sniffs a few times, then beams, eyebrows arching, pushing the baseball cap bill up.

“Using that new blueberry lube from DoYourThang, huh? That stuff is awesome.”

I sniff my hands. They do smell like blueberry. And Will did pull out a bottle before we decided to try something new that required a little more, ah – assistance – than usual...

“Get out,” Will says, pushing the basket back at him. The edge of the cellophane sticks to Will’s chest.

“Sorry! Sorry. I forget what it’s like for the normies. You keep it. It’s an apology present. I’m outta here. Have fun, kids.”

And with that, he’s gone as fast as he appeared.

Will slams the basket on the counter and glares at it.

Curiosity gets the best of me, and I take a peek. “Oooh, are those salted caramels?” I squeak, which is enough to get me to pull the ribbon at the top and open the entire thing. “There must be thirty different goodies in here!”

“I don’t want their gift. They just completely ruined our great morning sex.”

I pause, my hand on the candy, as I look at him. Will's hair is a mess, my gooped-up hands clearly taking a pass through it at some point, and lint dots his sticky chest. His underwear is on inside out and he wears an expression of frustration I want to kiss away.

"You came, right? I did, too."

"But we were about to –"

I cut him off with a kiss. When am *I* the reasonable one in a given situation? It feels good to be the soother and not the soothed.

"Let's just enjoy the gift basket," I whisper against his mouth. "Who can be mad at candy?"

"We were about to come together, Mal. You know how rare that is."

"I know. We'll get there again."

"Of course we will," he murmurs, starting to thaw, his arms around me, hands cupping my ass. "I'm just hating those guys next door more and more."

"They're annoying, but hate is a strong word."

"No more open windows when we have sex!"

Will lifts me onto the counter, leaning over me, my legs parting, wrapping around his hips. Everything's sore from moments ago, and if he tried to go down on me I'm pretty sure my clit would secede from the United States of Mallory and beg for asylum in Canada.

Temporary asylum, that is.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that a very fine bottle of Champagne is in the gift basket, and a note we didn't see before.

"Ooo, they sent Dom Perignon."

"Doesn't make up for the fact that he wanted to record our sounds and dub them."

"I see your favorite licorice in there."

"Really?" Perking up, he pulls away and starts rummaging through the basket.

Then he freezes.

"That's not my favorite licorice."

"What is it?"

"It's edible licorice panties."

"That's not a real thing."

He proves me wrong by holding up a small box that clearly says, "Edible Licorice Panties."

"GROSS!"

“Let me be the judge of that. Why don’t you put them on?”

“What else is in there? Look for the chocolate. Go toward the sugar, Will. Go toward the sugar.”

With a heavy sigh, then a relaxing laugh, I think he’s shifted out of his bad mood. Coffee will help, too. Nothing is planned today because our flight is a ten p.m. departure, and Will and I agreed we’d get all the sightseeing out of the way on Day 1, that Day 2 would be about dining out and eating well, but with a ten p.m. departure, everything’s a bit weird.

Will booked the place for the night, though we’re leaving early. Today, we walk on the beach, eat lunch and dinner before going to the airport, and off we go into bliss.

In that sense, we have plans.

As Will begins pulling everything out of the basket, I finish the coffee. By the time I have two steaming cups of perfect coffee done, he has discarded the cellophane and set the basket aside.

A virtual product sampler is laid out before me.

“I’ve organized it by category,” he begins.

“Ooo, you’re turning me on.”

He holds up a giant Rabbit vibrator. “Because of this?”

“No. Because you used the word ‘organize.’”

“We have food over here. Champagne, salted caramels, roasted macadamia nuts, and rum-filled truffles. And a subcategory.”

“Subcategory?”

“Bacon.”

“There’s bacon in that basket?”

“No. Bacon is its own subcategory. Bacon-flavored truffles. Bacon-flavored hard candy. Bacon-flavored gum.”

“You’re turning me on. Yum.”

“Then we have the anal category.”

“Anal bacon?”

“No.” We both shudder.

“Just... anal?”

“Yes.” A cluster of four products sits in formation. “Anal toys.” He holds up a blue bottle. “Look familiar?”

I blush. It’s from a company called DoYourThang.

“Okaaaaay. And what’s that?” A small velvet bag sits next to what look like roach clips and a small metal cage with... strings attached?

“Ah. That’s the pain category.”

“We have Food, Bacon Candy, Anal, and Pain?”

“So far, yes. Which pretty much describes Beastman and Spatula.”

“I don’t want to know about the other categories, Will.”

“There is one item I’m not sure about. It might need its own category. I almost put it in anal, but...” Sliding the box over to me, he grimaces. “It’s a butt plug.”

“That’s pretty anal.” Alarm floods through me. “You’re pointing this item out. Is that a... hint?”

“Open it.”

As I slowly slide open the generic white box, a puff of fur, the same color as my auburn-orange hair, pops out.

“Uh, what is this? It looks like a fox tail attached to a...”

Butt plug.

“It’s for the AnFet community,” Will explains.

“An-fet?”

“Animal fetish.”

“Animal *what*?”

“You know.” He rubs his nose and fails to make eye contact. “People who like to dress up as animals and have sex.”

“You say that like you’re discussing the impact of rising mortgage rates on commercial real estate, Will. How on earth does everyone else on the planet seem to know the jargon for all this sexual stuff and I don’t?!”

He shrugs.

“And how do you know about animal fetishes?” My blood goes cold. “Um, are you trying to tell me something?” Picking the tail up with my thumb and first finger, I dangle it in the air, the weight of the metal – metal??? – cone pulling it down. “Do you want me to, uh... use this?”

“No.”

“Do... *you* secretly want to use this? I mean, we’re on our honeymoon. It’s a time for exploration and getting to know each other better. Maybe when we watched *Everything Everywhere All at Once* you got some... ideas?”

“Mal.”

“If there’s a secret fantasy you’ve had and this is cracking it open, I’m here. I’m listening. I can be open-minded and –”

“I have zero interest in wearing a butt plug made of roadkill, Mallory.”

“Roadkill?” I shriek. “Who said anything about *roadkill*?”

“Read the little ‘About Us’ section. The part that starts with *No Animals Were Killed in the Process of Bringing You Pleasure.*”

“I don’t know if I want to read anything that starts with that!”

Instead of tormenting myself by putting that information inside my mind, I drink my coffee and look at the rest of the items. “This is like the opposite of an aphrodisiac.”

He picks up a bottle and shakes it. “We have those in here, too. CBD gummies.”

I peer at it. “Bacon flavored?”

“Yes.”

“Did I already try those a few months ago?”

“You did. You claimed they made your labia feel like they were filling with helium and turning into floats in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade.”

“That’s how we learned I can’t do anything related to marijuana,” I shudder.

Will tosses that bottle in the trash.

“Here’s another one for female sex drive. Horny goat weed.”

“I already said I can’t handle pot!”

“No, honey – it’s an herb called horny goat weed.”

“I want to know how that got started. Who ate an herb and decided to call it that? I assume a bunch of goats ate it, first, and it turned them on. But how would a human know a goat was horny?”

“You really do think these issues through with breathtaking detail,” he says drolly, tossing that bottle in the trash, too.

“There is no pill that will help me recover my sex drive after all this. Porn being filmed next door, Spatula interrupting us mid-coitus, my best friends mocking me, and now this.”

“It’s our honeymoon. You’ll warm up.”

“I hope so!”

“Once we’re in Fiji, they’ll be gone, and it’ll just be us.”

A prickly sensation makes my scalp tingle.

“What if this is a set-up?”

“A set-up?”

“Perky. Perky rented that horrible penis cottage for us, right?”

