

When you can't get over the one who got away



Tricked
by my Ex

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J. STERLING

TRICKED BY MY EX

by
J. Sterling

TRICKED BY MY EX
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A HALLOWEEN NIGHTMARE

EVE

“You’re coming tonight, right?” Greg, my most recent client, screamed from somewhere inside his four-thousand-square-foot house.

I was currently placing the finishing touches on all the Halloween decor, making sure it was sufficiently “scary yet chic,” as he had requested, before pulling out my phone and snapping a few more pictures for my website and portfolio.

Trust me, I’d had no idea what that meant initially either. I realized at some point during our multiple planning meetings that the *chic* part simply meant he wanted to add in colors other than the typical Halloween palette. In my head, I’d started picturing *Alice in Wonderland* met *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, and, voilà, a theme had been born. So, here I was, staring at hot-pink accents dotting the otherwise darkened hallway.

“Eeeeeeeve!” Greg shouted again, dragging out my name.

I stared at his ceiling before blowing out a long breath and pocketing my phone.

I never attended the parties that I designed. It wasn’t that I had a hard and fast rule about not going to them, but no one had really asked before. Okay, that wasn’t necessarily true. I’d been invited once or twice, but no one had ever *insisted*.

Greg was demanding that I show up tonight.

“Eve, I swear to God that I’ll hunt you down and tie you to one of the magic mushrooms if you don’t answer me!” he continued yelling from down the hall, his voice getting louder.

I heard his footsteps moving quickly in my direction, and I plastered on a wide smile right as he found me.

“Why do you want me to come so badly?” I asked through gritted teeth.

“Sweetheart”—he wrapped his arm in mine and started walking me down the dark hall—“I have a lot of people I want to introduce you to. Look at this place.” He pulled his arm out from mine and waved it around the space. “It’s a masterpiece. A terrifying dream. And everyone is going to want to know who created it.”

He wasn’t wrong about that. I was one of those people who had gotten lucky when it came to my business. My work spoke for itself, and I’d never

had to spend a dime on advertising, not even when I'd first started out. My calendar was booked a year in advance for holidays, and I had multiple employees that I was able to pay well. And all of it had stemmed from word of mouth.

"You can just give them my card. I'll leave a stack for you in the foyer," I suggested, knowing that he'd tell me no, like he'd been doing for the past week and a half.

"It would be better if you were here and they could meet you in person. You know your personality is part of your charm." Greg sensed my hesitation.

I wasn't even sure why I was being so difficult in the first place, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

He clearly wasn't going to give up or take no for an answer, which was probably how he'd gotten to be so successful in the first place. His tenacity and his ear for music. Greg was Hollywood movie score royalty, but he refused to live there. Said it was a fake place, filled with even faker people. And he wasn't the only one who disliked it. There were a lot of famous people who lived in Orange County. Way more than you'd think ... *thank God*. I loved that the majority of my business was out here instead of my having to drive all the way to Santa Monica or Malibu to do what I did. There were plenty of other event designers who lived out there. Basically, Hollywood didn't need my services, and I was glad.

"Eve, come for an hour. That's all I ask. You don't have to stay for the whole thing. Okay? One hour," he pushed, and I felt my heart pound inside my chest.

I did my best to avoid unnecessary interaction with Hollywood's elite and entitled—aside from when one of them booked my design services, of course. And I knew that even with typical LA traffic, tonight's soiree was going to be filled with celebrities from all over. Sucking in a quick breath, I decided that as long as one particular actor didn't make an appearance, I'd be all right. The last I'd heard about my ex-boyfriend, Tyson, was that he was overseas somewhere, filming another action movie. There was little to no chance that he'd be at this event tonight.

"Fine. But only for an hour," I said, and he clasped his hands together and grinned.

"Brilliant! Make sure you dress up. And nothing cheesy. You're representing all this," he reminded me as he skipped away like he'd won

some kind of battle.

To be honest, I wasn't sure that he hadn't.



Even though Greg and I lived in the same city, my home was on the outskirts of town and up a hill that overlooked the ocean from afar instead of right on the waterway with boat docks, like Greg's.

My two-bedroom condo in Newport, which I owned without any cosigners, was my second big purchase after my car—a fully loaded electric BMW, which was all paid off.

Both things had been on my vision board since I'd started my company, and they made me feel successful and grown-up.

As I made the twenty-minute drive to my place, my thoughts skirted back to the past. For some reason, I couldn't get Tyson Hunter out of my thoughts. And it wasn't because I'd seen his perfectly smiling face staring at me from the gas station earlier either.

I'd always known that Tyson would make it as an actor. Back in college, when he had started going on auditions, he was always getting callbacks, but didn't land any leading roles. We both knew it was only a matter of time. He had that *thing* about him, that unspoken energy that drew strangers to him.

Tyson was confident, charismatic, and talented. Plus, he had *the look*. The kind that made people stare. Everyone wanted a piece of him, but I was the only one he gave it to. I'd always felt lucky to be the one by his side. And not because of his impending fame, but because Tyson was kind, romantic, and considerate. He'd made me feel special.

At least, that was how he used to make me feel.

Now, whenever I thought about Tyson Hunter, I felt like a naive little girl who had believed all the things that a pretty boy once told her. I used to wonder how I could have been so stupid and why I hadn't seen that everything between us was only temporary instead of the permanence I so desperately wanted. But at the time, I'd truly believed that Tyson was my future. We used to be on the same page and wanted the same things. And then, overnight, everything had changed.

Literally.

It wasn't like I'd spent the last seven years pining for the guy. I'd definitely moved on and dated other people, but Tyson always seemed to

linger in the recesses of my mind. There were those constant what-if questions nagging at me.

What if things had been different?

What if he'd stayed?

What if he hadn't gone on that audition at all?

Days like today, when our past consumed me, it made me a little sad and on edge. For years after the breakup, I'd convinced myself that we'd find our way back to each other when the time was right. I thought it was some sort of coping mechanism, mixed with a hopeful heart. At some point, I'd stopped believing in that particular fairy tale. If we were supposed to be together, then he would have at least reached out. And so far, he never had. Not one time in seven years.

Sometimes, the years felt like a blip on a radar, but mostly, they felt like an eternity. A piece of my life that had happened so long ago that it almost felt like fiction. It was more than enough time for me to get over the guy and sever whatever connection we'd once shared. But those two things proved to be much harder than I'd ever anticipated.

His smile haunted me at every turn, his face a constant reminder. Nowhere was safe. The convenience store, the freeway, bus stops, grocery stores, my phone, social media. Tyson was everywhere I looked, especially when I wasn't looking, flashing that trademark grin.

It was the same one I used to catch him giving me back in college, his lips upturned into more of a smirk than anything else. I'd had that look memorized once. I'd thought he'd never stop giving it to me. That I'd never stop seeing it.

At least one of those assumptions was right.

Clenching my jaw tight, I shook my head, trying to make the old memories disappear like the scene in a snow globe, but it didn't work. It was almost like my body could sense that Tyson was near somehow even though I knew that he wasn't. The man couldn't be in two places at once. And if he were in town, I doubted that he knew Greg. At least not enough to warrant an invite to his party. I was getting myself all worked up for no reason.

There was no me and Tyson anymore, and it was about time I got that through my thick skull once and for all. If only someone could give my heart the memo, maybe we could both finally let him go ...

THE COSTUME

EVE

A few hours later, my girlfriend JJ, a hairstyle and makeup goddess, showed up at my place to help me with my look. There was no way I would have been able to do my hair in any kind of cool style, and the last time I'd tried to do my own costume makeup, it'd looked like a four-year-old had drawn all over my face. I might have been able to see details in my head and bring them to life for parties and events, but I couldn't draw by hand if my life depended on it.

I'd met JJ at a private event a few years back. She'd been hired by the same woman who had hired me, and we bonded instantly, each one of us admiring the other's work. JJ exuded confidence, coupled with a punk rock look that suited her perfectly. She was a badass with empowering energy. It was just one of those things. We grew closer after realizing we only lived ten minutes apart, and neither one of us had a lot of girlfriends—at least not ones that we trusted.

Being a woman was hard enough, but being your own boss and running a financially successful company took it to another level. Other women didn't always understand the sacrifices that needed to be made in order to succeed. Work would always come first for women like us, and that meant a lot of declined invitations and people feeling blown off. Eventually, they stopped asking. It got ugly at times. And it was definitely lonely.

JJ finished working her magic before spinning me around and letting me see what she'd done. Dark blue pieces folded seamlessly into my otherwise blonde hair. She'd added extensions that matched perfectly for a length I could never achieve on my own. I had what she affectionately called "bubble braids" cascading down each side of my body even though there were no braids in sight.

As for the makeup, I hadn't wanted my whole face painted because I wanted to be somewhat recognizable when meeting potential clients. JJ did dark blue and white eyeliner, accenting a smoky look with Ahsoka Tano's white markings on my forehead. I'd opted out of the cheek markings even though JJ said they'd be easy to do. It felt like too much.

"This is incredible," I said, instinctively moving to touch my forehead before JJ swatted my hand away.

“No touching. You’ll ruin it. Close your eyes,” she demanded before spraying my face with some sort of super setting spray. “Once this sets, you won’t be able to mess it up as easily, but it can still be smeared, so be careful.”

“Okay. Thank you. It looks amazing.” I grabbed the picture of Ahsoka that I’d printed out and held it up next to my face as memories sparked without warning.

Tyson and me in his bedroom. The giant beanbag chair on the floor that we’d done so much more on than just sit. How he’d always plop down first, get the beads just right, before reaching for my body and pulling me onto his lap. My head on his chest. His arms wrapped around me. The feel of his hardness in my back as we tried to watch TV. How I’d always turn around and start kissing him, our tongues touching, our breaths catching, before he’d tell me we were about to miss a good part. Moments I thought would never end.

“I still can’t believe you’re dressing up as this,” JJ said as she rolled her dark eyes at me.

I struggled to catch my breath for a second. She hadn’t even noticed that I’d taken a quick mental vacation.

“Ahsoka? She’s the baddest bitch in all of Star Wars.”

“She can’t be the baddest bitch. What about Princess Leia?”

I waved her off. “You haven’t even watched *The Clone Wars*, so you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Because I’m a grown-up. Grown-ups don’t watch cartoon shows.”

I started coughing. Choking really. Did she really just call *The Clone Wars* a cartoon?

“*The Clone Wars* is one of the best animated series I’ve ever seen. It’s groundbreaking. The storylines and plots are top-notch. The voice-over actors make you forget you’re not watching a live-action show. I’ve cried during episodes. *Cried, JJ!* It’s that good.”

I tried to get her to understand, but I’d left out the part where Tyson had introduced me to the show and made me love it, even after he left. I’d watched the whole series and then all the spin-offs, convincing myself that Tyson was watching it too, missing me just as much as I was missing him.

“You’re such a nerd,” she said, as if that word was supposed to make me feel bad or something.

I shook my head vigorously. “And a proud one.”

The days of being a closeted sci-fi lover were long gone, thanks in part to shows like *Stranger Things* and *Game of Thrones*. People wore T-shirts proudly, made fan accounts, and attended Comic-Con with excitement instead of embarrassment. We didn’t feel bad about loving the things society had once considered geeky. We felt cool. Included instead of left out. And being a girl nerd seemed to be one of the hottest attributes you could have these days.

“Does anyone even watch the show? I bet you twenty bucks no one even knows who you’re supposed to be.”

I reached out my hand and shook hers. “I’ll take that bet.”

Anyone who was even remotely into Star Wars would know who I was. Even if they didn’t watch *The Clone Wars*, Ahsoka was hard to ignore. She’d become an integral part of Anakin-slash-Darth Vader’s story arc.

“I do have to admit,” JJ started to say as she walked toward my costume, which was hanging nearby, “this outfit is really something.”

“I know. I love it.”

Ahsoka typically wore a tube top and a barely there skirt. In order to take the sexy factor down a notch, I’d bought a different top online. I opted for a shirt that wasn’t belly-baring, but my skirt was still shorter than I would have preferred. I’d basically put together a few Ahsoka pieces and combined them into one.

“Where’d you get all this stuff anyway?” JJ asked as she grabbed my knee-high boots. “Is there a store for girlie nerds?”

Most people would have thought that she was judging, but I could tell that she was genuinely curious.

“There is actually,” I answered with a laugh. “My girlfriend Ashley started it. It’s called Her Universe.”

JJ’s eyebrows shot up. “Impressive. That’s kind of cool actually. And smart. Were there any other stores before she started hers?”

“I don’t think so. That’s kind of why she did it. To fill a void, you know? She watched firsthand what happened in baseball merchandising for women and wanted to do the same thing for female sci-fi fans.”

JJ looked fascinated. “That’s really business savvy.”

“It was,” I agreed.

I remembered when Ashley had first mentioned the idea to me back in college. She’d known all the licenses she would have to acquire and all the

work she'd have to do to get them. She never gave up, even when doors were slammed in her face. I'd been inspired by her resistance in accepting the word no and her belief in what she wanted to create. She had known it was a good idea, and she'd refused to stop until she made it a reality.

"All right, I'll let you get to it. Call me tomorrow, and I'll come get that twenty," she said with a laugh as she packed up her stuff to go.

"It will be you giving me your hard-earned cash. I'll take it in fives."

"What?" She stopped what she was doing and gave me a strange look.

"I don't know." I shrugged before adding, "I was trying to be funny."

She shook her head at my bad attempt at a joke. "Hey, he won't be there tonight, right?"

One question was all it took for my stomach to drop before twisting and turning. I swallowed around the newly formed lump in my throat. JJ knew about my and Tyson's history, just not every single detail. She also knew that I wasn't completely over him, no matter how hard I tried to pretend otherwise.

"Not that I'm aware of."

"I didn't think so. I mean, you wouldn't put yourself in that position willingly. I just wanted to make sure."

She really was a good friend.

"Thanks," I said with a smile.

"Of course. You'd do the same for me." She gave me a soft smile before grabbing her things. Her makeup case was in one hand, and her hair bag was in the other. "Hell, you *do*, do the same thing for me. Every season."

JJ's ex-boyfriend was in the NHL, and whenever his team came into town, he still tried to hit her up and convince her to come see him. I printed up his hockey schedule and circled the dates when his team would be in town, and I also put those days in the calendar in my phone. We made sure to stay busy and hyperaware during those times. Guys like him could be unpredictable and could show up, uninvited, at any time.

And as much as he aggravated me with his inability to leave her alone once and for all, I was also kind of jealous of his tenacity. He kept fighting for what he wanted ... even after all this time. Her ex never quit, whereas mine acted like he'd never even met me. Hers called numerous times, begging for forgiveness and another chance. Mine never apologized. Or called.

"I sort of look forward to it now," I said with a laugh, and she stomped

her foot on the floor before giving me a crazed look and setting her things back down.

“You do not.” She let out a slightly horrified laugh. “You can’t possibly.”

“I do actually. It’s kind of like a tradition. Have you ever thought about how you’ll feel if he stops trying?” I asked, and her expression instantly shifted with the question.

“Not really. As much as I know I should hate and despise him, I like that he still tries. That he knows he messed up and lost a good thing and can never get it back. It feeds my ego.”

I could tell that JJ felt instantly guilty for admitting that to me. As if the thoughts alone made her a weak female somehow, but I knew exactly what she meant. And it wasn’t like she planned on giving him another chance or anything. She just liked having him fight for one.

