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CANDY

a real love novel by
Jessica Lemmon

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A REAL LOVE NOVEL

BOOK 2

JESSICA LEMMON



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PRAISE FOR JESSICA LEMMON

“*Arm Candy* is sexy and fun. Jessica Lemmon created an entertaining opposites-attract story with a great balance in the funny, sexy, sweet, and serious moments. Ms. Lemmon provided a rich cast of supporting characters.”—**Harlequin Junkie**

“*Arm Candy* is a sexy romance that is going on my re-read shelf, with a sigh of envy for Grace having found a partner like Davis.”—**All About Romance**

“*Arm Candy* offers readers a smoking-hot and tender romance filled with delicious banter and wicked snark.”—**Caffeinated Book Review**

“It doesn’t matter what Lemmon writes, I’ll be picking it up. Guaranteed good time with her stuff.”—**Little Miss Bookmark**

“This was a great read from beginning to end. I loved the romance that blossomed between Davis and Grace.”—**Book Binge**

“Fun, sexy times, great banter, just the right amount of angst and an all-around enjoyable read.”—**Readaholics Anonymous**

“Lemmon puts a twist on the friends to lovers theme... the perfect balance of humor and emotion with characters that are easy to fall for.”—**Smexy Books**

“I highly recommend this book.... *Arm Candy* is charming and sweet... I love the fact that it can be read as a standalone.”—**The Clever Bookworm (five stars)**

“Great banter, spot-on characterization, and all the feels. I loved this sparkling, yet heartfelt novel from Jessica Lemmon.”—**Kate Meader, *USA Today* bestselling author**

“One of the sexiest romantic comedies I’ve read in a long time—*Arm Candy* is a perfect laugh-out-loud, seriously steamy opposites attract story, with just the right amount of sweetness.”—***New York Times* bestselling author Lauren Layne**

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CHAPTER **ONE**

GRACE

I collect the two-dollar tip on the bar, sticky from sitting in a ring of spilled beer, and notice a phone number jotted on the back of one of the bills. I know it's fresh because next to the number is the name "Gregg," and the guy who sat here and drank three Bud Light drafts was named Gregg.

Question: Do guys *really* think that works? Like, can you find one and ask him for me? I can't imagine a bartender—or beer mistress, as I like to call myself—who would be wooed by a sopping-wet single covered in blurred ink from "Gregg," or any other guy angling for a date.

Let's say I call him. Let's just imagine that scenario for a minute. Let's pretend I bite my lip, shivering in anticipation. Let's set aside the likelihood that Gregg leaves his number for every other bartender in this city. The man spent over twenty dollars *and* left me a crappy tip, and wants to take me out. Little old me! I'm overjoyed! I call. He answers. I introduce myself as the redhead from McGreevy's Pub who received his phone number on my tip. He remembers me. In our fantasy world, let's imagine a best-case scenario: Gregg asks me out to a restaurant, actually pays (except you know I'm going to have to slide extra money into the black book for a tip), and then tries to get into my pants all night long.

I'm not opposed to sex on a first date, but Gregg, who occupied my bar seat for the last two hours, most certainly didn't leave an impression on me. He was average-looking and dressed casually. I remember that. But his facial features? A blur of attributes on an otherwise blah face.

Do I sound bitchy?

I don't mean to. And anyway, I prefer "jaded." No! How about "experienced"? *Worldly*. I understand a cold, hard truth most women refuse to believe.

There is no such thing as Mr. Right.

Hell, sometimes there's not even a Mr. Right *Now*.

If you thought otherwise, I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news. If you're with a guy currently who seems perfect, I don't begrudge you your happiness. Enjoy it for as long as it lasts, but know this: Every relationship has an expiration date. We're not Twinkies. We're more like Bibb lettuce. A relationship's shelf life is short. I operate like the end is nigh because, well, it is.

I could blame my divorce-lawyer parents (who themselves are divorced), but that's another can of worms. Let's get back to me.

I've been beer mistress at McGreevy's Pub downtown since the beginning of summer—a handful of months now—but my experience behind a bar is extensive. So much so, that I can predict, with a scary level of accuracy, what a couple on a date will order to drink. Most often the girls have the sweet pear cider on draft, and their male counterparts order the bitter IPA. There's a lesson in there about coupledness in general, but I digress.

Bob over there always has a shot of bourbon and a light beer. Shawn orders two Budweisers and takes both of them to the dartboard, where half his throws end up in the plaster. And then there's Davis Price.

Davis, who comes in here damn near every day. Davis, who requests the television be set on CNBC rather than sports.

Since he's the most common of our regulars (he has a seat at the bar he claims is "his"), one of our three TVs is always tuned just for him. He orders a bottle of Sam Adams and keeps his eyes glued to the television in between trading barbs with me.

I can handle him. It's his version of dipping my pigtails into the ink to get my attention. But here's the kicker.

Lately he has more of my attention than I'd like him to have.

Remember when I described Gregg and couldn't quite put the pieces of his face together? Davis Price is another beast. You could blindfold me and I could describe him to one of those artists who draw criminals, and it'd be like looking at a photo of Davis when he was done.

See? Too much attention.

The coping mechanism I've chosen is *antagonism*.

"Another?" I sweep by him, clean glasses in hand, and set them upside down on a shelf behind the bar. The key is to pretend that a shiver of awareness didn't just shock the air between us when I swept by.

"Yeah," he answers, eyes on the TV. Despite his fine visage being burned in my memory, I take advantage of his averted attention to check him out while I uncap his beverage.

He wears his standard attire: a pressed, expensive suit. He's tall yet fills out the jacket with a set of deceptively strong shoulders. I've seen them for myself on the rare occasion when he slips that jacket off—the way his rounded muscles press against a crisp oxford shirt. I've never considered myself a "shoulder girl," but laying eyes on his physique has a way of

making me wonder what he might look like *not* wearing pressed cotton.

Not wearing anything.

Davis's sandy brown hair is in disarray like someone ran her fingers through it in every direction. Given that he's not shy about taking a woman home from McGreevy's, that's not surprising. I'd like to think he did it himself, while hunkered over his office desk, working hard to crunch the numbers as a... whatever he does with stocks. I glance at the television and the scrolling numbers.

Gibberish to me.

I plunk the beer bottle down in front of him. I don't ask him if there'll be anything else, because if there is, he'll yell. I've made it halfway to the sink when I hear him do just that.

"Gracie Lou!"

That's not *exactly* my name. Grace is my name. He added the flair. Gracie Lou has a cute dinerish sound to it, doesn't it? The nickname has the added bonus of reminding me why I don't see Davis as even a Mr. Right Now. The expiration date with us has already passed. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

I turn to look over my shoulder and find his full lips pulled into a frown. His thick, dark brows center over smoky gray eyes. This grouchy expression does little to dampen his attractiveness.

When he doesn't say more, I sigh and pace back to him. That's new. I never go to him unless it's on my time.

Or maybe I'm overanalyzing.

"Your hair's different." He's still frowning.

“So?” It takes everything in me not to reach up and touch the ringlet I can see out of the corner of my eye. I don’t need Davis’s approval just because I bought a new curling iron and soft-hold hairspray I wanted to try out.

“So?” He tilts his head and his frown deepens. “You have a date or something?”

Ah, this will be fun. I give him a slow, devil-may-care blink. “Maybe.”

I don’t have a date unless I give Two-Dollar Gregg a call. I go on dates every once in a while. The men I see stick around at least twice as long as Davis’s flavor of the week, but he has me lapped in frequency.

Davis nods, sips his beer, and rakes a glance down my rhinestone T-shirt and tight black jeans. The rhinestones match the glinting diamond stud in my right nostril. Oh, and there are a few tasteful, usually hidden tattoos.

Even if Davis and I had more than a passing curiosity about each other, I know for a fact that Suit & Tie prefers his women in pearls, not rhinestones. Loose pastels, not skintight black jeans; and without ornamental piercings or ink.

Oh well. At least Gregg liked me.

CHAPTER **TWO**

DAVIS

Excitement is overrated. Wait. Hear me out.

Excitement has a way of hiding in sheep's clothing. It manifests itself as a charge of recognition in the air, revving your pulse. Tingling your balls. Promising a damn good time. But underneath that damn good time there's danger.

Which is exactly what makes excitement so exciting. Grace Buchanan *excites* me.

I don't like that Grace Buchanan excites me.

Let's just say I've had a brush with that type of danger. I'm not looking to get burned again. It's like the one time you try to light the grill using too much lighter fluid. The reward for your stupidity is no eyebrows. So, if you're smart, you don't go there again.

I'm smart.

I date. A lot. The women I date are... not exciting. This is a recent epiphany, so bear with me. When I first started dating for sport, there was excitement. Then the challenge fizzled out, and what was left was predictability. Predictability is a lot of things—I'm a big fan—but predictability could never be mistaken for excitement.

The women I date are blond. They're sophisticated and fun. They have goals and dreams and wishes and desires. But our handful of nights spent together aren't about scratching the surface of what makes them tick. The women I date want an itch scratched, just not that one. It's the naked, horizontal kind of itch.

I don't get to know them and they don't get to know me, and most of the time things end amicably—oftentimes before they start. That's the way it's been for several years, and it's completely fine.

Or I should say it *was* completely fine.

Along came Grace and suddenly “fine” is starting to look a lot like “routine.” Routine, like predictability, isn't negative. Routine is how I measure and live my life on a day-to-day basis. *Routine* I understand. *Routine* I can control.

I shake my head as the redheaded bartender pulls a beer tap and throws a casual glance toward the door, purposely looking past me. There's nothing controlled or routine or predictable about that one.

Her hair is always red, but sometimes it's auburn, other times Crayola red, other times carrot. Her clothes vary from rock-and-roll to retro to casual jeans and tee.

I take that back. There are a few things about Grace that do not change. The diamond in her nose that's too tiny to notice until it catches the light just right, and the tattoo I've spotted on the back of her right shoulder, trickling down her biceps on her right arm. Roses. Pink and red intermixed with a symphony of green leaves.

She's wearing a shirt that covers every inch of the ink—
Wait.

She shifts and the corner of a leaf makes itself known. If there are more tattoos hidden under her clothes, I've yet to catch a glimpse of them. Unless they're in spots inappropriate to share in public.

Fuck, that's a nice thought.

I've tried convincing myself that Grace is nothing but a collection of perfect physical attributes. From shapely thighs to a mouthwatering pair of breasts to the feisty glint in her eye. Mark my words: She chews men up and spits them out for fun.

Grace is hot in such a way that a man could be blind in both eyes and still notice her. It's impossible to ignore the way she carries herself. Confidence straightens her back as her gaze finds my eyes, challenging me to a staring contest she knows I'll refuse to lose. Nothing's as attractive as the way her voice dips to a husky alto when she's serious or lilts into laughter when she's not. Like when she's giving me shit for an offside remark I lob at her.

To cope with the obvious sexual tension, we've devolved. She's not interested in a stiff suit who watches CNBC, and I can't take her home. That means we can't pound out the tension brewing between us in a marathon of sweaty, no-holds-barred sex, so instead we pick at each other like competing fowl.

Why can't I take her home for a sex marathon, you ask? The short answer: self-preservation.

The shallow answer: I don't date redheads. I did once, and decided never to go there again. DO NOT ATTEMPT may as well be tattooed across Grace's smooth lower back. It's not. I checked.

I'm not one of those guys who has a "type." I understand that hair color does not the woman make. Let's call it a preference. A component of the routine. It's worked well for me, so why break stride?

As I think this, my eyes venture back to Grace. I never thought of myself as a superstitious guy, but for this "black cat" I'll make an exception.

As fun as it would be to let her devour me like a praying mantis postcoitus, her brand of fiery excitement and unpredictability could disturb the smooth surface of my carefully maintained Zen. That, I can't allow. I play by my own set of rules and have for some time.

Call it a precaution that I only date blondes.

I'll settle for skipping over the fun part of my and Grace's relationship (sex) and bantering with her like a couple who are sick to death of each other. The problem is the banter is starting to feel a lot like foreplay, and her brand of seduction has the other girls I date paling in comparison. The last girl who shared my bed? Boring. *Bo-ring*.

Grace strikes me as a woman who couldn't be boring if she tried—even if she were doing her taxes while attending a talk about investment logic for sustainability.

On second thought, I love numbers. I might find that kinky.

She struts by me again—she has to since my seat is in the dead middle of her bar—and I continue where I left off. “Where is your date taking you? Tell me it isn't that jerk-off who wrote his phone number on the dollar bill.”

She flicks me a glance beneath a slick of black eyeliner that makes her irises appear an explosive shade of green. Or maybe it's me who brings out that particular shade. I smile at the thought.

“Do you really think I'd date that guy?”

I don't. She deserves better and we both know it. “So. Where is your mystery date taking you?”

“Guess.” The catlike curve of her lips tells me she wants to play. I'm the mouse in this scenario, but what the hell? I'll

give chase.

“Domaine.” It’s the fanciest restaurant I can think of.

“Nope.” She pops her *P* and I watch her red mouth with a hint of jealousy for whatever louse she’s going out with tonight. I bet Gracie can *kiss*.

“So not a classy guy, then.” I take a drink of my Sam Adams and glance at the TV.

“If by ‘classy’ you mean uptight, no.” She surveys my suit and tie with a sneer. “Definitely not the business type.”

I smirk, plotting my comeback.

“You’re more a fan of the guy living in Mom’s basement, then? Is he taking you to a free concert at Bicentennial Park? Do you have to pay for your own drinks?”

A super slow blink precedes her comment: “Wrong again.”

She shakes her head, sending a rogue curl brushing one round, delicate cheek. I *really* like this look on her. Typically she wears her hair in big waves that brush her shoulders, but her curls are more pronounced today. And the way they move when she moves suggests they feel like silk.

Don’t go there.

“He lives alone,” she helpfully clarifies.

I narrow my eyes, trying to think of where to guess next. There are several options, but one stands out the most, and I don’t like it. At all.

“His house?” I grumble.

“Bingo!” She grins. “There’s nothing quite like a man who can cook, is there? I mean, unless it’s a man who knows what

he's doing"—she winks, black lashes hiding one clover green iris—"in the bedroom."

She wiggles away in a pair of black jeans hugging her ass. I grind my back teeth together. I bet every inch of her creamy, smooth skin tastes like cotton candy.

"I can cook," I mumble as a surge of competitiveness rolls through me. I was the one who built a wall between Grace and me in the first place. It wasn't too long ago that my buddy Vince and I were sitting here at this very bar and he told me to ask her out. Of course he had to know I wouldn't. He assumed the obvious: redhead. But Grace's hair color is an excuse.