“Sure.”

“Did she have anything to do with renting this place?”

“No.”

“Are you sure? What if this is some elaborate prank? What if Spatula and Beastman are in on it?”

“PUT THE DIGERIDOO ALL THE WAY IN!” a woman suddenly screams from next door. We both run to the window to find, well...

That’s not a euphemism.

“How can she...” Will’s sentence fades out as we both tilt our heads.

“Can a vagina stretch that far?” I mutter, wondering if that’s why my mother jokes that my sister’s middle name should have been Episiotomy.

“I don’t even know what to say,” Will whispers. “I know all about morning wood, but this is taking things way too far.”

“Q3, Year 4 might be too soon for kids,” I whisper.

Will walks back to the counter and returns with a small box containing a strap-on. It’s called The Beastman.

“NO!” I gasp in horror.

“This was in the miscellaneous pile.”

“Do you want me to use that on you?”

“Why would you ever, *ever* ask me that, Mallory?”

“I’m calling Perky.”

A choking sound comes out of him. “Because Perky and Parker used one of these?”

“How would I know?”

“I assume Perky’s an over-sharer.”

“She is. Hmmm. You have a point.”

“Which means they definitely haven’t used one of these. But why call her?”

“Because I have to make sure she doesn’t ruin Fiji, too!”

“Honey. *Honey*. I assure you, she’s not pranking us. Sometimes coincidences just happen.”

And just like that, another one manifests.

Because blue and red lights start flashing, LAPD officers surrounding the porn rental next door.

Chapter Seven



“Let me see your hands!” one of the cops shouts at the naked actors on the deck, Beastman freezing in place. Layla’s on all fours again, with Kiki holding a sheer red scarf, long and billowing in the breeze. The words “Sex Positive” are imprinted on the scarf, except she’s holding it backwards.

The actor who was in a suit yesterday – Lance? – is manning the digeridoo. He drops it to put his hands up.

Layla screams as it, uh... falls out. As it slides to the ground, gravity doing its job, air from I-don’t-want-to-know where comes out through the instrument.

“C sharp,” Will says out loud.

I am never, ever having sex again. My asshole puckers and all the parts of me that have any hint of libido dry up. Estrogen and progesterone parachute out of my body.

“Uh, I can’t,” Beastman grunts out.

“Hands up!”

“I’m, uh... fisting.”

Will and I both peer more intently. At least now I know where the air didn’t come from.

“How can she have a digeridoo in her *and* his fist?” I ask Will. We’re getting close to needing an architect to draw up blueprints here.

“Some women are just... bendy?”

“There’s bendy, and then there’s *X-men* territory,” I murmur as more cops appear.

Spatula looks up and makes eye contact with me. I drop to the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“He looked at me!”

“MALLORY! YOU FUCKER!”

Straightening instantly, I grab Will’s hand because he’s about to tear the screen off and jump out the window to attack Spatula.

“Don’t you DARE say that to my wife!” Will bellows, his voice strong and protective, chest swelling like a cobra on the attack.

Huh. I guess my libido is still there, after all.

“You called on us again, man? And I sent you Champagne and really cool sex toys!” Spatula screams at Will.

Will’s hands go up. “Swear to God, man. We didn’t call!”

“Liar!”

“Don’t you dare call my husband a liar!” I screech, racing out of the room, running outside before I realize what I’m doing. Will’s after me, grabbing a towel along the way. Still in his underwear, I guess he wants to... go swimming?

It doesn’t take long to get near their deck, but two uniformed cops block us.

“YOU TAKE THAT BACK, SPATULA!” I scream, advancing on him in a red rage, but I can’t go near him.

LAPD is making it impossible.

Will’s hands are suddenly on my shoulders, pulling me back a few feet. “Hello, officers. We’re on our honeymoon and renting the beach house next door. Can we help in any way?” he asks, smooth and cool as a cucumber, while I’m ready to take that digeridoo and turn Spatula into a scarecrow with it.

“He’s lying, Mal! You two called the cops on us after we gave you all that cool stuff!”

“We didn’t call, you sleazy little pancake turner!”

Will’s insult turns Spatula livid.

“Fuck you, Will. I’m no line cook. My nickname’s because –”

“I don’t give a shit about your nickname!”

“You were one big giant dick back in Massachusetts, and you haven’t changed a bit, huh?”

One of the cops clears his throat. The badge says Morales, and he’s big. Beefy arms, a dark moustache, and a face that says he’s seen enough.

“Spatula,” Beastman says from his position where he’s turned Layla into a lollipop, “maybe this is part of the production? Check the cops for Velcro

costumes. What if this is all just part of the movie? You know, one of those meta productions?”

“Not a porn actor,” Morales says calmly.

“NICE TRY BEASTMAN!” Spatula screams. “BUT THIS IS REAL.”

“What about your parole in Massachusetts?” Beastman asks earnestly, getting a ton of sudden attention from Officer Jones, a woman with a blonde ponytail and an expression that says she’s ready to transport him across state lines.

“Excuse me,” shouts a man from the other side of Spatula’s rental. He’s bald, with close-cut fringe that’s all white, and he has the brightest blue eyes I’ve ever seen. “I was the one who called.” His accent is faint, but clearly English.

He reminds me of Patrick Stewart.

“Who the fuck are you?” Spatula snaps.

“The neighbor. Linus Portman.”

Officer Morales puts his hands on his belt, clearly standing down from the whole situation, but not leaving. “Mr. Portman here was, in fact, the one who called.”

“SEE?” I scream. “NOT A LIAR! You take that back, Spatula!”

“You people know them?” Mr. Portman says to us, his expression shifting to disgust. “Are you part of the crew? Or the actors themselves? How many homes are you defiling in our neighborhood?”

“We pay ten grand a day and get treated like this?” Spatula fumes. Lance is draping a blanket over poor Layla, who is shaking. I’d shake, too after having all that in me. Her poor vagus nerve must feel like the Autobahn right now.

“TEN GRAND!” the neighbor chokes out. “SHIT!”

Profanity sounds so different in an English accent.

“Do you have a business card? If I’d known Bruce was getting ten grand a day to rent the place out to pornos, I’d have asked him how he did it!”

“Will,” I ask, hating myself for being unable to stuff the question down, “how much are we paying for our place?”

“Nothing.” He wraps his arm around my waist. “Nothing for you to worry about.”

We agreed to keep our bank accounts separate, even when we married, though we have a joint account now. Will comes from money and has made even more in the handful of years we’ve been together, while I work for his

parents' multinational real estate company.

My salary is about what he makes in bonuses each year.

No complaints, because I love my job, but ten grand a night for a honeymoon rental is... a lot.

For someone who started dating him when I was on my last unemployment check, and who ran into him on a porn set because I needed the \$400 job as a "fluffer" that day – I *swear* I thought it was a house staging job – this is one heck of a one-hundred-eighty-degree turn.

Beastman looks over at the neighbor's house. "You got nice exposed beams inside that big family room. What's the weight bearing load? We have some sex swings that are really hard to use."

Handcuffs come out, Beastman pulled away from the group, the female cop handling his wrists like they were contaminated with radioactive waste.

"Anyone have hand sanitizer here? Or a power washer?" she asks, scanning the crowd.

"I can help!" Kiki squeaks, appearing with alcohol wipes. She plucks a few out for Beastman, who wipes his hands carefully.

"And get him some pants," the cop grunts out, looking away from the muscled magnificence that is our Beastman.

Our.

I shudder.

"The handcuffs triggering you?" Will asks with a chuckle.

"Don't laugh at me! That day was horrifying. I genuinely thought I was going to be dragged to jail by Karen Minsky and my parents would have to bail me out. You try being threatened with arrest by your childhood babysitter!"