“It’s stupid, right?” she asked, pulling me from my internal thoughts.

“Not at all. I understand completely.”

When it came to matters of the heart, we simply weren’t logical creatures. We turned into people we didn’t always recognize and thought things we’d never normally think. In the end, we all just wanted to be loved.

“Really?”

“Of course. I think I’d feel the same way.” I gave her a soft smile, hoping that my reassurance would make her feel less crazy and alone. “And it’s not like you want him back.”

“Definitely not.” She made a face. “I believe in second chances, but not for guys like him.”

“See? I might have a different opinion if that were the case.”

JJ’s ex hadn’t just cheated on her once. It had been multiple times, in multiple cities. He could never recover from that. There was no apology that could erase or excuse his behavior, no matter how caught up in the spotlight he claimed to be.

“Have you ever thought about what you’d do if Tyson reached out to you?” JJ asked, turning the tables around on me.

It was something I used to think about all the time. I’d figured that he would try to get in touch at some point after our breakup, but time kept passing, and he never did. I wanted Tyson to regret losing me. I wanted him to be sorry. I wanted him to miss me. Eventually, I’d had to accept the hard truth—that he didn’t feel any of those things the same way that I did.

I shrugged my shoulders and swallowed hard. “I think if he was going to

do that, he would have done it by now.”

“You never know.” She blew out a soft breath.

But I did know. Too many years had passed by in silence. A handful of birthdays. Too many holidays to count. All of the typical dates that made it easy for people from your past to send a quick email or text. But Tyson never did.

“It’s been too long,” I said again.

“Guys are really stupid sometimes.”

I nodded in agreement. “You can say that again.”

She bent down to grab her things once more. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Try to have fun tonight. I have a date,” she said as she began walking out.

“You have a date? With who?” I wondered because my girl JJ was constantly dating guys one time and then never again.

She offered me a half-hearted shrug. “Some guy. I’ll let you know if he has potential or not.” JJ offered me a smile as I closed the door behind her, my head filling with more thoughts of Tyson.

I hated that I was all caught up in him again. And that I still believed I could *feel* his nearness when I hadn’t felt his touch in years. He probably wasn’t even the same guy I used to know. At least, not the one I’d fallen in love with. The one who told me we’d always be together, no matter what the future held. The one who called us a future “power couple” with his acting and my designing. I’d believed everything.

And it had all been a lie.

OPERATION EVE

TYSON

I was pacing around my Santa Monica condo, not even paying attention to the ocean outside my window. Normally, the view would calm me and take me out of the tailspin I was currently in, but it wasn't working this time.

I was too riled up, just thinking about her.

"I told you, she'll be there," Greg said, sounding exasperated, but this shit was too important to get wrong.

"She actually said that?" I pushed, demanding he tell me exactly what she had said to him. "Greg, Eve said she would come tonight? You're sure?"

He breathed into the phone, loud and annoyed. "Why are you doing this to me? I need to get ready, and you're making me sweaty."

"Just tell me what she said. Does she know I'm coming?"

"How would she know you're coming? We didn't talk about you," he shouted, his voice going up a full octave. He had no idea about my and Eve's past. "Listen, Tyson, Eve said she would come. But not for long. I could only convince her to stay for, like, an hour, so whatever shit you're planning on pulling during my beautiful and perfect party, you'd better get here early to do it."

Rubbing my hand down my face, I pulled the phone from my ear and wanted to scream. Getting to the party early was definitely going to be a problem. It was going to take me at least two hours to drive out there with traffic, and I hadn't even started getting dressed yet.

My face makeup alone was going to take more than an hour. It needed to be perfect, mysterious and not at all revealing. Eve couldn't know it was me underneath the mask and makeup. If she did, she'd leave. I pictured it all in my head—her putting the pieces together and bailing as quick as her legs would take her. There was zero chance she'd let me explain anything to her ... not after all this time. Everything had to be just right in order for this to work.

"Hello? Tyson? Are you listening?" Greg's voice interrupted the scene playing out in my head.

"What?" I snapped.

"I saiiid"—he dragged out the word, irritated—"Eve is a visionary genius, and if you make her hate me, I'll never forgive you."

My girl was a visionary genius. Hell, I'd already known that. Known it the moment I met her in the library on campus. She was sitting at a desk, surrounded by swatches of colors and shapes of all sizes. When I asked her what she was doing, she gathered them all up into a pile and told me to mind my business.

I refused to leave her side after that. Sat my happy ass down right next to her and begged her to tell me everything. She took more than a little coercing, her eyes pulling together like she didn't trust me or my motives. My good looks and charm didn't seem to work on her, and that only made me more intrigued. It sounded shitty, but I was used to girls falling at my feet. All I had to do was smile, and they practically threw me their panties.

But not Eve. She closed her lips tight, refusing to speak or tell me anything until I promised to buy and bring her Starbucks anytime she asked without question, no matter what time of day or night it was. I agreed all too willingly, dying to get a peek inside her head and hear her thoughts. It was in that moment that I knew this girl was different. That I'd do anything she asked me to.

It was that quick.

For two hours, she tried to explain how she saw things coming together in her mind. Eve could see an entire home decorated for an event from the front door to the back, all without drawing it out or using a computer. Everything was in her "mind's eye," as she liked to call it, and while she was in her head, designing, it was all she saw. I wasn't sitting next to her. There was no library. There was only her, colors, and a theme.

I had been fascinated.

I still was.

The fact that she was doing this for work now didn't surprise me in the least. It made me proud as hell.

"You're not listening. I'm hanging up. I hate you," Greg said before adding, "Do not ruin my party tonight."

He ended the call, and my mind started spinning. Eve and I would be in the same place later tonight, breathing the same air. For the first time in seven years, I'd be close enough to touch her. Close enough to apologize for all the ways in which I had ruined the best thing to ever happen to me. I'd messed up all those years ago by walking away, but I'd never once stopped thinking about her.

The worst part was, my missing her didn't seem to be going anywhere. If

anything, it had only gotten stronger with time. The feeling was almost unbearable, which was why I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to see her and make things right. I'd bet my condo here that my girl was still mad at me. I couldn't even blame her.

I'd wasted so much time.

What reason would ever be good enough to explain seven years of waiting to try and make things right?

“SNIPS”

EVE

Greg had snatched me away the second I walked through the front door and only recently let me out of his sight. Apparently, he was dressed like Taylor Swift in *Cats*. I'd never seen the play or the movie, but I believed him. He also approved of my costume even though he had no clue who I was supposed to be. He was the only one though. I'd actually gotten more compliments than I could have imagined.

I'd been introduced to so many people by this point that I'd lost count. All I wanted was a little peace and quiet, so I headed out back into the spooky but still *chic* graveyard. A two-person bench that overlooked his private boat dock sat in a corner of the yard. I knew that most people wouldn't know it was even there, so I silently crept that way and blew out a thankful breath when I saw it was empty. The fog machine currently spitting out ambiance helped keep the seat hidden until it was practically in front of you.

Sitting down, I looked at the lights dotting the water and smiled at how tranquil Greg's neighborhood was. The homes were beautiful, right on the channel, with windows so large that you could watch everything if the homeowners didn't close their blinds. Not that most of them were home anyway. Half of these houses were second homes, so they sat empty for weeks, if not months, at a time. It was kind of sad and felt like a waste. If I owned one of these homes, I'd never leave it.

“Snips!” a voice shouted from somewhere behind me, startling me.

One single word, and I felt my stomach drop to my knees. Snips was the nickname that Anakin called Ahsoka in the show *The Clone Wars*. Tyson used to call me that all the time. I hadn't heard the term of endearment out of anyone's mouth in years.

But it couldn't be *him*.

“Snips?” the voice questioned once more, growing closer to where I sat.

It wasn't Tyson.

I'd detected a British accent of some sort, and the tone of this person felt off in timbre ... too high-pitched, not the growly sound I'd once known and loved.

Even after all this time, I was convinced I'd recognize his voice if I heard it anywhere near me. And not just because he'd been in multiple movies,

commercials, and on a hit TV show. Tyson's voice was imprinted on my memory bank and on my heart. I'd heard every inflection of it when we dated, and I still had some of the voice mails he'd once left for me saved on my phone. Back when we had been happy ... or at least when I'd thought we were.

When I steadied my breathing, I turned around to see a guy, dressed like a terrifying mix of Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader, stalking toward me. The top half of his face was covered with a dark black latex mask while the lower half was done in really good movie makeup with a scar showing and everything. He'd had professional help with this, I could tell. It wasn't fair. But it was brilliant, if I was being honest.

"It is you, Snips," he said with a grin that I could only partially make out.

All I'd wanted was a little alone time before I slipped out of the party. Hopefully undetected and unstopped by Greg.

"Do we know each other?" I asked warily.

It was a fair question. I wouldn't recognize my own father if he were dressed in that costume. Plus, too many celebrities thought the world owed them something and didn't hesitate on acting like it. I did not owe anyone a thing.

"It's me, Skyguy," the guy said.

I wanted to argue because that lovable nickname had been given to him by my character when he was still good. Way before Anakin started giving in to his dark side and turning evil. This guy's costume was more than halfway there. He was in the midst of turning, of giving in to all the bad.

"Hey," I said, refusing to use the nickname.

He extended his hand, and I reluctantly reached out before he took my hand and placed a kiss on top of it. I quickly pulled away. That kind of thing did nothing for me, especially from strange men. It wasn't charming or romantic; it was creepy and weird.

"I'm not into actors," I said, sounding more than a little presumptuous and extremely judgmental. It wasn't becoming of me.

"Who said I was an actor? Maybe I'm a set designer. Or a props guy," he said through his accent, stumbling on the last occupation he suggested.

A slight laugh escaped me. "No one in props would call themselves a *props guy*. Plus, you totally give off actor vibes."

He looked amused. At least from what I could see of him and read of his body language. Most of his body and skin was completely covered.

“Oh yeah? How do I do that?”

I wasn't sure how to respond. It was a sixth sense I had about actors after falling for one and having my heart ripped out and shattered into a million pieces.

Shrugging my shoulders and looking away, I answered with, “You just do.”

It was a weak response. Not even remotely creative. But I knew I was right. This guy, with his accent and sculpted shoulder muscles, was definitely in front of the camera, not behind it.

“Fine. I might be an actor. Care to tell me why you don't like us, Snips?” There he went again, using the nickname that made my heart flutter and stop, all at the same time. “Are we too arrogant? Selfish? Self-absorbed?”

Nodding my head, I agreed with each assumption. “For starters, yes,” I said matter-of-factly.

In my line of work, I'd crossed paths with more than a few celebrities who were exactly those things. Of course, not all of them were like that, but the ones who were made an impression. And not a good one.

“I'd love to disagree with you,” he said before adding, “but I can't.”

“That's”—I paused as I searched my mind for the right word—“actually impressive.”

Most people would get defensive and argue against any statements that weren't flattering to their character, but here he was, actually agreeing with me when I wasn't being necessarily kind.

“Well, I am impressive.”

That made me laugh. “Your costume is for sure. You did a really great job. I've never seen anything like it.”

He glanced downward at his body before looking back up at me. “Thank you. I worked hard on it. Had to be just right.”

“Big Star Wars fan?” I asked, suppressing a yawn. I wasn't really interested in anything this guy had to say, but I didn't want to be rude, so I kept up the conversation.

“Isn't everyone?”

I cocked my head to the side and gave him a half-hearted shrug. “No. Definitely not.”

The part of his mouth that I could see dropped open in some sort of mock shock. “That's just preposterous. Absurd.”

“Is it really though?” I asked, calling him out on his comment because

there were a lot of people who didn't enjoy science fiction and it wasn't a secret.

"I guess not," he relented. "But you're obviously a fan." He waved a cloaked arm in my direction.

When I didn't say anything in return, he shifted on his feet, as if unsure of what to say next.

"I didn't mean to interrupt you out here. I guess I should probably leave you alone." His accent hung in the air between us, and I realized that I'd been more than a little unfriendly. It wasn't like me at all.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to be so hostile," I apologized before scooting over on the bench to give him room to sit down if he wanted.

This guy truly hadn't done anything to warrant my sour mood. I was projecting my feelings toward one particular actor onto him.

"I understand. You're a woman, sitting out here by yourself, and I snuck up on you without any warning in my terrifying costume and started talking your ear off," he said, overexaggerating the situation a tad.

"I wouldn't go that far." I offered a gentle smile.

"May I?"

He gestured toward the space next to me, and I nodded before he sat down, our legs brushing for only a moment. But something sparked to life, and I had to clear my throat before I started choking on whatever it was. The last thing I wanted to feel was any kind of electricity with someone who acted for a living.

"You okay?"

"Yeah. Fine," I said, studying him.

There was something familiar, but I resigned myself to the fact that it was simply because he was an actor and I'd most likely seen him on the big screen before. That happened a lot out here.

I'd embarrassed myself at the grocery store one afternoon a couple of years back when I couldn't stop staring at this woman, convinced that I knew her from high school or from going to camp when we had been kids. I'd even been stupid enough to ask her before I realized that she had been the star on a hit show back in the '90s and my dumb brain had thought I recognized her from somewhere more familiar than my teenage television set.

I wouldn't be making that mistake again. If this fake Anakin guy felt familiar, it was because he was famous. And to be honest, I didn't really care who he was and had no plans on asking him. Actors were on my DO NOT

DATE list. Granted, they were the only ones on said list, but after Tyson, they had to be.

I'd yet to make an exception.

"So, how do you know Greg?" Fake Anakin asked.

I crossed and then uncrossed my legs, unsure of how much I wanted to reveal to him about who I was.

Even though I was fairly certain this guy was harmless, you never really knew. Telling him that I had decorated this party meant that he could look up my business and find me after tonight if he wanted to. Not saying that he would do anything like that, but as a single woman, safety and security were always in the forefront of my mind.

And, yes, I realized the irony of my having business cards on display and my being introduced to strangers all night, but for some reason, this felt different ... more intimate somehow. Telling this guy felt like *exposing* myself. Like I would be throwing away any kind of anonymity that I currently had.

I must have taken too long, lost in my thoughts and talking to myself, because he added, "You don't have to tell me. I was just curious."

"You must think I'm some kind of nutcase," I said with a slight laugh. Never in my life had I acted so awkward and off-putting. I wasn't sure why I couldn't seem to stop behaving like that.

"Not at all. I think that you're protecting your privacy," he offered so effortlessly that it was as if he had read my mind.

I pursed my lips and gave him a tight nod.

"I get it. Trust me, if anyone understands that concept, it's me." His tone lacked the playfulness it'd had moments ago.

He was serious now, and I felt like an even bigger idiot than before. Of course he'd be the one who needed to protect his identity. He was a freaking actor. A man who had little to no privacy in his daily life. And here I was, insinuating that people followed me home and stalked me when they most certainly didn't.

"Want to know a secret?" he asked, his playful tone returning, and I suddenly found myself extremely interested in what he might confess to me.

"Absolutely." My excitement took over, and I instinctively leaned a little closer toward his body in case he wanted to whisper it to me.

"I came here tonight, hoping to see my ex-girlfriend."

That wasn't at all what I'd expected to hear him say. Granted, I had no

earthly idea what I'd thought he'd tell me, but still ... that wasn't it.