It's the rest of her that's a risk.

Risk isn't something I shy away from in business. My livelihood is the volatile vocation of stock analyst. I frown at my competing thoughts.

I watch Grace walk, the rhythmic sway of her hips and the gentle curve of her small shoulders producing infinite images of what she looks like out of her clothes and, say, on my lap.

She isn't a *safe* risk. Something tells me if I took a shot with her, I'd ride her all the way down until I was hollow inside.

Been there. Done that. Don't need a repeat.

"Be careful out there, Gracie Lou," I call, but I keep my eyes on the screen overhead as the stocks scroll across the bottom. "Men are predators."

"Aw, that's sweet, Davis."

I like the way she says my name—in a familiar, warm way. There is something about her that suggests she's fragile beneath her "I am woman" exterior.

She continues stacking glasses upside down on the shelf at the back of the bar, her voice going hard. “You should know better than anyone that I can handle myself.”

I do know that. I’ve seen her thwart many an advance. She’s good at it, and typically the bonehead trying to take her home doesn’t realize he’s getting a professional brush-off. Sometimes she uses the boyfriend excuse; other times she changes the subject so swiftly the dolt doesn’t know what hit him.

One hour later, I’m wondering which blow-off she’ll deliver to the braying jackass a foot from my right elbow.

“Gracie Lou,” I interrupt, wagging my empty bottle.

She’s leaning on the bar, cleavage between two perfect C-cups on display. She slides me a glance before returning her attention to the blocky guy standing in front of her. I don’t care that she’s flirting, but I don’t like being second place to a man of such low caliber.

“Gracie Lou. That’s a pretty name,” the jackass tells her, his hands gripping the bar.

“Just Grace.”

“Okay, *Just* Grace. I’m *Just* Tim.”

Of course he is. What a fucking moron. My hand tightens around my empty bottle.

“I have a bet with my pals over there”—he gestures to the dartboards, where three chinos-and-button-downs stand with their fancy IPAs in hand—“that you can tie a cherry stem into a knot with your tongue.”

“You don’t say.” Grace’s eyes flash the subtlest warning, but Tim doesn’t pick up on it.

“I say you can, and they say you can’t. If you can, and you show me right now, I’ll go over there, collect my winnings, and split them with you fifty-fifty.”

Another glance at his buddies tells me he’s lying. They’re not watching him at all, which means there’s no such bet and Tim is an asshole. Grace tilts her head as if she’s considering, but her eyes flick back to his pals. She’s figured out the same thing I have. I smother a smile with the mouth of my beer bottle and turn my attention to the TV.

Tim leans in and drops his voice, which I assume is an effort to increase his sex appeal. “There’s an even bigger tip in it for you if you do it nice and slow.”

All right. That’s it.

I’m off my barstool so fast, Tim doesn’t see me coming. He rocks in place, leaning away from my height, though he’s got me in width.

“How about she ties your dick into a knot and I’ll double whatever you’re offering?” I say, unable to take his jackassery any longer.

Tim holds both hands in front of him as a shaky smile finds his mouth. “Hey, buddy, I didn’t know she was your girl.”

I don’t confirm or deny, but I do lean closer, hovering over him until he gets my point.

“Grace, my apologies.” Tim clears his throat and tries to ignore me, which he finds challenging since I’m invading his personal space. “Just the drinks, then.”

She uncaps two bottles and he hands her a twenty-dollar bill, which Grace stuffs into the cash register, coming out with eight dollars in change. She puts the cash on the bar in front of

him. Tim shifts away as he takes his beers and wisely mutters, “Keep it,” before hustling back to his friends. I earn a smile from Grace for my bravery.

We lock eyes for a lingering moment, which makes every second of that interaction worth it. When she blinks, I return to my seat. “*Now* can I have my beer?”

“I didn’t know I was *your* girl either.” She chuckles and serves me another Sam Adams. “I could’ve handled him.”

“The sooner he went away, the sooner I could get a refill,” I explain as I tip the fresh bottle to my lips.

Her coy smile suggests she knows my refill wasn’t the only thing on my mind. Part of me has started to think of Grace as mine—at least in a superficial sense.

I fix my eyes on the TV, not giving her confirmation that she’s figured me out.

“Thanks, Davis.” I hear the smile in her voice.

I wait until she walks to the other end of the bar to reply. “You’re welcome, Gracie.”

CHAPTER
THREE

DAVIS

It's a good day to make a lot of money.

I straighten my tie and pull on my suit jacket, checking my reflection once more in the mirror to ensure I'm put together. Face cleanly shaven, check. Suit pressed into sharp lines, check.

Do I have to suit up to work in my home office? No. I could ride the couch commando if I wanted to. Listen up and I'll give you a little Work from Home 101, free of charge. If you dress like a slob, the guy on the other end of the phone or email can sense it. I didn't climb to the top of my company by being perceived as lazy. Would *you* give me your millions if I slouched into my office in Superman pajama pants?

No. Of course not.

Downstairs I prep my espresso while toasting an English muffin. My standard breakfast lately consists of a whole-wheat English muffin and two boiled eggs, espresso, and a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice. It's a bit of a rut, I suppose, but it's simple and I can spend my morning thinking strategy instead of meal planning.

I'm a routine guy, yes, but I mix it up on occasion. Like I said, I can cook. My Belgian waffles, much like my skills in the bedroom, are moanworthy.

After breakfast, I have a date with the stock market. She's a wily serpent, but at least she's reliable. I can count on that bell to ding, telling me she's open, and then another to tell me when she's closed, and those are the hours I keep.

Surprised? I get that a lot. Most everyone I meet doesn't understand why a guy who dresses impeccably to work at home doesn't overwork himself into an early grave. I have enough. Enough money, enough of a reputation. Enough clients.

Could I have more? Sure. Do I want more? Sometimes. But I refuse to work a minute past four.

I'm not going to be making any panicked after-hours phone calls shouting, "Sell! Sell! Sell!" That shit's for the movies.

What I like is a solid day of honest labor followed by dinner and an ice-cold beer. Slide in a lunch break and a visit to the gym, and that's my personal utopia.

After my daily obligations, I like to unwind, and typically I choose to unwind with a member of the opposite sex. One who sheds her clothes and her inhibitions with me for a night or two of fun.

I'm rinsing my plate when a female voice croaks behind me, "Morning." I'm not going to lie: She startled me a little bit.

Not that I didn't know she was here. Heather came home with me last night after I took her out of McGreevy's to hit another bar she invited me to. Her friend is in a band, and she begged me to go while tugging me toward the exit. I paid my tab and went along. I didn't foresee the pair of buttery nipples that took her down. You know I'm talking about the drink, right? Okay. So, yeah, she'd already had several when we were at the pub, but then at Rhode Haus she had two more, and guess who we couldn't find an hour later?

Her ride.

She was so sauced she couldn't remember where she lived, so I brought her back to my place. She sneaked from the couch to my bedroom at three in the morning and tried to go down on me, only to fall asleep next to me. I let her have my bed and I took the aforementioned couch. I slept for shit, but at least I wasn't being simultaneously mauled and/or puked on, so that was a win.

Heather, wrapped in my dove gray luxury comforter, drags it with her as she comes down the stairs. My apartment, I have to admit, is the stuff dreams are made of. A staircase from the front door deposits you into the living room and kitchen area, and then another staircase angles to the bedrooms upstairs. I keep my decor simple. White walls to offset the black slatted stairs, and abstract artwork on the walls to add a splash of color to what would otherwise be a monochromatic palette. My office is beyond the kitchen in a dining room I turned into a work space.

"How'd you sleep?" I ask, drying the dish and placing it in the cabinet.

"Fitfully." She's a little bit of a thing. Blond, so well within my shagging rights, but I didn't shag her. Not only because she was drunk, because, come on, we've all had that sort of a hookup, but also because she didn't appeal to me.

Even as I look at her, hungover though she is, I can't figure out the lack of desire. Petite, with long, flaxen hair, she's pretty in a simple way. Her face is angular and her piercing blue eyes memorable. She's thin rather than curvy; small breasts press against the cotton of one of my T-shirts.

Then it hits me. Heather isn't exciting. A certain red-haired bartender must've awakened my dormant adrenaline junkie.

Fantastic.

“What are we doing today?” Heather angles her face for a kiss. Rather than give her one, I thrust a glass of OJ into her hand.

“Drink this and get dressed. Your cab will be here in a few minutes.” I turn and grab my espresso and lift it to my lips. “I assume you remember your address?”

She blushes, purses her lips into a pout. “You have to go to work.”

“I do.”

“When?”

I hate when they’re desperate. It’s embarrassing for them and sad for me.

“Five minutes ago,” I lie. I’m not late. I’m never late. I prepare for each unplanned possibility.

No, really. If a sinkhole swallowed my apartment right this second, I’d have an escape route.

Once upon a time I was ill prepared for a circumstance that left me with my dick in my hand. (No, not literally.) I vowed that day to be prepared, and block off my life in manageable, measurable units.

“Oh.” She chews on the side of her lip. “I don’t have to go, though.” She steps closer and fingers the button on my suit coat.

“You have to go, Heather. I brought you here rather than leave you at Rhode Haus, and that requires no thanks on your part. But I need you to leave so I can get to work.”

Her eyes glitter with what might be tears, but then she smiles tightly and sets the juice glass down. “I guess I’ll get dressed.”

Right then a honk lifts on the air. We hold each other's eyes for a truncated moment. Her gaze is filled with longing and regret and mine is filled with patience and understanding.

I can tell she's not used to being treated with respect. The problem is she's mistaken my hospitality for what could be more, and I can't allow her to continue with that misconception.

At least I didn't leave her to the whims of one of the dirtbags in the band. See?

I'm a nice guy.

GRACE

“No one wears red like you, Grace.”

My best friend, Roxanne, puts the final touches on my hair. She’s the beautician responsible for my flame-red tresses. Today we opted for a more natural shade of red, though the color is still bright and bold.

Like me.

She makes house calls, which makes her indispensable. My house isn’t large, but we make do with a kitchen chair, some plastic on the floor, and a stainless-steel kitchen sink.

I put down the hand mirror after admiring the straight, smooth hairdo she’s given me, with only a passing thought about how Davis preferred my curls the other day.

“Let me see it again.” I put down the mirror.

Rox knows what I’m talking about, and it sure as hell isn’t my hair. She thrusts her hand in front of my face, and I’m blinded by a gorgeous diamond set in fourteen-karat gold and surrounded by other smaller, shining stones.

I cradle her hand in mine. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She gives me a playful shove as she fetches the broom from the pantry and starts sweeping the inch she trimmed off my ends. “I know you don’t buy into the whole matrimony thing, Grace. It’s okay.”

She hoists a dark brown eyebrow and pushes her hair behind her ears before continuing to sweep. Rox, like any hairdresser worth her salt, has phenomenal hair. Smooth,

straight, and down to her elbows. She prefers to keep her natural dark color but always has a few pieces of bright purple or royal blue—or both—peeking out from underneath.

“Yes, but for you I make an exception,” I say sweetly. I stand, remove the plastic cape responsible for keeping the hair dye off my person, and carefully carry it outside to give it a good shake. Back inside I continue. “I’m still coping with the fact that you didn’t call me until *two days* after it happened.”

Rox, done sweeping, gives me a sheepish look. “I’d apologize by asking you to be in the wedding, but Mark is talking about a destination wedding. I wasn’t sure you’d want the expense.”

“Oh, like Puerto Vallarta?”

“Or Cancún.”

We both purr at the same time, then giggle at our shared brains.

“That’s nice, though!” I argue. “If you’re going to do it, do it right.”

“Yeah, well, it’ll be awhile. He’s not done with his master’s degree yet.”

“No harm in waiting until you’re ready.”

Rox stands in front of me and cocks her head. “I could say the same thing to you.”

“I’m not even dating! How could I be waiting to get married?” I chuckle as I fold the cape, but my stomach does a sickening flop. Marriage, even talking about it as if it’s way out in the future, is a terrifying prospect. And not just because my parents hated each other and divorced after I graduated from high school.

They stayed together for me. (Gee, thanks, guys.) Growing up with that sort of animosity around doesn't foster visions of dream weddings. Logically I know my parents are individuals and their marriage doesn't set the tone for anyone but them. But the idea of falling in love and watching it devolve into hate—or, worse, ambivalence—terrifies me.

“What about that guy? What's his name?” Rox asks.

I shrug. “I don't know.”

“You do too! The one who wore the hipster-style black glasses. And rolled his skinny pants at the ankles.”

“Ugh. Micah.” I was trying to forget about him.

“Micah. He was cute.”

“He was okay.”

“You only went out with him three times.”

“That's because I thought *okay* would graduate to *not bad*. By date three he'd gone from *okay* to *meh*. Once they slide down the scale, I'm out.”

Rox lets out a small laugh. “You're quick to cut them loose.”

Better a fast death than a slow, dragged-out one.

“There's no such thing as—”

“Mr. Right,” she finishes for me.

“There's not.”

“It doesn't mean you can't have great sex in the meantime.” She leans on the broom handle.

It's not a throwaway statement. Rox knows of what she speaks. She was the epitome of the girl who didn't want to

settle down. She played the field quite a bit, and I don't mean that in a slutty way. I mean she played the players, and she was damn good at it. Then she took a class at the community college where Mark was teaching applied physics. His big brain won Roxanne's big heart.

Go figure.

"I don't go anywhere except work and here. How am I supposed to meet anyone besides drunk guys on the other side of the bar?"

"What about coworkers?" she asks, stashing the broom back where she found it.

"None I'd consider." But my mind is locked on Davis. He's not drunk and belligerent. However, he's typically on a date with a blonde, so I don't consider him an option. Even though lately our animosity has turned borderline friendly. I remember the way he stood up to bail me out of the cherry-stem incident the other day, and warmth gathers in the pit of my stomach.

"Whoa. Who is he?" Rox asks.

I blink to focus on her saucy smile and raised eyebrows. "Who is who?"

"Whoever you thought of just now. Your entire posture changed. You got this far-off look in your eyes, and you're twirling your hair."

I pull my fingers from the sleek strands in a rush to prove her wrong, but when I shrug, my movements are jerky. "No one."

"*And* your voice went up an octave. Don't keep potential Mr. Right from me." Rox trudges over and clings to my shirtsleeve. "*Pleeeeeease.*"

“Fine! All right!” I laugh as I shake her off my flannel. “There is a guy who’s one of my regulars at McGreevy’s. But,” I add when her eyes light up, “he’s a manwhore and we don’t like each other.”

“So he’s hot.”