"You're lucky I talked her out of it. You were filming a porno in my parents' house."

"She waves those zip-tie cuffs around with masochistic glee."

Morales walks over to us with a notebook and pen in hand. "You two just renting the place next door?"

"Yes."

"Then why do they know your names?"

"Because we met on a porn set. A *different* porn set," I hurry to clarify. "Back home."

"Where's home?"

"Massachusetts."

“You get around,” the cop says, leaning in. “You guys are porn stars, too?”

“No!” Will and I shout in unison.

“God, no. It’s a long story,” Will adds.

“My job is listening.”

“Your job is ruining people’s lives!” Spatula screams at the cop.

“Sir?” It’s Linus, the Star Trek captain doppelganger. “May I have a word with Mr. Spatula?”

“It’s just Spatula.”

“What an unusual name.”

“It’s because of the cream pies,” he tries to explain, but Linus stops him and points to LA’s finest.

“If you’re willing to have a private agreement, I’ll call them off.”

The two of them whisper, negotiating, as Morales and Jones huddle, giving us sidelong glances once in a while.

Finally, the blonde officer comes to us and says, “You should go.”

“Go?” we say in unison.

“I strongly urge you to leave. Now.”

“No problem, sir,” I say, realizing my error when her mouth puckers. “Er, ma’am.”

Will gently guides me back, one of his hands at his hip, holding the towel around his waist. It’s then that I realize how weird we must look, and that Will’s state of undress is suspicious.

My Powerpuff Girls pajamas probably don’t inspire confidence, either.

“BYE!” Beastman shouts. “Have fun in Fiji!”

“How does he know we’re going to Fiji?” I ask Will, fear spiking across my skin. “We never told him where we’re going next!”

Will halts in his tracks and turns around slowly, right in front of the deck by our rental’s door.

“Don’t you dare come to Fiji. Did Perky put you up to this?” he bellows.

“Who’s Perky?” Officer Jones asks. “Another porn star?”

“NO! She’s nearly engaged to a member of Congress!” I inform her, indignant.

“That makes her *more* likely, not less, to be in adult films, Mal,” Spatula shouts. “And we don’t know no Perky, but that’s an underrated porn name.”

My hand is in Will’s before I can reply, and he pulls me into the rental, slamming the door and plopping down on the couch, facing the ceiling, eyes

closed.

The towel slides to the floor, pooling.

“Where is that coffee again?” he grouses, looking around. I find our cups and bring them over.

Cold coffee is better than none.

We sip it together to the rhythmic glow of blue and red lights, until suddenly, they stop.

Chapter Eight



My body is humming, and the cold coffee isn't helping. Because he knows me too well, Will wordlessly takes the mug out of my hands, walks to the sink, dumps out the coffee, and begins making fresh espresso. The faucet turns on and I walk to our deck, the one we've barely used, opening the sliders and taking a deep, full breath of salty ocean air.

Calamity is part of life. There will never be a moment free of conflict and strife. Life can be calm and freeing, but it will never be "perfect." That is an illusion, I know. The word itself is shorthand for something deeper.

Alignment?

Effort?

Self-doubt?

Eagerness?

I don't know. The gentle richness of a medium roast tickles my nose, mingling with the fresh salt of the sea and my body relaxes, downshifting to a place where I welcome Will when he returns, gesturing for him to sit next to me on stretched-out lounging chairs.

No one is next door. The other neighbors to the left are nowhere to be seen. It's just me, my husband, our coffee and a gorgeous view.

The ocean's not so bad, either.

"What the hell was all that?" Will asks. He doesn't laugh.

"Karma? Coincidence? Perky pranking us?"

"It was too strange to label."

"Do we have to?"

"We don't have to do anything we don't want to do."

"Then I don't want to spend more energy trying to name whatever you

call – that.” I wave with both hands toward the porny beach house. “Because it’s going to take months to tease it all out, and I’d rather spend the rest of our honeymoon teasing each other.”

His eyes are closed, chest bare, underwear tight in all the right places. I flash back to high school, freshman year, more than half a lifetime ago and how much I instantly wanted him.

How he drew me to him.

And how utterly invisible I was.

Every day, now, he sees me. Peers into my soul and smiles. You can be loved, but have you ever been *seen* for the whole of you? Loved for your flaws, your life partner bearing witness to the pieces that are still forming, those that have matured, and the ones in between?

Calibrated by time and connectedness, it’s a unique journey to walk with someone else.

It is a wordless love. An undefinable knowing.

And I have it now.

Reaching for his hand, I thread our fingers, arm relaxing as we lie on the sun chairs, inclined enough to drink coffee. A breeze sends his bangs across his eyebrows, and I see our son in him. Does he see our daughter every time he gazes at me?

A ripple of anticipation dances in my belly. My left thumb worries the soft skin under my rings.

Change is good. Good change is even better.

“If all you want is to tease me, then we have a problem,” he finally replies, squeezing my hand.

“Who said that’s all I want?”

Setting my coffee aside, I cross the space between us, straddling him as I sit on him, my hands on his shoulders, those gentle eyes, sharp and kind, taking me in.

“Sexy jammies,” he says. “I always had a crush on Blossom,” he says, plucking at one of the pictures of her on my pajamas.

“I dressed up as her when I was five for Halloween.”

His fingers take a long, springy curl of mine and wrap it slowly around his knuckle. “I hope our kids have your hair.”

“It’s basically a rust-colored Brillo Pad here on the shore.”

“Mallory.”

“Mmm?”

“You need to work on taking compliments.”

“How about this?” Bending forward, his erection sliding right over my clit, I kiss him, rocking lightly against his shaft as he groans, tongue slipping between my lips, slow strokes inside my mouth making me wet between my thighs.

“This is how I want you,” he says in a raspy, low voice. “Like this.”

“You *have* me like this.”

He lifts me up, then stands, taking my hand and guiding me back into the house.

The large dining table looks like it was made from custom pre-Civil War reclaimed barn wood, carefully finished by a true artisan. Aside from the hardness, it’s the perfect place for sex.

So is the big, comfy bed upstairs.

“You are the best part of life,” Will says to me, pulling back with a long sigh and a smile that stretches forward to our fiftieth anniversary. In his eyes I see our kids and grandkids, all our pets and houses and adventures in a big collage that is so rich and complex I can’t take it all in.

Time is what I need.

All of the rest of time together with him.

“You make life so good,” I whisper back as he picks me up with a whoop, our laughter washing away everything stark and weird.

And porny.

The walk upstairs is swift, Will carrying me effortlessly, until he sets me on the bed and straightens with resolve.

He closes the window, then locks it. The blinds cord tightens. The curtains snap shut. Will finds a towel to hook over the curtain rod.

No one will see or hear us.

“Do you know what it’s like being around you and not being able to make love with you all day? How your ass looks when you sashay away from me, the curve of your breasts against your shirts, the way you lick frosting off a cupcake?”

I kiss him, hard and bold, as he crashes on top of me, my legs parting, knees pressing against his hips.

“Is it hard, Mr. Lotham?” I murmur, lifting my hips up to slide against his shaft. His groan of pleasure makes me smile.

“It’s always hard. When I’m away from you, all I want is you. And when I’m around you, all I want is you. We work together and you have no idea

how often I want to grab you, pull you into a supply closet, and fuck you up against a wall.”

“You’ve done that five times, Will.”

“Not enough.” He licks the hollow at the base of my throat, a tender spot that sends my back arching. “Never enough. I think about how you taste. How you smell. The little breathy sigh you make as you finally relax enough to stop thinking nonstop when we’re having sex.”

“You know that?”