"Really?" I reared my head back in shock. "Is she here?"

"She is."

"And?" I asked, desperate to know every morsel he was willing to divulge to me. I felt almost relieved that he wasn't hitting on me. Knowing that he was here for his ex relaxed the abnormal defensive wall I'd put up. "Does she know you're here? Have you talked to her yet? Did you mess things up with her?"

That smile that I could only see a tiny part of returned. Chills raced down my spine, the spark of familiarity returning, but I shook it off.

"I definitely messed things up," was all he said, his voice wistful and sad.

"Of course you did," I said before I could stop the words from tumbling out of my lips. "Oh my gosh. I'm sorry. That was mean." I slapped my hand over my mouth to keep it shut.

"That was mean," he agreed.

I lowered my hand slowly. "It's not you. I've got issues with actors," I explained, as if that made what I'd just said perfectly okay.

"I gathered as much. Care to tell me why?"

"Not really," I said with a shrug, the fog machine spitting out a thick layer of mist between us. "I like hearing your story better."

IT'S HER

TYSON

Eve was not going to give me an inch. I'd have to play this a different way and tell her about me and my ex instead. At least she seemed interested in talking to me when I was the one spilling secrets. Before that, she couldn't have cared less about what came out of my mouth. I honestly respected that she had refused to tell a perfect stranger personal things about her life, but that didn't stop me from wishing she would spill her guts and confess all her innermost thoughts to me.

The moment I had seen her tonight, I'd almost lost my breath. I'd recognize her anywhere. Even if she wore a costume that hid her entire body from head to toe—the way that I was wearing mine—I'd still know it was her. The curve of her back, the way her hips moved when she walked. Everything about Eve was distinct and solely ... *her*. My heart physically ached at the sight.

It had been years since I'd last seen her in the flesh. Years since I'd left her behind. Acting was fulfilling, and I planned on doing it for as long as I could, but breaking up with Eve in order to begin my career had been a mistake.

I'd never realized at the time that I could have both. Idiotic and selfish young me thought I needed to be single and free in order to chase my dreams and pursue my passion. My agent had planted the idea in my head, and I stupidly assumed she was right. There would be no one else to think of, no one to hurt, and work could be my number one priority and focus. Apparently, significant others held you back. At least, that was what I'd been told, and it had made sense at the time.

But I missed Eve every damn day. My best friend was gone. The one person I'd confessed everything to. The only person who had fought with and for me and seen me for who I truly was.

I'd upped and left her behind.

And now, here I was, staring at her like some silent stalker in movie-grade makeup so she wouldn't recognize me. I was even wearing contacts in order to change the shade of my eyes, not that she could really see them in the dark anyway. Eve could pick them out of a lineup. She used to always tell me that. Something about the yellow specks in all the brown that reminded

her of stars in the night sky.

So, contacts it was. Not to mention, the accent. I'd been working on it for a part anyway, so I'd figured I'd keep up the act. I definitely needed the practice. And I needed to see her. Was in LA to film and knew she'd never agree to meet me, so I pulled a few strings and found out her latest client was having a party, and here we were. I'd met Greg once before at an industry event, but it wasn't like we were close friends or anything.

I was sitting down on the bench next to her, dying to take her in my arms and hold her again. I would give up everything in that moment just to fucking touch her and have her not recoil. It was killing me to keep my hands to myself. Her skin looked even softer than it used to. Her blonde hair was longer. There were subtle changes to my girl. She'd become a woman in the time we'd been apart. I should have known she'd grow even more beautiful instead of the opposite.

Eve had belonged to me once, all those years ago, but I still belonged to her now. Only problem was, she didn't know it.

What if she didn't care?

"Are you going to tell me more?" Eve asked, those perfect lips forming the words, and I wondered how long I'd been silent for.

"About my ex?" I said, as if I wasn't sure what she wanted me to tell her.

She nodded enthusiastically, and I had to stop myself from reaching out and skimming her cheek. It took every ounce of willpower in my entire fucking body to not touch her.

"What do you want to know?"

"Have you seen her yet?"

Yes, she's fucking beautiful.

"I have."

"Did she see you?"

I'm sitting right next to her.

"I don't think so," I answered with a little trepidation in my voice. It wasn't a lie, but it wasn't exactly the truth either.

"Is she the one?" Eve's voice was weighted with sincerity. "The one who got away, I mean," she clarified before I could answer.

"Absolutely," I said without hesitation.

I watched as Eve sucked in a long breath and leaned back against the bench, her head lifting toward the stars. "I think we all have one of those."

This was my in. My chance to ask her the question in return and pray to

God she not only answered it, but that she also said it was me and not some other schmuck. I wouldn't be able to handle it if she told me there was another man she still pined for. If that were the case, then everything I'd ever believed about us would have been a lie.

How the hell was I supposed to move on when I couldn't let her go?

"Even you?" I asked carefully, hoping I worded the question in a nonthreatening way that would make her want to answer.

She lowered her head back down and glanced over toward me, her expression softening. "Even me."

"Anyone I know?" I asked with a laugh, hoping to lighten the mood and make her feel comfortable enough to keep talking.

"Actually," she said, and my heart started pounding inside my chest like a fucking gorilla in a cage, "you probably do know him."

Play it cool, Tyson.

Play. It. Cool.

"The actor who gave you issues, I take it?"

"Hey." She swatted my shoulder. "I don't have issues. I just have issues *with* actors. There's a difference."

I threw my cloaked hands up in surrender. "You're right. But was it? An actor?" I kept pressing the issue because I was desperate and needy.

"Yeah," she admitted, and I was pretty sure that she meant me. "But I don't want to talk about him."

"Okay," I agreed because she'd already given me everything I needed. "Just tell me one thing." I guessed I wasn't quite done yet.

"Maybe," she answered, and I bit back a laugh.

"How long ago did this fuckboy hurt you?"

I had to be one hundred percent certain. Maybe she'd dated other actors after I left town. I couldn't picture it, but what the hell did I know after all this time?

"I don't want to tell you," she said, and I hadn't expected that response.

"What? Why not?"

"Because it's embarrassing."

Shit. What does that mean?

"Now, I'm really intrigued." I gave her a slight nudge with my shoulder. "Come on, Snips. Tell me. Was it recent or something?"

"No!" she shouted before lowering her voice again. "That's the thing. It wasn't recent at all. It was years ago. So many in fact that I should be

completely over him by now.”

“But you’re not,” I breathed out, more in recognition than anything else because I felt the exact same way. Only I had no plans on getting over her anytime soon.

She hesitated and looked torn between confessing any more of her truth to me, but I was dying to hear it all. Jonesing for it actually.

“I’m not,” she finally admitted.

“Hey.” I reached for her arm and gave it a slight squeeze. “My situation is similar.”

She actually looked relieved as she blew out a soft breath. “Oh yeah? How so? You fall in love with your ex back in college and then ignore her for seven years? Good luck winning her back if that’s the case,” she said with a laugh, and my stomach instantly twisted.

My head started spinning, my mouth longing to spill the truth. That I’d come to this party just to see her. That she was the ex I’d been referring to all along. I couldn’t figure out exactly what to say or how without making her turn on me.

“There you are.” Greg suddenly appeared before his cat eyes narrowed and he reached for his tail and started twirling it. “I see you haven’t killed him yet. That’s a good sign. Meow.”

I tried to shake my head and get Greg to stop talking, but it was too late. He wouldn’t stop. He’d said too much. My cover was about to be blown.

“Killed who yet?” Eve started looking between me and Greg, and I hoped he’d pick up on the fact that Eve didn’t know it was me sitting next to her.

“Tyson. I figured after all the hell he put me through to get you here tonight, you probably hated him or something. But it’s good to see you two getting along.”

He kept talking, and Eve stood up like I had some sort of sickness that she was about to catch. She moved backward, taking small steps away from me.

Greg, who was still fucking as clueless as they came, continued saying words, but I couldn’t hear him anymore. All I noticed was the horrified expression on Eve’s face.

“Tyson?” she asked, her voice shaking with emotion.

“Eve ...” I reached for her as I dropped the fake accent, but she moved even farther away, out of my grasp completely.

She wasn’t happy or elated to put the pieces of tonight’s puzzle together.

She was pissed.

“You tricked me. You made me tell you all those things, and you just sat there. And you”—she pointed at Greg—“I can’t believe you would side with him after what he did to me.”

“Side with him?” Greg said, his confusion clear. “I don’t know what you mean. Don’t be mad at me, Eve. I’m on your side. I hate Tyson,” he shouted at Eve’s retreating back before turning toward me. “Look what you’ve done. You’d better fix it.”

“That’s what I was trying to do before you came over and ruined it,” I fired back, taking off in Eve’s direction.

She escaped out of the back fence and was racing toward a parked BMW that I somehow sensed was hers.

“Stay away from me, Tyson,” she said as she approached the car and hopped inside, locking the door behind her so I couldn’t open it.

“At least unblock me from your phone!” I yelled against her window as she fired up the engine. “Eve!” I shouted, but she drove away, almost running over my foot in the process.

I would have deserved it.

ACTORS ARE ASSHOLES

EVE

What in the hell was that?

I sped away, definitely breaking all California speed limit laws before I took a breath and decided to slow the heck down. My mind was spinning. My heart was racing.

Fake Anakin was Tyson?

I couldn't believe it.

From the second he had approached me in the backyard, he'd known it was me he was walking toward. He knew exactly who he was talking to. With every twist and turn of the conversation, he knew where it was headed. But I didn't know any of it. I'd had no freaking idea that I was having such a personal interaction with my ex-boyfriend.

I felt sick at the things I'd admitted to him. Stupid for being so easily deceived. And I was mad at him for manipulating me.

It was a mean trick.

My head continued replaying that part of the night over and over again. First, it kept repeating the things I'd told him without meaning to. Then, it moved on to his confessions.

He'd said he'd only come to the party tonight to see his ex-girlfriend.

He was talking about me.

And when he had said that his ex was the one who'd gotten away, again, he'd meant me.

It was almost too much to process. That, after all this time, he was still as hung up on me as I was on him. The idea seemed impossible.

I'd thought Tyson had moved on and never looked back. It'd certainly felt that way. How could I have been so wrong? And why now? Why was he suddenly showing up after seven years? I didn't understand, and I was awash with so many conflicting emotions.

I had more questions than answers, and I wasn't sure if I even wanted to know the truth or not. I felt like a walking contradiction. Just a few hours ago, I had been jealous that my best friend's ex-boyfriend couldn't seem to let her go. And now, here I was, getting what I'd always thought I wanted, but feeling unsure about it instead.

When I pulled into my garage and shut off the engine, I reached for my

bag. Tyson's shouts against my driver's window, telling me to unblock him from my phone, reverberated in my ears. I had forgotten that I'd even done that.

When he'd chosen New York over me and never looked back, I'd eventually blocked him everywhere. It had taken me a while, if I was being honest.

My curiosity had seemed to get the best of me at first, and I was obsessed with watching all of his posts and stories. I checked his social media accounts constantly, hitting refresh more times than I cared to admit. I was waiting for him to message me, or reach out, or post something that I would know was a secret message meant just for me, but none of those things ever happened. And all of his posts hurt me as I overanalyzed them and stopped me from healing.

He looked so damn happy, always smiling, his arm wrapped around a gorgeous costar or two. It was an awful thing to witness and watch.

Embarrassing, to say the least.

So, I finally worked up the nerve to unfollow his accounts and block him from mine. After a few days, where I fought the instinct to unblock him the entire time, I realized that I felt healthier and more in control. Not seeing his every move was freeing on my heart instead of having the opposite effect. *Out of sight, out of mind* wasn't a hundred percent accurate, but there was some truth there. I could try my best to forget about what had happened and move on even if no one else wanted me to, which it certainly seemed like they didn't.

Everyone at our college seemed to know that we were over and that it definitely hadn't been my doing. They whispered when I walked by, and some even had the nerve to tag me online in posts about him with other women. They watched him rise in popularity and fame, all while knowing that he'd left me behind, sad and brokenhearted. Grieving that loss in front of people who seemed to enjoy watching it was humiliating. I'd briefly considered transferring universities, but decided against it when I finally moved into the anger phase of grieving our relationship. Tyson would not make me rearrange my life just because he sucked.

I exited my car, locked the door, and walked into my condo through the garage entrance. Dropping my bag on the counter, I sat down on my couch and kicked my feet up onto the coffee table before pulling them back and tucking them underneath my body. I really wanted to call JJ and beg her to

come over, but I stopped myself.

I had no idea why. I guessed I wasn't in the mood to talk it all out yet.

Scrolling through my Contacts until I got to Tyson's name, I noticed that it was indeed still blocked. Part of me was surprised that he never changed his phone number, but I never had either. I pressed the button to cancel the block, and my text messages started blowing up instantly. He had been texting like a madman, but I couldn't bring myself to read them. At least, not yet.

It was all so overwhelming. And unexpected. And I was still kind of pissed off at the way he'd manipulated me tonight. He had known exactly what he was doing the whole time, and I'd been in the dark. Would I have listened to him though if I had known that it was him underneath all that makeup and costume? Probably not.

But I wasn't sure why. I'd always longed for an apology from him, and now that it was up for grabs, I was running from it.

I was annoyed at everything, especially my own warring emotions. I'd felt off and on edge all day, like I could sense Tyson's nearness somehow, and now, I couldn't believe that I'd been right.

How could two people still be connected after so many years of silence?

The memories crashed into me like a rogue wave, knocking me off my feet and taking me under.



"I got the job!" Tyson looked so happy as I stared at his perfect face on my cell phone screen, the time difference only a slight inconvenience as I bit back a yawn.

"I knew you would. Congratulations, babe," I said, feeling nothing but excitement for him. I couldn't wait to celebrate. This was a huge deal for him. "So, when do you come back home?"

His face fell, his eyes pulling together in a way that made him look pained. "I'm not."

I didn't understand what he was saying.

He'd flown to New York for an audition, but I never realized that he wouldn't fly right back after it was over.

"What do you mean, you're not?"

"They start filming in two days. I don't have time. My mom's going to

come to campus and pack my things for me.”

His mom? Why didn't he ask me to do it?

“Okay. What about when filming ends?”

“My agent says I should stay here. I'm getting an apartment in the city. Moving in later this week with another new guy.”

By this point, my heart was racing inside my chest, and I felt beads of sweat starting to form. I'd always wanted to see New York, but I was getting the sense that I wouldn't be doing that anytime soon.

“You're not coming back, are you?”

He started shaking his head slowly from side to side. “I don't think so. I heard that when we finish filming, most of the cast takes on movie roles.”

“But ...” I stumbled on my words, my thoughts tumbling into one another inside my head. “We live in LA. I'm sure there are plenty of roles here that you can take.”

“Maybe,” he said, but I could tell that he'd already made up his mind. Los Angeles was no longer on his agenda.

“And you don't get any time off?” I asked, feeling like it was a stupid question for some reason. I should have known more about how this business worked.

“My agent said that taking time off once the ball gets rolling would be career suicide. She doesn't want me to be deemed a diva or too hard to work with.”

I started shaking my head. “That doesn't make any sense, Tyson. Taking time off doesn't make you either of those things.”

“I get what you're saying, Eve, but you don't know the business like she does. She said that it could put a hard stop to any momentum I have going, and I believe her.”