“He’s gorgeous.” I can’t lie any more than I can prevent the sigh from lining my voice. “Hence the manwhore thing. Unfortunately, he’s working his way down a sexual bucket list of blondes, so”—I gesture to my red hair—“not his type.”

It’s a total blow-off, but Rox lets me have it.

“Honey, I can make you blond.” Her eyes narrow as she considers. “We’d have to do it in three different sessions and wait a few weeks in between color lifts. Otherwise you’ll have so much breakage—”

“Rox. No.”

She sighs. “Does he have a friend?”

“He has a very attractive friend.”

She gasps.

“Vince recently, and happily, hooked up with one of the cutest brunettes I’ve ever seen.” Not to mention that Jackie is sweet and funny and, from what I’ve observed, the perfect match for him.”

“Well. Shit.”

“I know.” I throw my arms into the air dramatically. “I’m hopeless.”

Rox is laughing. She knows I’m kidding. I never needed a man in my life to define me. “Change so we can go. I want to pick out an outfit to match my masterpiece.”

Her “masterpiece” is my hair. She wants me in new clothes to complement the new cut and color. I pull the flannel shirt off and toss it next to the accordion doors hiding my washer and dryer before taking the stairs to my bedroom.

“I have to be able to wear it to work tonight!” I call as I pull on a clean shirt. “No party dresses or four-inch stilettos allowed!”

She chimes in that she knows better and then starts in on how she thinks I’d look good in an emerald green floor-length gown.

My laughter ebbs as I picture it: me sashaying in wearing sequins and heels and Davis’s jaw dropping to the floor.

I bite my lip in consideration. There he is in my fantasies again. Now, how did that happen?

CHAPTER
FOUR

GRACE

I recognize the tiny blonde approaching my bar.

Last night Davis sidled up to her and bought her a buttery nipple. I poured it. She's young—college age maybe?—and more dishwater than platinum, but she's a blonde. Evidently Davis's latest flavor of the week has come back for a refill.

And I don't mean on her drink.

She missed Davis by seconds. He's in the bathroom. His beer is sitting in its usual spot. The blonde eyes the bottle of Sam Adams, and then the facedown cellphone like she's debating picking it up and checking the screen.

She flashes me a nervous smile, then looks around as if he were simply waiting off to the side to surprise her. Movement catches my eye in the back of the room. Davis steps out of the bathroom, well within my range of vision but too far over the blonde's shoulder for her to notice him. He notices her, though.

He takes three steps, spots her, and freezes like he's doing his own personal mannequin challenge. He gestures to me, slicing the air with both arms like he's a ref calling an incomplete pass. This is one particular blonde he's not looking forward to running into today.

Oh, Davis.

"Men. They'd forget their heads if they weren't attached to their necks," I say to the blonde as I pick up the phone.

Wagging it at her, I comment, “Do you know how many cellphones are left here each week?”

“No.” She blinks big blue eyes. Poor thing. I almost feel sorry for her, but not quite. “Davis usually sits here, doesn’t he?”

“He does.” I plaster a smile onto my face.

There was a time I would’ve sold him out. Pointed over her shoulder and told her he was avoiding her because he changes girlfriends like he changes underwear. Today I’m disinclined to give her a chance to sink her hooks into him.

I don’t know why. Maybe for the same reason that Davis swooped in to save me from the cherry-stem guy.

“The next time you see him, can you tell him that Heather stopped by?” she asks.

“Sorry.” I allow sympathy to color my features. “I can’t.”

This confuses her, if the pleat separating her thinly plucked eyebrows is any indication. She fiddles with the strap on her purse.

“We went out,” she continues explaining, “but I don’t have his number.”

Because he didn’t want you to have it, hussy, I think but don’t say. I’m definitely territorial today. This is my bar. I don’t want hussies in my establishment.

I lean toward her as if conspiring. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Davis lean in too, one hand out as if to keep me from blowing his cover.

“If I passed on every message from every pretty girl who’s upset with Davis, Heather, I’d have to quit bartending and make that my full-time job.” I pat her hand because she’s not

taking this news well. “Would you like a word of advice from a girl who’s been used by a guy like him?”

She nods slowly. Reluctantly.

“Cut your losses. The sex isn’t worth it and it only gets worse.”

Her cheeks color and she snatches her hand away. With a murderous glare at me—what did I do?!—she turns and stalks out of the bar, climbs into a red Smart Car, and zips down the road. Davis, the coward, slinks back to his seat once she’s gone.

“Thanks, Gracie Lou,” he says, relief in his voice. “I owe you one.”

He reaches for his bottle but I grab it before he does and empty it down the sink. He shouts a protesting “Hey!” but I keep pouring, giving it a few hard shakes to get the last drops out.

“You’re cut off.” I slide his cellphone back to him.

“That’s my first one! I only drank half of it.” He grimaces and damn if he still isn’t attractive. “Not the beer. You’re cut off from picking up girls in my bar.”

“McGreevy’s isn’t *your* bar.”

“Close enough.” I’m one of the managers. The owner, Dax, has been absent all summer doing God knows what. He hired me, then went missing like the FBI was on his tail.

“You can’t keep having sex with them and not letting them know it’s over, Davis.” I toss the beer bottle into the trash. “It’s inhumane.”

“Is that what she told you?” He leans forward and lowers his voice. “That she and I had sex?”

“She didn’t have to tell me. I have eyes. She has blond hair.”

He smirks like he has something on me. I cock my head to one side in consideration. “You mean you *didn’t* take her home?” I probe.

“I took her home, but nothing happened.”

“Ha!” Surely he’s kidding. My smile falls when he continues to watch me earnestly. “You left with her last night. I assumed...”

He shakes his head. “That’s not how it works, Gracie.”

What, like there are rules?

Relief washes over me and the feeling is so foreign, I’m tempted to turn and check the mirror behind me to make sure I didn’t *Quantum Leap* into someone else’s body. To cover my reaction, I grab a bar towel and start wiping down the bar in front of him.

“I wouldn’t know, since you have a type and I’m clearly not it.” I point at my hair. Once I jokingly suggested Davis try out a redhead sometime, and he stormed out of the bar. He avoided me for a good bit after that. When he did return, I received a mumbled apology without eye contact. I’m guessing he had a bad breakup with a redhead, but he never said that was the case.

“I don’t have a *type*,” he argues. “Give me a Sam Adams or I’ll go drink somewhere else.” He stabs the bar top with his finger.

I clutch the towel to my chest with both hands and let my chin tremble as I feign devastation. “No, Davis, please. Anything but that!”

By the time I throw my arm over my forehead in *telenovela* style, he's scowling at me. I grin and toss the towel aside.

"This is a tender topic, I know." I flatten my palms on the bar in front of him. "We've known each other awhile now. Level with me. Why the blondes? Why pastel-wearing Barbie dolls with large, vacant eyes and tiny little frames? Don't you want a woman who can handle it if, during the throes of sex, you back her against a wall, or I don't know, break a headboard or something?"

His gray eyes heat so much I could swear they're smoking. He leans forward, his voice a seductive husk when he asks, "Damn, Gracie Lou. Are you offering?"

I'm a blusher when caught off guard—blame the red hair. Heat steals up my neck, warmth enveloping me as I imagine just that scenario. Davis pushing me against the wall. Hard kisses. Shouts of completion as his bed frame bangs the wall....

I clear my throat but my voice is thin when I say, "You wish."

He sits back in his chair and fiddles with his phone, tapping it on the bar before flipping it facedown again. "I admit, I didn't know you were interested."

"I'm not interested." I'm flustered. My heart ratchets up a few beats per minute, and I reach for the bar towel again so I have something to do with my hands.

"Care to make a wager on that?" he asks.

I roll my eyes. "Don't you do enough gambling at your day job?"

"Not gambling, Gracie. I'm a stock analyst. I *analyze*."

The spark in his eyes matches the thrum in the air between us. It's the same sexual tension I've always felt around him. It lingers because we have no outlet. Like an overfilled balloon, we're in need of a release valve—or a sharp pin.

“Fine. I don't mind easy money.” I lift my chin. He wants to play? I'll play. Time for Davis to put his money where his contoured, firm mouth is. “I'll bet you one hundred dollars you won't ask out the next nonblonde who approaches you.”

He grunts, his eye roll suggesting he could do that in his sleep. I grin, knowing I have him. “Two hundred if she's a redhead.”

His cocky smile falls, which was the reaction I expected. What I don't expect is for his hand to shoot out and grip my wrist, his thumb rubbing the soft skin there.

His voice is barely above a whisper when he says, “I win.”

It takes me a full count of three to understand his meaning. Much like the blonde who was standing in front of me a few minutes ago, I snatch my arm away. “Not *me!*”

“You approached. I asked.” He shrugs. “Those were the terms.”

“I-I didn't approach you.” I don't want to date Davis. I don't like Davis.

“You leaned in and said, ‘Two hundred if she's a redhead.’ Gracie, *that* is an approach.” He winks, and the blush warming my neck burns into rage.

“I meant to challenge you,” I growl.

He gives me a curt nod and folds his hands like an executive at a desk. “Challenge accepted.”

His handsome face is scarily sincere.

“You have three Davis packages from which to choose.” He ticks them off using his fingers. “The Davis. The Davis Deluxe. The Platinum Davis.”

“You’re making this up.” Isn’t he?

“The Davis,” he continues, “is standard for any date save one detail.”

“Which is?” I fold my arms, still not buying it. What kind of guy offers dating packages, other than an escort?

“Hold the eggplant.”

He’s not laughing with me.

“Not literally. ‘Hold’ in this scenario means *no* holding. You can’t touch me below the belt.” My gosh. He *is* an escort.

“You need to make that distinction, do you?” I hoist a brow and try to appear like I’m not thinking about what Davis’s *eggplant* might look like. Like I’m not thinking about how many women bypassed that option because they were glad to touch it. “Why an eggplant?”

“Well, it used to be ‘Hold the pickle,’ but then the eggplant emoji gained popularity. I had to update.”

“Ah, I see. So sexting is part of the basic package?”

“No, that’s the deluxe,” he says so sincerely that I’m beginning to believe him. “Sexting is a substantial time requirement.”

“You’re insane,” I mutter on a nervous laugh. At least the heat is receding from my face now.

“I’m efficient. Which package would you prefer, Grace?” Something seductive slides into his voice. Even during this bizarre conversation, that same charge sizzles in the air.

“Unless you’re chicken,” he says, easing us onto familiar ground.

“I’m the one who issued the bet,” I remind him. “I’m certainly not afraid of you or your... *packages*.”

I kind of am, though. I just explained to Rox why I wasn’t dating. But maybe... I mean, there’s no way Davis will stick around for more than one date, so what’s the harm?

“Prove it,” he says. “When’s your next day off?”

My throat is so dry I have to swallow before I can formulate an answer. “Thursday.”

Am I really doing this? At some point our banter slipped off the tracks and we entered *The Twilight Zone*.

“Thursday.” He tosses a few bills on the bar to pay for his beer. “Decide which package you want before then and send me a text.”

“With or without an eggplant emoji?” I smirk.

He leans across the bar, grabs a pen from a cup, and jots his phone number on one of the dollar bills. I flick my eyes to his lips and for one insane second imagine what his firm, full mouth might feel like against mine.

Incredible, I imagine.

“That’s up to you.” He backs away. Without turning, he says, “Include your address with the text. I’ll pick you up at eight.”

I stare at his phone number on the dollar bill and consider texting him. *Damn*.

This might be the first time in the history of the world the ole phone-number-on-a-dollar pickup worked.

DAVIS

I know, I know. I made a lot of noise about not going out with Gracie. I alluded to a past that traumatized me enough that I swore off excitement forever.

But then I got competitive and that old adage “Always leave ’em wanting more” had me drop- kicking the ball into Grace’s court.

There is a problem with that adage in this case, though. I’m the one who was left wanting. I’ve avoided McGreevy’s the last two days to force Grace’s hand. If she didn’t see me, she’d have to text me. Part of my brilliant plan was also that she wouldn’t be tempted to take back her yes.

Today’s Thursday and she hasn’t texted. I shouldn’t care that she hasn’t texted.

At the gym, I finish one last bicep curl and rest my elbows on my knees, blowing out a slow breath. My mind goes to work and loops my mental to-do list until a voice interrupts my thoughts.

“Hey, stranger.”

Slowly I raise my head. I’m confronted by a smooth blond ponytail, caramel brown eyes, and legs that go for miles.

“Hi.”

She gives me a tight-lipped smile. I get this look a lot. “You don’t remember me.”

“Not true.” I stand and place the weights on the rack. “You and I went to the Ale Fest together over the summer. You like

ciders, hate IPAs”—I turn and snag my towel from the bench I was sitting on—“and your favorite color is green.”

She laughs—a predictable response. I don’t remember her favorite color, or if she told me what it was.

“It’s purple.” She gestures to her purple spandex shorts. I should have known. “I haven’t seen you around.”

I usually work out on my lunch break, but lately I’ve been hitting the gym first thing in the morning. Except for today. Today I checked my phone every hour on the hour for Grace’s text and then, frustrated, came in during lunch to blow off steam.

We made a bet. She lost. Rules are rules.

Except I’m not sure that’s what’s bothering me. I’m not accustomed to rejection.

“Anyway,” the blonde continues, reminding me she’s there. I try to recall her name. It starts with an *M*. I remember that much. “Are you free tonight?”

She cocks a hip and lifts an eyebrow.

Mandi.

That’s right. A visual of what her body looks like without clothes snaps to the front of my mind.

It’s not a bad memory at all.

“Sadly, Mandi, I’m not free.” Her eyes light as if she’s impressed I remembered her name, but the light snuffs out when I turn her down. “I have a date tonight.”

If she texts me.

“We could always hook up this weekend.” Mandi dips her chin and peeks coyly through her lashes. For the life of me, I

can't figure out why she's willing to play sloppy seconds knowing I have a date tonight. Mandi's fit, forward, and gorgeous. I bet half the guys in here would give their left nut to go out with her.

I take a step closer to her and touch her arm, just a gentle brush of my fingers. "Sorry, sweetheart. Maybe another time."

Her sex-kitten ploy drops and she now looks peeved. I hear her mutter, "Whatever, jerk," as she marches past me.

I watch her go, my gaze wandering past a bulky guy on the treadmill. He shakes his head like I'm an idiot for turning her down.

On my way to the showers, I consider that I am an idiot for turning Mandi down. She would have been a guaranteed good time tonight.

Instead I'm choosing to wait on Grace to text me, which is not guaranteed. Hell, if she does call, she could choose the basic Davis package. She might choose it out of spite, knowing it means she can't touch the goods.

What I didn't tell her was that the package doesn't exclude my touching her. I can still touch each and every part of her. *If* she asks.