“I feel it, Mallory. All I ever want is to be in this world with you where we’re naked, alone, and playing. Playing hot, playing rough, playing tender – doesn’t matter. And then there’s the way you moan before you come. And when you come. And when I make you come and come and come –”

“You have all of me for thirteen more days.”

Quickly, he unbuttons my pajama top, rolling me to and fro so the arms are loose, my breasts spilling flat against my ribs as he finds my nipples, the shock of wet mouth turning warm against my skin, my nipples tightening as I relax into his touch.

My hands go into his hair as he moves down, anticipation making my core curl in, my thighs parting as Will’s mouth goes exactly where I need it most. I lower my pajama bottoms and panties and Will instantly aims for my sweet spot, making me moan.

“Shower?” I suggest. “It’s a six-head steam room with a padded bench.”

“Sex in the shower sounds amazing,” he replies, pulling me off the bed, both of us naked in seconds. The tiled bathroom is expansive, outsized for a beach house like this, with more room to roam than anyone would ever need, but the renovations make it clear it’s designed for sex.

Instant hot water turns the room to a misty, arousing wonderland, and Will kisses me under the spray, all of the wetness making the line between my body and his dissipate, his hands everywhere, my tongue seeking him, until he sets me on the edge of a bench, the spray pounding his back.

“You are so tasty,” he says, and I laugh as I throw my head back, a light feeling that floats higher and higher as his tongue licks strokes that banish words from my mind, the sound of the spray overpowering me as he slides a finger in me, our bodies wet and messy, free and bold.

The way he gently sucks my clit, the smooth glide of my palms across his slick back, how my fingers find soaking wet, dark hair when I guide him on the rhythm that makes me explode – it’s so good, so hot, so tight.

So right.

“I’m – oh, God, Will,” I say, the words losing meaning, my gaze catching a glimpse of my rings on my hand, coming into view then obscured by steam, his mouth insisting that I accept this pleasure from him, for it is a gift of love and want and hot, raunchy need.

The second my fingers release his hair, he has me on my feet, pressing me against the wet, hot tile, my legs opening, Will coming in from behind. I’m so ready that I reach down and guide him in, his groan turning me on even more.

“You’re a work of art, Mallory. I could look at you like this forever,” he rasps against my ear as he pumps into me with long, deep strokes, a yearning inside me layering more and more, rising up, up, *up*.

Arching my hips back, I meet his strokes, pulling him in, my fingertips trying to grip the wet tile, my body doing anything it can to take in more of Will’s hot, hard cock. He rides me and I hit right back until suddenly, he isn’t there, and I am up, off my feet, shrieking with surprise. As my face is suddenly pressed against straining biceps, my ass lifted up by his powerful thighs, he walks us out of the bathroom.

Soaking wet, he moves us to the bed, where I don’t care that we are making a mess, don’t care that we leave the shower on, don’t care about anything but my husband, our bodies, our love.

As he enters me again, we say, “I love you,” my eyes closing as he drives home, on top of me, my legs pulling him in.

Taking his time, there is no rush, just the hardness of him pumping deep inside, his mouth strong and intense as we kiss, until I begin to cry out, his name on my lips, mine on his, and we come together so hard I clamp down, curling in, my body turning into one tight singularity whose sole purpose is to keep him close, hold him steady, find our truth together in climax.

“I so adore you,” he says in a low, full voice filled with passion as I come, wave after wave, each more intense than the other until I lose all control, no longer self-conscious, nearly unconscious as my body takes me places my mind never could, Will’s hands and cock and muscled chest the only anchor to reality.

I go limp. Nothing exists except us. All I can do now is breathe.

He nestles his face in the sweet spot beneath my ear and pants, hard, his breath slowing as a glow comes over me, so perfect I don’t want words or thoughts to ruin it. Instinctively, he stays quiet, too.

Or maybe he's glowing as well.

Finally, he stands, going into the bathroom to turn off the shower, returning to pull me into his arms. We rest, the room warm and comforting, a bit chilly as the water on us evaporates, my back to Will's front, and I feel myself drifting, aimless, happy.

My phone dings with a text. I reach for it, not to read, but to turn off my phone. A nap after sex is, after all...

Perfect.

But this text most certainly isn't.

Hey Mal.

It's Spatula. He must have saved my number from all those years ago. Why didn't I block him?

You guys want a digeridoo?

I power the phone off.

And don't say a word to my husband.

Some details are better left untouched.

And so are some digeridoos.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading Will and Mallory's honeymoon story. If you haven't read any of the Do-Over series, start with Little Miss Perfect, their "origin story," which takes place during their senior year of high school, as they compete for Valedictorian of their class. [The eBook is FREE, and you can start reading now.](#)

Here's the first chapter to get started now. Flip for more!

Little Miss Perfect

Ten years ago, my high school crush found me during senior finals week in the student parking lot with my car decorated with items you find behind a drugstore counter and a “Most Likely to...” banner that would make a pro blush.

And by “pro,” I don't mean golf.

In under an hour, everything I knew about myself was turned upside down and inside out, just as our high school career was in its final hours.

Then again, he's the high school quarterback. He's used to performing when the clock's running out.

Me? I perform well under pressure, too.

But not when Will Lotham is about to kiss me.

Or is he?

Little Miss Perfect is a prequel to the events that take place in *Fluffy*, Julia Kent's new book. It can be read on its own, without having read *Fluffy*.

Keep reading for more...

High school finals week. Senior year. Class of 2009 at Harmony Hills High School.

“Mallory?”

I whip around as my name echoes in the high school hallway, knowing that voice, unable to believe *that* voice is calling my name. The voice

attached to the lips and face and tongue and body and *omigod* is Will Lotham actually, trying to get *my* attention?

Now?

I mean... finally?

It's high school senior year finals week. The end. We're done. I have one more final exam left and my government textbook is in my car, an oversight I'm remedying right now. A breeze from a massive air vent in the wall shoves my knit skirt toward Will as he walks up to me, as if my skirt is seeking a hug. A kiss.

Contact of *any* kind.

It's been four years of torture, loving Will Lotham.

Or, rather, loving my fantasy version of him.

Four years of torture he knows nothing about, because crushing on someone means never having the guts to say a *word*. I'm wallpaper as far as he's concerned.

Except for that pesky problem with being his final obstacle on the road to valedictory.

We're tied for that honor.

And I'm determined to beat him.

"I — "

That's all I can manage as Will approaches, those deeply jewel-blue and green eyes framed by gorgeous lashes, his hair longer than usual because he doesn't have to keep it close cropped for football, lacrosse, and track anymore. We're seniors. He's off to Dartmouth and I'm going to Brown. We're the only two in our graduating class who made it to the Ivy League, but aside from that, we have nothing in common.

Not one thing.

Sadly.

"Hey. What are you doing here?" he asks, the question understandable as he looks around the hall. The white speckled linoleum starts to incline, the long hallway to the vocational wing of our high school an echo chamber. Neither Will nor I are in voc ed classes, so we must both be headed for the parking lot. This is a shortcut people use, but I haven't in a long time.

"Hi," I say, breathless, looking at him as if expecting him to go *poof*, like he's an apparition, one I've conjured in the last-minute desperation of the waning hours of ever seeing him again. My hair is long and unmanageable, the auburn curls turning into a frizzy mess when it's rainy, like today. Eyeing

the window, I see the rain's stopped. My glasses are smudged, but he's crystal clear when I finally look right at him.

To find he's staring right back.

“Hey. You okay?” Will stops and studies me with concern, a realness to him I've never seen before. He holds his arms with authority, not letting his hands dangle like some guys, or shoving them in his front pockets and looking awkward. Kind eyes take me in, brow tight with a little concern.