He sounded defensive, and I knew right then and there that I was losing him and that nothing I said was going to matter. He'd just gotten the one thing he'd always wanted, and who was I to try to compete with his lifelong dream?

It didn't feel fair. Why couldn't he have us both?

“So, that's just it then?” I asked.

“What's just it?” he repeated.

“You leave for an audition, and you're never coming back?” I bit back the shakiness in my voice and wiped at my face to stop the tears from falling.

“I didn't know this would happen,” he breathed out, his hand moving

down the length of his face.

I'd had no idea that when I dropped him off at the airport yesterday, it would be the last time that I'd see him. The last hug. The last kiss. The last touch.

"Are you breaking up with me?" I finally worked up the nerve to ask.

Even through the phone screen, I could tell that he was avoiding looking directly at me. His eyes hadn't met mine in at least three minutes.

"I don't want you to wait around for me. I have no idea what my schedule is going to be like. My agent said that everything's going to change for me once I'm introduced on the show. I'm not going to have any free time."

"Just say it," I demanded.

If he was going to dump me and throw away everything that we'd built over the last three years, he was going to have to say it out loud for both of us to hear.

"I think we should break up," he whispered so softly that I barely heard him at all before I ended the call and cried myself to sleep.



When the scene stopped playing out, I realized that I had tears in my eyes. It seemed ridiculous that a single moment from so many years ago could still affect me this strongly, but there was no denying that it did.

I was still in love with him on some level regardless if I wanted to be or not. A part of me would always love Tyson. First loves weren't easy to get over. Especially when you felt like you had no closure.

A little closure might be good for us both. Maybe, with it, we could finally let go and move on.

NOW WHAT?

TYSON

I stood on the sidewalk in front of Greg's house, texting Eve like a psychopath. The barrage was nonstop. Some of them only said one word—SORRY—in all capital letters to emphasize my point. Others were longer, like I'd rehearsed on the flight back to Los Angeles and over the years. I actually had a Notes app on my phone, filled with all the things I wanted to say to Eve once I finally got the chance. Some of them were embarrassingly stupid, but reflected my age and state of mind at the time.

She was ignoring every single one that I'd sent. Wasn't even opening them. Honestly, I'd expected nothing less. At least she'd finally unblocked my number from her phone though. I definitely considered that progress. I hadn't been sure that she'd even give me that much after all this time. But, dammit, I was leaving town soon to film another movie, and I wanted us fixed by then. Or at least started on that path.

"Way to go," Greg suddenly said from behind me, his tone filled with accusation and irritation.

I spun around and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Where does she live?" I asked with desperation in my voice, and he stepped out of my grasp.

"Oh, hell no. I'm not telling you that." He sounded almost horrified that I'd even asked such a thing.

"I'm sure I can find out anyway," I snapped back in response, but I had no idea if that was something I could do or not. I'd never asked any of my people to find an address of a girl before. I was fairly certain that crossed all kinds of lines, but I didn't care.

"Then, you go ahead and do that, buddy. You two clearly have some kind of history I wasn't aware of. And now, she's mad at me."

I waved him off and rolled my eyes even though he couldn't see them in the dark and behind my mask. "She'll forgive you."

"How can you be so sure?"

I know everything about this woman. She's the same person she's always been, and that's why I can't get the fuck over her.

"Because she doesn't hold grudges," I tried to explain before adding, "unless you're me."

"What'd you do to her anyway?" he asked before reaching for his long

tail and swinging it around.

He'd been handling that thing all night long. I was surprised it hadn't broken off yet.

"I broke her heart," I said matter-of-factly. There was no sense in sugarcoating the truth, no matter how bitter it tasted on my tongue.

"Meeow," he said in a silly voice, and I shook my head. "I didn't even know you two were an item."

"It was a long time ago. Before," I said in clarification without adding anything else.

His head drew back, nodding in recognition at what I meant. "Before your big break."

"Bingo."

My phone vibrated, and I almost dropped it. Glancing down, I noticed Eve's name on the screen. A text message waited.

"Shit."

"Is it her?" Greg tried to peer around my body to see the screen.

I pulled my phone away from his prying eyes, but answered him anyway, "Yeah."

"What'd she say? Oh my God, I'm so invested in this now."

He's invested? Jesus, I've been waiting seven years for this moment.

Standing on the sidewalk, I felt sick to my stomach. I was nervous as hell for what might be waiting for me when I opened the text message.

"Read it already!" Greg shouted.

I shushed him before pressing on the screen, and her words popped up.

EVE: WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME, TYSON?

"I ... I have to go," I stuttered.

Greg started whining in the background behind me. I only heard bits and pieces of whatever he was saying. My mind was too caught up in Eve and what my next move should be.

This was a good thing ... an opening ... an olive branch ... a *something*. I'd take any scrap of time she was willing to give me.

I sprinted to my car and threw open the door, wanting the quiet to respond to her without an audience. Pressing my back into the leather seat, I kicked one foot up onto the dash.

Without overthinking it, I sent a message back.

ME: I WANT TO APOLOGIZE. AND MAKE THINGS RIGHT. I MISS THE HELL OUT OF

YOU, EVE. I ALWAYS HAVE. PLEASE LET ME COME OVER AND TALK TO YOU.

The three dots began dancing instantly, and I knew she was typing out a response.

They stopped just as quickly before beginning again. My breath synched with her hesitation, holding and releasing each time the dots disappeared before coming back.

They stopped once more, and I held my breath, waiting.

I wondered what I could type to make her give me a chance. The dots reappeared again, and I blew out a long breath. It was absolute torture, waiting for what she might say.

EVE: I WANT CLOSURE.

My heart was no longer beating. Who knew that three words could be so devastating? The last damn thing I wanted with Eve was closure, but if that was the only way she would talk to me, so be it. I'd lie my ass off to get her address and then beg for her forgiveness on my knees if I had to. I was not leaving for London without knowing that Eve was mine.

ME: LET ME GIVE IT TO YOU. WHAT'S YOUR ADDRESS?

CLOSURE FOR ONE, PLEASE

EVE

As I stared at my phone, my hand started sweating from gripping it so tightly. I kept rereading our messages to each other, my head shaking the entire time, before I looked down at the costume I still wore.

Throwing off the too-short skirt, I slid into some sweatpants instead. The rest of my outfit covered plenty and didn't leave me feeling exposed the way the skirt had, and I wanted to be comfortable.

I couldn't believe I had told Tyson that he could come over to my house, and now, he was on his way here. I began pacing back and forth, fighting the urge to throw up in my kitchen sink.

Closure. I'd told him I wanted freaking closure. What in the actual hell was I going to do once he gave it to me? Move on and pretend like seeing his face on billboards didn't affect me? Like I wasn't the one he used to stay in bed with all weekend long, eating popcorn and watching old movies? Like I could just ... pretend we had never happened?



Pieces of popcorn flew through the air, hitting me in the back of the head. I turned around to see Tyson watching me instead of the movie he'd put on.

"Do you need something?" I asked with a sly grin as I bent down, reached for the stray pieces, and popped them into my mouth.

I'd only agreed to him coming over if he let me work on my paper. It was due in two days, and I wasn't even halfway done yet.

"I always need something when you're around." He gave me that wicked grin that he'd perfected, his brown eyes sparkling.

We never seemed to get enough of each other. Almost three years later, and our appetites were still unquenchable. I wasn't sure if that was normal or not since I'd never been in a relationship this long before, but I wasn't complaining.

"Babe, I have to finish this," I complained. I didn't want to be writing this stupid paper on communication missteps and lies from World War II either, but if I wanted to pass the class, I needed to.

“I know.” He gave me a wink.

I studied his features. His dark hair was spiked messily, the way I liked. And his skin was such a beautiful naturally tan color. He was a freaking work of art, and he was all mine.

Sex with Tyson never felt like a chore. Or like we were only doing it so he could get off, never mind my needs. Being intimate with him was like recharging some kind of hidden internal battery in my body. Instead of draining me, it always gave me more energy. I felt unstoppable after he came inside me, our hearts racing, bodies sweating.

The stupid paper could wait.

“I hate how handsome you are,” I lied as I pushed away from my desk and headed toward where he sat on my bed.

“Oh, yeah? Well, I hate how beautiful you are.” He pulled my body on top of his. I sat there, straddling his lap, feeling him harden underneath me. “Every time I look at you, I want to be inside you. It’s exhausting.”

“What’s exhausting about it?”

“Resisting.”

He leaned forward, his lips on my exposed skin as he pulled down my tank top with one hand. His tongue lashed out, making little wet circles between my breasts. I threw my head back, loving the way it felt whenever any part of him was on me.

“Don’t resist then. Take what you want.”

My nipple was suddenly in his mouth, and he sucked and bit at it, making me cry out with pleasure.

“Oh, I plan to,” he said before moving to my mouth and claiming it with a punishing kiss. “I need these clothes off you. You can write a paper about how much I love you when I’m finished.”



The sound of a car locking and a horn honking pulled me from my memory. My whole body shook in response. I hadn’t thought about that particular day in years. I wondered why it was the one that had decided to make itself known now.

Three hard knocks on my front door alerted me that my ex-boyfriend, the one guy I couldn’t seem to get over, was standing outside of it. I considered making him wait for seven more years until I let him in, but I didn’t have the

willpower.

Pulling the door open, I saw that he was still in his costume, completely unrecognizable. He stepped inside and immediately looked around. I had known that he'd take stock of my place and check it out, but I hadn't realized how exposing it would feel. Like he was judging my decorating style or the fact that it lacked any mention of him or us.

"Hey," he breathed out from around the mask and makeup.

"Hey," I said in response.

"Do you mind if I try to get some of this off?" He pointed at his face, and I was actually relieved that I wasn't going to have to try to talk to him while he looked like that.

A serious conversation about our past while he was dressed like a very convincing Anakin freaking Skywalker was a bit ridiculous.

"Bathroom's right over there." I pointed at the open door, and he started heading that way. "There's a washcloth under the sink if you need it."

"Thanks."

"Do you want something to drink?" I kind of hated how hospitable I was being, but I couldn't help it.

"Water would be great," he said as he shut the door behind him and turned the sink on.

I wondered how long he'd be in there as I grabbed us each a tall glass and filled it with the filtered kind from the fridge. My brain began to overanalyze the situation, starting with where exactly we should sit while we chatted.

The couch was too personal, too inviting, and we weren't that comfortable yet. My patio had two chairs and a table, but it was dark outside, and I wanted to see his face when we talked. And even though the kitchen table seemed a bit too formal, like we were about to negotiate a business deal, it was the perfect compromise. We could sit across from one another, close enough to not miss a single expression, but far enough that our knees wouldn't touch.

The bathroom door opened, and the sound of Tyson making his way through my living room had me instantly on edge. I swung my body around and waved my arm to let him know where he could find me, but almost burst into tears from seeing his face, now free of his mask and makeup.

"You got it all off." I tried to sound unaffected, but my stomach was twisting at the mere sight of him.

Seeing him in his costume tonight hadn't really been seeing him at all. I

was flustered. He'd matured so much over the years—his jaw more chiseled, his facial hair finally fully growing in. I almost laughed out loud, thinking back to how mad he used to get when the hair would only grow in certain areas. He was convinced it never would. Oh, how wrong he had been.

“What are you smiling about?” His voice was sweet, gentle even, and I quickly stopped the smile I hadn't realized I was giving him.

“Just remembering, is all.”

“Anything you care to share with the class?” He waved an arm around, pretending like we were surrounded by inquiring minds.

I shook my head. “Not really.”

He sat down across from me and downed the entire glass of water that I'd poured. “Thank you for this. Do you mind if I get some more?” He pushed to stand back up.

“Not at all. It's in the fridge.”

I watched as his body moved, taking note of just how broad his arms and shoulders had filled out. He'd discarded part of the costume, and he was now wearing a formfitting black T-shirt that literally hugged every perfect muscle on his upper body. It wasn't fair.

He'd been good-looking back in college, but this was another level completely. Adult Tyson Hunter was a freaking god. No wonder he was so famous.

“I'm quitting the show,” he said before sitting down.

My eyes widened, and I knew that I couldn't hide my surprise even if I tried. Seven years he'd be gone and living in New York. Well, at least as far as I knew, that was what he'd been doing.

“You are? Why?”

His shoulders shrugged half-heartedly. “I think it's time. There's really nothing more for my character to do. I think if I stay, they'll start giving me really ridiculous storylines that I'll be embarrassed about.”

I nodded, pretending like I had any idea what exactly it was that he meant. I'd stopped myself from watching his hit TV show in the beginning. And now, I didn't even have cable anyway.

Tyson started laughing. “You don't watch the show, do you?”

“No,” I admitted with a proud grin, like being able to resist seeing him over the years had made me stronger somehow.

Note to self: it really hadn't.

“Do you think it's a bad business move if I leave?”

It was like we'd slipped right back into our old roles. The ones where we asked each other for business advice and took it like it was gospel. Or at least, we used to. That was before he'd gotten an agent who contradicted the things I said and who he started defending and choosing over me.

"What does your agent think?" It was a shit thing to say, and we both knew it, but I was still resentful when it came to her and wanted the chance to be petty.

"I haven't told her yet."

"People quit shows all the time. I think it's better than staying and hating what they turn your character into. You'd be miserable."

"I know. I'm kind of miserable now," he admitted, and I cocked my head to the side and studied him.

If it were any other guy, I would have wondered if he was telling me the truth or if he was just working some angle to get a sympathy screw. But Tyson had never been a liar, and I could tell that he was being truthful.

"Why are you so miserable?" I wondered.

He had everything he'd ever wanted—fame, success, money, his choice of roles.

"I'm tired. Exhausted really. I've been working nonstop since I left." His voice cracked at that moment, and he cleared his throat. "I want to move back home. I miss the weather. I hate being cold."

When I didn't say anything in response, he leaned forward, his elbows on the table as he looked me right in the eyes and held my stare. "Have you seen any of my movies?"

I hated the way being looked at like that rattled me to my core and made me wet. The last thing I wanted was to be turned on by him, but my body didn't get the memo. Tyson's dark eyes, with those little blips of yellow, got to me every time. They always had. I felt like he could see right through me.

"Eve." His voice broke the spell I was under.

"Huh?"

"My movies. Have you seen any?"

I shook my head slowly, feeling more embarrassed instead of proud with this answer, although I wasn't entirely sure why. "No."

"None of them?" He leaned away, pressing his back against the chair as he blew out a breath and laughed like he couldn't believe it. "Really?"

"Not one." I'd stayed away from anything he was starring in, assuming that watching him on the big screen might hurt more.

“Wow. Do you mind if I ask you why?” He wasn’t trying to be a dick or have his ego fed with the question. Tyson was genuinely wondering how I could have avoided seeing him in his element.

“I didn’t think I could handle it,” I said, deciding to be brutally honest.

He had come here to give me closure after all.

“Seeing me, it hurts you?”

His expression twisted, and I wanted to reach across and comfort him. It was a habit. Albeit an old one, but still.

“It used to.”

“And now?” he pushed, but I wasn’t ready to spill all my emotions on the table between us when he’d given me nothing in return.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know how I feel.”

NOT OVER YET

TYSON

Well, that made one of us because I sure as hell knew how I felt. I wanted this woman back in my life. It had to happen, or I'd never recover ... never forgive myself.

"Why did you come to the party tonight, Tyson?" she asked me point-blank.

