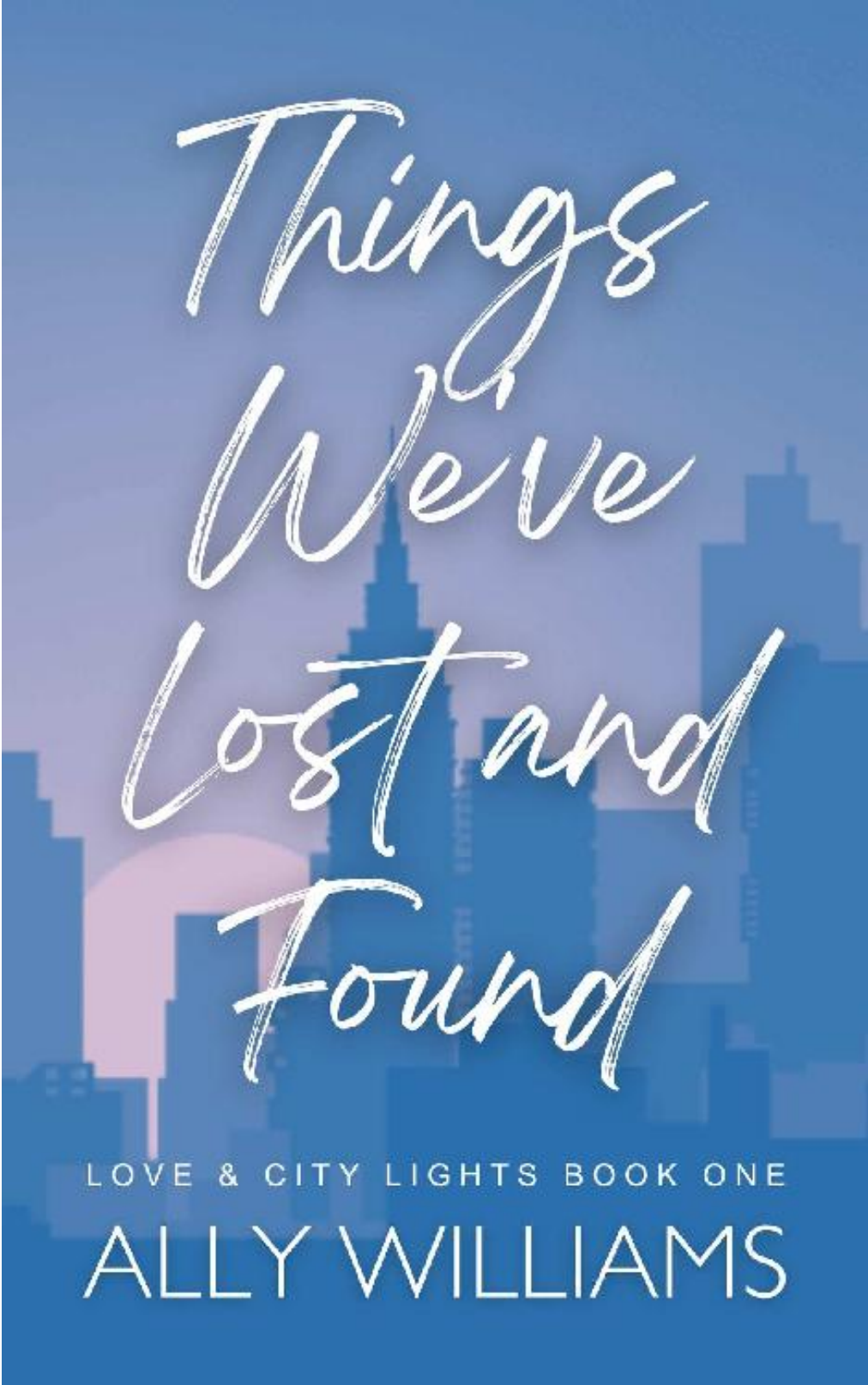




Things
We've
Lost and
Found

LOVE & CITY LIGHTS BOOK ONE

ALLY WILLIAMS



*Things
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Found*

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Things We Used to Believe

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About the Author

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Editing by Rozi Doci.

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CONTENT WARNING

This story contains explicit sexual content, foul language, a parent with advanced dementia, and the sexual assault of a side character.

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For the girl I used to be.

MAY

ANNABEL

I'm not one to scare easily.

In fact, I'd say I'm normally pretty levelheaded.

But there's something about the deep lurch and the thick, enduring silence afterward that makes my stomach turn.

The elevator has stopped.

I glance around, sure everyone can hear my hammering heart. The other four people in this elevator do the same, eyes darting wildly as we wait for the elevator to come back to life and escort us gently down. A layer of cold sweat coats my skin.

A tinny voice comes through the speaker. "Hold tight, folks, we're on our way."

The wide lobby only two floors below us calls to me, statuesque but welcoming, with a marble-lined entranceway and a thick wooden reception desk on the far wall.

I'm not going to make it to my second interview, am I?

I kick myself for taking the elevator to the wrong floor, for going to eighteen instead of sixteen and not even realizing my mistake until the doors closed behind me. Pressing the button for another car going up felt like a beacon, highlighting my clammy palms and fluttering stomach.

And now here I am, in an elevator with people who are presumably *leaving* the office—they have all the time in the world. Or at least an hour or two for lunch.

I check the time on my phone—I still have twenty minutes until I'm late.

I only need to go down two floors. *Two floors.*

A woman stands in the corner opposite me, her short brown bob perfectly coiffed. She sighs and unlocks her phone, her manicured fingers dancing over the screen until she realizes—as far as I can tell—that there's no service in the elevator. She huffs and turns to the man standing next to her. "Brock, do you have any bars?"

He pulls a phone out of his pocket and checks, shaking his head solemnly. "Sorry, Nadine."

Silence descends over the elevator, during which the five of us narrowly avoid each other's glances.

After a minute or so, Brock clears his throat. "So uh," he starts, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. "Should we take bets on how long this is going to be?"

"I'm an optimist, so I'll say under five minutes." When I glance at the man speaking next to me, my breath catches. Tall, with a five-o'clock shadow already showing across his chin. He seems relaxed, almost entertained by the situation. He wears slacks, but no tie, and the top button of his shirt is undone, revealing the smallest bit of chest hair.

He smiles down at me and a rush of heat blooms through my body.

I'm drawn to that little triangle of skin at the top of his shirt, and I have to force myself to refocus on the elevator floor.

Is this the female equivalent of being distracted by cleavage?

All of my senses are heightened, thanks to this stupid broken-down elevator. That's why I'm focusing on that little triangle of skin. It's a stress response.

"I'll say five to ten," I chime in. I'm surprised my voice isn't shaking. I stand up straighter.

I will not allow a stuck elevator to unravel me.

I reach up and tighten the bow in my hair—red with white polka dots, the equivalent opposite of my shirt. I walked by a store on my way here that had a whole rack of them on display and thought that it was serendipity, my power pattern appearing as if from nowhere, on my way to potentially the most meaningful job interview I’ll ever have.

But now the elevator has broken down. I don’t know which sign to believe in more.

A young woman stands on the other side of the door, dark hair swept into a low ponytail over her shoulder. I squirm as the heat rises up my silky polka-dot blouse, jealous of her cotton shirt.

“I’m not tempting fate by betting any longer than ten minutes,” she squeaks out.

I smile at her, and she tentatively smiles back, her fingers wringing the hem of her shirt.

“I think that’s a good idea,” Brock says, smiling reassuringly at both of us. “I’ll second that bet. Less than ten minutes.”

“Me too.” Nadine looks over at both of us and I force my shoulders down. I remind myself to breathe normally.

I’m not particularly afraid of elevators, honestly. It’s just that it’s happening *right now*, and the girl standing across from me looks like *she* is. There’s a charged energy in this elevator held delicately in balance by the three people who seem unperturbed.

And then there’s me, the free radical who could panic too, who could breathe life into the fear stewing across from me.

Or I can focus.

Silence falls over us, and I count the seconds as they go by.

Who will win this bet?

I breathe a little easier as I put all my energy into determining a winner.

As I run through the logistics of what little I know of elevator rescues, the girl across from me slowly derails. White knuckles, shallow breathing. She stares at the panel of buttons, shifting her stance and licking her lips, and attempts a deep breath that doesn't seem to help.

I used to have panic attacks—I know what they look like.

Mine started with Ben, my boyfriend in college. We had gone to the same large high school but didn't really hang out until we ended up in the same dorm freshman year. Thus began a long and mostly happy relationship.

Until I walked in on him, junior year, screwing a girl who lived down the hall from me.

After Ben came Lloyd. Having never properly processed the end of my relationship with Ben, I would text him, wondering where he was and why he wasn't texting me back. I knew, even as I was doing it, that it was inappropriate.

But I couldn't trust him, not after Ben.

I was right not to. After a year, I caught him sexting one of his coworkers.

And then there was Chris, my forbidden work romance. He was a manager in an unrelated department, so it wasn't *that* forbidden, but we thought it was sexy to think of it that way.

Chris was kind to me. He validated my fears and made a point to check in with me. He told me after six months that we might not know each other to the fullest extent yet, but he was sure I was the one for him. We moved in together, decorating our apartment and filling it full of things that would one day move with us into a three-bedroom, single-family, suburban home.

And I caught him in bed with his assistant—in *our* bed.

After that, every time I entered that apartment, I had a panic attack, the unwanted image of his body moving on top of hers popping into my mind. Their surprised expressions when I let out an involuntary gasp of horror. The sound of my bag crashing to the floor. Her puckered pink lips and smooth skin.

The thought makes me shudder.

Last month, I moved into an albeit smaller apartment in a neighborhood with moderately better nightlife and slightly safer streets. The furniture acquisition process is painful, considering there was nothing from that old apartment I wanted, but I get to make this place totally my own, which, for now, means having not much more than a bed, a couch, and a TV stand.

And the shining win that makes the whole painful process worth it: no more panic attacks.

I'm not sure I can ever trust someone again, but at least I have that.

It's a start.

But now I see those telltale signs of a panic attack in the girl standing across from me.

An image of my mom flashes in my mind, her expression pinched with concern, reaching out to me as I puffed out, "I'm fine. I just need some air." She finished packing up the rest of my things without me as I sat uselessly on the front stoop of the apartment. Later, she asked me what happened, and I had to come clean and tell her that her strong, independent daughter had been rendered *less than* by a man cliché enough to sleep with his assistant.

I think through the things I have in my bag like I'm searching for something to entertain a toddler. I have a bottle of water, a smattering of pens, an umbrella, a reusable shopping bag, and thirty copies of my résumé. If I had my Xanax with me, I'd probably give her one.

The speaker crackles. "Alright, folks, you're between floors here. We'll be down to you soon, but it looks like you might need to climb out."

Her breath catches.

"What's your name?" I ask because I don't know what else to do.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide.

“Mari.” She glances around the car. “What’s yours?”

“Annabel.” I choose my next words carefully—I don’t want to put her on the spot, but I do want to distract her from her anxiety. “Do you, by any chance, have a bottle of water on you?”

She nods and takes her bag off her shoulder to root around until she finds it. She holds it out to me. “Take as much as you need.” She’s sweet.

“Thank you.” I take the water bottle from her and make a show like I’m going to twist the cap off and then pause. “I’m such an idiot,” I say, holding it back out to her. “I have my own water. I’m sorry, this isn’t my usual bag. Of course, I brought water. I’m here for an interview.”

I slap my forehead. Silly me.

But my plan worked.

She takes a sip of her water and holds on to the bottle. I dig mine out of my bag and make a show of taking an extra-long sip, complete with an exaggerated *ahh*.

“Where was your interview?” she asks.

“Wink, on the sixteenth floor.” I pull out my phone to check the time, noting that—of course—I don’t have service. “And it technically starts in thirteen minutes.”

Her eyes go wide. “You’re kidding.”

I shake my head. “Nope. And I don’t have service in this stupid elevator, so I’m going to show up late, in addition to flustered, despite leaving half an hour early.”

Everyone takes a moment to check their phones.

“I don’t have service either. Brock, do you?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t.”

I nod. “My luck.”

The guy next to me takes out his. “I don’t have service, but it looks like I have a smidge of Wi-Fi—I don’t know if it’ll go

through, but you're welcome to send an email," he says, holding his phone out to me.

"I'll certainly try," I say, taking it from him. Our fingers brush as he hands it to me and a little thrill runs down my spine. I'm suddenly aware of just how intimate it is to borrow another person's phone—I'm only a tap or two away from his family, his bank accounts, or any number of embarrassing texts or photos. My blush returns in full force at the possibility of there being naughty pictures of him in the palm of my hand.

"Thank you," I stutter out. I sign into my email and shoot off a quick note that I might be a few minutes late, and hand the phone back to him.

"You're very welcome."

My eyes are drawn to that triangle of skin at the top of his shirt again, and my blush creeps higher. He has big, brown, laughing eyes with thick lashes set over a perfectly straight nose. The sensation of his fingers brushing mine makes me wonder what his forearms feel like, the skin of his chest.

A loud thump on the other side of the elevator door knocks me from my daydream.

Mari jumps, her eyes trained on the door.

The tinny voice returns. "Hey folks, looks like the inner door is stuck. We've got a guy running down to the elevator control room who's going to shut off the main power so we can get you out of there—but don't worry, the lights and air will still be on. In the meantime, do we have any injuries?"

Eyes dance around the elevator, a silent confirmation that everyone is, in fact, alright. Mari takes her first deep breath, and I relax back into the wall behind me.

"No injuries," Nadine reports.

"Great. And how many people?"

"Five."

"Any elderly or disabled?"

"No."

“Good. We’re about two feet below the seventeenth floor—is anyone unable to use a step stool?”

“No, we’ll all be fine.”

“Thanks, folks, hold tight. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

A giddy sense of relief floods through me. “Is it possible I might actually get to this interview on time?”

“It seems more and more possible by the minute,” Mari says, a smile spreading across her face. “You’re gonna do great.”

I laugh. “I appreciate your faith in me despite meeting me all of two minutes ago.”

She shrugs. “I know good people.”

My heart kick-starts. I think I love Mari. “Well, thank you.”

I check the time again—I have six minutes to get out of this elevator. We’re a little below the seventeenth floor, so hopefully, I can slip out and walk in like I didn’t just spend twenty minutes in a claustrophobic horror film with four strangers.

I hear more movement on the other side of the elevator door, and I straighten up. I adjust the bow holding my hair back and pull my bag a little higher on my shoulder.

And the doors open.

The bottom half shows solid concrete, the top half, freedom.

“How’s everybody doing?” Our savior kneels down to speak to us. He’s dressed in dark-blue slacks and a light-blue shirt and sports a ring of silvery hair around his head, a shiny brown bald spot on top.

“Much better now,” Nadine says, and everyone chuckles in a lighthearted way that feels far too relaxed for our current situation.

He smiles encouragingly as he slides a step stool—identical to the one in my mother’s kitchen—into the elevator and climbs down inside.

“Alright, I’m just making sure there’s no risk of anyone falling,” he says, taking a step back and surveying the bottom half of the elevator. “And it looks like we’re all good.”

He turns toward us, clapping his hands together. “Anybody here ever been trapped in an elevator before?”

We shake our heads, and he laughs. “Bunch of newbies! Okay, so here’s what’s going to happen. First off, my name is Herb. You got any questions, comments, concerns, ask John.” His laugh barks over us, and I can’t help but giggle. “Now, for real, power to the elevator is cut off, meaning this baby is stuck in place until the elevator technician gets here and turns it back on. That also means that getting in and out is as safe as getting in and out of your bathtub—just watch your step. I’m going to climb back out and help you all out of here. Just take my hand and you’ll be on your way. Any questions?”

Resounding headshakes, a murmur of nos.

He claps his hands again. “Alright, let’s get this party started.” He turns to the man standing next to me. “Sir, if you wouldn’t mind helping the others with the first couple of steps?”

“Happy to.” He turns to Mari as Herb climbs out of the elevator, holding out his hand, and I step to the side to give them room. “You’re up, Mari.” She gingerly takes his hand.

One step, two, and the transfer is made to Herb. My anxiety wanes.

“Annabel.” He turns to me, his hand held out, and all I can think of is how my name sounds like silk on his tongue. I catch a whiff of his cologne, so subtle that I find myself leaning toward him to confirm it’s coming from him.

His hand wraps firmly around mine, his thumb pressing into the soft spot between my thumb and forefinger. He looks right into my eyes, and for a moment, I wonder if he can sense the thoughts that are running through my head, that the little

triangle of skin above his shirt threatens to distract me during my interview.

I take one step up, then two—and knock my head on the edge of the door.

“Oh,” I say, slightly stunned, as I duck and continue my ascent up.

“Watch your head!” Herb shouts. “Watch your head, folks!”

I take a moment to gather myself once I’m on solid ground.

Mari’s waiting there with wide eyes. “Your interview,” she says urgently. “Go!”

I nod, looking around and suddenly realizing this isn’t the sixteenth floor. We climbed up, not down. *Shit.*

“Where are the stairs?”

“Last door at the end of the elevators,” Herb barks. “To your left.”

I start running, checking my phone as I go—I have three minutes.

“Good luck!” Mari shouts after me, and I hear a chorus of similar shouts from the rest of my companions.

“Thank you!”

I take a quick left through the door ahead of me, the heavy metal clanging shut behind me. I run, down, down, down, my footsteps echoing in the concrete stairwell until I see the door labeled sixteen and blast through it.

I reach the reception desk with one minute to spare.

Carrie, the receptionist I made friends with before my last interview, holds up a finger as she finishes her call. She tucks her curly blonde hair behind her ear as she hangs up, and her piercing blue eyes fill with concern as she stands to talk to me.

“Are you alright?”

I nod. “Do I not look alright?”

“You look a little bewildered.”

I let out a long breath. “I was stuck in the elevator.”

Her eyes widen. “Like, *stuck* stuck?”

“Like, maintenance had to shut down the elevator and give us a step stool to get out.”

Her mouth sets into a wide *O*.

“Look, Evelyn emailed me that she’s running a couple minutes late. Why don’t you come sit down and have a sip of water and a snack before you go in? I brought in some veggies and hummus for lunch that I was just about to break out.”

“Oh, I don’t want to take your food.”

She shakes her head and waves me around her desk. “Come, sit.”

Reluctantly, I let her lead me to the empty chair next to hers.

She reaches into a small fridge that sits underneath the desk, pulls out a gigantic platter of carrots, broccoli, cauliflower, and cucumbers, and then adds a bag of tortilla chips from a shopping bag nestled next to her purse.

“If I get something that’ll feed enough people, I can get away with charging it to the corporate card,” she explains, winking. “I usually do it once a week, get a big platter, eat my fill, and then throw it in the big conference room and call it team building.”

I laugh, the tension slowly releasing from my muscles. “I like your style.”

She shrugs. “This company’s got plenty of money and they eat that team-building shit up like it’ll give them eternal youth.”

She takes a carrot, dips it into the hummus, and throws it in her mouth.

Glancing over her shoulder, I notice what looks like a story pulled up on her computer.

“Are you a writer?” I ask, the drama of my elevator entrapment waning with the prospect of a story I can lose myself in.

She rolls her eyes, quickly minimizing the window. “Not really. I just, you know, do it for fun. I mean, I’m a receptionist, you know? There’s downtime.”

“What kind of things do you write?”

She shrugs, picking up a tomato. “Fiction.” She dips it into the hummus, her eyes finding mine. “Romance.”

“Oh, Carrie, please tell me you share your work every once in a while.”

She fixes me with a look. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

I’m not going to push her about it, but I’m going to keep that little factoid stored somewhere in the back of my mind. Carrie writes romance.

I take a carrot and a generous glob of hummus. “So, do you like working here?”

She nods. “It’s a good place. Some teams are better than others, but from what I’ve heard, Evelyn is great to work for. She can be demanding with some deadlines, mostly if she’s got a tough client she’s trying to please, but she’s practical and empathetic, which is a lot more than I’ve seen from others.”

“That’s good to know.”

Carrie lowers her voice and leans toward me. “She really liked you after your first interview.”

“She—”

“Evelyn!” Carrie shouts, cutting me off.

I turn to see Evelyn scurrying down the hallway toward us, her big, curly red hair like a flame against her all-black ensemble.

“Annabel!” She throws her hands up. “I’m so sorry I’m late. I was trying really hard to woo a client, and she just needed five more minutes on the phone to make her decision. But we got them!”

Evelyn, a woman who talks as fast as she walks, takes me off guard, my mouth full of cucumbers and hummus.

“Yay!” I say, standing up and gathering my things. “That’s great!”

“Annabel got stuck in the elevator,” Carrie throws out.

Evelyn pauses a few feet from the desk. “What?”

“Like they had to climb out, it was a whole ordeal,” Carrie says.

I nod. “It was definitely a new life experience.”

Evelyn rests her elbows on the reception desk, peering down at the platter of veggies between us. She reaches down and takes a broccoli floret, dips it, and pops it into her mouth. “Are you traumatized?”

“I don’t think so, but it’s still pretty new.”

Her eyes are wide as she picks up a piece of cucumber. “I would have to take the stairs every single day if that happened to me.”

I nod. “Yeah. I mean, this job will be perfect for me because I’ll finally get in shape.”

She laughs a sharp *ha!*

“You’re funny,” she says. “I like that.” She turns to Carrie and then glances down at the veggies. “Can we take some of this with us? I’m starving.”

Carrie nods and pulls open a stuffed desk drawer, from which she takes a handful of plates, utensils, and napkins and hands them over to us. “Take what you want.”

Once our plates are sufficiently loaded, Evelyn beckons me over to the closest conference room. “Come on, lady, let’s chat!”

I follow her in, adjusting my shirt and reaching up to tighten my bow before we sit, only to realize it’s gone.

CHARLES

Something about being trapped in this elevator feels an awful lot like cosmic punishment.

Not that I believe in that crap, of course.

But Amy does.

For a second, my resolve falters.

I wonder if the universe would agree to punish her ex-whatever for breaking up with her as soon as she caught feelings—and how far that punishment would go. Death by falling elevator seems a little extreme for the short time we were sleeping together.

The bigger question is, what did these other assholes do to deserve the same?

But now we're on our way out. Perhaps this was just the universe issuing a warning. *Shape up, dude, or next time you're getting it.*

“Annabel,” I say, holding my hand out for her. Hers is cold, and I realize she must have been more panicked than she let on. I feel bad for missing it—not that I had any obligation to help—and grip her hand a little harder.

She smiles at me, pushing her dirty-blonde hair behind her ear and stepping carefully up to the floor. As she presses her weight into my hand, the delicate note of her perfume swarms my nostrils. Strawberries with an undertone of something sweet.

And wow, I'm not looking at her ass in that pencil skirt.

Nope.

I am *not*.

I look away.

And she whacks her head. *Was that my fault? Shit, I'm an asshole.*

"Watch your head! Watch your head, folks!"

Annabel's and Mari's voices ring out on the floor above us—Annabel has to get to her interview. I shout out a "Good luck" with the rest of the gang and then turn my focus back to Nadine, who's next to step up to the seventeenth floor. She smiles and nods as I pass her along to Herb. "Thank you."

Brock is the only person left, and I hold my hand out to him as well. He might look completely able, but I was given a job—and I will always offer my help to someone who might need it.

To my surprise, he takes it.

"Thank you, kind sir. I sprained my ankle last night. I—and the others, I'm sure—appreciate your help."

"Happy to be of service." I pass him off to Herb, itching to follow on his heels.

I wait while Herb makes sure Nadine and Brock are alright, my stomach clenching tighter with every extra second I spend alone in here. I could easily climb up on my own, but they're standing right where I need to go.

The realization dawns on me that now that I'm the only person left in here, the universe can do with me what it will.

So I wait, my fingers tapping along the rough, exposed concrete, trailing along the cool metal doorframe.

As my eyes roam the now-empty space, I notice something red underneath the step stool, tucked in the doorway and in danger of slipping through and falling to the very bottom of the elevator shaft.

I reach down to pick it up, feeling the silky polka-dot bow between my fingers.

“You’re up.” Herb holds his hand out to me, bringing me back to reality, and I stuff the bow into my pocket. I grab his hand harder than I’m willing to admit and step up into the hallway. Annabel is long gone.

I’ll have to find her, somehow, to give her bow back.

“Is it just me, or is anyone else not looking forward to taking another elevator to actually get out of here?” Brock asks.

Mari is white as a sheet when she speaks. “I’m taking the stairs.”

She turns on her heel and heads for the stairwell, her bag slung over her shoulder. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and for a moment, I wonder if she’ll ever be able to take an elevator again.

As the stairwell door bangs shut behind her, I push the down button for another elevator. Herb sets up an out-of-order sign in front of the one we came from.

The three of us wait in silence. After a minute, we’re joined by someone from the floor who pauses his mindless scrolling for only a second to make sure the button is pressed and quickly returns his attention to his phone.

He’ll never even know what just happened.

The elevator dings, and we let the newcomer enter first. If the universe is after us, maybe it’ll pause until he’s out of the way.

Unless it was all a ploy to get the four of us.

We take the same places we were in before—the three of us toward the back, the newcomer, blissfully unaware, at the front. He hits the button for the ground floor, and we wait, watching as the doors close and the car slowly begins moving.

Down, down, down.

I watch the floor numbers change like a hawk as if paying close enough attention will ensure they keep on changing. Nadine's fingers tap along the edge of her bag, and Brock's lips are pursed, his eyes glued to the seam of the doors.

And then they open.

The lobby of the building is busy, people scurrying in and out, in and out, talking to security, meeting friends and lunch dates along the benches below the wide windows. The four of us step out of the elevator and, with a friendly nod, go our separate ways.

When I leave the building, something about the sunlight feels surreal.

I shoot off a text to my brother as I walk.

CHARLIE

Running a little late, be there soon.

I walk down the street, suddenly aware of all the dangers around me. The cars speeding through the city hall roundabout, the mentally unstable man shouting about Jesus coming to save us all, the very real possibility that underneath all of this infrastructure—the buildings, the streets, the subway system—there's a sinkhole brewing, growing in silence and waiting to swallow us all.

I reconsider my atheism as I turn at the end of the street and continue into the park.

It's a beautiful day, as evidenced by the hundreds of people milling around—blankets on the grass, sunglasses, shorts, and music. I'm jealous that I'm dressed for work, but I'm far from the only one, and at least I'm not stuck wearing an uncomfortable tie.

I follow the path until I see them—Julian, Ashley, Tucker, and my mom, in their usual spot. My mom is in her wheelchair, carefully rolled into the grass where Julian and Ashley sit on a blanket, Tucker bounding in circles around them.

My mom doesn't need a wheelchair, but it makes getting anywhere significantly easier and allows her to sit comfortably at the park. We used to go to restaurants, but it became a game of choosing between my mom's comfort and Tucker's—ultimately, this compromise works for us right now.

When Tucker sees me, he stops running and tilts his head back, screaming in the deepest voice he can muster from his little seven-year-old body, “Chuncle!”

As he barrels into my arms, I grab the nearby bench to keep from toppling over. “Hey, Tuck!” My smile widens as I dig into my bag and pull out a new deck of Pokémon cards. “Look what I've got for you.”

“Oh, cool,” he shouts, ripping into them and looking through each one in turn. “I have all of these.”

As quickly as it starts, it's over, and he's back to running circles, the pile pushed into his dad's hand to keep.

“Tuck, say thank you,” my brother reminds him.

“Thank you,” he shouts over his shoulder. I see, now, that he has a bottle of bubbles in his hand, and it looks like, rather than blowing them, he's trying to run them into life.

“Hi Mom,” I greet her, bending slightly to place a kiss on her cheek.

“Charles,” she responds, resting her palm gently against my face. “Nice to see you, honey.”

“You too, Mom.”

It's a good day for her. Often she calls me by my father's name, and considering what a piece of shit he is, it's like rubbing salt in the wound.

I drop my bag on the blanket next to Julian, who gives me a handshake and then leans back on his hands, observing the park. Ashley gives me a quick one-armed hug and then continues chomping down on her apple.

We do this every Friday. Our mom is in an assisted living home that, by much planning and strategy, is not too overpriced but is still close enough that either Julian or I can

stop by as needed. He works nearby, and both my apartment and my job are within walking distance.

Julian and Ashley used to live close too, but we made these plans before Tucker was around. Only months after moving my mom into assisted living, Ashley got pregnant, and our whole strategy went out the window. Once they got a real feel for the Philadelphia school system, they quickly realized suburban schools would probably be a better choice.

But at least we both still work nearby. If we couldn't make these Friday lunches, I'm not sure we'd see each other as a whole family. Julian and Ashley have all sorts of kid obligations on weekends and after work, and they tend to fit visits into their schedule when they realize they have an extra hour on the way home from something or an event gets postponed for whatever reason.

Ashley passes me a sleeve of crackers and a jar of peanut butter.

We do lunch, but we don't do it fancy.

Her long blonde hair blows in the light breeze, her sunglasses pushed up high on her head. She notices my mom leaning forward in her wheelchair and passes her the water bottle by her foot.

I take a cracker out of the plastic and dip it in the peanut butter jar. Ashley gives me a look. "Use the knife, please."

"Sorry."

I grab the knife and spread the peanut butter around.

"You alright? You seem a little off," Ashley asks.

I sigh. "I got stuck in an elevator."

She cocks her head to the side. "Like, it broke down, or you just couldn't get out?"

I shake my head. "It broke down. We had to climb out."

Julian's eyebrows rise. "Holy shit."

Ashley fusses with the cooler bag she brought and lays a few sandwiches out in front of us. She takes out another

container with a precut sandwich and a side of grapes and passes it to Julian, who places it in my mom's lap.

"Alright, Mom, today's cuisine is ham and cheese with a side of grapes. Does that sound good?"

She nods. "Yes, dear, thank you."

As Julian sits, she starts picking at her food, throwing a grape in her mouth, and chewing slowly. Her eyes roam, resting for the most part on Tucker, with a slight smile on her face, but also wandering around the three of us on the blanket and the multitude of people meandering around the park.

"So, you climbed out?" Ashley asks, continuing our conversation and then promptly getting distracted. She turns to Tucker, whose attention is now on a rock he found. "Honey, come sit and eat. Put the rock down, and here, wipe your hands." She rips open a wet wipe and runs it over his squirming fingers.

I unwrap my sandwich and take a bite. Simple but good.

I notice my mom has stopped eating. "Mom, how's your food?"

She nods. "Good dear, thank you." She starts picking again.

She used to be a great eater, but recently, not so much. For the past few months, we've needed to prompt her more and more.

I nod, turning back to Ashley. "They brought in a step stool."

She laughs, and Julian smirks, watching her.

They recently celebrated their tenth anniversary with a small backyard shindig, just the family and a few friends. I hung out with my mom for the most part but watched as Tucker played on his swing set and Julian and Ashley talked and laughed with all their couple friends. After dark, they set off a round of fireworks in the street that lit up the asphalt and left smoky ghosts floating through the neighborhood.

I vividly remember the first time Julian mentioned Ashley's name. We were lounging on my mom's couch, sharing stories from our separate weekend adventures. I'd been out with my game night friends while he'd been at a bar, fortuitously crossing paths with a gorgeous blonde who, for some reason, took a liking to him. He mentioned it casually, almost in a braggy sort of way, and knowing him, I thought he'd move on to the next girl in no time.

And now, ten years later, they're stronger than ever.

"A step stool like...?"

"A flat-out step stool. The cheap kind you can get at Walmart."

"Wow." Ashley takes a bite of her sandwich and leans back on her hands, her eyes lingering on something behind me. "Well, I'm glad you made it out okay."

"I'm now reconsidering my atheism, but yes, I made it out okay."

I'm not sure Ashley hears me. Her eyes fix on something behind me, and I glance over my shoulder to see what it is.

"What is that?" she asks, her eyes narrowing. She grabs something off the blanket beside me, and I realize with a start that Annabel's bow must have slipped out of my pocket when I sat down.

She holds it between two fingers. "Charles Sinclair, what is this?" She pauses, holding it with both hands now, her eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, this isn't underwear."

Julian barks out a laugh, taking it out of her hands. "Char, why do you have a ladies' hair tie in your pocket?"

I shrug, fighting the urge to grab it back. "A girl in the elevator dropped it."

They glance at each other.

"A girl in the elevator?" Ashley's eyes flash as she cocks her head to the side. "What exactly was happening in the elevator before you got stuck?"

My feigned nonchalance crumbles as I grab the bow out of her hands and stuff it back in my pocket. I never should have taken it in the first place. The chances of running into her again are close to zero, and judging by the delighted expression on Ashley's face, it's probably not a great idea to keep it on me until then. A heat unrelated to the midday sun creeps up my neck.

"Nothing."

"Does Elevator Girl have a name?" Ashley asks, leaning toward me.

I pause, unsure whether telling Ashley a name will quell her curiosity or encourage it. "Annabel," I start. "But it's not what you're thinking."

Her eyes widen. "Annabel, huh? When do we get to meet her?"

I shake my head. "It's not like that. There were five of us in there."

"Kinky," Julian interjects.

I throw the wrapper of my sandwich at him. "You are so not helpful."

He shrugs. "Ashley's the one who wants you to get married, so she has someone to talk to. I just want you to get married so she'll stop talking about it."

I hold my hands up. "Everybody take a step back here. I met her in an elevator. We happened to be trapped together. She lost her bow on the way out. I was going to return it. That's all."

Ashley nods. "I'm excited to meet her. You should bring her next Friday."

"You're impossible."

"You don't know the half of it," Julian chimes in, and Ashley playfully elbows him.

A silence falls over us, and I'm overwhelmingly aware of the bulge in my pocket that's no more than a ladies' bow.

Tucker makes his way through his sandwich and a bag of chips, and my mom is, once again, staring off into space.

“Hey Mom, how are your grapes?” Ashley asks.

She nods, glancing over at us. “Good, thank you.” The slightly vacant look in her eyes makes me think she’s having trouble remembering Ashley. She starts picking at her grapes again but side-eyes us as she does.

Having finished his sandwich in all of five bites, Julian gathers our trash and stuffs it back into the cooler bag. His silence is unusual.

“You alright, man?” I swallow the bite in my mouth and wait for him to speak.

He turns to me, his eyes on mine, as he takes his seat on the blanket again. “We actually wanted to talk to you.”

I glance back and forth between him and Ashley, trying to decipher the reason behind their stern tone and stony expressions.

“Is everyone okay?” I ask, my mouth going dry. My mind races back to my mom’s diagnosis, the heavy chest and weighted silences.

Julian waves off my question. “Yes, everyone is fine.” He takes a deep breath. “I got offered a promotion at work. A big one.”

My eyebrows furrow. “That’s great, man, congratulations,” I say, clapping him on the shoulder, even though I know this can’t be the whole story.

“I would have to move to New York.”

Oh.

“Staying here isn’t really a viable option. They made it clear that if I want more, I have to make the move.”

Julian and Ashley watch my face, and I do my best not to let the tightness I suddenly feel in my chest show. I want Julian to succeed—and he’s been incredibly successful thus far—but it’s not lost on me that most of my mom’s care would

fall to me if he moved. We split it evenly right now, and it's still a lot.

I let out a long breath. "We talked about this," I remind him.

Julian looks at Ashley and then back to me. "I know we did, but as we both know, anything and everything can change in an instant. Ashley and I talked about it, and I think we're comfortable moving up there and paying for an additional nurse to come for Mom twice a week. The salary increase is more than enough."

"Jul, you've worked hard for this. Go, be your big shot, overrated self." As much as I hate the thought of him moving even farther away, he deserves this more than anyone I know.

He laughs. "Honestly, I think this can be a good thing for all of us, but my main concern is leaving you in the lurch. It's close enough that we'll at least be able to make a trip every other week. But that would mean any emergencies or midweek doctor's appointments would fall on you, and that's a lot to ask. And part of the reason we want to pay for more care for Mom. But ultimately, it places a hell of a lot of burden on you. Are you okay with that? Answer honestly."

I glance at my mom, who doesn't realize we're discussing her right now. She's watching Tucker again, her sandwich barely touched on her lap.

I nod, my hunger returning now that I know no one else in the family is dying or otherwise in need of long-term care. "I'm happy to take care of her," I say, taking a bite of my sandwich. "Just make sure you call her, alright?"

"We'll call every day." He casually snatches a chip from Tucker, who immediately voices his protest, and adds, "But you have to let us know if you need something. Whether it's a break for a week or if you need us to contribute more to her care costs—"

"The additional nurse is more than enough," I interrupt.

"I'm just saying. Let us know."

“I can always drive down, too,” Ashley says, pulling a container of chopped fruit out of the cooler bag and leaving it on the blanket between us. “It doesn’t have to be Julian.”

“Thanks, Ash.”

Julian leans forward. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I’m happy for you, man.”

He smiles, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. “Me too. It just seems like inopportune timing, you know?”

“Her dementia will progress with or without you here.”

He shakes his head. “I know. It just feels wrong.”

“What’s wrong is neglecting to live your own life because she can’t live hers. She wants you to be happy, too. She just has some difficulty understanding the context. And it’s not like you’re moving across the country. Like you said, you’ll still visit and be involved. You’ll call every day. I’ll just have to handle more doctor visits. Don’t worry, Jul. This is a good thing.”

He nods, accepting this. “Thanks, Charlie. Your support means a lot.”

JUNE

ANNABEL

I call Layla once I've finished my makeup—well, *almost* finished my makeup. I need a final outfit before selecting a lip color, of course.

This company is hip—casual and understated, but cool. I can't just wear jeans and a dippy sweater on my first day. I may be in flux right now, with a half-empty apartment, a new job, and a suddenly *single* schedule, but I refuse to show up looking anything other than sleek, polished, and intelligent—the ultimate young professional.

I have a few choices laid out on my bed, and I use the spare moment before Layla picks up to straighten out my new, vibrant bedspread. Chris lived mostly in gray scale, so while he was cool with floral patterns, he wasn't a fan of the bright colors. Now, I'm going with a butter-yellow-and-lilac color scheme. I just need to get some curtains to match.

“Hello?” Layla sounds groggy. She's probably still in bed.

“Hi. I need some last-minute outfit help.”

I hear her stirring, moving around.

And then I hear something else. “Babe?”

My heart skips a beat and I drop my voice to a whisper. “Oh my god, are you with a guy?”

“No. I just fell asleep with the TV on.” I hear footsteps and the closing of a door, and Layla finally shows up on the screen. She's sitting on her couch, wrapped in a robe, with last

night's makeup smudged around her eyes and a bun on her head that's far surpassed a "messy" designation.

"Well, who was that?" I turn the phone to my face instead of my clothes.

"Nobody." She shakes her head, then tries to correct her wild hair.

"I heard a voice."

"Annabel," she scolds. "It was a mistake that we don't have to get into right now."

My jaw drops as my mind runs. "Was it Paul?"

"Please state your purpose for calling me at the ungodly hour of—" She checks the time. "Oh shit, it's almost eight."

"You're welcome."

"What do you need?"

I decide to come back to the man in her bed later. She gets grumpy in the morning, and if she's decided that she's not telling me, I'm not going to convince her by the time I need to leave.

"I need fashion advice. This place is casual, so I don't want to overdo it, but at the same time, I want to come off like a chic young marketer." I turn the camera back to the clothes I laid out on my bed, three outfits that I think will convey exactly what I need them to. And any of them will go with my most comfortable pair of black pumps.

"You *are* a chic young marketer."

"You're not helping."

She sighs. "I mean, Elle, I don't understand why you're abandoning your signature color," she says, quoting *Legally Blonde*. That's a vibe I'm definitely trying to channel today.

I pause. "What do you mean?"

"Where are the polka dots?"

I turn the camera back to me. "Don't you think polka dots are a little immature?"

She shakes her head. “Listen, girl, you’ll never get anywhere in life unless you own who you are. Polka dots are only immature if you make them immature, which you don’t. Put on something you’re confident in. Walk into that building strutting your best polka dots—it’s not the outfit that makes the chic young marketer—it’s the woman.”

I’m not sure what to say.

“I didn’t know I needed a pep talk today, but that one’s going to carry me through the whole week.”

“Good. Now, is there anything else I can do for you before begrudgingly deciding I’m up for the day and getting into the shower?”

“Oh. Yes. I mean, which polka dots?”

She sighs, taking a moment to think about it. “The silky white shirt with the red polka dots.”

“I wore that for the interview.”

“Then the silky blue one with the white polka dots and the sailor’s neck. With your black pixie pants.”

I nod. “Yes, okay, that’s perfect. Thank you!”

She laughs. “You’re welcome. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Thank you, Layla! Say hi to your bedbug, whoever that may be!”

She scoffs and hangs up.

It was definitely Paul.

I dress according to Layla’s instructions, adding gold studs and a couple gold bangles to round out the nautical look and finish with a slash of red lipstick across my mouth.

When I’m done, I put away my other outfits, pour some hot water into my French press, and straighten up the blanket on the couch I fell asleep under last night after my good luck tea.

I pull together my first-day bag and coffee mug and lock up on my way out.

The walk to work is surprisingly relaxing. I chose the location of my apartment based on accessibility to Center City, and while I figured having a walking commute would be a positive, I didn't realize how much of a mood lifter it would be.

On my way in, I pass by the shop where I bought the red-and-white-polka-dot bow that went missing during The Great Elevator Entrapment. I notice that style seems to have gone out of stock, but they do happen to have a navy-blue one. Seeing that there's no line at this time of the morning, I duck in quickly and buy it.

Walk into that building strutting your best polka dots.

Layla's words loop in my head as I rip the tag off and twist the new bow into my hair.

If polka dots are my thing, then I'll wear them loud and proud.

My new office is only another block away, but now is as good a time as any to let Layla know I'm following her advice.

I call her, and this time, her voice is lighter.

"Happy first day of work!" she shouts. "Sorry I wasn't more awake this morning. You know me and mornings."

The building looms in front of me, and my heart kick-starts. This is the first day of something new and good. Rush hour traffic stops and starts along the street beside me, and I wait until the light turns green to cross the street.

"I didn't take it personally," I say. "But I wanted to let you know I bought a new polka-dot bow that matches my outfit because you're totally right. If polka dots are my signature style, I should wear them confidently on my first day of work."

She laughs. "Good! I'm glad. I'm sure you look great."

"Well, thank you for your fashion advice. I'm heading into the building now and fully expect the polka dots to make exactly the first impression I want."

I carefully step into the spinning doors, aligning myself between two other people beelining for the same spot. I push through, the brass cool on my palms.

And I'm in. I step to the side and watch a steady stream of people slip in, slip out, and say friendly hellos to coworkers and familiar faces.

"Well, you're very welcome. Good luck, Annabel, you're going to do great."

"Annabel!" Someone behind me shouts my name, and I twist to see who it is, only to slam directly into him, sending my phone and his coffee flying. I'm paralyzed for a second, his torso warm and hard against my arm as I steady myself. His hand finds my elbow, holding me there.

"Oh my god." I watch as the brown liquid flies through the air, seemingly in slow motion, the cardboard landing with a dull thud on the floor and the coffee slowly seeping out.

When I look up, everyone is staring at me. My heart drops into my stomach.

"I'm so sorry," I say.

Only then do I realize the guy standing in front of me is the same one I was stuck in the elevator with. His hand is warm on my elbow, his body still pressed against my other arm, and I'm at a momentary loss for words as I look up into his warm, brown eyes. I catch a faint whiff of his cologne, a musky pine scent that makes me want to bury my face in his neck.

"You alright?" He releases me, taking a step back to retrieve my phone from the puddle of coffee. He shakes it off gently and hands it back to me.

"I'm totally fine. Thank you." I wipe my phone on my pants. Thank God Layla told me to go with the black ones. I grimace as I watch the pool of liquid grow. "Oh man, your coffee."

"It tasted funny anyway," he says, his mouth tipping into a lopsided smile.

The crowd sways around the coffee, their eyes searching with disdain for the source of the spill as they avoid getting it on their shoes.

“I’m mortified.”

He laughs. “It’s my fault, really. I wasn’t keeping a safe following distance.”

I laugh, a quick snort that conveys more disbelief than humor.

“Definitely a necessity around me. Caution: this vehicle makes sudden stops.”

And another wave of mortification falls over me as I realize I just compared myself to a construction vehicle.

Then again, he made the joke first—I just made it worse. A hint of laughter passes over his lips as he cocks his head to the side.

“I’ll have to pay closer attention to your brake lights.”

My jaw falls open—I don’t even *know* what that means, but I have no doubt it’s sexual.

“Well, maybe next time I’ll turn on my hazards for you, just so there’s no confusion.”

He nods, his face straightening. “I don’t know. If I’m coming up behind you, I might think you’re trying to tell me you go both ways.”

My laughter explodes out of me. *If he’s coming up behind me?* An image flashes in my mind of him behind me, pulling my pants down roughly, burying himself inside me. A flush creeps up my neck. I hope he can’t tell what I’m thinking.

“I, unfortunately, do not go both ways. At least, not since that one night in college.” I wink at him, and his eyes widen.

“Well, what I wouldn’t give...”

His eyes dip, and while normally I’d shy away from the attention, the feel of his gaze on me sends a little zip of electricity down my spine.

But I am becoming increasingly aware that the spilled coffee is growing in size, inch by inch, across the center of the lobby. I can only imagine how many of my coworkers are walking by us, cementing my face in their minds as “the girl who spills shit.” They’ll think I’m clumsy, that I don’t pay attention.

His eyes follow mine, and he holds up one finger. “Wait here.”

He walks quickly to the front desk and leans over to speak to them. They wave him off, nodding and laughing and placating him.

When he returns, he reaches for my elbow, gently guiding me out of the stream of people heading for the turnstiles. His hand is warm, and I can’t help but notice the little shiver that runs down my spine from where his palm touches my skin.

“They already called maintenance. Somebody will be here in a minute to clean the mess,” he says. “And don’t worry, these things happen all the time. One of the many reasons for tile floors.”

I sigh. “I hope something like this doesn’t happen every single time I walk into the building.”

He laughs, a charming, contagious sort of laugh that I feel in my chest. “If we’re starting with a broken-down elevator and moving to spilled coffee, I’d say you’re going in the right direction. I might expect an exploded pen or an inopportune sneeze this week, but after that, I think you can get rid of the big yellow bumper sticker.”

I laugh. “Thank you for the perspective.”

“Anytime,” he says, his smile so genuine that I’m certain he means it. “Anyway, I actually had a reason to so graciously sacrifice my morning coffee,” he says. He reaches into his bag, a sliver of red emerging from it in his fist. “You lost this last time we spoke.”

“My bow!”

“Thought you might want it back,” he says, handing it to me. He puts his hands back into his pockets, his stance

easygoing and confident. I find myself thinking back to that triangle of skin behind his tie. He looks so put together now, his hair coiffed and his tie perfectly centered. Even his shirt looks pressed.

I dressed with every intention of looking as perfect as he does now, but after a twenty-minute walk on a June morning, there's no chance I still look like I did leaving the house.

"Thank you! I can't believe you held on to it." I hold it with both hands, running my thumbs along the silk.

He shrugs. "It seemed like something that might brighten your day if I happened to run into you. So, you choose what holds more weight, a lost coffee or a found bow?"

I'm smiling so hard my cheeks are starting to hurt. "A found bow. Definitely. I like that."

"I thought you might say that."

We're quiet for a moment as I struggle to lower the wattage of my grin. "Can I at least replace your coffee?"

He pauses and then nods. "That'd be great, thank you."

In the corner of the lobby, there's a small café that boasts an assortment of baked goods and a reasonably short line for this time of day. We sidestep the reaching legs of spilled coffee on our way there.

"I didn't catch your name," I say.

He holds out his hand, shaking mine a second longer than decorum would dictate. "Charles Sinclair."

"Annabel Hall."

"Nice to meet you, Annabel Hall."

"Nice to meet you too, Charles Sinclair."

A young barista meets us at the register.

"What can I get you?"

"Just a black coffee, please," he says to her. "Anything for you?"

I shake my head. “I brought mine,” I say, reaching quickly into my bag and pulling out my thermos. “Just that, please,” I say to the barista and hand over my card.

He seems caught off guard, and I wonder, for a second, if he had planned to pay for it. If he had accepted my offer to replace his coffee just so he could talk to me.

The barista hands over his coffee, and we return to the lobby. The coffee spill has been cleaned—no brown liquid in sight.

“Well, I have to get upstairs. Don’t want to be late on my first day.”

“Of course.” He raises the coffee cup as a toast. “Good luck, Annabel Hall.”

“Thank you, Charles Sinclair.”

I really love the sound of his name.

As I turn toward the security desk, he calls out my name. “You can call me Charlie, by the way,” he says as if reading my mind.

“Charlie,” I repeat, trying it out, and he smiles. I give him a small wave. “Well, have a good one.”

I do my best to shake him from my mind as I go to the security desk for my temporary badge. I have a good fifteen minutes before I’m supposed to be upstairs, but given the elevator situation last time and the coffee spill I’ve already gone through this morning, there’s no reason to take chances.

As I wait for someone to help me, I hear a sound coming from my purse, and I realize I never hung up the phone.

I fish it out of my bag and immediately hear Layla’s voice booming through the speaker.

“Who was that? I swear to God, Annabel! Who was that?”

“Jesus, Layla, calm down.”

“Who was that? I must know!”

I shake my head. “A literal nobody.”

“Oh my god, he sounds sexy. Is he sexy?”

“Layla, I have to go to work.”

“You have to tell me all about him after, okay?”

“Okay! Bye!”

I smile sheepishly at the woman behind the security desk and give her my name and Wink’s floor.

As I wait for her to check the system and set up my key card, I glance behind me.

Charles Sinclair sits across the lobby from me, his coffee cup on the ledge beside him. He sees me looking and nods.

I take in his long legs, the arms that seem nearly ready to burst out of his perfectly ironed dress shirt, his thick-lashed eyes and those patterned socks sticking out from the bottom of his pant legs, and I think to myself, *what a perfect man*.

What a perfect man to think about, to fall for, to be betrayed by.

If Chris had never happened, I might even take the chance.

But with my history, I look at Charles Sinclair and see nothing more than heartbreak.

CHARLES

For the past week, every time I pulled out my laptop, the silky fabric of Annabel's bow brushed against my hand. Every time I reached for something, the bright pop of red in the recesses of my bag caught my eye. I was desperate to return it to its rightful owner.

Yet now that it's gone, I feel its absence.

As I sip on my fresh coffee, I wonder whether it's the bow that haunts me or the brevity of our conversation.

When I'm about ten minutes late for the weekly all-hands sales meeting, I head upstairs. I have a reputation to keep up, after all. I don't need to go into the office, and most weeks I elect to skip this meeting altogether. In fact, I barely even have a desk anymore.

But that's sales for you. I'm usually out on the town, "pounding the pavement," as those guys in corporate offices say as they nudge my elbow, making fun of the millions of dollars I bring in annually for a company that won't even pay me a salary. All the while, they fiddle with spreadsheets that list Sinclair as a line item.

But it's usually the top line item, so my absences are generally swept under the rug.