A little.

Let's not get carried away here.

“What? No. I'm fine. Yes. *Fine.*” I laugh at myself, pulse racing, smoothing my baby blue cotton shirt against my hips, resisting the urge to pluck at a tiny thread that begs for attention. My chest feels like an elephant is taking a nap on it, but my hands turn into helium balloons.

And my heart?

It's flopping in my chest like a fish out of water.

“It's just exam stress. You know.” I give him a smirk, eyes raised, because he knows. I know exactly how much Will Lotham knows about academic stress.

He nods.

My shoes *click clack* on the floor as we resume walking, the hard soles making my teeth rattle as I notice everything in triplicate. Who knew Will could trigger electric fields in my skin?

I did. I knew. I *soooooo* knew.

I knew four years ago, the day we met for the first time, and time hasn't changed *anything*.

As we reach the doors to outside, Will moves a little faster, pushing the horizontal bar and then standing there like a gentleman, waiting for me to pass. Carefully, I inhale as I move inches from him, closer to him than I've ever been, his scent as delicious in person as I've imagined it for – *yep*.

Four years.

We're at the edge of the student parking lot, the cars a mixture of older sedans, nice compacts, and the richie-rich kids with their showpieces from Dad's garage. Will is one of those. He drives a red BMW convertible, about five years old, with a black top, license plate number IG3 —

See? I've got it *bad*.

“I – I don't have an exam for this period. I'm using the time to study,” I blurt out as he waits for me to pass, then walks astride.

“Me neither. Last exam is government.”

“Right. Same here,” I say in that stupid voice that really isn't me. The one that's trying to hide my excitement but can't.

He's eyeing me like he expects me to stumble, or make a mistake, to do something wrong so he can take advantage of that. Every molecule that makes up my body is trying *not* to do that. Not do any of that. Not fall, not collapse, not go weak in the knees from his proximity.

An infectious grin spreads across his face. “I know. We're in the same class.”

I almost ask, *You noticed me?* but that would be stupid.

“Government. The only obstacle between us and freedom,” I joke, not really meaning the words, but knowing they're socially acceptable.

“We're down to the wire, huh?” Casual and comfortable, he's using a tone that makes me feel like we've been friends forever. I glance at him, taking in the red pima cotton polo, the form-fitting faded jeans, the cracked white tennis shoes. He walks with a kind of grace I don't see in most guys, athleticism more than enough to explain it, and yet it doesn't tell the whole story.

Will Lotham is the whole package.

I look away, because now I'm thinking about his, uh – *package*.

“What do you mean? Down to the wire?” I blurt out, mirroring him to cover for my never-ending supply of internal thoughts that sabotage me. A flurry of biological facts ripples through my mind, my amygdala doing its best to recall every moment of terror I've experienced, most of it in the confines of my mind.

I'm a caged animal.

And I'm the cage itself.

“C'mon, Mallory. You know *exactly* what I mean.” The tone changes. His hard edge comes out.

I hate this. I *do* know what he means. I hate being face to face with him, the object of his attention, when he only seems to see me as an obstacle. Not a person.

And certainly not a person of interest.

I go mute.

“Valedictorian,” he says with a smile that somehow combines admiration with a wretched vulnerability and a little bit of outrage that the competition is so fierce.

“That?” I squeak, my face reddening. We're tied for number one in our class.

“*That* is all my parents can talk about. How being valedictorian will help with grad school.”

“You're worried about *grad school* already? We barely finished undergrad applications!”

“*They* are. They've planned everything out. Pretty sure they named my first kid already.”

“You got Gemma pregnant?” I ask that last question a little too loudly. Gemma and Will have dated for a few months. Head cheerleader and captain of the football team. The homecoming queen and king.

The Quarterback and the Queen Bee.

He closes the distance between us and covers my mouth with his hand, laughter in his eyes, but quick reflexes shutting me up before anyone hears.

He is *touching* me.

Will Lotham is *touching my mouth with his warm, strong hand*.

Quickly, he moves away, leaving me branded and so close to licking him, but it's too late. “I was speaking about hypothetical children. No, Gem's not pregnant. We don't need any nasty rumors.” He looks around. “Then again, who cares? I'm out of here after this.” A shrug punctuates his apathy, the thick, ribbed collar of his polo shirt brushing against the ends of his hair.

“We all are.”

“No. I mean out of town. I go to Oxford for summer school, then straight to Dartmouth.”

“You're *really* leaving.” A muscle in my chest feels like two woolly mammoths are using it for tug of war.

“Yep. Anyone with half a brain is.”

“I love our town,” I protest, instantly defensive.

He jolts. “You do?” Eyebrows up, a cocky skepticism rolls over him, the same emotional suit he always wears when he's in a group here at school. Without it echoed in the faces and bodies of his posse, though, it's softer. Less threatening.

Less powerful.

“Yes.” Defiant, I jut my chin up. “I do.”

“You need to see more of the world.”

“I know what I need,” I whisper, looking him straight in the eye and not breaking away.

He doesn't either.

“Besides,” he says, looking away finally, “I broke up with Gem.” Broad shoulders go wider, as if he's proud.

“Why?”

“Because it's time. We did prom.” One shoulder goes up in another shrug. “Time to move on.” He cracks a knuckle on his left hand.

My heart seizes. The mammoths stampede, bringing along a hundred of their friends, all using my breastbone as their path.

“Yeah,” I say. “It is, isn't it? Time to move on.”

Some subterranean part of me knows this. It really *is* time for me to move on. Not from Anderhill, the town. I love living here. Brown is a little over an hour away, so I can come home whenever I want, but it's not about the physical place.

Being known is important. We all need to feel *known*.

Every part of this town is in my DNA, from the Dance and Dairy festival every August to Taco Taco Taco, the new Mexican restaurant that opened up four months ago and makes all the national chains taste like sawdust.

But Will is right. It's time to move on.

Here's the problem: It's time for me to move on from my crush, too. Time to move on and leave all these hopes in the past. All the wonderings. All the day dreams. All the repressed wishes that never got a chance to see if they could be real because fear ties hope down like a really skilled kidnapper with an unlimited supply of rope.

That's why Will's words feel like an anvil being lowered over my left ventricle. The weight of truth is measured in blood, isn't it? In tears and ache.

“It's all over.” He stops, just short of his little red car. Not a scratch on it, the rain from this morning pools in perfect drops, like someone dotted it with dragon tears.

It's all over.

This is my last chance.

My last chance, *ever*, with Will Lotham.

Four years of having lockers next to each other, of being in the same honors classes, suddenly feels like nothing, like a short elevator ride, like a waterslide drop, like a hundred meter dash.

Over before you know it.

Panic grips my stomach, my skin turning hot at the truth of what I'm facing. I waited all this time, hoping against hope that maybe – just *maybe* –

he would notice me. Say something. Give me an opening to get to know him and to be known.

And now it's too late.

"It's all over," I whisper to myself, not realizing I'm echoing him, one hand nervously tugging on a long strand of my hair, the ends scrubby like a dish sponge. I swallow, hard, trying to control my heart.

"Except for government, yeah."

"Government. Right."

His brows drop as he looks at me, seconds deepening our gaze, my body turning to one big hum without tethering, without grounding, the vibrations between us their own form of matter.

Then his point of sight goes over my head. An astonished look comes over him, the careful mask Will normally wears torn off as real emotion, all of it connected directly to laughter, takes over.

"Holy shit," he says, gently grasping my elbow and pointing. He's touching me again. I struggle to hear his words, every sense focused on the point where our bodies connect. "Whose car is that?" he asks with a low whistle following.

I squint.

I pause.

I die.