"I told you the truth earlier. I came to see you."

"I know you said that." She stumbled on her words before reaching for her water and taking a sip. "But why? What do you want?"

A lump formed in my throat, and I attempted to swallow around it. "You said you wanted closure."

I fucking hated that word.

"Uh-huh," she said, barely audible.

"Well, I don't."

Her eyes pulled together, revealing her confusion.

"I don't want closure, Eve. I don't want to move on. I don't want you to get over me."

"What do you want then?" Her voice was shaky, just like my heart was.

I'd been in movies with A-list actors who were well respected in Hollywood, and I'd never been this nervous.

"I want to apologize. Tell you how fucking sorry I am. How I've thought about you every single day, but I didn't know how to tell you that without sounding like a self-absorbed prick. How, once too much time passed, I didn't know how to get it back. I always figured it was too late. But wanting you, missing you, it's never gone away. And I've finally realized that it never will."

I pushed out of the chair and walked around the table to where she sat, her hazel eyes watering. I dropped to my knees and reached for her hands. She let me hold them. God, they were soft.

"I came here tonight to see you. To see if you still loved me at all, the way that I still love you."

Reaching for the back of her neck, I pulled her toward me, my lips meeting hers with years of pent-up passion. Our tongues touched, and I swore my dick grew ten sizes in that moment.

Eve pulled away just as quickly, however, breaking the kiss. I had known it wouldn't be that easy to convince her.

"Wait," she said breathlessly. "Tyson"—she pushed at my body, making me almost fall backward—"you can't just show up after seven years and pick up where we left off."

"I know that," I agreed, but that was exactly what I wanted to do. Reality wasn't always my strong suit when it came to her. "But fuck, Eve. I've missed you so damn much," I said as I pushed to a stand, hovering over her still-sitting frame.

It took everything in me not to grab her caveman-style, toss her over my shoulder, and march straight into the bedroom ... wherever that was ... and show her just how much I'd missed her.

"I've missed you too." Her eyebrows pulled together like she was in pain. "But you really hurt me."

"I know." I shook my head before begrudgingly walking back to my side of the table and sitting down. Running my hands across my face, I stayed in that position for longer than I'd anticipated, my breath hot against my palms as I tried to figure out how to make this better somehow. "I know I hurt you. I know I did."

"Do you though?" she asked, her fingers brushing down my arms, causing me to look at her. *Really look*. "You left for New York, and you never came back. You broke up with me over the phone. And then ..." She paused. "I literally never heard from you again." She wiped at her face, and it killed me to see the tears fall from her eyes, knowing that I was the reason. "Until tonight."

"I know I handled things poorly. I messed up. I can't take back what I did. I wish I could. I'd do anything to turn back time and do it all over again," I explained as my emotions made my voice shaky.

"What would you do differently?" she asked, her eyes piercing into mine.

"I wouldn't have let you go. Ever," I answered without even hesitating or taking a breath.

Her face softened, and she allowed a smile to spread across her lips. "Want to know something?"

"Always."

"I think we would have broken up eventually anyway."

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end, and I felt myself growing ridiculously defensive. "Why would you say that?"

“Hear me out.” She sounded so calm, like she’d considered this alternate scenario a thousand times before. “We wouldn’t have made it through you moving across the country and me still being in school. And then all your movies. And me trying to start my business. I just think that, at some point, we would have ended things.”

I opened my mouth to argue or agree—I didn’t know which—but she spoke instead. “It just wouldn’t have been the way that you did it. So abrupt and without warning. I never saw it coming. I mean, Tyson”—she sniffed—“we were really happy. *Really. Happy.* Or at least, I was.”

“I was too. Don’t ever question that.”

“I’ve questioned everything at some point,” she admitted, and I felt about two inches tall.

I’d done that to her, made her feel like our relationship hadn’t been what it was. “I know that I caused that.”

She reached for her glass and finished off the rest of the contents before slamming it on the table a little too hard. “Oops.” She inspected it to make sure it hadn’t cracked. “This is so crazy.” Her exhale was loud.

“What is?”

“You. Here. Taking responsibility for what happened between us.” She shook her head. “I wanted this for so long. I thought I’d never get it.”

Fuck.

I’d just given her the one thing I never wanted her to have, no matter how selfish that sounded—*closure.*

Think fast, Tyson. Quick.

“I’m not trying to let you close the door, Eve.”

She looked at me with an odd expression.

“I’m trying to open it again.”

Her chair squeaked as she moved in it, scooting it a little closer. “But why now? After all this time, why are you just now showing up and asking for this?”

“Because I’m ready for more.” It was the most honest answer that I could give her.

“More what?”

“More ...” I paused before adding, “Life.”

I shifted in my seat, putting my arms back on the table, hoping that she’d meet me in the middle and reach for them. “That’s why I came here tonight. After I finish filming in London, I’m announcing my exit on the show and

slowing down. One to two movies a year, max. I'll be moving back home permanently. I want a relationship. I want a partner. A best friend. I want to do normal things. I miss hanging out at the beach and watching the sunset."

"I feel like I haven't done that in forever."

"But you live in Newport." I knew I sounded surprised.

"And I run a million-dollar company."

"Sounds like I'm not the only one who could use a break." I tried to tease, but I was only partially kidding.

"I'm too young to stop working."

"You don't have to stop, but maybe you can do what you always said you wanted."

A half of a smile appeared. "And what was that, Mr. Hunter?" she questioned, convinced that I remembered nothing of our time together.

"You wanted to be the designer, but you didn't want to have to be the one who actually decorated. Remember? You wanted a staff for purchasing, ordering, and setup. Your plan was to eventually be the visionary only and open offices in multiple locations. You said you could work remotely and meet with clients virtually as long as you had trustworthy staff in those locations."

She actually looked shell-shocked, and I knew that she couldn't believe I'd recalled those details about her dream, but I remembered being so impressed with her vision. We'd had a hundred conversations about our respective future careers, and I'd kept track of them all.

"I can't believe you remember that."

"I remember everything."

Her breath caught, and it made an audible sound.

"What can I do to fix this?" I wagged a finger between our bodies. "I want a second chance. I know I royally messed up the first one you gave me, but I promise I'll never let you down again."

Her features changed in an instant. She hardened somehow when I'd assumed my words would elicit the opposite reaction.

"I need some time to think about it."

Time was the one thing I didn't have much of. "I leave for London in a few days."

"And?"

"I really want us to be on the same page before I go."

"Why's that?"

I started laughing. “I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “Because that was in my plans. I thought I could fix this before I headed overseas, and we’d be together while I was there.”

“Everything doesn’t get to be on your timeline, Tyson.”

How selfish had I been, expecting her to forgive me simply because I asked? I’d romanticized our getting back together. In my head, it’d played out like a movie, where the heroine forgave the hero and they fell into each other’s arms like nothing bad had ever happened and never would again.

But life wasn’t a movie.

And this wasn’t a script.

“You’re right.” I shook my head, chastising myself. “You’re absolutely right.”

“Getting back together might not be a new concept for you since you’ve been prepping for this moment, but it’s all new to me. I need a little time to process.”

I blew out a quick breath, knowing that it was my cue to leave. As I pushed to a stand, she did the same.

Looking into her eyes, I hesitated before asking, “Can I hug you before I go?”

She laughed. “Of course.”

We met in the middle, both of our arms open, waiting for the other to fall into them.

Leaning down, I whispered in her ear, “Just don’t say no out of spite.”

I wasn’t sure what on earth had possessed me to say that, but she pulled away from my embrace and gave me a disapproving look.

“I would never do that,” she said, but I’d already known that wasn’t in her nature, so I wasn’t sure why I’d forced her to say it out loud.

Maybe I’d needed to hear it. Being surrounded by fake people on a daily basis got to me sometimes. Eve was as real as it got. She had loved me before the fame. And I knew she loved me still.

I just hoped that would be enough for her to give us another chance.

SECOND CHANCES

EVE

Tyson left without a fight, and I watched him disappear out my front door before I got ready for bed. My head was filled with so many thoughts and memories from the past. I tossed and turned all night. Once I finally did fall asleep, Tyson haunted my dreams. Nothing really happened during them. He was just ... *there*. At my side. In my bed. Holding my hand. Attending events with me. They were like snippets of moments that hadn't happened yet.

I woke with a start before realizing that my phone alarm was playing my wake-up song. Reaching for the Stop button, I hit it before firing off a text to JJ, asking her to come over without any other details. I needed my best friend, and there was so much to fill her in on. She was going to absolutely lose her shit. Nervous butterflies started flapping their wings inside my stomach when I got her response.

JJ: ON MY WAY. BRINGING COFFEE.

I scrolled through the rest of my notifications, reading a handful of concerned messages from Greg. He was convinced I hated him and wasn't going to stop reaching out until I assured him that we were fine. I typed out a response to let him know I wasn't mad and we'd talk later, and then I felt a sliver of disappointment zing through me at not seeing any other messages waiting.

Tyson was giving me the time and space that I'd asked him for, but that didn't seem to stop my emotions from going haywire over it. The poor guy couldn't win.

Throwing the covers off, I reached my arms over my head and stretched before stepping out of the warmth of my bed. JJ didn't live far enough away for me to hop in the shower, so I dismissed that original thought. Grabbing a pair of sweats and pulling them on over the thong I'd changed into last night, I went through my typical morning routine of stretching and a few quick yoga poses. It always made me feel better, centered somehow.

The doorbell rang in quick succession, over and over again, and I knew my best friend was here.

"I'm coming. Stop ringing that thing!" I yelled.

But she didn't stop, and I heard the sound of her laughing from the other

side of the door.

I threw it open, and she barged inside, almost knocking me over in the process, balancing our drinks in one of those tray things with one hand. JJ waltzed into the kitchen, pulled the coffees from the holder, and placed them on the table across from each other, exactly where Tyson and I had sat last night.

She plopped down into the chair and gave me an impatient look. I was clearly taking too long to follow her lead.

“Sit. And start talking.”

I opened my mouth to speak, and she raised her hand to stop me.

“Wait. First things first. Did I win the bet last night? Of course I did.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Aside from Tyson knowing who I was, which I didn’t really count anymore, there had been other people who not only complimented my costume, but also loved it.

“People knew who I was. But to be fair, some had no idea, even after I told them.”

“I knew it,” she said proudly, as if she’d won. Taking a sip of her drink, she eyed me. “So, what’s going on? What happened?”

I wasn’t even sure where to start. Once my brain figured that part out, I filled her in on the whole fake-Anakin-slash-Tyson debacle up until he had left my place last night.

“This is crazy. I can’t believe he was at the party. And you didn’t recognize him?”

Shaking my head, I knew it sounded unbelievable. “He was unrecognizable in his costume and makeup.”

“What about his voice? His mannerisms? I mean, I hate my ex, but I’d still recognize that asshole anywhere.”

“He talked with an accent. And I haven’t seen him in seven years, JJ. He’s all manly now. Filled out. Muscular. Different.”

She sat there, staring at me, her mouth slightly ajar before it turned into a wicked grin. “And he knew you’d be there? That’s the whole reason he went?”

I nodded. “Apparently.”

“That’s kind of hot, don’t you think?” She wagged her eyebrows, and I knew she was enjoying this a little too much.

That was the exact problem. “I do think it’s hot. But I don’t want to be

stupid. That's why I need your advice. You're a neutral party."

"I'm not though," she argued. "I mean, not really. I'm on your side. *Always.*" She emphasized the last word.

Wrapping my hands around the coffee cup, I spun it back and forth, the warmth feeling good. "No, I know that. But I think you'll be able to see things rationally. Logically."

"And you can't?" she asked, questioning my judgment. "I've never known you to be irrational. Unless it comes to your company, then you're a little batshit crazy, but otherwise ..." Her laugh stopped the rest of her words.

"I want to make the right decision," I tried to explain. This shouldn't have been anywhere near as hard as I was making it, but I couldn't seem to stop myself.

JJ shook her head and looked me dead in the eyes. "What does your heart say? How did you *feel* when you figured out it was him last night?" She put her hand over her heart and waited for my response.

I pictured the moment I'd found out and watched it play out in my head. "Well, I was pissed at first."

"Cause he lied," she said quickly, as if she would have reacted the exact same way.

"Yeah. But after that went away, I was kind of excited."

She smiled big and clapped her hands together. "Who wouldn't be? You finally got what you'd always wanted. The guy not only apologized, but he also wants another chance."

Her words should have been comforting, but they had the opposite effect. I *was* getting what I'd always hoped for—Tyson regretting leaving me behind. I'd hated being discarded like trash. I'd felt so replaceable and unimportant.

But now that he was finally telling me all the things I'd once longed for, was it just my ego that needed to hear it?

"What's wrong?" JJ asked, her tone now full-on concerned.

"I was just psychoanalyzing myself."

She blew out a long, annoyed breath as she wagged two fingers in the air. "Nope. You're making this into something it's not."

"This is a big deal for me," I complained.

"Yeah, yeah." She sounded annoyed at my level of seriousness. "It's really not though."

A laugh escaped me. "How can you say that?"

“Because, Eve, you’re acting like this is life or death,” she said overdramatically, clearly making fun of my mental state. “I hate to break it to you, but it’s a fucking relationship. They come and go. Sometimes, they work out, but *most* of the time, they don’t. Think about it. We get our heart broken, and then we give it to someone else, hoping they don’t do the same thing. But if they do, we heal, move on, give our heart away again, and the cycle continues.

“Tyson wants another chance with you. I can see it all over your face that you want to give it to him, but you’re scared it won’t work.” She paused for effect. “*Again*. And so what if it doesn’t? You’ll finally be able to shut that door once and for all and move on. Because I’m not sure if you’ve noticed or not, but you haven’t done that yet. Not really. Not since I’ve known you.”

Her rant struck a nerve. She wasn’t wrong. And apparently, she also wasn’t done.

“And, hey, the flip side is, what if it does work out this time? What if you guys needed to be apart in order to come back together stronger and better than ever? If timing truly is everything, what if this is finally yours? You’ll never know if you don’t go for it. You need to lighten up. See where this takes you. Give him that second chance. If it works, I can’t wait to be the maid of honor at your wedding. And if it doesn’t, we’ll find brothers to marry instead.”

I wasn’t sure if she was finished or not, so I stayed quiet for a moment just to make sure. “That was one heck of a speech.”

“I didn’t mean to get so worked up, but it’s just not that serious, babe. It doesn’t have to be this big, dramatic event every single time. Just go for it and see what happens.”

I couldn’t even tell JJ to follow her own advice because she already did. No wonder she was always going on dates with that mindset.

“I’ve never thought of it that way before.”

“Most people don’t.”

I liked what she had said. Even if a part of me fought innately against it, the rest of me felt lighter, free, and less wrapped up in my own head somehow. Giving Tyson a second chance wasn’t a life-or-death decision, like she had said. It was a simple choice. A little risky, of course, but still worth it.

“Are you going to call him or what?” JJ asked before pushing my cell phone closer toward me.

I reached for the device, held it in my hand, and stared at the screen while

she slowly stood up and tossed our empty coffee cups into the trash.

“Just do it already. Put the guy out of his misery.”

“Fine,” I relented, and she grinned, clearly proud of herself.

“It’s about time. Only took you seven years,” she said in a smart-ass tone, and my mouth dropped open. “Too soon?” she asked.