When I get upstairs, I grab a bagel and cream cheese from the table by the door while my boss, the regional sales manager, clicks through slides and waxes poetic about last quarter's numbers and this quarter's goals. The room smells like coffee and boxed breakfast, and pervasive boredom cloaks

the space, interrupted only by the regular clicking of a pen, the pop of a travel mug opening, the sighs of imprisoned extroverts.

Some reps seem engaged with his presentation, but most are like me—eyes wandering, wondering when we’re going to either be given some leads or released from this room. We’re a loquacious bunch, and while Dieter may be proud of his little charts and spreadsheets, we’re not the crowd to brag to if he’s searching for fanfare.

I take a seat next to Gabi in the far corner of the room. She does all the administrative stuff for our team.

“Hey Char,” she whispers, glancing down at my bagel as I sit beside her.

She’s tall and blonde, a natural-born saleswoman who seems reluctant to explore her full potential. I’ve taken her on a few client dinners with me, and she does well, but sometimes I wonder if she’s intimidating to the clients, either because she’s smarter than most of them or significantly more attractive.

I won’t say I haven’t been there. I’m a yes-man.

But given our working relationship, we keep a respectful distance.

“Hey Gabs,” I say, offering her a bite of my bagel that I’m absolutely certain she’ll refuse.

“I’m surprised to see you here.”

“I’m surprised to be here.”

She turns to me, her eyes narrowing. The little pom-pom-like things on her shirt remind me of Annabel Hall. “Why *are* you here?”

I shrug.

“You’re not dipping your pen in company ink, are you?”

I glance around the room, wondering who on earth in this room she thinks I’d consider. “No.”

She raises an eyebrow. “You’re up to something.”

I hold my hands up. “Why am I getting grilled for showing up on time?”

She glances at the time on her phone, holding it up for me to see. “You’re over an hour late.”

That’s a surprise to me. “I thought it started ten minutes ago.”

She shakes her head. “I sent you the meeting update yesterday. Dieter moved the time because he wanted to go through a new lead management system.”

I shrug. “Must have missed it.”

“I don’t think anyone paid attention to the demo, anyway.”

We fall into silence for the rest of Dieter’s presentation. I pull out my laptop and catch up on some emails I didn’t bother checking last night—I’m good at the sales part of my job, but I don’t worry too much about internal communications or meetings like this. So many people try so hard to be good enough at everything that they completely neglect the things they actually excel at.

But I know what I’m good at. There’s a reason I’m at the top of Dieter’s spreadsheet every month, and there’s a reason why I get away with things that other reps wouldn’t.

They’re concerned with rules; I cut to the chase. What is it you really want from me?

Yes. Yes, I can do that.

Sales. Family. Women.

Yes. I can *absolutely* do that.

As the meeting comes to a close, chatter around the room grows. Dieter hopelessly tries to remain in control for the last few minutes but eventually gives up, closing his laptop and falling into conversation with the reps in the first row.

“Want to grab lunch with us? My sister’s meeting me in the lobby at noon if you’ll be around for a bit. We’re doing tacos and midday margs,” Gabi says as we stand from the table. She gathers her things and I follow her down a long

hallway to her desk. I technically have the one across from hers, but I long ago surrendered that to the rest of the team for their planning docs and community snack drawer.

I shake my head. “Can’t today. Last time was fun, though. Monday?”

“Sounds good. You have the Dullet meeting tonight, right?”

“Yep. Want to come?”

She considers it for a second and then shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so.”

Gabi’s been more of a homebody since her breakup with her last boyfriend. He was emotionally manipulative and turned a fun party girl into an anxious mess—something I certainly won’t forgive him for, despite Gabi’s insistence that life gives you harsh lessons, so you know better for next time.

“You sure?”

“I don’t think I’m up for it tonight.”

One day, I’ll get her to come out with us. Her focus has gone so far toward perfection and planning when it comes to these client meetings that she doesn’t know how to have fun on them anymore, and relishing in the fun moments is the only way to deal with jobs like ours.

“Well, you let me know when you’re ready for a fancy meal on the corporate card.”

She smiles, setting her things down on the edge of her desk. I eye the space that used to be mine, now covered with various pink cardboard plates, utensils, and napkins. Gabi sees me looking.

“Mariah had her baby,” she explains.

I blink. “Mariah was pregnant?”

She laughs. “You’ve gotta start checking your email, dude.”

“Yikes.”

Mariah is another team member, slightly more junior than Gabi, and before she apparently went on parental leave, she did most of our scheduling and initial outreach. It's not a glamorous job, but there's no way I could cinch the number of deals I do without her.

"Who's doing outreach?"

Gabi stares at me. "Me."

"You are?"

She nods. "Dude. Come on. Email. Haven't you noticed all of your meetings are being sent from me? She's out for the next two months, so I'm slammed. That's why I don't really want to go to any client dinners. I have to take care of everything around here and I don't need another one of your creepy clients eyeing my backside when I go to the bathroom."

I'm not sure what to say, which is something for me.

"I didn't realize that made you uncomfortable. I thought it —" I don't know what I'm trying to say. "I thought it was like a power move on your part."

She raises her eyebrows at me, shaking her head. "Oh Char, no. It's not."

I wrinkle my nose. "I feel like a dick now."

"It's not your fault." She shrugs. "It's theirs. And don't get me wrong, it's not all of them. But Stevens? Horndog. Anyone from Harper Media? Horndog." She thinks for a moment and then cocks her head to the side. "Frankie Carver, though? I can sell him without you."

I smile at her, realizing that maybe she's more healed than I thought.

"Well, you're always welcome. You let me know when you want to come to one." I tap on her cubicle, and as I glance down the long hallway, I see Dieter coming my way. "And on that note, I have to go have lunch with a very special client."

Her eyebrows knit together. "What client?" she asks, but I'm already on the move. She's probably panicking, realizing

there is no client meeting on my calendar and she didn't prepare anything.

"My mom!" I shout over my shoulder, ducking around the corner just as Dieter clocks my presence.

The irony is not lost on me, as I round the corner and slip into a closing elevator, that the last time I felt this relief—of narrowly escaping several hours of spreadsheets and software training—I ended up trapped in here with Annabel Hall.

There's a part of me, I think, that wouldn't even mind it happening again.

If it was just the two of us.



TODAY, I'm a little early to lunch.

On my way to the park, I stop at a convenience store and pick up a pack of Pokémon cards for Tucker. It's a ritual at this point—I buy a cheap pack of cards for him and he tears them open wildly, only to inform me, somewhat glumly, that he already has them all.

But that's okay. The excitement is the fun part, those couple of seconds as he's tearing into them where he thinks this pack might be *the one*.

And who knows, one day it might be.

I pay the cashier and tuck the cards into my pocket as I leave the store. The sun is harsh today, so I throw on my sunglasses and stick to the shadows.

But as I cross the street, something in the store window next to me catches my eye.

It's the exact same bow that was sitting in my bag for three weeks.

I can still feel the silk between my fingers, and I imagine the softness of her hair underneath, how it would feel to unravel her.

There's something charming about the idea of little Annabel Hall strolling down this street and seeing something in the window that catches her eye.

I push the thought of her away. She keeps popping into my mind, that long dirty-blonde hair tied back with a bow, her little pencil skirt, her thing with polka dots, the way she looks so deeply into your eyes when you're speaking like she's paying attention to every single word.

But she's not my kind of girl. I'll bet she wants romance—red rose petals, champagne, and a two-year courtship followed up with the ring she's already picked out. A suburban home with some guy whose job is far less volatile than mine to make little cookie-cutter copies of themselves and become a sweet little nuclear family.

I continue my walk, anxious to get away from the little red bow.

I'd relish the opportunity to please little Miss Annabel Hall, but I've learned the hard way to listen to what people want.

Despite Amy's general disinterest in most things, I took her flippant attitude about relationships and disdain for men as an indication that we could use each other for a few weeks. But when I saw the yearning in her eyes, I realized my mistake—she was broken, hurt by past relationships. She didn't hate men because of it—no, she wanted someone to prove her wrong.

I can't be that guy.

But I never lied to her. I don't lie.

I give people what they want, assuming we have mutual interests.

I can usually tell if someone is lying to me, but I haven't figured out yet how to tell if they're lying to themselves.

I wait for the walking man to appear and cross the street with a crowd that disperses in all directions once we reach the park. I make my way around, my eyes beelining for my mom's

wheelchair, Julian and Ashley's blanket, and the ball of boundless energy that is Tucker floating around them.

Tuck, the whirlwind, gesticulates animatedly to Ashley as she leans over to hear him better. She pushes a saran-wrapped sandwich into his hands just before he turns and sees me coming.

"Hey Tucker!" I say, pushing my sunglasses up to greet him.

"Chuncle!" he shouts, dropping the sandwich on the ground and spinning to hug me.

"How are you, buddy?"

"I'm not hungry!" I glance at Ashley, who rolls her eyes and throws the sandwich back in her cooler bag.

"You should have a taste so you have enough fuel to get you through the day."

He shakes his head, and Ashley waves off my attempt.

"He'll eat in the car on the way home," she says, coming over to hug me, her skirt blowing in the breeze. Julian stands from the blanket to give me a quick handshake, and I bend over to kiss my mom on the cheek before sitting down with them.

"Your day going alright, Mom?"

She nods. "Yes, thank you, dear." From her wheelchair, she reaches over and pats my shoulder. I take a moment to kiss her hand while it's there.

None of us talk as we get settled. Julian has his computer open in front of him, probably some last-minute work obligation he couldn't push. Ashley watches Tucker absently, popping a pretzel into her mouth every so often. My mom has that gentle, slightly vacant look that says she's enjoying herself, but she's not totally here.

After a few moments, Julian moves closer, turning the screen of the computer toward me.

"I started a spreadsheet for Mom's stuff."

I raise my eyebrows at him. “Her stuff?”

He nods and points as he starts going through tabs and clicking random cells. “Her medication, her doctors, her nurses, her neighbors.”

As I scan through, I start recognizing names and numbers. There’s no new information here—it’s just an extremely condensed and detailed medical history of my mother. Aside from her new nurse, I’ve met everyone listed, and I was there for most of the prescriptions.

“I think I know most of this already.” I scroll down, clicking around.

Julian shrugs. “Keeping it here serves two purposes: we always have the most up-to-date information and are always on the same page.”

“Ah. You think I won’t keep you in the loop?”

He levels me with his gaze. “You don’t always keep me in the loop, but I don’t always keep you in the loop, either. Honestly, we should have done this ages ago. It’s not like she’s getting any better.”

His words crash into my chest. I’m not in disagreement, but sometimes reality sneaks up on me.

I have a rare flash of what my mom was like ten years ago—still playful, sharp, a terrific cook and a terrible dancer, proud of her sons but never failing to pass judgment. For a moment, I feel like I’m floating, looking down on my brother and me, planning my mom’s care, and I wonder how time has stretched for so long while my mother slowly withers away.

“I think this is a good way to make sure nothing gets missed—not that you’ll miss anything—but we’re going from three pairs of eyes down to one here.”

I nod. “Yeah, this is a good idea.”

Julian’s eyes meet mine. “This, from the guy who shudders with disdain at the sight of a spreadsheet?”

I roll my eyes. “Come on, it’s a good idea. I hate that it’s a spreadsheet, but it’s a good idea.”

He pulls the computer back into his lap. “Cool. Honestly, I thought you’d require more convincing.”

“Nope. For once, your argument is sound.”

He guffaws. “That’s more like it.”

While we eat lunch, Julian clicks around into different houses they’re considering, and Ashley navigates to the furniture she’s hoping to fill the eventual new house with. The excitement radiates off them as they show me a place they’re going to see after work tonight—a gorgeous three-story townhouse with antique chandeliers in every room, a formal dining room, and a park down the street they can walk to with Tucker.

I’m only half listening as they start contemplating Tucker’s furniture. If he’s ready for a bigger bed. If they should start him in private school right away or see how public school goes first. If Ashley can get in with some of the moms in the neighborhood before they put an offer down so they have a better idea of childcare options.

My stomach churns at the thought of them moving away. Julian deserves the recognition he’s getting, but it does sting a little to think we won’t have our Friday lunches anymore. That I’ll see my brother and his family even less than I do now.

While they move on to color schemes, more bickering to themselves than discussing with me, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Amy.

I silence it and put my phone away again, but Ashley has already noticed.

“Is that Annabel?”

I wish. My mouth goes dry. “Amy,” I correct, but I hope she immediately forgets the name.

“Oh, sorry. I guess they all get a bit jumbled up.”

I smile sardonically at her, wishing for more house talk. “How close will the house be to your new office?” I redirect to Julian.

He shrugs. “I think it’s about a half hour. Not bad at all.”

“You know, you can bring her next Friday if you want,” Ashley continues.

“Amy?”

She nods.

I shake my head. “Nope, I’m good.”

Ashley sighs but allows the conversation to move past Amy/Annabel and on to Julian’s new responsibilities. He talks animatedly about his new office and despite my tight chest, I can’t help but smile as he chatters on. Julian only goes off on tangents when he’s really excited about something.

My mind wanders as he talks. It’ll be just me and my mom, a woman whose self-agency seems to diminish by the day. Right now, Julian and I split my mom’s appointments evenly, though I tend to take the last-minute stuff or anything at weird times during the day, just because of the nature of my job.

But soon, it’ll be completely up to me. And I’ll have to update the stupid spreadsheet on my own.

By the time we head our separate ways, a cold sweat envelops my body. I’ve never been solely responsible for another person before. I’ve watched Tucker before, but not until he was old enough to talk and run around on his own. In no time, my mom will be less capable than him.

And it’s all going to fall on me.

I need the walk home today. A spiking energy pulses through my veins and although the walk might not quell it, it’ll be better than sitting still on a train or an Uber.

Although, I can think of another physical activity that might help quell that energy.

I take my phone out of my pocket while walking, thumb over to Amy’s missed call, and realize there are multiple. The question is whether I could live with myself calling her when I know we’re looking for different things. I know she’d come, in both senses of the word.

I think of the last time we saw each other, the question poised on her lips. “Do you want to stay over tonight?”

I’m a yes-man, but only under the right circumstances. If I thought we’d be fucking all night, that shiny brown hair of hers twisted in my fist as I ram into her from behind, I would have been tangled up with her before my lips could even mutter a “yes.”

But I knew what her question meant, and it was as good as a proposal.

I weave between wandering walkers, sweat pooling on my back. As I pass by a familiar storefront, I suddenly stop, my feet rendered useless as a thought occurs to me.

Amy threw me for a loop because what she asked for wasn’t actually what she wanted.

Maybe Annabel Hall could throw me for a loop, too.

I march into the store and—with the most masculine scowl I can muster—buy a polka-dot bow.

ANNABEL

Evelyn is a blur. Her curly red hair is loose and free as she whips around the corner of her office, her slim black jeans hugging her hips and her black cowl neck sweater impossibly perfect under her colorful mane.

Steph, Danielle and I have been waiting in her office for the past few minutes. She's late to her own meeting, a phenomenon that I'm starting to call Evelyn Time. I sit up straighter as she brushes in and takes her seat, a hint of her vanilla perfume hitting my nostrils as she passes by me.

"All right, ladies, let's wrap this week up strong. What did we accomplish and what are our goals for next week?"

Her office is like her, a little messy and a weird mishmash of styles. Behind her are bookshelves stacked with a wide array of guidebooks for women in business, and her desk is cluttered with magazines for inspiration and mock-ups of things her team is working on. The entire room carries a faint smell of old coffee and vanilla.

This is my first weekly meeting, and although Steph already filled me in on what to expect, I don't want to be the first to answer the question.

Steph pops her gum. "I finished up proposals for Home Deals and Marigold Beauty. Home Deals hasn't gotten back to us yet, but Marigold Beauty came through in, like, half an hour and they're super excited to be working with us."

"Oh!" Evelyn scrambles toward her desk, abandoning the laptop she'd been carrying in one arm. "That reminds me!"

She steps away from her desk drawer with a handful of lip gloss tubes and hands them out to each of us. “Marigold Beauty Pucker!” she says, smacking her lips. “Free samples, ladies. Try them out and see if they inspire you.”

We each take a tube and swipe on a thin layer. It tingles.

“Wow, this is an experience,” Evelyn mutters, rubbing her lips together. Her eyebrows furrow.

Stephanie turns the tube over in her hands. “Does this come with a warning label?”

Danielle smacks her lips. “It’s not that bad.”

Stephanie gives her a look. “On your *lips*.”

“Where else—” Evelyn starts and then changes her mind. “Oh lord. If anyone has spicy weekend plans, feel free to report in.”

“Will do,” Danielle says quickly.

The four of us burst out in laughter.

Evelyn shakes her head. “Steph, please continue.”

“Two proposals sent out, one approval received. Next week, I’m tossing Marigold Beauty over to Danielle for a project timeline and hopefully starting on a proposal for Century Grand Real Estate.”

“Nice work.” Evelyn nods and turns to Danielle. “Your turn, girl.”

“The project plan for Delfin Group has been completed and approved by both us and them. Next week is Marigold Beauty, hopefully, and a continuation of the filing system project.”

“Good work.” She nods and turns to me with a smile. “Which brings us to Annabel.”

My heart kick-starts. It’s a stupid answer, mostly because I barely know what I’m doing yet and everyone in this room knows it.

“Lots of onboarding this week, filing system stuff, and shadowing Steph,” I say. “Next week, I’ll still be shadowing and hopefully, I can start digging into Marigold Beauty with everybody.”

Evelyn nods, giving me a warm smile. “Good job.” She faces the other girls. “Questions, comments, concerns?”

A round of shaking heads.

“Good. Go home!”

It’s a little earlier than I would normally leave, but when I return to my desk after a quick bathroom break, I see that Stephanie and Danielle have already packed their stuff and left the building.

I hang around for a few minutes until I see Evelyn dart out of her door and lock it behind her. She waves a quick goodbye over her shoulder as she passes me, and I figure if my boss is leaving, I can probably do the same.

So I have half an hour to unwind from my first full week of work before meeting Layla for drinks.

When I get down to the lobby, I head to the café in the corner for an iced tea and some reading time.

As I swipe through the turnstiles, I clock Stephanie lip-locked with a guy by the front doors. She has her backpack on, her long blonde hair falling in cascades to either side of them, and he holds her face in his hands, his thumb stroking her cheek. My eyes are glued to them for a moment, suddenly missing Chris’s touch.

An ache throbs in my stomach as I realize how much I crave that. Strong hands on my cheek, thick arms pulling me close. For so long, I’ve held on to this fiery rage that I totally neglected my need for closeness, the comfort of intimacy.

My breath catches in my throat, and I force myself to refocus on the menu board in front of me. I realize with a start that the barista is watching me, patiently waiting to take my order.

I peep out an apology, take a cursory look over the options, and order a kiwi-flavored iced tea. I didn't even know there was such a thing.

"Make that two," says a voice behind me.

I turn to see Charles Sinclair, dolled up in a pin-striped suit, that little triangle of chest showing at the top of his shirt. My heart jumps into my throat as I take in his sheer size in the little café. He hands over a card before I can get mine out.

"Thank you," I squeak out.

He shrugs as we step over to the waiting area. "I owed you one."

"No, I spilled *your* coffee first. And now I owe *you* one."

He grins at me, steps forward and whispers, "Deal," in my ear.

Surprised by his directness, I look up at him, and something deep in my belly stirs when our eyes lock.

The barista places our drinks on the counter, and he grabs both for us, motioning toward one of the many empty tables scattered around us.

"I'm glad I ran into you," he says, taking his seat as I take the one across from him. His confession inspires a few giddy butterflies in my stomach. "I found something of yours." He reaches into his bag, the top of his shirt straining against the stretch, and pulls out a silky black hair bow with white polka dots that I recognize from my collection.

I didn't even realize I had lost one. *What are the chances of him finding two of my hair bows?*

"Oh my god," I mutter, taking the bow from him. "I didn't ___"

Running it through my fingers, I realize there's a tag still attached. I cock my head to the side, uncovering it from within the fabric. My eyes narrow as I lift the bow so he can see what I'm looking at.

"Sir, there's a tag on this bow."

He shrugs. “I guess you lost it in the boutique down the street.”

It takes a moment for his words to settle in my mind, but when they do, I burst out laughing and watch as his grin turns into laughter, too. “Did you buy me a bow?”

He nods, his smile wide.

“Why did you buy me a bow?”

“I thought maybe you’d consider having a drink with me?”

I glance down at the drinks on the table. “I guess it worked.”

He takes a sip of his kiwi iced tea and makes a face.

I do the same. Although honestly, I don’t hate it.

“So, how was your week? Should I have bought you a bow the color of a caution sign?” he asks, his words taking me back to my very first day.

I look into his eyes for a moment, and my imagination carries on without me. I can feel the stubble of his cheek on my palms, the warmth of his torso against mine, the softness of his lips on my neck.

I try to shake the thought from my mind, but that little triangle of skin at the top of his shirt draws my attention. Drooling over a total stranger is the *last* thing I should be doing right now.

I’m fragile. I’m not even going to try to deny it. Three men have cheated on me and broken my heart.

Yet I find myself drinking a kiwi iced tea with a man I’m certain could break a heart with a single glance. Charles Sinclair is not the kind of guy I need right now. But the attention sure is nice.

“It was great. No caution signs needed,” I say with full conviction.

He takes a sip of his kiwi drink. “Tell me about it.”

His eyes don't stray from mine as I talk about my new coworkers, my new desk, and the lunch spot I'm looking forward to trying next week. He recommends another place to try afterward, one where I can get my favorite Thai noodles extra spicy without losing that delicious flavoring.

A mantra loops in my head as I realize I've gone from polite laughter to comfortable enthusiasm. *This guy is in sales. This is what he does. This guy is in sales. That's why he's so charming.*

This is not something that I would normally do. My interactions with people are based on similar grounding, shared experiences, and common interests. But talking to Charlie Sinclair is different. We lead totally different lives, yet our conversation flows so easily. My brain kicks into overdrive, desperate to know who he really is and why he's buying me pretty polka-dot bows and delicious kiwi-flavored drinks.

And then I realize he wants what all men want. He's just good at masking it.

But can I separate sex from love or at least the prospect of love? I like to think I can, but in practice, I'm not sure I'd be able to.

I'm already getting carried away. I'm imagining what his brother looks like, his gorgeous bohemian sister-in-law. I want to know what his bedroom looks like, the feel of his sheets, the water pressure in his shower, the clothes he wears when he doesn't have to be fancy.

The urge to retreat flashes hot under my skin. I'm not ready to be swooning over a guy. If I could guarantee myself that I could keep my distance, I would be all in. But right now, I don't trust myself enough for that. And I certainly don't trust him.

My phone buzzes in my bag and I fish around for it, realizing I've lost track of time as we talked. "Oh my god, I'm late." I swipe my phone to answer Layla's call. "I'll be right there!"

“Where you at? I can come to you.”

“I got caught up at work. I’m a couple of blocks away. I’m sorry, I’ll be right there!”

Layla laughs. “Take your time, alright?”

I hang up and grab my drink, balancing my phone precariously in the same hand that holds my iced tea. “I’m sorry, I’m late to meet my friend,” I tell him, hooking my bag over my shoulder.

He nods. “No problem. Maybe—”

“Thank you.” I look him in the eyes one more time before heading out the lobby doors, my gaze slipping only for a moment to that triangle of skin at the top of his shirt. “This was really nice.”

“Sure, maybe—”

“Maybe I’ll see you around!” I say, darting out the door before he can ask for my number.

I really want him to, but I need to wrap my head around my own expectations before getting caught up in a frenzied flirtation that I might not be able to handle at this stage post-breakup.

When I get outside, the summer air is stifling, turning me to sludge on the pavement. Along with it comes a sense of disappointment, like I’m missing out on something, even though the logical part of my brain knows that sort of fun can only turn to heartbreak.

I’d be a second thought after one night. If I’m already feeling it after no more than a kiwi iced tea, there’s no way I can keep my expectations in check.

I shake my head and urge myself forward, down the street, to meet with Layla.



BY THE TIME I reach the restaurant, Layla already has a table for us. She worked from home today, so she's wearing denim shorts and a flowy white top—very summery and free, opposite my more corporate attire.

The bar is casual, the outdoors done up with wooden teak furniture, a variety of tropical plants dotting the concrete around us and separating the patio from the sidewalk. The scent of hibiscus and summer roses floats between the tables, and the umbrellas scattered across the patio create alternating pockets of sun and shade. I adjust my seat so I can sit in the shade, one of the hibiscus plants lazily grazing the back of my chair.

“You didn't need to run,” she says, taking a sip of her pink martini.

I undo the top button of my shirt and pull on it, letting some cooler air in. “I'm sorry, I feel terrible. I got out of work early and thought I'd have enough time to sit in the café and have an iced tea, but I got caught up. Talking.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Talking?”

I nod. “That guy from the other day, who you heard over the phone.”

Her mouth moves into a soft *O*.

“He bought me a bow.” I pull it out of my purse and lay it on the table.

She takes another sip of her drink, the edges of her mouth tipping into a smile. “How dare he.”

The waiter comes over, having spied me sitting down.

“What can I get you, miss?”

I glance at Layla's drink, considering it. Knowing her, it's some variation of vodka with a splash of cranberry juice.

“Do you have any kiwi liquors?”

He nods. “I believe we do.”

“Can I have a kiwi martini? With vodka?”

“Kiwi,” Layla comments as the waiter leaves. “That’s interesting.”

“I tried a kiwi iced tea today, and it was fucking delicious.”

She nods, grinning mischievously as she takes another sip of her drink. “Kiwi iced tea with a side of man candy?”

I rub my lips together, the spicy aftertaste of Marigold Beauty Pucker still tingling after I swiped on a layer while rushing over.

“He’s straight-up *hot*,” I say. “The kind of hot that makes you pull down your panties and beg to be hurt.”

Layla’s jaw drops, and a dribble of martini leaks down her chin. She quickly wipes it away. “Oh my god, if he’s that hot, why the hell are you here?”

The waiter sets down the kiwi martini gently in front of me, and I marvel at the bright-green color of it before touching my lips to the edge and taking a desperate gulp.

I shake my head. “I don’t know if I can do it. He’s Greek god—level hot, and I don’t know if I can handle it. I mean, you know I’m still reeling from Chris, and I know the best way to get over someone is to get under someone else, but it feels like a recipe for disaster. I’m delicate, and there’s no way a guy who looks like that and could charm me in half an hour isn’t a *ruthless* player.”

She shrugs. “I mean, I hear what you’re saying, but do you hear what you’re saying?”

I crinkle my eyebrows at her, taking another sip.

“You’ve already categorized him as a one-time thing. You know you’re not ready for a relationship right now, but you also know you need to get back out there to get over Chris.” She pauses, thinking over her next words. “This guy fits the bill, and he obviously wants you. What’s the holdup if it’s only sex?”

I keep my mouth on the edge of the martini glass and take a few haphazard sips while I think.

Layla fills in the blank for me. “You want a relationship.”

I shrug.

“That’s what’s stuck in your head right now. You want the next person to be *your* person, and that’s fair.” She holds up a hand to stop me from interrupting her. “But some hot guy appeared out of nowhere and has taken a liking to you—embrace the opportunity. You can’t find your person while you’re sad, but you can have some fun, blow off steam, and start looking at the world through a lens of opportunity instead of hurt.”

I pause for a moment, considering my next words carefully. “But what if I fall for him?”

Layla takes a sip of her martini. “Don’t.”

I shake my head at her. “I can’t control that.”

She gives me a look. “Yes, you can. Set boundaries if you need to. Delete him from your phone afterward. Go on dates with nonplayers. Don’t friend him on Facebook.”

“I don’t know,” I say. “It all just sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

She guzzles down the last of her drink. “Well, on the bright side, the choice is totally up to you. But I think you should go get fucked. As soon as possible, really.”

I laugh as the waiter makes his way over again and we quickly agree on another round.

“Is that what you’re doing with Paul?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes. “I would not suggest any of what I’m doing right now.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Sounds naughty, what is it?”

“Not even worth talking about.”

“God, Layla, I’m so intrigued. Will you ever just tell me?”

She levels me with her gaze.

“Wow, this must be either a level-ten pity fuck or something so kinky it’s beyond my imagination.”

“It’s over and done with. I’m not fucking anyone.”

I pout. “Tell me,” I whine.

She only smiles and thanks the waiter when he drops our brightly colored drinks in front of us.

Maybe it wasn't her ex, after all. They were always close, friends even, during their off periods, but she's never been so close-lipped about the occasional romp with him. She doesn't proclaim it, but she'll normally give a few details if I ask.

I wonder who else it could be. For a moment, I wonder if it's Charlie Sinclair.

“His name is Charles Sinclair,” I say, just so I can gauge her reaction.

“The hot guy?”

I nod.

“Sexy name.”

Okay, so her guy is not also Charles Sinclair.

Layla's words echo in my head as I guzzle down the rest of my drink, our conversation turning easily from boys to my first week of work, and I regale her with the same stories of Steph, Danielle, and Evelyn that I just told him.

By the time we head our separate ways, we're swaying, talking a little louder than we should be, and my thoughts are entirely focused on Charlie.

I take an Uber home and from the back seat, with my eyes closed, I imagine pushing his jacket over those broad shoulders, unzipping his fly and springing loose the thickness waiting behind it. I can feel him, lips slick with me, sliding up my body, his tongue drawing a delicate line along my abdomen, sliding between my breasts, nibbling on my collarbone.

I strip myself of my work clothes as soon as I get home and sink into my bathtub. The wetness pools between my legs, and slowly, I build myself up to my first orgasm in over a month.

CHARLES

Annabel waves goodbye flippantly as she dashes out of the building, nearly knocking over a man making his way inside as she does.

Maybe I'll see you around.

I'll admit I was not my smoothest.

But maybe this is a sign. Maybe she can read people as well as I can, and she's already determined that I'm not what she's looking for.

That's okay.

I'm not the kind of guy to get hung up on one specific girl. I'm not looking for anything serious, just a basic level of humanity, honestly. The ability to have a real conversation before falling into bed together.

Annabel Hall wants the stuff that comes after that.

That's okay.

Even if that was something that I wanted to explore, I have too much on my plate right now. With all the time and energy that goes into caring for my mom, there is no time for a polka-dot girl like Annabel Hall.

That's okay.

I gather my stuff and drop the rest of the gross kiwi iced tea in the trash receptacle by the door.

I'll be early for my meeting, but I'm not opposed to grabbing myself a drink beforehand, so I head for the restaurant. I'm meeting with a guy named Bob, who's been the company's client for nearly twenty years. He was transferred over to me when his old rep left and we've been friends ever since.

The sun is scorching, the early June heat stifling. I consider ordering an Uber to avoid it, but I don't. Bob won't be offended if I'm a little sweaty.

I stop in the liquor store a few doors down from the office and pick up a bottle of his favorite whiskey—cheap stuff that comes in flavors like black cherry and salted caramel, a complete contradiction to the amount of money his company spends with mine. I grab a bottle of Woodford for myself.

When I walk out, I catch a glimpse of the bow display in the window across the street.

I hesitate, and an older lady shuffling by gives me an annoyed look as she takes two steps to the left to pass me.

I push all thoughts of Annabel Hall and her polka-dot bows to the back of my mind.

The restaurant we meet at once a month on Fridays is nice but not fancy—nothing that would raise Dieter's eyebrows, anyway—and about halfway between my apartment and Bob's office. Most people here are doing the same thing we are—post-work drinks or dinner, suits and business casual galore. It's dimly lit, with a long bar that runs the length of the restaurant and a long mirror to match, giving it the illusion it's twice as big as it actually is.

Red vinyl booths are arranged in a gentle curve along the length of the restaurant, with rounded tables and a half wall separating the seating area from the bar.

I confirm with the hostess that we still have our reservation before finding a place at the bar and ordering an old-fashioned. The bartender recognizes me—this is where we come every month—but he doesn't make idle conversation. Instead, he

slides a drink in front of me and leaves me to stew in my own thoughts.

And sometimes, I really appreciate it. Most people would describe me as chatty, extroverted, suave. But in reality, that's just a byproduct of a job I've become exceptionally good at. If anything, my social abilities make the quiet moments that much more special.

I've learned to appreciate them.

My whole life changed when my mom started getting worse. Gone were Fridays playing video games, Saturdays with the game night crew, and Sundays rolling into my mom's house for breakfast with the rest of the family after having gotten sloshed the night before.

It was time to grow up. Once Tucker was around, I could see in Julian's eyes that he was waiting for me to follow suit, to fall in line behind him and start taking responsibility.

I struggled, initially, to live up to what I thought Julian wanted me to be—a staunch corporate executive or a spreadsheet-driven maniac. But over time, I figured out what works for me. How I can contribute just as much as he does in a way that doesn't make me want to pluck my eyes out.

Before my mom got sick, I used to play Dungeons and Dragons with a couple of friends from college on Saturdays. While my dinners with Bob are great, sometimes I do miss that, even though in hindsight it's a little silly—a bunch of grown men rolling dice and arguing over whether a specific warlock would turn out to be an enemy, and if so, how to spell his name.

I take a sip of my drink, the harsh liquor burning my throat, and relish in the taste. Sweat drips from the glass to the coaster underneath, making the glass slick in my hand.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, and I check it quickly, just in case it could be my mom, but I'm almost certain it's Amy.

I made it clear to her that we wanted different things when we stopped seeing each other. Her name on my caller ID tells me that still hasn't sunk in.

Bob arrives as I take the last sip of my drink. He's reliably five minutes early every time, which makes planning for these things easy. I thank the bartender and leave a generous tip before meeting him at the hostess stand.

Once we're seated, he orders a house whiskey. I order another old-fashioned and slide over the bottle I bought for him.

"Thank you very much," he says, nodding.

He's wearing his typical khaki pants and company polo. He's thin but well-kept, his hair combed to one side and his reading glasses on a loop around his neck.

"So, how you been?" he asks, folding his menu in front of him.

We both know he'll be ordering the crab cakes, like always, but I'm not sure yet what I'll get—I might even try something new tonight. The corporate card is burning a hole in my pocket.

If tonight is anything like last time, and the many times before that, I'll open my laptop tomorrow to an email approving a budget for next month that'll give me enough commission for a trip to Paris.

I love this sort of deal—one where we both leave pleased. And what makes it even better is that I think we both honestly enjoy these dinners. The corporate dance we do really only includes the bottle of whiskey I bring him and the emails he sends each month, continuing the same budget he's had with us since I was in high school.

"Doing well, Bob, and yourself?"

"Candace is bugging me to go on vacation soon," he says, leaning back in his chair. "She's thinking the Keys."

I smile. Bob's brought Candace to dinner a few times. She's tall and thin like him and dresses very mildly, but always with a pop of jewelry that tells me he likes spoiling her every once in a while.

“You *should* go on vacation. I don’t even remember the last time you missed one of our dinners, let alone a week of work.”

“I like working. She likes working, too.” He sighs, watching as the waiter sets our drinks in front of us. “Though I get the idea that she’s thinking about retiring.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Really?”

Candace is a high school art teacher, and everything I’ve heard about her until now pointed to her having a long career ahead of her.

“She was talking about pensions and retirement accounts the other day. Even mentioned working part-time for the business if I wasn’t ready to retire yet.”

“Well, that might be nice.”

“Oh, I couldn’t imagine having her working for me. She’d change everything,” he says, laughing. “She’d change everything, and I’d have to hide my face in shame because it’d be an improvement.”

His laughter is contagious, and I settle into my seat, looking forward to a long meal of Bob’s jokes.

And then my phone buzzes again, and my hackles stand up. Amy again.

“Do you need to get that?”

I shake my head.

“Uh-oh.”

“It’s nothing.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Is it...Amy?”

“Yes.”

He shakes his head. “Always another lady problem when I see you.”

“I wouldn’t say always.”

He grins. “I can almost predict it at this point. Last month, you were singing Amy’s praises, how she was just the kind of

girl you were looking for. This month, she's a problem. Same thing with Carissa, with Lana, with Melanie before her. Though I think she might have lasted *two* dinners."

"Yet every time, you bust my balls about it as if you *can't* predict it."

The waiter comes over to take our order, and I decide at the last minute to go with the veal—this place is known for it, after all.

"Maybe I'm just jealous," Bob laments, sipping his whiskey. "A young man out on the town, a different girl every week. I've been married almost thirty years now and I wouldn't change it for the world, but sometimes I think I should have explored a little more when I was younger."

My phone buzzes again, and I take a needed sip of my drink. "It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"You're probably right. Knowing me, I'd have felt her absence. She came into my life, told me that she was going to marry me so I better shape up, and six months later, I was proposing."

He shakes his head, and I wait with bated breath for him to continue. Bob and I have an easygoing and open relationship, but he's never told me so much about his marriage.

"Well, all that to say, I hope you're having fun. You know, I think I had the most fun I could have had with Candace. But everybody has their own path. I just hope you're finding your bliss."

"Well, I certainly try. But I won't lie and say it's all bliss," I say, glancing pointedly at my phone on the table as it rings again.

"I'd tell you to turn it into a drinking game, but I'd be afraid you'd end up in the hospital."

I take the phone off the table and slip it into my bag. "Let's forget about this for a while. Tell me about your trip to the Keys. Is Candace planning all of it?"

He nods and launches into their plans—snorkeling, hiking, various restaurants and wine bars. They don't have a set date or resort, but Bob is already planning his time away from the company.

When we finish dinner, Bob claps me on the back, like always, and tells me to get home safely. He heads into the parking garage to his truck, which I can hear rumbling to a start from the street, and I walk home, Bob's words stuck in a loop inside my head.

I've always liked Bob, but I never realized how much of a romantic he is. The few times he brought Candace along, it was clear he loved his wife. He was the same guy I had always known, just with extra consideration for her—whether she was enjoying herself, if she liked her food, whether she liked me or not.

They laughed and smiled and bickered a couple times throughout the meal, and I was struck by how they moved as one, how she predicted his second drink based on the pursing of his lips, and how he predicted that she'd need to use the bathroom after scratching her ear. The lifetime they'd spent together was apparent in actions as meaningless—to an outsider, at least—as crossing one leg over another.

At the time, I was just happy that they were happy. But something about Bob's words tonight hit me a little deeper.

He had the best time he possibly could have had because of Candace.

On my way home from the restaurant, I take a detour, heading in a loop closer to the office instead of straight home.

This time, I don't hesitate.

I head into the boutique and buy a polka-dot hair bow.

ANNABEL

I wake up embarrassed, my hair still wet and mushy from last night's shower. I'm naked in my bed, the sun streaming through my window and resting on my covers, creating a warm little cocoon full of color and flowers.

Last night comes rushing back to me—fantasizing about Charlie Sinclair in the Uber, laughing obnoxiously with Layla about God knows what after three martinis because we're lightweights, coming home and touching myself in the bathtub.

I slink out of bed and put myself right back in the bathtub, this time for a shower.

I'm going to my parents' for lunch today, a habit I started after breaking up with Chris. It's nice to have a standing obligation for a Saturday, a day that has always been very couple-y for me. Chris and I always spent our Saturdays together, having brunch, taking walks along the river, attending the occasional family party or dinner.

But now I find myself throwing on a pair of leggings and an old sweatshirt, my hair loose and wet over my shoulders, and sliding into my car.

The drive only takes about half an hour, and by the time I get there, my mom has already brewed their second pot of coffee for the day, which I thirstily pour myself a cup from. My dad is outside, mowing the lawn, as he does on Saturdays during the summer. He pauses when I pop out the back door and wave to him. "I'll be inside in a few, kid!"

Their house is a typical suburban house in a neighborhood of other typical suburban houses. I grew up playing basketball with kids down the street, using a net that still stands strong more than ten years later, no worse for wear. Framed family pictures dot every available surface, as well as finger paintings and macaroni crafts from my childhood.

“How are you, Belly Bean?” My mom leans over the puzzle, picking up a piece and sliding it into place. She grabs a coaster from the bar cart in the corner and tucks it underneath my coffee mug, protecting a dining room table with more dents and scratches than a frat house.

“I’m okay,” I say, sectioning off a variety of blue and white pieces as my own.

We puzzle silently for a few minutes, the hum of my dad’s lawn mower steady outside the window.

I take a sip of coffee, sliding two pieces together.

“Jan and Harold are separating,” my mom says, sighing. She slips into the chair across the table from me.

“What?” I abandon the puzzle pieces I’m separating. They’re my parents’ immediate neighbors and have been a staple of Maple Glen since I was little.

She shakes her head. “They told me last week. Jan said it was a long time coming, but they think it’s the right thing to do.”

“Wow,” I say. Aside from my parents, they’re the last couple I’d expect to separate.

“I know.”

We return to the puzzle, but my mind is fixed on Jan and Harold.

“I guess a relationship is never too old to fail.”

My mom sighs. “That may be true. It’s a surprising amount of work to be happy,” she laments, and my attention snaps to her.

“Are you and Dad okay?”

“Oh yes, honey, don’t worry about us. I think Jan and Harold just came as a shock to me. The one couple I never thought would divorce. I suppose it serves as a reminder of how fragile life can be. How do you go from spending thirty years with someone *to not*? I can’t imagine.” She glances out the window, watching my dad go by with the lawn mower.

Even though I sense the concern in her voice, there’s something comforting about her words and the way she looks at my dad, still, after all these years.

A mischievous grin blooms on her lips as she turns back to me. “Maybe I’ll remind him of that next time he leaves his dirty socks on my nightstand.”

We burst out laughing as we return our attention to the puzzle.

“At least you *have* somebody to leave dirty socks on your nightstand. I’d take that any day if that meant meeting someone kind who won’t cheat on me.”

It’s a little more truth than I had planned to share, and my mom’s face crinkles into sympathy. “Oh honey,” she says, getting up from her chair to hug me. “It’ll happen for you one day. You’ll lock eyes from across the room with some guy who makes your breath catch in your throat, and you’ll just know there’s something good there. And you’ll doubt yourself, and you’ll doubt him, but you’ll just have to jump—and it’ll be magic.”

At that moment, my dad pushes through the back door, dirt smudged across his forehead and grass clippings stuck to his jeans. He fills up a glass of water at the sink and takes a long drink of ice-cold water, punctuated by an overenthusiastic “AH!”

“And the next thing you know, he’ll be tracking grass clippings across the house you so diligently cleaned that morning. Tom, take off your shoes!”

My dad walks into the dining room and bends over to give me a kiss on the head. He smells like freshly cut grass.

“I’m going right back out,” he says to my mom, kissing her on the cheek. “Just wanted to get some water.”

“Tom, if you leave the kitchen, you have to take off your shoes!”

“I know, Delia, I’m going right back out.”

She pauses for a second. “Right, but you left the kitchen.”

“Well, I wanted to say hi to our daughter. Do you want me to ignore her?”

Her fists ball up and her jaw tightens. “No, I just want you to take off your shoes!”

He holds his hands up. “Okay, I’m going back out and next time I come in, I will take my shoes off.”

“Thank you!”

My dad hums a little dad tune as he heads back outside.

“He’s not going to take off his shoes,” my mom says once the door closes behind him.

“I mean, it’s only been thirty years of this,” I say, and she rolls her eyes.

“What was I saying? Oh, that’s right.” She clears her throat. “One day, you’ll see something good in someone, and it’ll be worth the grass stains on your dining room carpet. But until then, let yourself be hurt and work through it, or else you won’t be able to see the good. It’s a process, honey. You just have to let time do its magic.”



MY CONVERSATIONS WITH LAYLA, my mom and, of course, Charlie bounced around my head all weekend—Layla suggesting I make the most of the opportunity, my mom reminding me that it’s okay to hurt and that time heals all wounds, and Charles Sinclair just existing.

It occurs to me, as I pull on a pair of navy pixie pants that there’s a simple reason why all these conversations are running

on repeat in my mind.

I'm confused.

And like my mom said, I'm hurt.

But that doesn't mean that time heals all wounds. Maybe it's my friendship with Layla. Maybe it's going out and doing more of what Chris and I did together, alone. Maybe it's not waiting around for the pain to go away but actively choosing to spend my time fulfilling things that help me remember that my first—and currently only—obligation is to myself.

I pull on a silky white blouse and tie my hair in a matching bow. A swipe of red lipstick and a lift of mascara, and I'm out the door in the brisk morning air. I shiver for the first block or so, the breeze unseasonably cold for June, but as I get going, my body heats up, I hit a good stride, and I feel confident in this new plan.

Getting over a betrayal is not a quick process, and a transition period is normal—good for me, even. I square my shoulders as I walk. I'm ending the grieving stage of that relationship. I'm choosing to free myself of it because he freed himself long before I did. The only person holding me back is me.

I stride into the lobby of the building confidently, the door spinning in circles behind me, and walk directly into Charles Sinclair. I can't help but laugh at the timing.

He smiles at me and takes a step back, protecting the coffee in his hand. "Slow down there, stranger," he says, and the smile morphs into a grin. "I was hoping I'd run into you."

I wonder what his game is. Maybe he likes picking up random ladies from other floors and leaving them hanging after a night. All these sales guys have quotas—maybe he's just trying to hit his.

"How can I help you?" I ask. It comes off more haughtily than I intended.

He doesn't miss a beat. "I wanted to give you something." He reaches into his pocket, producing another bow, tag still attached, and handing it over to me.

I take it in my hands, the pattern familiar but not one I own yet. I run the silk through my fingers, itching to replace the one I'm wearing with this one. My heart beats faster as I go to war with the expression on my face. I'm sure my delight is obvious.

I'm not ready for this, but God, do I want it.

“Look, I'm sorry if I gave you the wrong impression. I just went through a rough breakup and I'm not sure I'm ready to be wooed by an albeit very handsome stranger.” I watch his face as I speak, but he doesn't look disappointed or upset by my rejection. “I shouldn't accept this.” I begrudgingly hand the bow back to him, and he nods.

He doesn't say anything for a few seconds, then tucks the bow back into his pocket. “Consider it an open invitation.”

I raise my eyebrows.

He moves toward me, our bodies only inches away from each other and leans down to whisper in my ear. “Rebound sex. Whatever flavor you desire. I'll have your toes curling and your back arching in no time. When you're ready, you let me know.”

His breath is hot on my neck, and a fiery heat builds in my abdomen.

I'm left stunned, my jaw somewhere on the floor. *Well, when you put it that way.*

He nods once, his eyes finding mine as if to emphasize his words and then disappears within the crowd. Leaving me short of breath in a wave of people pushing impatiently past me.

I take a second to gather my thoughts and continue drunkenly toward the turnstiles.

Before I swipe through, I glance over my shoulder and, through the mass of people behind me, see that he's heading for the benches along the windows. I quickly turn back around so he won't see me looking.

My insides have turned to mush. Two minutes ago, I was on a high, ready to reclaim my life after Chris. *But, uh, who's*

Chris again?

I'm fully aware that I need to scan my badge to get beyond the turnstiles, but I can't remember where it might be. I fumble with my purse, frustrated with myself—frustrated that one sentence from Charles Sinclair has me forgetting Chris completely, forgetting *myself* completely.

Imagine what one night could do. The thought has my mouth going dry. My heart beating in my throat.

Maybe Layla was right.

I stand up straight and turn to the bench where he'd sat down, his coffee on the ledge next to him.

His eyes cling to mine as I reach up to remove the bow from my hair, holding it between two fingers. I make sure he sees it drop to the floor.

One eyebrow rises as he leans forward, watching.

I wink, holding his gaze for just a second, and then turn, fishing my badge out of my purse and swiping through the turnstiles.

He'll find me.



I SPEND the day running through my measly filing tasks with delight, thinking myself a clever, sensuous tease. All day, I picture him sitting in that same spot, on the bench by the window, twirling my bow around his finger.

As I drag and drop file after file, I imagine his fingers trailing up my neck and into my hair, grabbing hold of my bow and tugging it out.

His words echo in the quiet of the office. *I'll have your toes curling.*

At some point during the day, Evelyn calls me into her office to let me know that I'll start working from home on

Monday. It's one day a week for now, but in a month, it'll turn into two, and in three months, it'll turn into three.

Steph leans over her coffee once I sit down, side-eyeing Evelyn's office.

Her voice is low, so only I can hear. "Just so you know, when we work from home three days a week, no one is really counting. I went to Mexico for a month earlier this year and I don't think Evelyn even noticed. As long as you're on your shit, she doesn't care."

She gives me a wide grin before returning her attention to her screen.

I tuck that little nugget of knowledge in the back of my head and continue my work, thoughts of Charles Sinclair dancing through my head.

CHARLES

I take a seat on one of the benches by the door and watch as she heads toward the turnstiles, her pace slower than usual. The smell of her perfume sticks in my nose, warm and sweet.

I took a risk, that's for sure, urged on by warm strawberries and thoughts of my skin against hers, her hair tangled up in my fist.

I don't believe in all the spirituality of the universe stuff that Amy always gabbed on about, but something about this feels kinetic. This whole time, I'd wondered if the innocent-looking, sweet Annabel had a wild side. She has no idea, but she gave me the perfect opening to offer exactly what I'm good for.

The way her lips parted and eyes widened after I whispered in her ear told me all I needed to know. She's interested, and it's only a matter of time.

Something tells me Annabel Hall is worth the wait.

When she turns back to look at me, I'm careful not to look away.

The echoes of the lobby cease as I narrow in on her, following her movements as she pulls the white bow out of her hair, holds it between two fingers, and drops it on the floor.

And then she winks.

A rush of blood runs south. My pants are immediately too tight.

She swipes through the turnstiles, abandoning her bow on the floor, and all I can imagine is her bending over to pick it up, my fingers tracing the outline of her backside.

That wink.

She wants to play a little game, then.

Immediately, I'm on my feet, weaving through the crowd to where the bow lies on the floor. I wipe it off on my shirt, the smooth silk inspiring images of a naked and begging Annabel Hall running through my mind.

I bet her skin is just as soft.

But I won't go after her just yet.

I can play games too.

I let out a long sigh, anxious to be alone so I can relieve myself of the pressure, but that won't be happening anytime soon. The bow tucked safely in my pocket, I head outside. I need to walk off the past few minutes before my first meeting in an hour.

Just as I'm about to push through the doors, I hear my name from somewhere behind me.

“Charlie!”

Dieter. Fuck. He waves exuberantly at me from the elevators, stopping traffic from getting on or off. Once he has my attention, he meanders toward me, oblivious to the people behind him who have to readjust their trajectories in his wake.

“Hey, Dieter,” I say, turning toward him. “I was just on my way out.”

He swipes through the turnstiles and runs to catch up with me. “I'll walk with you.”

“Okay.”

We push out the doors to the sunshine outside. “I just wanted to make sure you saw that we have a new business incentive for this quarter.”

“Yeah, of course.” I didn’t. Gabi will probably fill me in later.

“I have a lead that I want to pass over to you. One of my friends from college started her own company. She’s been pretty successful and wants to discuss advertising with us. I gave her a high-level overview, but I think if you and Gabi put together a proposal for her, maybe take her out to a nice dinner or two, you’ll easily get a million annually from her.”

I miss a break in the sidewalk and trip, catching myself quickly but not without Dieter noticing. “A million?”

“Like I said, she’s done well.”