Because it's *mine*.

Someone – and I have my suspicions who the culprit(s) might be – has taken the liberty of covering my car, the one Mom and Dad gave me when I was sixteen, my older sister's old car from when *she* was sixteen – with white fluffy cream, streamers, magenta glitter paint and balloons.

"Oh, no," I groan, squinting to see what the writing on the windshield says. It's not legible from this angle. The only way to get clarity is to walk closer.

God help me.

"That's your car?" He laughs through his nose, a pure, uncontrolled and unrestrained smile of amusement turning his eyes to triangles that take me in without pretense. A glimpse of who Will is without all the trappings of popularity and achievement gives me more of a thrill than four years of watching him act a part.

I like *this* Will. This feels more real. I like him more than the fantasy man I've created for the last four years.

How did it take this long to meet him?

I pat the hood of his car, my palm wet from the rain. I wipe it on my skirt as I mutter, “We can't all drive Beemers.”

“I don't mean that. Your car is fine. I mean – man. I haven't see that kind of treatment for anyone but football players during district playoffs. What the hell did you do to deserve *that*?” Genuine mirth fills him, his hands on his hips. A breeze blows his hair across his forehead and I can see the man he'll become, strong and confident, always finding his footing.

Like the quarterback he is.

We walk closer and I come to a dead halt as the words on the windshield come into view, mortified.

Will bursts into laughter.

Most Likely to Become a Porn Star is written in hot pink glitter paint across my windshield.

“Did I miss a class vote for that one?” Will snarks as he points and continues laughing, hard. “Don't remember a page like that in the yearbook, and I was editor.”

A blush blooms from my chest to my ear tips. My skin matches the magenta sparkly paint.

“Pretty sure my friend Persephone is responsible for that,” I squeak. She must have just done it right after the rain. It's fresh.

“Persephone?”

“Yes?” A head with long, honey-colored hair pops up from behind Will's car, two rows over, her overgrown bangs brushing against the tips of her eyelashes. She's wearing overalls and a massive smile that says, *Gotcha*.

“You're dead! SO DEAD!!” I shout. “That is not funny!”

“Actually, it is,” Will says.

“I didn't ask for your opinion!”

“We're told we can do anything if we put our minds to it,” Will says, deadpan. “I'm sure if you try hard enough, you can become a porn star.” His eyes drift lower, as if he's assessing the truth of his joke.

One finger tip grazes against the paint. Studying it, he smirks, then wipes it off on my windshield. As he moves, his thumb pad slides against more paint, until he frowns and tries to get rid of it, leaving a sparkly line on the underside of his wrist.

Persephone throws her arm around my shoulders, an ever-present to-go cup of coffee in her hand. Her eyes jump from me to Will, filled with more

questions than our pending government final. "What's up?"

"My blood pressure!" I hiss.

"I mean why are you both out here?" Her eyes add, *Why are you with him?*

"We forgot our government textbooks," I explain.

"Why are *you* out here?" she asks Will.

"Like I said. To get them from our cars," I quickly re-explain before he can answer. Is Persephone high? I look at her eyes.

No. Not high.

Just an impish jerk.

"Didn't you turn those in already?" She acts like we're harboring a fugitive.

"The exam isn't until one o'clock."

She looks at her phone. "That's in two hours."

"Right."

"How much more can you learn in two hours?" she asks, her face pulled back in a kind of existential horror. She takes a long drag off her coffee cup, sucking on the lip like it's a cigarette. A few months ago, she smoked her first one. Our other friend, Fiona, and I keep trying to get her to stop, but once Persephone puts her mind to something, that's it.

She's not just stubborn. She's stupid-stubborn.

The worst kind.

"What do you mean?"

"You think two more hours of studying will make a difference?" she scoffs.

Will and I exchange a look that makes me feel understood.

Persephone flips hair off her left shoulder, the long, straight, strands leaving my insides in a puddle of envy. I could spend ten years with a straightening iron and never have hair like that. Reflexively, I reach up.

Yep.

Poodlehead.

Flaming auburn poodlehead. I look like a copper scrubby.

She points to him, one corner of her mouth scrunched up, evaluating Will like my mother getting an Easter ham at the butcher shop, trying to decide whether it's what she needs.

"Or is this about trying to edge Mallory out of being valedictorian?" she challenges Will.

Looking at me, he answers her. "Of course it is."

"You left your textbook in your car just so you could walk out here with Mal and intimidate her, all alone in the parking lot? Good thing we came out here to decorate her car, buster!"

"I think you meant *desecrate*." I poke one of the balloons on the antenna. It pokes back. "Persephone, what's on this balloon?"

"Lube."

I peer closer at the balloon. "Is that a *condom*?"

"Yeah. We forgot to grab regular balloons at Target, so I improvised."

"With *condoms*?"

"I'm impressed you had leftovers," Will says, fighting to keep his face blank.

Persephone glares at him. "Is that a cut?"

"No. I'm serious. Who has leftovers?" Tingling takes over every nerve in my body at the thought of Will using a condom.

"I buy them in bulk because I'm a total slut," she snaps back.

His palms go up. "I never said that."

Jumping to Will's defense comes naturally. "Technically, Persephone, what he said was the opposite. He was bashing you for not having enough sex."

"I never said that, either!" Will protests, cracking the knuckles on his left hand, one at a time. He makes it through three before stopping. As an astute student of All Things Will, I know this means he's nervous.

Why would he be nervous? It's not like Persephone and I are up there in the High School Popularity Food Chain. Will is lobster and filet.

We're hamburger in a tube. On sale. At Wal-Mart.

"I'm trying to help you," I start to explain to him, feeling like every word out of my mouth is on a dimensional time delay, the multiverse hard at work to transport my words to the exact wrong contexts for maximum chaos.

"You're really bad at it." His voice goes low. Is he joking, or angry? I can't tell, Everything about Will is fuzzy.

So fuzzy.

My racing brain catches on something, like a parent grabbing a merry go round that's spinning out of control. I look at Persephone and put my hands on my hips, imitating a preschool teacher with infinite patience addressing a three year old. "Don't you have your math final right now?"

She frowns, grabbing her phone. A few seconds of looking at it and she

screams, running off. “Shit! I forgot! Thanks, Mallllll.”

Her voice fades as she sprints for the double doors.

“I can't believe it,” Will says.

“I know! Who forgets they have a final?”

“I meant the extra condoms part. Who has *extras*?”

I laugh nervously, because I have no other way of laughing when Will Lotham jokes about sex. Sex I haven't had yet. Sex I've imagined having with him a thousand times, in a thousand ways, but never, ever in front of my car with the words *Most Likely to Become a Porn Star* painted on it in glitter-glow hot pink paint.

Tires squeal on pavement as Sameer Ramini, one of Will's football buddies and the biggest asshole at Harmony Hills High, comes ripping into the parking lot, crookedly managing to take part of three different spots a few rows away. His convertible top is down and he grabs a book and sprints into the building. If he's late for an exam, he's *late*. Like, an hour late. Perky-level late. His exam score is going to suck.

I smile. Good. After what he did to me a few years ago, *good*.

Will's brow goes down as I realize he's watching me watch Sameer. Before I can even try to explain what I'm thinking, Will's neck moves slightly, the way you become attuned to a sound. “Do you hear that?”

I go quiet. There's a hum, like a swarm of bees in the distance.

“I do.” Turning my head, I twist to catch it, the sound low. Lower than you'd expect a swarm of bees to fly.

“Shhh.” His finger covers his lips. I want to be that finger. Never before in the history of my entire life have I wanted to be a *digit*.

My phone beeps with a reminder. Will stays on task, searching for the source of the weird sound. I look at my phone.