I open my locker and check my text messages. One from Vince. Zero from Grace. I'm not sure how long to wait.

Arguably, I've already waited too long.

CHAPTER
FIVE

DAVIS

When I open the door to McGreevy's, Grace's head swivels in my direction, her hair curled the way I like it, her lush mouth parting into a smile. My chest gives a longing tug I'm not used to feeling.

Like I missed her or something. Strange.

"Haven't seen you around for a while," she says casually. She's bent over the sink washing a wineglass she then rests on a mat to dry. I most certainly do not admire the way her breasts jiggle with the move.

Much.

"Yeah. Busy week." I rest my hand on the barstool. She knows I'm here to confront her: the *ghoster*.

"Staying for a drink?" Her smile holds.

"Why not?" I'm off-kilter but slide onto the seat anyway.

Once there, I fold my hands in front of me. A Sam Adams appears and, before she can skip away and act like there's nothing going on, I latch onto her wrist.

Her eyes widen.

"Forgetting something?"

Her eyes dart to the bottle. "Coaster?"

A smirk finds her lips as I shake my head. "You're toying with me." I let go and gulp down a few swallows of my beer.

"Only a little."

Eyes on the television, I try to ignore her. Not easy when she smells so good. My immediate space is infiltrated by an exotic scent—flowers or cinnamon. Flowers *and* cinnamon.

Hell, I don't know, I'm horrible at that sort of thing.

She walks to the far end, chats up a customer before delivering the bill, and cashes him out, then swaggers my way. And I do mean *swaggers*. She walks like a woman who knows the ball is in her court.

Allow me to lob another one her way.

“A girl at the gym asked me if I was free tonight,” I announce. I lift my beer but don't drink, pausing halfway to my mouth. “Repeats are the norm.”

Okay, that was an asshole thing to add, but whatever. I stand by it. I take that drink.

“And what did you tell her?”

Placing my bottle back on the bar, I lower my voice, which has the desired effect of Grace leaning in to hear me. “I told her no, and then she asked me what I was doing over the weekend.”

“Why am I not surprised?” She grunts, droll. A pale tinge of pink stains her cheeks. Anger? Maybe. I sure as hell hope so. Anger means jealousy, and jealousy means Grace wants a piece of me.

Now that we've crossed a line, I'm all for it. Dangerous or not, *yippee-kai-yay*.

“I turned her down for that too.” I let Grace off the hook. “I wasn't sure if you were going to go for the platinum, in which case I might be tied up this weekend.” I give her a wicked grin. “Or tying you up this weekend.”

Grace tosses her head back and laughs, which has the simultaneous effects of me grinning like an idiot and a rogue surge of pride swelling my chest. Don't get me wrong, I'm used to charming women. But there's something special about charming *this* woman.

"I didn't text you," she says when she sobers, placing her hands on the bar in front of her. She's wearing a high-necked shirt with sleeves, but the shoulders are cut out. The innocuous part of her that's exposed is oddly thrilling. Especially with a pale pink rosebud visible. I shift my eyes to her face, glance at her diamond nose stud, and meet her gaze again.

"Change your mind?" I ask, careful not to sound peeved. To be clear, I'm not peeved. I'm curious. When it comes to Grace, insatiably so.

"Why? Are you going to call the blonde at the gym?" She hoists an auburn eyebrow.

"How do you know she was blond?" I feign confusion. Grace smiles.

"I didn't change my mind. But I'm not going to choose a package beforehand."

"No?" I'm intrigued.

"Nope." She shakes her head and soft curls coast over her smooth skin. "What if I choose the Davis but decide halfway through the date I want to put my hand in your pants?"

I shouldn't have taken that drink. I sputter and cough, and she laughs, the sound tinkling and cherubic. Too bad I know about the horns poking out of her hair. She's not innocent.

"Or," she continues as I clear my throat again, "what if I choose platinum but then learn you're a horrible kisser?"

Horrible kissers are notorious for being unable to satisfy me in bed.”

This time my cough is more a sound of disbelief. My mouth is open, poised to defend myself, as my mind whirls. Satisfying Grace in bed—or in the car—or right fucking here, in the bathroom of McGreevy’s, is a challenge I’m up for.

She holds me hostage with hypnotizing jade green eyes. “I can be demanding, Davis. I’m not sure you could handle me.”

I shut my mouth so hard my teeth clack. Then, through the tension humming around us, reply with, “Say the word and you’ll find out.”

We stay like that for two, three, twelve seconds. I’m not sure. She blinks first, but only because the bell rings over the door announcing a new arrival to McGreevy’s.

My best friend, Vince, has horrible timing.

“What’s shaking, guys?” He’s dressed for work—jeans and a button-down, a vest with a watch pocket in the front. Vince has the look of an artist even working in a business setting. It’s admirable. If I lost the suit, who knows what bad luck would befall me? Maybe I *am* superstitious.

“I thought you were hanging out with Jackie tonight,” I tell Vince as he sits next to me. I don’t relish the idea of an audience while I strike out with Grace, so hopefully she saves the really humiliating stuff for after he leaves.

“She’s coming over, so I ordered takeout.”

I’m not used to Vince with a girlfriend. Vince with a wife was something to behold, but I can’t remember him this relaxed around Leslie. Vince with Jackie is just Vince. With Jackie. He’s able to exist in the same space with her, and her

with him, and yet they're still themselves—only they're in love and getting laid a lot more often.

I'm happy for him.

“Here you go, Vince.” Grace places the bag on the bar and completely blocks his face.

Only until he pays and takes the bag in hand do I see him again. “What the hell do you have in there?” I ask.

“Four entrées. We're hungry after we work out, so I make sure we have midnight snacks. You know. *Work out.*” The grinning idiot. He pats the bar, then takes his leave, calling over his shoulder, “See you guys!”

I roll my eyes.

“I think it's sweet,” Grace says to me after he leaves. “He seems like a guy who deserves to be happy.” Before I can agree, she continues, “Never really thought about deserving happiness myself. I've always been more of a go-with-the-flow kind of girl.”

“I would've guessed that about you.”

I have the sudden urge to suss out her story. I want to know what makes her tick, which is a new desire for me. I normally keep my dates surface. Deep diving isn't my norm.

“Is that why you won't choose a package?” I ask, steering her back to the topic at hand.

“Be honest, Davis. Do the girls you date seriously choose a package?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” Her face scrunches.

I hold up a palm as if taking an oath. “Hand to God.”

“Every time?”

“Not every time. In the case of the one-night stand, we don’t get that far.”

She harrumphs, which is cute. “Don’t you miss the spontaneity of not knowing what comes next?”

“I get enough spontaneity at work.”

“I can’t get enough spontaneity.” Her teeth close over her bottom lip and again my mind goes to what she tastes like. Sweet? Spicy? Sweet and spicy?

Then she’s off to do her job and I’m in a familiar spot: sitting at the bar, waiting for her to walk by.

Only now I add to my preoccupations wondering when our date is going to start tonight. Grace didn’t technically say yes, but she didn’t say no. That’s almost as good as a yes.

GRACE

Davis is still here and it's pushing eight o'clock. My relief showed up a half an hour ago in the form of Candace. She's sixty years old and so short she only comes up to my boobs. She's one of those dames who ride Harleys and cut their teeth in dusty, dangerous biker bars. There's something pretty about how rough-hewn she is, though. From her smoky, deep voice to the way she can lift a keg.

"You going to keep that poor boy waiting all night, Grace?" she asks as she stuffs ones in the drawer in every which direction. Facedown, faceup, left, right... I reorganize them on the nights we work together. She's worked here a few weeks, but already she feels like family.

"He's not waiting. He's always here." I tell the white lie with a small smile, but I grab my purse from beneath the counter anyway.

"Yeah, but tonight he hasn't taken his eyes off you."

My smile broadens. I can't prevent it from happening. The idea that a guy is pining for me doesn't get my rocks off or anything, but the idea of Davis waiting, watching, and anticipating is kind of thrilling.

Earlier tonight I told him I like to fly by the seat of my pants. It's safe to say I'm ready for takeoff.

"I'm done, but I have to go home and change," I tell Davis as I approach from the customer side of the bar.

"I'll follow you." That stops me short.

“Don’t you want to go home and change too?” Not that the navy suit, crisp white shirt, and burgundy tie are a bad look. At all.

Purr.

“I changed into this *for* our date.” He stands smoothly, buttoning his jacket. There’s a folded kerchief in his pocket, sticking out a scant inch, but enough so I make out the burgundy and navy plaid print. Damn, he’s attractive.

“Well. I’m underdressed.” I gesture to my jeans and T-shirt.

“Overdressed for my taste, but you were the one who said you can’t commit to a package.” He stands over me, making me feel dainty and delicate, which is no easy task. I’m neither of those things. In his capable, masculine presence, the desire to let him care for me is strong.

And scary.

How many men have I watched walk away? My dad. My mom’s boyfriend. *My* boyfriends.

Thank God I smartened up. No trust equals no heartbreak.

“You aren’t seriously going to wait for me at my house, are you?” I step into the perfect September evening. Sixtysomething degrees with a cool crispness to the air that makes me long for bonfires and cider and Halloween costumes.

“Depends.” He places his hand on my lower back, the warmth and comfort welcome and foreign at the same time. “Will you invite me in?”

“No hanky-panky,” I warn, slowing as we approach my royal blue Mini Cooper with a fuzzy pair of dice dangling

from the rearview mirror.

“On my honor, Gracie Lou, I won’t pressure you. You can come to me.” He leans close, his lips over my ear when he adds, “And then you can come *for* me.”

My thudding heartbeat manages to pound between my legs as well as in my chest. Doing anything for Davis’s pleasure should feel stifling and unwanted, but it doesn’t.

Lord, this is such a bad idea. Luckily the premonition of doom never stopped me before. “You’re welcome to a seat on my sofa and a drink from my fridge while I get ready,” I tell him as I slide into the driver’s seat.

“Can’t wait,” he says before shutting me in. Then he’s walking across the lot to his car—a shiny black Mercedes that he roars to life, pulls from its spot, and idles.

He’s waiting for me again. I *really* like that.

DAVIS

Grace has a tiny house.

I don't mean one of those newfangled houses on wheels with a bucket for a toilet—not a trademarked “tiny house”—just that her house is on the small side.

A steep-roofed A-frame tucked in a residential area, it's not clear to me at first if she owns or rents. Rents, I'm guessing. Unless she has an inheritance. This neighborhood is pricey.

Unsurprisingly, Grace's house isn't fussy or overly tidy. The front door opens to a living room and kitchen—one room—and an alcove to the right opens to a bathroom. She jogged upstairs the moment she let me in. The loftlike area at the top of the stairs is her bedroom.

She's bent over her dresser across from the bed, pulling out black lace. She gestures with the panties when she says, “In the fridge you'll find beer and maybe some leftover white wine. Help yourself.”

“Sure you don't need my help with anything up there?” My voice is thick, my eyes on the panties. I bet she's mouthwatering wearing those.

From the drawer she extracts a black see-through lace bra, hooks it on her finger, and says, “Nope,” before disappearing behind a privacy panel.

Cruel. She did that on purpose.

The living room is simple. A red fabric sofa covered in bright yellow pillows and a colorful afghan stands against the wall, flanked by a pair of end tables. One of the tables is cluttered with books, like the shelf next to it. The other holds a lamp and a candle. I grab a beer from the fridge—Sam Adams. Does Grace drink it, or did she buy this brand with me in mind?

Dangerous thought, that one. I'm flirting with the dating faux pas of overthinking. That's why the packages come in handy. Then I know what to do next. What she expects.

Grace is determined to keep me limber.

I find a glass, not hard to do since there are all of two cabinets in her minuscule kitchen, and empty the bottle into it. There's a full dish drainer by the sink. The dishes are dry. While I sip my beer, I slide her plates, bowls, and glasses into the cabinets. She catches me as I'm tucking away the last of the silverware.

"What are you doing?"

I turn to find Grace wearing a tight black dress with a low V-neck, a long silver necklace's pendant resting between her full breasts. Her shoes are strappy and high, and her hair is pinned up on one side. Diamond studs wink from her earlobes.

"You look amazing." I'm too stunned to say anything more original than that.

She gestures with the shawl and handbag she's holding in one hand. "Putting away someone's dishes is a touch intimate, don't you think?"

"Gracie, if that's what you consider intimate, I have a thing or two to show you." I place the final fork in the drawer.

Her lips twist to one side in amusement.

“Ready to go?”

“I have to brush my teeth and put on my lipstick.”

“No lipstick.” I shake my head. “I want to kiss you before we leave.”

Her bright green eyes light with what I hope is the same lust saturating my bloodstream. She shakes her head as if regaining her footing before backing toward the downstairs bathroom and shutting herself inside.

Two minutes later, I’m waiting on her couch when the water stops running and the door pops open. She hesitates when she spots me and glances at her front door. I don’t go to her. I’m curious what she’ll do if I stay put.

Turns out she walks over to the couch.

“Now I’m ready,” she says.

I offer my hand. She thinks I’m asking her to help me up, but I tug her to me instead. In one smooth motion, Grace’s ass is on my lap. Her breasts lift, taking in a breath of anticipation, as she looks down at me. I test the softness of her curls before I palm her neck. I angle her face closer to mine.

An inch away from making our dreams come true, I whisper against her mouth, “Since you didn’t choose a package, I’m going to have to ask. Kiss or no? What say you, Gracie?”

But she doesn’t say anything. She lowers her lips to mine for a soft, sweet, slow, sinful kiss. No tongue, but my pants stir, my budding hard-on nudging her hip.

She pulls back first, her lashes lowering as she looks at my mouth.

“Silly Davis,” she purrs through her smile. “Didn’t you notice I didn’t put on lipstick?”

CHAPTER
SIX

GRACE

Honky Tonk is not Davis Price's style. He's not dressed for this club, but he also doesn't care, which I admire. He hasn't once looked around at the denim-clad crowd and wondered if he should have worn something different. Even I did that, and I'm the one who suggested we come here.

He's currently leaning against the bar, longneck in hand, watching me dance. I like how he watches me dance.

He watches like I'm the only woman in here, and I'm not. I share the dance floor with at least twenty other women, most of whom are younger than me and wearing short, frayed cutoffs and knee-high cowboy boots. We keep rhythm together, line dancing in formation. They're good, but so am I.

Davis and I went to a five-star restaurant with black tablecloths and low candles and menus in black leather binders. We drank French wine and ate fine, expensive food. We chatted during our meal, some of it polite, and some of it similar to the banter we participate in on any given night at McGreevy's.

Being around him is eerily comfortable.