I blink. *Since when does money fall from the sky?* An expected budget like that usually involves corporate desk jockeys arguing over what to include in a proposal, who then get angry with me for ignoring the whole thing and agreeing to whatever the client wants.

And that’s the reason they’re behind a desk, and I’m the one brokering the deal.

“Send over an introduction. One of us will set something up.”

“Good man. I’ll warn you, though, she expects a lot, but if she’s impressed, she’ll be a customer for life.”

“Then I’ll make sure she’s impressed.”

“Good.” Dieter stops, glancing back toward the building. “Well, I better get into work.”

“Sure. I’ll see you next time.”

Dieter gives me a knowing smile as he walks away.

A million dollars. If I can make that happen, that’s a nice chunk of change in next month’s paycheck. Not to mention, it’ll satisfy whatever new business incentive he’s made up. Hell, I could even hire another nurse for my mom.

I wonder why he chose me out of every talented sales rep we have. I have great numbers, but I’m not a kiss-ass like so many of the others. They would have drooled over a deal like

this, where they just have to dot their *i*'s, cross their *t*'s, and walk out with a million dollars.

Then again, maybe there's more to the deal than Dieter is telling me.



ON WEDNESDAY, I go into the office again. Shortly after our brief encounter, Dieter sent me a long-winded email that served one purpose: he wanted me to know he amassed some materials for the new client he's handing me on a silver platter, and I wouldn't get any of those materials unless I came in.

Fine.

He could have just given everything to Gabi, which is exactly what I'm going to do as soon as I get my hands on it, but I'll play his little game if there's potentially a million-dollar deal on the line.

When I get off the elevator and head down the hallway to our desks, Gabi looks up at me. She raises her eyebrows, giving me a quick wave as I pass her by, but she doesn't get off the phone. I nod toward Dieter's office, letting her know why I'm here, and she mouths, "Good luck."

I knock twice, more as a courtesy than a request, and make myself comfortable on the slippery vinyl sofa across from his desk.

His eyes are trained on his computer, his fingers flying across the keyboard. "Hey bud, let me finish this email."

Bud. I resist the urge to roll my eyes.

It's nearing five and I have exactly one hour to spend here before I plan on staking out the lobby for Annabel Hall. I'm counting down the seconds.

I reach into my pocket, rubbing the silky fabric of her bow between my fingers, and a little jolt of excitement runs through me. In my head, I see that wink again, the bow dropping

daintily to the floor. The scent of warm strawberries in her wake.

“So.” Dieter pushes his keyboard away from him and turns to me. “How you been?”

“Pretty good. Looking forward to hearing about this potential new client.”

He claps, wringing his hands together. “Oh, that’s going to be an exciting one. Her name is Mina Larson. I met her at a frat party during my sophomore year of college. She was doing a keg stand, and at that moment, I thought I’d marry her one day.” He sighs, lost in nostalgia.

“I take it you’ve talked to her more recently?”

He leans forward, pulling his keyboard back. “Ran into her at a Starbucks and we got talking. I think we can help her out.” He starts typing and then turns his monitor so I can see it.

It’s a picture of a cat.

Anger stirs in my belly. *He made me come in for this?*

“That’s her cat. You want to know what his name is?”

“What?”

“Sir Charles.” He snickers.

“Ah.” I undo the top button of my shirt, annoyed that Dieter seems intent on wasting my time.

“Isn’t that funny?”

“Is that why you gave me her account?”

He thinks about this for a second. “I actually didn’t know until this morning, but it’s like a sign, isn’t it, that you’re the guy for the job?” An unwanted image of Amy flashes into my mind—that’s something she would say. I push the thought away.

“So I take it your day was spent creeping on Mina Larson’s Facebook?”

Dieter blows right past the subtle dig. “I’m doing recon for you.”

I resist the urge to scoff. Gabi will do the real research and summarize it succinctly in a formal, shared document that she sends to the whole team. Dieter's just trying to relive his glory days and brag about knowing someone who's now a somebody.

"You know, we had a class together senior year and got lunch almost every day afterward. It was one of the toughest classes in the business school and both of us were dead set on A's. If it weren't for her help that semester, I don't think I would have even passed, let alone gotten a good grade. I hope I did the same for her." He nods wistfully, leaning back in his chair and resting his hands on his head.

Taking a quick glance at the clock on his screen, I resign myself to an hour of Dieter pumping himself up.

I laugh and nod when I need to, but otherwise, check out of the conversation. I would never have agreed to this meeting if it wasn't for the chance of running into Annabel afterward, and as the minutes tick slowly by, I realize I'm probably going to miss her.

But I try to keep perspective. Dieter's always pestering me to come into the office more, and this gives me a full hour of face time. It never hurts to be on your boss's good side. Though the fire in my belly rages strong when my fingers graze the bow in my pocket, I decide I'll come back tomorrow. Twenty-four hours won't kill me.

I force my muscles to relax on the couch and listen as Dieter regales me with story after story, half of them not even containing Mina Larson anymore.

Eventually, he pulls her picture up on LinkedIn, his eyes drawn to the screen as his stories jump from tangent to tangent. She looks about my age, even though she's got a good ten on me if she was in college with Dieter. She has long, braided hair that fades to blonde ends, smooth mocha skin, and piercing eyes. She's attractive, to put it lightly—no wonder Dieter's hung up on her.

By the time the meeting ends, most of the office has already left, but I'm relieved to see Gabi is still here. It looks

like she's getting ready to leave, but considering Dieter's behind me and seems intent on chatting, I duck into the cube next to her that's covered in party favors.

"Nice talking to you, Dieter," I say over my shoulder. I collapse into an abandoned office chair that sits far too close to the ground.

"You too, Charlie, let's do this more often." He waves as he continues down the hallway.

Gabi raises her eyebrows at me as she slips her laptop into her purse. "What was that all about?"

I throw my feet on the desk and run my hands over my face. "Dieter wanted to brag about knowing some beauty brand CEO before she was a beauty brand CEO."

"Ah." She takes a quick sip from her reusable water bottle and slips it into her bag.

"He gave me her contact info."

Gabi holds out her hand. "I'll set it up."

I pass her the folder and she drops it into her bag behind her laptop. She grins at me as she zips it closed.

I narrow my eyes. "Why are you smiling like that?"

"Did you get my email?"

One of these days, Gabi will realize I'm reliably at least three days behind on any emails she sends me.

"No."

"Frankie Carver."

I nod in understanding. "I should have known."

"I look forward to seeing you there."

"I look forward to the free meal while you do all the selling."

She throws her bag over her shoulder. "I can't wait. God, he's so hot. I was creeping on his Instagram today. Dude's got, like, a ten-pack."

“You realize all that means is that he only eats chicken and broccoli.”

She huffs. “Let me have my crush.”

I stand up from my seat, checking down the hallway to make sure Dieter’s gone. “Have your crush, Gabi. Enjoy it. Maybe you’ll have the magic touch in getting that extra million a year I’ve been lobbying him for.”

Her smile widens. “Maybe he’ll have the magic touch.”

A laugh jumps from my throat. I gesture toward the elevators. “Want to walk down with me?”

“No, you go ahead. I’m waiting for my sister. She said she’ll be done in a few. One of the few days one of her boy toys isn’t taking all her post-work attention.”

“Alright. Well, bye, Gabs,” I call over my shoulder as she fusses with something in her bag.

There’s a small part of me that thinks maybe—just maybe—I might get to see Annabel after all.

The lobby is full of people, full of movement, and I search for polka dots, a silky bow nestled in dirty-blonde hair. When I see no sign of her in the lobby, I head into the café. I scan the room, my heart sinking as I realize there’s no Annabel Hall in sight.

I should have gotten her number when I had the chance.

Tomorrow.

ANNABEL

Every day this week, I've expected to see him in the lobby, sitting on the bench by the windows, bow in hand, only to be met with a sinking feeling in my stomach upon realizing he's nowhere in sight.

I've started to wonder if his game is the thrill of the chase. Maybe once a girl seems interested, he looks elsewhere. Maybe he just wanted to see if he could win me over, if I'm as easy as I look or if he could buy me with a silly hair bow for less than the price of a drink.

I'm beginning to lose hope. He blew into my life, awakened a sinister little fire that burned for him deep in my abdomen and disappeared.

I'm angry and desperate to release the tension he's inspired in me. I rush home from work, not even glancing at the nearby boutique to see if they have any new bows I like, and settle myself in the bathtub, gently stroking myself.

I close my eyes and move slowly, imagining his fingers dancing up and down my opening, slowly pushing inside. His offer pops into my head again. *I'll have your toes curling and your back arching in no time.*

I imagine him moving on top of me, his body weight lowering onto me, his fingers moving inside me, teasing me until I'm just about ready—and then taking him in, feeling myself clench around his thickness, feeling him push deep inside me, so deep I feel like I might burst, and moving, rocking into me slowly at first until we reach a crescendo, my

nails raking down his back and his grunts turning to sighs in my ear.

I finally give in and order a vibrator. I haven't had one since college and if this is what life is going to be like, post-Chris, I need something to give my wrist a break. I impulse buy a dozen red roses from the corner store with my microwave dinner because I might as well romance myself while I'm at it. I set them up in my fancy vase on my entryway table.

My confidence waning, I text Layla and tell her what happened. She tells me to meet her for happy hour tomorrow so we can dissect this properly because, from all angles, she thinks I pulled off the tease but can't be sure until we talk about it in person.

I replay the encounter so many times that I'm not sure I remember it correctly. *That was intrigue splattered across his face, not secondhand embarrassment. Right?*

CHARLES

Today's the day I get Annabel's phone number. This morning's client meeting went well, as did my afternoon workout at the gym, and I'm *ready* to see her again. I wonder if she's excited to see me.

I wonder if she wears white silk panties that match the bow I keep in my pocket. I wonder if they feel just as soft.

The thought brings a rush of blood to my groin. I try to think of other things—the slightly balding man we made a deal with this morning, the smell of the dumpsters outside the building on trash day.

That one does it.

I push into the lobby early, planning to actually check my email or at least bullshit back and forth with Gabi for a while. My guess is that Annabel will probably head home at some point over the next hour, and I'm not leaving tonight up to chance—or Dieter.

The past few days have been hard. Figuratively and literally. I've completely eradicated Amy from my mind, aside from the few insistent texts and calls I get from her. At first, I thought I might have left something at her place, that she was trying to get in touch with me for a real reason, but the last text she sent me was an invitation out for a drink by her apartment. Not at all subtle.

And I thought she'd been getting the hint.

I'll need to be clearer with her. Although, I thought telling her we should stop seeing each other was clear enough. Either way, the Amy situation is not my highest priority—I can be clear with her at some point in the future. Right now, all I need to do is secure a phone number, ideally, a drink or two, and *extra* ideally, an invitation to Annabel's place.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I sit down on my bench and pull my laptop out. I scan through my emails, most of which are spam or company newsletters from our clients. Some meetings, corporate updates, nothing of particular interest. An invitation to guys' night at my college buddy's house that they must have accidentally added me to—I haven't gone to a game night in years. Part of me misses it, but I just don't have time for nights like that anymore.

I pull out my phone, already bored with my email, and see a barrage of text messages and missed calls on my screen that have my blood running cold. I must not have heard my phone going off in my pocket.

They're from Julian.

My fingers can't move fast enough as I call him back.

He answers after one ring. "Hey."

"Are you okay?"

"Me and Ashley and Tuck are fine, but we can't find Mom."

"You can't find Mom?"

My heart hammers in my chest.

"The new nurse, Peggy, started today, remember? Something about her must have confused Mom because she left for the bathroom while we were talking and somehow left the apartment without her phone. We've scoured the whole building, but she's not here."

The lobby is a sea of people in front of me, and before I realize what I'm doing, I stand, shoving my laptop back in my

bag and brushing through the maze. “Okay, I’ll be right there. You’re still at her apartment?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to start circling the building. Ashley and Tuck are going to wait with Peggy at the apartment. They have all the staff looking for her, but they want a familiar face there if they find her.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in five minutes. What side of the building are you starting on? I’ll do the opposite and meet you in the middle.” I push through the front doors, squinting in the sunlight.

“I’m going to go around back. I want to look in the shops back there. She likes that New Age store, so hopefully, she just went there.”

“Okay, I’ll do the front then.”

“Check that bar, okay? And the take-out place?”

“Yeah. Yup, I’ll check everywhere.” I mentally map out the block the assisted living is on, trying to count how many places she could be.

“Okay, thanks Char. See you soon.”

I take off running as soon as we hang up, the June heat instantly creating a layer of sweat on my skin.

There was a part of me that got used to my mother’s disease—trusted its current state, even, as ill-advised as that is. She’s never been a wanderer, and that comforted me—sure, she’s in the advanced stages of dementia, and it really sucks—but she never wandered. We didn’t have to worry that she’d be in one place one minute and gone the next.

Now we do.

The whole thing rushes back to me as I weave between walkers and run between cars stuck in rush hour traffic jams—the initial diagnosis, the first signs that she was losing herself, the first time she called me my shithead father’s name, the first time she forgot who her grandson was.

It’s almost as if we can deal with her current state as long as it’s not getting worse.

And then it gets worse, and the pain and worry come back just as strong as that very first day.

I know I'm running to stop my mom from wandering into rush hour traffic. To stop her from eating shrimp because she's deathly allergic but doesn't always remember. To stop her from becoming a victim to someone who recognizes someone worth preying on. But I run as if finding her might stop the progression of the disease, stop that first day from ever happening in the first place. Like I can stop our own personal Groundhog Day hell from happening just this one time.

I skid into the take-out shop and look around. There's a long line of people at the register, but the man working there clocks me, probably recognizing the panic in my eyes, and waits cautiously for me to approach. Before barging through all of them, I pull up a recent picture of my mom on my phone. I hold it up and ask each person as I pass by them, "Have you seen this woman?"

I move closer to the register, each person looking at her face and shaking their head until the guy at the register finally does the same.

"Do you have a bathroom?" I ask.

He gestures to a door on the other side of the register. He pushes it open for me, and I'm not relieved to see it's empty.

"Thank you," I call out before returning to the street.

Julian calls as I step outside.

"Did you find her?" he asks.

"No. I take it you haven't either." My heart pounds. If we can't find my mom, I'm not sure what we're going to do. We'll probably have to go to the police station, file a missing person report, and put out a silver alert.

"No, I'm heading your way. Where are you?"

"I'm going to check the convenience store. I'll meet you at the bar after."

"Okay."

My breathing is shallow, and I force a few deep breaths.

In the convenience store next door, I ask each person the same question, holding my mom's picture up in front of me. I'm met with resounding headshakes. They have no public bathroom, but one of the workers goes back to check the one in the storeroom, regardless. No Mom.

A pit of anxiety builds in my stomach as I continue down the street. This is the last building within fifty feet of her facility, and if she's gone farther than this, she could be anywhere.

This disappearance alone is enough to put a tracking bracelet on her. The assisted living facility offers them to residents who are prone to wandering, but Julian and I always thought the risk of wandering wasn't high enough to justify the invasion of privacy.

Now, I'm not so sure.

I push inside the old Irish pub and see that it's mostly deserted.

But there, at the end of the bar, is my mother, chatting up the bartender.

A wave of relief washes over me, and I could collapse right here, over the threshold of a dive bar that looks like it was last cleaned in 1980. The sharp scent of antiseptic does nothing to cancel out the stale beer ingrained into every crevice. Now that I know she's safe, my muscles relax, my fists unclenching.

My mom is fine.

I move toward her slowly, scanning her, scanning the bartender talking to her. She has a drink in front of her, something clear and bubbly in a tall glass with a lime on the side.

That's not good. With her disease, the last thing she should be doing is drinking.

"Mom." I touch her shoulder gently, unsure of what's going on inside her head and doing my best not to agitate her.

She looks at me for a second before she recognizes me.
“Hi honey, how are you?”

I wonder if she knows it’s me or thinks I’m my dad.

“I’m okay. How are you? Are you okay?”

“Oh, I’m doing well.” Her smile is slightly reserved.

She’s not being evasive. She doesn’t even realize she did something wrong. It’s not her fault, of course—it’s her disease. But her guilt or lack thereof can be a good indicator of where she is in a day. She seems comfortable. At ease. And I can’t help but wonder what she’s experiencing. Where her mind is.

Sometimes, it seems like she wanders through the past, experiencing memories like walking through an old movie, not quite as they were, but vivid and real—at least to her—nonetheless.

The bartender eyes me as I lean against the bar.

“Can I get you a club soda?” she asks. She glances surreptitiously at my mother’s glass.

“No, thank you.” I turn to my mom. “Hey, we should get you back home.”

“Seth, I’m having a drink.”

So it’s one of those days. The hair on the back of my neck stands up.

Julian walks in then, his eyes locking on mine as he lets out a deep breath. He whips out his phone to let Ashley know we found Mom.

“Mom.” He hangs up the phone as he joins us on her other side, a sheen of sweat across his forehead.

“Julian, honey, so nice to see you.”

She never forgets Julian.

I let him take the lead in getting Mom back to her room. She’s not interested in me right now, or more aptly, some asshole version of my dad that she sees when she looks at me. Julian ushers her nonchalantly toward the door.

I hand the bartender my business card, in case it happens again, along with a few dollars for keeping my mom occupied.

“It’s not the first time,” she says, smiling warmly. “We keep a lookout for any older folks who wander in and generally won’t serve them. I was hoping to get her name so I could call the assisted living across the street. Does she live there?”

“She does. She doesn’t usually wander, though.”

She leans back against the bar. “My grandmother had dementia. Sometimes, the progression of it can take you by surprise.”

She holds up a finger and then starts rummaging around underneath the bar for something. She’s still bent over when I hear a click, and I lean over to see she’s writing something on the back of a receipt.

She straightens up and hands the small piece of paper to me. “If she heads out again, let me know. I’m here most nights.”

I look down at the paper in my hand and see the name Kat, followed by ten digits.

“Or, you know, if you just need to talk. I know how hard it can be.”

She smiles warmly at me, and even though I know my mom and Julian are waiting for me to leave, my feet are glued where I stand. The past half hour has my heart beating fast, my shirt sticking to my chest. My focus is ten feet away, my mom and brother chatting surprisingly casually for nearly having to file a police report.

But for a moment, Kat brings me back to reality.

Is she hitting on me? Or is she just genuinely nice?

Normally, I have a feel for these things. I know an opportunity when I see one, but I’m caught off guard here, my confidence wavering. My back is slick with sweat, my fists clenching and unclenching like I can release some of the tension by milking the air.

It dawns on me, then, that Kat is attractive. She's got long, dark-brown hair and dark, shaded eyes. I see a hint of a tattoo on the sliver of skin between her ripped jeans and the black tank top that hugs her torso. She has a nose ring, a little sparkle hidden in the curve of her face.

"Thank you." The words come out thick, like I've only just learned to speak.

"You're a good son," she says. "Seth, was it?"

The color drains from my face as I correct her. "Charlie."

Her face scrunches up over her mistake. "I'm sorry, that's rough."

I nod, not sure what to say to her—I don't normally talk about my mom's disease. Julian and Ashley are probably the only ones who know how far she's deteriorated, but even they don't understand what it's like to have your own mother forget who you are.

I tuck the receipt with Kat's phone number on it into my pocket and follow my mom and Julian out.

They chat easily as we walk my mom home. He reminds her that they met the nurse today. That Peggy was excited to speak with her. My mom insists she just wanted to dip out for a quick nip and had planned to return soon. Julian jokes with her, telling her she's just as quick-footed as she always was.

I follow behind them, struck by the last half hour.

I still don't feel settled, despite knowing my mom is safe. It feels as if I've lived a week since leaving the office. Julian has flipped back into his role of the caring son so effortlessly, and I know I need to follow suit, but I have this irrational thought of us leaving my mom safe in her apartment only to be notified tomorrow or the next day, or in a week, that she's disappeared again.

This time, we were lucky—we knew she slipped out immediately. Next time, we might not be.

Not to mention, things will get exponentially worse once she starts forgetting Julian, too. *If* she starts forgetting him.

I just need to remember it's her disease that caused the wandering, her disease that calls me my father's name.

Not her.

She's still my mom. She's just a little confused.

ANNABEL

After work on Friday, I head to the café and order a kiwi iced tea, just like last week. This time, I plan to drink it alone. But I won't lie—there's still an inkling of hope somewhere deep inside me. *What if the next time I see him is in six months? A year?* I know from our conversations that he only comes into the office when he wants to, and generally, he doesn't want to.

I watch the barista make my iced tea, lost in thought and somewhat enamored by her warp-speed movements.

And then I feel someone touch my elbow. My breath catches, and I pause before turning, wondering whether I could be imagining it.

It takes me a second to recognize the girl with long, dark hair standing behind me.

“Mari.” Her name jumps to my mind as my mouth opens to speak it.

“Annabel,” she says, smiling. “I'm so glad I ran into you.”

“Oh yeah,” I say, my brain struggling to catch up to this unexpected person behind me. “Yeah, I'm glad I ran into you, too. How are you? I hope you're not scarred from that elevator ride.”

The barista notices Mari and asks if she'd like anything.

“A dragon fruit iced tea, please,” she says with a quick smile and turns back to me. “I've never been so in shape. I took the stairs for about two weeks after that.” She rolls her

eyes. “But one day, I woke up late and had no choice but to take the elevator. For a week, I took the elevator up and the stairs down. Now, I can finally do both the up *and* the down. It still makes me nervous, but each day gets a little better.”

“Any progress is good progress,” I say, claiming the green drink on the counter as she grabs the pink one. “And by the way, I looked it up afterward. The likelihood of you ever getting trapped in an elevator again is so small that you probably don’t have to worry about it. You got your once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

We thank the barista and she waves as we walk toward the front doors of the building. I take a sip of my iced tea and the subtly sweet kiwi goodness sends a little shiver down my spine.

“Well, I just wanted to say I appreciate what you did. Not that it wasn’t blatantly obvious, but that’s not the point, right? I knew everyone in that elevator could see me struggling, but you made the effort to bring me down. Thanks for looking out.”

My face heats. “Honestly, I wasn’t totally with it myself. It helped me to focus on your panic rather than my own.”

She knocks her drink against mine in a cheers, little splashes of condensation dripping onto our hands. “Well, isn’t that just a perfectly symbiotic relationship?”

“Also, just so you know, I don’t think anyone could tell you were panicking except for me. I used to have panic attacks a lot, so I can spot them from a mile away. If I had known you better, I might have hugged you. That always helps me, but hugs from a stranger can be alarming.”

Mari throws her head back and laughs. “I don’t even know what I would have done. I might have been stunned out of it.”

“Or it would have totally backfired.”

We’re quiet for a moment as we push through the doors into the still-blazing sun, and we have that awkward moment where we’re both trying to figure out which way the other is going.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Mari pauses on the sidewalk outside the door.

“Shoot.”

“How did you get over them? Your panic attacks?”

We move out of the way of a crowd crossing the street in front of the building. “Mine were situational. I figured out what my triggers were, and I removed them from my life. But everybody is different, you know, especially if it’s not one trigger or based on one experience. I think I was lucky that I was able to pinpoint it and move on.”

She nods, seemingly digesting the information. “Yeah, that makes sense.” She motions toward the sidewalk in front of us, the ice in her drink swishing. “I’m going this way.”

“Me too.”

“So, I take it you got the job?” Mari says, pulling a pair of sunglasses out of her backpack pocket and throwing them over her eyes.

They’re red, heart-shaped aviators, and for a moment, as she sips her iced tea in the blazing sun, I’m struck by how cool she is—not just the way she looks, either. She was able to talk casually about a serious subject, process it, and then carry on with her day. I already feel like I know her better than most acquaintances. Maybe even some friends.

“I did get the job,” I confirm.

“Congratulations. I had a feeling.” We walk past a group of suits arguing about their happy hour destination.

“You said the same thing that day, didn’t you?”

She flashes me a grin as she tightens the straps of her backpack. “I work in HR. Over time, you develop a feel for people.”

“You know, that was a nice boost you gave me that day. I really appreciate it.”

“Like I said”—she motions between us—“symbiotic.”

We check for cars and cross the street, the restaurant I'm meeting Layla at coming into view. I clock Layla at a table outside, her feet up on the chair across from her and her face turned toward the sun.

"Well, this is my stop," I motion to the brightly colored outdoor area in front of us.

Mari waves, continuing on her way. "Enjoy!"

Before she's out of earshot, I pause. "Hey," I call out, and she turns toward me. "Do you want to join us? I'm meeting my best friend from college. It's just a girls' hangout."

Her eyebrows crinkle. She checks her phone and then nods. "I have plans a little later, but yeah, I can stay for a drink."

We guzzle down our beverages from the café and drop them in the trash bins on the way to the table Layla staked out. She waves as we make our way over, and I detect a hint of confusion in her expression that she quickly wipes away.

"Layla, this is Mari, a fellow survivor of Elevator Gate 2023. Mari, this is Layla, a fellow survivor of Drexel Class of 2016."

Layla's eyes go wide over her half-full pink drink. "Oh my god, so you know what Elevator Man looks like!"

I scrunch my eyes closed. I'd forgotten the reason for the happy hour. An analysis of the tease, a breakdown, likely involving a reenactment, of what exactly happened and what I may have done wrong.

"Elevator Man?" Mari asks as we slide into two empty seats around the table.

"The superhot guy in the elevator that Belly is obsessed with."

I see it click in Mari's face. "Wait. The guy you were standing next to?"

"That's the one."

“Oh, he was hot,” Mari agrees, and Layla claps her hands together, bouncing in her seat.

“How hot, though? I can never tell with Annabel. She thinks Steve Carrell is hot.”

Mari glances over at me, one eyebrow raised.

I roll my eyes—Layla will never let me live this down. “I think his humor is charming and as far as normal people go, yes, he’s hot.”

“Too old for you, though,” she insists.

“That doesn’t mean I can’t think he’s hot.”

“Right, but it’s got to be a real possibility, or it’s not hot. It’s just, like, you appreciate the way they look.”

“In that case, I don’t want to talk about the hot guy in the elevator because if hotness means it’s a possibility, I don’t want either of you to ever look at him.”

Mari turns to Layla. “He’s so hot I wouldn’t have blamed her if they started going at it while we were stuck in there.”

Layla’s mouth sets into an *O*. “That’s significantly hot.”

The waiter comes over and asks for our drinks—a kiwi martini for me and a simple vodka soda for Mari.

“So.” Layla takes a long sip of her drink, her eyes dancing between Mari and me. She sits up straight and speaks loudly. “We are gathered here today to determine whether Annabel fucked up her chance with the hottest elevator man who ever did exist. Tell us what happened.”

I walk them through the scene without sparing any details. The waiter delivers our drinks right when I’m about to repeat the words he whispered to me, so I lower my voice as I speak and elicit a series of squeals from across the table.

“Wait, let me see you wink,” Mari says.

I throw a quick one at her.

“Eh, okay, yeah, I’d give that a solid eight out of ten. Little slow but better than being too fast and him missing it or

confusing it for a facial spasm.”

Layla laughs. “Yeah, your wink game is fine. Any chance he just got busy?”

“I don’t know, I guess. I mean, I never got his phone number. Like rule number one, never leave a hot guy without at least *trying* for a phone number.”

“Yeah, but you were doing a tease thing,” Mari says. She swishes her straw around her drink and takes a long pull before continuing, “The tease can’t ask for the phone number.”

“Right, but being without a phone number causes all this confusion and self-doubt, which is worse than just straight up asking for what you want.”

Mari rests her drink on the table, swishing it around in the puddle of condensation pooling beneath it. “It’s kind of fun, though, isn’t it? The waiting, the thinking about him, the wondering if he’ll show up. It’s exciting.”

I let out a sigh. “I guess so, but only if I see him again.”

“True. If it leads to something, it’s all worth it. If it doesn’t, it’s just lady blue balls.”

“Seriously! I’m dying over here!” I lean over to them, the kiwi martini going straight to my head. “After what he said to me, I bought a vibrator. I haven’t had one since college, but God, he really did something to me. With only his words.”

“Yes, girl!” Mari shouts, slapping the table and drawing the attention of a couple sitting a few feet away.

“Oh, I’m so glad to hear that.” Layla shakes her head, turning to Mari. “She’s had a rough time recently—” She stops and looks at me as if waiting for my approval to continue.

I sigh, my excitement over Elevator Man waning as thoughts of Chris take over. I suppose Mari should know the story. “My ex cheated on me. We worked together, and I caught him in our bed with his assistant. Thus, new apartment, new job, and I was really hoping for a new sexual partner, but that part remains to be seen.”

“Yikes. I’m so sorry.”

I shake my head. “Not even the worst part. He was the third.” I hold up three fingers for emphasis. “The third person to cheat on me. And he did it in the most hurtful way. The whole time, he was super sweet when I freaked out and acted like a psycho because he understood the hurt. He understood what I had gone through. And then he goes and does the same exact thing.”

“Oh, you poor thing.” A group of college kids sit at a nearby table, loudly discussing their drink selections.

I hold up a hand. “Thank you, but I’m no longer accepting pity. He’s over and done with and can rot in hell for all I care. But it does mean that I have quite a hump to get over before I’m ready to get serious with someone again.”

“Hence the obsession with Elevator Man.”

“Hence! Yes!” I take a big gulp of kiwi martini. “So, what do we think? Did I screw it all up?”

They both shake their heads.

“Give it time.” Layla waves it off, but she seems less enthusiastic than before. I hope she doesn’t think I’m upset that I had to tell the Chris story.

“Yeah, I think he just got busy or maybe he’s trying to tease you back, which might be even better.”

I raise my eyebrows. “I like that theory. It’s certainly working.” I think it over for a second. “Alright, I’m okay with that conclusion. He’s either busy or teasing. Elevator Man meeting adjourned,” I shout. Layla downs the rest of her drink.

“So, Mari, how’s your love life? Any incidents we need to dissect?”

“Unfortunately, I’m woefully single without a prospect in sight.”

Something about that surprises me—I just assumed there was someone behind the scenes equally cool as she is. “That’ll be short-lived. Enjoy it while you can.”

“Thank you for your confidence,” she says, repeating my line from the elevator.

I can't help but smile at her.

She leans back in her chair, the sun making her heart-shaped aviators glow. "What about you, Layla?"

"Nothing going on here." She flags down the server and requests another round.

"Oh, that's not true. She's sleeping with her ex," I explain.

Layla shoots me a look. "I'm not."

"Who was it I heard over the phone in your bed?" The college students loudly place their orders as the server passes them by with a tray of empty glasses that looks far too heavy to be making pit stops.

"No one."

I roll my eyes at her. "You're not sneaky."

"Annabel, drop it." Her tone is flat. Final.

I'm taken aback. "I'm sorry. I mean, it's Paul. Sure, he's not the most interesting—I mean, he's an accountant, you know—but is he the worst guy in the world to have in your bed? Absolutely not, especially if you're just getting your rocks off."

"Annabel."

I stop talking, the seriousness on her face confusing me. I don't know how this conversation is suddenly offensive when we have some variation of it on nearly a weekly basis.

"I'm sorry."

"I just don't want to talk about it," she insists as our server drops off three fresh drinks at our table.

"Okay."

A silence descends over us while I try to figure out why Layla suddenly doesn't want to discuss Paul. I know enough about his penis that nothing has really felt off-limits, at least until now.

"Mari, I love your sunglasses. Where'd you get them?" Layla asks.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

"Oh, I got them from the boutique down the street."

"I've bought so many bows from there." I pull my bow around over my shoulder. "I love that place."

"They have a great little yoga section too," Layla offers.

The conversation devolves to shopping and local fitness classes, and I'm relieved we've rebounded from our few seconds of silence.

But as we finish our drinks and Mari gets ready to leave, I can't help but wonder what is happening in Layla's life that I don't know about.

Since when did we keep secrets like this from each other?

If she wants privacy, that's totally fine—it's just different from how we operated before.

We wave Mari goodbye, and when I turn back to Layla, it's like nothing ever happened. If she doesn't want to tell me, it's fine—I'm not going to bring it up again. But I don't get why that topic is taboo. We order another round of martinis and though we don't talk about boys any further, we don't run out of conversation topics either.

By the time my Uber pulls up to my apartment, I feel a little woozy and light-headed.

Once inside, I flick on the lights and grab a tall glass of water. I down half of it while standing at the sink and fill it up again before stripping my clothes off.

My apartment is too warm—I haven't figured out the ideal thermostat setting yet, so I adjust it a few degrees lower before heading to the bathroom. I desperately need a shower, the grime of June heat sticking to my skin.

I mindlessly check my email with one arm behind the shower curtain, the droplets of water pitter-pattering my skin as I wait for it to warm. My email is taking a while to load, and I start to wonder if my phone's Wi-Fi connection is acting up. I'm about to give up on it when I finally see a new email appear in my inbox.

Subject: FOUND BOW

CHARLES

On Friday, we meet in the park for lunch like usual, except this time, there's a certain fatigue in our movements. I think Julian and Ashley slept about as poorly as I did, judging from their subdued greetings and the store-bought snacks instead of Ashley's usual homemade spread. I add the convenience store taquitos I brought to the pile and ignore Ashley's confused expression. She'd asked me to bring food, but she didn't specify what, and I wanted taquitos.

I greet my mom first, hesitantly kissing her cheek.

"Charlie, so nice to see you, honey," she says, squeezing my hand.

A wave of relief washes over me. She remembers me today.

Having gotten that out of the way, I sit down on the blanket next to Tucker, who looks like he's about to turn into a potato chip at the rate he's shoveling them into his mouth. He smiles at me expectantly, and my heart sinks as I realize I forgot to pick up a new pack of Pokémon cards for him.

"Sorry, Tuck, I got caught up—I don't have any cards for you."

He shrugs. "It's okay. Last night was a lot."

I don't want to laugh, but I can't help a smile coming to my face. I have no doubt in my mind he picked that up from

one of his parents' conversations. A hint of a smile touches Ashley's face as she and Julian lock eyes.

"Thanks for understanding, Tuck. I'll have one for you next time."

"Cool."

He's faster to forgive than most adults I know. He refocuses on his food, a little calmer today than most days. Last night's drama must have been a lot for him, too.

"How's today?" I ask, glancing at my mom.

"Like nothing ever happened." Ashley shakes her head.

Ashley and Tuck usually drive into the city together, park in the garage next to my mom's building, and get her ready for our family lunch at the park. Today, though, Julian met them before going in, just in case she couldn't remember Ashley.

Julian inspects one of the taquitos before taking a bite. "There was a moment when we first arrived that she seemed surprised, but it passed. Since then, it's been a normal Friday."

A second wave of relief passes over me. When I got home after her field trip to the bar, ready to crash, my mind began running. Sure, my mom's wandering could be a one-time issue, but it occurred to me as I lay in bed begging for sleep that days like yesterday could be our new normal.

Whether my mom is fine or not, this worry feels like the kind that might never go away.

But Julian will—and any more wandering will fall squarely on my shoulders.

And I'm not the one she remembers.

I let out a sigh. "Well, as long as Mom is fine, I guess."

Ashley squeezes my arm. "How are you?"

"Carrying on, as always."

She narrows her eyes. She heard my mom call me Seth yesterday. "Are you sure?"

“As sure as I’ll ever be.” I don’t want to have this conversation, and Ashley knows it. “How are you guys?”

A look passes between them, and my heart ticks faster.

“Well, it’s certainly weird timing,” Ashley starts.

They’re still looking at each other, and Julian nods like he’s giving her the go-ahead to tell me something. I think about every possible medical situation that could go wrong within the family, and my heart drops even further when I think about Tucker.

“We went to see a house last weekend, put in a bid on Sunday night, and they called yesterday to let us know it was accepted.” Ashley’s words come out fast, like she’s done something wrong and is trying to explain herself. “Closing is on the fifteenth.”

I feel like my brain is firing in quicksand. There’s no emergency here. This isn’t one negative thing piling on top of another—it’s a positive thing coming at the strangest possible time.

“Congratulations.”

“We were going to call you yesterday, but you know.” She gestures to my mom.

I struggle to find the right words. “That’s awesome. Which house was it? The one you showed me last week?”

Ashley nods. “It’s even more beautiful in person. Oh, Char, I can’t wait for you to come see it.”

I give her a quick hug. “I’m happy for you guys.”

Julian leans forward, playing with an open bag of pretzel sticks. “We did want to talk to you about something, though.” He takes a deep breath. “We were wondering whether it would be better to move Mom up there, too. There’s a nice assisted living facility about twenty minutes away. It’s a little more expensive, and her apartment would be a little smaller, but at least there would be two of us to take care of her, you know? Instead of just you.”

I play with the idea. I'm already overwhelmed and they haven't even moved yet. But Philadelphia is my mom's home, and if she starts wandering regularly, it would be better for her to be in a city she knows. Not to mention, Ashley doesn't work, but taking care of Tucker is more than a full-time job.

I glance at my mom, who happily people watches as we decide her fate. "What if she wanders again?"

Julian leans back on his hands. "Then we'll find her. The reality is, this isn't the first time and it won't be the last. The place I found is similar to this one where we can get her a bracelet, or there's an option for her to live in a wing with full-time security."

It isn't the first time? This is news to me. "When has she wandered before?"

"Remember when you ran into her while she was walking to the grocery store?"

Before we moved my mom here, I was driving to her house for dinner when I saw her walking out of her neighborhood. I was ten minutes late at that point, but she insisted she just wanted to pick up something easy to make. I could tell something was off, but it never occurred to me that she had been wandering.

"And that time she showed up four hours late to Tuck's birthday party in a police cruiser because she missed the turn and kept driving until she ran out of gas?"

A weight grows heavier on my chest.

He continues. "Even last week, Mom met Ashley in the parking garage, and she seemed surprised to see her."

I swallow, several past experiences suddenly sliding into place.

The realization dawns on me that I've been watching her wander and making excuses for it this whole time. "Last week, I visited for dinner, and she was down the hall when I got there, but I thought maybe she was visiting a friend or got bored and decided to move around a bit. It didn't click that she was wandering." I run my hands over my face. "Man, this

whole time, I was thanking my lucky stars that we at least didn't have to worry about *losing* her."

Julian's voice is low when he speaks. "I think we've been much closer to losing her than we've known." He hands me a pamphlet for the assisted living facility near his new house. "Think about it. Let's make sure we're both alright with this."

"Thanks." I tuck the pamphlet into my bag and try to focus on the conversation as it veers toward their new house and Tucker's new school. My mind keeps wandering—just like my mom, without direction.

When we're done with lunch, Julian walks Ashley and Tucker back to her car, and I take my mom to her apartment and get her settled on the couch. She usually watches TV in the afternoon and then heads down to the cafeteria for dinner when she gets hungry.

Her apartment is like a mini version of her house, which wasn't all that big to begin with—pastel colors, pinks and yellows, full of lace and pretty china. A large bookshelf crowds an entire wall, filled to the brim with books my mom has collected over the years, family photographs, and drawings from when we were kids.

Sometimes, it really boggles my mind that these things she displayed so proudly on her shelves were the most important things to her only a few years ago. Now, I'm not sure she could even tell me what they all are.

She flops onto the couch, pulls her blanket into her lap, and fumbles with the remote.

"May I?" I ask, watching her fingers tremble as she hits the buttons.

"Thank you, Charlie."

"*Friends?*"

She smiles. "Yes, thank you, dear."

Once I get the show started, I hand the remote back to her, and she takes a moment to squeeze my hand. "Thank you. You and Julian do a lot for me."

My breath hitches. I'm happy to take care of my mom, no thanks needed, but after the drama of yesterday and forgetting who I am on top of it, the appreciation makes my heart swell. "Of course, Mom."

I grab my bag from the kitchen chair and throw it over my shoulder. I should get to the gym, work through an overwhelming twenty-four hours with some good old-fashioned physical exertion before the client call Gabi scheduled for later today, but my feet are heavy on the soft carpet.

My mom's attention moves from the TV to me as if she notices my struggle. "Do you want to stay and watch for a bit with me?"

I don't hesitate. "Yeah, if you don't mind."

She pats the cushion next to her. "Come sit, Charlie."

I drop my bag on the floor and sink down next to her on the couch.

Over the next few hours, we watch my mom's favorite show, laughing softly at lines we've heard a million times before. I text Gabi to let her know I won't make the client call and she should take it on her own if she can.

After a couple of episodes, her breathing changes. I glance over and see she's asleep, a spot of afternoon sun falling across the blanket in her lap. I get up and close the blinds just enough that the sun won't wake her but not so much that she'll wake up confused about whether it's night or day.

I consider leaving but decide against it. Instead, I take my spot on the couch next to her again and take a moment to appreciate the afternoon for what it is: my mom and I lying around and watching a silly show together.

Days like these are numbered.

She wakes up about an hour later and sleepily looks around the room. Her eyes narrow when they land on mine. "Seth?"

I have to stop the disappointment from showing on my face.

I check the time on my phone. It's probably late enough in the day that she can head downstairs for dinner.

"Ready for dinner, Mom?"

She glances away from me, then back. She nods. "Yes, I'm ready."

She's standoffish as I help her off the couch and fold the blanket back into a square on the cushion next to her. I make sure she locks her apartment with the key chain that hangs from her wrist—soon to be a tracker bracelet—and we head down the hall to the elevator. She walks at a distance from me as we go down.

"I better head off," I say, as the bustling cafeteria comes into view, residents and families scattered throughout. The scent of something hearty fills the large room. Meatloaf or stew of some sort.

"Okay."

"Bye, Mom."

Normally, I'd kiss her on the cheek before leaving, but I don't want to alarm her, so I squeeze her hand instead. Her eyes lock on mine, and I search for any indication of what she might be thinking. *Is she confused? Does she remember who I am? Does she remember who she is?*

"Bye." She turns on her heel and heads into the cafeteria.

When I get outside, I'm simultaneously relieved to have had some time with her—even if she did spend half of it sleeping—and disappointed that she once again thinks I'm the asshole who fathered me, not the son she lovingly and determinedly raised on her own.

I walk down the street with a strange mix of emotions I still haven't learned how to process. It was nice to spend the afternoon with my mom. Yet it doesn't feel like enough after the whirlwind of the last twenty-four hours.

I find myself looking into a weekend without any plans—no clients, thanks to Gabi for stepping in for me this afternoon, no plans with my family thanks to recent events, and no idea what I’m going to eat for dinner, let alone what I’m going to do with the rest of the weekend.

I don’t have a thought in my head as I dip into the Irish pub where we found my mom yesterday.

Kat’s behind the bar, doing something on her phone, and looks up as I take a seat. It’s more crowded than yesterday but still surprisingly empty for the beginning of happy hour. Music plays over the sound system, low enough that it doesn’t interfere with conversation but loud enough that it brings some life to the otherwise dingy bar.

She smiles when she sees me, and I’m struck by how bizarre it is to obsess over whether my mom remembers who I am, yet someone I’ve spoken to only once remembers me in a heartbeat.

“Hey, how’s your mom?”

I drop my bag on the empty seat next to me. “She’s good. I think it was just one bad day.”

“Good.” She throws her phone down on the lower counter as she reaches for a bottle of whiskey behind her. “Now let me guess, you’re a whiskey-on-the-rocks sort of guy.”

“Maybe with bitters and a cherry?”

She rolls her eyes. “Ah, the high-maintenance whiskey-on-the-rocks sort of guy.”

I watch as she turns and gathers the ingredients, her dark shirt riding up slightly as she reaches for a glass.

“What can I say? I like what I like.”

She pauses, appraising me for a moment, and a familiar jolt runs through me, a current pulsing through the air between us.

Perhaps she’s how I’ll spend my weekend.

We're quiet as she makes my drink, a song switching overhead. A man at the other side of the bar flags her down as she slides my drink to me, a cardboard coaster thrown haphazardly underneath.

"Thank you."

She nods, her attention already on her next patron.

The glass sweats as I take a sip, and I relish in the harsh burn as it goes down. I grab my phone, content to sip and scroll for a while, but the condensation interferes with my scrolling and I switch to my email app unintentionally.

Wait a second.

I lean over the bar to grab a napkin and wipe both my hand and my phone off. I scroll through for a second, wondering why I'm getting emails about sales on ladies' dresses and Amazon confirmations for romance novels. *Did I get hacked?*

My mind struggles to gain traction, a mismatch of expectation and reality throwing me for a loop.

And then I realize Annabel Hall's email account is still open on my phone.

Annabel Hall, who only two days ago I was hoping to run into, have a drink with, undress.

In front of me, Kat moves around the bar, making another customer's drink. She reaches above her for a glass and smiles at me. Things with her could be easy, quick, fun. Exactly what I need right now.

But something about Annabel Hall snags in my mind. Reaching into my bag, I search for her bow until my fingers come across the silk fabric nestled underneath my computer. She feels like unfinished business, like unexplored territory.

I know I'm overstepping, but I decide to send her one email before I sign out of her account.

I'll give her my phone number, and if she wants to do this, the ball is in her court.

ANNABEL

CSinclair@ADvantage.com

Good condition

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(267) 555-0128

My heart thumps in my chest as steam billows out of the shower. I try to blink the booze away, rereading the email. Charlie Sinclair has my email address.

How?

I think back to the day we met, how he let me borrow his phone—but there's no way I'm still logged on. It's been weeks, at least.

I copy the number into a new text message, but I blank on what to say. I've spent so much time thinking about this exact moment, but now that it's here, I'm not sure what to do.

ANNABEL

Still available? I'll give you one drink.

I watch with bated breath as he types back.

CHARLIE

Deal. When can you meet?

I bite my lip. This is the part of the conversation where I would normally make myself woefully unavailable for the next week, but the past five days have been charged, and I don't know if I can last that long.

ANNABEL

I'm pretty free this weekend.

He starts and stops typing three times before the text appears.

CHARLIE

Tonight?

I put the phone down on the counter, taking a second to wipe the mirror with the hand towel on the wall next to me. My makeup is smudged and the sheen of June sweat sticks to my skin, red indentations all over my body from where my work clothes rubbed.

Meeting him tonight would go against all dating advice. But dating isn't really the end goal here, is it?

ANNABEL

What time?

He texts back immediately.

CHARLIE

Whenever you're ready. I'm at Mooney's.

My stomach clenches. He's close by.

ANNABEL

I can be there in 45?

See you then.

I shower quickly, careful not to screw up my makeup any further, and add a quick swipe of eye shadow before throwing on a slinky black dress with a daring plunge neckline and side slit but long sleeves.

Because, you know, balance.

And, of course, it has polka dots. But they're mild, the same color as the dress, little velvet circles dotting the otherwise shiny fabric.

I don't take a second look in the mirror before shoving my phone, wallet, and keys into a little black purse and rushing out the door. Three happy hour martinis and the rush of possibility propel me forward, and if I stop for one moment to consider how I look or what my intentions are, I might second-guess my decision.

Charlie Sinclair has made it clear that he's available to be my rebound.

And I intend to take full advantage of that.

Before I slip inside the bar, I text Layla and send her access to my location for the next twenty-four hours. And then I throw my hair over my shoulder and straighten my spine as I push through the heavy brass door. I don't want to make it obvious I rushed over as soon as he texted me. I was just out for a night with friends—looking like a fucking rock star if I do say so myself—and decided to stop by.

Cool. Calm. Collected.

Definitely not tipsy. I'll keep that part to myself.

I smile as I pass the hostess and motion toward the bar. She waves me off, already peeved with the Friday night crowd, and I scan the bar for a familiar face.

He gives a small wave when he sees me and a charming, crooked smile. My heart skips a beat—he's even more attractive than I remember, his sleeves rolled up on thick forearms and his shirt unbuttoned at the top. That little patch of skin that mesmerized me when we first met.

He makes space for me to sit, pulling his bag from the seat beside him.

We lock eyes for a moment, and he motions to the bartender.

“What’ll you have?”

“A kiwi martini?”

He makes a face as the bartender begins making my drink.

“You really like kiwi, don’t you?”

I shrug. “I was never *that* big a fan, but something about that iced tea the other day got it stuck in my head—now I can’t help myself.”

He nods, digesting this information.

“You hate kiwi, don’t you?”

“Something about that iced tea the other day,” he repeats and sticks his tongue out. “I don’t know how you drink it.”

The bartender slides the green concoction carefully across the bar toward me, and I lean forward to take a delicate sip rather than picking it up and risking turning my dress into a sticky mess.

“Oh man, this might be the best kiwi martini I’ve ever had.” I wipe a stray bit of martini from my lips with a finger and, when I look back up at him, see his eyes following my movements.

“Maybe I’ll learn to like kiwi.”

I’m suddenly very aware that my knee is pressed against his. A surge of electricity passes through me.

A woman slides into the chair on my other side, knocking into me as she does so.

“Oh, sorry.”

“No problem,” I say, inching my chair closer to him to give her room.

He reaches between us, grabs the edge of my chair, and, in one swift movement, brings me right up next to him.

Any pretense of personal space between us is shattered. I have no choice but to wind my legs through his, and he turns his upper body toward me, resting one arm along the back of my chair, the fingers of his other hand drifting along my knee and leaving goose bumps in its wake. I catch the faintest whiff of musky pine cologne emanating from him.

“Thanks.”

It strikes me just how intimate a crowded bar can be.

A stranger looking at us might think we’ve been together for months and know all the delicate crevices of each other’s bodies.

“You’re very welcome.”

Every particle of my being narrows in on his thumb as it traces a small circle on my back. A touch so innocuous that it feels X-rated.

My body heats and I pick up my drink carefully, doing my best not to spill. I take the moment to collect myself. He takes a sip of his drink at the same time, his eyes on mine, and I glance away.

I can’t help but think he’s bluffing, pulling me closer, touching me so lightly. He’s daring me, seeing how far he can push me without ever making a move at all.

He’s playing with me.

I put my drink back down, the glass nearly empty—oops—and a boldness takes over me. I lean over and press my lips against his, my arms snaking around his neck. His wrap around my back, pulling me so close I’m nearly in his lap. He licks my bottom lip, asking for entry, and pushes inside.

I’m only vaguely aware of the bar full of people around us. I thought this kiss might satiate me, but it’s doing the opposite.

His hand closes around the back of my neck, his fingers intertwining with my hair. I want him to pull it, to crush me into him. I’d let him take me on the bar in a crowd of people if he so much as hinted at it.

He slowly pulls away from me.

“You are *so* fucking sexy.” His breath is warm on my cheek, his lips brushing lightly over my skin. The faint shadow of stubble across his chin scratches me and I find myself desperate to feel the sensation again.

“Do you want to go?” I ask.

His eyebrows rise. “Go?”

“Yeah, like back to my apartment?”

He seems momentarily stunned, and then he slowly reaches for his drink again.

My heart drops. I’ve gone too far. I’ve shown my cards.

He leaves his glass on the bar, now empty, and leans toward me, his hand resting on my bare thigh. “You know I’m not a relationship kind of guy, right?”

“I don’t want a relationship.”

He reaches forward and pushes my hair over my shoulder. “Are you sure?”

“I don’t want a relationship,” I repeat.

He nods. “Okay.” He leaves a few bills from his pocket on the bar. “Then let’s go.” He pulls out my chair so I can stand, takes my hand, and leads me to the front of the bar.