I nodded. “Too soon.”

LET ME LOVE YOU

TYSON

When my cell phone pinged with another text message, I almost didn't look. My phone went off at all hours of the day and night, mostly with a bunch of bullshit messages and unimportant things. But something prompted me to check, and thank God I did.

It was Eve. And she was asking if we could talk.

I'd gotten a hotel at a fancy golf resort right down the hill from her place last night, hoping that she'd reach out at some point today. I had known, if she did, I'd be desperate to see her, and the last thing I wanted was to be back in Santa Monica. It was too far, and I was too impatient.

ME: I'M STILL IN TOWN.

EVE: HERE? IN NEWPORT?

ME: YEAH.

EVE: DO YOU WANT TO COME OVER?

ME: ON MY WAY.

I wasn't going to give her a chance to change her mind or meet in a public place, where we couldn't be intimate without prying eyes. This thing between us was a private matter, and there were things I wanted to do to her ... *privately*. That was, if she let me.

Her wanting to see me had to be a good sign. Why would she invite me over just to tell me to take a hike?

I quickly threw on some clothes and asked the concierge where to get the prettiest flowers. After getting his directions, I headed that way first. I would not be showing up at Eve's house empty-handed.

I planned on romancing the hell out of her. I'd already set up multiple deliveries with a florist for while I was gone and on set in London. Eve would be getting flowers every five days until I got back and could hand-deliver them myself. It was definitely presumptuous of me, but I was confident.

With the most extravagant bouquet of wildflowers, sticks of some kind, and roses sitting in my passenger seat, I hauled ass up the hill to Eve's. When I got there, I noticed a car parked in front of her garage. Pulling into a visitor

space, I grew a little anxious. What if this was some kind of setup or trick to humiliate me?

When I walked up to her front door, it pulled open before I could even start knocking. A punk rock–looking chick stood there, dressed in all black leather, blocking my entry as she looked me up and down.

“I’m sorry, Tyson. She wouldn’t leave until you got here.” Eve’s voice rang out from somewhere inside the house.

“Well, Tyson, you have me to thank for all this anyway,” Punk Rock said before finally moving out of the doorway so I could come inside.

I gave her a questioning look. “Uh, thank you?”

“Exactly. You’re welcome.”

Eve appeared, her long golden hair cascading around her shoulders. She was in a tank top that hugged every curve of her upper body and a pair of jean shorts that should never be seen outside of this house.

“That’s JJ,” Eve said with a grin before eyeing the enormous bouquet I still held.

“Nice to meet you, JJ,” I said before handing Eve the flowers. “These are for you.”

“They’re gorgeous. Thank you. Did you get them at the florist on Main?”

She knew their work. I should have expected as much. Eve probably bought fresh flowers all the time for her events.

“I did.”

“They might be the prettiest flowers I’ve ever seen. You did good, actor.” JJ practically beamed, like I’d impressed her somehow. Before I could thank her, she grabbed her purse and tossed it around her body. “All right, I’m leaving. You two have a lot of making out to do.”

“What?” Eve’s eyes grew wide, and her mouth opened.

“I meant, making up. You have a lot of making up to do,” JJ said with a wink. “Some making out wouldn’t hurt either. Again, Tyson”—she turned to look me in the eyes—“you’re welcome. You owe me. I’ll start thinking about which friend of yours you can hook me up with and get back to you.”

She walked out the front door and slammed it shut behind her, leaving both me and Eve in her wake.

“What was that?” I pointed toward the door.

“That was JJ,” Eve answered with an eye roll and a smirk.

“And why do I owe her?”

“Because she convinced me to stop overthinking this and to just go for

it.”

I took two steps closer to Eve’s body, hoping she wouldn’t take two steps back. She stayed put as I closed the distance even more, my frame hovering over hers.

“Am I the *it* in this scenario?”

She swallowed hard, her hazel eyes looking into mine as she nodded that I was. I watched her take shallow breaths, her chest moving with each one as I fought against the urge to tear the fabric from her body and make myself at home between her breasts.

“I still love you, Eve,” I confessed, and I noticed the desire that flashed across her features. “I’ve never stopped.”

“I tried to,” she admitted, and my stomach flipped.

“But?” I pushed, and she looked down at her feet before meeting my gaze once more.

“You’re not that easy to get over.”

“Thank God. I’ve waited seven years to do this.” I cupped the back of her neck and leaned down to claim her mouth with mine.

My head spun the moment we made contact. It felt like no time had passed. My fingers wrapped in her hair, pulling on the locks as her lips parted for me, letting me in. Our tongues tangled, and my dick grew so hard, so fast that it was distracting.

“Tyson,” Eve said, her breath hot against me.

I wasn’t sure if she wanted me to stop or not, but I pulled away.

“Is this not okay?”

“Oh, this is more than okay.” She licked her lips. “Bedroom,” she demanded, and I scooped her into my arms and walked down the hall, determined to find it on my own.

THIS IS WHAT I'VE BEEN MISSING

EVE

Tyson was currently carrying me throughout my condo. He peeked into the first room we came upon, quickly shook his head, and moved right back out of it.

“Not it,” he said, and when I started to tell him which doorway led to my room, he shushed me. “I’ll find it.”

I giggled. “It’s not like you have many options to choose from.”

Being in Tyson’s arms after all this time was exhilarating. Kissing him again was thrilling. My body had instantly melted into his when his lips met mine back in the kitchen. It was like it had been waiting for him. There was a comfort and familiarity that existed between us because of our past.

Crossing physical lines so quickly felt acceptable since Tyson wasn’t someone new. It wasn’t like he was a stranger that I’d only met the night before. Not that there was anything wrong with that, mind you, but it just wasn’t in my nature.

If I’d thought that my head would tell me to slow down or stop, I was sorely mistaken. Every cell in my body was on board with this coupling. There was no hesitation, no second-guessing, and no qualms. I wanted to give myself to him. Every question and concern I’d had the night before simply vanished.

“Eve,” Tyson whispered as he walked into the right room and placed my body gently on top of my bed, his brown eyes looking so deeply into mine. “There’s so much to say. I have so much to tell you.”

“You don’t have to.” I tried to stop him. There would be time for talking after. “Not right now.”

His signature half-grin appeared. “What do you want to do instead?”

“I think you can figure that one out.”

He didn’t need to be told twice. I watched as he reached for his shirt and pulled it over his head, his naturally tan skin and washboard abs on full display. His body was a Hollywood cliché for shirtless actors, but, hey, that was exactly what he was at times.

My heart started pounding even harder inside my chest. This was getting more real with each article of clothing he removed. The sound of his button popping on his jeans had me salivating. It had been a long time since I’d seen

all of Tyson, and he was definitely a man now.

I wonder if it's bigger.

Does it grow as they age?

Guess I'm about to find out.

His jeans fell to the floor, and he stepped out of them, revealing a pair of short black boxer briefs that couldn't contain him if they tried ... and they were trying. His dick looked like a massive tree branch, pointing right at me. I made eye contact with it and gasped.

"He won't hurt you." Tyson looked down before stepping closer to where I still lay on the bed. "Unless you want him to."

"Is it bigger?" The question tumbled from my lips, and I started laughing. "Sorry. I just—it's just—" I kept tripping on my words as I pushed up to a sitting position. "I think it's bigger."

He glanced down again at the thing pointing at me and shrugged. "Well, he's definitely not smaller."

Before I could say anything else embarrassing, Tyson dropped to his knees and grabbed my body, tugging me toward the edge of the bed. His hand snaked behind my neck once more as he kissed me like his life depended on it. He was masterful, skilled at making me forget my own name as his tongue danced against mine. Pulling away softly, he reached for the hem of my tank top and yanked it over my head, his eyes firmly locking on to my breasts.

"I think these are bigger too," he said, licking his lips.

I only grinned in response. They'd definitely gotten fuller since I'd last seen him.

His hand was on my back, unclasping my bra, and I felt the air hit my exposed flesh before I could comprehend anything else. Tyson growled low, one hand moving to cup my left breast while he took the other in his mouth. Throwing my head back, I moaned in response to the pleasure he was giving me. I fisted his dark hair, scratching my nails on his scalp as he moved from one breast to the other, sucking and biting.

When he stopped, I wanted to cry out, but his fingers dipping into the waistband of my jean shorts kept me quiet. I raised my hips and scooted around on the bed to help him get them off. We were both in nothing but our underwear, each one of us staring at the other like it was the first time.

Seeing him like this was kind of new. He looked better than ever. Grown-up Tyson was a damn treat.

“God, you’re even more beautiful now than you were back then,” he breathed out into the air between us.

“I was just thinking the same thing about you,” I admitted.

“I remember everything, Eve. The way you taste. The way you move when I’m fucking you. The sounds you make. Everything.”

I swallowed hard, consuming each word that he gave me. I thought about saying something back, but my voice failed me, and once he started removing my thong, my brain short-circuited instead. His finger ran down my sex, hitting every nerve along the way before he inserted it inside of my hole.

“So wet for me.” He removed his finger and put it inside of his mouth, sucking every last drop of me from it. “Oh, I’ve missed this.” His face practically lit up as he dived straight down and buried his head between my thighs.

“Oh God,” were the only words I managed to squeak out between labored breaths.

His tongue was magic. And I knew it wouldn’t be long before I came on his lips. Not if he kept going the way he was.

“You like that, baby?” His breath was hot against me, and I gave him a look that said I might kill him if he stopped. “Yeah, you like it.” He grinned before going back in and making me lose all control.

I completely unraveled. And after my body stopped quivering, he stood tall, his tree-trunk cock stabbing me in the knee.

“I need to be inside you,” he commanded.

And who was I to stop the man from giving me more pleasure?

“If you insist,” I said, my voice still shaking as I moved to the center of the bed and waited for him.

I watched as he removed his boxer briefs, allowing his dick to spring free. “Oh. It’s definitely grown,” I said with wide eyes, and he smirked before rolling a condom on.

We had stopped using condoms when we were dating before and I was on birth control, so somehow, this felt like a step backward. I wanted to tell him he didn’t need to wear one, but I didn’t because using one was the smart thing to do.

He hovered over me, his shoulders flexing as his brown eyes bored into mine with so much emotion that I almost started crying. “Forgive me if I don’t last long. I’ll make it up to you later,” he warned before reaching for his dick and guiding it toward my opening.

When the tip of him touched me, I shuddered, still sensitive, but he didn't stop. When he pushed all the way in, I gasped at the size of him filling me.

"Definitely bigger," I breathed out, but Tyson looked like he was concentrating so hard, his face all pinched together. "Are you okay?"

"I swear, Eve, just being inside you makes me want to come. I'm trying not to move."

"Are you kidding?" I laughed, my hips wiggling against him.

"Stop doing that." He held me down. "I mean it. This is so embarrassing."

Sucking in a long breath, I reached for his chin and held it, forcing him to look at me. "Don't be embarrassed. Not with me. But please, please fuck me."

"Oh Jesus," he breathed out before he started thrusting hard into me. "You can't say those things out loud."

Each time our naked body parts touched, sparks ignited. There were so many emotions filling the space between us that the room felt thick with it. Our past. Our present. All of the heartache was gone, and in its place was so much ... *love*.

It was all I felt. And I was overcome with it. Our connection had never been severed. It was still as strong as ever.

Tyson shuddered and released inside of me. He had moisture in the corners of his eyes, and that was when I knew that he felt it too.

As we lay in my bed, side by side, our bodies tangled together, my heart continued to pound like it wanted out of my chest. I had no idea where it intended to go once it left my body. Maybe it thought it belonged to Tyson and should be with his.

In a way, I guessed it did.

It always had.

THE START OF FOREVER

TYSON

That had been the most intense experience of my personal life. I'd never been so overcome with emotion during sex before. I wasn't sure if it was because of our past or the way I'd never been able to get over her, but being inside Eve had been a fucking soulful moment. We were bonded in ways most people only dreamed about. That connection that everyone craved, we had it, even after all our lost time.

"So, now what?" Eve broke the silence between us.

"We do it again?" I answered like a question, making her laugh a little.

"Could you?"

Could I?

Dang, I definitely did not impress her if she thought so little of me. I could take her for the rest of the day and night if she let me.

"With you, absolutely." I rolled back on top of her naked frame, and she shoved at me, but I refused to move, staring at her like I'd never get enough. Because I wouldn't.

Her eyes pulled together slightly, and I could tell she wasn't in the mood to joke. My girl was overthinking things, and I had to stop myself from teasing her about it.

"I just meant, what does this mean? For us?"

"I told you I loved you," I reminded her before leaning down to give her what I intended to be a quick kiss, but once I started, it was hard to stop.

Our tongues touched, and I felt my dick grow hard in that instant. This woman pushed all my buttons.

When I finally mustered the strength to break apart from her, I said, "I still love you, Eve. I've never stopped. I'll never be able to stop. Hell, I don't want to ever stop."

I kept professing my love to her before I noticed a few tears start to fall from her eyes. Pressing my finger to her cheek, I wiped them away softly.

"Stop making me cry. It's annoying."

I never wanted to make her cry, but I knew that these were tears of joy. Or at least, I thought they were.

"You're happy though, right? These are happy tears?" I asked, suddenly nervous because she hadn't told me that she loved me back yet. Not really.

Rolling off of her, I slid to the side instead, making sure not to pull her long blonde hair in the process.

“They’re emotional tears,” she said, and that still didn’t really answer my question. At least not to my satisfaction.

“Eve”—my voice came out strained—“am I the only one who wants this?”

She pushed up onto her elbows and faced me. “Wants what exactly? I need you to spell it out for me.”

I thought I’d already done that last night. Apparently, I hadn’t done a good enough job. I’d repeat myself a thousand times if that was what she needed. Then, it hit me. She thought that us having sex had changed my mind somehow. That this was some kind of game or I was only in it for the thrill of the chase. A part of her believed that I wanted one thing, and now that I’d gotten it, I’d either be on my merry way or want to be friends with benefits.

Fat chance of either of those things happening.

“I didn’t go to the party last night to see you one last time. I didn’t come here to give you closure or to get closure. And I definitely didn’t come over this morning to get you into bed for one last fuck.”

I chose that particular word to strike a chord, to make a harsh point. And when she flinched as I said it, I knew I’d landed the point home.

“I’ve never been able to move on past you, Eve. I’ve never wanted to. Thank God you aren’t in a serious relationship because I don’t know what I would have done if that were the case.” My jealousy flared, burning me from the inside out. “I would have waited for you to break up, but it would have killed me. I don’t deserve another chance with you. I know that. You have every right to tell me to kick rocks and get out of your life. I know how badly I hurt you and that I handled things all wrong. But I am begging you for another chance. I’m not a stupid kid anymore. I promise I’ll do it right this time. I want forever with you. Please tell me you want the same.”

Eve sucked in a slow, long breath as she turned her head to stare at the ceiling instead of at me. If she was planning on letting me down easy, I wasn’t sure how I’d handle it. I’d be fucking devastated, but it would be the consequences of my past actions. People didn’t always deserve a second chance, and I couldn’t make her want to give me one.

I watched the rise and fall of her chest, counting the breaths she took before she finally turned to look at me.

“Okay,” was all she said with a nonchalant shrug.

“Okay? You want the same thing?” I clarified, hoping we were on the same page.

“I want to give us another shot.” She nodded.