After we finished eating, he asked what I wanted to do. Rather than order dessert, I suggested an out-of-the-way hole-in-the-wall bar that I knew didn't serve Sam Adams.

I peer through my lashes as I wiggle my hips to the beat. Davis, in his suit, sips a Budweiser as he stands in a sea of men wearing jeans and flannels. He smirks as he drinks. He

knows I'm putting him through his paces, but he doesn't seem to mind the challenge.

Why am I putting him through his paces?

Because Davis is used to life being easy. I've witnessed his dating rituals and habits firsthand. I've served buttery nipples and shots of tequila for him to deliver to his blonde du jour. Davis doesn't have to try to get laid. I want him to know that with me, he's going to have to try. I'm not easy.

Not that I'm a prude or anything. I don't mind having sex on a first date. I like sex. I like Davis. I bet sex with Davis is as delicious as his full bottom lip tasted back at my place. I haven't kissed him again since, but I'm going to.

And then I'm going to go home with him.

I hide a smile as I put my arms in the air to do another spin. Over my shoulder, I notice Davis relinquish his beer and wade into the gyrating crowd. He doesn't stop at the sidelines. No, no. He walks right into the center of the line dance. He weaves around girls tossing their hair and waving their arms, snagging my waist as the DJ spins another fast-beat song. The women, my tribe for the three-and-a-half-minute dance, dissipate. Some vacate the floor altogether; others move closer together and dance in tight circles of three or four.

Davis pulls me in to slow-dance to a song that doesn't require a slow dance. A fast-dancing couple nearly runs me over. His hand flattens on my back and he holds me close, the corner of his lips hitching.

"I've got you, Gracie Lou."

I smile, unable to contain my happiness at his attention. Wrists around his neck, I cock my head to one side and savor the slide of his arms at my waist anchoring me to him. He's

doing little more than swaying, but I can tell by the way we rock that he's matching the song's rhythm just fine. I wouldn't be surprised if, in spite of the suit he's sporting, Davis Price can cut a rug.

"You smile a lot when you're with me," he says, smiling himself. "It's the kind of thing that could give a guy like me a big head."

"Maybe I think you're funny." My voice has a husky quality I didn't intend. Under the dim lights of the dance floor and the fading buzz from my line dancing, I find this all very fun.

Davis hums his response. I don't hear it. I feel it work through his torso and rumble from his chest to my breasts.

That's when we lock eyes for the count of three.

Four.

Five.

Before I decide to, I'm leaning in to bite his full bottom lip. His tongue touches mine tentatively, and our mouths mate. The heat engulfing me is as sudden as a brushfire in a drought. I tighten my arms around his neck, wanting to be closer, pushing deeper—wanting more than he's giving me.

He's holding back. Because we're in public? Or is he putting me in my place?

There's only one solution to this sort of relentless attraction—only one way to dull the throb pounding its way from my gut to the space between my legs.

I finger his bottom lip and cock my head to one side.

"I've decided on a package," I say loud enough for him to hear.

“That so?”

I nod, lick my lips, and say, “The *full* package.”

His grin lights the room, but instead of taking my hand and leading me out of here, he surprises me by saying, “Let’s finish this dance first.”

He continues the slow, intentional swaying body to body to the beat of the music. Not that I don’t enjoy it, but I’d enjoy it a lot more if we were moving like this naked.

I thread my fingers together behind his neck and lean in to tease him. “Are we slow-dancing because you have no rhythm?”

I pull back to see his lips quirk. His eyelids grow heavy.

“Don’t be embarrassed if you can’t dance, Davis. Lots of guys have two left feet.”

The beat of the music shifts into another fast song. Without warning, he braces my hips with both hands and begins to move. Like, *really* move. He crushes me close and backs me across the floor, his eyes on mine. I’m forced to follow his lead or face-plant on the floor.

I keep up—*barely*.

He spins me, pressing my back to his front. He hoists my arms overhead and literally does the *Dirty Dancing* move where he drags his fingers down the sides of my breasts and over my ribs. His solid chest presses against my back as he moves.

His pelvis grinds into my ass before he spins me again to face him. I keep rhythm with him, matching his steps. He wears an expression of sheer smug satisfaction, and I’m so impressed I can’t dredge up so much as a believable eye-roll.

The beat thumps on, but before the song ends, he dips me—a literal dip. The club flips upside down as I give him my weight and drop my head back.

Everyone watches.

When the world rights itself, my head is slightly dizzy and the crowd breaks into applause. Davis is grinning, knowing he has me.

I like that he has me.

At his side I exit the floor, his hand in mine. This time he doesn't hesitate to walk to the door.

DAVIS

Grace's name is apt. The woman moves gracefully. *Seamlessly.*

I watched her on that dance floor as I tried to enjoy the pathetic excuse for a beer I was forced to order in lieu of my usual. I watched the angle of her head as she shook her curls. The elegant line of her neck leading to her arms and down to the bell curve of hips that popped and swayed to the beat. I hadn't planned on joining her until she shot me a smile.

That was as good as an invitation.

Surprising her with a few of my smooth moves was fun, but watching her keep up was infinitely more fun. It made me wonder if our sparring and one-upping would continue in the bedroom. There, in those few sweaty minutes amid a crowd of drunken clubgoers, challenge lurked in Grace's green eyes.

If the way she moved on the dance floor is any indication of what she's like in bed, we're both in for a treat. I gave her a good preview of the way I could move, and I'm ready to show her more.

I start kissing her outside my apartment and briefly unseal my lips from hers to unlock the door. We stumble inside, and Grace pushes my jacket off my shoulders as I shut and lock the door behind her. I take her black wrap and purse and set them on the foyer table. I toss my keys into a bowl and slip off my jacket, throwing it over the banister.

Her breasts lift and my eyes go to the pendant resting between them. She watches me hungrily for a few seconds as

she comes to me again. Before she can blot out my brain with another of her drugging kisses, I turn her hips and point her upstairs.

Her butt sways in the black fabric and I follow, knowing she's adding an extra wiggle for my benefit. At the landing she turns as I loosen my tie. She reaches to help, yanking the length of silk free and unbuttoning the first few buttons of my shirt.

I halt her hands with one of mine.

“Can I get you a drink? Water? Wine? I might have champagne.”

A crease dents the space between her eyebrows as her hands flatten on my chest. I've confused her. Grace thinks tonight is going to go a certain way. She believes she's calling the shots. At the dance club, she implied that sex was next on the agenda, and she assumes her yes means I'm going to strip her naked and fuck her against the wall, my pants around my ankles and her dress hiked high on her waist.

I have a different plan in mind.

“Are you serious?” she asks, that dent deepening. I nearly grin.

“About the champagne?” I ask, purposely being obtuse. I lift her hand to my lips and kiss her fingers before moving to the refrigerator. “Let me check.”

I emerge with a chilled, corked bottle. “Champagne.”

Her shoulders droop, and the smile she wears is uncertain. I like her uncertain. I like surprising her, and I can't surprise her if I do what she expects.

I brandish two flutes from the cabinet and fill them halfway with the sparkling wine. I hand over her glass and we toast silently, tapping the edges of the glasses together before drinking. Grace glances around my place and I wonder what she's thinking. I don't have to wonder long.

"You have a clean sense of style." She walks to the living room, running her fingers along the arm of my *L*-shaped gray couch. She pauses in front of the glass coffee table and a decorative bowl filled with large smooth rocks to admire my view. My apartment window faces a park. It's closed this time of night, but you can usually spot the end of a lit cigarette or dark silhouettes walking through the trees.

I click on a lamp in the living room. "The windows are tinted. No one can see in." She peers at me over her shoulder, her uncertainty fading some.

"You know, in case you were interested in"—I take her glass and set it with mine on the coffee table—"making faces at the people below or something."

She offers a light laugh as I touch her waist. Her hands cover mine, and when she studies me with her cool, green stare, she's the Grace I remember from the first time I spotted her in McGreevy's.

Bawdy. Confident. Brash.

The women I normally date are demure and unsure and use their sexuality as a way of getting what they want. Grace isn't like that. She doesn't try to be sexual to get something. She *is* sexual. It's part of her identity, interwoven with the way she carries herself, the way she moves closer to me.

"What's your game, Davis?"

See? Bawdy. Told you.

“No game.”

“Why aren’t we naked yet?” She fingers the open placket of my shirt, stroking my collarbone.

I lift my eyebrows. “Are you in a hurry?”

“I—” Her mouth opens, then closes before she frowns in thought. “I just thought—”

“You thought you had me figured out.”

“I’m pretty good at categorizing men, yes.”

“Let’s hear it, then. Who is Davis Price?” I deliberately pull away from her an inch.

“Okay. Um...” Her eyes skate across the room and to the darkened upstairs before meeting mine again. “You live alone. No pets. You are a serial dater and bring home lots of blond women. Lots of drunk blond women,” she adds in a whisper.

I maintain my poker face. She’s not getting a comment from me until she’s through.

“I know part of your MO. Drinks at McGreevy’s and *sometimes* they choose one of your packages. Judging by what I’ve seen, your dates find you charming. You come back to your place after clarifying the rules of your hookup. Jury’s out on if there are contracts involved or not.”

Smart-ass.

“Then the sex happens.” She shrugs. “From there, you tire of them and they go away forever. Unless one of them approaches you at the gym for a *repeat*.”

I was right about her jealousy over the gym girl. I bite the inside of my lip to keep from rewarding her with a smile for her quick wit and abject charm.

“Am I close?” she asks.

“Spot on.”

She blanches, her gaze jerking left then right.

“And now you’re wondering why you’re not getting that same treatment,” I guess.

“Okay. Fine. I am wondering that.”

I move her arms so that they wrap around my waist. Pushing her hair away from her ear, I lower my lips to kiss her lobe, then pepper kisses down the side of her neck. She tilts her head, giving me room to explore. I taste her skin, closing my teeth over her pulse before soothing the bite with a wet, soft kiss.

“You requested the full package, Gracie,” I whisper in her ear. “You’re getting it.”

Her hands tighten at my waist, wadding my shirt with her fists. I return to kissing her neck, drawing slow circles with my tongue, skimming my hands up her rib cage and stopping short of cupping the swells of her breasts.

Her breaths grow shorter, a moan coming from deep in her throat as I grip her neck and run my tongue over her ear. She whimpers, and I know she doesn’t mean to. A woman like Grace would never play up her pleasure for a man’s sake. I prove myself right when I pull back. The confusion in her eyes is her trying to reconcile what she thought would happen with what is happening.

I bend at the knees and run my fingers up the inside of her knee to her inner thigh. Her eyes widen as I grasp the back of her neck and tilt her face to mine. My lips hover over hers as I inch my hand higher, *higher*.

“You’re soaking wet,” I mutter. The lace of her panties is damp against the pads of my fingertips. I stroke her once. Twice.

When her mouth opens and her eyes close, I slide my tongue along hers and continue teasing her most private part with my fingers.

“Davis,” she moans into my mouth. I want her to say it again, but instead her palm cups the front of my pants, gripping my hardening cock.

I grunt, biting back a growl of pleasure. She gives me a gentle squeeze and then the she-devil smiles, certain she has the upper hand.

Little does she know.

I slide her panties aside and find her bare skin. I nudge her arm aside as I slip a finger inside. Grace’s hands fist my collar as she holds on. Her knees give, just slightly, and that’s when I stop.

“Davis.” That was a protest.

“Don’t worry. I’m not done.” I back her to the couch, where she sits, releasing me to reach for the zipper at the back of her dress. So impatient, this one.

I’m a lucky son of a bitch.

I pull the zipper down and whip the dress over her head. In two seconds flat, Grace is wearing nothing but transparent black lace—the bra and panties she teased me with at her house.

She doesn’t look as confident now. She’s perched on my couch, nervous and unsure. It’s such a foreign expression for her, it takes me by surprise.

“You’re beautiful,” I tell her. She’s a divine, exquisite creature. I cup her breast, thumbing her nipple through the sheer material as her eyelids close. “Lie back.”

She does as I say. I run my hand down her stomach and to her panties, yanking them from her hips and shimmying them down her legs.

A thin line of auburn hair is the only barrier standing between my tongue and a flooring orgasm for Grace.

She watches me, propped on her elbows, as I remove my shirt. My belt.

My pants.

Then I lower between her legs to help myself.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

GRACE

“Wait.”

W Moments before Davis lowers his lips to my... well, *you know*, I stop him cold with that one word. His hand is looped around one of my ankles—my high-heeled shoe still strapped in place.

“I’m waiting,” he states before resting my calf on one round, muscular shoulder. He maintains eye contact, which is incredible. Since I’m naked from the waist down, he’s closer to looking my vulva in the eye than me.

“Um...”

He waits, eyebrows raised.

I bite down on my lip, weirdly embarrassed. “You don’t have to do that.”

I mean, this is sort of Sex 202 stuff, right? First-date sex is usually had quickly—standing up or in the back of a car.

His eyebrows crash together over his nose. “You don’t want me to do this?”

“I didn’t say that.” I clear my throat, my face heating. We’re having the world’s most awkward conversation.

“Then why don’t you get comfortable, Gracie?” He throws my other leg over his other shoulder, wedging himself into place between my thighs. “I’m not in the habit of doing things I don’t want to do, so no worries.”

“But—”

A wink precedes him lowering his face and giving me one long, slow, mind-bending lick. I forget what I was going to say.

The result is like lightning striking—every part of me tightens in anticipation of the inevitable thunderclap. Davis glances up, a cocky smile on his face. But he doesn't plead his case. He just does it again.

And again.

Soon my fingers are wound in his hair, my hips thrusting toward his seeking mouth. He takes his sweet time, squeezing my thighs as he administers his perfect licks. I've been so close for so long, I have no idea how much time has passed since he started.

I'm antsy—and not because Davis is doing anything wrong. Because my stupid brain won't shut off enough to give me the pleasure the rest of my body is begging for.

So close.

So freaking close.

“Dammit,” I huff in frustration, tossing an arm over my eyes.

But Davis isn't ready to give up. His fingers nudge, then slide deep, filling me, as his tongue finds my clit.

I incinerate on contact. Heat blooms low in my belly as he delivers blow after decadent blow. By the time he reaches up to cup my breast, I'm writhing. Then he tilts my hips and I'm totally gone.

The orgasm hits me mercilessly, shocking my entire system. I grab whatever's close—a pillow from the couch—and smother my cries with it. As my hips pump their helpless

rhythm, I'm aware of Davis leaving the cradle of my legs. I use the break to push my knees together, roll to my side, and cuddle the pillow against my chest.

When I finally open my eyes, Davis is on his knees by the couch in front of me. Not gonna lie, I half expected him to be rolling on a condom.