His warm, calloused hand makes me wonder how his skin would feel against my stomach. How it would feel for him to grab my hips, pull me roughly against him, feel him responding to me.

The warm summer air hits me as we walk outside, and I immediately head toward home, Charlie trailing close behind me. The last of my kiwi martini sloshes around my empty stomach as I pick up my pace, spurred onward by the image of his bare chest above me.

I know in my head that it’s at least a fifteen-minute walk home, but the fire burning in my belly encourages me faster and faster until we’re in the more residential parts, the people fewer and farther between.

“Jeez, you’re a fast walker,” he says.

I laugh. “Oh, you know, when you haven’t had sex in months, it becomes a priority when you have the opportunity.”

He stops, pulls me back, and wraps me in his arms. “Months, huh?” He pushes my hair over my shoulder, staring down at me. My heart thuds at the touch, at his strong chest underneath my palms.

“Months,” I say, unapologetically staring at his mouth.

“Well, we wouldn’t want to miss the foreplay, now would we?” He glances around and then tugs me into the alleyway. There are only garages back here, cars parked haphazardly on the sidewalk. Next to us is a brick wall that he pushes me up against, his palms pressing harshly into my hips.

“Do you like this, baby?” His words rasp across the skin of my neck.

I hook a leg around him, pulling him closer.

“God, yes,” I mumble as his mouth finds mine.

His hands cup the bare skin of my ass, and he props me up so his hardness rubs right into the triangle of my underwear. I pull on his neck, desperate to be closer to him.

If anyone were to walk by right now, they’d get quite a view.

“I kind of want to fuck you against this wall.”

A guttural sound escapes my throat.

And then the metallic, mechanical sound of a garage door opening cuts through the air, and he steps away from me, pulling my dress back into place. A few houses down, harsh white light spills out into the street. Shouting voices sound through the night, a husband and wife arguing over the optimal place to hang a tennis ball so the husband stops hitting the spare refrigerator.

He grabs my hand, gesturing to the street, and we continue toward my apartment. His hands constantly touch my hips, my shoulders or my hair. *God, it feels so good to be touched.*

When we get to my building, I pull my keys out of my purse, fumbling through them until I find the right one. It feels like hours before I finally get it in the front door and push my way inside, missing the warmth of his hands on my hips.

It feels even longer still as I climb up to the top floor, my legs aching and sweat slicking my skin. I hope it's not too hot inside my apartment—but if it is, we'll have sweaty, slick sex and it'll be just as great, anyway.

“Man, you really like to make a guy work for it,” he jokes as we reach the fourth floor.

My laugh is sharp, my breath taken by the abnormally fast speed at which I scaled the stairs.

I open the door to my apartment, the sweet scent of roses filling my nose, and turn to grab him, ready to continue where we left off.

But instead, my foot catches my workbag. My three-martini ass neglected to put it away in my rush to the bar, and rather than smoothly, suavely bringing his mouth to mine and moving us toward my bedroom, I tip over, twisting awkwardly in midair, and fall flat on my face, knocking my head against my entry table as I go.

I'm stunned, splayed out in my entryway, as I take stock of each body part. I watch the roses on the table above me sway, threatening to topple over onto me. He steadies the vase before it can fall.

“Are you alright?” He bends down next to me, pushing my hair out of my face, his fingers brushing gently over the bruise I already feel forming on my temple.

I start laughing—cackling, more like it—and touch my fingers to my head. They come away streaked with a little bit of red. A minor cut to the forehead and a very bruised ego.

I can't stop laughing as he turns around and finds the light switch. We're bathed in a warm-yellow light, and I sit up, pulling my raised dress back down.

“Wait, wait, don't sit up yet. You really hit your head there.”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” I say, reaching for his hand.

“Are you sure?”

I wave him off. “Yeah, let me just put a Band-Aid on,” I say as he pulls me to my feet. I motion into the kitchen. “Feel free to pour yourself a glass of wine.”

“Do you need help at all?”

I shake my head as I quickly adjust the roses so they’re centered. “Go, sit, relax. I’ll be out in a couple.”

“Do you want a glass of wine?”

I pause, considering it. “I think I need one to quell the embarrassment.”

CHARLES

Tonight has taken quite a turn.

When she kissed me, pressing her body up against mine despite being surrounded by a crowd, I was sure that by this point in the night, I'd be deep inside her, straining against her taut little body beneath me.

Instead, I'm pouring two glasses of wine while carefully maneuvering the minefield of her apartment. It's clean and perfectly organized, but there are *things* everywhere.

Three stacks of books sit in one corner of her living room, three of those little decorative boxes next to them, as if there's supposed to be a bookshelf there, holding everything together. In front of her couch is a neatly folded pile of blankets that, in anyone else's apartment, would be housed by an ottoman or coffee table.

I would sit on the couch and wait, but there's nowhere to rest our drinks, so instead, I follow the small hallway along to the last door, which is partially open, light leaking out the sides. My eyes wander involuntarily to the vase of red roses by the entryway as I pass them. I can't help but wonder who bought them for her. Not that I would buy her roses. But I don't like that someone else is, either. I push the thought away.

I pass her bedroom on my way to the bathroom, clocking the exact location in case muscle memory has to guide me later.

"Knock, knock."

She opens the door, one hand holding a cotton ball to her forehead. I hand her one of the glasses, and she takes a thirsty sip.

“Thank you.” She rests the glass on the vanity and motions to the edge of her bathtub. “Do you want to sit?”

I pause. *Is she serious?* When she doesn’t make it known she’s joking, I nod. “Sure.”

I push the floral, brightly colored shower curtain to the side so I don’t sit on it. I’m surprised at the complete lack of polka dots but charmed by the bright colors—everything in this apartment is homey and happy.

The bruise forming on her temple looks nasty already, her skin pink. She turns to the mirror and dabs at it, and underneath the cotton ball, I see a long, thin line of red. She must have hit the corner of the table.

She leans against the vanity. “I’m still bleeding a little,” she explains, rolling her eyes. “I put some Neosporin on it but didn’t want to bleed through a Band-Aid.”

“I take it you don’t bleed often.”

She laughs. “What is that supposed to mean?”

I stand, leaving my wineglass on the vanity with a clink, and take the cotton ball from her forehead. A drop of blood pops up across the cut. I take a fresh cotton ball from the open bag on the counter and a Band-Aid from the squished box next to it. I position them on her forehead so the Band-Aid holds the cotton ball tight against the wound.

“You’re inexperienced.”

She raises her eyebrows at me, and in the harsh light of the bathroom, I see that her eyes are dark, her pupils dilated. I’d like to think she’s giving me bedroom eyes, but I notice her sway a little as she rests a hand on my abdomen, leaning into me.

I narrow my eyes. “How much did you drink tonight?”

She straightens. “Not that much.”

“Annabel.”

“I had a couple of martinis before I came to meet you.” She picks up the wineglass from the counter and then second-guesses herself, putting it back down. “I didn’t know I’d be meeting you tonight.”

Everything clicks into place. The spontaneous kiss at the bar, the even hotter kiss in the alleyway, the face-plant coming into the house. She’s full of martinis.

And I was so filled with desire for her that I didn’t see any of it.

There will be no sex tonight. I don’t know her well enough to judge how many she’s actually had, and I’m not the kind of guy to take advantage of a drunk girl. A pervasive disappointment settles in my stomach as I come to terms with the fact that this night will not end in the release I had been hoping for.

Her lips brush over the skin of my collarbone. A jolt runs through me.

I put one hand on her hip. “I don’t think tonight’s the night.”

“I’m not drunk if that’s what you’re implying.”

“Look. Like I said, I’m not a relationship guy. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have rules. One rule is that I don’t sleep with drunk girls.”

She stomps like a little kid having a temper tantrum. “I’m not drunk.”

“Okay, yes, you’re not drunk. But I don’t know how many you’ve had and it’s just not a good look. I’m not that kind of guy.”

“But, Charlie,” she whines, her hands gliding along my shirt, wrapping around my back. The sound of my name on her lips inspires images of bare skin and sweaty sheets. A rush of fire builds in my groin. “Don’t you want me?”

And that fire intensifies. Her eyes light up.

“You want me.”

I close my eyes, tilting my head back. “Yes, I want you. But we can’t do this tonight. It’s not right.”

She rubs the bone of her hip against me, spurring me harder. She certainly doesn’t seem drunk. On the contrary, she seems exceptionally aware of everything she’s doing to me. I kiss her, my resolve faltering, and her hand trails down my abdomen, her palm resting on my dick, applying increasing pressure.

“Annabel,” I warn, my voice low.

“Do you like that?”

“I really like that.”

She pulls away just enough that her hands have space between us. She fumbles with my zipper, and I’m reminded of how long it took her to find the key to her building.

This can’t happen tonight.

But maybe I can give her a little teaser for later.

I lift her, pull her legs around my waist, and carry her back into the bedroom. I throw her down on the bed and lower myself between her knees, her hips grinding into me. Her arms wrap around my neck, pulling me close with a surprising amount of force.

The scent of warm strawberries makes me hungry for her as I kiss her neck. I push her mane of hair out of my way and slide a hand up her thigh, grabbing a palmful of her ass. She arches into me, pulling at my clothing and grabbing my hips impatiently. Little moans escape her throat, each one making me throb.

This is going to be harder than I thought.

I am rock hard, and we both clearly want this.

I could pull her dress aside, taking her little pink nipple in my mouth.

I could pull her underwear to the side with one finger and plunge deep within her in a matter of seconds.

But I don't.

I kiss her leisurely, slowing her, and she calms, thinking this is our new rhythm, that we're not going to do this fast and furious but slow and lazy.

And then I pull away, struggling to adjust myself as I come to my knees.

Her legs are open in front of me, and I get a glimpse of her underwear hidden in the darkness of her dress. *Are those polka dots?*

I run my hand along her knee, relishing in the softness of her skin. "Baby, I have to go."

She sits up, her hair wild around her face. "Did you just tease me?"

"It was a lot of fun."

"That's not fair."

"If it's any consolation, I completely agree with you." I kiss her again, my hand trailing up her bare thigh. She inches toward me, egging my fingers forward, but I pull them away before I can feel the damp fabric of her underwear.

I don't know if I'll be able to leave if I do.

"I'll text you, okay?"

As I climb out of her bed, she flops back down, making a disgruntled noise as her head hits the pillow, her hair splayed in every direction.

"I'll get you back for this," she says, rolling onto her side and propping herself up on one elbow. Her dress hangs off her, and I'm tempted to get a better look at the polka dots she's hiding.

I kiss her selfishly before letting myself out, desperate for one more hit of her. "I can't wait."

I grab my bag from where I dropped it by the door but pause as I see Annabel's. The cause of her injuries. I move it to the other side so she won't trip over it again.

This girl.

I lock the door on my way out and walk home fast, anxious for a cold shower and a glass of whiskey.

As soon as I get inside, I throw my bag on the couch and undress, noting the little mark on my pants that tells me just how wet she was for me. *Fuck*. When I close my eyes, I can still smell strawberries, still feel her arms clamped around my neck, that perfect pressure as she rubbed me.

I turn the shower on cold and step in, welcoming the sting of the water. I lean my head against the tile wall, shut my eyes, and imagine that my hand is her welcoming me into her mouth, into her body. My release comes quickly but pales in comparison to what I'd been hoping for tonight. I still feel the pressure in my abdomen, like I need to be with her to fully eradicate the building desire.

When I get out, I wrap a towel around myself and pour a generous glass of whiskey. I keep the lights out, preferring the view of the city over the insides of my apartment.

I step out onto the balcony, the wind gentle and calm around me, and look at the city sprawling in front of me.

If I look close enough, I can probably see her apartment.



WHEN I WAKE UP, I realize I've been dreaming about Annabel Hall. Although most mornings I wake up a little stiff, this morning I wake up particularly so.

It takes me a minute to realize that the notification on my phone is not a text message from Annabel, contrary to what my dream brain is insisting, but Julian asking me to help him clear out his storage unit in preparation for the move.

I would much rather text Annabel to see if she's up for some morning delight, but family comes first, so I roll out of bed, throw on a pair of shorts and an old T-shirt, and meet Julian at their apartment.

This certainly isn't how I would ideally spend my morning, but a good night of sleep has cleared my sex-clouded mind, and I realize this might be for the best. I went straight from a taxing twenty-four hours with my mom to hopping into bed with Annabel—I didn't get to the gym yesterday, and I should probably follow up with the clients whose meetings Gabi rescheduled for me. I want to see Annabel as soon as possible, but I can't screw with the good habits I've worked so hard to create. With my mom's recent issues, that has to be a priority.

Luckily, Julian and Ashley's storage unit isn't huge, and Ashley has already cleared out the small stuff, leaving the furniture and a few heavy boxes for Julian and me to take care of. Someone is coming later in the day to pick up Tucker's old crib, but the rest of it is getting loaded into the Salvation Army truck waiting on the curb.

"Have you thought about that assisted living I showed you?" Julian asks as we drag an old mattress into the back of the truck. We stack it up against the wall and then head back to the basement for the frame that goes with it.

"Not really. I mean, this is her home. Sure, it'll be tough, but none of this has been easy. I couldn't be the one to make that decision."

Julian holds the basement door open for me. "I tried asking her the other day."

I pause. "What did she say?"

We never agreed to keep my mom out of decisions about her care, but over the years, we started asking for her input less and less. We would never make a big decision like this without consulting her, but we usually make sure we're aligned before bringing her into the conversation.

"She said Philadelphia was her home." He chuckles. "Then she said New York can go fuck itself."

I laugh, continuing to their storage unit.

"Although," he continues. "I'm not sure she really understood what I was saying. I reminded her that Ashley,

Tuck, and I are moving there, and she got that kind of glazed look she gets sometimes, you know? And when I asked if she'd be interested in moving too, she seemed like she didn't get why I would ask her such a thing."

I shrug, slightly miffed that he asked her without talking to me, but at the same time, relieved she had the same thought I did, that Philadelphia is her home. Her eyes sparkle every year when we walk around Christmas Village. When we take her to the Chinese Lantern Festival or walk around Harbor Park in the summer. Until a few years ago, she kept up with city politics, too.

Julian picks up the edge of a bed frame balanced precariously against the wall, and I follow suit on the other side, brushing a spiderweb off one corner.

"I guess I just feel bad," Julian explains, leading us back toward the basement door. "It's one thing when you have a family to rely on, and I don't mean just Ashley—I mean all of us together. And I'm abandoning you," he grunts as the bed frame scrapes along the doorframe leading back outside. "When she's likely only going to need more help."

We walk along the sidewalk to the truck and throw the bed frame against the mattress. We pause to catch our breath, and I take a sip from the water bottle I stashed inside the door.

"Jul, I don't know what to tell you. This situation sucks. But think of Mom ten years ago. She would have scoffed at you if you said you were feeling guilty about something you've worked so hard for. Don't let guilt ruin a good thing. Not to mention, you're only going to be an hour and a half away."

His mouth opens like he's about to protest, but I continue before he has a chance to. "Yes, I know it can get worse with traffic or if there's an accident, but you're not moving *that* far. You hired another nurse. You're doing your best to care for Ashley and Tuck, which is what she wants when her mind is clear."

"Look, Char," he starts, his hands on his hips. "This sounds horrible, but I'm not worried about Mom." He shakes

his head. “She’s not herself anymore, you know? Of course, I’ll do whatever I need to for her, at any second of the day, any day of the week.” He pauses, glancing around us on the street. “I *am* worried about you, though. I mean, I have a kid, and it’s more difficult to take care of Mom. She worries me more than Tucker does. She’s in more danger than Tucker is. And you’re going to be alone in dealing with it. It takes two to raise Tucker, but it takes three for Mom, and taking on the responsibility of three people is a lot.”

I appreciate where Julian is coming from, but his hesitancy to lean on me is a familiar refrain that grates on me. I attribute it to my dad taking a nine-year-old Julian aside and giving him the responsibility of making sure I grew up into a good man before abandoning us for a woman he barely knew.

“Julian, you have to let it go. Mom and I will be fine without someone hovering outside her building every single second of every single day.”

He nods, but I can tell his guilt isn’t assuaged. “I negotiated with work to get an additional work-from-home day every week.”

“Yeah, you told me that.”

“No, I asked for another.”

I turn to him. “You have two days from home a week now?”

“Yeah. And I was thinking, if it’s okay with you, maybe some weekends, the three of us can stay over. Help with any Monday appointments she has. Or Fridays if she needs to be anywhere. That would take at least half a week of appointments away from you. And I can come down the first couple weekends after we move to help with the transition.”

I’m about to protest when I realize how helpful that would be. It seems like my mom has doctor’s appointments every week at this point, and while I don’t mind taking her, I’d much rather spend time with her cooking dinner or watching one of her shows.

“Sure, whenever you want. As long as it doesn’t interfere with your new job. Or with Ashley or Tucker, of course.”

“Of course not. They’re on board.”

His expression softens and I get the feeling he thinks we’ve come to a good compromise.

Except in my opinion, a compromise means no one is totally happy, and I’m kind of thrilled with this outcome. I feel like I haven’t spent any quality time with my brother for almost ten years. Since before Tucker, before our mom, before his job took every spare moment of his life.

“I just hope you know you can ask for help. Anytime, any day, okay?”

“Thanks Julian, you’ve fulfilled your big brother quota for the year.”

He holds his hands up. “I know, I’m being too much. It’s a big change.”

“We’ll all be fine,” I say, slapping him on the back as we descend into the basement, our sights set on an old dresser. We lift and carry, Julian shuffling backward since he knows the building better than I do.

“You guys doing alright?” Ashley appears in the doorway, quickly moving out of the way when she sees us approaching. Tucker is behind her, fast and erratic as usual, and her eyes dance between the three of us, taking stock of the surrounding chaos.

We take the stairs slowly. “Doing just dandy,” I say.

“You have water, snacks?”

“Out by the truck,” Julian says, reaching street level and waiting for me to take the last few steps.

She hovers near Julian and lowers her voice. “Did you ask...?”

“No, not today.”

“Julian,” she warns.

“Not today.”

“What’s not today?” I ask, and they both snap toward me.

Ashley pauses, falling into step with me instead of Julian, and levels him with her gaze. He rolls his eyes, refocusing on his footsteps as we set the dresser on the edge of the truck and gently push it inside.

“We were wondering if you could help us move. We’re getting a moving truck, so it won’t be that much physical labor, and we’ll be packed the night before, so no diddling about with boxes. Julian doesn’t seem to remember how many issues popped up the last time we moved, and especially now that we have Tucker, it would make me a lot more comfortable to have a helping hand on standby if needed, even if it ends up being a hangout.”

“Sure, I figured you’d ask me, anyway.”

Julian shakes his head, and I get the feeling that this request is a point of contention between them. We head back to the basement, Ashley maneuvering Tucker by the shoulders so that he stays away from the road and out of our way.

“I’m driving up the night before with basic provisions—food, water, beer. And we’ll be prioritizing the bedrooms if you want to take full advantage of that and stay over.”

“I’ll probably let you know closer to the day if that’s okay. But I’ll definitely be there. I’m looking forward to seeing the house.”

“Thank you,” she says, giving me a quick hug.

“Always happy to help.”

I follow Julian back into the basement, Ashley and Tucker on my heels. Julian pulls a bookshelf forward, lifting the top, and I grab it from the bottom. Ashley busies herself pulling together the errant cleaning supplies littered across the floor, and enlists Tucker to gather up a few spare bits of trash into a bag for her.

Julian and I move slowly toward the basement steps.

“Hey, I saw your buddy the other day. Zeke?” he says.

“Oh yeah?” Zeke was a college friend of mine who later became a part of the game night crew.

Julian takes a backward step up. “Said he hasn’t seen you in a while.”

“Yeah, we don’t hang out much anymore.”

Julian stops, causing me to walk into the bookshelf we’re carrying. “You should catch up with him. You guys were tight, weren’t you?”

I narrow my eyes as we reach ground level and pivot toward the truck. “What’s this about?”

He grunts as we load the bookshelf onto the truck. “Look, this transition is going to be hard. It might be good to have a friend or two to lean on, you know? He seemed genuinely interested in how you’re doing.”

“Okay, yeah. Maybe.” With the increasing responsibility of my mom, I’m not sure I have time to hang out with Zeke like we used to. Not to mention, after last night, I think I’d rather see Annabel.

We descend once again and take a look around the storage unit. Judging from the look on Julian’s face, he realizes at the same time I do that our last piece of furniture is also the heaviest. It’s an old bookshelf from my mom’s house, one that spans about five feet wide and six high, made of solid wood.

“How did you guys get that in here?” Ashley asks, crossing her arms as she eyes it.

“I couldn’t tell you.”

Julian clasps his hands together. “Alright, this is the last one.” He searches for convenient holding places and explains his plan. “I think if we tip it this way, turn it counterclockwise ninety degrees, and then lift toward the door, we’ll be able to get it out.”

I position myself so he’s walking backward again. We turn it and lift.

And somehow, I’m the one going backward.

“The other way,” Julian corrects, moving toward me.

“It’s heavy, let’s just move it.”

“Right, but it’s heavier than it needs to be if we’re lifting at this angle.”

“Let’s just get it outside and we can take a break. Are you good?”

“Yeah, I’m fine, just worried about you.”

Always worried about me. “I’m good. Let’s just get it out.”

I watch the floor carefully over my shoulder as we move across the uneven concrete.

“Still good?” Julian asks.

“Yeah, you?”

“Yeah.”

I go up the stairs, matching my steps to Julian’s speed.

We’re one step from solid ground when my heel catches on the last step, annoyingly taller than the others, and I fall on my back, a bookshelf the size of half a room landing squarely on my chest.

“Fuck! Ashley, lift and push,” Julian shouts from the basement. The gigantic bookshelf pinning me to the ground blocks his way.

“Jesus, Charlie, are you alright?” she asks as she musters all of her strength to lift the shelf from the middle. I push up on it with the little strength I have at this angle and grunt as the three of us lift it just enough to move it a foot to the side. It clatters onto the sidewalk and I jump at the noise.

The stupid shelf knocked the wind out of me. So I stay put on the ground as I take desperate, shallow breaths through my nose. Julian, Ashley and Tucker crowd around me, their faces pinched in concern.

“Don’t touch him,” Ashley says, holding Tucker’s concerned hands away from me. “Can you move your toes? Your fingers?”

I can't talk, so I make a show of wiggling my fingers and flexing my feet. Ashley seems relieved, but I'm still struggling to breathe, so I'm not quite as relieved as her.

"Any lumps? Extreme pain?"

My breath finally returns. "All of it," I choke out. The shock is beginning to wear off, the feeling returning to my body.

I take a minute to flex my major muscles and sit up. Julian and Ashley kneel in front of me, and a second later, Tucker appears between them, holding my water bottle out to me with wide eyes.

"Thank you, Tuck," I say, touched by his thoughtfulness but hoping the image of his uncle getting pinned by a bookshelf didn't scar the poor kid.

"That was nice of you, Tucker," Ashley says to him, her voice low.

I realize then that we've drawn a crowd. Ashley looks like she's forgotten how to breathe, and Julian's eyes are bugging out of his head. Tucker, the whirlwind, is still. Behind them, a man and woman with a tiny dog strain their necks to see what's going on. A guy with an oversized backpack takes out his headphones to hear what's happening.

"I'm okay," I say, hoping to reassure everyone, but it doesn't seem to make a difference.

I take a sip from the water bottle Tucker gave me, feeling the cool water run down my throat. I feel surprisingly fine, aside from a dull ache that starts in my chest and radiates outward. I'm sure that bruise will last a good long time.

But I get up fine and shake it off. The few people who've stopped to make sure I am okay—or, more accurately, gawk—take their leave. Julian turns and kicks the bookshelf, which has miraculously stayed intact.

He tries to hide it, but I see him flinch.

"You really showed that bookshelf," I say.

He glares at it. "I always hated that fucking thing."

“Well, I guess it’s as good a time as any to get rid of it, then.” I lean over, lifting one side. “Come on, let’s put this baby to bed.”

Ashley pulls Tucker out of the way, and Julian hoists up his side.

He takes great pleasure in slamming the door shut once it’s in the truck.

“Thank you for nearly donating your life to our move,” he says.

“Anything for you, Jules.” I stretch out my arms, testing my range of motion. Every movement pulls on my chest.

Julian’s eyebrows are furrowed. “I can’t believe that happened. Are you sure you’re alright?”

“It’s just an excuse to drink a little extra whiskey tonight.”

“Man,” he laments. “That was scary.”

“It’s over now, Julian. I’m okay.”

He slaps me on the back, lighter than he usually would. He shakes his head, muttering as he wraps an arm around Ashley’s waist, leaning over to kiss her forehead and ruffle Tucker’s hair.

“We can handle the rest of the stuff in there ourselves,” he says. “Go home and lie down or something, okay?”

I take a deep breath, the ache in my chest waning and waxing as I do.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

“Thank you, Char,” Ashley says, squeezing my arm. “Text us when you’re home, okay? And again later tonight, so we know you’re okay?”

“Yeah, I will,” I say, anxious to be home and in bed. “Let me know if you need anything. Nonphysical, at least for a while.”

“*You* let *us* know if you need anything. Ice packs, food, pain relievers,” Julian says.

“Will do!”

When I get around the corner, I take another deep sip of water and let out a long, somewhat painful breath. I text Gabi as I walk, asking her to push back any client meetings I’m needed for over the next few days. I really am fine, but I’m going to be sore as hell tomorrow, and wincing through a presentation is not a good look.

She texts back quickly, saying she already had to push some of our meetings to make room for Dieter’s crush, who, as of this morning, canceled on us anyway.

Gabi’s annoyed. I accept her well-wishes with gratitude and agree to text her before bed and again in the morning since I’m too stubborn to go to urgent care like she suggested.

ANNABEL

By Tuesday, the June heat has returned in full force. I dress in light layers, and stomp my way to work.

I “accidentally” left my coffee at home today, so I’ll have to pick up a fresh cup from the café in the lobby, creating just a little extra time to run into him if he’s in the office today.

Feeling slightly miffed and exorbitantly charged from our *almost*, I spent the rest of my weekend distracting myself. Studying my slides for the Marigold Beauty presentation and doing puzzles with my mom.

I refuse to text him. I essentially begged him to fuck me, and for the sake of my dignity, I need him to make the next move.

The line is long when I arrive, but the baristas are prepared for the morning rush and move quickly through the line. The scent of specialty coffees and breakfast sandwiches makes my mouth water. I stand in the waiting area, anxiously scanning the tops of heads for Charlie Sinclair’s gorgeous, coiffed hair, but by the time my coffee is slapped onto the counter in front of me, I still haven’t seen him.

I do, however, spot Steph walking in, a different guy holding her hand than last time. This one is tall but less beefy, with a man bun hovering above his collar. He leans down and kisses her, brushing her hair out of her face so gently that I look away to give them some privacy in this lobby full of people.

I turn back to the barista and call a quick thanks, ready to give up on my search for Charles Sinclair when someone touches my elbow. I whip around to find Mari, her smile wide, her heart-shaped sunglasses pushed high on her head.

“Wow, you look a little glum,” she says.

“I’m sorry. In all honesty, I thought you were Charlie.”

“Ah. I was worried you’d deemed me unworthy once I left happy hour.”

I wave her off. “Oh, stop. We had a blast. We should do it again sometime.”

“Definitely,” she says and then glances toward the elevator bank. We start walking in that direction, a few seconds of silence falling between us. “Hey, was Layla okay though? She seemed a little defensive, and I kinda felt like maybe it was because I was there.”

We join the crowd of people filtering in through the front doors of the building. “I don’t know what’s up with her. She’s been a little moody lately, not just that night.” We pass through the turnstiles and squish into one of the elevators heading up. “I think she might be going through something, but I don’t know what. She won’t talk to me.”

Mari’s shoulders tense as the doors close on us and three others. “Ah, okay. I’m sure she will, eventually. I just wanted to make sure I wasn’t getting in the way of your friendship.”

“Oh, absolutely not,” I say. “We were thrilled to add a third.”

She smiles—a true, genuine smile—and I can’t help but think that some sort of kismet put us on the same elevator that day. She keeps an eye on the numbers as they tick upward.

“This is my floor,” I say as the elevator glides to a stop, leaning over to give her a quick hug. “I’ll text you, okay?”

“Have a good day!” she shouts as I step out. The elevator doors shut behind me, and I make my way through the sea of cubicles to where our little group sits outside Evelyn’s office.

Today is our first presentation for Marigold Beauty. It's one of our larger accounts, thanks to Evelyn's expanding role and team, and all four of us have put everything we've got into this presentation. As I take my seat, I catch a glimpse of Evelyn standing in the middle of her office, muttering to herself while looking over a stack of papers in her hand.

Danielle and Steph are already here, both dressed to the nines. Danielle looks like a supermodel every day, but Steph has diverted from her normal sweater and jeans, upgrading to a long-sleeve black wrap dress and chunky heels that show off just the right amount of leg. Her dress reminds me of the one I wore on Friday, just a little looser, a little longer, and definitely corporate-appropriate compared to the plunging neckline I boasted.

When I sit at my desk, I push all thoughts of Charles Sinclair to the back of my mind. It would have been nice to run into him this morning, and it probably would have given me a little pep in my step, but the only thing that matters for the next few hours is that this meeting goes off without a hitch.

It's my first in-person client meeting and I need to put my best foot forward. Evelyn will guide the meeting, and Steph will lead the presentation. Danielle doesn't have a role in the PowerPoint, but she did a lot of the logistics, the planning, the gathering of materials and organizing.

I don't have a huge role in today's meeting, but I'm the visionary and designer behind the entire suite of new brand assets. I've never had this much creative autonomy or control before, but it follows their wishes perfectly. It might even be the best work I've ever done.

The meeting isn't until noon, so I spend the morning working through the last of the stupid file-system project. Steph just got approval for another client we'll be meeting with in a few weeks to map out a plan, and I'd like to get this filing system done so I can put all my energy into that.

I make a cup of tea to double fist with my coffee. I'm not about to go into a client meeting without a real dose of

caffeine, but something about herbal tea sounds calming before having to prove my worth.

Steph is full of movement this morning, alternating between walking to the kitchen for coffee refills and staring at the presentation on her computer. Danielle, however, seems calm. I walk by her desk on my way to the bathroom and see she's doomscrolling Facebook.

I choose to not obsess over my slides, even though I spent four hours on Sunday perfecting my talking points. Instead, I'm going to get through some thoughtless work and try to relax. I always do my best when I'm chill, and I'm not about to throw that out the door just because Evelyn and Steph are type *A* and can't stop moving.

By the time the Marigold Beauty cohort shows up, I've almost forgotten the presentation is today. Danielle gets them situated in one of the nicer conference rooms, complete with a Wawa hoagie tray, a Dunkin coffee box, and a variety of snacks, many of which Carrie has already surreptitiously taken her pick of. We ordered way too much for the three people who came, but it's always better to be overprepared.

Wilhelmina sits at the head of the table, braided hair pulled over one shoulder. Alphonse, her Director of Marketing, sits to her left, and her assistant, Dean, is on her right.

"Welcome, welcome!" Evelyn glides into the room and greets each of them, taking a moment to reiterate the names and titles of everyone on our side. Wilhelmina does the same, although she definitely doesn't have to—I'm sure everyone on the Wink side has googled everyone on the Marigold Beauty side as many times as I have. "Nice to meet you all in person!"

"Nice to meet all of you as well. I have to say, we're really excited to see what you guys have come up with. Thanks for making the time to walk us through in person," Wilhelmina says.

"Oh, we're happy to," Evelyn says and then lowers her voice. "Especially since we all get a free lunch out of it!"

Laughter fills the small conference room as Stephanie closes the door and takes a seat next to Danielle, who makes quick work of pulling up our presentation on the large TV. I sit between Alphonse and Danielle, Evelyn across from me.

“Alright, let’s get to it.” Evelyn turns to face the Marigold team. “Steph will walk us through some logistics and success metrics, and then we’ll turn it over to Annabel for a design review.”

Just hearing my name has my stomach clenching.

Danielle clicks into the first slide, and Steph clears her throat.

“So, to start us off, we wanted to go through some of the market research we did for this. From our previous conversations, we recognized from the very beginning that Marigold Beauty has a small but strong following, especially locally. You guys came to us with a desire to level up, to take the strengths that you already have and light a fire underneath them. Knowing that, we went straight to the customer and asked them what they love about your brand.

“Over the past few weeks, we pushed seventeen polls on social media and sparked conversations on Reddit and Facebook that gave us a number of insights into what really counts to your customers. We ran three focus groups and solicited feedback from four different beauty influencers who have previously posted about your brand on Instagram or TikTok.”

Wilhelmina’s eyebrows rise, and she leans back in her chair.

“We wore the products ourselves and wrote down our experiences, aligning them with the feedback we got from other sources.” Steph nods to Danielle to click to the next slide. “And this is some of the feedback we got.”

This slide is filled with rows and rows of customer feedback, too much to feasibly read at one time. “We’ll send you all this presentation when we’re done, as well as a full feedback report, but some of the highlights include sustainable

business practices, small ingredients lists, presence in the Black community, high-quality products, ease of use, a wide array of colors and finishes, clear and concise packaging.”

Steph pauses, watching as their eyes scroll across line after line of feedback.

“These are the things we wanted to preserve with our new designs. However, we also wanted to address some of the negatives we saw in our feedback. Some of these may be contradictory, considering everyone has a different experience with a product, but sometimes the same things showing up in both positive and negative feedback can be an indicator that maybe you’re only speaking to one part of your market or maybe some part of your packaging or product design is very clear to some people but confusing to others. We asked for more detailed feedback where we could and incorporated that into our designs.”

Danielle clicks to the next slide, and Steph continues. “So here are the salient points of feedback that we wanted to improve in our redesign: product labeling that doesn’t match product packaging, lack of customer support, confusion over animal testing, purchasing availability.”

“Obviously, we can’t address everything listed here, but our redesign should help with some of these negatives while ultimately multiplying the positives.” Stephanie eyes the Marigold crew. “Any questions before I hand it over to Annabel for a design review?”

With a sigh, Alphonse purses his lips. “Did you use the same platforms for positive feedback as well as negative?”

“Yes, but keep in mind that depending on the platform itself, feedback can sway wildly one way or another, so while we made sure our questions remained neutral, people coming from Instagram, for example, were significantly more concerned about animal testing than those in the focus groups, which can be partially attributed to a bit of a hive mind effect. At the same time, people coming from Instagram were also very impressed with the quality of the product, which suggests

that by making it more obvious the brand is against animal testing, there could be a significant consumer base there.”

Wilhelmina huffs, crossing her arms, and I forget how to breathe. Steph’s eyebrows knit together.

“I know,” Alphonse says, shaking his head.

Evelyn sits up straighter. “Can we expand on anything further for you?”

“No, no. She just gets upset over the animal testing thing. She doesn’t want to pay for the logo.”

Wilhelmina closes her eyes, pinching her nose. “I just hate that I have to pay a license fee to use a logo that says my company is cruelty-free when they don’t do any due diligence to enforce it. I source from the US only, I vet every single company in my supply chain, and I have an entire section on my website dedicated to how I built this company without ever testing a single product or ingredient on animals. People care more about a stupid logo than my personal, moral commitment to not test on animals.”

“They don’t know you personally—it’s easier to trust the logo,” Alphonse says. It sounds like something he’s used to repeating.

Wilhelmina huffs. “I’m going to lose this battle, aren’t I?”

Alphonse looks to the Wink team to answer.

“We obviously can’t force you to do anything you don’t want to do, but we would highly suggest paying for the license,” Evelyn says. “You’re doing far more than what the license requires, and that’s great, but most consumers are picking your product up off a shelf for fewer than three seconds or scrolling through Amazon. They want an indication, fast, that tells them your brand fits within their moral code.”

Wilhelmina shakes her head. “I guess if it’s what the brand needs to level up, I’ll pay for the stupid license.” She turns to Alphonse. “But I’m not going to be happy about it.”

“You will be when you see that revenue coming in,” he says, leaning back in his chair with a smile. He throws his hands behind his head, the faintest hint of a victorious smirk on his face.

Evelyn lets a few seconds pass before continuing. “If there aren’t any more questions, we’ll hand it over to Annabel for the design review.” She lowers her voice. “But in the interest of full disclosure, it does include the logo.”

“I can’t wait,” Alphonse says, a grin warming his face. Wilhelmina rolls her eyes.

My palms sweat as Danielle clicks to the next slide.

And we’re met with a black screen, the words “End of Presentation” along the top. I glance at Danielle, who doesn’t seem to notice anything is wrong.

“If you’ll give us a minute to set up,” Evelyn says, nodding pointedly at me. She’s improvising to buy me time.

I scramble to sign into my computer and pull up the presentation.

Luckily, I still have it open from yesterday, so all I have to do is take a wild look at my open windows and make sure I don’t have anything incriminating up.

I pull the cord connecting Danielle’s computer to the projector and shove it into my own. My heart catches when the screen goes black and doesn’t come on again. I jiggle the wire and realize I didn’t have it plugged in all the way. The screen comes back to life.

Urging my thumping heart to slow, I put my slides on full screen.

Keep it cool, Annabel. You’ve got this.

I take a deep breath before starting my spiel. “Like Stephanie said, Marigold Beauty already has a strong, loyal customer base. We don’t want to confuse them by making drastic changes. So instead, we focused mostly on what’s already working.”

I flip to the next slide. “On the left, you’ll see the old font used on all Marigold Beauty branded products. On the right is the upgraded font, which is similar but features slightly thinner lettering, as is currently trending, as well as a drop shadow that really makes the logo pop.”

Clicking to the next slide, I continue. “Here, we have an array of mock-ups using the old font versus the new one. You can see that this font upgrade alone results in a vastly different experience. The logo is easier to read in almost every format.”

Wilhelmina nods, but she doesn’t seem particularly impressed. I wonder if it’s the cruelty-free logo I included on each design. I push the thought to the back of my mind—I don’t have time for self-doubt.

“But something that we noticed from many of your packaging materials was an abundance of hexagons that don’t really appear anywhere else—on your website, social media, branding. Some of the user feedback we got highlighted this mismatch, and considering hexagons are trending right now, we wanted to bring them into the design where applicable. For small products like eyeliners or lip liners, we would suggest using the logos mocked here. But for larger products where a more detailed design can fit, we created these designs.”

I click to the next slide and pause for a moment, gauging their reactions. Alphonse looks at Wilhelmina, his eyebrows raised, and she stares at the screen.

“The combination of a truly eye-popping font mixed with a shape that appears alongside Marigold Beauty wherever it’s seen creates a unique branding experience that’s memorable while portraying a premium experience. The quality of the product speaks for itself, as evidenced by the strong local following. But a design upgrade that marries a name with a premium experience turns hometown loyalty into a nationally loved product.”

The room is quiet, the urge strong to fill the silence with words, but this is where my practiced spiel ends, and I refuse to ruin it with filler words.

“I like the hexagons.”

“You do?” I don’t know why this surprises me.

She nods. “Yeah.” Her nails tap the table rhythmically. “I like this.”

Alphonse grins. “Even with the license you have to buy?”

She huffs. “You better be careful, or I’m going to fire you again.” The room fills with laughter and a lightness blooms in my chest.

“Any questions, comments, feedback, requests?” Evelyn asks.

Wilhelmina smiles. “No. I’m pleased. But if you could send me that user feedback report as soon as possible, I’d really appreciate it.”

“As soon as we’re done here, I’ll email it to you.”

“Great.” She stands, smoothing down her slacks. “I look forward to getting these to our manufacturers.”

As we say our goodbyes to the Marigold Beauty team, Wilhelmina lowers her voice, her perfume wafting softly around her. “That was a good save,” she says and then winks at me. *A fellow winker! My kind!*

“I was hoping you didn’t notice.”

“These things happen all the time. You handled it well.”

She reaches over and squeezes my elbow.

She pauses before leaving the conference room. “I hope it’s not too pushy, but we’re planning a rebranding event for August. We might have a few minor requests before then but mark your calendars. We’ll want you ladies there. We’ll send details closer to the date.”

“Thanks, Wilhelmina,” Evelyn says.

She pauses before responding, a smile on her face. “I think we’re friends now. You can call me Mina.”

“Well, thank you, Mina!” Evelyn repeats. She walks out with them, her gestures wide as usual, and I can hear her laugh retreating as they move farther away.

Danielle ducks out of the room, laptop under her arm, and Steph gathers the food, combining it into smaller containers and walking it out to Carrie, who I notice is typing furiously at her computer, oblivious to the growing pile next to her. I don't interrupt her, but the part of my brain that thirsts for romance novels is dying to hear what's happening in her story.

I sit at the conference table in front of my computer as Steph runs in and out, scrolling through my email, searching for confirmation that I did, indeed, send my slides to Danielle.

And there it is, my email signature and everything, addressed to Danielle.

I'll write it off as a mistake, but I'll be sure to double-check next time—that was dumb of me not to look at the final presentation beforehand. I can't help but wonder how Evelyn didn't notice either, though—of course, she's much more seasoned than me and can probably spin off a presentation in her sleep if she wants. Maybe she just trusted her team would get everything in the deck that needed to be there. And we let her down. I let her down.

No. Danielle let her down.

But I'm not sure how clear that is. It was my slide, my responsibility. Danielle was just throwing everything together that we sent to her. I want to tell Evelyn what happened, to absolve myself of blame with evidence of my email, but that would probably make me look like a catty asshole.

I don't know whether it's my waning nerves or a trustworthy gut feeling, but something about this feels intentional.

I'm about to go down a rabbit hole of overthinking when my phone lights up on the table next to me.

Charlie.

If there's one person who can pull me immediately out of a downward spiral, it is Charles Sinclair.

CHARLIE

Happy hour tonight, my place?

The anxious energy that had been coursing through my veins only a moment ago instantly turns to lust.

My fingers hover above the phone as I debate just how enthusiastic my response should be. I've decided against exclamation points when Evelyn whips by the conference room and shouts to us, "Nice job today, ladies," and continues down the hallway without a second glance.

So, crisis averted. I think.

I decide on a simple response.

ANNABEL

Address?

CHARLIE

1909 Walnut St., Apt 1102

My heart kick-starts. I have his address.

I help Stephanie carry the last of the food trays out to Carrie and spend a second lingering behind the reception desk, anxious to talk to someone about the Danielle thing.

"Wow, I'm so glad I didn't bring lunch today," Carrie says, grabbing a hoagie from the tray. She's still typing with one hand, the other taking a quick bite. "I don't think I'll need to make dinner, either."

Her words have me wondering where my dinner will come from if I'm going to his place for happy hour. He might be one of those people who doesn't keep snacks in his apartment.

"Do you mind if I take some?"

"I certainly can't eat all of it," Carrie says.

I gather a couple of sandwiches into one of the smaller containers and then add two donuts for good measure, the

sweet scent of them reminding me I haven't eaten yet today. I take another sandwich to appease the grumbling in my stomach.

"Seems like that meeting went well," Carrie remarks, turning away from her screen and rolling toward me.

"Thank God. My slide was missing from the deck, but luckily, it wasn't a big deal. Honestly, they were really nice about it, but it made me look like a fool."

Carrie tilts her head to the side, spinning in her chair as she takes another bite of her sandwich. "Hmm."

"Hmm? Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Seems like an oddly common problem. Did Danielle do the presentation?"

"Yeah, she did. Why?"

She lowers her voice. "She's been on a few teams here, and from what I can tell, she's good at what she does, but I don't know. There's been an awful lot of turnover on the teams she's been on, and she seems awfully forgetful sometimes."

"Forgetful, as in forgetting necessary slides in a presentation?"

She rolls closer. "Personally, I always give the benefit of the doubt until given a reason I should do otherwise. People make mistakes, you know? Just keep your eyes open."

"Yeah, okay, I will."

Carrie returns to her sandwich, and I pause before I go back to my desk. I can't resist.

"Hey, what are you writing?"

She grins. "It's a good part."

"Oh, Carrie, you're killing me with the suspense."

"Maybe one day I'll let you read it."

"I'm counting the seconds," I say, Charles Sinclair popping into my head once again.

Leaving Carrie to her writing, I take my sandwiches and donuts back to my desk.

Danielle doesn't look up as I sit down, and I can't stop my brain from running, wondering what that could mean. Maybe she's embarrassed that she missed my slides, and she's slowly spiraling in her head. Maybe she's angry that her attempt to fluster me proved inconsequential.

I'll never know. So, for now, as Carrie suggested, I'll just have to keep my eyes open.



I WASN'T EXPECTING a fourth-floor walk-up with peeling paint, but I also was not expecting a doorman, a spacious lobby that smells like lavender and honey, or an elevator that takes me to the eleventh floor. His apartment is at the end of a long hallway that boasts coordinated artwork and several ornate chandeliers.

My breath catches when I reach his door, and I knock before I can second-guess myself.

He answers after a few moments, still dressed in his work attire, that little triangle of skin visible at the top of his shirt.

"Come in, come in," he says, stepping aside.

The doorman and the elegant lobby have nothing on *this view*.

"Oh my god," I mutter, walking right past him and straight for the floor-to-ceiling window that takes up an entire side of the apartment. I can't resist putting my hands up to the glass, peering through as if it's the first time I've ever seen the city. I narrow in on a street marked by Eastern State Penitentiary. "You can see my apartment!"

He smiles as he comes up to the glass next to me. "Yeah, it's a pretty nice view, isn't it?"

We stand in silence for a few moments, watching the city.

My mouth goes dry, suddenly self-conscious about my sparsely decorated four-story walk-up that—until I saw this—I had been so proud of.

“Your apartment is beautiful,” I say, turning toward the inside, where a gray linen couch is propped in front of a flat-screen TV, an open kitchen behind it with stainless steel appliances and a marble countertop, a dark hallway to the right of it is where, I presume, his bedroom is.

“Thank you,” he says, moving into the kitchen. He takes a bottle of whiskey from the counter next to the fridge and a tumbler from the cabinet. “Can I make you a drink?”

“Sure.”

He pours a finger into the tumbler in front of him. “I think I have something you’re going to like.”

I raise my eyebrows, setting my bag down underneath the side of the counter with seating.

He takes a quick sip and then pulls out a martini glass.

“Oh wow, we’re doing something fancy, huh?”

He grins, reaching into another cabinet and pulling out a green liquor.

I have to stop my jaw from slamming down on the floor.

“How does a kiwi martini sound?”

“Like you know what you’re doing.”

“Some might say I do.” He smirks at me and pulls out the rest of the ingredients for my martini. He measures, shakes, pours, and slides it toward me over the counter. “Tell me what you think.”

I take a sip and nod. “Perfection.”

“Good,” he says, taking another sip of his whiskey.

Martini in hand, I wander back to the big window. There’s something mesmerizing about it—how small the cars are, how the masses of people milling about on the sidewalk look like

toy versions of themselves. He comes up behind me, resting a hand on my hip.

“You look really nice today,” he says, his breath warm against my neck.

A shiver runs down my spine. “Thanks. I had a client meeting.”

“How’d it go?”

“Well, I think.”

“Cheers to that,” he says, clinking his glass against mine.

He retreats, and when I turn around, he’s taken a seat on a leather chair that faces the windows. He rests his glass on the area rug next to him and undoes the second button on his shirt.

Instantly, heat rushes into my abdomen, and I avert my eyes back to the big window. He’s not undressing—just getting comfortable—but he managed to choose just about the sexiest way to do so. I can still feel that patch of skin on my lips. Feel the warmth of his chest under my fingertips.

“How do you ever get anything done with such a view?” I ask, desperate to calm the burgeoning need building within me, to distract myself because some primal part of me thinks rushing over to him and straddling him is the appropriate response to the undoing of that one button.

“I guess you get used to it over time.” He leans back in his chair, grabs his glass again and takes another sip. “It’s certainly more interesting now.”

I can’t help the smile that comes to my lips. “You’re a pretty smooth talker, aren’t you?”

“Entirely up to you to make that judgment.”

I turn toward him, the question popping out of my mouth before I can think about it. “How often do you do this?”

“Do what?”

“Have ladies over. For totally casual, commitment-free sex.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Well, I’m glad our expectations for the night are clear.”

I roll my eyes, the blush creeping up my neck.

He rolls up his sleeves, exposing thick forearms. I was able to control myself for the button, but God, he’s pulling out the forearms now, too. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Frequently,” he says. “But I only ever have sex with one woman at a time. And it ends either when there’s feeling, when there’s someone else, or when there’s boredom.”

“On her part or yours?”

He thinks about it, then says, “Either, but I’ll be honest that I’m usually the one to end things.”

I nod, digesting that information.

His eyes are on mine, watching my reaction. “Who bought you the roses?”

For a second, I think his words are a code, something sexual I don’t know the meaning of. “The roses?”

“In your apartment. The roses?”

“Oh. I did.”

He nods. A look of surprise on his face. “You did?”

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

He shakes his head. “No. I was just curious if there was anyone else I should worry about.”

It clicks in my head, what he’s asking me. “Oh, no. No one else. I got tested after I found my ex cheating on me. I’m clean.”

“Me too. I get tested between each partner.”

I nod, realizing just how committed he is to *not* committing.

He sighs, leaning back in his chair. “And in the spirit of full disclosure, there’s only one thing I ask from you,” he says. “Honesty. If this isn’t working for you for any reason, say it.”

What you want, say it. What you don't like, say it. We're fulfilling a need for each other here, so tell me what you need, and I'll do the same for you."

I nod, my mouth going dry as he speaks of wants and needs. All I can think of is peeling off layer after layer of his clothing. The feel of his length against my hip when we made out, the way his body crashed into mine just before he left my apartment. The taste of whiskey on his lips, the salt of his skin.

He follows my movement as I walk toward him.

I place my martini on the coffee table and, careful to miss his whiskey glass, lower myself onto his lap. Our faces are only inches apart, but we don't narrow the distance yet.

His hands start at my knees, slowly trailing up my thighs until his thumbs graze the edges of my underwear and a rush of heat travels through me.

I lean over slowly and kiss him, our lips touching softly as his hands move around me, cupping my ass gently at first and harder as he pulls me against him and deepens our kiss.

I sink into him, my body anxious to be near him. My hands are in his hair, wrapped around his neck. I pull him closer, following the line of his collar around to the front, where my thumbs dip beneath his shirt. My fingers find the next button to undo, grazing that bit of soft skin that's mesmerized me since the day we first met.

We start moving in a rhythm, his fingers digging into my ass, him growing thick beneath me.

He moves his hand back over my thigh, trailing his thumb underneath the edge of my underwear, and my desire turns to desperation.

"Baby, I want you," he growls into my neck.

I abandon the buttons of his shirt and move my hands down to his zipper. He pushes my hair over my shoulder, leaving little kisses along my collarbone, a nip on the raised part as I lift myself gently off him, allowing room for his thickness between us.

“Oh my god,” I whisper, feeling the width in my hand.

He grins at me, biting his lip, and runs his fingers under the edge of my underwear once more, sending a shiver down my spine. He pulls them to one side, running his thumb along my slickness.

I move forward as he directs and come down gently on him, letting out an involuntary moan as I take all of him in.