My palms started sweating. I never got anxious like this, not even during filming. “So, we’re together?” I asked, wagging my finger between our two bodies. “We’re exclusive? You’re mine, and I’m yours? That’s what you’re saying, right?”

She was grinning like a little devil, clearly enjoying my nervous ramblings. “As much as I hated it at times, I’ve always been yours.”

“Me too, babe. Me too.” I wanted her to know she wasn’t alone in that. “I need to be inside you again.”

I reached for her body, craving the connection. I planned on making sure she ached for me the entire time I was away in London, filming. Without giving her a chance to respond, I was back on top of her, hovering, lingering, waiting for her okay.

“I’m on birth control, by the way,” she mumbled, and I almost threw my fist in the air.

“Thank God. I’m clean too,” I informed her.

I would never do anything that put her body in danger. And even though I hadn’t been a saint in the years we’d been apart, I’d been careful. I never went without a condom. Ever. The last thing I’d wanted was any kind of scandal in the press or an unplanned pregnancy.

“Tyson ...” Eve’s voice was as soft as her skin.

“Yeah?”

“I love you,” she said, and I felt myself break apart.

“I love you more,” I said before covering her mouth with mine and moving my dick toward her entrance.

She was already wet for me as I pushed inside, slowly at first. The way her eyes rolled to the back of her head almost made me come undone, but I refused to lose it that quickly a second time.

I thrust in and out of her before her hands gripped my back and her hips moved in a way that stopped my access to her.

“I want to be on top,” she demanded, and I gladly obliged.

Rolling onto my back, I slipped out, but she was on me so fast, straddling and reaching for my dick, that I didn’t notice anything other than the fact that she was touching me ... *there*. Her fist gripped me tight, and I was inside her again, her mouth dropping open as she took all of me.

My fingers dug into the sides of her body as she started to move up and down, taking me deeper each time. I was mesmerized as I watched her gyrate on my cock, her blonde hair dancing around her shoulders. Eve looked like a fucking goddess, and she felt like magic.

“You feel so fucking good, babe,” I said, my hands still holding on to her for dear life. “Get down here and kiss me.”

A smile spread across her lips as she bent at the waist and licked my lips instead. Moving to my ear, she gave me a throaty breath before sucking on the lobe playfully. She pressed kisses against my cheek, working her way toward my mouth. Our tongues collided, and I couldn't stop fucking her even though she was trying to distract me.

“Enough kissing,” she said before straightening up and riding my cock again.

I wanted to go deeper, fill her more, but she was taking all I had.

“I'm going to come,” she breathed out, her hips rolling on top of me like a wave.

I watched the way she moved, riding me the way that she needed, and I felt her orgasm building. Her pussy gripped me tighter, the pressure increasing as she yelled out and came apart on top of me. That did me in, and with a few more deep thrusts, I lost myself inside of her.

I'd never come inside of anyone other than Eve. And I knew in this moment that I never would.

LONG-DISTANCE ROMANCE

EVE

Tyson had eventually left for London. He asked me to come with him, but I had my own work and couldn't leave at a moment's notice. There were too many events and things to prep for. The holidays were my busiest season, and I was just getting into the thick of it. He understood, and I thought he had known I'd say no before he even asked.

When he had walked out my front door, my condo had suddenly felt like something was missing. It had always been more than enough for me before, but now, it seemed empty without his presence. Only Tyson Hunter could waltz back into my life and leave me struggling to breathe without him.

"You've got to be joking." JJ walked through my front door without knocking, her arms carrying a giant floral arrangement. "How many has this guy sent?"

I almost squealed when I saw her face. We hadn't seen each other in person in over a week, both busy with work. She had been in Vegas the past few days, doing hair for a bunch of swimsuit models, but I'd kept her up-to-date on all things Tyson via text.

"It's the third arrival since he left," I said, not even remotely complaining as I gave her a one-armed hug before taking the vase from her arms and putting it in the living room. My place looked so pretty, filled with fresh flowers.

JJ shot me a look. "Oh, you love it. All this romance. Was he always this way?"

"Always," I breathed out. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. Being in Vegas with a bunch of swimsuit models really does something to a girl's self-esteem."

Shaking my head, I narrowed my eyes at her. "I don't believe that for a second. Those girls have nothing on you."

"You weren't there when we went to the club. It was like I was invisible."

"Not possible," I argued.

"Eve!" JJ shouted. "Why would I lie?"

I laughed. "I'm not saying you're lying, just maybe overexaggerating a little?"

JJ never had a problem with meeting men. And they most definitely

didn't look past her or not see her whenever we were in public together. She had them doing double takes and chasing after her.

"Scout's honor." She threw up a hand before sitting down on my couch, and I followed suit.

"Let me see some pictures," I said, and she quickly scrolled through her phone before handing it to me.

"Wait." I swallowed the laugh that wanted to come out. "What was this from?"

"The night I went out with the girls," she said, and everything she had said made sense.

The girls were wearing practically nothing. There was so much skin on display that there was little left to the imagination. Small strips of fabric covered their private areas, and that was about it.

JJ, on the other hand, was wearing ripped jeans and a tank top. She looked hot as hell, if you asked me, but men were always looking for what they considered to be the easiest conquest or the best time. JJ looked like the least of those things in comparison.

"JJ," I said with a smile as I handed her back her phone, "look at that photo. What do you see?"

"A bunch of hot bitches," she said.

"Agreed. But look at your outfit compared to theirs."

She did as I'd asked and shrugged a shoulder at me. "You know I don't dress like that."

"I know you don't. But I'm saying, if you're a single guy, in Vegas of all places, which girl are you chasing?"

She rolled her eyes at me and threw her phone on the ground. "Whatever. Screw Vegas and stupid men. Let's talk about your perfect boyfriend. How's the long-distance working out?"

Hearing her refer to Tyson as my boyfriend made a grin spread across my face that I couldn't stop if I tried. I was in deep ... already.

"It's not that bad, honestly. The worst part is the time difference. That part sucks."

To my surprise, I was actually enjoying the time apart. We texted throughout the day, and there was always a video message waiting for me when I woke up in the morning. Long-distance wasn't as bad as everyone always said it was. Then again, ours had an end date, so maybe that was why it seemed so tolerable.

“You don’t miss him like crazy?” JJ asked before pushing off the couch and heading toward the kitchen. “I need caffeine. You want anything?”

“I’m good. And, yeah, of course I miss him, but this is kind of nice actually. It’s forcing us to talk and get to know each other all over again. It’s kind of fun, talking about our days and the people we interact with. I feel like we’re rebuilding our friendship.”

“Is he different? I mean, different than he used to be?” She sat back down next to me, a diet soda in her hand.

“Yes, and no,” I answered before trying to explain what I meant. “He’s still the same, but he’s changed too. I think it’s the business he’s in and all he’s gone through since we’ve been apart. He’s had so much success and fame. There’s no way that doesn’t change you a little bit. But at the core of who he is, he’s still that guy I fell in love with when I was nineteen.”

“I’m sure you’ve grown too. Not in a bad way,” she said, but I honestly didn’t feel like I’d really changed all that much.

Sure, I was successful and ran my own company, but I was still me. The girl who loved Star Wars and *Stranger Things* and saw colors and shapes in my head. The girl who had fallen for the charming boy back in college and never quite got over him.

“I’m really happy for you,” she said, and even though I’d never once questioned that, it was still nice to hear.

“Thank you.”

She started tapping a finger on her lips. “Now, which one of Tyson’s friends should I date?”

I laughed, and JJ shot me a look that let me know she wasn’t joking.

“You’re not kidding, are you?”

“Why would I be kidding?” she asked before reaching for the phone she’d thrown and typing with both hands. “Ooh, he’s cute.” She quickly turned the screen toward me, but the only thing I saw was that she was on Tyson’s Instagram.

I missed whoever it was that she was referring to. She went on that way for the next ten minutes until I was convinced that she had half of Hollywood on a list in her head.



My phone rang out with a video notification as I was lying in bed. It was only

eight p.m., but I was bingeing a show, and I couldn't seem to stop. Glancing down, I saw Tyson's face on my screen. I did the math quickly, knowing that it was four in the morning in London.

When I pressed the Accept button, his gorgeous face filled my phone screen, and I smiled. I'd had flashbacks of sorts whenever we first started video chatting. Considering the fact that the last time I'd seen him was on my phone as he dumped me, being a little triggered seemed normal. I hadn't expected it, but it'd faded quickly. Now, whenever I saw his face, I got happy and giddy.

I couldn't help it.

"Hey, baby." Tyson yawned, and I ran my finger down the screen, touching his cheek like either one of us could feel it.

"It's so early there," I said, as if he wasn't aware of this fact.

"Our call time got pushed up. We need a sunrise shoot apparently."

"How are you not exhausted?" I asked because the man worked insane hours.

There were script rewrites and new lines that needed to be learned for the next day's shoot, last-minute location adjustments, and call-time changes. It was all part of the production and usually couldn't be helped, but going through the day-to-day with Tyson really made me appreciate the level of commitment he had to bring to a project.

"I am exhausted. I can't wait to come home to you, Eve. I miss you so much. I'm ready to take a break."

"I miss you too. I can't wait to open my eyes and see you there." I grinned into the phone, and he smiled back.

I'd thought about it so many times even though we hadn't officially discussed what we'd do when he moved back home. Living in different areas probably wasn't a big deal to most people, but in Southern California, it was almost long-distance in its own right. It could take hours to get from my place to Tyson's. And I hated leaving Orange County anytime that I was forced to do it for work. Dread filled me the second I got onto the freeway, wondering how much of my day would be wasted in traffic.

The flip side was that the majority of the movie studios and film stages were in Los Angeles County, where Tyson lived. I couldn't ask him to always come out to Newport Beach and be the one who had to commute. It was the exact same dilemma and conversation I'd had with myself every single day since he had gotten on that plane with no solution in sight.

“I can see the wheels spinning in your head. What’s up?” he asked.

I wanted to be irritated that he could read me so well, but it was comforting and kind of romantic.

“No, it’s nothing.” I waved him off, shaking my head at the screen. I didn’t want to bring him down or talk about this while he was working. Plus, there wasn’t any rush to figure it all out this instant. It was just something I’d been thinking about.

“You’re sure?” he pushed.

“Promise.” I gave him a soft smile and changed the subject. “But ...” I paused before adding, “JJ is looking at all your socials to find her next date.”

He let out a laugh so loud that it made me look around to make sure no one was listening in. I had forgotten we were in private.

“She wasn’t kidding about one of my friends, huh?”

“Apparently not.”

“I might have someone in mind,” he said with a satisfied nod. Before I could ask for more details, I heard a loud knock on his hotel room door, and he told me he had to go. “I love you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“I love you too,” I said before ending the call and pressing the phone against my chest.

Who would have guessed that the same two kids who had fallen for one another in college would find their way back to each other as adults and give their love a second chance?

The thought had always lingered in the back of my mind like a perfect romance novel, but I’d never held on to it. It had hurt too much to live in the fantasy of what-ifs and if-onlys with Tyson Hunter.

But now that it was really happening and the two of us were back together ... I was never letting go.

KEY EXCHANGE

EVE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Tyson had come home from London months ago, given his notice on the show, and wrapped up filming in New York. They scrapped his character way sooner than he had anticipated, and he was released right away. He had sold his place in the city and sent all his belongings from there to my condo in Newport without telling me.

The other afternoon, I got home, and a hundred boxes were sitting in front of my garage. I had no idea what they were until I got out of my car and noticed Tyson's name on all of them. Reaching for my cell, I pressed his contact and waited for him to pick up.

"Tyson, why are there boxes with your name on them sitting in my driveway?"

"Shit, babe, I forgot to tell you," he said with a laugh, and I held my breath, waiting for the explanation. "It's my stuff from New York. I figured it was easier if I sent it all there."

"Ahhhh," I breathed into the phone, wondering how the heck I was going to make all that fit into my already-full condo. "It's a lot of shit, babe."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry?" He said it like a question, and I simply shook my head even though he couldn't see me. "I'll be there soon to move them. Don't touch them until I get there."

"Uh, why can't I touch them?"

"Because they're heavy. And you're a girl. And I'm your man. And it's my job. Just don't fucking move them, babe. Me and Ransom will be there soon, and we'll handle it."

"If you insist," I argued because it wasn't in my nature to sit around and watch someone do all the work while I did nothing, but getting sweaty and lugging heavy boxes didn't sound very fun at the moment.

"I do. Gotta go."

"Bye." I hung up the phone and sent JJ a text, letting her know that the guys were on their way over to move some East Coast shit into my place.

Ransom was one of Tyson's costars that he'd known for years. Surprisingly enough, he actually hadn't been one of JJ's picks when she scrolled through Tyler's friends online and presented him with a list.

Thankfully, Tyler had better taste than JJ did when it came to guys, and he picked her out a good one, setting Ransom and her up on a double date with us one evening.

It was supposed to just be one date at a movie premiere, but it turned into more soon after. Hell, it turned into more that night. They were all over each other, kissing for the cameras, laughing and holding hands like they'd been together forever. I'd never seen JJ look so happy. They'd pretty much been as inseparable as Tyson and I had been ever since.

I was still standing outside, staring at the mound of boxes, when JJ pulled into a visitor spot and cut the engine. Her door swung open, and her long legs shot out first, followed by the rest of her body in a gorgeous sundress with hair and makeup perfectly done.

"You're shitting me with all these boxes." She laughed before handing me a latte.

"You're a goddess," I said, taking it from her and sipping. "And you look way too hot for a casual hangout." I eyed her from head to toe.

"I like to look sexy for Ransom. Not all of us have known each other since we were kids, you know." She gave me a pointed look.

I glanced down at my outfit—yoga pants and a crop top, both with a thin layer of sweat still showing. "Are you saying I look bad?"

"Never." She shook her head a little too rapidly.

"Crap," I groaned. I'd left the house this morning to go work out, and I hadn't put on any makeup or brushed my hair. "I'll go change. And get myself presentable for my man."

"It's just the makeup artist in me. Occupational hazard," she shouted after me, but I was already racing inside to shower and change before the guys got there.

I was just applying my last coat of mascara when I heard the commotion. Guys were so loud.

"Eve, where are you?" Tyson shouted, and I yelled that I was in my bathroom.

Staring into the mirror at my reflection, I spotted him the second he came into the room. He looked so damn good, heading straight for me.

"I missed you," he growled into my ear as his strong arms wrapped around my middle.

I spun around to face him and ran my finger down the length of his face. "I missed you too."

He kissed me then, and the world stopped. I wondered if it always would. It always used to.

“Sorry about the boxes,” he apologized. “You’re not mad, are you?”

“Of course I’m not mad.”

“I practically live here anyway,” he said, attempting to sound nonchalant about it, but I could tell he was trying to get some kind of reaction out of me.

“Pretty much,” I agreed.

Tyson had spent almost every night at my place since he’d moved back with the exception of literally a night or two. He was also working nonstop on a screenplay that he wouldn’t let me read until it was finished. It drove me crazy.

“Think you’ll ever give me a key?” he asked.

He’d been hinting at my giving him a key to the condo for weeks now, and even though I’d had one made for him while he was wrapping up in New York, teasing him about it had become too much fun.

“Think you’ll ever let me read that screenplay?” I fired back, and his head started shaking.

“You play dirty.”

“I play fair.”