He pushes a lock of red hair from my eye and smiles proudly. "It's okay if you're nervous about performing, Gracie." He lifts a haughty brow. "I'm a pro. You can trust me to get you there."

I respond by lifting the pillow and smacking him in the face with it. When it bounces off his perfect jawline, he's squinting one eye and his hair is falling over his forehead. He looks puckish and laid-back.

"Want some more?" he asks so sincerely, so sweetly.

"I want you," I answer with my own sincere sweetness.

We lock eyes for a beat, and a small part of my brain asks: *Are we in uncharted territory?*

I clasp his neck and tug him to me. I'm rewarded by his kiss—another intentional onslaught, slow and effective in its delivery.

"I have a condom in my purse," I whisper when we part.

He grins, then puts a kiss on the tip of my nose. "Your purse is too far away."

He turns behind him and lifts one of the stones from his decorative bowl, opens a little compartment, and extracts a condom.

I gape.

“A hide-a-key?” I say of the fake rock.

“I call it a hide-a-condom.” He tears the foil with his teeth as I giggle.

Damn. I’m not a giggler, but here I am—feeling warm and effervescent all over.

“You rendered me a giggler.” I shake my head in mock shame as he pushes his boxer briefs to the ground.

Then I lose my train of thought.

Davis’s penis stands erect—thick and long. I press my knees together in anticipation. I don’t normally categorize dicks as beautiful, but there’s something about the shape and heft of his that closely resembles a work of art. I’m speechless.

“I don’t mind giggling, Grace,” he says as he rolls the condom down his length. “As long as you know the appropriate time to giggle.”

He’s hovering over me a moment later, making room on his couch for both of us. I wrap my legs around his lower back.

“Now,” he murmurs, his lips very close to mine, “is not the time to giggle.”

With that said, he tilts his hips and pushes inside me. Once he’s settled, I realize I was remiss when I thought his fingers filled me. This kind of fullness is oh, so much better. Then he moves and I swear I’ve died and gone to heaven.

Like we did on the dance floor, we *glide*. He moves with intention and purpose. I return each of his forward thrusts with an upward shift of my hips.

He *fits*.

“Damn, Gracie,” he says on a harsh breath.

Palms flat on his pecs, I savor the firmness there before running both hands down his torso. His golden skin is stretched over taut muscles and firm abs.

“God, you’re gorgeous,” I say on an expelled breath.

His laugh blows my hair off my face before he lowers his lips and kisses me. The levity is quickly replaced by something much more intense—much more intimate. His kiss grows hungrier, and I cling to his back as he picks up the pace and rides me.

I’m lost in the sound of our intermingling breath and bodies coming together—up to the point we actually *come* together. I squeeze him from within and he relinquishes his release on a growl.

My hands in his hair, I pull his delicious mouth to mine again, savoring the feel of him inside me. He can hardly keep our mouths sealed—each of his exhalations radiates gratification.

His breaths gradually slow along with mine. He lowers his elbows to either side of my body. Gently, ever so gently, he moves my hair from my forehead and watches me in the silence stretching out between us.

His gray eyes are fathoms deep, darker from a hefty dose of pleasure.

It’s enough to make me smile. He smiles back. I swear the earth shakes beneath me. Something happened just now.

Something *big*.

Something I’m going to ignore.

DAVIS

Grace follows me to the bedroom, where I pull open a dresser drawer and extract my favorite OSU T-shirt. There's a hole in the neck and the seams have popped on the sleeves. It's as soft as fine silk.

I toss it to her and she launches a hand out in front of her, catching the toss midair.

"That's some badass kung fu shit right there," I praise.

She's dressed the opposite of when we were making love on my couch—not wearing a bra but wearing her panties. Grace's breasts are too gorgeous to cover up, but judging by those pale pink nipples sitting like mini marshmallows on the tips, she's cold and needs a T-shirt.

Pity.

"Stop staring." She's reprimanding me with a smile. We've been smiling at each other like we have a secret, though neither of us knows the other well enough to share what we think that secret is.

Wouldn't it be a kicker if it was the same one?

She hugs the T-shirt to her chest. "I don't have to stay."

"What's with you and the phrase 'don't have to'?" I ask, because seriously—what *is* that? She shrugs her shoulders, and I mentally trace the dots of the smattering of freckles there. "Never noticed these before."

"Plight of the redhead."

My fingers go to the dots fading off into the tattoo coloring her shoulder. “Always wanted to touch this.”

Her breathing goes shallow as I give in to the fantasy of tracing the lines of the roses and thorns, leaves and buds. Then I pause and narrow my eyes in thought.

“Is there another one?”

Her mouth forms a small *O*. “No?”

“Let me see it.”

She backs away, her grin returning. Dammit. I knew it. While I was busy with her on her back, I missed the opportunity to see it. She bumps into the wall next to the bathroom and bites down on her bottom lip.

“Gracie.”

“Fine. You’ll see it eventually.” She rolls her eyes. Turns around. My mouth goes dry.

There, on the swell of her right ass cheek, is a shamrock. An honest-to-God shamrock. I laugh, touching it with my index finger before giving her perfect, round butt a squeeze.

“Why not four leaves?”

“Cliché.” She peeks over her shoulder at me, in a freeze-frame that’s hot as hell.

“Are you this into Saint Patrick’s Day, or is this a nod to your Irish heritage?”

“I liked it. So I got it. Same with the roses.” She turns and I shake my head in admiration.

“Good reason.”

“So, are you sure about the shirt?” She holds it over her breasts again.

Every inch of her body is so sexy I hate for her to wear anything at all. It's a crime to cover up that porcelain skin and her perfect curves. Nevertheless...

"No. But put it on. You don't have to stay forever, but you're not leaving right away."

"Oh, I'm not?" She pulls the T-shirt on. It comes to her hips and her black lace thong teases me from under the T-shirt's frayed waistband.

Fuck me, she looks good in my clothes.

"Didn't peg you for a snuggler." She releases her soft curls from the neck of the shirt and drops them onto her shoulders. Her bare toes cut through the thick carpeting of my bedroom rug as she comes to me.

I'm in my boxer briefs and an OSU T-shirt too, though mine's not as butter soft as the one I loaned her.

"Silly redhead," I tsk. "Snuggling is the best part."

She can't tell if I'm kidding, as evidenced by the raised, questioning eyebrow.

"Couch or bed?" I end the question by gesturing to the bed behind me. I have a fantastic bed. One of those adjustable ones that I've loaded up with a down comforter, Egyptian cotton sheets, and a ton of pillows. *No*, not for the women who accompany me from time to time. For me. I like soft things. Speaking of, I reach out and cup one of Grace's breasts through the T-shirt.

"God, they feel even more amazing through worn fabric." My eyes sink closed. "Is there anything your tits can't do?"

I earn a hearty laugh, but instead of swatting me away, Grace steps closer, letting me keep my hand where it is. She

tips her chin for a kiss, which I gladly give while taking another for myself. My other hand moves to her other breast and we find ourselves migrating to the bed.

“Davis,” she whispers when I reach for the inconvenient shirt.

“Yeah, Gracie?”

She lifts her arms and allows me to undress her—again. Another kiss and we’re falling into a sea of blankets.

MORNING COMES and Grace is in my bed. She’s not wearing my T-shirt.

She’s not wearing anything.

“Coffee?” I ask before reverently kissing one of her perfect nipples. Sun streams through the curtains, painting her in golden light.

“Or more sex. I’m open to either,” I amend.

She smiles sleepily and opens her arms. “C’mere, snuggler.”

An odd term of endearment, but I do, in fact, go there. A minute later I’m wrapped in her arms. Not a bad morning at all.

CHAPTER
EIGHT

GRACE

Two days after our date, I knock on Davis's front door. He's expecting me—I texted him. He said to “come on in” when I got there, but I feel awkward walking in, even invited. Especially after everything that happened.

Great sex. Great night. Great morning after.

It's safe to say three “greats” is outside my normal dating zone. I've experienced the rarity of two out of three. More often than not, one out of three. Even then, the great morning is due to my cutting the evening date short and going home alone.

During the great morning with Davis, we drank coffee at his kitchen table. He wound one of my wilted curls around his fingers and told me again how he liked my hair that way. He offered breakfast, but I told him I had to go home. I didn't, but breakfast was pushing my luck. I couldn't expect great breakfast after a three-for-three.

So, I went home and enjoyed a couple of days off before having to work today. As I was getting ready, I realized I'd be unable to legally enter McGreevy's without my manager's keys. I suspected they'd fallen out of my purse at Davis's. When I texted him to ask, he confirmed they were at his place.

And now, so am I.

I wring my hands, after having raised a fist to knock again, and the door swings open. Davis wears a dark gray suit. A bright pink tie slashes down a pale pink shirt. I rein in my excitement, but it's not easy. He's strong and sure standing

there. Capability and power waft off him. Speaking into the cellphone pressed to his ear, he tips his head for me to come in.

I abandon the crisp fall air for the welcoming warmth of his apartment. When I close the door, he takes my hand and starts up the short staircase leading to the living room area. It's sunny today— and only nine A.M., but Davis is alert, as if he's been up for several hours.

Me? I have to open soon, so I'm in a pair of (stylishly) tattered jeans and a frilly white top with a short leather jacket over top.

Davis's shiny brown shoes climb one short flight of stairs and pass a second set of stairs to his bedroom. Memories shiver down my spine. One night together was fun. Could lightning strike twice?

Beyond the stairs and behind the kitchen, two doors dot a hallway. The first one on the left is his office. It's what you'd expect given the rest of the house. Sturdy black desk, black bookcase, spotless wood floor with a plush, patterned gray rug. A green plant by the window happily soaks up the sun's rays.

"Not since yesterday," Davis says into the phone, his voice firm. A pause, then a stern "Because it's my job to know."

I fidget, knowing I'm interrupting his work. He's responsible for handling the hard-earned cash of wealthy folks, which sounds big and important. The worst damage I can do on any given night is make a bar patron wait a minute too long for a beverage they don't need.

"That sounds like bullshit," he says into the phone as he paces over to me. His harsh tone is at odds with the gentle

fingers twirling a lock of my hair and the tenderness in his gaze as he looks me in the eyes.

I mouth the words “I can go” and point behind me with one thumb, but Davis shakes his head. He turns, punches a few keys on his computer keyboard with flair, and then says to the caller, “Done. You can thank me later.”

He ends the call and tosses the cell onto his desk.

“I could have come later if now’s a bad time.” I twist my fingers nervously as he stalks over and plunges his fingers into my hair.

“I just made a million dollars,” he rasps, his eyes locked on mine.

I blink as I digest this news. “What? Are you serious?”

“Not even a little.” His lips tip in mirth.

I start to laugh, but my laugh ends in a hum when his full mouth hits mine. The kiss is like the kisses from two days ago—the ones that led to my stripping naked and having sex with him on the couch. And then on the bed. And then in the morning on the bed...

It was supposed to be the one time to satisfy our curiosity—or prove a point. Neither of us said so, but it was implied. With Davis’s fingertips cradling the back of my head and his tongue sliding sensually over mine, it’s becoming clear we’re not fizzling out like we’re supposed to.

His phone rings and he drops his forehead on mine. “Shit.” He turns me loose and backs away.

“Davis,” he answers. “I don’t care how long you’ve been—. Listen. Hang on for two seconds,” he tells the caller gruffly.

Back to me, his voice softens. “Your keys are in the bowl by the front door. I’ll see you tonight.” He gives me a wink before going back to his terse conversation. I hustle out of his office to grant him privacy.

The bowl by the front door holds the keys I left behind. I palm them and let myself out, wondering the whole way to McGreevy’s why he didn’t just hand them to me without taking me upstairs. Then I remember the potent kiss and I know exactly why.

Davis likes me.

Maybe as much as I like him.

I’LL SEE YOU TONIGHT.

Davis implied he’d come into the bar tonight. He’ll come in. He comes in here almost every one of my shifts. I take a break from stocking beer bottles in the fridge to sneak a look over my shoulder for the umpteenth time.

Davis’s seat is empty.

I’ve never watched for him before. Usually I’m aware it’s about time for him to show, but I don’t *watch*. I’m frowning as I stock more rattling bottles when a baritone, resonant voice startles me.

“Have you seen Margo?”

I legit jolt and turn to find Dax hovering over me. Dax owns McGreevy’s, but he’s been absent most of the summer. He has two managers in place and communicates with us via the occasional email. The assistant manager, Margo, and I have only worked together a handful of times.

“I hardly ever see Margo,” I answer, standing with the empty beer box. She works mostly opposite shifts, considering we’re each other’s relief.

“Huh.” Dax frowns, a common sight. When he hired me, I noticed he was frowning, and when I’d been working here for a week and a half and he praised me for doing a great job, he was still frowning. He continued frowning when he gave me a raise. He’s a frowner; that’s all there is to it. Don’t get me wrong—it doesn’t make him any less attractive.

To be honest, I didn’t even know he was back from wherever he was this summer. I’m not sure he’d tell me if I asked. Maybe he leads a double life as a bounty hunter or something. He’s sure as hell built like one. That, or a Chippendales dancer.

Dax’s chest is wide and thick and pressing against the confines of a dark blue T-shirt with a faded motor oil logo on the front. His jeans have holes—but unlike mine, the holes were worn through. Black leather motorcycle boots poke out from the legs. Above the neck, the situation only becomes more favorable. Dax Vaughn is insanely attractive. Spiky, sandy-colored hair. Silvery-blue eyes with long, thick lashes. Contoured lips that purse temptingly....

Definitely *not* my type.

I’ve dated a hot, bulky frowner before, and while I’m certain Dax is nowhere near as big an asshole as Miguel, I’m not interested in this prototype any longer.

Anyway, I have Davis.

I mean, I don’t *have* him. He’s not mine or anything.

Wow. That was an alarming thought.

“She’ll turn up.” Dax props his hands on his hips and looks around the bar. “Dead tonight.”

“It’s early. We’ll pick up later.”

The bell over the door rings and in walks the man occupying my every other thought. My heart lodges in my throat at the sight of him, making me dizzy, given that I can’t breathe around the pulsing lump.

“Davis! Hi!” I chirp, and then clear my throat when I realize Dax is regarding me with curiosity.

I am as much a chirper as I am a giggler.

“Gracie Lou.” Davis, still in the pink-on-pink shirt-and-tie combo from this morning, slides into his assigned seat and nods at Dax. Dax says nothing, only turns and walks away.

Charming.

“He’s back,” Davis states as I deliver his Sam Adams bottle.

“He is. And he’s asking where Margo is. Like I know?”

“Dance lessons.”

“What?”