He groans into my shoulder. “Jesus, you feel so good,” he says, pulling on my ass to create a rhythm, his desperation showing through.

I take control of the movement, grinding on him.

His hands continue up my dress, pulling down on the neckline until one breast is exposed. As I move on top of him, he takes it in his mouth, his tongue licking and flicking my nipple, eliciting another deep moan.

“God, that feels so good,” I say as the pressure builds, my release on the horizon.

His fingers dig into my hips, pushing himself deeper inside me, and his lips leave a small trail of kisses along my collarbone.

“You’re going to come soon, aren’t you?” he asks me teasingly. He pulls me close, one hand tugging on my hair to expose my neck. He nibbles lightly at the skin there as my nails scrape at his shoulders.

I nod, too focused on the movement to speak.

He lowers his voice. “You’re going to come all over my dick, aren’t you?”

His words push me over the edge. It only takes a second for my body to catch up. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” I say as an involuntary moan escapes. “Oh god, yes.”

His body stiffens beneath me as he grabs at my hips, taking over our movement. “Are you on birth control?” he asks quickly.

I nod. “I have an IUD. Come inside me.”

He pulls me down hard on himself, his hips bucking underneath mine as he releases, combining with the tail end of my own. As he relaxes back into the chair, I collapse into him, letting my full weight rest against his chest, my head on his shoulder.

“Jesus. You feel amazing.” His arms wrap lazily around my waist, pulling me in. His hands move back to my legs, his fingers drawing swirls on my skin.

“That was so good,” I manage to get out. I sit up straight, my energy starting to return. “I think I need to clean myself up in your bathroom.”

“Down the hallway, first door on your left.” His lips press into my neck, one hand grabbing my ass before releasing me.

I extricate myself from him carefully and find the bathroom, surprised to come face to face with a full wall mirror as I close the door. My hair is flying in all sorts of directions, my dress is hiked up funny, and there’s a devilish grin on my face as I think about going right back out there and doing all of that again.

Next to me is a shower stall encased in pristine glass. The countertop is black marble, and crisp white hand towels hang on the wall like this is some fancy hotel bathroom. There are no shower things here, no hint that this bathroom is lived in, and I realize he must have two. It’s one thing to have such amenities in the suburbs, but in the middle of Center City, it’s something totally different.

I get myself cleaned up, fix my hair, wipe away some stray mascara, and wash my hands and face. My underwear is soaked through, so I just throw them into my pocket. The last ten minutes play repeatedly in my head and I bite my lip, yearning for him again.

I haven’t quite had my fill.

My stomach growls loudly as I leave the bathroom, and I press on it, urging it to calm down. I still have the sandwiches in my purse, but I’m not sure what the protocol is on postcoital sandwiches for this friends-with-benefits situation.

When I envisioned this night, I imagined a bedroom, the kind of foreplay that can last for hours, on and off sex interspersed with a hoagie for continued energy. I didn't expect to get down to business so quickly, and considering I'm still fully dressed, it seems almost appropriate to grab my stuff and head out.

But God, I'm so hungry.

He stands behind the kitchen counter, his hair mussed as he refills his whiskey glass. He puts the bottle back and meets me by the edge, winding his arms around my waist and kissing me deeply.

"That was fun," he says, leaving a kiss behind my ear.

My stomach growls in response, and I can only imagine the mortified look on my face.

He laughs, his energy contagious, and I find myself giggling along with him.

"So, you're hungry?"

I breathe a sigh of relief that he said it so I don't have to. "I brought sandwiches."

He cocks his head to the side. "You did?"

I nod, reaching under the counter to grab them from my purse. I slide one across the counter toward him, and he raises his eyebrows. "You are impressively prepared."

We unwrap the hoagies, and they look like some sort of ham and cheese *thing*. I glance up at him when I realize how soggy the bread has gotten. He stares at his hoagie with a look of confusion on his face.

"They're a little soggy," I say.

"They're a lot soggy."

I roll my hoagie up again and search for an answer somewhere in his face. "Maybe I should just pick something up on my way home?"

His eyes snap to mine. "You're leaving? I thought we were just getting started."

“Oh, I didn’t know if, like, food is allowed, you know? Seems very relationship-y. Especially considering we both, you know, got off already, so I don’t know, I thought maybe it would be against the rules.”

His forearms distract me as he leans toward me over the counter. “Annabel, the thing that distinguishes this from a relationship is feelings. I don’t want to fuck a stranger. Food is allowed, hanging out is allowed, anything is allowed that we feel inclined to do.”

“Just not feelings.”

He nods. “Just not feelings.”

“Okay.”

“Is that cool with you?”

I nod. It’s actually a relief, honestly. Without knowing each other, it would probably be the equivalent of fucking a mannequin. Sure, the parts are in the right places and look good, but nobody wants to stick it in plastic without personality.

“That’s perfect.”

“And, by the way, since we’re talking about rules, don’t feel like you have to abide by what I say. Rules make it sound so official, but this is just what I want, what I usually do. It’s what I’m used to and what I’ve kind of come to expect, but you’re built differently, so be honest about your needs, too. Like breaking for food. Or anything else, just—”

“No feelings.”

“Just no feelings.”

I think about it. “Well, like you, I don’t want to fuck a stranger. So, I’d like to declare us, officially, nothing more and nothing less than friends.”

He grins, holding out a hand to me. “Friends.”

“Friends.”

We shake on it.

“All right, friend,” he says, reaching into a drawer behind him for a take-out menu. “This place is in the lobby of the building. They’ll be here in ten minutes once we order. Pick what you want.” He glances at the hoagies. “Can I throw them out?”

“Please do.”

CHARLES

I take another sip of my whiskey as she gets her martini from the coffee table. She wanders back to the window and looks out, one hand pressed to the glass. I'll have to hit that with some Windex when she leaves, but if that turns her on, I'm happy to do some extra cleaning.

Especially after The Chair.

I'm not sure I'll be able to sit in that chair again without popping a semi. That was hot.

That chair has seen its fair share of sex—most of my furniture has—but something about her determination made it better than any other time. She looked at me, walked over and lowered herself onto my lap like a goddess, hair flowing over her shoulders, ass smooth in my hands. And so wet. God, just the thought has me tight against my pants.

I watch her silhouette against the window. The view is made infinitely better with her in front of it.

I'm not particularly hungry, but she is, so we'll wait for food, eat at a pace far slower than I'd prefer, and eventually fall into my bed. I'm antsy to get there. The Chair was incredible, but it wasn't enough. I could hardly contain myself, with her moving on me like that. I need more and I want to feel the desperation she showed me on Friday. I want to make her beg for it.

As we eat, she talks about a new client she's doing creative for—I like that she's artsy but still wears those cute little corporate dresses. I nod along, watching as she devours her

salad between sentences. I got a wrap that I only kind of pick at—it'll save well enough for later.

When I'm done eating, I throw the rest in the fridge and pour myself a little more whiskey. She's still finishing up her salad, and I realize, watching her, that I don't know what her bare skin looks like. I know the way her ass feels, and I can still taste the delicate skin of her nipple in my mouth, but I don't know the curve of her waist, the skin of her sternum.

I'm anxious to know. "All done?" I ask as she gathers the last bits of lettuce onto her fork and shoves it in her mouth.

She nods. "That was delicious, probably one of the best Caesar salads I've ever had."

I smile, clearing the box from the counter and chucking it into the trash can. "I'm glad you liked it. That place is surprisingly good for how fast and cheap it is."

"I'm jealous it's in your building."

"All the more reason to make it a regular stop."

She's still sitting at my counter, but I'm not sure I can continue just talking. I've watched her cross and uncross her legs about seven times during our meal. Watched her lips glide sensually over her fork. Watched her push her hair out of her face repeatedly as it fell in front of her with every bite.

I move behind her, pulling that damn hair out of her face yet again, and this time I gather it in my fist, pulling her head back as I kiss her neck. A noise escapes her throat, so delicate and feminine, and I run my teeth along her skin, my tongue flicking the lobe of her ear.

She turns toward me, slipping off the barstool to kiss me. Her tongue slips into my mouth, her arms around my neck, her body melding into mine. I put my whiskey down and reach behind her, taking her ass in my hands and lifting her onto the counter. Her legs spread easily around my waist. Her dress bunches up around us, her bare skin under my hands making my pants less and less comfortable. I'm itching to take them off. My hands wander, feeling the supple skin of her thighs,

trailing up higher, searching for the confines of her underwear, but I feel only skin.

“Did you take your underwear off?”

“They were too wet,” she confesses, her lips trailing across my neck.

Now I’m busting out of my pants. “God, that’s hot.”

“You’re hot. I’m already wet again,” She says, pushing her body against me.

I take a moment to pull away. I’m anxious to whip out my dick, thrust inside her right here and now, but I feel her desperation building. I want to make her wait. She’s breathing heavily, her dress barely covering her, and she’s leaning toward me, a look of confusion as she contemplates why I pulled away from her. She grabs my hips, her legs locking around me but she’s careful not to tip off the countertop. I take a moment to push her hair over her shoulder *again*, and she leans into my palm, desperate for the touch.

Putty in my hands.

I grab the hem of her dress with two fingers, pulling it up gently to expose her. She waits, her legs taut around me, begging me to move closer.

“Look at that beautiful pussy,” I say, reaching forward and trailing a line down her wet slit.

Her head tips back and she emits that noise again, the one that causes all of my blood to rush down south. I move my hands away, reaching around and grabbing her ass again.

“Wait, don’t stop,” she says, pushing away from me, wanting me to continue playing with that pool of wetness.

“We have all night,” I growl into her shoulder, squeezing her harder this time. She lets out a surprised gasp and starts fumbling with my zipper again.

I pull her hands away. “Not yet. I want to see you,” I say, reaching around for the zipper on her dress. She peppers my neck with kisses and starts attacking the buttons of my shirt. I

force our pace slower, pulling her zipper down inch by inch, relishing in her kisses but blocking her from my pants.

I pull the dress over her head, throwing it onto the ground next to us. I kiss her deeply, my hand running along her neck, between her breasts, lingering on the little bow at the bottom of her bra. I trail my fingers down her stomach, feeling her trembling beneath them, her breathing heavy, her hips rocking toward my touch. I feel the curve of her belly button and that sweet, sensitive skin below that runs into her valley, swollen and slick.

“You’re beautiful.”

I play with her, my fingertips stroking gentle lines up and down as she shudders into me. “Charlie, that feels so good.”

I can’t wait to be buried inside her. I reach around her and pop the clasp of her bra. She shrugs out of the straps, the bra falling to the ground, and her breasts are free, her chest rising and falling rapidly with her breath. I pinch one nipple gently between my fingers, and she moans.

She starts rubbing me, and I think that if she keeps going, we won’t even make it to the bedroom.

“I’m so hard for you.”

“Charlie, fuck me,” she says, and my dick hardens even further against her palm. “Please.”

I lift her off the counter and she wraps her legs around me, a noise of surprise jumping from her throat. She leans down and kisses me, bucking against my body as I walk us into my bedroom at the end of the hall. My dick strains at my pants and I have to encourage myself not to just take her against the wall.

I throw her onto my bed, the sight of her dirty-blonde hair across my covers one that will be seared into my mind forever. She props herself up on her elbows as I climb on top of her, her legs opening easily for me, her hips rising to meet me. Her fingers reach for the buttons of my shirt, undoing them one at a time until she’s pushing it off, her whole body leaning into its removal.

I want her to beg me again—but I'm not sure how much longer I can resist her.

She pulls on the clasp to my pants and edges my zipper down, squirming underneath me. I lift off of her for a moment, helping her take them off me.

She seizes the opportunity to climb on top of me, her fingers clawing at the waistband of my underwear until I'm exposed.

I want to play with her, make her sweat a bit, but I'm rendered incapable as she guides my dick inside her. She lowers herself slowly, and I think I might explode into her right here and now.

She's desperate for me.

This is better than any begging could be.

She lets out a deep breath, her eyes closing as she starts rocking on top of me. "God, Charlie, you feel so good."

I didn't know my dick could get any harder, but it does.

She opens her eyes, smiling at me, and cocks her head to the side. "Do you like it when I say your name?"

My dick responds for me, and her smile turns into a grin. "You do, Charlie, don't you?"

I lift my knees, interfering with her movement. "Be careful. You're going to make me come too soon if you keep talking like that."

"That's okay, Charlie, we have all night."

I bite my lip and gaze at the ceiling to avoid releasing in her right now.

She moans as her hips rock back and forth, her head tipping back in pleasure. I squeeze her ass, reaching up and playing with her nipples. One of her hands joins mine, squeezing and pinching at her own nipple as she picks up speed, her hips rocking harder against me. I think this might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

Just when I think I can't hold it in any longer, her moans reach a crescendo, her pussy tightening around me. She's coming, and God, if I can just hang on a few more seconds.

"Oh god," she whimpers, tighter and tighter against me, until she finds her release and collapses into my chest. The floral scent of her hair wafts up to my nose as I rock my hips slowly into hers, careful now that she's extra sensitive but anxious for my release.

"Baby, it's my turn now." I pull her body into mine and flip her over, her eyes opening as her head hits the pillow underneath me. She wraps her legs around me as I start moving inside her, her arms tight around my back, her fingers running through my hair. I thrust into her hard, and she gasps as I grunt, my release coming quickly. I collapse onto her, careful not to hurt her.

"God, that was good," she sighs into my shoulder.

"Better than good. That was amazing." I lift myself just enough to trail a hand down her body, from her shoulder to her soft, pointed nipple, to the curve of her hip and around her ass.

She drops a kiss on my collarbone. "I think I needed that."

"Me too." I fall to my back on the bed beside her. "I think you riding me might just be the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

She laughs and knocks me on my shoulder. "Oh please, I'm sure you've had plenty of girls ride you like that."

I shake my head. "Not like *that*."

Not with reckless abandon like that. Not without the self-consciousness of being on display. Not with the pure, desperate need that oozed off her as she lowered herself onto me.

"Well, consider me flattered, then."

"You should be," I say, turning toward her and pulling her close to me. She sighs as I leave a kiss on her forehead.

"I guess I should go get cleaned up," she says, getting up and moving toward the bedroom door, her head swiveling like she's confused about where to go.

“Pocket door behind you is another bathroom.”

“Right.” She slides it open, disappearing as she closes it behind her.

I roll onto my back, staring at the ceiling. *My god, Annabel Hall.*

After a minute or so, I muster up enough energy to throw my underwear back on and grab a glass of water from the kitchen. I get one for her too, meeting her in the bedroom as she reappears from the bathroom.

She takes my shirt from the ground, which I predicted she'd do because *every* girl does that, and slips it over her bare skin. I pass the water to her, and with a grateful smile, she takes a long drink.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand and, noting that it's only spam, I kill the call.

Annabel pauses, the water halfway to her mouth, and for a second, I wonder if it was Amy, if my sex-crazed brain saw what it wanted to instead of reality. *Fuck, I don't want this to be over before it even gets a chance to start.*

And then I realize she's staring at the bruise on my chest. I double check my missed call just to make sure it was, in fact, spam, and turn back to Annabel.

“I got in a fight with a bookshelf.”

She runs her fingers gently along the square bruise on my ribs. Goose bumps prickle along my skin. “I'm sorry the bookshelf won.”

“You win some, you lose some, when dealing with furniture.”

“What happened?”

I walk around to the other side of the bed and sit, my back up against the headboard. She doesn't look like she's about ready to leave, and if I have to be honest, I could probably go for round three in a bit if she's amenable. She follows my lead, crawling into bed and curling up under my shoulder, her limbs folded together neatly underneath her.

“My brother is moving and asked me to help get some furniture out of his storage unit. He’s been storing this big old bookshelf for my mom that must weigh three hundred pounds, and I tripped while we were moving it. Came right down on top of me.”

Her mouth forms an *O*, her fingers lightly stroking the purple spot on my chest.

It occurs to me that Annabel Hall has been on my mind for so long that I didn’t notice Amy finally moving on. She hasn’t called me in weeks, and I feel a gentle wave of relief.

It’s only Annabel. I only ever have to think about Annabel. I lean my head back, relishing in the gentle motion of her fingertips over my skin.

“That must have hurt.”

“It certainly wasn’t fun. Just sucks that they were giving the bookshelf away, anyway, so it’s not like we could exact revenge by getting rid of it. Just kind of had to continue with what we were already doing.”

She shakes her head. “My god, what if it had fallen any other way? You could have gotten seriously hurt.”

“Luckily, it didn’t.”

She picks at the hem of her shirt, looking up at me meekly. “Are you close with your brother?” She pauses for a second. “Am I allowed to ask that?”

I hope she doesn’t get too hung up on “allowed” things. I almost want to tell her about Gabi, but discussing a relationship with one woman while in bed with another seems like overstepping a boundary—even a friend-with-benefits boundary.

“You can ask whatever you want. We’re friends.”

“It seems like something a friend should know.”

“We’re close, but not as close as we once were.” I wonder how much I should tell her. I was the one espousing honesty earlier, but my mom’s situation is unnecessarily complicated.

But if I want her to be honest with me, I have to be honest with her.

“My mom has dementia, early onset and pretty late stage, at this point,” I say, and I watch her expression form into one of pity, her fingers spreading out across my chest. “Tucker—Julian’s son—was born right after she was diagnosed, and between having a kid and the increasing responsibility of caring for my mom, we became secondary to each other. We’re still close, but I don’t even remember the last time we hung out for the sake of hanging out with each other.”

“I’m so sorry about your mom.”

I shrug. “It’s just life, you know? But that’s one of the reasons I do things the way I do. I have a lot going on with her. She needs a lot of care, and at this point, when she has a good day, I kind of drop everything to hang out with her. They’re getting fewer and fewer as time goes on.”

Her lip twitches as if she’s about to cry, and my heart starts hammering in my chest. *Jesus, change the subject, change the subject.*

“It might be nice though. Julian’s going to stay with me some weekends to help take care of her, so we’ll get to hang out a bit.”

“Aw, that’s sweet,” she says, taking a sip of her water. “When do they move?”

I do the mental math in my head. “Two weeks.”

She nods. “Well, I’m happy you guys will get to hang out again. Does your dad help at all?”

I stiffen involuntarily and then feel bad when she does the same. “My dad’s not a good guy. We don’t consider him a part of the family.”

“Ah, okay.”

She doesn’t press, but she’s still tense. I pick up her hand from my chest and kiss it, and she relaxes into me.

“I think this is going to be good for me,” she says.

“What?”

“This,” she says, motioning to our intertwined bodies. “Casual sex, no commitment. I’ve lost my faith in the opposite sex. Maybe dealing in only honesty and orgasms for a while will remind me that it’s not all bad.”

“I’m glad to be of service to my gender.”

She smiles at me. “Now I just need two more of you to counteract the assholes in my life.”

I raise my eyebrows at her. “Are you into that?”

She shakes her head, laughing. “Oh god, no. I mean, two more of literally you? Maybe.” She winks and I feel a twitch within my underwear. “No, I’ve been cheated on three times, three guys who have promised to love me and only me have gone completely against that promise.”

“Three?”

She nods. “Three.”

“No wonder you’re done with men.”

She laughs. “I think starting simple is good. We’re fulfilling the most basic of needs for each other and prioritizing honesty the whole way. I think this is good practice.”

“I will practice this with you as many times as you need.”

“Thank you.” She laughs, pushing her hair over her shoulder. This girl seriously needs a hair tie. I glance at her wrists, searching for that ubiquitous black band, and there it is. She’s choosing to live life with hair in her face.

And then I realize she wasn’t wearing a bow at all today. Every time I’ve seen her, she’s worn one.

“Hey, what happened to the bow?”

She raises her eyebrows. “The bow?”

I motion to the back of my head. “In your hair, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you without.”

“Oh,” she says, absentmindedly running a hand through her hair. “I thought it would make me look like a little kid for my presentation today.”

“That’s silly. They look great on you. And I was kind of looking forward to undoing one.”

She laughs. “I’ll wear one next time, then.”

“Please do.”

“You don’t think they make me look childish?”

“I mean, if you were wearing one that was pink and frilly or something, maybe, but the ones you wear look, I don’t know, French.”

She grins. “French?”

“Yeah, like a fancy French girl. It’s hot. Definitely not juvenile.”

“Fancy French girl. I like it.”

She takes a delicate sip of her water and places it on the nightstand.

“How’d the presentation go?”

She crosses her legs, turning toward me. “Honestly, it went great. They loved the designs and invited us to their big brand relaunch party.” She bites her lip. “But there was one hiccup that I still can’t get my head around. The girl on my team who was putting together the presentation left my slides out, but I can’t tell if it was on purpose.”

“Why would it be on purpose?”

She throws her hands up. “I don’t know. We talked through the whole thing as a team so many times, and they were kind of important slides. It was all their new designs, which is kind of what they’re paying us for. It just seems odd to forget the most important part of the presentation.”

I try to put myself in her shoes and think through what I would have done. “You should ask her.”

She looks taken aback. “What, straight up ask her if she forgot to include it or if she did it on purpose?”

“I mean, if it was intentional, there’s no way for her to win if you straight up ask her. She’ll look like a fool no matter her answer. If it wasn’t, she’ll probably just apologize, and you can all go about your days. You can even frame it like you were the one who did something wrong. Maybe your email didn’t send and you just want to make sure they’re going through now. Even if she lies, you’re a good judge of character. You’ll be able to tell.”

She cocks her head to the side. “You think I’m a good judge of character?”

I don’t know why I said that. She just told me she’s been cheated on three times, so she’s probably not. “Well, you’re sleeping with me, aren’t you?” *What does that say about me?*

She laughs. “Cocky, aren’t you?”

“For you, very.”

She laughs, and the sound brings an involuntary smile to my face. She pushes her hair over her shoulder and sighs. “I guess I could try that. I just don’t want to make things worse if there is a problem.”

“I mean, that’s what I would do, but you know. Your mileage may vary.”

She smiles at me, chewing on her bottom lip.

“What about your mileage?”

“My mileage?”

She sits up straighter, leaving a kiss on my chin. I catch a whiff of strawberries. My body responds immediately.

“I was thinking it might be nice to take a shower before I leave so I’m not walking home all gross and sweaty, but I’m not sure I can do it by myself. Do you have some fuel left in the tank to help me get clean?”

“Absolutely,” I say, already on my feet and throwing her over my shoulder. She giggles, and I’m careful not to whack

her head against the bathroom door as I set her in the rainfall shower and her shirt falls to the floor.

This girl.

I take her on the vanity, up against the shower door, doggy style underneath the water. Shampoo bottles clatter to the floor, and there's water *everywhere*, and I can't stop looking at her slick skin, her perky breasts, her curvy ass.

By the time the actual shower happens, I'm spent. My muscles are depleted of energy and my eyes droop shut on their own accord. I drift back into bed in a daze, a towel around my waist as she pulls on the same dress she's been wearing all day.

I can see her taking a mental inventory of her things—her dress, her purse, the underwear that fell out of her pocket at some point through the night.

“You can stay if you want.”

She looks at me and then back down at my bed like she's considering it. “I should really get home. I can't show up to work like this tomorrow.”

“I have a washer and dryer.”

She pauses, considering it, and then shakes her head. “No, I should go.”

“Okay.” I won't push.

She throws her bag over her shoulder, and I follow her out into the living room, noting the darkness that's descended over the city.

“Let me get you an Uber. It's kind of late to be walking on your own.”

She looks like she's about to protest and then thinks better of it. “Well, if you insist. Thank you.”

After ordering, I give her a long kiss at the door, accidentally sporting a bit of a chub because I'm naked underneath this towel and she's gorgeous. “Text me when you're home, okay?”

She yawns, covering her mouth with her fist. My chest tightens. She's cute when she's tired. "Yeah, I'll text you," she agrees. She gives me a little wave and starts down the hall toward the elevator.

When I close the door behind her, I gaze out at the city from the big windows and imagine I can watch the Uber safely deposit her at her door. And then I realize I can.

I sit in The Chair with the app open and watch the little black car drawing a line through the city streets, depositing her at home less than ten minutes later.

A text pops up.

ANNABEL

I'm home! Tx for a fun night. Let's do it again soon

CHARLIE

Can't wait. Good night Annabel Hall.

I fall asleep in my towel, with the light on and thoughts of Annabel Hall's naked body riding me.

JULY

CHARLES

I'm not too thrilled about spending the weekend helping my brother move. I agreed to this before Annabel. Now that we're sleeping together, I would much rather be in her bed. Pulling on that dirty-blond hair, my nose full of warm strawberries, rather than watching a bunch of sweaty guys lugging my brother's furniture into different rooms.

She runs through my mind nearly constantly. The feel of her skin beneath my fingertips is seared into my brain. The enthusiastic way she rolls onto me, guiding me inside her, has left an imprint in my mind that replays every time I close my eyes. She has made me insatiable.

But instead of undressing Annabel, I'm putting together furniture for Ashley.

She gave us clear directions. While the movers are doing their thing, we focus on reconstructing beds and staying out of the way. She wants us all to have a comfortable place to sleep tonight, which I appreciate, but I would much rather be sleeping with Annabel Hall.

Their house is gorgeous, a brownstone in Brooklyn just a little smaller than the house they lived in outside Philadelphia. Stainless steel appliances, those fancy iron light fixtures with Einstein bulbs, combined with all the charm of an old house—high ceilings, a quirky floor plan, and original wood floors. Tucker even has a reading nook in his room with built-in bookshelves on either side of a sunny window bench.

Julian and I do our best to reassemble Tucker's bed frame. When we took it apart earlier, it had been three pieces—but now it's somehow in four, and we're not sure how or why it got that way. Julian's efforts have become too forceful, and if he keeps going like this, he's only going to make the problem worse.

"Maybe we should try one of the other bed frames and come back to this one. I think it might have gotten broken along the way," I say.

He lines up two pieces and pushes them together to no avail. "Ashley will kill me if Tuck doesn't have a bed for tonight."

"He'll be fine as long as he has a mattress." One of the guys from the moving company enters the room with a quick nod, leaving a pile of boxes by the door labeled "Tucker."

Julian lets the two pieces clatter to the floor. He stops and looks at me. "My kid can't sleep on the floor."

"Jul, out of anyone here, he's the least likely to even notice he's sleeping on the floor. It's a move. He'll be fine for a night."

"I need a glass of water." He gets up abruptly and leaves the room. I take another sip of my beer.

Ashley wasn't kidding about being prepared. She drove back and forth all week, buying groceries so we'd have snacks, making sure the electricity was on, and bringing Tucker up in advance so he wouldn't feel blindsided by a new space. She's been running between rooms this whole time, making sure everything is being loaded in the right places.

Julian has to go to work tomorrow for his first official day in the New York office and she's trying to make sure everything goes as smoothly as possible. She already has lunch packed for him, complete with a note reminding him that he should go out with coworkers instead if they have something planned.

The two of them must be under a lot of stress if she feels the need to remind him how to people.

I hear slamming from another bedroom, and, knowing that Julian is likely in the kitchen, I run out to make sure Tucker didn't get away from Ashley and pull a bookshelf down on himself.

But it's just my brother forcing another bed frame together incorrectly.

"Julian," I say, but he doesn't hear me, his focus on two pieces of wood that I think are actually parallel sides of the bed frame. "Julian!" He jumps, dropping one of the pieces directly on his toes.

"Fuck!" he shouts, jumping up and holding his foot up. "Fuck!"

"Are you alright?" I ask, putting a hand on his shoulder to steady him.

"Don't touch me!" He hobbles away from me.

Hurried footsteps pound up the stairs. "Are you alright? We heard screaming." Ashley's eyes are wide as she takes in the scene, Julian pacing but wobbling to avoid putting pressure on his foot. "We're fine," Julian says, rubbing his temples. He won't look at any of us.

Ashley glances at me, searching for an answer. I shrug and motion toward the door. *I can handle this.*

"Well, we'll be downstairs. We're unpacking Tucker's playroom," she says.

Julian nods, but he still doesn't look at us. Instead, he faces the wall, one hand on his forehead, the other on his hip.

"Are you okay, Daddy?"

Julian's shoulders slump as he turns toward Tucker. "Yeah, I'm okay, buddy. Thank you for asking."

Ashley guides Tucker out of the room by the shoulders and back downstairs. Their voices are too low for me to hear what they're saying, but I can only imagine that Ashley's reassuring Tucker that his dad is just fine.

I just hope he is.

He leans against the wall, his hand covering his face.

“Jul?” I put a hand on his shoulder. He sniffs in response, and I realize my big brother is crying. I take another step toward him. “Julian, what’s going on?”

He lowers his hand from his face, his expression flat. “I don’t think I can do this.”

“Do what? This move or your new job?”

“Both. All of it.”

“Come sit,” I say, gesturing to an ottoman floating at the edge of the room. Aside from the floor, it’s the only place to sit. “Why don’t you think you can do this?”

He rests his elbows on his knees. “The New York office is a different place, a different sort of company. I can run circles around anybody in Philadelphia, but I’m uprooting my entire family, making huge financial decisions on a hunch that I can do the same in New York.” He rubs his hands over his face as one of the movers whisks by the door, arms full of boxes. “What if it doesn’t work out? We have a gigantic mortgage and we’re two hours away from family. What if Tucker doesn’t fit in school here? What if Ashley decides she doesn’t want to be so far from her sister? What if I don’t have time for her because I have to be at work all the time? I’m trying to be everything I have to be for her and Tuck, which means not being who I have to be for you and Mom.” He sighs, shutting his eyes. “I just don’t know how to do this.”

We turn our heads in the direction of a thump in the next room, likely the boxes hitting the floor. A few seconds later, hurried footsteps retreat down the hallway. “I don’t get the luxury of being upset about it. People depend on me. Ashley, Tucker, you, Mom, and now a whole slew of people who I barely know yet trust me to make the right decisions.”

“Jul, you’re the single most qualified person to do this, speaking as the little brother who still, after all this time, looks up to you. And as far as I go, maybe it’s time to let me be an adult, considering I’ve been one for about fifteen years already.”

He brushes me off. “I know you’re an adult, but it’s still my responsibility to be a good brother and son. I don’t get to leave that behind just because of a job.”

“Julian, do you remember that night when we were in college? You drank like an entire fifth of liquor.”

He pauses. “I mean, no.”

“You told me that Dad gave you the responsibility of making sure I turn out okay.”

Julian’s eyes flick to mine and away again quickly.

“Have you maybe taken that to heart a little too much?”

He rolls his eyes. “Look, I’m not doing anything based on what Dad said to me. The problem is that you and Mom are my family just as much as Tucker and Ashley, and this job is putting me in a position where I have to choose.”

“You don’t have to choose. You have to delegate. Just like you’ll have to do at work.”

“It’s different with family.”

“It’s not.”

He looks at me, shrugging his shoulders. “I don’t know what you want me to say. I’m sorry I care so much?” Ashley’s voice ricochets through the house as she shouts directions to the movers.

“You should be. Your only responsibility is to Ashley and Tucker now. And if that means taking a fancy new job and moving to New York, then that’s what you have to do. If I recall correctly, it’s not like you were given a choice of your new job versus your old one, right? It was kind of your new job versus none?”

He sighs. “Yeah, pretty much.”

“So you don’t have a choice. You’ll either fail spectacularly or succeed spectacularly, but my guess is it’ll be the latter. That’s your obligation to Ashley and Tuck. As far as me and Mom, you’ve already fulfilled your responsibility. At

least, if I'm allowed to call myself a fully functioning adult now?"

He smiles, but he doesn't laugh.

"You're doing well, Jul, but you're still trying to micromanage me and Mom. That's not going to work if you want to live a happy life with Ashley and Tucker. You've gotta let me handle it."

He's quiet for a moment. "How do I get past the guilt?"

I don't have a good answer for that. "Time, I think."

He swallows, his eyes finding mine as a beat of silence passes. "Don't you want more?"

"More?"

He takes a deep breath. "It doesn't seem fair. I get all this," he says, gesturing vaguely around. "I get Ashley and Tucker and the freedom to follow my job. It feels like I beat you to the finish line and because I got to cross, you never will."

His words hit me straight in the chest. I'm struck by his humility, his inability to recognize just how hard he's worked for everything he has, but also his concern. It's not just the guilt of unloading responsibility onto me that plagues him, but the cost of that responsibility. I see in his eyes that fear that hits after a narrow escape from death, the thought almost unbearable that one little decision could have cost everything.

He's afraid that his decision will cost me my future Ashley. My future Tucker. And to him, they're everything.

I know what I want in life—or, more accurately, what I don't want—but the look in his eye makes me question myself. Before now, I never wondered what it would feel like to care for someone so fiercely that the very thought of never having met them scares me as much as death.

I'm suddenly curious.

But that's not what he needs to hear. "That was never my finish line."

"It was never mine, either."

“How about we circle back to this conversation when my personality does a one-eighty?”

Julian eyes me. “We’re not all that different, you know.”

“It’s like we’re related or something.”

He gives me a look. “I’d feel a lot better if you would just agree to lean on me if you need to. Or Ashley.”

“I promise to lean on you if I need to,” I repeat.

He shakes his head. “I’ll take that with a grain of salt.”

“I mean it. I just probably won’t need to.” We hear voices outside, the movers discussing getting a big piece of furniture out of the truck. “And I’m not trying to be a dick, but it might be worth talking to someone about the impostor syndrome creeping into your head. You’re the most capable person I know.”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil.” He rubs his hands along his thighs like he’s about to get up.

I smile. “So, can I buy you a new bed frame now? Because this shit is a disaster and I don’t feel like dealing with it.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “I’m sure we can figure it out.”

There’s the Julian I know and love. “Me too, I’m sure we can.” I slap him on the back and we return to our furniture assembly. He still doesn’t seem himself, but I hope a good first day tomorrow will set him back on track.

And I hope Annabel texts me soon because I’m aching to see her when I get home.

ANNABEL

Today, we have another client presentation, and I plan on spending the entire morning keeping an eagle eye on my parts of the deck. I have more to talk through this time, which indicates that whatever or whoever screwed up last time has been forgotten. I'm still a trusted part of the team.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've kept a closer eye on Danielle. She's not super friendly with anyone at work, but she smiles often and is nice to everyone. I'm starting to wonder if the whole thing was just a huge misunderstanding. She seems more shy than anything else, but maybe she just hasn't fully developed her confidence in this role. Carrie did say she'd bounced around the company a bit before landing on Evelyn's team.

Our presentation is at noon again, and when I get there in the morning, I ask her to send a link to the most recent version.

As I flip through, I see that all of my slides are included. I let out a deep breath, readjusting the bow in my hair. I'm being ridiculous, seeing drama where there is none. I should apologize to her—as corporate women, we need to be holding each other up, not tearing each other down.

But no, I shouldn't apologize to her because all that would do is highlight that I thought she had intentionally done something wrong last time. It was a mistake, that's all.

Stephanie whispers through her notes just loudly enough for me to recognize that she's saying something but not quite

loud enough to decipher what it is. Evelyn's door is shut for a call that started with a lot of exuberant yelling and greetings.

I drink my tea and run through my notes, excited for a drama-free presentation.

But half an hour before the meeting, Danielle sends an updated file. I glance over at her.

“What were the updates?” I ask casually.

Danielle shrugs. “I just added our branding to the new version, so it aligns with our regular presentations. Just trying to make it as professional as possible, you know?”

I convince myself she doesn't glare pointedly at my bow when she says the word “professional.”

“We have to present this in half an hour,” Steph says, standing from her cubicle and peering down at Danielle. “I think we should just use the old presentation. We don't know if anything changed.”

“It's literally copied and pasted from the last one. It's the same.” Danielle levels her with her gaze, but Steph doesn't sit back down. “But if you want to use the old version, that's fine.”

Steph thinks about it for a moment. “I would prefer to use the old version.”

I chime in. “Me too.”

Danielle nods, outnumbered. “Okay, old version it is then.”

As the minutes tick down before the meeting starts, I open both versions of the presentation side by side on my dual monitors and flip through each slide. I read my notes while doing it, so it's not like I'm squandering the last half hour of practice before the clients are here—I'm just also searching for interference while doing it.

And my breath catches when I see that three out of six of my product mock-ups have disappeared. I flip back and forth between the slides before and after, searching for any indication that something just got misplaced, but it's clear they're nowhere to be found.

I glance at Danielle. I shouldn't confront her now. We're so close to our meeting, and Steph and I have to keep level heads.

But a boiling anger in my stomach forces me to say something. Like Charlie said, maybe I'll be able to tell if she's lying.

"Oh wow, thank god you said that, Steph," I say, watching Danielle out of the corner of my eye. "I was accidentally practicing with the new version, and it looks like the copy missed three of my mock-ups."

"Oh phew," Steph hisses. "Thank god for that."

"Oh, my god. Wow, good catch, Annabel," Danielle chimes in.

My nostrils flare at her response. I can't tell if she's lying.

Evelyn's door opens, and she walks brusquely out, leaning over the top of Danielle's cubicle. "Hey, what's up with the new deck?"

"We're just going to use the old one. I wanted to update the formatting to be more in line with the Wink brand, but I think I made the change too late," Danielle says.

Evelyn squints at her, her red hair wild around her face. "Yeah, I think we should have decks done by the end of the day before the presentation. No changes the morning of."

"Yeah, okay. That makes sense."

Evelyn turns on her heel and marches back into her office, shutting the door.

Danielle faces back toward her computer.

I accidentally lock eyes with Steph, who raises her eyebrows quickly and then turns back to her screen.

I take out my phone and text Charlie.

ANNABEL

Danielle update - drinks tonight?

He has a client dinner tonight, but earlier today Mari asked if I was up for a post-work dinner. If we get our timing right, this might work out perfectly.

The past few days, Charlie's been busy helping his brother move and making up for a few days of lost time at work, yet he still wants to see me. I ignore the giddy feeling I get when I see him after a long day, the top button of his shirt undone and shadows under his eyes.

The late nights are rough. By the time I get home, I'm exhausted, but I just can't stay over. It feels too relationship-y and while a lot of the other things we do toe that line, there's something about the thought of waking up in his arms that scares me.

Probably because I'd wake up feeling safe and warm and protected, and then our whole arrangement would turn on its head.

Charles Sinclair told me from the start that he doesn't do relationships. I can hold on to my logic as long as the comforting haze of morning doesn't turn him into something he doesn't want to be.

CHARLES

I scroll through my email at the bar as I wait for Bob to arrive, cool condensation running down my fingers as I take the last sip of my drink. A notification pops up that Dieter's crush has canceled on us yet again, and while normally I'd be justifiably miffed, a sense of relief washes over me.

I have a mass of client meetings this week, thanks to my mom's bookshelf falling on me. Gabi rescheduled everything within the same couple of days, so I'm booked from morning to evening with coffee meetings, presentations, lunches, dinners, and drinks. I didn't even realize we had this many clients and Gabi's even taking some meetings by herself. I barely have time to hit the gym in the afternoons. I barely have time for Annabel.

She's having dinner with one of her girlfriends tonight and agreed to wait for me at a bar down the street once she's done so I can sweep her into my apartment and undress her.

But I can't let thoughts of Annabel Hall distract me. Even though she'll be just two doors down, reading one of her silly romance novels, just waiting for me to bring her back to my apartment and throw her around.

She's incredible—a distinct sense of freedom comes over her when she climbs on top of me. Her persisting lack of self-consciousness and demanding tone when she tells me what she likes—which she's doing more and more often now—has me

craving her constantly. I've never been so excited to please someone as I am Annabel Hall.

She's the perfect friend for benefits.

When I finally sit down at the table across from Bob, I'm running on fumes and thankful for the reprieve from my hectic week. He grins at me, and I let go of all the pretenses I usually bring into client meetings.

Bob orders his crab cakes, just as I expected him to, and I decide that today's dish will be the veal. Something about it stuck in my mind from last time.

"Veal again?" he prods, unfailingly entertained by my choices.

"Something about it," I say, and it's not lost on me that there's something about Annabel, too, that keeps me coming back.

"Wow, should I take a picture for my scrapbook?" Bob jokes, taking a sip of his drink.

"Probably," I say, smiling. "It'll never happen again."

The entrées arrive a short time later, and we dig in, ordering another round of drinks.

"How's your mom doing?" He pulls away a bite of crab cake.

For a second, I almost forgot. What a mess my mom's care has turned into. I wipe my mouth with my napkin and sip my drink before answering.

"Well, Julian is moving to New York." I let that settle, and Bob pauses, his fork hovering above the plate instead of hungrily clawing into his food like he was the moment before. "He's going to hire an additional nurse for her, but otherwise, a lot of stuff will be up to me."

Bob sets his utensils on his plate and leans back in his chair. "That's a lot of responsibility. She's been having a lot of trouble lately, hasn't she?"

I nod, my concerns racing back to me. “She’s not really herself anymore.”

A look passes over Bob’s face, and I panic, remembering this is a client dinner. There should be no pity on his face, only smiles, extra drinks, and delicious food. But it’s Bob. He’d be offended if I tried to back out of it now.

“That sucks.” He takes a sip of his drink. “Is there anything I can do?”

I smile, figuring this is an opportunity to turn the charm back on. “Keep meeting me once a month for dinner.” I pick up my glass and clink it against his.

His smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “It’s okay to ask for help, you know.”

“I know, Bob. I’ll be alright. My mom raised us. The least I can do is make sure she lives out the last years of her life as well as she can.”

Bob nods. “You’re a good kid.”

“Thanks, Bob.”

We eat silently for a few moments, sipping our respective drinks.

“So,” he starts. I give him my full attention, sensing he’s about to tell me something important. He takes a deep breath and leans back in his chair. “I wanted to let you know that I’m going to be retiring next month.”

My heart drops. “What?”

He nods. “Candace and I are going to do some traveling. Maybe spend some extended time in Florida like the old folks we are.”

My mind blanks as I struggle to catch up to what he’s saying. *Is he trying to tell me he won’t be meeting me for dinner anymore?* “But it’s your company,” I stutter.

He shrugs. “I’ve got some good guys who work with me. They’re going to take it from here. I trust them.”

He watches me, and I feel like he's expecting something more than cold sweat and nervous whiskey drinking, but that seems to be all I'm capable of at the moment.

"Congratulations," I say, having trouble finding the right words. "That's fantastic."

He smiles, his eyes narrowing. "I did, however, manage to snag myself the one and only board seat." He presses his lips together. "Which happens to influence how we're spending our advertising money. So if it's okay with you, I'll still be your contact."

Relief floods through me. "Jesus, Bob," I say, laughing.

"Well, it's nice to know how much you appreciate me," he says, his grin wide. "Or at least, my money."

I shake my head. "I think at this point, you know how much I enjoy these dinners."

He smiles. "I do, too. We've been coming here for what, the past ten years? Since you were just a baby, it seems. I remember you telling me I was one of your first clients and you were nervous enough to piss your pants."

I cringe, embarrassed by the memory.

"You did good. It was endearing."

"God, that's just the word I wanted to hear," I joke.

"But look at you now, big shot sales rep taking on the entire city. If your mom had seen this before she was diagnosed, she'd be really proud of what you're doing now."

My face heats.

"All right, I'll stop talking now." He holds his hands up in surrender. "A man has few times in life when he gets to be sappy, but I think retirement is one of them. Candace will argue it's every time a good rom-com comes on, but we're not going to bring that up."

"A *good* rom-com?"

He pauses, caught. "You're right, they're all good."

A barking laugh escapes me.

We spend the rest of the meal chatting like friends, but there's a new level of comfort between us. I'm pretty sure whatever board seat he's taken is completely made up, and I'm not sure whether it's just for me or all advertising, but I'll take it.

I always looked forward to dinners with Bob, but I didn't realize how much I relied on them for a sense of calm during the storm until I thought they were gone for good.

We order dessert this time, and I feel ridiculous splitting a raspberry cheesecake with another grown man, but it seems we're both extending this meal, potentially our last true "client dinner." I'm thrilled to put the abnormally expensive bill on the corporate card, and we walk out together, making plans for next time.

"You're not going to start skipping our dinners now that you have all the time in the world to do other things, are you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

We pause on the sidewalk, where we normally part ways, him to the parking garage and me to my apartment.

And then, over his shoulder, I see polka dots.

My heart starts hammering in my chest.

Bob's retirement announcement surprised me so much I completely forgot Annabel was waiting for me. She retreats quickly, her hair bouncing as she walks away from us.

"Annabel!" I shout, not even realizing what I'm doing. *Oh god, I forgot her, I forgot her, I forgot her.* "Annabel!"

She whips around and slowly walks toward us, eyes wide and a pinched smile on her face. The panic that set in when I realized I had forgotten her now turns into dread when I have to introduce her to Bob.

"Hi," she says, grimacing as she joins us. "I'm sorry. I was, you know, at the bar and I thought you—"

“I’m sorry,” I interrupt. I want to touch her, pull her into me and kiss her, but I can’t in front of Bob. I turn to him instead. “Bob, this is Annabel. Annabel, Bob.”

They shake hands quickly.

“I’m so sorry,” I say. “Bob just told me he’s retiring, and it was just a bit of a shock and I completely forgot you were waiting on me.”

She waves me off. “It’s fine. I should have called or something. I just thought I could sneak a peek and, you know, see what’s happening. I’m sorry.”

Bob starts laughing, shaking his head. “Well, while the two of you trade apologies all night, I’m going to head home.”

He turns to me and shakes my hand, his other on my shoulder.

“You better make it up to her,” he says in a low voice. He turns to her and takes her hand once more. “And it was nice to meet you, Annabel. You hold him accountable for being a jerk, okay?”

She laughs. “I will.”

He takes a step toward the parking garage and then pauses, turning back to us.

“Actually,” he starts, holding one finger to his chin. “Candace has been bugging me about coming to another dinner with my friend Charlie here. Wouldn’t it be nice if the four of us did a little retirement celebration?”

Annabel and I both freeze.

Bob knows what he’s doing.

“That would be lovely,” she says hesitantly, watching my eyes as she does.

“Absolutely lovely,” I agree.

Bob shakes my hand again, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “I’ll see you two soon, then.”

We go in our separate directions, Annabel falling into step beside me.

“So, we can probably just cancel, right?” she asks.

I was thinking the same thing, but there are a couple of reasons why I hesitate.

Bob’s dangling an extra dinner in front of my face because he now knows how much I enjoy them. And if I don’t bring Annabel, he won’t bring Candace. This will make his retirement celebration nothing more than one of our regular dinners, in which case, he might want to just wait until the next dinner we have on the books.

He also knows that any girl he sees me with likely won’t be around for long. He’s bluffing, but I can bluff right back at him. “No, I think we should go.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Really?”

“As friends. He’s just trying to bust my balls—I think we can be honest about what we are and still have fun with them.”

She nods, pondering this.

“If that’s okay with you,” I say.

“Yeah, that’s okay with me.”

We walk in silence for a few moments.

“Hey, I’m sorry about tonight.”

She knocks into me playfully, and her grin makes my pants tight. “I think I know of a way you can make it up to me.”

ANNABEL

I tuck my legs under me as I lean back into the couch, nestling into the crook of Charlie's arm. Just the touch of his skin on mine is enough to make me forgive him, but I won't let him off the hook that easily.

I can see in his puppy-dog eyes that he feels terrible, as he should. I was waiting at that bar an hour later than he said he'd be done, no text or anything. Unwilling to leave without the promised orgasm, I swallowed my pride to search for him rather than head home.

He rests a hand on my knee, his thumb drawing little circles on my skin.

"So, what is the Danielle news?" he asks.

I take a sip of my drink, leaving it on the coffee table. "She had to have done it intentionally. She got reprimanded today because she tried to send out an updated version of the presentation half an hour before our meeting, and Evelyn just wasn't having it. I checked afterward, and three of my mock-ups had been deleted from the new version."

He raises his eyebrows. "That's kind of evil."

"Yeah, I just don't know why. I mean, what could I possibly have done to her?"

He thinks about it for a second. "Are there any, like, workplace etiquette things that you've noticed are weird there? Could you have slighted her in some way when you started because you didn't know any better?"

I think back on it. When I first started, I was pretty much only working on the file system revamp project that Danielle was handling. “Maybe I rolled my eyes at one of her requests?”

“Did you?” he asks, eyebrows high and the hint of a smile on his face. “Seems kind of unlike you.”

“I mean, we both complained about it. It was one of those mindless projects that had to be done and she was tasked with executing it. I just did what she told me. I don’t know, maybe it’s one of those things where it’s only okay for her to complain?”

He shrugs. “Maybe. Any chance she applied for your job and got turned down?”

“I don’t think so. She has no design experience. She’s been in a bunch of different coordinator roles at the company, all administrative. Unless she was hoping to get on a team that would teach her?”

He takes a sip of his drink, the swirls of his thumb on my knee stopping momentarily. “Could be. It’s odd that she’s singling you out, of all people. Makes me think maybe it’s less about you as the person and more about your role.”

I nod, thinking that over. “I’ll have to do some snooping.”

“Ms. Annabel Hall, corporate detective,” he jokes, his fingers trailing up my leg.

I push his shoulder, laughing. “Oh, stop.”

“I can’t wait to see you sleuthing about the new filing system, searching for clues.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I meant I’d ask around.” I lower my voice. “Surreptitiously, of course, so as not to arouse suspicion.”

He laughs harder, the sound contagious. The ice in his glass shakes as he leans over and kisses me on the temple.

And for some reason, I just expect him to say, “I love you.”

“I hope you wear a trench coat,” he says, his lips lingering over my skin, and I’m harshly reminded of what this is, what we are.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?”

He nods his approval. “Only if there are no clothes underneath.”

“Maybe I’ll surprise you for your birthday,” I joke and then pause. “Wait, when *is* your birthday?”

“May eleventh.”

We fall into silence. I probably won’t be around for his birthday.

I swallow. “So, Bob is one of your longest-standing clients?” I ask, taking a sip of my martini.

Charlie’s thumbs return to their swirls. “You know I’m good with people,” he says, leaning back into the couch. “But I’m really not a huge extrovert. I actually find all these meetings kind of draining sometimes, especially when it’s somebody you know you can’t really be yourself with.” He takes a sip. “From the start, Bob was always just a nice guy. Real unassuming, caring, smart as fuck, and humble. I mean, this guy owns one of the biggest construction companies in Philadelphia and you’d never know it.”

“You have a lot of respect for him.” The tension eases from the air as he continues on his tangent.

“I do. He’s just a great guy, and I guess it rocked me a bit to hear that he’s retiring. I mean, sure, he’s still technically a client, but honestly, I get something out of it that money can’t buy.” He shakes his head. “Sounds dumb. I just appreciate him.”

“Aw.” I smile, a few little pieces clicking into place. “Bob’s your dad.”

“Bob’s your uncle,” he says quickly.

“What?”

He turns to me, his eyebrows crinkled. “It’s ‘Bob’s your uncle,’ not ‘Bob’s your dad.’”

I shake my head. “No, *Bob* is your dad.”

He raises his eyebrows, not following me.

“You look up to Bob like he’s your dad. He’s become part of your people, you know? Everyone talks about ‘found family.’ You just happened to find a dad figure rather than a sister or brother figure.”

He thinks about it for a moment. “That’s weird.”