“The exam's in less than two hours now, and we have to study. Or, well, *I* have to study. I need to reinforce my understanding of how to write answers to the document-based questions.” I reach for the handle to the driver's side door.

He looks in my car window. When his eyes widen, they're even more handsome. Reaching for me, his palm covers mine, stopping my hand on the door.

I ignite.

“What? Is there a bee in my car?” I gasp, wondering how I can speak through the flames flying into the air from my lips as he touches me.

“Something like that.” Moving closer to me, his shoulder grazes mine as he peers in. I can smell him, mint and coffee, and suddenly, I have no senses other than scent and touch. Whatever parts of Will connect with me are all that I am.

And all that I want to be.

“What's in there?” I beg, needing more than his answer.

“I don't – ” His face changes as he tilts his head, astonishment making those blue-green eyes go wide. He bites his lower lip. A wicked grin starts to emerge. “I, uh, Mallory, you might want to brace yourself.”

“Something dangerous got in there, didn't it?”

His mouth tightens, a shock of dark hair bisecting his forehead as a sudden breeze blows it askew. “Dangerous? Maybe.”

“I don't want it to hurt me! Is it big?”

“Uh,” he chokes, losing his composure, shoulders shaking with amusement. Will is the most self-assured guy at Harmony Hills High, so whatever creepy thing is in my car, it must be *bad*.

“Then I'm not opening it! How will I get my textbook out of there?”

And how do I stop having a runaway heartbeat from your touch?

No. Wait.

How do I get *more* of this? Dear God. Oh, Lord.

Help.

“That's not... a bee, Mallory. Unless bees are dark purple, twelve inches long, and have fake veins in them.”

“What are you talking about?”

He points.

I cup my hands around my eyes as I peer in through the window.

And find a giant vibrator flailing on my front seat.

“Oh my GOD!”

“Not a bee.”

“I figured that out, Will!” I snap.

He gives me an appreciative grin. “You can yell.”

“OF COURSE I CAN YELL!”

“I've never seen you yell before.” He crosses his arms over his wide chest and leans against the car next to mine as if settling in to watch a show, then quickly lifts his ass off the metal, the leftover rain darkening his jeans in all the right places. “Little Miss Perfect can get angry. Who knew?”

What the hell does that mean?

“EVERYONE CAN YELL! ESPECIALLY WHEN THEIR FRIENDS DO THIS TO THEM TWO HOURS BEFORE AN IMPORTANT GOVERNMENT FINAL!” I shout, my mind exploding.

Little Miss Perfect?

He calls me that? Do his friends call me that behind my back? Why did he call me Little Miss Perfect? What does this mean?

And why does he keep looking at me like he's seeing me for the first time in his life?

“Why are you yelling?” Fiona says, suddenly appearing from behind another car. Her head is shaved, her hair about half an inch long. She has thick black eyeliner on, drawn at the edges like Cleopatra, and she's wearing a sleeveless black tank. Her breasts are bound and her jeans are so baggy she uses rope as a belt. Shit kickers cover her feet, the tips worn down by a file from her father's garage. She henna'd the tips in a pattern that matches a tattoo on her thigh, which you can see through a big tear in her jeans.

She's a walking dress code violation and likes it that way.

I point to my car. “Do you really need me to spell out a reason for why I'm yelling?”

A big grin splits her face. “Gotcha!”

“This isn't funny!”

“Porn stars are always funny.”

“There is sex lube all over my windshield!”

“Don't worry. All your lectures about safe sex got through to us. We got the condoms with spermicide. Your car can't get pregnant.”

Will snickers. Fiona looks at him and, comically, does an *Ah-oooo-gah* face. You know, like in cartoons, where the character's eyes pop out of their head, their tongue drops to the ground and rolls out for fifty yards, and their head smokes?

That's Fiona right now.

Looking at Will.

“You,” she says.

He points to himself, tapping his chest. “Me?”

“Yeah. You. What are *you* doing out here?” Ignoring him, she reaches for her phone, flips it open, and starts texting someone, pressing buttons furiously. Probably Persephone.

“I'm – what?”

“Why are you here with Mallory?”

The words *with Mallory* burn in my brain, like leather working in shop class.

Szzzzzzzz.

“We forgot our government textbooks, if it's any of your business.” Will's voice takes on that quality guys in his circle have, where who he shares information with depends on how they fit in, status wise. If you're not important enough, you're not worth his attention.

“She's my bestie. It's my business.” Fiona holds firm. “And if you're here to scare her into bombing the final so you can be valedictorian, fuck off.”

“Hey!” Will and I shout the word at the same time, in two completely different tones.

Actually, huh.

Same tone.

Outrage.

“Fuck you right back, Feisty,” he says, resurrecting her nickname from middle school. Fiona dropkicked Chris Fletcher, one of Will's football buddies, and the name stuck. “I don't need to cheat to win.”

“Not cheat. Just intimidate. I know how your kind operate.”

“My kind? *My kind?* What the hell does that mean?” Will challenges, his body loose and casual, his face sharp and angry. Having one of my best friends trading profanities with my biggest crush makes me feel like a referee in a fight I never agreed to jump into.

I'm up against the ropes, ready to be pummeled.

Fiona looks at me. I know exactly what she means. A tiny, imperceptible head shake from me makes her stand down.

“Whatever. You're not worth the fight. Bye. Good luck with your finals.” She looks him up and down. “You'll need it.”

And with that, Feisty walks away.

“What a piece of work,” Will says to me. “*That's your best friend?*”

My turn to snort. “Like your friends are any better?”

“They don't run around accusing people of using underhanded tactics to win.”

“That's exactly what Fletch and Ramini did last fall during football season, when they accused the Lawrence team of using covert signals to eavesdrop on the coaches.”

“That's different.” But I can tell he's surprised I am aware of anything football related.

“No, it isn't. Objectively speaking, if you apply the same standards, it's the same.”

“Do you apply objectivity to everything?”

“Yes.”

“Even to rejecting Harvard?”

My heart leaps into my throat like it's jumping from a burning building.

“Excuse me?” I back up, the tip of a blown-up condom scraping against my hair, the sudden chemical scent of lube reminding me of hospitals, shots, stitches.

Pain.

“You just said that applying the same, objective standards to everything is important to you.”

“Well, not – I didn't – ”

“And I heard you rejected Harvard.”

“Heard?”

“Through the grapevine.”

“The grapevine talks about *me*?” The words are out before I can stop myself.

“The grapevine talks about everyone. You're not special.”

You're not special.

I close my eyes and try not to curl my abs in from the verbal KO those words just delivered. His words have the same power as Fiona's foot to Chris Fletcher's jaw.

As I lean against my car, I feel a strange vibration. A humming. I'm turning inside out, drawing on the deep energy of the earth, an ancient and timeless –

“Your vibrator.”

“My what?”

He points. “It's next to your gear shaft. It's making the whole car hum. You might want to turn it off.”

“Quit calling it *my* vibrator. It's not mine! I don't want to touch that thing!” A quick glance inside my car shows that the stick shift has been covered in some sort of giant silicone... apparatus... that turns the stick shift into a peach penis.

Persephone and Fiona are dead meat.

“If you don't put it away, when finals are over, someone will see it,” he says dryly, going back to the casual, closed-off guy I've known for four years,

as if the mask is adjusted and back in place.

“I don't care if someone sees it, but it clearly bothers *you*,” I say, stung by his words earlier. “Remember? I'm not *special*. Why would anyone care what's in my car?”

He frowns, then closes his eyes, taking in a long breath, letting it out while his hand rakes through his hair. “That was mean. I'm sorry.” Real Will engaged.

I'm getting dizzy watching him flip-flop.