Davis swallows a mouthful of beer. I watch his throat work and remember kissing it while he worked us both into a sweaty frenzy. Gosh. That’s a distracting thought.

“Margo is taking tango lessons with her husband. That’s why she wasn’t here last night.”

“You came in last night?” I ask thinly. I didn’t know Davis came in when I wasn’t here.

A twinge of hurt radiates through me and I give myself a mental slap in the face. So we had sex. So what? I’m not going

to let my lizard brain attach the rest of my body to him no matter how great our private parts work together. “How fun!”

Geez. *Again* with the chirping. It’s Davis’s turn to frown.

“Successful day at the keyboard, I take it.” I not-so-smoothly change the subject.

“Oh, you mean that million?” His lips flinch. All I can think about is the way his fingers felt twined in my hair this morning. “All in a day’s work.”

“Menu?”

“Hit me.”

The crowd picks up after dinner and soon I’m slinging drinks left and right. Davis has his eyes on the TV as per his usual, but unlike my usual I’m not ignoring him. Quite the opposite. I throw glances his way every chance I get. To watch him take a drink, or blink, or breathe. He’s fascinating and beautiful in a way I’ve never thought about before.

Currently, however, I’m more fascinated by the perky blonde sidling up to him. She’s flashing her pearly whites and flipping her flaxen hair. I mix a margarita in a metal shaker and keep my eyes on her—and on Davis.

She rolls her eyes and cocks one hip. Her pursed lips shine with gloss.

Davis offers a standard smile as she talks, dipping his chin as he casually spins his beer bottle on the bar top.

I’m feeling... I don’t know what. “Jealous” isn’t the word, but I certainly am not feeling magnanimous toward the cute girl trying to nab the guy I went home with two days ago.

“ ’ Scuse me, sugar.” Candace nudges past me to grab a cherry for the manhattan she just mixed. She came in about

twenty minutes ago to bartend. She hands the drink over to the server who ordered it. I find myself directly in her path after I deliver the margarita to a waiting guest.

I step to move around her but she blocks me. “How long are you going to shoot lasers at that girl hitting on your man?”

I force a loud “ha-ha!” in hopes of convincing her she’s reading way too much into the way I’m looking at Davis.

She doesn’t buy it. I can tell by the half-lidded slow blink.

“He’s not *my man*.” I feel better the moment it’s out of my mouth.

“But you two slept together.”

My mouth gapes. I palm Candace’s arm and drag her off to one side. She comes with me under her own steam. No way could I physically move her if she didn’t want to be moved. Her center of gravity is much lower than mine.

“Tell me you can’t tell that Davis and I had sex by looking at me.” My plea is a frantic whisper.

“*I can tell*,” she says. “But I’m the only one who can tell. Been there before, gorgeous.” She shoots an assessing look at Davis. “He’s here to see you. Don’t let the blondie bother you.”

Even if Davis slept with the perky blonde in his past, Candace is right. I’m not in competition with any woman who occupies his bed before or after me. I shake “the blondie” off and take care of the immediate problems before me: a server’s well full of drink orders that require the dreaded blender, (I hate making strawberry daiquiris) and a few guests with food needing sides of this and extra that.

Once that's done, I glide by Davis. His company has parted, and his beer is empty. "Refill?" I offer.

"Nah. Cash me out."

My stomach sinks. Did the blonde leave her mark? Is Davis leaving with her?

I convince myself I don't care, cash him out, and return with the receipt. He offers his credit card. I take it, but he doesn't release it right away, trapping us in a tiny plastic tug-of-war.

"Do you work Saturday?" he asks.

"Yes."

"What time?"

"Three."

"Do you work Sunday?"

"Yes. At noon."

"What time are you done?"

"Do you mean Saturday or Sunday?" I have no idea what he's getting at.

He leans on the bar between us and lowers his voice. "Gracie Lou, when can I see you again?"

"What about the blonde?" I blurt.

His eyebrows come together, then slide back to neutral. His slow grin tells me what I need to know, but he says it aloud anyway. "I'm only interested in redheads now."

Heat blooms on my cheeks and my shoulders melt. I'm inches away from swooning but manage to keep my cool.

"Gracie. When?"

I give in and answer. “As soon as tonight and as late as Sunday after eight.”

He releases his hold on his credit card, and I make quick work of charging him. The flutter in my belly intensifies.

“Tonight,” he says, signing the receipt with a flourish. “I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I have to change first.”

“No you don’t.” He hands over my pen. “You’re perfect.”

Then he’s gone.

Across the room, the perky blonde who spoke to him earlier tracks his every step outside.

Sorry, honey, I think with a hefty dose of smugness. Davis is taking me out tonight.

CHAPTER
NINE

DAVIS

I left McGreevy's to take care of a few things for tonight before returning to fetch my date.

When I walk in, Grace is sitting on the patron side of the bar, an empty plate in front of her. She's looking at her phone. She doesn't notice I'm standing next to her until I rest my hand on the back of her neck.

She starts, but then her surprise fades into a warm smile. Like she's glad to see me. Damn, I like that.

"Sorry to make you wait, Gracie Lou." I give her neck a gentle squeeze. "You ate before our date?"

"Just a salad." She rests her arms over the purse in her lap, phone in hand. "Is that okay?"

"Totally okay." Where we're going there's only small plates. "Ready for your big date?"

She rolls sparkling jade eyes. "The dare was for one date, Davis."

"I know," I deadpan. "If memory serves, you owe me two hundred dollars."

Black lashes close over the greenest eyes I've ever seen. The color is natural. When she spent the night with me she didn't remove contact lenses or use a bottle of eye drops.

I offer my palm and she slides prettily off the barstool. Over her shoulder, the blonde from earlier glares. I recognized her standing there when I walked in, her eyes on me the

second I entered McGreevy's. Just when I think Grace didn't notice me noticing, she corrects my assumption.

"Changing your mind about which one of us to take out?" Her hand is in mine as she turns to look over her shoulder, not being the least bit casual about it. Grace shrugs. "I would understand. Blondes are a hard habit to break."

Grace doesn't feel the confidence she's portraying. I watched her earlier. She was an inch away from hissing and swiping a paw at the blonde. Can't say I didn't like that reaction. Hell, when I spotted Grace talking to Dax, my neck prickled too.

"I have enough habits," I tell her. "I'm shaking things up a bit."

Her easy smile falters before she recovers with a turn of quick wit. "You want shaken, baby, you've come to the right girl. I'm a professional mixologist, don't you know?"

"Oh, I know." I snag her leather jacket from the barstool and hold it out for her to slip her arms into. She murmurs about how I'm "*such* a gentleman." I let her tease me. I know she appreciated that token move. Especially in front of the blonde from earlier.

To set the record straight, the blonde was asking if I was busy later and I turned her down. I've seen her in here before but never approached her. If it weren't for Gracie's challenge for me to take out a redhead instead, I wonder if I'd have taken the blonde up on her offer. Probably. That sounds like me. But as I hold the door open for Grace, my palm settled on the swell of one of her hips, I have to say, the blonde doesn't appeal.

Maybe my grandmother was wrong and a leopard can change its spots.

At the time she made that assessment, she wasn't talking about me. She was referring to my mother, who left me at the hospital with my comatose father when I was nine years old.

A motorcycle accident had landed him in a hospital bed, and my mother, who never was one for sticking through difficult times, left the room to grab a coffee and never came back. It wasn't the first time she bolted. I ended up in the care of my grandmother, but it was the last time my mom left. I never saw her after that.

Fast-forward to my wedding day six years ago, Hanna not showing up, and it wasn't any wonder that I had an allergy to both redheads and commitment.

Hence the blondes. Hence the packages. For Grace, I made one hell of an exception.

"Where are we going?" she asks, her husky, sexy voice slicing into my brain.

"Wouldn't you like to know." I lead her to my car, where she slides onto the leather seat. Once we're navigating the one-way streets of downtown, I clue her in on our destination. "I had the idea this morning after you left. I made a call to Bubbly Café and finagled some last-minute reservations."

"Bubbly Café? I thought that place sold fancy candy or something."

"They host bands, mostly. And serve a fantastic double espresso."

"With a name like 'Bubbly' you'd think they sold gum, or at least champagne."

"You have the champagne part right," I tell her, giving her a hint.

“And what are we doing there tonight? Did John Mayer decide to pop in?”

“No, he’s busy.” I hang a left and draw out the anticipation some. I like surprising her.

“Hmm. Johnny Depp? He’s in a band with Alice Cooper, I heard.”

I suck air through my teeth. “So close.”

“Really?” Her voice goes up an octave. “Wait. You’re not serious.”

“You’re learning.” I sneak a look over at her.

She sags in the seat, lifting her arms and dropping them into her lap for effect. “I give!”

“We’re taste-testing. And you already guessed correctly.” I park at the curb and climb out, but by the time I reach the passenger door, Grace is standing on the sidewalk.

“Champagne.” Her chin is elevated, her voice a soft sigh. Twinkle lights festoon the tops of the windows on either side of a green door. Etched into the glass are the words BUBBLY CAFÉ. CELEBRATE EVERY DAY.

Grace lets out a little yip and wraps her arms around one of mine. “I *love* champagne. I’m not much of a connoisseur, but I’m willing to learn.” She pauses to give me the side eye as I grasp the doorknob. “I guess you know that after the other night.”

“You clued me in.” I smile as pink dusts her cheekbones. During pillow talk the morning after, she mentioned how sorry she was that we hadn’t finished our champagne the night before. She also mentioned that she never had a reason to drink it. She shouldn’t have to have a reason to drink

champagne, and so here we are. On a random Wednesday, to drink champagne.

The crowd is densely packed into the tight room, and I hand over our tickets. We're seated in the back left corner, far away from the barista-slash-bartender who is presenting each vintage. There are six to try, and they pass out plates of Brie, crackers, fruit, and chocolate squares to each of us. By the fourth taste, Grace is giggly and stealing chocolate off my plate. After the sixth, half the crowd dissipates. Of the half who are left, half of them buy a bottle to take home while the rest of us settle in with refilled glasses.

Or ice cream.

Yes, Bubbly has an ice cream counter. They offer whole-cream, goat's-milk, and dairy-free ice cream. Each one is available in vanilla and chocolate, and that's it. If you want to get fancy, you can have them put a scoop of candy or a squirt of peanut butter sauce on top. But the main draw of this place is the bar—and the coffee, which it's too late for but I ordered anyway.

Living on the edge is my new thing.

“What a cool place. Who knew you had this in your bag of tricks?”

“I don't spend *every* night at McGreevy's, you know.” I dig into my goat's-milk vanilla with strawberries and pecans. “I have layers.”

Grace passed on the ice cream, but she ordered another tall glass of the third champagne we tried—Château de... something or other.

“Want a bite?” I offer the spoon.

“No thanks,” she answers, but steals a strawberry slice. I scold her with my eyes as she licks her thumb, dragging the digit slowly from her pursed lips.

Damn.

Everything she does reminds me of having sex with her. Grace doesn't taste like cotton candy. More like sin and spice. My dick gives a hopeful twitch.

“You paid attention about the champagne,” she says.

I shrug like it's no big deal, but I know it is. I take a huge bite to deter her. It doesn't deter her, and gives me a minor brain freeze, so lose-lose on that move. When I recover, I confess.

“I paid attention about the champagne.”

She smiles, pleased.

“You mentioned you rarely had a reason to indulge. I received a newsletter a week or so ago announcing this tasting, and then you told me you were available tonight. We don't always need a reason to celebrate, Gracie.”

Her expression softens, her top teeth pressing into her bottom lip. She shifts in her seat before munching on a cracker left over from the tasting. After she chews, she takes another drink of her champagne and swallows.

“You're thoughtful.”

“You're welcome.” She didn't exactly thank me, but I can tell she's grateful that I listened and acted on it. It's rare for a guy to behave unselfishly. Selfishness is inherent in our genes. It just so happens I pay attention to shit like that. Not so I can get laid or be memorable but because it's the decent thing to do.

She touches my hand. “Thank you.”

We sit like that for a few beats, her expression cautious and vulnerable. Suddenly our date feels like a bigger deal than either of us anticipated.

Like the night we spent together. Great sex was expected, but the connection... We both noticed the potential and then backed the hell off.

Backing off isn't what I want any longer.

“Anyway.” I break eye contact and scrape the ice cream from the bottom of my bowl. The urge to put us back on familiar ground is strong.

At a loss for more to say, I laugh instead, the sound uncomfortable. I hope she didn't notice, but one look at her tight-lipped smile tells me otherwise.

She noticed.

GRACE

There may as well be sirens blaring over my head for how uncomfortable I feel right now. Davis is great, and Bubbly's has a fantastic atmosphere—cozy and retro, warm and relaxing. The siren blare is because Davis is quickly turning into a man I want to see beyond a handful of dates. That's not how I do things.

Like. *Ever*.

Not that I go out with men predisposed to dumping them, but it's my comfort zone. Being disappointed isn't new territory for me. I eye Davis over the rim of my champagne glass, letting the bubbles tickle my nose.

He's not disappointing me. He's impressing me.

I'm not sure how to handle a man who's impressing me.

I set my glass down. An employee takes our plate and Davis's empty bowl and espresso cup and then asks if we'd like refills. I decline and Davis orders a water. I'm not convinced he even likes champagne. Which means he arranged this whole tasting for me.

We share an eye lock similar to the ones we've shared before. I swear I see the faint shimmer of his soul before I blink and drink from my glass. I don't typically gaze into a guy's soul. Hell, had you asked me not too long ago, I'd have questioned whether or not they have them.

Uncharted territory. Once again.

“Tell me about the Platinum Davis,” I blurt as he lifts his water glass to his lips. His eyebrows rise as he swallows. He licks his lips and my dirty mind fills with images of him between my legs effortlessly wringing orgasms from me. It’s not an easy image to get out of my head. The ache between my legs becomes harder to ignore.

“Why do you want to talk about the packages now?”

Great question. One I can’t answer truthfully because the truth is that sleeping with Davis one time captivated me. By my calculations, a second time would merely satisfy me, and the third time I’ll be underwhelmed. We’ve had a streak of luck, but no one can keep it going forever.

It’s the old “get it out of our systems” theory. Once the shine wears off, we can call it quits and no one has to feel bad about ending it. I can go back to serving Davis Sam Adams and giving him hell, and he can go back to picking up a sorority sister with whom to decorate his bedsheets. It’s the circle of life. Anything outside of that is messing with the natural order of things.

A pang of longing radiates deep in my gut at the idea of his going back to serial dating. Which means we’ve become more serious than I intended. Serious boyfriend-girlfriend stuff is doomed from the start. We all know that. If there’s no Mr. Right (and there isn’t), then why delude ourselves? Distraction is okay. Distraction with an end date. A predetermined one.