“No, it’s beautiful. That’s what life is about, finding people who give you life rather than take it away.”

He narrows his eyes at me and glances down at my martini glass. “How many of those have you had tonight?”

“Not enough for having been stood up for an hour.”

He cringes. “I deserved that.” He rests his whiskey glass on the table and winds one arm behind me on the couch. “Tell me how I can make it up to you.”

One hand slides up my skirt, a finger pulling at my underwear.

“How hungry are you?”

He shrugs, processing for a moment. “Honestly, not very hungry. We ate a *lot* for dinner tonight.”

I wait, raising my eyebrows at him. A moment of delight washes over his face when he realizes what I mean.

“Oh,” he says, grinning. He leans over, dropping a kiss at the base of my neck. “I love it when you tell me what you want.”

He grabs my knee, pulls me down onto the couch underneath him, and presses his mouth to mine, his tongue moving between my lips. I can feel his length between us, throbbing between our bodies.

“I am actually starving,” he whispers into the skin of my chest, leaving kisses all along the way as he tugs on the

neckline of my dress, exposing a nipple and taking it eagerly in his mouth. He knows that makes me squirm, and I wind my fingers into his hair, pulling him closer.

Meanwhile, his other hand moves toward my underwear, one thumb stroking me gently over the cotton, stirring my insides and causing me to buck against his hand.

“You like that, baby?”

“I would like it better without the layer of fabric.”

He tugs on my underwear, ripping them forcefully down my legs.

“Is that better?” he asks, and my eyes tip back into my head as he continues his stroking.

“Yes,” I moan.

His teeth scrape against my neck and he licks my nipple again, this time with a little nip that makes me gasp. He moves lower and lifts my skirt so I’m exposed to him.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs as I strain not to thrust my hips toward him.

He peppers kisses along the line of skin at the corner of my thigh, his lips pausing after each one.

“You’re so wet, you’re dripping,” he says, leaving kisses just above my slit, moving in a circle around where I want to feel him. “I can’t wait to eat you.”

I fight the urge to yell at him to get to it—he’s enjoying teasing me way too much.

He slides one finger inside me, and I let out a moan of pure ecstasy.

“Oh, you *really* like that, don’t you?”

“Yes, please,” I groan.

“Well, since you said please,” he says.

His lips connect with my clit. His tongue begins a circular dance around it, flicking up with the most delicious suction. I have no control over the sound that comes out of my throat as

he slides another finger inside me, pulsing gently, forward and back, as his tongue continues those little circles, his lips gently sucking. One hand is on my ass, squeezing me harder and harder.

“I’m going to come,” I gasp.

“Come into my mouth.”

Fireworks alight in my abdomen as my orgasm takes over. He grabs my hips, holding me in place so he can continue licking me until I’m done. He watches me writhe in complete satisfaction until, finally, my breathing heavy, I relax.

“God, that was so hot,” he says, climbing on top of me and peppering my neck with little kisses. He kisses me deeply, the taste of me overwhelming on his lips.

“I should clean myself up,” I say.

He sits up to make room for me to pass between him and the coffee table and grabs my ass as I do, pulling me close to him and leaving a kiss on my hip. “God, you are sexy.”

I take a few moments to readjust myself in the bathroom, and when I return to the living room, he’s waiting patiently on the couch, whiskey in hand.

He smiles, setting his drink down on the coffee table. He looks like he’s about to get up, probably planning on throwing me over his shoulder and taking me into the bedroom, which he seems to like doing, but I very daintily pick up my discarded underwear and slide them on before he has a chance.

“What are you doing?” His eyebrows crinkle together.

“I should get home.”

His jaw drops, a hint of a smile appearing on his face. “I can’t decide what’s making me hornier, you coming into my mouth or demanding an orgasm and leaving me high and dry.”

“Maybe a combination of both?”

“Yup, I’d say it’s both.” He takes another sip before setting his drink back down on the coffee table and standing up. His

hands are on my waist, and he pulls me into him, kissing me deeply.

“Are you sure I can’t convince you to stay?” He’s rock hard against my stomach, but I won’t be convinced. Not tonight.

“It’s late. I should be getting home.”

He bites his lip. “I’m going to have to jerk off in the shower about ten times tonight.”

I smile sweetly up at him. “I hope you enjoy your alone time.”

He grins. “Consider me reprimanded.”

“Don’t forget about me, *baby*,” I say, the last word dripping with a little more disdain than I intended.

His eyebrows pop up, and I reach down for my purse, throwing it over my shoulder.

I’ve noticed, over the past few weeks, that he only ever calls me baby when we’re fucking, which in itself isn’t a problem, but I can’t help feeling like it’s a habit from sleeping with an endless train of different women. Yet he comes almost on command when I utter *his* name.

He walks me to the door, one hand on the small of my back, and kisses my temple before I step out.

“Text me when you’re home, okay?”

I nod. “I will.”

By the time I climb up the stairs to my apartment, I’m exhausted and ready to fall directly into bed, but I force myself to take a quick shower and change into my comfy jammies. I text Charlie that I got home okay, and he sends me a series of panting emojis in response.

CHARLIE

I’m DYING over here.

I let him stew in it.



THE NEXT MORNING, I wake up to an array of texts ranging in desperation between hopeful and near death. I agree to give him a redo tonight, and he agrees to reenact last night as long as I'm okay with waiting for him through one last client dinner. I agree, mostly because last night has been playing on repeat in my mind, too.

Their meeting is at a fancy steak house about a five-minute walk from his apartment but a good half hour from mine, so I set myself up at a bar down the street that's cozy and library-themed, each wall filled to the brim with old books.

He should only be another twenty minutes or so. He'll zoom into the bar, slap a twenty on the table, and grab my hand, walking briskly toward his apartment with desire in his eyes. He's been texting me frequently tonight, keeping me updated on the status of the dinner.

Compared to how he talked about Bob last night, he seems almost derisive about the client he's meeting tonight. His exact words described Frankie Carver as an overgrown frat boy when he gave me a rundown of tonight's dinner. He noted that his coworker, who's also coming, is very likely to go home with the overgrown frat boy tonight and rolled his eyes as he did so.

A part of me wonders whether he rolled his eyes because she deserves better or because she deserves someone like Charlie.

But that's tapping into an insecurity I've worked really hard to put behind me.

I will not allow Chris's indiscretions to impede on what's turning out to be an incredibly satisfying friends-with-benefits situation.

I will not allow jealousy to ruin this.

Then again, he did say he only sleeps with one woman at a time, so I'd at least have a right to be mad.

I shake the thought from my mind, returning to the start of my chapter because while my eyes read the words, my brain didn't understand them. I'm distracted tonight.

He texts me, and I abandon the book in favor of responding.

CHARLIE

Omg they're playing footsie under the table and frat boy just rubbed my leg.

OMG, lol.

They're def going home together tonight, hopefully soon, just finished dessert.

I nod, even though no one is there to see me, and continue reading, slowly sipping my drink so I'll be done when he gets here.

And I keep reading. And sipping. And reading, and sipping.

And then he calls.

"Hey."

"Hey, are you about done?"

"Look, Annabel, I'm so sorry. Something came up. I can't do it tonight."

I mark my page with a Post-it and shut my book. "What? I've been waiting here."

"I'm sorry, I'll make it up to you. I just—" I hear a woman's voice in the background. "I have to go. I'm sorry. It's an emergency. I'll explain later," he says and hangs up.

Emergency, my ass.

I leave a twenty on the table, shove my book into my purse and stomp along the sidewalk until I'm a block away from the steak house, with a clear view of the entrance. He's impossible to miss—tall, dark hair, perfectly tailored suit sticking out among the crowd. He sways back and forth, a tall blonde girl

wrapped in his arms; *so much for the coworker and the frat boy going home together*. I can't see his face from my vantage point, but I'm not sure I want to. I'm disgusted with him for being a liar and a cheat.

Not a cheat. We weren't together.

For being a liar, at least, and I'm disgusted with myself for being upset by it. I shake it off and head home, imagining my heels digging into his face with every step I take.

When I get to my apartment, I slam the door shut and lock it with gusto. I drop my bag on the floor right in front of the door because I'm feeling self-destructive—maybe it'll take me out again and I can spend a blissful thirty seconds unconscious on the floor, unable to think about Charles Sinclair. I throw my kettle onto the stove for a cup of tea like it did something wrong, and as I wait for the water to boil, I swallow down a shot of vodka and dial Layla. The phone rings and rings until I get her voice mail. I text her instead.

ANNABEL

BOY CRISIS.

I kind of expect her to call me right away, but she doesn't. I pour the hot water into a cup with a tea bag and sit on the floor in front of my couch, my tea next to me because I don't have a coffee table yet. I try to force a few minutes of meditation, but every time I close my eyes, I see Charlie and his blonde coworker out front of that steak house and my blood runs hot.

My phone rings, and I instantly grab it from the floor next to me, thinking it's Layla.

But it's Charlie.

I don't pick up. He calls again, and I watch the phone ring on the floor next to me, feeling the vibration through the wood. He calls once more, and when I still don't pick up, he texts me instead.

CHARLIE

Want to hear a story of how I cost my company
five million dollars in five seconds?

CHARLES

For Gabi's sake, I keep my opinions about Frankie Carver to myself, but he's the worst of the worst as far as clients go. He drinks too much, swears too much, and considers his advertising budget a gift to those less fortunate.

But Gabi sees something in him; he has that chiseled look, muscles far thicker than mine thanks to a slew of personal trainers whose work he takes credit for on his Instagram; he eats strictly chicken and broccoli because his body is a temple and he puts his health first, despite the half bottle of whiskey he drinks at every meal that definitely cancels out any clean eating. Worst of all, he has a charming smirk and baby-blue eyes that focus his undivided attention on the most attractive girl in any room.

As far as I've ever seen, that girl has always been Gabi. She's a stunner in the most classic way—long blonde hair, a tight ass, and legs that go on for days. They'd make beautiful little blue-eyed babies until he's canceled off Instagram for being the sexist bigot he is, and she'd be left holding the bag on a slovenly drunk who's squandered away all of Daddy's money.

He may have once made a derisive jab at Bob and I may have never forgiven him for it.

He also may have once made a joke in very poor taste about us flying to Paris with Gabi and giving her a true "Eiffel Tower" that I've never quite forgotten *or* understood.

But I have Annabel Hall waiting for me only a few minutes away, and if Gabi wants to take her chances on good old Frankie Carver, I will gladly light her way.

We spend the first few minutes of dinner going over next quarter's campaigns, and he nods along and pretty much accepts our proposal. At least, he promises to send over the money the next day—it doesn't really work like that—but I'm not sure how much of a role he has in the company or if he's just a figurehead who gets taken to drinks and agrees to things.

I don't care, though. I got a verbal agreement and Gabi will draft an incredibly friendly reminder in the morning to the agreed-upon terms, and it'll be another few months before we have to talk to Frankie Carver again.

When our entrées arrive, I think for a moment that he's going to send it back. He pokes at the chicken, then tastes a small bite of broccoli that seems to be acceptable, and he digs in.

After a few bites, he looks up at us, a question on his face.

"We should do a shot," he suggests, mostly to Gabi.

"Of what?"

He shrugs and then turns to her. "What do you like?"

"Oh, I don't know. Lemon drops?"

He scrunches up his face.

"How about tequila?" he asks, and without waiting for confirmation, he calls the waiter over and asks him for three.

"Tequila it is," I say to Gabi, and while Frankie is looking elsewhere, she levels me with a look.

"So, Frankie, how are your brothers?" she asks.

"Trey is in Greece with a bunch of girls. Greg just got promoted. He kind of sucks now. Parker is getting married soon, which extra sucks."

We've met Greg and Parker, both of whom also work at the company, but neither behaves like Frankie. Greg is serious, almost alarmingly so, and Parker is a jokester with a heart of

gold, though he tends to be awkward with new people. And then there's Frankie.

"Well, good for them. I'm happy they're happy," I say too pointedly and Gabi shoots me another look as the waiter drops off three tequila shots.

I stop talking and text Annabel.

CHARLIE

Frat boy's ordering shots. Kill me now.

Her response comes back quickly.

ANNABEL

Lol. Don't drink too much, or decency would dictate I shouldn't take advantage of you tonight.

My dick pulses against my pants.

"Do you see an upcoming promotion for yourself?" Gabi asks politely.

"Probably. I'm running external relations now."

I can feel Gabi's eyes on me, but I don't look at her. I force my gaze forward. *I must not roll my eyes.*

"Oh, that's great. What sort of things do you usually work on?"

He shrugs. "This kind of stuff, really."

Gabi's not sure how to respond.

I reach forward and grab one of the shots. "Cheers!"

Frankie and I throw ours back easily, but Gabi hesitates. She's not a tequila drinker and can only take a little at a time.

"Oh, come on now, girl, you can do better than that," Frankie says, and Gabi catches the twitch in my eye.

She sighs, closes her eyes, and throws the shot back. She gags a little once she swallows it down.

“Are you going to throw up?” I ask, not to taunt her, but to highlight to Frankie that some people are just not tequila drinkers. The look she gives me tells me I’ve pissed her off instead.

“No, I can hold my liquor, thank you very much,” she quips.

“See? She’s fine!” Frankie says and catches the waiter by the arm as he’s walking by with a tray of cleared dishes, nearly pulling it to the floor. “Jeez, watch it!” he says, and Gabi gulps. “Can we get three more shots, please?”

The waiter glances at me and I shrug, hoping the movement conveys my apology.

“Sure, sir.”

We’re close to finishing our dinner by the time the next shots arrive, and I can tell Frankie is annoyed. He orders dessert with clipped words, eagerly passing the shots to us. I’ve neglected my old-fashioned, knowing that these shots were coming, and Gabi’s first wine is still nearly full, a queasy look on her face as she eyes the tequila.

“Alrighty, bottoms up,” he says, his eyes on her.

We cheers quickly over the center of the table, and as we lift the shots to our mouths, I gasp, looking over Frankie’s shoulder. “Oh my god!”

He whips around quickly, “What?”

I grab Gabi’s shot, dump it into my empty water glass, and put it back in her hand.

She coughs at the perfect time—I have to ask her later if that was intentional. Frankie whips around to look at her, a slow smile spreading across his face when he sees the empty shot glass in her hand.

“There’s my girl,” he says, and she smiles at him, placing it on the table.

He glances at me, noticing mine is still full. “Well, are you going to join us?”

I tip the liquid into my mouth, horrified at the taste of tequila, and wash it down with a sip of Gabi's water. "Oops, my bad," I say, scooching it closer to her.

He bangs his fists on the table, ever the frat boy. "Now it's a party!" he shouts.

The waiter drops dessert off at the table with a smile, and there seems to be no misunderstanding between us that he and Gabi are splitting this dessert and I am not welcome to any of it. That's fine. I had enough dessert last night for a year—at least, the kind you can get at a restaurant. The kind I had on my couch, though? I'm starving for it.

When Frankie's done picking at dessert, he leans back in his chair, seemingly relaxed now that he's had a couple of shots and some sugar.

I suddenly feel something moving up my leg. I jump, moving out of the way, but he doesn't seem to notice he is hitting on me, not Gabi. His eyes are locked to hers, not skipping a beat.

CHARLIE

Omg, they're playing footsie under the table and frat boy just rubbed my leg.

ANNABEL

OMG lol.

I text her again, overcompensating a little to make up for my behavior last night.

CHARLIE

They're def going home together tonight, hopefully soon. Just finished dessert.

Gabi wipes her mouth on her napkin and stands up from the table. "I'm going to hit the bathroom," she says. My heart sinks, knowing I'll have to carry this conversation on my own for the next few minutes.

But after only a few seconds, he excuses himself too. Pleased with a few minutes of solitude ahead of me, I drink a little more of Gabi's water to wash away the tequila and take another sip of my old-fashioned. The waiter brings over the check.

"I'm sorry about him. He's a client," I say, handing him my company card.

"No problem, sir."

When he brings the check back to me, I leave a generous tip for dealing with Frat Boy. I take another sip of water, another sip of my drink.

And I start to wonder what's taking them so long.

Then I realize they're probably making out in the bathroom.

Leave it to Gabi to watch a man perform the way he did tonight and still be interested because he has a theoretically perfect body. She's never going to find someone as objectively attractive as her who's not a total asshole.

Minutes pass, and she finally reappears.

"Get lucky?" I ask snidely as she sits down.

The raw expression on her face immediately takes me aback.

"Are you all right?" I ask her. She looks like she needs to throw up or something.

She nods, but as she reaches for the water I stole from her, I see the front of her shirt has a gigantic rip.

"Gabi?"

"I'm fine," she says, but I see a tremble in her arm as she lowers the glass to the table.

"Gabi," I say, reaching out and touching her arm.

"I'm fine," she snaps.

"You're not," I say, pulling her arm away from the front of her shirt and seeing the extent of the damage. It has two layers,

so she's not on display, but the entire top layer of chiffon is ripped from top to bottom. "What happened?"

She shakes her head as Frankie rejoins the table, sighing as he sits.

"All right, well, this joint's beat," he says.

She's quiet, and I feel a rage building in my stomach.

"What happened?" I ask the table, now including Frankie.

"Nothing," Gabi says, shooting me a look.

Frankie laughs. "Your girl's a tease," he says, scoffing.

"What the hell does that mean?" I turn to him.

"Come on," he says, nodding at me. He leans over. "You know, girls like her wanna make out, do a little over-the-pants action without realizing what it means to be with guys like us."

I stand up from the table, my blood boiling. *Guys like us?* I want to reach across the table and strangle this guy. "What the fuck, Frankie?"

"Oh, okay, what is she, your girlfriend?" he scoffs again, standing up and pushing his chair forcefully into the table. "She knew what she was doing, she knew what she wanted, and she decided she just wanted to play with me a little. And then *she* got upset, that's what happened. I should be the one who's upset here."

I don't realize what I'm doing until I do it, a rage stronger than I've ever felt before putting a spring action into my bones. I push him, and he stumbles backward.

"What the fuck, man?"

He lunges back at me, his fist coming for my face, and I sidestep him, but not quite in time. His knuckles scrape hard against my jaw. I fly back at him, and my fist connects with his cheekbone. He falls, his foot catching a stray chair leg.

He scrambles up, his hand to his face, and glares at me.

“We’re never spending a dime with you psychos again,” he shouts and stomps out of the restaurant.

Only then do I realize there’s a restaurant full of people staring at me, the family of four next to me gawking with wide eyes and utensils frozen in midair. Gabi sits quietly at the table, her head in her hands, her sniffles barely audible over the eerily quiet restaurant as the background music softly plays on.

I catch our waiter out of the corner of my eye, and he slowly claps, a look of delight on his face. No one else does.

“Come on, Gabi.” I take her elbow and pull her up.

She desperately tries to wipe away the tears on her face, and I grab a napkin for her from the table as I lead her outside.

“If you could call the cops,” I say to the waiter before leading her outside.

“They’re already on their way.”

We wait outside, Gabi wiping tears away as I hold her against my chest and try to let her know she’s all right. A sickening sense of guilt settles over me when I realize that while she was being attacked, I was sitting obliviously at the table, daydreaming about Annabel’s curves.

“Gabi, what happened?” I ask when her tears finally subside.

She shakes her head. “He followed me to the bathroom, and we made out a little, which was fine. But he kept trying to go further, and like, it’s a public bathroom with stalls, not exactly a private space! And I kept telling him, ‘Not here, not here,’ and he started pulling on my clothes. And God, this skirt —” She looks down at it and then back up at me. “If this skirt didn’t have a million annoying buttons and a hidden zipper, he would have gone further.”

She starts crying again and I have to ignore every impulse in my body to take off running after wherever the hell Frankie Carver went to absolutely pummel him.

“Gabi,” I say, my voice breaking. “I’m so sorry.”

When the cops arrive, we give our statements. While Gabi sits with one of the detectives recounting the story, I step away to call Annabel. She's pissed, as I'd expect.

I'll have to make it up to her later. Red roses float through my head, just like the ones she had in her entryway the first time I went to her apartment, but that might give her the wrong idea. Sexual favors only, although, to be honest, I don't hate the elated expression I imagine she'd have if I did get them for her.

But that would make things all too messy. Gabi calls for me, and it pains me to tell Annabel I have to go.



APPARENTLY, Frankie got me a little harder than I initially registered. When I get home, I'm surprised to see a deep line of red three inches long, following the line of my jaw, likely from the gigantic class ring he wears. I'm lucky it only grazed me—it probably could have broken a bone.

Annabel, as expected, is less than thrilled to pick up the phone for me. She ignores my first few calls, but I eventually get her to pick up with a little clickbait. When she finally does, the dull note in her voice tells me I'm on thin ice.

I recount the story to her over the phone as I sit on my couch with a bag of ice on my jaw. I tell her what happened and eventually her tone lightens, revealing much more concern for Gabi than anger with me. She still doesn't seem thrilled, but I play myself up as a hero as much as I possibly can and by the time I get to the part where our statements are taken and one of the lady cops gives Gabi a heartfelt hug, she sighs.

“Well, I'm glad you were there for her. Of all reasons to reschedule, that makes sense.”

I swirl my whiskey around in the glass, looking out over the city lights. “She's a good person. She doesn't deserve an asshole like Frankie.”

Annabel's quiet for a moment. "You're not sleeping with her, are you?"

"What?" I ask, nearly dropping my whiskey, thanks to condensation and surprise. "No, we're coworkers and *friend* friends."

"Okay."

But now I feel like I'm lying because although I'm *not* sleeping with her, I *have* slept with her. "Although I guess in the pursuit of total honesty, I should say we did sleep together. About three or four years ago. I was a little less professional when we first started working together."

"Ah."

Her voice is flat, and this uncomfortable tightness in my chest spurs me to explain further.

"But it was a one-time thing, fueled by too many drinks and a lack of forethought about what it would be like to work with someone you've slept with."

She goes quiet again. "So you would have *kept* sleeping with her if she didn't work with you?"

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees.

"Annabel, hold up a second," I say, sensing this conversation veering off course. "I slept with Gabi years ago. It was a one-time thing that we both agreed was a bad idea afterward. We've been good friends ever since. She's a relationship I need to have for work, and we do well together. That's all."

"Yeah, I understand."

"Do you?" She's saying all the right words, but the subdued tone of her voice tells me she's still upset.

"Yes, I get it. She's a friend."

"Not the same kind of friend as you, though." I take another sip of whiskey, cautiously leaning back on the couch. "I'm still being totally honest with you, and I'm not sleeping with anyone else."

“I know,” she says, sighing. “And you know what, I have no right to even ask. We have our deal, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

She’s somber, and I debate offering to come over and pepper little kisses across her skin to make her smile. But it’s late, and by the time I get there, we’ll barely have any time before I have to turn right back around and come home.

Some small part of me wonders if her disappointment is bigger than a missed orgasm.

I bury that thought. Like she said, we have our deal.

“Hey, Annabel?”

“Yeah?”

“Can I see you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, that would be nice.”

AUGUST

ANNABEL

Midway through the afternoon, Evelyn sends us all a message asking me to drop the branding files in the Marigold Beauty presentation folder, Danielle to throw the PowerPoint in, and Steph to update the proposal links and documentation.

I message her back, asking what she means. When I created the new design files, I saved them in that folder. Every version should be in there, from start to end.

And as I hit send, a familiar anxiety creeps into my bones. I side-eye Danielle.

She's unperturbed, as usual, which only strengthens the tightness in my chest. I don't have locally saved files—I thought it would be safer to put all the files on the shared drive to begin with, so we knew they'd be the freshest copies.

I navigate into the folder, searching for them, and see that it's empty. My heart pounds in my chest. All the work we presented to them is gone. We might be able to screenshot some clips, but the designs will be low quality compared to the raw image. The layers will be all wrong, the creative assets won't display properly—and they definitely won't translate correctly to the printers when they actually want to implement the designs.

What is this chick's problem?

Charlie's words echo in my head. *You should ask her.*

Fueled by a simmering rage that propels me out of my chair, I smooth down my dress, square my shoulders, and walk over to her cubicle, leaning casually on the side.

“What’s up?” She doesn’t look at me.

“Any chance you know why the Marigold design files are missing from the shared drive? Was a backup restored or something? Because as I created them, I was saving them in that folder, and now they’re gone.” I’m trying my best to sound nonchalant, but it’s not coming out that way. “I figured I should ask you since you spearheaded that file-system project.”

She shrugs. “No backup as far as I know. You should probably keep a copy on your personal computer.”

I nod, unsure what to say to that. I can’t say anything, really, without coming off like a catty brat. So, I bite my tongue and return to my desk.

But as I’m walking, I hear what sounds like a scoff. I turn on my heel, attracting Steph’s attention from one cube over as I move. *You should ask her.* The words pop out of my mouth before I have a chance to second-guess them. “Do you have a problem with me?”

She looks at me, her eyebrows raised. “No,” she says. She has the audacity to act surprised by my question. “It’s probably just good practice to save your files to your computer.”

I shake my head. “It’s not, and we both know that. For the sake of continuity, best practice is to save all files to the shared drive, as written in the handbook *you* created for that project.”

“That doc is copied and pasted across this company. It’s still probably good practice to save your own files.”

“Danielle,” I say, drawing her attention to me. “What is your problem with me?”

“Why are you being so confrontational about this?”

“Why are you deleting my files?”

“Annabel?” Evelyn’s voice leaks out from her office seconds before she appears in her cracked open door.

She must have heard our conversation.

Fuck.

Silently cursing Danielle, I head into Evelyn's office. I hear a clucking noise coming from Danielle's cubicle, and there's nothing I'd rather do than turn around and slap her across the face.

But I don't.

I follow Evelyn into her office and prepare myself for whatever reprimanding she's going to give me.

"Sit," she says, nodding to the sofa in the corner of her office.

She closes the door and follows me over, and I perch on the edge, my fingers intertwined in my lap. I can't get comfortable and end up crossing and uncrossing my legs about three times before giving up. A thin layer of sweat coats my skin as Evelyn pushes her thick-rimmed glasses up onto her head and takes a sip of her tea.

"So, what's going on with the file system?"

I feel tongue-tied. It's one thing to complain to Charlie about a workplace mishap, but complaining to the boss feels akin to tattletaling. And as frustrated as I am, I wouldn't want something as petty as lost files to cost Danielle her job.

"Tell me honestly." Evelyn eyes me. "I'm not an idiot. I know something has been going on here, so I need you to be honest about what it is."

I lick my lips and take a deep breath. "I think Danielle might have accidentally deleted my files."

Her nostrils flare. "And the mock-ups from the presentation a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah, those too."

"And the slides from the first Marigold presentation?"

I swallow. "Yep."

She sighs, taking another sip of her tea. “I’m going to tell you something that’s just between us, okay?”

I nod.

“Danielle submitted herself as a reference for a girl who applied for your job. They were best friends in college, and she really wanted to work with her, but she wasn’t as qualified as you were. And if someone you refer is hired and stays for a year, you get a thousand bucks.”

My mouth forms an *O*.

“Danielle was an enthusiastic worker up until you were hired, and I wasn’t going to say anything to her or about her, thinking maybe over time she’d adjust, but we can’t have her deliberately screwing with our work.” She shakes her head, taking a moment as she looks out her window at the sky. “I’m really not sure what to do, but I think I have to talk to HR.”

“I’m sorry. I feel like this is my fault.”

She smiles. “Not your fault, but please do keep backups of your work for the time being.” She shakes her head again. “I can’t believe I have to ask you to do that, but it is what it is. Not everyone is a perfect hire.”

“Well, thank you for believing me.”

She rests her tea on the floor by her foot. “I guess it’s time I tell you one of the big reasons I hired you.” She smiles, crossing her legs and leaning back on the couch. “I didn’t want to give you a big head or a superiority complex before I got to know you, and I’m happy to say now that I don’t think that’s your thing. But anyway, I happened to receive a very sparkling reference for you from a friend in the building on the day of your last interview. A husband and wife team, Nadine and Brock Jenkins, who own the law firm upstairs. They said you displayed kindness in a time of stress.”

I blink, struggling to catch up to what she’s saying.

“They said you helped one of the people you got stuck in the elevator with, that she was having a panic attack, and you probably helped avoid a major crisis.”

“Oh. Mari,” I say, the story clicking in my mind. “We’re friends now.”

She laughs. “Well, I’m glad that proved fruitful to you.” She picks up her mug from the floor and takes another sip of her tea. “Anyway, I just wanted to let you know that you’re appreciated here regardless of what other team members might be doing. It might take a bit to get everything sorted, but we’re happy you’re here. And I’m sorry for the mess.”

A grin spread across my face. “Thank you for telling me that. It really means a lot. I’m really happy to be here.”

She smiles. “I’m glad to hear that.”

We stand from the sofa, and she squeezes my elbow before returning to her desk. I head toward the door, feeling optimistic about my day.

“Oh, by the way,” she says before I can open it. “Those files should be somewhere in your email folder. Remember when I asked you to email me all the finals?”

“Did you do that intentionally?”

She nods quickly. “Unfortunately, these things take time.”

“Thank you.”

She glances up at me once before diving back into her work and waving me through the door. “Go design stuff.”

I keep to myself for the rest of the afternoon, but I notice Steph glancing at me a few times, and I make sure to keep my elation in check. Toward the end of the day, Evelyn calls Danielle into her office, too, but she doesn’t seem upset when she returns to her desk.

I wonder what Evelyn’s plan is. I feel terrible thinking about it, but my imagination runs off without me, envisioning a workplace without Danielle where I don’t have to be anxious about missing files every time a client comes to visit.

I shouldn’t have to worry about that.

By the time I meet Charlie in the lobby downstairs, I’m just about bursting with delight, thanks to Evelyn’s kind words

and our rapidly approaching dinner with Bob and Candace. Although I'm not totally sure what to expect, I'm excited to go. It's not technically a business dinner, but it's still nice to think that Charlie trusts me enough not to stick my foot in my mouth in front of a client.

"You look happy," he says, grabbing my hand and spinning me quickly, my dress floating up at the edges. "And this dress. Wow." He runs one hand down my hip, feeling the fabric.

I'm wearing a black wrap dress with a black-and-white-polka-dot bow in my hair, an outfit that hopefully transitions well from day to night. We're going straight from here to happy hour, to dinner with Bob and Candace, and then—if the stars align—to his place for a quick romp before heading home and crashing.

"Thank you. I figured I should dress up a little if I'm meeting your dad."

He rolls his eyes at me, having been sick of the joke from the very first time I made it. "Not my dad," he says. "And please do not refer to him as such tonight."

I shrug. "I will or I won't. We'll see how the night goes."

Before we leave the building, I clock Stephanie walking through the turnstiles. She smiles as a man who is neither The Beefy Beast nor The Man Bun wraps his arms sensually around her and places a kiss on her cheek. I've got to ask her about this train of gorgeous men who show up for her after work every day.

When we hit the pavement, Charlie directs us to a nearby bar where we'll get a quick drink before heading over to their usual restaurant.

"I didn't check the menu to see if they have a kiwi martini," he says, casually lifting the flap of his bag to show me the bright-green bottle inside. "I usually bring Bob a bottle of whiskey, but I was also running low on kiwi for your martinis, so we can slip a little in if they don't have it."

"Wow, he comes prepared," I say as he leads us into a dimly lit bar decorated in dark greens and reds, with a long,

thick wooden countertop running along one side. It looks like the sort of place where you drink whiskey straight and contemplate your life choices.

Perfect for Charles Sinclair.

We take a seat at the bar, and to my delight, they do have a kiwi martini.

As the bartender slides our drinks onto the bar in front of us, someone touches my arm from my opposite side. I turn, and standing next to me is Paul, the ex I'm almost certain Layla is still sleeping with.

"Paul," I say, genuinely pleased to see him. And then I realize—if Paul is Layla's mystery man, she might be here too. "Are you here with Layla?"

His eyebrows rise, and it becomes quickly apparent that Paul is not, in fact, Layla's mystery man.

"Uh, no," he says. "Um, I'm here with my girlfriend."

A pretty brunette with a button nose steps up behind him, weaving her arm into his elbow.

"This is Penelope," he says, motioning to her. "Penelope, this is Annabel. We knew each other in college."

Charlie falls into the greeting easily, maneuvering around me to introduce himself and shake hands with both of them. Ever the salesman, Charlie casually invites them to have a drink with us. I think for a second that Paul will refuse, his greetings and cordialities tending toward the more awkward side, but with a smile and a glance toward Penelope, he takes a seat next to us, Penelope following suit.

I can't help myself from asking, "So, how long have you been together?" Because there's still a little part of me that wonders if, just a couple of months ago, it was Paul who was in Layla's bed.

They glance at each other. "A little over a year now," Penelope says.

I'm so charmed by the way they check in with each other, agreeing on their answers as they say them. I try to remember

if he was like this with Layla. If they confirmed things with each other as gracefully as he does with Penelope.

“Oh, okay. Well, congratulations on a year.”

“Thank you,” she smiles. “What about you guys?”

A variety of social constructs shatter. Charlie clears his throat, a totally nonsubtle indication that I’m to answer this question, and for a moment, I wonder what it would be like to say, “Oh, just about three months.”

But I don’t.

“Oh, actually, we’re just friends,” I say, not bothering to glance behind me for confirmation from him.

Paul looks surprised. “Oh, I could have sworn,” he says, and I follow his eyes to where Charlie’s hand rests on my thigh.

I shake my head. “Just friends,” I repeat, not bothering to hide my removal of his hand from my thigh.

We spend the next hour talking casually with them, mostly Paul and I catching up after having not seen each other for quite some time, but we’re careful not to exclude Penelope or Charlie. Paul delicately avoids any mention of Chris, and I sidestep anything pertaining to Layla.

By the time we leave to meet up with Bob, Paul and Charlie have bonded over a soccer tournament I know nothing about, and Penelope and I have traded about twenty anecdotes about our signature styles—my polka dots and her velvet. We’ve also decided a combination would be ideal.

Paul and Charlie exchange numbers after realizing that one of Paul’s work buddies has been struggling with advertising for his shop, and Charlie might be able to help them out, complete with a dinner for him and said buddy on the corporate card.

I hug Penelope goodbye, and the men shake hands, and Charlie and I continue on to meet Bob.

My elation from earlier persists, but there’s something else mixed in there, too, something painfully apparent about the

overextended time line of my and Charlie's relationship. Our conversation over drinks was so enjoyable that I couldn't help but imagine us doing this again, meeting other couples over drinks and just talking.

Is this easiness a normal part of a friends-with-benefits setup?

Something feels wrong here—wrong, but so good at the same time.

He holds my hand as we walk, joking about something Paul said that I don't really understand because it has to do with sports, but his motions are exuberant and full of life. It doesn't matter that I don't know what he's talking about. I could listen to him forever.

CHARLES

I'm not sure why I'm suddenly nervous about meeting with Bob and Candace. I guess I'm not nervous about Bob—he's just Bob—but I don't know Candace as well. And, of course, Annabel is a totally new variable.

It dawns on me as we leave the bar just how much time we're spending together tonight that has very little to do with sex.

But that's okay. We can make up for that later.

She's wearing a slinky little dress that shows off her thigh when she crosses her leg, and if that isn't foreplay, I don't know what is. I fight the urge to keep a hand in that spot all night, holding on to the feeling of her soft skin in my palm.

When we get to the restaurant, Bob and Candace are already seated, and we join them at a circular table toward the back. I present him with the bottle of whiskey from my bag and, for her, a kind of Persian chocolate that can only be bought from one specific corner store in Philly. Her eyes light up, and I thank my lucky stars I had the forethought to write down the exact location of the chocolate she mentioned falling in love with the last time I saw her.

“Oh goodness, Charlie,” she says, standing up to give me a quick one-armed hug. “I don't even remember telling you about these.” She rips open the packet and puts one in her mouth.

She turns to Annabel. “I suppose I should shake your hand before I get my fingers all gummed up with candy. Hi, I'm

Candace. I've heard a lot about you," she says, and I think I see Annabel tip her head to the side as she reaches forward.

"It's so nice to meet you," she says, then turns to Bob. "And nice to see you again, Bob."

"Nice to see you," he says, tipping his head forward.

We get settled and order drinks, with some polite but somewhat impersonal conversation about their drive in and the restaurant's decor.

"So, Annabel," Candace says, "I'm so anxious to know how you two met. Bob said you work together?"

"Oh." She seems slightly flustered and glances over at me. It's not quite the same question Paul asked us earlier, but certainly along the same lines. Annabel decides to gloss over it. "We actually met in an elevator. It broke down on us when I came in for my interview. We don't actually work together, though, just in the same building."

The way she clarifies that we don't work together tells me we wouldn't be here if we did, and it makes me a little uncomfortable. As temporary as our friends-with-benefits agreement is, the thought of missing out on it for the sake of professionalism makes my chest tight.

"Oh, how stressful. How long were you stuck?"

She shrugs as the waiter drops off our beverages. "Not long at all, actually. Maybe fifteen minutes?" She looks to me for confirmation, and I shrug. I don't know. Not long enough.

"Something like that."

Candace is waiting for the rest of the story. "And you just got talking, and that was that?"

"Well," Annabel starts, looking to me for help.

It's cute to watch her squirm, trying to stay within the bounds of our situation. I only smile while she looks to me for guidance, and she shakes her head almost imperceptibly when she realizes I'm not going to help her.

“He Cinderella-ed me,” she says, smiling at me sweetly with a dare in her eyes. I nearly choke on my drink—fairy tales should not be mentioned when talking about us. That’s going too far. “We had to climb out of the elevator, and gentleman that he is, when my hair bow fell out, he scooped it up and searched me out to return it.”

Now I’m anxious again. *How do I backpedal this without seeming like a dick?*

“Aw,” Candace says, turning to me. “And here I thought you were a hopeless bachelor.”

The words are stuck in my throat. *I am, though. I am a hopeless bachelor!*

Annabel watches my expression and then turns back to Candace. “Well, in the interest of full disclosure, I guess I should say that we’re just friends.”

“Oh,” Candace says, looking between us with crinkled eyebrows.

Bob snorts, and our attention turns to him. “That won’t last long.” He claps me on the shoulder. “A grown man carrying around a hair bow for three months feels a certain kind of way.”

Annabel looks at me with wide eyes, and Bob grins.

“I did not carry it around for three months. It was a week or so at the most.”

Bob nods. “Right—I’m sorry—not the same bow. But there’s always a bow.”

A blush creeps up my neck. I never returned her other bows. They’ve been sitting at the bottom of my bag for months. Bob probably saw them during one of our dinners.

I roll my eyes and reach into my bag, producing the white bow she dropped for me and the polka-dot one she refused to take from me. “I meant to give them to you. I just forgot.”

And I like reaching into my bag and feeling the silky fabric between my fingers when you aren’t around. But that part I don’t say out loud.

“Thank you,” she says, folding the bows up delicately and slipping them into her purse. I follow her motion, a little miffed that I had to give them back.

A silence descends upon the table, one that I’d normally fill, but I’m feeling a little too much like the center of attention here. Thankfully, the waiter comes over to take our entrées. I ignore the side-eye Bob gives me for ordering veal because there’s just something about it I’ve been craving, and I’m not going to let him influence me into a dish I’m not excited about.

He takes a sip of his drink and leans forward. “So, Annabel, you said you don’t work together. What do you do?”

She smooths her napkin in her lap. “I’m a graphic designer. I work for a marketing and branding agency, so we help companies find their brand’s voice or improve on it if they’re already established. I just started, but I really like it so far, and”—her eyes find mine—“I actually got some really good feedback today.”

I raise my eyebrows to show her I’m listening.

“I had a bit of a problem with one of the girls I work with. She was kind of sabotaging my work, which was in turn sabotaging the team’s work,” she says, for Bob and Candace’s benefit, and then turns to me. “And today, I confronted her.”

I can’t believe she didn’t tell me before. “You did?”

She bites her lip. “I asked her if she had a problem with me.”

I can’t help but grin. I wish I could have seen this. “No you didn’t.”

She nods. “I did. And she basically wouldn’t answer, but my boss happened to hear it. She called me into her office and I thought that was it. I was getting fired.”

I want to grab her and hug her. They’d be idiots to fire her.

“But it turns out one of her friends applied for my job, and she would have gotten a thousand bucks if her friend was hired and stayed for a certain amount of time. So not only does she

not get to work with her friend, but she's out that money. I guess I can kind of see why she's upset."

Leave it to Annabel to empathize with someone who was trying to get her fired.

She takes a sip of her drink. "My boss also said one of the main reasons she hired me was because one of her friends from another floor—a husband- and wife-owned law firm—called her to put in a good word because I displayed kindness in a time of stress." She turns to Candace and Bob to explain. "There was a girl—we're friends now, actually, her name is Mari—who was having a bit of a panic attack, which I recognized because I used to have them when—well, a while ago. I just talked to her, honestly, but she came out of it. Probably not because of me, but I tried." She turns back to me. "It was the other two people in the elevator with us that day. They took the time to call my company and forward my boss a reference because of it."

"No way." The words pop explosively out of my mouth.

She nods, grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm so proud of you," I say, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm leaning over and kissing her on the cheek.

"Thank you," she says, and I can imagine the heat creeping up my face is about as pink as her cheeks are turning. She takes a sip of water. I take a sip of whiskey.

"Well, good for you, Annabel," Candace says, breaking the silence. "I'm glad you're working somewhere you're appreciated. Lord knows we've all had our fair share of bad jobs." She turns to Bob. "Remember that last construction job you had before you started your own company?"

He shrugs. "Wouldn't be here today if it weren't for hating it so much."

She places a hand on his arm, leaning toward us to emphasize her words. "Oh, he used to come home raging. And late every night. Anything I cooked for him didn't have enough salt—I don't know how his job made my cooking taste

bland, but I didn't change my recipes and he stopped complaining as soon as he started his own company."

"That's because you stopped cooking for me for a month to show me just how much work it is to put food on the table every night," he quips. "And it worked."

She pats his arm. "I think it was because of the job. You love my cooking now, don't you, honey?"

"Best food I've ever tasted."

I smile. Bob's complained about her cooking more than once, but some things are best left unsaid. The waiter drops off our meals, and we dig in.

"So, Bob, now that you're retiring, how do you plan to spend your days?" Annabel asks.

He smiles. "Candace has me completely booked. We're spending some time in Florida first, the Keys, then we're thinking about doing an old folks Euro trip—"

"Speak for yourself, Bob," Candace interjects.

"I plan to catch up on some reading and watch some movies for a couple of months. But knowing me, I'll get bored, so I'm going to try to keep an open mind and follow my passions in a way I haven't been able to before."

"And Bob's your uncle," Annabel finishes for him, winking at me as she says it. I nearly spit out my whiskey as Bob and Candace laugh.

"And Bob's your uncle," he repeats. "Haven't heard that one in a while."

"Well, that sounds like a really wonderful retirement," Annabel comments.

"It's gonna be weird, but we're looking forward to it."

They regale Annabel with their travel plans, and Bob and Annabel connect over their mutual love of rom-coms, though they tend to experience the same stories through different mediums—she, her books, and he, his movies.

We do a light dessert that I don't take part in because there seemed to be a moment during the ordering process where it was assumed that Bob and Candace would split one, and Annabel and I would split another. I've already been called out for carrying around women's hair bows. I placed an assumptive kiss on her cheek in front of everyone. I can't split a dessert with her, too.

She pouts at me as she stabs her apple pie. "I can't eat this by myself."

"I'm not hungry." It does look good, though.

She sighs, pushing the plate away.

I pull it toward me, dipping my spoon in, and she rolls her eyes at me.

"You're such a—" She stops, sitting back in her chair.

"A what?" I ask.

Bob and Candace are watching us.

"Nothing."

I finish the apple pie under Annabel's pouty gaze and put the meal on the corporate card. We get a round of hugs under the awning outside the restaurant, and once Bob and Candace are out of view, I grab Annabel by the waist and pull her into me. There are strangers walking by us, but I don't care if they see.

"A dick," she says.

"You want one?" I lean down and kiss her neck.

She pushes me away. "No, you're such a dick."

"What?"

"You have these arbitrary lines about what's allowed and what's not and it's hard to follow. We go to dinner with your dad as a couple, yet it's too much to split a dessert with me?"

"You're upset over dessert?"

She stomps, her hair bouncing with the movement. "No. I'm confused. Because tonight was—"

“Was what?”

She holds my gaze. “A date.”

A shiver runs down my spine. “It wasn’t a date. We literally told them that we’re just friends.”

She glares at me. “*I did. I told them.*”

“Okay, you told them. What does it matter?”

She crosses her arms. “*I told Paul and Penelope too.*”

“Right. It seems like we’re on the same page here.”

She huffs. “You know what, never mind. You’re impossible.”

We went into tonight with the understanding that we’re just friends. I could see why she might be upset that I deferred to her to tell people. I could even see why refusing to split dessert might upset her, considering how rarely I put up a boundary with her.

But none of that changes our deal.

It does, however, make me wonder what’s going on in her head. If this is really just about who speaks the words or spoon-fighting over the last bite of apple pie.

My heart thumps as fear blooms in my gut. These last few months have been so good. We can’t let feelings get in the way of that.

“Annabel,” I say, grabbing her arm and hesitantly pulling her close, concerned she’ll push me away again, but she doesn’t. The scent of warm strawberries elicits thoughts of her bare skin between my sheets. “What’s the matter?” I ask, gathering her hair behind her in my fist and pulling on it gently so I can kiss her.

I say a silent prayer that she doesn’t answer truthfully.

“Nothing,” she says resignedly, and after a few seconds, she relaxes into me. I can feel the tension leaving her body like it’s leaving my own. I wrap my arms around her, leaving a kiss on her head. She sighs into me, and I know I have her again.

“Can I take you home now?”

She nods into my chest, and a warm feeling spreads outward from that movement.

I grab her hand and pull her along. Knowing her, she wants to be home at a reasonable time, and knowing me, I’m still not going to be satisfied by whenever a reasonable time is.

ANNABEL

A confusing mix of emotions that I can't totally grasp distracts me as we walk toward Charlie's apartment. Tonight couldn't have gone any better, but he's lying to himself if he's calling it anything other than a date.

This all feels very relationship-y to me. I know Charlie would say that as long as no feelings are involved, we're good. But I'm starting to wonder if that's really the line we're toeing. Tonight, he told me he was proud of me and kissed me in front of other people without a modicum of sexual energy. It was perhaps the most erotic kiss we've ever shared.

You can be proud of your friends. You can even kiss your friends on the head. Lord knows, Layla and I have had our fair share of platonic kisses.

He insists this wasn't a date.

I mean, sure, we were never alone, seducing each other over oysters and red wine. By that definition, it wasn't a date. But we went out with another couple. We made plans to split dessert even though that, according to Charlie, is apparently what makes it a date.

I shake the thought from my head as he pulls on my arm, pushing me into a clumsy spin.

"What's on your mind?" he asks.

"Otters."

He pauses. "Otters?"

I shrug. “I don’t know. It was the first thing I thought of.”

He laughs and pulls me into him. He bends down and kisses me, and my confused thoughts fade into the dark recesses of my mind. We’re a few steps away from the front door of his building, and I can already feel the tension building, his hand slipping down my back and grabbing my ass. He grabs me harder, like he wants me to hitch my leg around his waist.

“Charlie, we’re out in public.”

He shrugs, pulling away from me and moving swiftly toward his building.

“I can fix that,” he says, holding the door open for me. The lobby’s mild scent of lavender and honey engulfs us as we walk through to the elevator. He presses the button and rocks up on the balls of his feet while he waits for it to come down.

He lets me go in first when it arrives, and as soon as the door closes and we press the button for his floor, he’s on me again, his hands winding up into my hair. He pushes me against the metal, pulling my knees up around him as he rocks into me.

“Baby, I can’t wait to fuck you.”

I scoff, *baby* an unwelcome reminder of my confusion. He takes me on a double date with his dad and won’t even call me by my name afterward. Maybe the confusion didn’t leave my brain.

He takes a step back. “What was that?”

“I’m sorry, it was just a weird sniff.”

He tilts his head to the side. “You don’t like it when I call you baby?”

“It’s not that.”

He raises his eyebrows.

I should be honest with him. That was one thing we always agreed on. “It’s just a little impersonal.”

He runs his fingers through my hair. “Why didn’t you say something? What do you like to be called?”

I shrug. “I don’t know, I never really thought about it.”

Annabel.

He bites his lip. “Bad girl?” he tries, and I can’t help but laugh. “Okay, so ‘bad girl’ it is.”

I shake my head as the elevator doors open and we move toward his apartment. He has his arms around me from behind and we walk like strange, uncoordinated penguins down the hallway. I’m still in front of him as he unlocks his door, and immediately upon crossing the threshold, he pulls me around and backs me up against the door.

“How do you like that, bad girl?”

I can’t help but giggle as he lifts my leg, his hands running up and down my skin, his lips leaving kisses down my neck and collarbone.

And then I hear a cough from across the room.

We spring apart, his arms splaying out around us to cover me.

I quickly adjust my skirt down and straighten myself back up.

“Julian, Jesus,” he says, checking to make sure I’m not on display and then moving toward the man standing across the room from us with a gigantic blanket wrapped around himself. “Shit, I forgot you were coming.” He glances over at me, a look of despair on his face.

“It’s okay. I guess I’m forgettable,” Julian says.

“Stop it,” he says.

Silence falls across the room as Julian and I awkwardly look at each other. I take a step forward. “You must be the brother,” I say, reaching out to shake his hand in the most delicate way possible, considering he might have just gotten a full view of my panties. “I’m Annabel.”

“Annabel?” he asks, glancing at Charlie.

Has he talked about me?

Charlie nods. “Annabel.”

“Wow. It’s nice to meet you.”

For the third time tonight, I repeat my familiar refrain. “We’re just friends.”

“Okay,” Julian says. He looks at Charlie. “Hey, I’m going to be here all weekend, so don’t change your plans, okay? I’ll be in my room.”

“Are you sure?” Charlie asks. “I mean, I want to hear about your week. Was it, you know, all good?”

“All good,” he says. “I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.”

We stand in awkward silence for a few moments again.

“I just wanted to get some water,” Julian says, motioning to the kitchen behind us.

“We’ll just be, you know,” Charlie says, motioning down the long hallway.

He grabs me by the shoulders and guides me to his bedroom. When we’re out of sight of the kitchen, he moves my hair away from my neck, his lips brushing my skin so lightly that goose bumps follow in their wake.

He closes the bedroom door behind us and then scoops me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, my hands tearing at the buttons of his shirt, anxious to feel his chest on my palms. He slams me down on the bed, climbing on top of me and pulling my underwear to the side.

He unzips and pummels deeply into me. Just as a guttural noise starts in my throat, he clamps a hand over my mouth.

“Shh, baby, we can’t be loud tonight.”

I bite his palm.

“Ah!” He shakes his hand out. “God, that was hot. I’m sorry I forgot. It won’t happen again.”

I take a deep breath into his neck as he picks up his rhythm.

“Does that feel good?” He pulls on the neck of my dress, reaching for my nipple, pinching it lightly between his fingers, and I arch up into him involuntarily. “Yes, it does,” he answers for me, a sly grin on his face.