“Yeah, it was mean. It was also true. I'll take the truth over fakery any day.”

In the air between us, something pauses. Absorbs. *Attunes*.

“You want truth?” he says quietly, voice low and full of attention.

I stop myself from reaching into my car and look at him. “Always.”

“Fine. Then here's some truth: you made a huge mistake.” The words come out of him like he's been holding them in a pressure cooker. I swear I feel steam as they blast out across the gulf between us.

“What?”

“Rejecting Harvard. Big mistake.”

“No, it's not!”

Fury – abject fury – takes over his face.

I step back. I step *away*. There's so much emotion in Will Lotham suddenly, all of it aimed right at -

Me?

“You know how it all works,” he says, as if he's angry with me. As if I've done something wrong and I don't know what that is. “Do all the extracurriculars. Be the best jock in town. Get the highest SAT scores. Take all the AP classes. Volunteer and intern and network until you are the cream of the crop. Get into a good Ivy. Then grad school. Come out on top, always fighting, and keep rising. We're supposed to push and push and push, right?”

It takes me a few seconds to realize I'm wrong.

He's not angry with *me*.

In fact, he's trying to get me to explain his anger. To him. Or to validate it? I don't know. All I understand is that Will Lotham is leaning against the wet door to my 1998 Toyota Corolla, his ass on the very same handle I touch every time I drive, and he's talking to me like we're friends.

Deep friends.

“Is that – is that what you want?”

“Huh?”

“Is that what you want your life to be like?” I try again.

“What does what I *want* have to do with any of this?” Yet again, the mask I have seen in almost every interaction with Will for the last four years snaps back on, like tiny magnets were activated to bring it back in place.

I'm not fooled, though.

Not anymore.

Some part of me decides in a split second to persist. To put myself out there. To cut through Will's self-imposed bullshit and to be real. He can hurt me, yes. He can cut me down with a look or the wrong kind of sigh.

But I'm about to take my last final exam and move on to a whole new world in college. If I can't take a risk now, when can I?

“What you want, Will, is the only important thing. You are the one who lives your life. Not your parents.”

“Tell *them* that.”

“Have you?”

“You can't tell – I can't tell people who control everything in my life what to do.”

“Why not?”

Tilting his head, he eyes me like it's suddenly dawned on him that I am legitimately crazy.

“Okay, then, Mallory. What do you want to do that is different from your parents' path for you?”

“My parents don't have a path.”

“You got into Harvard and Brown. Your path is pretty damn fine. So are you.”

His eyes. Oh, those eyes, as he says those words. Is he flirting? Does this mean what I think it means?

“I'm, um – what was the question?” A battle forms inside me, defenses drawn, places entrenched as the army of emotions falls into formation. On one side, we have Practical Mallory, the part that knows damn well Will Lotham is absolutely, positively, unequivocally not flirting with me. There is zero history between us to indicate that I should interpret any of his signals as romantic interest. A careful inventory of every single aching difficult moment I've ever interacted with him demonstrates that.

But then there's Eternal Optimist Mallory.

And she is activating antennas like a cell phone company expanding into

new territory. *Ping ping ping!*

His soft laughter cuts through me, ripping me out of my reverie. “How did you become so successful?” he asks. At the word “successful” my mouth goes dry. Having the truth spoken so easily – because I am successful, academically – feels like a crown. An awkward one, crooked and weighty, but a crown. Something ordained and spoken, a symbol. Will's words have that power. They're not just heard.

They are seen.

I am seen when he speaks about me.

“You said your parents don't have a path for you,” he elaborates, as if giving me time to process but still expecting an answer.

“They don't.” Truth is my only choice now. I've spent most of high school guarding who I really am against the tide of people determined to make every step outside of a line drawn around me without my permission a transgression.

Telling the deep, direct truth feels like breaking the rules, but it also feels oh, so good.

“You just magically excel in school?”

“No magic. Hard work.”

“We all work hard.” An edge cuts through his words, slicing straight to my heart.

“I didn't mean to imply you don't. I just – I don't have the kind of pressure you're describing. My parents want me to be happy.”

He does a double take.

“I – I – I don't mean to say your parents don't want *you* to be happy!” I cry out, feeling like everything between us is wrong, upside down and inside out, like we've entered a strange dimension where Will Lotham is paying attention to me like I'm a live, breathing, feeling human being and when did this happen? When did I slip into a wormhole and enter the black hole of my blabbering, where every word in the universe gets sucked into my mouth then hurled out in the most embarrassing format possible?

“I didn't think you were saying that.” He slumps against my car, batting away a purple balloon condom. This one smells like mint and petroleum. “I know my parents love me. It's just – man. The pressure. You know that look in their eyes when you don't win? When you're not the top student? When you don't get voted into office or don't throw the game-winning pass?”

“No.” I'm about to explain that I don't do team sports, I only run for office

when it's an academic curricular and I'm friends with half the club or team, and –

He just nods. “Right. Me neither.”

I'm so confused.

“I don't know what that actually looks like, because I've spent most of my life making sure it *never* happens, Mallory.”

Whoa.

Will just went deep.

“You would never know,” I whisper, a breeze taking my words and carrying them to Will, who jerks his head up and stares at me, eyes narrowing with trepidation and something else.

Something else I can't name.

“You really wouldn't,” I continue, boldness taking over. “You're – well, you're Will Lotham. *The* Will Lotham. You seem like you have it all together. Captain of the football team. Lacrosse captain, too. You're an Eagle Scout and fluent in two languages and you play saxophone – ”

“Badly. I play saxophone very badly.”

“It's your embouchure,” I assure him. I play flute. I should know. “You just need more practice.” The thought of Will using his lips and tongue to practice anything makes my skin tingle harder, as if there's a scale I didn't know about. My eyes drift to his lips and I can't look up, can't make eye contact, am constitutionally incapable of doing anything but imagine how those lips would feel on mine.

“I don't give a shit about playing sax, Mallory. I only do it because Mom and Dad said I needed an instrument.” He aims an epic eye roll at the school building, his face in profile, chiseled yet human.

“Oh.” I blink hard, looking away.

“See? How many activities do I join because my parents think it will help with some path I'm on that I never chose? You play clarinet, right?”

“Flute.”

His eyebrows knit. “Are you sure? I would swear you play clarinet.” Our eyes meet again.

“Pretty sure I know exactly what my lips do when they're held up against something long that makes a sound, Will.”

He goes still. Curling his lips in, he bites them, stifling a laugh.

What did I just say?

WHAT DID I JUST SAY?

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About the Author

New York Times and *USA Today* bestselling author Julia Kent writes romantic comedy with an edge. Since 2013, she has sold more than 2.5 million books, with 5 *New York Times* bestsellers and more than 21 appearances on the *USA Today* bestseller list. Her books have been translated into French, Italian, and German, with more titles releasing in the future.

From billionaires to BBWs to new adult rock stars, Julia finds a sensual, goofy joy in every contemporary romance she writes. Unlike Shannon from *Shopping for a Billionaire*, she did not meet her husband after dropping her phone in a men's room toilet (and he isn't a billionaire she met in a romantic comedy).

She lives in New England with her husband and three children where she is the only person in the household with the gene required to change empty toilet paper rolls.

She loves to hear from her readers online.

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Many posts include an audio conversation between me and my husband, Clark. We talk about my books, ideas about romance, and so much more. Sometimes we're even funny! ;)

I'm having so much fun reliving into topics ranging from wedding romance to one-night stands to cover design to food insecurity and volunteering. Designed to be a free-flowing place for ideas, my little online writing cabin invites you to come on in, take a seat by the fire, and chat with me and other readers in the comments.

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<3