He made a tsk sound before kissing me again, and it took all my strength not to hop into his arms and straddle his waist. When we broke the kiss, he held me tight.

“You need to move some of your things into the Santa Monica place. I know we barely stay out there right now, but it will be easier for whenever we do,” he suggested, his tone uncertain, like he wasn’t entirely sure how much pushback I’d give him on the matter.

“That would make things easier,” I agreed because it would be nice not to have to pack each time I stayed the night there.

We had decided that it was smartest for Tyson to keep his condo in Santa Monica, as opposed to sell it, in case he had to work out there. The commute from Newport to Hollywood or Burbank would be a pain in the ass, and that was a logical solution that made the most sense.

Plus, if I took on work in the area, I’d have a place to stay now too. It was very much a win-win situation for us both, and it made me feel relieved instead of stressed. I had always dreaded taking jobs out there, but now, I could look forward to it instead, if I wanted.

In the meantime, however, he stayed here. It had been his idea. He’d said

he wanted to support me and see my business thrive and that there was no reason to be so far away from each other if we didn't have to be.

"And because I obviously love you more than you love me, I already made you a key," he said, pulling it from his pocket. It was decorated with palm trees and sand castles. "That way, you know it's for our place at the beach."

"Our place?"

"Babe, I'm not into wasting any more time when it comes to you. I did enough of that to last me a lifetime. What's mine is yours."

I smiled at him and palmed the gift before walking over to my nightstand and pulling open the drawer. Staring at the silver key inside, I reached for it and walked back over to Tyson.

"What is that?" he asked, turning his hand over, palm side up. I dropped the key into it, and he smirked. "Is this real?"

"Of course it's real," I answered with a laugh.

"How long have you—" He didn't finish asking his question before I answered it.

"Long enough."

"Maybe you do love me as much as I love you."

"Maybe." I shrugged, and he kissed me again.

"We'd better get out there before they try to make a baby on your couch," he said, and I shook my head to rid myself of the mental image.

"Tyson. Gross."

"What? I'm just being honest. They can't keep their hands off each other."

"It's your fault."

"My fault?"

"You introduced them!"

He nodded. "Eh. I'd do it again too. But if anyone's making a baby on that couch, it's me and you. Let's go."

He reached for my hand, and I tried to pretend like he hadn't just said that while secretly loving that he had.

When we walked out, I braced myself for what we might be walking into.

"It is pretty quiet out there," I whispered as we headed down the hall.

No sooner had the words left my lips than I noticed JJ sitting on the counter in my kitchen, Ransom standing between her legs, kissing her.

"Jeez, you two, get a room," I shouted, and they broke the kiss and turned

to face us.

“At your own place. Not ours,” Tyson added quickly, and I didn’t miss the way he had called my place *ours*.

JJ grabbed Ransom’s face and said, “Gladly,” before hopping down.

“No! Don’t leave. You just got here.”

“We’re not leaving, gorgeous. Who else would help your man carry all those boxes?” Ransom asked before walking in my direction and giving me a hug.

I swore Tyson growled under his breath. “Hands off.”

Ransom laughed and hugged me tighter in an effort to torment Tyson and his apparent jealousy. The doorbell rang, and I narrowed my eyes, wondering who it could be, as Ransom still held me tight, refusing to let go.

“Pizza’s here,” JJ said as she jogged over to the door to answer it.

Tyson took a step in our direction, his jaw tight, and Ransom dropped his hands instantly.

“I want it known that I’m only letting go because I need food.”

I stood there, biting back a laugh as the smell of pizza filled the air. My stomach growled.

“Hungry?” Tyson asked against my ear before sucking the lobe into his mouth and nibbling on it.

All thoughts of food flew out the window at that second, and I only wanted him.

“Not anymore.” The words fell breathlessly from my lips.

“Wanna go make that baby?” he asked, his tone dead serious, and I swatted his shoulder.

“No. I mean, not right now. Not yet. Not today.” I stumbled on all my words as my internal freak-out came spilling right out of my mouth.

“Soon though?” he pressed, and I gave him a surprised look.

“You’re joking, right? We’re not even married,” I started to say.

But before I could continue my rant, filled with all the logical reasons as to why we shouldn’t have a baby yet, Tyson was on one knee, holding a massive yellow diamond ring between his fingers.

“Yet. We’re not married yet. But we will be, if you say yes.”

My jaw dropped at the sight, and I forgot that anyone else was in the room with us even though I could make out the faint sounds of cheering and screaming from somewhere around me.

“Say yes to what exactly?”

That million-dollar signature smirk appeared, the one he used to give to only me back in college, and I was getting it to myself all over again. He reached for my hand and held the ring at the tip of my finger.

“Eve, you are the love of my life. You always have been, and you always will be. Say you’ll be my wife and never make me spend another minute without you by my side. Will you marry me?”

He held the ring steady as tears spilled from my eyes.

“Yes. Oh my God, yes!” I said before he pushed the diamond all the way on and stood tall, reaching for me.

I fell into him, my body melting against his as our mouths fused together as one. We lost ourselves in that moment, our tongues touching, our emotions filling the room. When we finally pulled away, he reached for my hand and held it gently in his.

“Do you like it? I can get you something else if you don’t. You always said you wanted a yellow diamond when we were younger, but I’m not sure if you’ve changed your mind since then.”

I shouldn’t have been so surprised that he remembered what I used to say, but I still was. “Like it? It’s stunning. And I don’t want anything else. Ever. This ring is perfection,” I said, staring down at the brilliant yellow stone sparkling in the sunlight against my skin.

JJ walked up with a grin on her face. Once again, I’d forgotten that she was even there; she’d grown so quiet.

“I filmed the whole thing. You’re welcome. Now, let me see that behemoth.” She grabbed my hand and pulled me over toward Ransom. “Honey, *this* is a ring. I mean, not that we’re there yet. But one day, if we get there, make sure you bring Tyson along to help you.”

“I don’t need Tyson’s help,” Ransom complained. “I’m a big boy. I can pick out a ring all by myself.”

“Honey, I love you, but you can’t even pick out a birthday card by yourself,” JJ said, and we all started laughing because it was true.

Ransom would stare at his options for hours, going back and forth between multiple cards, never knowing which one to choose, until he made himself sick over it. No lie. He had stood in the card aisle at the grocery store for over two hours one time. We knew because some fans had filmed it and put it online.

I kept staring at my hand, thinking it might be gone the next time I looked even though my finger now felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

“Well, I definitely can’t help with those boxes now,” I said, holding my hand in the air. I didn’t want to do anything to hurt it. The ring, not my finger.

“You girls just sit here and look pretty while we do all the work,” Ransom said before peeling off his shirt.

Not to be outdone, Tyson quickly followed suit and ran over to me. “Keep those eyes on me, fiancée. No ogling the help.”

“I only plan on ogling you, fiancé.”

“Good God. You two are going to make us all sick,” JJ mock complained, but the second the guys were out of sight, she squeezed my hands. “I’m so happy for you. You deserve this. And you deserve that ring.”

“Thank you.”

“I told you I was going to be the maid of honor at your wedding.” She gave me a wink, and I smiled.

“Or that we were going to marry brothers,” I reminded her, and she laughed.

“This scenario is close enough.” She gave a wave to the direction of the garage door, where our men were, and I couldn’t have agreed more.

EPILOGUE

TYSON

TWO YEARS LATER

I was standing on the red carpet, my beautiful wife at my side as cameras flashed relentlessly. One hand rested on her stomach while the other held mine tight. She had just started to show. We hadn't announced it publicly yet, but this would tell the world what they'd been asking the past couple of months.

Yes, my wife was pregnant. And glowing.

"Tyson, Eve! This way! Look over here!"

The line of press screamed our names, shouting directions into the air, hoping that we'd listen and make eye contact with their cameras for the perfect shot.

"Eve, are you pregnant?" one of them asked.

I looked at my wife just in time to see her cheeks blush and her head nod softly.

Clicking sounds and flashes filled the air. I'd gotten used to it, but Eve was still adjusting.

"Can we go inside yet?" she whispered into my ear, and I leaned down to give her a kiss, my hand moving toward her stomach, like it always seemed to do.

That only fueled more pictures and more shouting. She pulled away from me, a grin on her face as she took a step back. I followed her gaze and noticed JJ right behind us. I released Eve's hand so she could find solace with her best friend as I worked the press line.

"Everything you two do creates a scene." Ransom appeared at my side, which didn't calm down the picture taking in the slightest.

"You're one to talk," I said before tossing an arm around his shoulders and posing for the cameras.

He'd proposed to JJ not that long ago, and he'd done it very publicly before the start of a Dodgers game, where he was throwing out the first pitch. The press had eaten it up. So had the public. Their every move seemed to be documented online now. His only saving grace was that JJ seemed to handle it well and was unfazed by it all.

Even now, as I glanced at our two women, JJ was posing for the cameras

and talking back to the press while Eve attempted to stay in the background, biting her lip to keep quiet.

“Let’s get to the TV interviews.” I gave Ransom a nudge, and we both headed back for our ladies before taking them by the hands and leading them farther down the carpet, where TV cameras waited.

Ransom was playing the lead character in the movie we were here to premiere. But it was my directorial and writing debut. That screenplay that I’d been working on ... the one I wouldn’t let Eve read until it was finished ... well, it was about us.

Our love story, starting when we had met in college through now. Of course, I had thrown some fictional drama in there to make it more interesting and marketable. Once I had finished writing it, I’d left it on Eve’s pillow for her to read. I had come home that evening to a crying fiancée, who told me it needed to be a movie and a book and that every female needed to read it.

“I know I’m partial because it’s our story, but it’s really raw and compelling.”

I remembered feeling so proud, but also scared to death because what if she was wrong? What if it sucked and wasn’t really good at all?

Eve had convinced me to send it to my theatrical agent right then and there so that I couldn’t change my mind or take it back. I had a response waiting for me the next morning, asking for a meeting that afternoon.

That meeting led to the screenplay being optioned, complete with a bidding war. It all happened quicker than I had anticipated with studio backing and funding falling into place without my having to put up any of my money to get it done. I’d assumed that I’d have to fund it myself if I wanted to see it on the big screen. I couldn’t have been more off base.

We even hired a writer to reverse engineer a book from the script. Since I had no idea how to write an actual novel, I left it to the experts, but still got a co-writing credit on the cover along with a percentage of the royalties and a seven-figure advance.

Love Tricked had become a *New York Times* bestseller the second it was released. I always knew that I was popular with the public, but I guessed I never realized just how much until I wrote my and Eve’s love story. It seemed like everyone wanted to get inside my head and peek into my heart.

All I knew was that I was beyond grateful that she and I had gotten our happily ever after. I couldn’t imagine if Eve had blown me off after that Halloween party and never talked to me again. I guessed I would have

written a very different screenplay if that had been the case. Hell, I probably wouldn't have written one at all.

Looking at my pregnant wife now, I couldn't stop staring.

She caught me and asked, "What are you looking at?"

"You."

"Better not ever stop."

"You know I won't," I said before kissing her mouth again, not caring who was watching or taking pictures or filming. I'd never been able to get over Eve, and I knew that I never would.

Some people spent a lifetime trying to find their soul mate in this world, and I had met mine when I was just a kid in college. Lucky for me, she had given me a second chance to get us right after I screwed up and did us all wrong. And now, I was going to be the best husband and dad on the planet.

Even I couldn't have written us a better ending.

The End

Thank you so much for reading my Halloween story! Before becoming a writer, I used to work for Lucasfilm and Disney, so the entertainment industry was a big part of my life. I hope you enjoyed this one. There's one more coming. *The Thanksgiving Hookup* is available for preorder right now, so make sure you grab it. Have you read all the other Fun for the Holidays stories? There are twelve in all! And in case you're an audio lover, they're available in audio now as well for the first time ever! Enjoy, and thank you so much for reading! :)

THE THANKSGIVING HOOKUP makes me LOL everytime I read it! This is a really fun enemies to lovers, forced proximity, workplace romance that involves the most annoying and arrogant pilot on the planet. Phew. That was a mouthful! Are you intrigued? Keep reading for a look inside...

THE MOST ANNOYING PILOT

SKY

Oh, please, God, no, I grumbled under my breath as I neared the departure gate at the terminal, rolling my carry-on behind me.

River Santos, the world's cockiest and most gorgeous captain, was sitting in one of the chairs, alerting me to the fact that he would be flying our plane tonight. I almost started bargaining with the Almighty, asking for anyone but River to take the controls, but knew it would be no use.

The airport was already tumultuous enough. An impending storm had canceled multiple flights, and the aftermath was all around me in the form of screaming babies and frustrated passengers just trying to get home. I knew that if our plane actually got cleared to take off, it was going to be a bumpy ride. In more ways than one.

I took the precious few moments before River noticed me nearing to really study him. It wasn't something I usually allowed myself to do. Mostly because he was always paying attention to us flight attendants and trying to eavesdrop on our conversations. We were a gossipy bunch. But if the pilots didn't give us such good material to work with, then we'd have nothing to talk about. Basically, it was their own faults that they were our favorite topics of discussion.

River used to date my friend and fellow flight attendant Stacy. At least, that was what she always told me. But that was before I started working for the airline. He was the first pilot Stacy had warned me about, telling me that he was as typical as they came. A man-whore who slept with half the staff and left a trail of broken hearts in his wake, hers included.

She had told me to stay away from him. And me, being the good rule-following friend that I was, had listened to her. I didn't want to make things at work uncomfortable, and crossing that line with River would definitely do that. Stacy clearly wasn't over him even though she claimed that she was. I saw the way she looked at him whenever they happened to cross paths and I was around. Her eyes lit up like he'd hung the moon and stars, and she acted like a lovestruck teenager, just waiting to be noticed.

Why is he so freaking hot? It's not fair.

Just watching him annoyed me. He looked so at ease, sitting in a sea of frantic people, lost in his own world, typing something on his phone. His

pilot's hat was sitting in his lap, and his stupid dark hair was perfectly gelled into place, per usual. That man never had a bad hair day. It wasn't in his DNA—or in the gel he probably owned stock in.

I took two more steps, and I swore that man could feel whenever I was close to him. He looked up slowly, like we were in some kind of movie, his deep blue eyes roving up the length of my body until he reached my face. A smirk appeared.

“Well, well,” he said before locking eyes with mine, stopping me in my tracks. “I get to have you tonight, Sky?”

I snapped my jaw shut and ground my teeth together, attempting to stop whatever sarcastic remark was about to come out of my mouth. It was all in vain. I couldn't help it. River's existence made me snarky.

“You'll never get to have me,” I sniped.

He gave me a wink before adding, “So you keep saying.”

“At least I'm consistent.”

“No, Sky. You're a challenge,” he said before licking his lips, and I pretended not to be the least bit affected by that calculated move. “Men live for a challenge.”

[..... download THE THANKSGIVING HOOKUP today!](#)

Other Books by J. Sterling

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My Week with the Prince
Fools in Love
Spring's Second Chance
Don't Marry Him
Summer Lovin'
Flirting with Sunshine
Falling for the Boss
Tricked by my Ex
The Thanksgiving Hookup
Christmas with Saint

About the Author

Jenn Sterling is a Southern California native who loves writing stories from the heart. Every story she tells has pieces of her truth in it as well as her life experience. She has her bachelor's degree in radio/TV/film and has worked in the entertainment industry the majority of her life.

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