It’s not lost on me that he’s not calling me *anything* now. I know he wants me to tell him what I want, but I want him to just get that I want to be called by my name. *My* name, not someone else’s nickname.

The pressure builds in my abdomen and I know I’m close. He knows, too, and he hooks one arm underneath me so he can push into me just a little harder. He clamps a hand over my mouth again as the pressure tops off.

“God, Annabel, you’re so sexy,” he says into my neck just as I reach my peak, and I crash immediately around him, his hand forceful on my mouth, his arm clamping me to him.

“Annabel,” he breathes as he jerks into me, filling me.

We lie there for a moment, and in my stunned release, I reach for him, pushing his hand off my mouth. He leans into me, his tongue licking at my lips, pushing past my teeth.

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” he asks, our lips still touching.

I shake my head. “I just wanted you to get it.”

I excuse myself to the bathroom and splash some water on my face. I’ve started carrying a small mobile bathroom kit to make these nights easier—makeup wipes and deodorant, the works. I go through my routine and return to his bedroom, feeling refreshed.

He reaches for me, pulling me into bed and tucking me into his arm. “Are you alright?”

I look up at him, caught off guard.

“You seem distracted tonight.”

I shake my head. “I’m not, I’m fine.”

He kisses my head, and I have to remind myself to ignore the warm feeling that gives me. “You know you can talk to

me, right?”

“I know,” I say, leaning on his shoulder. “I’m sorry. I swear I’m fine.”

“I thought maybe you were uncomfortable because Julian’s here.”

“I literally forgot he was here.”

He looks surprised. “So, are you into gagging?”

I laugh. “I guess I am now. It was kinda hot.”

He thinks for a moment. “I might have to buy some stuff.”

I’m mad at how easily he makes me laugh. How readily he gives me the physical touch I crave and sound advice when I need it.

He draws circles on my shoulder like he always does in these in-between moments when we’re just sitting together, and it dawns on me like a brick from the sky why I feel so conflicted tonight.

I’m not *confused*.

We’re lying to each other. We’re lying to ourselves.

We’ve been sleeping together for three months. At least four days a week, I’m here, or he’s at my apartment. We go for drinks together. Sometimes even eat together. I’ve met a selection of his family and friends and he’s met mine.

We’re dating. And we have been for a long time.

“Wow, you just got tense,” he remarks, his fingers gliding gently down my arm.

I force myself to relax. I don’t know how to navigate this yet. “Ha. It must be your brother. I don’t know why, but he’s stuck in my head now.”

“Please don’t start having sexual thoughts about my brother.”

“Oh, ew, Charlie,” I say, hitting him playfully. “Not like that.”

“Maybe I can distract you,” he says, lifting one of my hands and placing a gentle kiss on top. His eyes find mine, and I melt a little as he pulls me toward him, his lips finding mine so tenderly that I get lost in our kiss.

My heart catches when he pulls away from me like this little bit of distance is just too much. My pulse pounds faster as my realization goes one step further. Not only am I dating Charles Sinclair—I’m hopelessly in love with him.

I force my eyes closed as he kisses me again. His hand weaves into my hair, pulling my head back gently, his other hand running from my chin, down my chest, between my breasts, and around my hip, pulling me closer.

“Annabel,” he whispers into my skin, and I’m gone.

I’m in love with a man who I’m not sure has ever had a serious relationship, who has only ever asked me for one thing—my honesty. But if I’m honest with him, he’ll end things. He hooks an arm around my hips and pulls me down onto the bed underneath him.

He pauses, lifting himself slightly off me. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

I nod enthusiastically because I can’t bear the thought of him stopping now. If he stops, we’ll have to talk, and if we talk, I’m not sure I can keep my revelation to myself. I simultaneously feel like I’m betraying him and holding my heart out on a platter to him, and I don’t know what to do other than submit to him, physically and emotionally.

He has me.

And it’s going to hurt.

“I’m totally fine,” I say with false confidence.

“Do you want to stop?”

“No.” I grab his shirt, pulling his body down into mine.

“I like that,” he says into my shoulder, commencing his kisses, nipping lightly at my skin there.

I continue with the buttons of his shirt, pressing my lips to that triangle of skin at his neck that suddenly feels so precious. He shudders into me, and I push on his shirt until he lifts up briefly, letting me tug it the rest of the way off his arms.

I feel the heat of his chest against mine, his back muscles flexing as he grinds against me, teasing me just the way I like.

“God, Annabel,” he says. “I don’t know what it is, but you’re doing something extra special tonight. You’re going to have me coming in my pants the way you’re moving.”

A pulse of desire rages through me, and I tear open the button of his pants, unzipping his fly and forcing his pants down. His erection presses hard against me.

He pulls at the sash of my dress, opening it around me. He slides a hand underneath me and quickly pops my bra, pulling it swiftly from my arms and throwing it to the ground.

“So beautiful, Annabel. So beautiful.” He leans back to look at me, gazing intently at every inch that lies prone and waiting beneath him. He leans down, enveloping one nipple with his mouth, his teeth grazing the delicate skin, his tongue flicking and swirling.

My hips start moving of their own accord, desperate for him to be inside me, and a moan escapes my lips for just a second before he slams a hand down over my mouth again. “Annabel, we have to be quiet,” he says sternly, my nipple aching to feel his lips again.

I try to speak around his fingers. He pulls his hand down so he can understand me, resting it on my neck, then slowly cupping my breast, his thumbs gently massaging.

“Charlie, fuck me,” I say, certain the only way for me to stop panicking about the feelings for him in my heart is to have the feeling of him in my body.

He grins, biting his lip. “You’re a little firecracker tonight.”

“Charlie, please. Come on,” I say, but I should know better.

He loves it when I beg for him. He has a wicked grin on his face.

“Annabel, you’re desperate for my cock in you, aren’t you?” He holds it in one hand and guides the tip in a line along my entrance. I gasp as it passes over the little nub at the top, and he takes the opportunity to kiss me, shoving his tongue forcefully into my mouth.

“Quiet, remember?”

“Charlie,” I whine, but I don’t say anything further. I grab him instead, trying to pull his hips into mine, but he’s too strong.

He holds himself above me, delight plastered across his face. “Annabel,” he breathes, the warmth of his words gliding over my shoulder. “I love how much you want me right now.”

For a moment, I thought he was going to say he loved me. Just say it spontaneously while making love to me. Making love. *Is that what we’re doing?*

“Charlie, I need you.”

Annabel, I love you.

“Annabel, oh man, I need you too.”

I need you to tell me you love me.

“Charlie, I—”

He pushes himself inside me, one hand clamped over my mouth with perfect timing because—oh, I could scream. My head tilts back and my hips arch up into him. My nipples are taut as he plays with them between his fingers. He moves slowly, quiet groans escaping from his throat. He pushes one hand up into my hair, pulling my head back to nip at the delicate skin of my neck.

“Charlie, you make me feel so good.”

Not dishonest.

His dick twitches in response, his rhythm ticking faster.

“Annabel, you *feel* so good. That tight little pussy, oh god.”

I pull his mouth down to mine, wrap my arms around his neck and bury my fingers in his hair. He pushes his body down harder on mine, sensing my need for his weight and giving it to me. If he could just crush me, maybe he could stamp out the feeling I have for him in my heart.

He slows his movements, his mouth still pressed to mine, as one hand trails lightly down my side. He cups my ass—but not roughly, as he normally does. He’s caressing me.

He pulls away and looks into my eyes. He must know. He looks down at us, joined, and trails his fingers from my hair, between my breasts, to my stomach. I shiver in response, my breath caught in my throat.

He leans down and kisses me again, so delicately, and slowly builds back up to a crescendo, one hand across my mouth as he feels my muscles tense, my breathing hitch up, and I crash around him.

And then he jerks into me, his breath coming out in thick bursts in my ear as his arms tighten around me, holding me to him. We lie there for a few moments, his eyes on mine, and I wonder if he’s going to tell me how he feels. I wasn’t sure before, but I am now. We just made love.

We disentangle ourselves slowly, the weight of the past few minutes heavy between us. I clean myself up and grab his shirt from the floor, as I like to do and crawl back into bed with him. He wastes no time tucking me under his arm, playing with the ends of my hair.

“Annabel,” he says, kissing my head. “That was incredible.”

“Charlie—” I say, but my voice cuts out. *Am I about to cry?*

“Are you alright?” he asks, pulling away from me to look at me.

“Sorry, I got something in my throat,” I explain, tapping it lightly.

“Phew, god, it sounded like you were about to cry.”

I shake my head.

He suddenly seems unaffected.

“That was really good,” I say, testing the waters.

“I think that was the best time yet.” He shakes his head, pulling me back into his shoulder. “Holy shit, that was good.”

“It felt like there was something extra there.”

“Did you do something different?”

“I mean, no, it just—” Judging by the look on his face, he’s not getting it, so I let it go. “Never mind. It was just *good*,” I say and laugh it off.

We sit and talk for a while, and my mind slowly moves on to other things. He tells me Gabi is slightly disheartened with men but otherwise seems to be doing okay. We dissect the Danielle situation a little further now that it’s just the two of us. Eventually, he leans over to check the time on his phone.

“Hey, it’s kinda late,” he says, holding it up for me to see. “Do you need to go?”

I sigh, the pang in my heart rushing back to me.

I know I should leave, but I also know the end is coming soon. I can’t help but feel like I at least deserve one night with him as a consolation prize. The heartbreak is coming either way—it’s not like one sleepover is going to change that.

“Would you mind if I stayed?” I ask.

His eyes light up. “Oh man, I’ve been dreaming of morning sex with you since we met. Absolutely.” He leans over and kisses me again, tugging at the buttons of my shirt. “Although I don’t know if I can wait until morning if I keep thinking about morning. Might need some pre-morning sex to hold me over.”

I can’t help the laugh that escapes me as he rolls lazily on top of me.

CHARLES

When I wake up, I'm aware I'm alone, which isn't alarming initially but becomes increasingly so when I remember Annabel stayed the night. I fell asleep imagining our morning, waking up pressed against her, rousing her with lazy kisses on her neck and slipping inside her. Morning breath, mussed hair and all.

I roll over in a panic and see her sitting in the chair by the window, organizing her things in her purse. She looks up at me when she senses movement, but her smile doesn't stretch to her eyes. "Good morning."

"Good morning." My voice sounds raspy and I desperately need to brush my teeth. She, however, looks freshly showered and put together.

"I need to get going." She stands, taking a few steps toward the bed, and I sit up, moving toward her. Something in my chest feels heavy, and I want to pull her to me to ease the feeling, wrap her in my arms and drown her in little kisses.

"But I thought we were going to have morning sex," I say, and judging from her flat expression, that was not the response she was hoping for.

"I don't think we're being honest with each other anymore."

I second-guess her words as she speaks. *We're not? We?* "Do you have something to tell me?"

“Do *you* have something to tell *me*?” She looks pointedly at me.

“Annabel, come on. Don’t play games.” I stand up, grabbing my briefs off the floor and pulling them on. “What’s going on?”

“I’m in love with you.”

My heart beats loudly in my ears. “You’re what?”

“And I think you’re in love with me too.”

A beat of silence passes while I process this. Her eyes are on mine, waiting for the rejection that we both know is coming.

If there was anyone, it would be Annabel Hall.

But I can’t give her what she wants, at least not without shortchanging my life as I know it.

“Annabel, look, I’m sorry. I thought last night that you staying over was a convenience thing, you know? Since it was so late? I should have encouraged you to keep your boundaries. This doesn’t have to be it, though.”

My blood rushes in my ears. I’m not ready for this to be done.

She holds up a hand, telling me to stop. “I didn’t fall in love with you because I slept over.” Her words drip with disdain. “We fell in love over the past few months by dating each other, which is exactly what we did, by the way, under the guise of being just friends.”

“Annabel, we *are* just friends.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, and we’re also two otters on a tandem bike.”

“What?”

“I thought we were saying random words without meaning here.”

I pause, waiting for her to be done with the sarcasm. “Annabel, you know that’s not me.”

“I know it’s not what you think you want or what you tell people, but what happened last night was love. We made love, whether you want to admit that or not.”

I feel like I’m on display, standing in the middle of my room in my underwear with nowhere to put my hands.

She appraises me and, after clearly concluding that I’m not going to say anything else, continues, “I’ll do you the courtesy of bowing out since you’re so intent on lying to yourself.”

“Annabel, wait,” I say as she moves toward the door. I don’t know how to make her stay, but I know I can’t let her leave. “Can’t we just go back to before last night? We can just keep doing what we were doing, you know? No harm done.”

“Charlie. You’re not listening to me. This is not last night. Whether you want to call it dating or not, we’ve been going out for the past three months—you’re just too scared to call it what it is, and you’re too scared to admit that you love me too.”

“We haven’t been dating, we’ve done *friend* things!”

“We get drinks together, we go to dinner together, we meet clients together. If friends do that, tell me what significant others do.”

She has me there. I don’t have a good answer. “Significant others love each other.”

I don’t realize what I’m saying until she shakes her head. I didn’t mean for it to come out so harsh. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t care for her, but love is something different, something bigger. It’s too much responsibility for someone who already has more than enough.

“Charlie, I saw the look in your eyes last night. I’m certain that in that moment, you loved me. But I don’t trust you to treat me well if you still think love comes at a price. And I’m not willing to be just friends with you anymore.”

It feels like someone is sitting on my chest, pushing all the wind out of my lungs.

“Annabel, please.”

“Bye, Charlie.”

I watch every step she takes, the click of her shoes on the wood floor like a countdown to her final departure.

“Annabel, please don’t go.” I follow her down the hall, a lump forming in my throat. I want to grab her and force her to stop moving, but I know it won’t get me anywhere. If anything, it’ll just make her angrier.

“Charlie, just leave it.”

“Annabel, you’re the one just leaving it. Just stay another ten minutes, please.”

She whips around when we get to the living room, leveling me with her eyes. I don’t think I’ve ever seen her look so angry. “Get a hold of yourself, Charlie. This isn’t my choice, it’s yours.”

“It’s not, though. I’m begging you to stay.”

“I’m protecting what you want. If you want to be single and have casual sex with a different woman every month, that’s fine. You can do that. Just not with me. I deserve to get what I want, too.”

“Annabel,” I shout, stressing the last part of her name harder than I mean to because she’s frustrating me. She jumps at the sound and I immediately want to take her in my arms and apologize, kiss that look of bewilderment right off her face.

I consider calling her bluff, telling her to come back to bed and be my girlfriend just for the few more blissful weeks, maybe even months, I’d get to spend with her. If that’s what she really wants, she can have it, but the reality is she’ll be gone when she realizes my life is a lot more than the snippets of sunshine and roses she’s seen.

She’ll be gone, and I’ll be left with a pit of hopelessness in her wake.

When she turns and walks to the door, a sense of panic descends around me like I’ve never quite felt before. “Please don’t go.”

I don't have a reason to give her or a way to entice her to stay. She's already made up her mind. She opens the front door and slams it shut behind her without another look.

A sense of doom envelops me as the lump in my throat morphs into a full-blown rage. I grab a throw pillow, toss it in the air, and punch it as hard as possible when it falls. It touches the ground just a little faster, the motion woefully unsatisfying.

Why is she doing this?

Everything was so good. Everything was perfect.

But not to her.

This whole time, I thought we were on the same page. I *felt* like we were, at least. But she was falling in love. And she was hiding it, exactly what she said she wouldn't do. I can't believe I fell for it. It was all too good to be true.

"Dude."

I jump, having forgotten my brother is here.

Julian grins, and it's incredibly offensive. When he starts singing Usher to me, I wonder whether you can disown a sibling.

"You got it, you got it bad..."

I pick up the throw pillow I hit and chuck it at him. He deflects, and it falls to the ground in a pathetic lump. "Dude," he repeats. "What happened? Because that sounded like quite a blowup for a *friend*."

I shake my head and flop down on the couch, not even realizing I'm only in my underwear until Julian gives me a look. I grab another throw pillow and hold it over my crotch for modesty. He sits down next to me, the extra-large blanket draped around his shoulders again.

"She told me she loves me."

"How dare she?"

I give him a look. "You know I don't work like that. She knows I don't work like that."

“Hey, people change, you know? How long was your longest hookup before her? Three weeks? Come on, man, are you sure you don’t love her too?”

“No. I don’t. I can’t. I don’t have time for someone like that.”

“What do you mean?” He’s looking at me like I’m crazy. “You’ve been sleeping with the same girl for, what, three months now? Seeing her multiple times a week? Dude, that’s all the time you need.”

“No, a relationship would be way more than that. You know, like meeting for coffee and taking her to doctor’s appointments or going on Friday night dates and stuff.”

Julian’s eyebrows wrinkle. “I mean, I think Annabel can take herself to doctor’s appointments. And didn’t you go on a date last night?”

“It wasn’t a date,” I repeat for the millionth time. But I don’t explain further because I can see how he and Annabel might think it was a date, but it was just a dinner with Bob. And I can also see Julian twisting my words in a way that makes me question what I know—and I *know* last night was not a date.

“Have you ever thought that maybe you’re scared of someone relying on you because you’ve had to take on too much responsibility in the past? Even, maybe, in the present?”

“Julian, can you please stop with that? This isn’t about you.”

He raises his eyebrows at me. “Char, I was never the only one shouldering responsibility in this family. You’re holding yourself back if you refuse to see that. And yeah, dating Annabel will come with responsibilities, but I don’t take her as the kind of girl to demand without giving in return. She might help you in more ways than you know. Ten years ago, I never thought Ashley would be the one picking Mom up for lunch and coordinating her care. But here we are. That’s one of the lesser reasons I love her, but it’s one of the many that make our relationship a net positive instead of a net negative.”

I'm happy for Julian, but I never pictured my life turning out like his. "I don't need help though. I don't need a net positive relationship with someone. That's what we already had, and it came without any responsibilities. I just don't get why there has to be love or, like, commitment."

"Because that's what she wants. Char, I must be missing something here. You wouldn't be so upset if you didn't love her." Julian gives me a look. "I mean, your face is red and you're mostly naked, having a conversation about feelings with your brother at the crack of dawn on a Saturday morning. What's the real issue here? Because I know it's not that you want to fuck anyone else."

I think for a moment. The question has been nagging me since I considered calling her bluff. The thought of Annabel being mine wasn't the issue. That part, I actually didn't mind.

It's the part that comes after that makes me want to stomp on the brakes. The thought of her wide-eyed expression when she realizes how much time my mom takes. Her somber voice when I tell her I won't be home until after she's asleep because a dinner meeting is running long. Her resigned sigh when she comes to the realization that she could be having so much more fun with someone else.

"Look, I know I let things get out of hand. I like her. I'll admit that. But what happens when she gets bored? She says she loves me now, but she doesn't know how hard Mom's stuff is. How much time my job takes. She's making that judgment based on the fun stuff and giving me an ultimatum she doesn't even understand. She doesn't want all this. There's no way she wants all this."

"Oh, Char," Julian says, and the look that descends on his face is so pitiful and sad that I want to take myself out back and start digging my own grave. "That's a decision only she can make, but she can't make it unless you let her in."

I shake my head. "I can't do it. If I let her in like that, it means I like her and I want her." Julian gives me a look that says all of this is obvious. "I'll look forward to it." He blinks and then nods. "And then when she realizes her mistake,

losing her is going to be like Mom getting diagnosed for the first time all over again and I can't do it. I can't do that again."

Julian sighs, his expression pinched. "I hate how hard that was on you."

"I'm fine. I just really didn't like the experience and would prefer not to go through that sort of disappointment and sadness and fucking grief again."

He puts an arm around my shoulders. "That's the risk, isn't it? But look at the bright side, dude. You've already done the hard stuff. You've found a girl who loves you. Now you just have to get over your shit."

"You're one to talk." It slips out way harsher than I intended, and I cringe. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Julian."

"It's okay, Char. You're hurting. It happens. You'll be happy to know I started seeing a therapist."

"You did?"

He nods. "I told Ashley you suggested it and she ran with it. She did all the research for me, so all I had to do was show up. You should consider doing the same."

"I don't have an Ashley."

Julian smiles. "Well, that's the problem, isn't it? To get your Ashley, you need to work through your shit. But you need your Ashley to *help* you work through your shit. At some point, you just have to jump."

I sigh. "I guess that makes sense."

"Are you going to go after her?"

I think about it for a second. "I don't know yet."

He shrugs. "Okay. Well, I tried. Let me know if I can help, okay?" He stands, wrapping the blanket tighter around himself.

"Yeah, I will."

He pauses before disappearing back into his bedroom. "Hey, do you still hang out with your game night crew?"

I shake my head. “Not for a couple of years now.”

“Maybe you should.”

I struggle to see the connection. “Why?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes, when you’re stuck, you just need a reminder that people care—that *you* care about other people without any obligation or responsibility. I get that Annabel feels like a lot, but when you’re enjoying life with people you care about, the hard stuff stays on the back burner. I think you’ll be surprised how irrelevant Mom is when you’re playing a game with your buddies. Or watching a movie with Annabel. Start easy.”

I consider his advice, then nod. “Okay, maybe I’ll text them.”

ANNABEL

I hold the tears back until I get to the sidewalk, and then they rock me fully, coming in pitiful sobs that I try my hardest to hide from strangers on the street. I let my hair fall in front of my face as I walk. Forming a shield against the world.

I think about going home and sitting in my empty apartment, stewing in the ecstasy of last night and the sharp ending of this morning. I can't go home. I'll go insane.

It's Saturday, so I can't even distract myself with work. I can't visit my parents, or they'll pepper me with questions about why I'm upset, which will only upset me further. Then I'll end up telling my mom in confidence, who'll immediately relay my friends-with-benefits situation to my dad, who will, in a horrified manner, clear his throat and declare it a "girls' issue."

I call Layla, redirecting myself toward her apartment. Things have been weird between us lately, but I need her right now. Hopefully, she can get over whatever is bothering her for a day.

I call her three times, which conveys an emergency that does not involve death, but she still doesn't answer. When I check my texts to her, I see that she never even responded to the last one I sent her. And now I'm just mad. If she wants to break up with me, she should say it to my face.

It feels good to have an emotion other than despair.

I stomp my way to her apartment, planning my speech. *What's the issue, Layla? Haven't I been there for you during every breakup? What about your breakup with Paul, where he didn't do anything wrong? You just decided you didn't love him anymore. What about that, huh, Layla?*

As I get there, someone is leaving her building, and I take the opportunity to slip in the front door behind them. I march up the stairs and knock heavily on her door.

I hear movement inside, and my resolve fades. I don't want to be mad at Layla.

I just want to feel like she cares about me.

Tears prickle behind my eyes as I'm faced with the prospect of her opening her arms to me, pulling me into a hug and telling me to sit on her couch while she makes us an almost edible breakfast.

The door opens, and all of my expectations evaporate. My heart drops into my stomach, the sight of his slightly mussed hair and broad shoulders causing me, momentarily, to forget why I'm here.

"Chris," I gasp.

"Annabel?" He seems as surprised to see me as I am to see him. He wears only sweatpants, his chest and feet bare, and it takes me back to the last time I saw him in our bed with his assistant. "I thought you were maintenance."

"What are you doing here?" I ask, my mind slowly working through his bare skin, the way he so comfortably opened my best friend's door.

It dawns on me, suddenly, that they're sleeping together. I can't help but wonder if they were sleeping together six months ago, when I caught him in bed with his assistant. *Did she choose him over me?*

I feel sick to my stomach as I back away from the door.

"Chris? Is he here?" Her voice rings out from somewhere deeper in the apartment.

I'm momentarily stunned, my realization causing my feet to stick like glue to the ground underneath me.

And then she appears behind him. Her jaw drops when she sees me, and he takes a step back to let her through.

"I'll just give you a minute," he says, turning and disappearing into her apartment.

So I guess I won't be coming in, then.

"Layla," I start, but I'm not sure where to go from there. My chest is tight, my breathing shallow. The familiar feeling of a panic attack on the horizon that I've so blissfully avoided for the past few months takes hold of me hard and fast.

"Look, I wanted to tell you," she says. "I just could never find the right time."

"You realize he cheated on me, right?"

She nods, squeezing her eyes shut. "I know, but he's a different person now." *Sure, he is.* She watches my face. "We're in love."

My voice shakes. "He cheated on me with his assistant, in *our* bed."

"I know." She has the decency to look sheepish.

"And you chose him over me."

She swallows before she speaks. "I didn't choose him over you. I just couldn't find the right time to tell you."

"You've been weird for months. Ignoring me for months. Being evasive for months." I shake my head. "You cheated on me, Layla." I let out a breath. "And I really believed I was done with that part of my life." *Ever since Charlie.*

"Annabel, I'm really sorry. It got out of hand. I know that. I really hope you can find a way to forgive me."

I shake my head. "No. I won't."

I turn on my heel and retreat down the hallway, willing the tears prickling behind my eyes to subside.

Over the past few months, I got so comfortable that betrayal was the last thing on my mind. *It worked*. My silly deal with Charlie *worked*, but I had to go and catch feelings. And now when I need him the most, I can't go to him.

My hands tremble as I take out my phone and call Mari.

She answers on the second ring, her voice groggy. "Annabel? You okay?"

I sniffle, doing my best to hold off on the tears that are begging to fall. "Mari, can I come over?"

"Yeah, are you alright?" she asks, her voice more alert now. I hear shuffling, and I can only imagine I woke her up.

I start crying. "I'm sorry to wake you. I just broke up with Charlie and I just found out Layla is sleeping with my ex. I don't know what to do, but I can't go home right now." My voice trembles.

"Yeah, come over. I'm texting you my address. Where are you?"

"I'm somewhere between Spring Garden and the Art Museum."

"Okay, you're close. I texted it to you. We can stay on the phone while you walk."

For some reason, her kindness makes me cry harder. When I make it to her apartment—a little converted townhouse just like mine—she meets me at the front door and wraps me in a hug. She brings me upstairs, directs me to a pair of sweatpants and a T-shirt, and pours me a cup of coffee.

We sit on her couch, a red velvet thing that's far from the only colorful thing in her apartment. It's a large studio with a loft bed accessible by a ladder off to the side. The ceiling is tall and slopes up to a point, the walls covered in old movie posters and pop art. Vintage suitcases stand in place of side tables, a sandalwood candle balanced on one of them, filling the apartment with smoky comfort.

"Thank you for hosting me at the spur of the moment."

She waves me off, tucking her feet up underneath her. “We all have shit sometimes. It’s nice when you can lean on someone,” she says and takes a sip of her coffee. “So tell me what happened.”

I walk her through everything, from making love last night to breaking up in the morning to walking in on Layla and Chris.

When I’m done, she shakes her head, letting loose a long breath through her teeth that makes a hissing noise. “People take drugs to feel as many emotions as you’ve gone through in the past twelve hours.”

I laugh, but it hurts my heart a little bit.

“I’m sorry, Bells. That’s a shitty situation.”

I lean back into the couch, warming my hands on my coffee. “He was supposed to be my rebound. Something simple, sexy, fun. No stress, just honesty and orgasms. And you know what? He did exactly what he said he would. I didn’t. *I* fell in love.”

She sighs, contemplating. “I mean, maybe it did you some good, though. You told me you had panic attacks before because of Chris. Did you have them with Charlie?”

I shake my head. “If anything, the opposite. I trusted him. I got a little jealous, I guess, but I trusted him.”

She takes a slurping sip of her coffee and leaves it on the suitcase next to the candle. “Some people aren’t meant to be forever. Some are meant to burn bright and fast and leave you better for it, even if it hurts at the time.”

I can feel the tears coming again, and I stay quiet for a few moments because I’m really scared she’s right, and I’m really scared I’m going to lose it. I try to swallow it down, but my shallow breaths betray me, and she pulls me in for another hug. “And Layla’s a dick, by the way.”

I laugh through my tears into her shoulder. “He cheated on me. What the hell is she thinking? She’s essentially choosing him over me, considering she’s been ignoring me for weeks. I thought she was my best friend.”

“Fuck her. That’s not cool.”

I groan. “It’s not, but I would have understood, I think. It’s weird that she could find him attractive, but I would have figured out how to be okay with it for her.”

Mari gives me a look. “Bells, her dating the ex that cheated on you invalidates the hurt you felt when he did. There’s a big chance that relationship will go sideways, which I’m sure she knows, and she still chose the asshole over you. Good riddance. Don’t sell yourself short. You advocated for yourself this morning. Don’t stop now.”

I look at Mari for a moment, marveling that we were strangers only a few months ago. “Thank you, Mari.”

She shrugs. “If you don’t know your own worth, no one else will either.”

Her words have a calming effect on me, and I’m suddenly thankful I ran into Chris at Layla’s. I think Mari’s fun, colorful apartment is exactly where I needed to be.

“Where have you been all my life?” I ask.

She grins. “Somewhere between here and North Jersey.” She takes another sip of her coffee and turns toward me. “So, I don’t know if you know this about me, but I’m into old movies.” She motions all around her, referring to the posters along the walls. “I was planning a movie marathon today if you’d like to join me.”

I don’t hesitate. “I’d love to.”

“Adventure, comedy, rom-com, or horror?”

I think about it for a moment. “Rom-coms, but today, I’m going to consider them slashers.”

She laughs and puts together a lineup of old movies, pulling out an array of blankets and pillows from the gigantic closet on the wall. She throws them on the ground and sets up the first feature film.

“Thanks, Mari,” I say again as I settle into the blankets on the floor.

She smiles. “Anytime.”

She lies next to me while *Say Anything* rolls on the screen, a comfortable silence descending over us as the movie takes our attention. We laugh and I cry, and I buy Mari lunch for dealing with me, and then we do it all again through the afternoon for *Clueless*.

At some point, I fall asleep and wake up disoriented to dark windows and credits rolling down the screen. I hear Mari moving around in the kitchen, refilling her water and opening and closing cabinets. I unlock my phone with some false hope that someone will have wanted to talk to me—that maybe Charlie texted me—but I have no new notifications.

I don’t know what I was expecting. I check my email and see only a reminder about Thursday’s Marigold Beauty rebranding event. Evelyn forwarded it to me late last night with a note that said, “See you there, girlie. This is all you!”

The hurt comes back then, because she also notes that I’m welcome to bring a plus-one.

“Hey, Mari?” I shout.

“Yeah?” She appears in front of the couch again with a bowl of fresh popcorn that she nestles into the blankets between us as she takes her seat.

“Want to be my plus-one to a party on Thursday?”

She pops a kernel into her mouth. “Yeah, sounds fun.”

CHARLES

I 'm doing it.

I'm going to game night.

Sometime between hitting the gym in the morning and meeting my mom for lunch before Julian leaves for New York, I decide that maybe he's right. Or at least, I'm willing to entertain him not being wrong. And while Annabel still feels like a lot, game night seems doable.

Even fun, maybe.

Sometime over the past few years, my life became an obsession with making sure things were going as planned: my mom, my job. Considering there's no limit on either of those things, it was the perfect storm. There's always something I can do for my mom, and there's always another prospect I can chase.

I neglected the other things in life worth doing, people other than my family who are worth spending time with.

When I get back from visiting my mom, I text Oliver, our game night coordinator. He dictates who hosts, who brings what snacks, and what games we play. He adds me back to the group chat without question, and I'm met immediately with exclamation points and a variety of welcome-back memes.

He tasks me with bringing a bag of corn chips, something dippable, and a six-pack of something light.

When I arrive at Zeke's, he welcomes me in with a pat on the back. His new apartment is larger than the old one and

darker, with dim lighting and leather-and-wood furnishings. He leads me into the kitchen, where everyone is sitting around the table, beers being popped open, music coming from somewhere, game pieces being organized.

There's a cacophony of chairs moving, greetings, glasses clinking.

And when I sit down, it's like no time has passed.

Oliver, a loquacious fellow like me, tells a story about a girl at work he has a crush on—she said something the other day that he swears is funny even though no one laughed and explains that we probably just had to be there.

Zeke, Oliver's opposite in every way, sits beside him with a smirk as he prattles on. Zeke catches me looking at him and rolls his eyes, just between the two of us.

Kick, my college roommate, trades one of his light beers for mine and pops open the cap for me. He's quiet like Zeke but a little less stormy. The youngest of five brothers, he was born to become a football star. Unfortunately—according to his parents, at least—he found he'd rather be writing.

And Henry, always the first to arrive and last to leave, grins as he sets up our pieces. He doesn't care about the night's game or who will be there. He's just happy to be at the party.

“Hey, how's your mom doing?” Oliver asks conversationally, but I can see a nervous look in his eye. Zeke regards me carefully, and I notice even Henry's grin wane.

I sigh. I guess it's time for the truth. “Not very well. It's been a lot, over the past few years, taking care of her.”

Oliver nods. “We figured. Didn't want to push, but I'm glad you texted.”

“Thanks. For asking.”

“My aunt had dementia,” Oliver shares. “She had a rough time with it too. My mom took her in for a while, but eventually, it got to be too much. It's like caring for a frail toddler all the time, one who can't really speak and randomly

hates you. I guess that's just a regular toddler, though, come to think of it."

Henry kicks him under the table and he flinches. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be insensitive."

I shake my head. "I think that's a pretty apt description, actually." Oliver gives Henry a look that says I told you so. "We have her in assisted living now. They do a lot of the hard work. Still sucks, though, seeing it happen."

Kick claps me on the back. "You know we're happy to help if we can."

"I think this is all the help I need," I say, the words surprising me as I say them. I know that's exactly what Julian wants me to think, but I've only been here for a few minutes. Game nights are lighthearted and fun, but they don't erase the weight of my mom's disease, and they won't quell this sinking feeling I've had since Annabel left.

I think he's right. This is something I should be doing more often, but I think he's wrong in thinking it's going to fix anything or make the situation with Annabel more bearable.

I take a sip of my beer to clear my thoughts.

"Hey, how's Eliza?" I ask Oliver.

"She's good. Just got her master's in childhood education. She likes to joke that now she finally knows how to deal with me." Everyone at the table laughs. "You can really see it, though. She gave Henry a stern talking to the other day." Henry rolls his eyes. "She was staying over with one of her girlfriends so they could go out in the city, and of course, this asshole saw her Instagram story and decided he should drop by after his night of partying."

Henry holds up a hand to slow him. "In my defense, you said I could."

"Because I thought you wanted to hang out with me!"

"Well, you know what they say when you assume things." Henry flicks a game piece at Oliver, who easily catches it and slams it back down on the table between them.

“So anyways, he’s getting drunk off my stash, playing loud music while the girls are trying to wind down and she just stood up, put on her teacher’s voice, and said, ‘Henry, you put down that beer right now, go drink a glass of water, and put the sheets back on the sofa like you found them.’ Once he was done, she stole his phone, ordered him an Uber, and sent him home. I don’t think he’s ever listened to someone like he listened to her that night.”

Henry grimaces. “She was scary. I’ve never seen her like that before. She’s always so sweet.”

Oliver’s jaw is tight when he speaks. “She’s not interested.”

“Yeah, I’ve figured that out by now.”

A moment of quiet tension ripples through the room, eyes wandering back and forth as Henry’s unrequited love for Oliver’s little sister makes waves. Zeke and I catch each other’s gaze accidentally, and the surprise eye contact has us snickering at each other from across the table, the tension slowly easing from the room.

I lean back in my chair, listening to them talk and banter back and forth with each other, and realize just how much I’ve missed this.

My mom’s diagnosis was a whirlwind, and by the time I had a second to catch my breath, it had been months since I’d gone to a game night. At that point, it felt like a chore to text Oliver and invite myself back into the group. I was leading a whole new life, and with that came a strong suspicion that the moment I started enjoying myself again, she’d get worse. I folded into myself. My only outlet was a string of beautiful women who never lasted more than a few weeks.

And then came Annabel Hall, a girl who’s beautiful, quirky, and smart. She didn’t look like the girls I’d normally sleep with and didn’t behave like them either. She gave me the benefit of the doubt when I didn’t deserve it. She gave me more honesty than I ever could have asked for.

She made me forget about life for a little while in a way I haven't let myself in years.

My chest grows tight at her words. *I think you're in love with me too.*

I take out my phone, navigating to her thread.

My response to her echoes in my ears. *Significant others love each other.*

I lock my phone and let it drop to the table in front of me.



A FEW HOURS LATER, we all have a gentle buzz going on, and the guys start making plans to hit a bar. I take a moment to finally check my phone, unconcerned with whatever bar they'll choose, and see that an unknown number has called me twice and texted me. It takes me a second to process what the text says.

KAT

Hey, it's Kat. Your mom is at the bar. She doesn't seem to want to go home.

“Fuck.”

“You alright?” Kick asks.

I let out a breath. “My mom wandered over to a bar. I have to go get her.”

Oliver cleans up the last of our game pieces, zipping them neatly into a plastic bag. “What bar?”

I push my chair out, throwing my empty bottles into Zeke's recycling. “I don't remember the name. It's at Market by the river.”

“Can we come?” Henry asks.

There's a beat of silence around the table as I take in their eager expressions. “Sure.”

I try not to read too much into this—they're coming because they were going to a bar anyway, and this makes choosing a place easy.

But it's kind of nice to know that my night isn't over. I'll pick up my mom, escort her back home, and rejoin my friends. I'll probably even find a little solace in staking out the bar, just in case she sneaks out again. My nerves are always highest after a new development with my mom, and being close by will help assuage them.

“That settles it, then,” Oliver says, a note of victory in his voice.

“Oh, that's not fair. Next time we go out near my apartment, then,” Kick says.

“You can have all the next times you want, honey.”

Zeke's apartment is near the train, so we take that, considering it'll be about as fast as an Uber. Kick and Henry don't have passes, so they loiter ominously outside the ticket booth until the train pulls in and then hop over the turnstiles. I anxiously check my phone for any updates from Kat, but as soon as I'm underground, I lose service.

It's bizarre to have these two areas of my life colliding, but I don't hate it. I see Julian's smug expression in my head while I solemnly wait for the train to arrive. But it doesn't.

My boisterous friends follow me off the subway, shouting as they go. Oliver and Kick argue over a call Oliver made as Dungeon Master during our last game, and both get distracted as two attractive ladies walk by us. Zeke and Henry bring up the rear, their conversation much more serious. I think I hear one of them mention quarterly taxes.

I guide us into the bar, my head on a swivel as I look for my mom.

Kat catches my eye from behind the bar and waves me down. She's managed to get my mom to one end. It looks like they're having a pleasant, though somewhat strained, conversation. The guys find the last open table, and a waitress whips by me to greet them as I collect my mom.

“Mom,” I say, touching her elbow gently.

She turns to me, and instantly, a cloud of disappointment falls across her face. “Seth,” she bites.

Kat grimaces, and although I feel the familiar weight of anxiety on my shoulders, something in my brain breaks. I am not my dad. I’m not a liar or a cheat. I never was one, but that one name from my mother’s mouth comes with all the accusations he deserves. Until now, I’ve absorbed it like I deserved it, too.

Maybe Annabel is partially to thank for that. Everybody espouses honesty, but there are few people who truly embody it. I was honest with her about Gabi, even though I knew it would be a difficult conversation. And she was honest with me.

Even when I couldn’t be honest with myself.

The realization cuts me like a knife. *I think you’re in love with me too.*

My chest is tight as I shrug off my dad’s name. “Thanks for taking care of her. I really appreciate it,” I say, leaning low to talk to Kat so my mom can’t hear. I don’t always know what will upset her, but if she’s calling me Seth, she might not be in the best mood.

“No problem. We had a nice chat. I’m not sure how much of it she was there for, but we talked about her husband a bit. Sounds like that was a bit rough.”

I laugh at the understatement. “He was a royal dick, and she’s better off without him.”

The beers must be hitting me a little differently tonight, probably because it’s been years since I’ve had one. I’ve been drinking whiskey and being moody for so long that I feel bubbly tonight, almost giddy.

Then again, maybe it’s because of my revelation, because of Annabel.

“Can I get you anything? I’m happy to sit with your mom for a bit if you want a drink,” she says.

“I actually came with a bit of a group. I might take her home really quick and come back if that’s alright?” I motion over my shoulder to the guys at the table and get a variety of positive reactions, from thumbs-up to fist pumps. They think I’m picking up the bartender. I take a step back, suddenly self-conscious. I don’t want them to think of me with Kat.

“I’ll make sure they’re taken care of,” she says, taking a tentative step toward me and then around. I didn’t realize I was blocking her way.

“Dude,” my brother shouts, appearing as if from nowhere. His fists connect with my chest, and I’m simultaneously surprised and a little put off.

“What are you doing here?” I ask.

His eyes bore into mine. “Why aren’t you answering your phone?”

I shake my head, struggling to catch up. I pull my phone out of my pocket and see a barrage of missed calls from Julian. And Annabel.

My tongue feels heavy as I say her name. “Annabel?”

“Yeah, she called you, you asshole, because I asked her to. Because you weren’t picking up your fucking phone and Peggy called to tell me that Mom slipped out again!”

“Yeah, she’s right there,” I say, motioning behind me.

He emphasizes his words with his fist. “I know that now,” he growls. He shakes his head. “I could punch you right now. God, she was here, you know.” His hands are balled into fists at his side, and I worry that he might actually punch me.

And then it dawns on me what he’s saying.

“She’s here?” I’m moving before I have a chance to think about what I’m doing. “Watch Mom!” I call over my shoulder.

I run out the door, onto the street outside, and look in every direction for her.

Polka dots, where are my polka dots?

I scan every person I see and then head in the direction of her apartment, walking first and then jogging because I can feel it in my bones that she's getting farther and farther away from me.

I pull up her contact. Maybe if she's close by, I can convince her to come back, so I can explain and maybe tell her...tell her how much I love her during boys' night when my mom's gotten lost and Julian's about to punch me.

Just this morning, I told her I don't love her, and now I'm drunk and feeling things. *Will she even believe me if I say it?* I put my phone back in my pocket.

When I get back to the bar, my mom and Julian are gone, and I check my phone to see a snide text from him not to worry, that he got Mom home okay and he'll be heading back to New York now.

I throw my phone on the table as I take the last open seat, letting out a breath as I lean back in my chair.

"Your mom okay?" Oliver asks.

I nod. "She's okay, she's home safe."

"Good. You need a drink? I gotta get one, too. Some chick spilled mine." Oliver says. He glances at the bar. "Oh hey, do you know the bartender here? You looked close."

I fish my wallet out of my pocket and separate a few bills to give to Oliver. "Just a friend. My mom's come in here before."

"Oh, okay. So do you mind if I...?" He motions toward Kat.

"Go forth if she'll take you. And get me a Yuengling while you're at it." I pass the money to him, and he gets up immediately, smoothing down his shirt as he makes his way to the bar. Kat looks up and smiles politely, nodding as he places his order. He says something else, then, and she looks confused for a moment before breaking into laughter.

Boys' night continues, and after a couple hours and a few more drinks, we're all laughing like no time has passed since

the last time we did this. Which, for them, is probably true, but for me, it feels like a breath of fresh air. I'm vaguely aware that Julian is pissed at me. And Annabel too, but I'm too far gone to be trying my luck with her tonight.

I stumble into my apartment past closing time, fumbling with my keys in the door and pouring a large glass of water that gets mostly in my mouth as I chug it over the sink. I strip down in my kitchen and throw my bag somewhere on the floor, and in my haze of the night, I manage to send one text.

Good night, my lovely Annabel Hall.

ANNABEL

As day turns into night, dusk settling across Mari's windows, my phone starts pinging rapid-fire. I wrestle it out of the blankets and unlock it to see someone messaging me repeatedly on Facebook.

It's Julian.

"Charlie's brother is messaging me on Facebook."

Mari's head dips to one side as she contemplates. "Maybe he's trying to get you two back together."

"He asked me to call him." I stare at the words on the screen, wondering what would cause his brother to contact me directly. Charlie's not the kind of guy to let others do his legwork. I look at Mari, who's still slumped up against the couch, one eye on the TV and one on me, as she throws another piece of popcorn in her mouth. "Should I call him?"

She sits up, moving toward me. "Can I see?"

I hand her my phone, and she wipes the popcorn butter from her hands on her pants before taking it.

Her eyebrows crinkle as she reads it. "That's weird. Just, 'Hey, can you call me?'"

"Should I?" I search for an answer in her expression.

She hands my phone back to me. "Your call. Just remember you don't have to listen to anything he says, and hanging up is just another way to say no."

I laugh. “You’re the support system every girl needs post-breakup.”

She grins, flipping her hair over her shoulder. “I do what I can.”

I dial the number he messaged me.

“Hello?” His voice is clipped and fuzzy like he’s driving.

“Hi. It’s uh, Annabel.”

“Oh,” he sighs. “Thank you for calling me. Sorry for messaging you out of the blue like that. I’m driving back into the city now and it’s all I could do to find your Facebook, let alone draft a coherent message. Look, are you with Charlie? I need him to call me.”

I sit up, sensing an unnerving tone in his voice. “No, I’m not. Is everything okay?”

“Fuck,” he mutters. “I can’t—we can’t find my mom, and Charlie isn’t answering his goddamn phone. I just got a call from one of her nurses that she’s not in her room and I just need him to go look for her because I’m still a good half hour out, and God, she could be anywhere!”

I’m already standing. “I’ll try calling him too. Do you know where she might be? I’ll look if you could send me a picture of her.”

“Yes, thank you, Annabel. God, I really appreciate it. He doesn’t deserve you.”

My breath catches in my throat. “Send me her address and picture, okay?”

“Yeah, sending now. Seriously, thank you. I wouldn’t ask, I just—”

“I know. I’ll see you soon.”

“Last time we lost her, she went to the bar across the street. Can you check there? I forget the name, but it’s in front of the entrance.”

“Yeah, I’ll check and let you know.”

I throw my bag over my shoulder and pull my shoes on—flats that look ridiculous under Mari’s sweatpants, but I’m going to ignore that for now.

“Their mom is missing,” I explain to Mari, who’s already matching my movements. “He can’t get a hold of Charlie, so I said I’d try calling and if I can’t get him either, I’ll go look for her.”

I freeze as I scroll to his number.

“Do you want me to call?” Mari asks, and I shake my head because even though it might be painful to hear his voice again, there’s a part of me that’s craving it, too.

I press it and hold my breath as it rings, and rings, and rings. He doesn’t pick up.

“I hope he’s alright,” I say. With his mom, he always keeps his phone close. Now that I think about it, I don’t think he ever missed one of my calls.

Mari stands, leaving the popcorn on the floor. “He’s probably fine. You know, he might be upset too and trying to forget about things.”

“Yeah. Maybe.” I bite my lip as I slide my phone into my pocket. “So I guess I have to go look for her.”

Mari nods. “I’ll go with you.” She slips on a pair of sneakers and ties her hair up.

“Thanks, Mari, I appreciate it.” I squeeze her hand quickly, and we bolt out the door.

When we get to the address Julian texted, we start searching for the bar but quickly realize that the building seems to have three different main entrances. Thanks to its central location in the middle of the city, there are arguably three other bars we could be looking at. I show Mari the picture on my phone that Julian sent me, and we head into the closest one with an eye out for an older woman with a silvery-gray bob and a smile in her eyes.

The first bar boasts pounding pop music and a college clientele, so we move on to the next. We do our due diligence

and weave through a similar crowd a block away, deciding quickly that emo dance night is probably not the vibe Charlie's mom would be looking for, either.

The last bar we check is dimmer and somewhat removed from the younger crowds of the other two. Music fills the room at a more reasonable decibel, with country rock notes matching the rustic decor.

As we maneuver through the slightly older crowd, we see her sitting on a stool at the end of the bar, a glass of something bubbly in front of her, garnished with a lime.

"There she is," I tell Mari, grabbing her elbow. My heartbeat hitches up, realizing that now that we've found her, I somehow have to make sure she stays here until Julian arrives. I send him a quick text and a location pin.

But as we make our way toward her, I clock the person next to her, standing halfway into the employees-only portion of the bar. With a slick smile on his face, Charlie leans down to talk to the unfairly gorgeous brunette bartender in a skimpy shirt who might as well have heart-shaped pupils with the way she's looking at him.

My heart flutters, seeing him, but any excitement I have is tamped down by the woman he's talking to. A flare of jealousy rages through me that I don't feel entitled to, which makes it all the worse.

They're focused only on each other.

This bar is too crowded, the music is too loud, and everyone is just too close.

"I can't," I say, and start backing up, accidentally walking into a table and knocking someone's drink over. "I'm sorry," I say quickly, picking up the glass as if that does anything, and rush for the door.

Mari is right behind me as I crash out onto the street.

"That was torture. Literal torture." I'm somewhere between crying and screaming and my words come out in little huffs.

Her face scrunches up in pity. “God, I knew I should have stopped you. I’m sorry, Bells.” Mari wraps me in her arms on the street as barhoppers walk by, and I do my best to hide my face from them. It’s dark out now, but not dark enough or late enough to presume they won’t see me.

“I don’t know what I was thinking,” I say into her shoulder.

She takes a step back from me, her hands still on my shoulders. “You were trying to help.”

“Hey.” A voice from behind us makes my heart thumps faster.

I turn toward it, but it’s just Julian. I deflate. “She’s in there,” I say.

He lets out a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank God. Thank you for coming, is she alright?”

“I think so.” I swallow down the lump in my throat. “Charlie’s in there.”

His eyebrows crinkle together, one rising. “He is?”

I nod.

“Why didn’t he call me back?”

I shrug. “He looks a little distracted.”

Julian takes a step toward me, his eyes focused on my face. “Hey, are you alright?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I take a deep breath, and Mari follows my lead as I walk away, one arm looped in mine. I look over my shoulder. “Glad you found her.”

“Thank you,” he calls as we walk toward Mari’s.

“You okay?” she asks, her voice low.

I lean my head on her shoulder. “I think I need more movies.”

CHARLES

The sun hits my eyes with a vengeance, and last night's events crash down around me.

I groan as I sit up, a headache pounding through my temples.

I grab my phone and, confirming I did send that text, bang my head back against my headboard. Without context, that text means nothing to her. It probably makes everything worse because she feels like she can't get a clean break.

I exit out and call Julian instead.

"Hey." He answers after only one ring.

"Hey. Look, sorry about last night. I should have been checking my phone. I should have known the nurses would realize she wasn't there and call one of us."

I hear Tucker in the background shouting something and Ashley's soothing voice afterward. "It's no problem. Honestly, I overreacted. I panicked, and I took it out on you and that's not fair."

I lower myself back down into my pillow. "That's kind of the nature of the disease, isn't it? It's never just the diagnosee."

"Yeah, unfortunately." Julian sighs. "But listen, I'm glad you called. I know last night was rough, but I was really happy to see you out with your buddies. Did you have a good time?"

“Yeah, I did. A great time, actually.” I rub my temple, urging the headache away. “I really need to do that more often.”

He’s quiet for a moment. “Have you talked to Annabel?”

“I texted her last night,” I admit.

“You did?”

I put Julian on speakerphone so I can look at the thread again. “Just to say good night. She hasn’t texted me back.”

“Man, I’m sorry. I feel bad for asking her to come. She seemed upset.”

I let my phone drop to the pillow next to me. “Yeah, I’m sure she was. But it’s not your fault. I would have done the same in that situation.”

“Have you thought any more about, you know, your relationship with her?”

I let out a long breath. “Yeah. But I don’t really know what to do. I mean, if she won’t even answer my text, she must be pretty pissed.”

“Maybe she just doesn’t know what your angle is. I mean, I was here when she stormed out. She was pretty clear about what she wanted, and I don’t think a good night text is enough to make her think you’re up for the ride.”

I pull the pillow over my face, my phone falling onto the mattress. I leave a little room so my voice isn’t muffled when I speak. “I didn’t mean to text her. I just missed her, I guess. I probably made it all the worse for myself.”

“Well, just go talk to her in person. I’m sure she’ll listen.”

I throw the pillow on the floor and sit up. “Yeah, I just don’t know what to say.”

Julian’s quiet for a moment. “Really?”

“Really what?”

“Jesus, dude. ‘Annabel, I love you. Annabel, I want to be with you.’ Those exact words will get you ninety percent of

the way there,” he says. I hear Ashley’s voice in the background, getting louder as she gets closer to the phone. “Don’t overthink this one.”

“Well, that’s not all I was going to say.”

“I mean, you can say hello, I guess, but seriously, don’t overthink it. You know what she wants.” A swishing sound comes through the phone, and I hear snippets of Julian’s and Ashley’s muffled voices. “And Ashley knows now too, so expect Pinterest links of wedding dresses. She’s been accumulating links like they’ll keep us warm in winter.”

Her voice is distant in the background. “Those were for our vow renewals!”

“Are you kidding? You want me to spend a thousand dollars on a dress to say vows we’ve already said?”

She grumbles something unintelligible in the background.

“Anyway, you should go talk to her.”

“Yeah. I will.” I swipe away a new text message notification in the group chat, only to be met with a new one immediately after.

“Let me know how it goes, okay?”

“Yeah. Bye Jul.”

“Bye Char.”

I end the call and navigate to the group chat, which has transitioned from welcome-back memes to party memes to every meme ever created about a girl turning down a guy.

Oliver is getting skewered this morning. He was in the running for Kat’s favorite customer last night—she was bringing him drinks and joking along with him for hours before he decided he’d try to kiss her.

He got an “oopsie” drink poured down his shirt, and for the rest of the night, we had to go up to the bar to order our drinks, avoiding the sideways glares she shot at him.

“I thought she was leaning in, too,” he shouted, pulling his wet shirt from his chest.

Kick shook his head, holding out a handful of bar napkins to him. “She was setting your drink down, you idiot.”

“So she was leaning in!”

“Not for a kiss, you asshole!”

By the end of the night, he managed to get her attention once more and quickly offered a heartfelt apology, to which she held up one hand and then shoed him back off to our table.

I think I caught her smile while she rolled her eyes, though.

I have a text from Gabi, too, asking me to call her when I get a chance.

“Hey.” She’s far too chipper, and it makes me want to crawl back into my sheets and close my eyes for another few hours.

“What’s up?”

“God, you sound terrible.”

“Thank you.”

“Are you hungover?”

I pause, thinking this over for a second. “Yes.”

“I thought you didn’t get hungover.”

“Everybody gets hungover if they drink too much.”

She hums. “Well, whatever. I wanted to let you know I managed to get us on the list for a party Mina Larson’s throwing on Thursday. Well, Dieter and I, because he assumed the second ticket was for him and I didn’t know how to correct him. Hopefully, we’ll be able to get five minutes of her time and we can bypass her asshole assistant.”

“Oh, nice. He’s still giving you the runaround?”

She makes a noise of annoyance. “Yeah. I’ve emailed him probably twenty times since you gave me their file, and we’ve had what, three meetings scheduled and pushed at this point? My sister’s been working with them on their rebranding and

they've been a delight to them, but for some reason, they don't give us the time of day."

I run a hand through my hair, noting how badly I need a shower. "Well, yeah, we're the annoying ones."

"I really hate that."

"Well, maybe it'll be a fun party. Maybe you'll meet someone."

She scoffs. "Unlikely. It'll just be my sister and her marketing girls repeatedly shouting, 'Oh my god, we did this, ladies!'"

I laugh, but something about Gabi's words sticks in my mind.

"Wait," I say, rubbing the sleep from my eyes. "Your sister works in the building, right?"

She's quiet for a moment. "Yeah, Charlie. We've had full conversations with her in the lobby. You knew this."

"Does she work at Wink?"

"Yes, Charlie, she works at Wink," she deadpans.

My heart ticks faster. "Does she know Annabel?"

"Annabel? Your polka-dot girl? I don't know. I haven't heard her talk about an Annabel."

I'm up out of my bed now, the little pieces clicking into place as I realize Mina Larson's company must be the beauty brand that Annabel's been working on. She mentioned a rebranding party coming up soon. This has to be it.

"What's your sister's name?"

"Charlie!" she scolds. "We've literally had lunch with her."

I pace the room, desperate for a physical outlet now that the hint of a plan is forming in my mind. "What's her name, Gabi?"

"Stephanie. God, you're such an asshole, Charlie. I can't believe you. I talk about her all the time. You've flirted with her."

“I didn’t realize she was your sister.”

I thought Gabi had just latched on to a girl in the building who happened to look kind of like her. Tall, blonde, conventionally attractive. I didn’t feel the need to impress anyone there—I thought we all just happened to be getting tacos that day. “God, but I should have figured that out, considering the scolding I got afterward.”

“You should have. Jesus Christ, Charlie, I don’t know what to do with you. How you make sale after sale boggles my mind considering you don’t even remember my freaking sister.”

I pause my pacing, holding up a hand in surrender. “In my defense, I remember people I’m trying to make a deal with.”

“Well, maybe in that case, I should be glad you don’t remember her.”

I’m quiet for a moment, my thoughts running over this new information. If I had to take a bet, Gabi’s sister is the same Stephanie on Annabel’s team. “Gabi, can you get another ticket?”

“I don’t think so, Charlie. Steph was annoyed I asked her in the first place.”

“Gabi, please? I need to be there.”

“What, for Annabel?”

“Yes.”

She pauses and then sighs heavily. “Fine, but I’m going to put all the blame on you. Bring her a bottle of wine to say thank you. Pinot grigio, okay?”

“I’ll buy her ten. What do you want? A car? A pony? Take the offer while it’s good.”

She laughs. “You must actually like this girl.”

“That might be an understatement.”

A beat of silence passes while she considers this. “Why aren’t you going with her, then?”

I shrug, continuing my pacing in front of my bed. “Well, like you said. I’m an asshole.”

“Okay, so are you going to get us kicked out of this party for showing up where you’re not supposed to? Because we just lost Frankie Carver. Dieter’s not going to like it if we lose this one, too.”

“I promise you I will leave if it’s determined that I’m not welcome.”

“Okay. I’ll drag you out if I have to.”

My mind races—I’m going to see Annabel in a few days. She probably still hates me. Probably hates me even more with every day that goes by. But I have to try.

“Hey, did Dieter say anything to you about Frankie?”

She sighs. “No, and I’m a little anxious about it. I wouldn’t push this party if I wasn’t trying to make up for a five-million loss.”

“Gabi, that money isn’t gone because of you—it’s gone because of Frankie Carver. This isn’t your loss to fix.”

She sniffs. “Yeah, I know,” she says brusquely. “But either way, I think we should go to this thing and just see what happens. Maybe we’ll get a meeting out of it, maybe even a deal. Maybe we’ll get put on their shit list. Who knows?”

“I like the way you think, Gabi.”

“Yeah, okay. Well. Just don’t be an asshole, okay?”

“I promise.”

When we hang up, it dawns on me that somewhere between today and Thursday, I have to get my shit together. I have to figure out something to say to her that will reverse course on the damage I’ve done and make her decide to trust me in spite of everyone in her life who’s taught her otherwise.

I have to make sure I’m a net positive on her night—*her* night. She’s going to be excited about this. Hopefully, she’s going to be really happy. I can’t be the reason she’s not.

It occurs to me suddenly just how big a risk I'm taking. I thought the risk was my job, even my relationship with Gabi, but it's not. I'm gambling on her happiness, making the decision to roll the dice on her night. And I can't help but wonder whether I should really be going to this thing at all.

ANNABEL

I stare at three different outfits I've laid out across my bed. None of them speak to me, and I'm painfully aware that whatever I leave the house wearing this morning will still be on my skin at ten tonight. It's worth dressing for comfort today, considering we're going directly from the office to the party.

I consider calling Mari, but I've been leaning on her too much lately. She's coming with me to the damn thing—the least I can do is dress myself without her. I'll buy her a few drinks while we're there, and hopefully, she can just enjoy the party.

I go with a loose-fitting chiffon sheath dress. No polka dots, but I'm not sure exactly how to dress for this, and black is always safe. I throw on some similarly nondescript flats and consider myself dressed. I'm already running late, as it is—and I realize, on my way out the door, that I never started my coffee.

I'll have to stop on my way in for a cup, and any other day, that wouldn't bother me, but today, I'd like to limit my time in the lobby as much as possible. I have a long day ahead, and there's no reason to start it with the image of Charles Sinclair walking past me like he never knew me at all.

He's sent me one text but has otherwise ignored my existence, and I'm not sure how to take it.

CHARLIE

Good night, my lovely Annabel Hall.

It feels like he's trying to stake his claim on me without agreeing to the new terms. He's trying to worm his way back in to continue where we left off, but I've moved on from what we used to be to each other. It's love or nothing for Annabel Hall.

By some miracle, I don't run into him. I order my coffee and wait an obnoxiously long time for it, and by the time I swipe through the turnstiles and head up to the office, he's nowhere in sight.

I don't know if I want to see him or if I'm dreading it, but I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a small part of me that was disappointed I didn't.

And honesty is all I really wanted, after all.

I wonder if that's what charmed me about him in the first place. He held no qualms about telling me what he wanted and he urged me to do the same. It really was great, for so long. I trusted in his words, in his actions. I guess I trusted him to tell me when his feelings changed, too.

But sometimes, the hardest person to be honest with is yourself.

That's what I think about when my mind replays the image of him talking to the pretty brunette in the bar. The reptilian part of my brain wants to learn from experience, from the multiple times I've been cheated on, but there's another part of my brain that I'm not sure I've listened to before that believes in what I felt the night we spent together.

A conversation in a bar might be nothing more than a conversation in a bar.

If what I felt was true—and it was true enough that I felt the need to vocalize it—he didn't sleep with her.

The day starts out uneventful, with a quick team meeting, and then we all head back to our desks. At some point,

Danielle disappears into Evelyn's office and I don't realize until noon rolls by that we've spent half the morning without her.

"They've been in there a while," I say to Steph.

She shrugs. "Well, we haven't heard anyone screaming yet, so there must not be an issue."

I laugh. "Who, Evelyn or Danielle?"

Steph snorts. "Both? I could see either one, honestly."

We settle back into silence, and when Danielle eventually does come out, she heads back to her desk with a casual indifference that makes it impossible to tell what that meeting was about. Steph catches me eyeing Danielle and I quickly avert my gaze back to my computer.

In the afternoon, I start to get antsy. I head downstairs, pick up another coffee and find myself scanning the lobby again.

Why is he sticking in my mind today?

The answer crashes into me as I scurry back through the turnstiles, an iced coffee I'm not very excited about sweating into my palm.

It would be nice to have the person I love around on a day when I get to be a little proud of myself. I want somebody to smile at, to pick up a Marigold Beauty napkin and tell, "Hey, I made this."

I'm sad that he won't be there. Angry that he made me feel this way. Embarrassed that my feelings aren't reciprocated.

The party doesn't start until six, so we hang around the office late. Steph is working, of course. She always has something to do. Evelyn opens her door around five, and I notice her movements have slowed, almost like she runs through her day at top speed and now that we're just kind of waiting, she can relax for a moment.

A little after five, Danielle surprises us by standing up, gathering her things, and dropping a mild "see you" before

heading toward the elevators. I lock eyes with Steph as we listen to her heels tap down the hallway.

“She’s not coming?” I ask.

Steph shakes her head. “I guess not. Unless she’s meeting us there?”

I lean back in my chair, taking a surreptitious look into Evelyn’s office. I don’t see her right away, her all-black ensemble serving as camouflage against her couch, and when I do, she’s staring at me, her glasses pulled down to the tip of her nose.

“You can come in,” she says, smiling.

I instantly turn beet red.

Steph follows me over and we slip inside. She leans against the wall, eyes wide, and I awkwardly lean against the desk, not wanting to intrude too far into her space without being invited in further.

“Is Danielle not coming tonight?” Steph asks.

Evelyn looks pointedly at me and then nods to the door. I close it gently.

“I might as well tell you now since you’re snooping either way.” I feel the heat run down my chest now, too. “Danielle submitted a transfer request this morning, so she’ll be leaving the team as soon as it’s accepted.”

“Finally,” Steph says.

If she didn’t, I would have.

“So, it’s going to be a little tight around here.” She looks at Steph. “Nothing new for you,” she says, and then she turns to me. “I hope you’ll just bear with us, okay? It’s only temporary and we’ll just have to make sure we have each other’s backs here.”

I nod. “Totally. Whatever I can do.”

“Is her transfer going to be accepted, though? With her history?” Steph asks.

Evelyn rolls her eyes. “Who knows? I hope so.”

“Doesn’t she have kind of a reputation here?”

Evelyn shoots her a look. “Yes, but you’re not supposed to know that.”

Steph shrugs. “Why not? It’s not like I’m going to say anything.”

“This place has enough rumors; we don’t need to add to them.” Evelyn shakes her head. “And I’m not letting you buy me spritzers anymore. You’re too good at plying me for information.”

Steph grins. “You didn’t have to drink them.”

Evelyn huffs, clicking her pen pointedly as she returns to her work. “Why don’t you girls head over early? You might be able to get a drink or two before there’s a line.”

“Okey dokey,” Steph says, moving easily toward the door.

“We’ll have a spritzer waiting for you,” I add.

Evelyn’s quiet for a moment. “You two are trouble.”

We laugh as we slip out the door and gather our things. Steph’s nose is buried in her phone as we make our way to the elevator.

“Do you mind if we wait five minutes in the lobby? My sister works upstairs. She’s my plus-one and she’s not quite done yet.”

“Sure,” I say.

Mari left work a little early to go home and change before the party—her dress code and working hours are a lot more lenient, so she’s opting to meet us there.

We wander downstairs, and I quickly regret not just waiting on our floor. Charlie could come down or even walk in at any minute, depending on what weird meetings he has today. I find myself scanning while simultaneously hiding behind Steph.

But a minute or so after we reach the lobby, another similarly tall and blonde woman joins us. She's dressed very corporate—pencil skirt and a baby-blue chiffon top, French manicure, and black pumps. She smiles as she greets Stephanie and then turns to me, realizing I'm unfamiliar.

“Hi, I'm Annabel,” I say, with a quick wave that I immediately realize looks dumb.

Her eyebrows fly up, and her eyes bore into me for a moment. I've never felt quite so on display and I don't even have polka dots on today.

“Hi,” she says, eyeing her sister. “I'm Gabi.”

“Nice to meet you,” I say, feeling self-conscious about my boxy little dress and flats that put me a good six inches shorter than either of them. I feel like somebody's kid sister who's getting dragged along to their adult event.

“Nice to meet you too,” she says, and when she glances at Steph again, Steph gives her a confused look. “Sorry, in the interest of full disclosure, I guess I should say I work with Charlie.”

“Oh.” Twenty different thoughts race through my brain. *She's that Gabi.* The one who was assaulted by Frankie Carver. The one who was hugging Charlie. I wonder if she knows what happened on Saturday. “I've heard a lot about you. All good things.” I finally manage to say.

She grins, then. “That's a lie if I've ever heard one.”

Steph and Gabi cackle as we exit the lobby doors.

She turns to me as we head in the direction of the swanky hotel hosting the party. “I've heard a lot about you too.”

“Have you?” I hate how hopeful my voice comes out.

She nods, and my heart swells like maybe there's a chance for us after all. And then I clamp it down because, as nice as Gabi seems, she's not the one who decides whether there's a chance for us. That's Charlie, and he seems to have decided not.

“Wait,” Steph says. “So, her Charlie,” she says, looking at her sister and then turning to me. “Is your Charlie?”

“Apparently so.”

She nods. “Well, this just got a lot more interesting.”

CHARLES

I'm going, I've decided. I think that Annabel is my person, and if she's my person, then I should be there for her big moments.

But tonight is not about me. Tonight is about her, and if I want to be with her, I have to respect her boundaries. She never texted me back after my drunken good-night text, and why should she?

She knows what she wants. I know what she wants, too. Tonight is about getting over my shit long enough to let her know that I can deliver, even if that might be the hardest thing I ever do.

I've spent years learning how to be this way. I've spent years shunning the things that make me happy because they all feel so impermanent, because everyone in my life, aside from Julian, has taught me that good things are fleeting. It's better to never get used to them. But that doesn't mean I can't appreciate them when they're happening. I've been missing that part.

I watch the way Julian appreciates his family—Ashley, who keeps him in line, and Tucker, who keeps him young and playful. It's stressful, overwhelming, rewarding and beautiful, all at the same time.

I'm not saying I'm ready for marriage and a kid with Annabel, but I'm also not opposed to it. Not anymore. But what I really want right now is to talk to her. I want to be there for her big moments and I want to smile and laugh and

experience life with her if she'll have me. If she'll forgive me for saying things that I can't easily take back.

She showed up on Saturday when she didn't have to. And I was so far out of my own mind that I didn't realize the significance of that until days later. She has absolutely no obligation to me, but she still showed up for me.

I bet if I told her that, she'd say she was helping my mom, not me. That's just the kind of person she is. Just like she refuses to admit she was helping Mari that day in the elevator.

Mari, who I suddenly realize is standing right in front of me, hands on her hips, foot tapping on the pavement. She's dressed up, and it dawns on me that Mari must be going to the same place that I am. She's the plus-one that I should have been.

“What are you doing here, Charlie?”

I pause, sticking my hands in my pockets as I try to figure out what the right answer is to that question. “I'm here for Annabel.”

She cocks her head to the side and crosses her arms. “Look, I'm not going to get in the middle of your relationship. I think she still has feelings for you, but I do want to remind you that the whole reason this party is happening is because of the really hard work she did. Don't get in the way of that, okay?”

I take a step toward her, and she seems taken aback by that, her eyebrows rising as she looks up at me. “I have already made promises that if I need to leave, I will. I'm kind of on a conditional ticket here.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I think I like you, but I can't tell where the suave pickup artist ends and Annabel's boyfriend begins.”

I think we're both surprised by her words. Her expression falters, probably remembering the nature of our relationship. I feel a certain heat building in my abdomen at the title so casually thrown out.

Annabel's boyfriend.

I haven't been anyone's boyfriend since college. Even then, the term didn't seem appropriate for someone I'd sneak into my dorm for the weekend and promptly forget about during the week. There's a tightness in my chest that I'd normally associate with anxiety, but I think it might actually be more along the lines of excitement.

I want what I've had the last three months, and I'm slowly coming to terms with the fact that that was the blissful beginning of a new relationship. I just didn't want to call it what it was, and I managed to find someone who—at least in the beginning—was just as willing to turn a blind eye to what I wanted as I was.

And she came around to the truth before I was ready to admit it, to our mutual detriment.

“Saturday really sucked for her.”

“It really sucked for me too.”

She pauses for a moment. “Who was that?”

I raise my eyebrows, suddenly a little lost. “Who was who?”

“The girl you were talking to at the bar?”

My breath catches in my throat. She means Saturday night. With the guys. And Kat.

“My mom's gone there before. She called me to come get her.”

Mari looks like she doesn't believe me.

“Fuck.” I lose all my breath in one word. “Fuck, she thinks I fucked somebody else, doesn't she?”

Mari shrugs. “I don't know. I don't know what she thinks, but she was managing okay that morning. And then she wasn't. We watched a lot of movies and we drank a lot of wine and—” She stops abruptly.

“And what?”

“She fell asleep crying on my couch with half a glass of cheap wine in her hand and most of a bowl of popcorn thrown

over her shoulder because she kept missing her mouth.”

It feels like a punch in the gut. She was crying because of me.

Mari glances down the street. “Look, she’s coming. Either get yourself together before she gets here or get out of the way.”

She starts walking toward the entrance to the hotel, a doorman eagerly stepping aside as she crosses the threshold. I see two tall blondes heading toward us, a smaller girl between them dressed in all black.

If I don’t move now, they’re going to see me, and I don’t know what I’m going to say yet. So, I dart inside behind Mari.

And I hope for the best.

ANNABEL

The hotel lobby is large and full of echoes. On the far side, a black-and-gold posterboard hoisted onto an easel proudly proclaims that the Marigold Beauty rebranding party is in this ballroom. The party hasn't started yet, and the ballroom is filled mostly with staff setting things up, so we pick a spot to wait off to one side until they're ready for people to come in.

"So, do you mind if I ask what happened? Between you and Charlie?" Gabi asks, leaning casually against the wall, her bag at her feet. "He said enough to imply he fucked up, but he didn't give me any details."

I shrug, kind of wishing Mari was here. She'd be great at deflecting.

But I'd be lying if I said I'm not interested in hearing what his best friend has to say about things.

"You don't have to," she says, sensing my hesitation. "I'm just curious."

"Nosy, you mean," Steph corrects, and Gabi shoots her a look.

"Yeah, I'm nosy," she agrees, rolling her eyes, and then turns back to me. "So?"

Steph hasn't heard the story—it's not like I've been broadcasting it—but I felt like I was accepted into her and Evelyn's girls' club this afternoon during our closed-door conversation. I think I trust her enough to tell her.

“We had a friends-with-benefits thing going,” I say, mostly for Steph’s benefit, and I watch for her reaction. She’s not surprised. Perhaps Charlie’s reputation precedes him.

“And I guess I fell for him.” My heart catches, remembering the crestfallen look on his face when I told him. “And he said that the difference between friends and significant others is that significant others love each other.”

Gabi grimaces. “Oh, Charlie.”

“Yeah. It was something.” I glance over at the bar area, wondering if they’re serving yet. “Compounded by finding out twenty minutes later that my best friend is sleeping with my ex, who cheated on me, not with her, if that matters. Then, later, I see Charlie talking to some random chick at a bar who’s not me. God, kill me now, you know?”

“Oh man, I thought you seemed a little off this week, but I never would have imagined that,” Steph says.

I shrug. “That’s life, right? I mean, Charlie was supposed to be a fling, you know? Like a stepping-stone back into dating, even if it was just the benefits part of it. I was cheated on three times before him. He was supposed to mean nothing to me. Ugh, I must be after all the wrong men. Three cheaters and a guy who can’t commit, followed by a home run of my best friend sleeping with my ex.” I make a clicking sound with my teeth and swing an imaginary bat, and then immediately wish I didn’t.

Tears prickle behind my eyes as I struggle to take a deep breath. There’s a lot of sudden silence around us and now I’m thinking I’ve become the awkward guy-obsessed coworker who tells way too many personal stories.

“I think you need a drink,” Gabi finally says.

“Or five,” Steph adds.

“Let me see if I can make something happen,” Gabi says, adjusting her top and walking toward the bar with purpose. The bartender glances up, sensing movement, and his eyes are drawn to her, watching her long legs stride toward him.

At first, he shakes his head, and we watch as he nervously glances around, but then Gabi says something that makes him reconsider. Smiling, he hands over a stack of plastic cups and around the side of the bar, a bottle of white wine. Gabi hands him a twenty from the cup of her bra and moves quickly toward us.

“Come on,” she says, grabbing her bag from the ground and heading back out into the lobby. “He wouldn’t serve me yet, but he agreed to sell me a bottle as long as we don’t drink it in the ballroom.” Her head is on a swivel as she searches for a place for us to go.

Off toward the other end of the lobby is a seating area, and she beelines for it. As we pass by, Mari comes out of the bathroom.

I flag her down. “Mari! We’re early, but we’ve got wine.”

“Perfect,” she says, easily joining our group while glancing over her shoulder as if she’s looking for someone.

We fall into four armchairs positioned around a coffee table, and Gabi makes quick work of opening the wine, topping mine off with the last of the bottle.

“So, Mari, this is Steph, who I work with, and Gabi, who Charlie works with,” I say.

Her mouth forms an *O*.

“And this is Mari, who has been my absolute saving grace this week. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” I reach forward to squeeze her elbow in thanks, and she smiles easily at me.

“So how did”—Mari motions between me and Gabi—“this all happen?”

Steph raises her hand. “Gabi’s my sister. I’m the problem. I didn’t realize there was a connection.”

Mari nods. “Oh, I see.”

“I take it you’re *not* the best friend who slept with the cheater ex,” Steph says.

Mari shakes her head. “Definitely not. I can’t think of anything less attractive.”

“But I think she is my best friend, though.”

“Aw, Bells,” she says. She scooches forward in her seat and wraps her arms around me. “You’re my best friend too.”

I suddenly feel like I’m going to cry again. “Seriously, you’ve been so kind to me. Thank you.”

“Okay, okay, okay. I know we’ve got issues this week, but no crying, okay?” Gabi says.

I nod. “No crying.”

She holds her cup up in the middle of us. “To a group of smart girls who have done some impressive work over the past few months.”

“Cheers!”

CHARLES

I'm slinking around this hotel lobby like I'm trying to rob it, and I'm painfully aware of the receptionist eyeing me like she knows what I'm up to.

Like she *thinks* she knows what I'm up to.

It's times like these when the suit really comes in handy. If I was dressed any other way, she'd have already called the cops on me.

But as it is, I hang out in the elevator bank and wait because in order to get to the ballroom, I have to pass by the chairs they're sitting in. The party starts in a few minutes, but I know Gabi and Annabel well, at least. Neither of them cares about the party as long as they have friends and a drink. Their voices echo in the high ceilings, not well enough to make out words, but I recognize them all the same.

And it sounds like they're bonding. I won't be surprised one bit if Gabi secures another bottle of wine so they can keep sitting and chatting rather than actually going to the party.

If it comes to that, I'll have to just walk out. I can't stay in the elevator bank all night.

Maybe I can text Gabi and get her to surreptitiously move their party in.

But I don't need to do that yet. The only timeline I'm worried about is that of my bladder. I wait, listening to their voices, and tell yet another couple heading into the elevator not to hold the door for me—I'm waiting for someone.

The party starts, the lights dimming and music from the DJ leaking out into the lobby. People are starting to arrive en masse, and I think maybe I'll be able to sneak out and wind my way through the crowd. But then I hear their voices getting louder—they're on the move.

I panic and press the elevator button. I don't know what to say yet—I don't know how to fix Saturday night and I can't come face to face with Annabel without having some sort of plan.

The elevator dings, signaling its arrival, and I press myself into the doorway as their voices get even closer. They must be right around the corner, and I hold my breath, just waiting for them to see me.

I don't wait for the door to open—I push myself inside.

Only to realize the elevator isn't empty.

“Charlie!”

I jump at the sound of my name in my ear. “Jesus, Dieter,” I say, only now remembering that he wanted a ticket too. “Are you staying at the hotel?”

His eyebrows rise. “No, I parked in the garage.”

“Oh.” I glance behind me at the crowd in the lobby, but I don't see the girls.

“Are you staying in the hotel?”

My attention snaps back to him. *What is he implying?* “What? No.”

“Okay.”

I realize, then, that I'm blocking his way and take a step back for him to pass.

And then I see her. The four of them are meandering toward the ballroom, talking and laughing with each other and for a moment, just seeing her happy like this is a relief. I can't have hurt her that terribly if she's enjoying herself.

Right?

“I take it Gabi still hasn’t had any luck setting up a meeting if you’re here?”

“No, still no luck. Maybe you can introduce her. That might make things a little easier.”

Dieter nods, a look of determination falling over his face. “Yeah, I can do that.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes as we walk across the lobby. The girls have gone in, and I can’t find them in the dimly lit space. I guess I’ll be hanging out with Dieter tonight.

As we get in line for a drink, someone grabs my arm. My heart lifts, thinking that it’s Annabel, and sinks again when I realize it’s only Gabi.

She stands close, a fresh drink in her hand, and speaks into my shoulder. “Look, it’s not only you at this point,” she says, quiet enough that only I can hear.

I bend down to hear her better.

“She got royally slapped on Saturday—she left your apartment only to find her best friend sleeping with her ex and Steph said she’s been weird all week. She’s hurting, Charlie, and it’s not only because of you, but it really makes me wonder if you should be here at all tonight.”

I struggle to process the information. “Layla?”

Gabi looks confused for a moment. “I don’t know what her name is. It wasn’t Mari though.”

I shake my head. “God, and Mari told me Annabel thinks I slept with someone else. Fuck,” I say, wildly scanning the room for her. I just need to talk to her, to see her.

Gabi pauses. “Did you?”

“No,” I insist, and she gives me a look. “I didn’t, I swear.”

She accepts this answer with a shrug. “She’s fragile, Charlie. Don’t take a good night away from her.”

I digest Gabi’s words. “Yeah. Okay.”

Dieter's at the bar now, and before I decide whether to stay or leave, he puts a beer in my hand. I'm reminded of Saturday night all over again.

He returns to the bar to leave a few dollars in the tip jar, and I lower my voice to speak to Gabi. "Look, is it so bad to just be here? I mean, ideally, I'd be with her, but I also don't want to leave a party that's kind of celebrating her."

She eyes me. "I'll tell her you're here. If she's upset, you go. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Hey, Gabi," Dieter says happily, joining our conversation.

She narrows her eyes at him, probably wondering what he's going to ask her when she's already going above and beyond to secure a meeting that, according to him, was as good as a done deal.

"Hi, Dieter," she says warily.

"Hey, I wanted to tell you I talked to the Carvers the other day."

She goes stiff, and I feel the urge to step between them and break off the conversation.

"Frankie's out," Dieter says casually, taking a sip of his beer.

"He's out?"

"Apparently, that was the last straw. He's been behaving inappropriately with other vendors, too, but mostly by drinking too much and being an entitled prick. They fired him as soon as they heard what happened. So, Greg is our new contact. They want to restart their advertising at the same rate. And it's up to both of you whether you want to keep his account or transfer it to another rep."

I raise my eyebrows, watching Gabi's expression. She looks dumbfounded. "That's great," I say. "But we don't want the account."

“Done,” Dieter says. “He always seemed like a little asshole.” He scans the crowd, probably looking for Mina.

I knock Gabi with my elbow real quick, making sure she’s still alive, and she looks up at me with a bewildered expression on her face. “You okay?”

She nods. “Yeah. I just didn’t expect that.”

I wrap an arm around her, pulling her into me. “You should expect people to care about you every once in a while.”

She shakes her head. “I just feel bad. Well, not so bad anymore, I guess, if they’re still spending. But I feel bad about you. That was a big check you just turned down.”

“Gabi, don’t let yourself feel bad about this. Taking that account back is like saying what he did was okay as long as we get paid. That’s a moral line I’m not comfortable toeing.”

She nods. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

She turns, disappearing into the crowd, and Dieter and I take a seat at a table off to the side, close to where the event staff is coming in and out through a side door. It’s quieter over here.

There have been few times in my life when I’ve felt woefully unprepared, but tonight is one of them. I came here with some grand idea that I could catch her at the right time, drop a love bomb and we’d ride off happily ever after into the sunset.

It dawns on me that my rejection of her set off a compounding chain of events that has festered in her mind. “I love you” isn’t enough to fix it. It doesn’t even scratch the surface. I sit through another beer with Dieter as he anxiously prattles on about Mina, who hasn’t so much as looked at him yet tonight and try to figure out how to undo the damage I’ve done. I can’t make Layla a better person, but I have to account for the effect it must have had on Annabel. To first be rejected by someone she loves, only to be completely betrayed a *fourth* time.

Seeing me with Kat was probably just the icing on top of her Saturday night.

At some point, I realize that I've been here for quite some time and Gabi has probably had ample time to let Annabel know I'm here. Yet I haven't seen either of them for the past half hour or so. Maybe I fucked up badly enough that she doesn't even want to look at me.

Mina Larson takes the stage at the front of the room, calling out accolades to her team. She does a few superlatives, mostly picking on the people she works closest with. But she does give a shout-out to the Wink team who did her rebranding, and I stand up, looking for her. Their table is cheering loudly, obviously a few drinks deep.

I clap along with the rest of the room, my eyes finding her somewhere in the middle of their group. She's smiling, and Mari's arm is around her, and Steph is shouting something at her across the table, reaching for her hand.

She must feel me watching her despite the chaos of her table. She turns and looks directly at me, but I can't read the expression on her face.

What am I still doing here, really?

I sit back down at the table and wait until Mina's done with her accolades.

"I gotta go," I tell Dieter once Mina steps down. She meanders through the crowd, taking only a moment or two to talk to the people swarming for her attention, and exits through the nearest door.

"What? But we haven't gotten our meeting yet."

I shrug. "Leave it to Gabi. She'll get it." He looks like he's about to fight me on it, but I turn away, following Mina's footsteps out into the hallway. I don't think I should be here anymore.

ANNABEL

We station ourselves at a table near the entrance so Carrie and Evelyn can find us when they get here. Gabi sneaks away to grab another bottle of wine while we take our last sips and Steph and Mari trade old movie recommendations.

The venue is set up spectacularly—all black and gold, with our designs plastering every free surface. I smile down at a napkin embossed with the new Marigold Beauty logo that I spent days creating, running my fingers over the embossed design.

When Gabi returns, she sets the wine on the table and wedges her way between Mari and me, her face serious. “Charlie’s here.”

I gulp, my heartbeat thumping. “Oh.”

“Is that going to bother you?”

“No, of course not.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “You’re allowed to tell him to leave, you know. It was a condition of his ticket.”

I hate the thought of him being somewhere else in the room, but I don’t hate the thought of him being here. I wish he would say something, though. I didn’t expect him to be here tonight, and now that he’s here but not saying anything, I can’t help but wonder why.

The hopeful part of me that just doesn’t want to give up thinks maybe he loves me after all. The realistic part of my

brain that can't seem to drown out that hope thinks he probably just wants to get laid.

But I'm not doing the friends thing with him again. No way.

It's love or nothing for Annabel Hall.

"Why is he here, though?" I ask.

Gabi shakes her head. "I think he misses you. But he's leaching your night. Make sure you enjoy yourself, okay? And I'd be thrilled to tell him to leave for you if you want."

I'm certainly not going to make the first move, so if he wants to sit by himself in silence all night, that's all on him. Even though I know it's a feeling I should be sprinting from, something about having him here at all is comforting. "No, don't. He can be here."

"Okay."

Evelyn and Carrie arrive, arm in arm, and join our table, giggling. The four of us have already gone through two bottles of wine, and Gabi eagerly runs over to the bartender she's befriended to get a third.

"What's with all the giggling?" Steph asks as they stuff their bags under the table. Gabi returns with a fresh bottle and starts pouring for them. My eyes wander, lingering on every face that passes by me.

"Do they have spritzers?" Evelyn asks, eyeing the bar.

"I'll get you one." Steph is halfway to the bar before Evelyn halfheartedly tells her that wine is fine. Gabi shrugs and tops up the rest of our cups. She doesn't top her own, though, and I see her following someone's movement out of the corner of her eye. *Charlie?*

"Carrie just showed me her latest chapters. That's why we were a little late. Phew!"

"Oh, I'm so jealous!"

Carrie rolls her eyes and then, for the benefit of the table, adds, "I write a bit, sometimes."

Evelyn holds up one hand and accepts the spritzer Stephanie got her with the other. “Oh, this girl doesn’t just write. She writes steamy. Oh, my aging heart! She nearly did me in today.”

I instantly get a jolt of excitement, my mind focusing on Carrie. “Are you sharing now?”

She shrugs. “I mean, Evelyn has always kind of been my first beta reader. I might share some pieces once I get some edits in. It’s a little rough now, and it’s not like I’m a published author or anything.”

Evelyn shakes her head, taking a long sip of her drink. “God, this is delicious,” she remarks, turning her attention back to Carrie, pointing at her. “She’s just being modest. She wrote in a character who looks like Keanu Reeves for me and the teenage girl I used to be had heart palpitations reading it.”

The table collectively giggles, and I realize we’re all a little tipsy. I get the feeling that Evelyn and Carrie stopped at a bar on their way here.

Gabi darts from the table suddenly, and I see her across the room, bending down to help Mina Larson recover a poster board that another partygoer knocked over. They nod at each other, Gabi giving an easy smile, and then she returns to our table.

“Okay, I think if one more drunk person can piss Mina off, I might make enough of an impression that she’ll remember me and accept my meeting request.”

“On it,” Mari says. She takes a quick look around and, judging the distance between Mina and the side door the staff uses, takes a casual walk by the bar and tips one of the gift bags off the table. Gabi, laughing as she runs to help, picks up the bag just as Mina moves to do it herself. They say a few quick words, and then I see Gabi’s face light up. She steps forward, pulls a business card out of her pocket, and hands it over.

When she comes back to the table, she does a little dance and pours herself a hefty glass of wine.

“She has my card! She has my card! I’ve been trying to get this meeting forever and she finally has my card,” she exclaims.

We cheers as Mari returns to the table from the other side, having taken a lap around the party.

“It worked!” Gabi shouts.

“No way.” Mari laughs. “You’re kidding.”

“She has my card! She said thank you for looking out and she seemed a little frazzled, so I just said if she needed any help, I’m happy to step in, and then she kinda looked at me, and she was like, ‘Do I know you?’ My picture’s on my company’s website, so she probably saw one of my emails and ignored it. Whatever. It’s sales, you know? But that was enough! She said she’d make sure her assistant got back to me to confirm or find a new date!”

“That’s great!”

And now there’s jumping and more wine, and Evelyn is asking for another spritzer, and Carrie is describing a body part to Stephanie in vivid detail, and all I can do is search the room for Charlie.

A few moments later, Mina Larson is on the microphone, thanking everyone for coming to celebrate her company’s rebranding. She goes through a laundry list of people in the company whose expertise she highlights before she gets to the rebranding itself.

“And to the girls at Wink who did an incredible job bringing our vision to life, thank you. All the promo products here and in the swag bags—don’t forget to take yours home—are covered in their designs. Thank you, ladies!”

Our table cheers, probably far too loudly, and there’s more jumping, some spontaneous dancing, and some overenthusiastic hooting that probably makes us look like idiots. Mina smiles and quickly wraps up her speech, talking a little louder to drown out our noise.

As I turn back to the table, my eyes catch on someone standing across the room, watching us.

Charlie.

I can barely make out his face, but I recognize his stance. The way he claps. He starts moving, his silhouette dark against the bright hallway he walks into, and a little roar of anger builds in my stomach.

Is he leaving?

I debate for only a second and then duck out the entrance behind me so I'll run into him in the lobby. After all this, I can't believe he's seriously going to leave without even saying anything.

Then again, that seems to be his thing.

When I get to the lobby, I think I must have missed him. He's nowhere in sight.

But when I turn around, he's right in front of me, pausing midstride like he's considering other exit routes. "Annabel."

My name, like silk from his lips.

"You're leaving?" I ask incredulously.

"I'm sorry, you don't need me around interrupting your night." He pauses and moves closer until we're only a few feet away. "Look, just so you know, the girl at the bar on Saturday? My mom's gone in there before, so we traded numbers in case it happened again, and it did. There's nothing going on there, okay?"

I give one short nod. "Okay."

"I just didn't want you to think there was anyone else."

"I didn't think that." *Tell me you love me.*

He looks like he's searching for words, and I wait with bated breath for the ones I've been aching to hear. "And I'm really sorry about Layla, that's really shitty of her."

"Yeah, it was." *Tell me you love me.*

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you."

Apologies are appreciated, but we both know what I'm waiting for. "That would have been nice." *But if you could just*

tell me you love me.

“I’ll leave you to enjoy your night.”

I won’t be the person who gives more than I take. I’m not going to tell him I love him, that it’s okay if he doesn’t love me back and that I want him by my side, regardless. I’m just not.

“Okay.”

He walks past me, continuing toward the street, and I go back into the party, my anger morphing into sadness. When I rejoin them, my table is alive with conversation, and I reach between Gabi and Mari for my drink.

“What happened?” Gabi asks.

I shake my head. “Nothing.”

“Didn’t I just see you with Charlie?”

I shrug. “Like I said, nothing.”

“He didn’t apologize?” Mari asks.

“He did, but I don’t want an apology. I just want him to tell me how he feels.” I take another sip. “I mean, I know how he feels, and honestly, I was never worried about him sleeping with that girl. I don’t know. I guess I always trusted him. But I want him to get over himself and tell me that he fucking loves me.”

Gabi puts a tentative arm around me. “He’ll come around,” she says. “He’s stubborn, but he’s not stupid.”

“I don’t get why he came here if not to say something. Like he did the work, fucking close the deal, dude. I’m not accepting half-assed apologies instead of what I know that he knows I want.”

Gabi groans. “Man, I feel like I accidentally played for the wrong team tonight. He could have used my help, but it’s definitely cheating to tip him off now.”

I laugh, but it comes out dry and sarcastic. “Well, you know what? He’s not here now, so I’m declaring this minor

freak-out over. I'm going to have fun tonight and stop burdening the table with my problems."

"Oh, you're not a burden," Gabi says. "You should hear the shit Steph deals with. You guys are two peas in a pod—Steph's been cheated on, she's been in a relationship that she thought was monogamous but was actually, due to a pretty fair miscommunication, polyamorous, and the last one took a two-month trip to Brazil last year and just never came back."

"Oh my god, did he die?"

Steph shakes her head. "No, he still posts on Instagram. I think he's in Colombia now, though."

"Well, at least I'm in good company."

And we cheers to that, too.

Evelyn guzzles down another spritzer, and I start to wonder how many she can throw back at once. She leans over the table, looking me in the eye, and picks up one of the napkins underneath our drinks. "You designed this," she says, and I can't help but smile. "How cool is that?"

"It's really cool." Despite the other things plaguing my mind, I can't help but smile. I may not have everything together, but I have a fulfilling job and a great boss. I'm one of the lucky ones.

She takes a step around the table so she's between me and Steph, and then wraps her arms around both of us. "You two are gold. Steph, you know how much I love you already. Annabel, I'm telling you—we've got something good here." She leans over, kisses each of our heads, and then moves around the table to Carrie. "And Carrie, my sweet, naughty little princess. I don't know what I would do without your book boyfriends." She plants a kiss on her cheek, too, and then turns to Mari and Gabi. "And I think I like you two, too, but I don't know you very well yet." She grabs her bag from underneath the table, and I realize we're coming up on closing time.

"Alright, ladies," she says. "I'm going to head out before there's a stampede."

“Wait!” A voice booms out from behind us, and we turn to see Mina striding toward us, a box full of swag bags in her arms. “You can’t leave without your goodies!” She hands each of us a bag. “Annabel,” she says, squeezing my shoulder after handing me mine.

“Thank you,” I say, folding up the plastic edge so nothing falls out.

She winks at me before she moves on, and I feel a little too good about myself that I happen to be the one she winks at. She glances around the table and sees half of us clutching our unopened bags. “Well, open them! Gifts, samplers galore, all with your designs!”

We scramble to comply, and Evelyn drops her purse on the ground again to rifle through hers. I flip through the things inside gently—a barrage of lip glosses, makeup samples, even nail care things inside, and all high-quality stuff. As I reach farther in, something silky catches my attention.

It’s a polka-dot hair bow. Eyebrows furrowed, I glance around at the rest of the table. It’s covered with various makeup samplers, just like the ones I pulled out, but no one else seems to have a hair bow. I scrunch it in my hands, feeling the tag within the folded fabric.

“Um, what?” Confused, I pull on the tag and see a handwritten note.

You’re not you without the things you love.

Annabel Hall without polka dots is like me without you.

I know what these words are, but I have trouble making sense of them. This is Charlie’s handwriting, but he left at least an hour ago. I glance up at Mina—she’s smiling, biting her lip, her eyebrows high.

“What is it?” Gabi asks, maneuvering around her sister to get a better look. She sees the note and her jaw drops, her head swiveling as she looks around the room.

“You’re not you without the things you love. Annabel Hall without polka dots is like me without you,” I repeat, my words coming out slow, the syllables difficult to make sense of.

“Oh my god,” Mari mutters, watching my expression carefully. “He figured it out.”

“Well, put it on, put it on!” Gabi shouts, and suddenly, she’s behind me, weaving it into my hair and pushing me out toward the lobby. “He has to still be here. You can’t drop a bomb like that and then leave.”

I stumble out into the light of the lobby, my bow haphazardly falling over my shoulder. I wind through the crowd, searching for that dark hair and spot him leaning against the wall just before the doors.

He holds his hands behind his back and bites his lip as if he’s not sure what I’m thinking. I’m not sure either. We’re only a foot or so apart when we stop.

“Did you get my note?”

I nod.

“What do you think?”

“I want you to say it.”

He steps toward me, revealing a single red rose from behind his back. “For three months, I’ve been thinking about buying you roses. Ever since I saw the bouquet in your apartment. This whole time, I’ve been denying myself the pleasure of seeing your face light up just like that. I’m sorry it took me so long to figure it out. You were right about all of it.”

He reaches forward to feel the silk of my bow, his note still attached and poking me awkwardly in the neck. His hand trails down my shoulder, his fingers only barely grazing my skin. And then he reaches up, his palm resting just underneath my chin, tilting my head toward him.

“I love you, Annabel Hall.”

He kisses me then, one arm wrapping around my waist and holding me to him. I wind myself around him, scared he’ll let

go. I relish in his scent and the warmth of his skin that I missed so much.

“I love you too.”

I hear a squeal from somewhere behind me, and I know without looking that it's Gabi.

“I have one more thing for you, though,” he says. “I put you through the wringer this week, and I want you to know that I'm not saying I love you just to get back in your good graces. I want to be with you. I want a relationship with you. I want you in my life for good.”

He reaches into his pocket and holds out a little bronze key. “Will you move in with me?”

I can't help the grin that spreads across my face as I take the key from him. “You just want morning sex,” I joke.

“You got me.”

I pull his face down to mine, wrapping my arms around his neck, and I can feel his smile on my lips.

“I do have to ask that you come home with me tonight, though. I kind of need you to let me in,” he says.

“Okay, but I'm never leaving.”

“Deal.”

“You weren't planning on giving me a key tonight, were you?” I ask.

“No, but I'd rather you have it than me.”

He holds my hand as I get my bag from the ballroom, nodding a quick thanks to Mina as we pass her. Evelyn and Carrie walk out with us, seemingly oblivious to my heart being sewn back together in the past ten minutes, and as we leave the table, I hear Gabi, Steph, and Mari making plans to hit a nearby bar.

We walk *home* from the hotel leisurely, his hand in mine or with an arm around my shoulder. And when we get to *our* apartment, he stands aside, leaning against the doorframe as I unlock the door.

When we get inside, our clothes come off in a frenzy, and he carries me into *our* bedroom, his mouth pressed against mine and lays me down. And when he moves inside me, he's gentle, peppering my neck with little kisses, staring deep into my eyes.

And when I crash around him, he whispers into my neck, "I love you, Annabel Hall."

OCTOBER

CHARLES

I t's my turn to host game night, and I'm pleased to see that although I'm a novice, the guys are enjoying themselves.

Zeke sits in The Chair, looking pensive as he stares out at the city skyline, a glass of whiskey swirling in his hand. Henry is *into* the hummus and vegetables that Annabel laid out before she left for her girls' night. Kick flicks through the bookshelf that now lines one wall of my apartment, filled with all of Annabel's books. Oliver, once again, regales us with a story of being rejected by a woman who's likely out of his league.

His incessant talking distracts us enough that we've lost our place in the game, and we decide to just pick it up again next time. But that's okay. We've been doing game nights more often, and it doesn't feel like we're missing out on anything. We're just hanging out like friends do.

We might head out to a bar later, but I'm silently hoping Annabel gets home before we make that decision. Not that I don't want to go out to a bar with my friends, but something about falling into bed with her and hearing that little post-drinking snore of hers sounds so unbelievably good that I might forgo a trip to the bar in favor of that.

My heart thumps when I hear her key in the lock.

Annabel busts in with a big smile, knowing she's walking into guys' night. And then I hear chattering behind her—it's not just her. I probably should have expected this; there's a

fifty-fifty shot that the ladies end up here anytime she goes out.

I'm fine with it. Oliver and Henry are *really* fine with it. Zeke and Kick seem unaffected, though I think I see a little heartbeat growing in Kick's for Carrie.

Annabel leads the five of them in, and what was a fairly calm guys' night grows exponentially louder as the girls stumble in.

Gabi and Steph are having a lively discussion over a new bra they've found, and I see Zeke quickly avert his eyes as Gabi adjusts herself, motioning to the cleavage she's demonstrating for Steph. He clears his throat, returning to the window, but not before he catches me catching him. I think I see a faint blush creep up his cheeks, which he'd never admit to.

Oliver is in heaven, his eyes wandering wildly over all the girls as he takes in the little dresses, the heels, the done hair. Henry leans over and snaps in his face, reminding him to keep his eyes up.

And Annabel, in her little velvet dress that I wish she'd reserve for my eyes only, tiptoes quickly toward me. I can see the question in her eyes—is it all right that she brought everyone back?

She presses herself up against me, her arms winding around my waist, and she leaves a little kiss on my jaw. I lean in and kiss her deeply, reaching down to grab a handful of ass just because I can. And because of that dress. *Are there still people here? Can we make them leave?*

She heads into the kitchen and starts making drinks, passing out waters as she takes requests. We spend an hour or two on the couch, laughing and joking and probably annoying the crap out of our neighbors. Our friends leave in waves after that, Zeke and Kick escorting Gabi and Carrie home, Henry and Oliver making sure Steph and Mari make the journey safely.

And then it's just the two of us. Annabel sips from a bottle of water as she tells me about her night, her smooth legs propped up on my lap as she whines about how her heels hurt her feet.

Over time, her head lolls into the cushions behind her, and I suggest we head into bed.

"You want to take me to bed?" she jokes, her eyes heavy from the drinking and the late hour.

"You know I do," I say, grabbing her hand and pulling her up.

We head down the hallway to our bedroom, my arm around her shoulders and her heels dangling from her fingers. She takes off her dress and throws on one of my old T-shirts, and I strip down to my underwear. She takes a moment to top off the water in the vase of red roses on her bedside table, feeling the petals between her fingers with a contagious smile.

I pull her down into bed with me, an arm around her waist, her hair tickling my nose. I kiss her neck, and she wiggles back into me, pulling my arm tighter around her. My body responds, but not tonight. Morning sex is better.

I turn to flip off the light on the nightstand, but before I do, I reach into my drawer, fishing down deep to confirm the presence of the little velvet box that's taken residence there recently.

Soon.

THANK YOU

Thank you for picking up this book and taking a chance on an indie author. It truly means the world that I get to share the stories in my head with readers like yourself. If you have a spare moment to leave a review, it helps tremendously in reaching other readers who might enjoy this book, too.

THINGS WE USED TO BELIEVE

Head to authorallywilliams.com for updates on book 2 of the Love & City Lights Series, Things We Used to Believe.

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