“I was remiss in not choosing a package,” I tell him, taking control of this situation before it spirals out of control. “I’ll choose one now.”

“What happened to being spontaneous?”

“We can still be spontaneous,” I hedge.

“Platinum.” He breathes out a sigh of resistance. “What about deluxe?”

“Well, we’ve surpassed that.”

“You don’t know what it is, Gracie Lou. How do you know we’ve surpassed it?” He sounds impatient, but since he’s indulging me, I continue.

“*Fine*. What’s the deluxe?”

“The deluxe is our most popular package.” He rubs his hands together, and I bite back a smile. I *will* choose a package tonight no matter what. What Davis and I have will come to an end.

Once I’m in control of when that is, I can relax and enjoy myself. Waiting for the proverbial dropping shoe is not my idea of fun.

“The Davis, as you know, is a date, hold the eggplant.”

“Except no literal holding of the eggplant.”

“Right. Can’t really go back to not holding it once you’ve held it, can you?” His eyes twinkle with mischief.

“No, I suppose not.” I grin at him, liking the ease of this conversation. No soul-staring or wondering. Just discussing our future and its black-and-white parameters.

“Okay, then.” He nods once. “The platinum has two options. It can be a weekend thing—three days straight—or it can be three times.”

“*Three* times?”

Davis leans close and waggles his thick sandy-colored eyebrows. “Three. Times.”

“So, if I chose the platinum, this would be our second date, with only one more to go.” Totally doable.

“No, sweetheart,” he corrects. “Three *times*.” He lifts his eyebrow and tilts his head, letting his expression speak rather than his words. He’s talking about sex.

“*Oh*.”

“Yeah. *Oh*. Tonight I may return you home with nary a kiss on the cheek.”

“Did you just use the word ‘nary’?”

“No sex means tonight doesn’t count as one of the times.” He drinks from his water glass again.

“Hmm.”

“On the other hand, choosing the deluxe means that after tonight we could be done.” He shrugs with his mouth like it doesn’t matter to him which we do.

“No sex required?” I narrow my eyes, waiting for him to lighten the moment with a finger point and a “Gotcha!” He does neither.

“No sex required,” he confirms.

I know it’ll take a few encounters with Davis to go from fascinated to out the door, so the deluxe isn’t an option. Getting him out of my mind means getting him back into bed. Once may do it, but twice would *definitely* do it. I have no choice, really.

“I guess it’s going to have to be the platinum,” I announce.

My tummy flips and I press my knees together against the anticipatory quivering between my legs. Amidst a light champagne buzz and talking to him so openly about our sexual

arrangement, I'm ready to seal the deal on that second time with him.

Tonight.

After that third "time," we'll be back to normal, and then I can relax. Not knowing when we expire is throwing me off. We weren't ever supposed to start. I'm not intrigued by the mystery of will-we-or-won't-we. Not knowing what's to come is the scary part.

It always was.

We leave Bubbly's for what I think is his place, until he asks if I have everything I need from McGreevy's before he drops me at home. My place is more convenient than his, considering I don't have a toothbrush or a change of clothes with me. Smart thinking on his part.

At my front door, Davis walks me up the three steps leading to my house. A surge of certainty replaces the nervous tingles, but I'm still anticipating what is to come.

"You're welcome to stay," I say as I unlock my front door. I pull the key out and face him. "I have—"

Davis kisses me. Slow.

Long.

Deep.

I give in to the fluttering of my lashes, closing my eyes and wrapping my arms around his neck. My breasts press against his firm chest and my heart beats erratically. When we part, I'm sort of hanging from his shoulders and he's watching me through hooded lids.

"This is where I say good night." He places a kiss on the center of my lips. I whimper my disagreement. *Good night?*

When he lets me go, I catch his hand in mine before he walks away. “No deal.”

His mouth tips at one sensual corner. “No?”

“No.” My firm tone brooks no argument. At least I hope so. “I want you to come in.” I open my front door and gesture at the gap as if he doesn’t understand plain English.

“And after I come in? Then what?” His thumb caresses my hand as he steps closer. My heart mule-kicks my ribs. Is he going to turn me down again?

“And then everything,” I whisper, hope jittering in my veins like too much caffeine.

“Everything is a tall order, Gracie Lou.” His voice has taken on a deep, husky tone.

“Well,” I say as he spears my hair with his fingers, “I did request the platinum.”

CHAPTER TEN

DAVIS

Are you kidding? Of course I wasn't going to leave.
I'm not about to turn Grace down when her green eyes telepathically sext me.

She has a tight hold on my hand when she closes the door, but when she tries to let go, I squeeze her palm with mine. Her smile is devilish and slightly shy. It's the best combination I've ever seen on a woman. Normally it's one or the other. Grace is a tantalizing mix of both.

She points to the loft with her purse. "I should take a quick shower. You know what to do." She inhales a steep breath and gestures to the fridge. "Grab a beer." Then she gestures to the two-cushioned sofa. "Have a seat."

I nod.

She lets go.

I watch her ascend the steps, smiling to myself as I flip the lock on her front door. If she thinks I'm staying down here while she strips naked and takes a steamy shower without me, she's crazy.

GRACE

I had a very long shift at McGreevy's tonight, followed by a date with Davis. A fact I became hyperaware of the moment he stepped into my cramped house behind me. As much as I'd like to ride this fizzy champagne buzz all the way to the land of orgasms, I need to shed my work clothes first.

Under the warm stream, I'm careful not to wet my very clean, perfectly styled hair—I clipped it back. Hot water pounds my shoulders and I stretch my arms to release the tightness and aches from lifting and bending.

I can practically hear the exasperated sigh coming from the college degree buried in the back of my bedroom closet. It's in a large, overpriced frame, and the only reason I kept it is because my dad framed it for me. It was the least he could do, since he'd skipped my graduation—and has been MIA for the last eight years of my life.

Anyway.

The degree in communications led me to an unfulfilling job working in HR at a prominent company downtown. My desk was near the top floor and I had a cubicle to myself. The hours were a dream—eight to five and an hour for lunch gave me all the nights and weekends free I could want. But the job? Torture for a fun-loving people person like me. I picked up a bartending gig on the side at Club Room, figuring I could have a social life and make a dent in my school loan.

After I paid off said school loan, the bartending job became my true love. I'd picked up so many shifts, I spent almost as much time at Club Room as I did at my HR position.

With few bills, and fewer incentives to continue working round the clock, I chose between the two. Saying sayonara to the Notorious J.O.B. to sling drinks for a living was the best decision I ever made. My mom rolls her eyes to this day. But hey, I paid for that degree, not her. I can waste it if I want to.

Turning toward the spray, I push my past back where it belongs and think instead of the tall, sexy man in my living room. I haven't decided yet if I'll beckon him upstairs after I've arranged myself on the bed in my sexiest lingerie (or nothing), or if I'll go downstairs wrapped in a towel (or nothing). Each has its own merits. If I wait in bed...

My ears perk when I hear movement outside the shower curtain. When the bathroom door clicks shut, I know I didn't imagine it. Short of the outlying possibility that a stranger has broken into my home, incapacitated my date, and crept into my bathroom, that's Davis.

"Hello?" I call, hoping my would-be assailant is my super tall, hunky date.

I'm answered by the metal-on-metal sound of decorative shower curtain rings sliding along the rod. I peek over my shoulder.

"Who'd you think it was?" Davis's handsome face appears in the gap of the curtain, his hungry gaze sliding down over my bare ass and up again while I futilely cover my breasts.

Then.

He gets in.

"What are you doing?" The words escape me on a breath strangled with lust because Davis's ass is also bare. He adjusts the shower curtain to keep our steamy shower hot and lays cool hands on my hips.

A kiss lands on my shoulder and his heat blankets me from behind, though nothing other than his hands and lips have touched me.

Yet.

“Mind if I join you?” he asks, kissing my shoulder again.

I chuckle. It’s a little late for that question, and he knows it. He also knows the answer as well as I do. I don’t mind if he joins me.

“You startled me,” I purr, tipping my head to one side as he feathers kisses along my throat. His hands wrap my waist and splay over my belly. “I thought you were a robber.”

“Not a robber,” he murmurs, his tongue laving my earlobe before he suckles it between his teeth.

He is *so* good at that move.

“Unless you want me to be. The platinum includes role-playing.” Hands on my hips, he turns me, and I duck my head to avoid getting doused. He notices and trades places with me. Now the water is warming his back instead.

“Smooth, Romeo,” I scold him. “Now I’m cold.”

“You won’t be cold for long, Gracie.”

Can I confess something? Whenever he adds that “-ie” to my name, I *melt*. It’s the way he says it. Like I’m his and his alone. Like he’s branding me as his. He says my name with possession and confidence and familiarity. Each time he extends my name to two syllables, I know I’ll do whatever he wants.

Whatever he asks.

I take advantage of our close, wet quarters to run my eyes down his body and appreciate every nuance. I didn't take careful inventory the first night we slept together. Or the next morning. We were too busy, well, *getting busy*.

Now, though, we have all the time we need.

I start with his hair, which he soaks in the shower spray and smooths off his face. His sandy brown is darker when wet, and his long eyelashes spike when he swipes the water from his face. Davis has great cheekbones, an angled jaw built from determination, and a full, firm bottom lip designed to drive women wild. It's no secret my spine turns to jelly whenever he kisses my neck.

He winds one of the curls that flopped out of my clip around his finger as I reach out and brush his pecs. Firm and round and punctuated by flat nipples. I run my fingers down to abs that aren't too pronounced but cut enough that I'm able to trace them with my nails. His muscles clench as I continue my exploration with my eyes and with my fingers. I run my hands over the manscaped thatch of hair above a penis now happily jutting to attention.

"Hello there." I grip him in my palm, smoothing the skin over the head and down again as lust crashes into his storm gray gaze.

His hands go to my jaw, tipping my chin as he lowers his mouth to mine. He grows rigid in my fist as our kisses turn more desperate. More pronounced. More insistent.

He pushes my back to the shower wall, snatches both my wrists, and presses them over my head. My chest heaves as he watches me, desire thrumming mercilessly between my legs as he holds both my hands with one of his and draws a slow line between my breasts.

His fingers circle one areola. My back arches. Then that talented tongue of his closes over one nipple. He pulls me deep into his mouth as a moan of satisfaction works its way from my throat. When he releases my hands, I transfer them to his hair as he slides his fingers between my legs. He finds me as warm and wet as the water surrounding us. An answering groan comes from him as he continues swirling his tongue over the turgid flesh.

I start to crest, rolling onto the balls of my feet, my muscles tightening in my legs—in my entire body. He plunges a finger deep inside me while working my clitoris with his thumb. When he lowers his mouth to my nipple again, I explode like a shattering pane of glass.

A strong arm wraps around my back as my orgasm rocks me. I lower my heels to the slick tub floor, and Davis's mouth presses against my forehead, where my now-damp hair has slid from the clip and is mopping the wet wall behind me. Wet hair is a small price to pay for this much pleasure. As my breaths lengthen and slow, I hum a happy sigh. My eyes are closed but I know Davis is smiling.

His chest rumbles when he chuckles. "I really enjoy doing that for you."

I really enjoy having it done, I think, but only have enough energy to emit another satisfied hum.

The next sound is of the water being turned off. I lazily open my eyes. My body is overheated, my legs weakened. I could fall asleep right where I'm leaning.

Davis steps out of the tub and hands me a cream-colored towel before lifting a robin's-egg blue towel to his hair and scrubbing it dry. I keep my eyes on the droplets rolling over

the landscape of his perfect form. Each elongated muscle and limb is a work of art.

I move to climb out of the tub, and he offers his hand like I'm a lady exiting a carriage. A small laugh escapes me as I step onto the fluffy rug outside the shower.

“What?” He wraps the towel at his waist. The contrast of the soft blue shade, his golden skin tone, and gray eyes is staggeringly beautiful.

“You're much more of a gentleman than I would have expected.”

“You've accused me of as much once before,” he says. “At first I was flattered. Now I'm wondering if I should be insulted.”

Wrapped in my own towel, I go to the mirror and finger-comb my hair. It's damp but not soaked.

“Don't be insulted. It's more of a reflection on me than you,” I say, my eyes on his in the mirror. “I'm not accustomed to platinum service.”

In one smooth move, he snatches the towel from my body and lifts me into his arms. I shriek in surprise, hanging onto his neck until he deposits me onto the bed.

Then he overdelivers on his platinum promise.

DAVIS

My heart pounds hard and my breaths narrow and shorten.

Making love to Grace is a singular experience. Not that I ever compare, but if I did? I can't remember another woman who's been under or on top of me who turned me on this fucking much.

I'm not sure if it's the intense eye contact Grace and I share or the way she strokes the backs of my thighs with her feet while I thrust into her again and again. She's worlds apart from what I'm used to.

From what you've gotten used to.

I hate the idea that I've been settling since I first laid eyes on her, but *damn*. Had I known what awaited me at the end of the rainbow, I'd have asked her out a hell of a lot sooner.

Her forehead pleats and her rosy lips part: Grace's *O* face. There's nothing as breath-stealing in this world as her coming. Her dampened red waves are spread over a white pillowcase. She thrusts her hips upward to meet mine as her eyes squeeze closed.

Her orgasm crashes into her, wringing mine from me. While her sweet, breathy, high-pitched moans roll, my release exits on a guttural growl. I damn near black out from the head rush of her squeezing me tight. *Everywhere*.

Her arms are lashed around my neck, her legs clutch my ass, and her inner muscles milk my cock as sparks burst on the insides of my eyelids.

Fuck.

Yes.

“God *damn*” are my first coherent words a minute later when my throat decides to work. I press my lips to hers. She wrecks my hair with her fingers as she kisses me, no holds barred. “That was one for the books.”

“Don’t tell me you keep score.” She rolls her eyes playfully, but a dart of chagrin stabs my chest. I don’t want her thinking I keep score.

“Do *you* keep score?” I challenge, because I’m not going to defend myself.

“If I did, Davis Price, that performance would be in my top three.”

“I’ll take it.” I give her another slow, long kiss and slide from her sated body. “I guess next time I’ll have to try for number one.”

She hums thoughtfully and pegs me with eyes the color of the greens on the golf courses at Pebble Beach. “That was a better idea than you sitting on the couch waiting for me.”

Her finger strokes my bottom lip—she does that a lot.

I take her fingertip between my teeth and put enough pressure there for her to gasp. Then I release her and we stare and smile like idiots for a protracted moment. I like these silent seconds with her. No one counts. It doesn’t feel awkward. We just share a slice of time.

It’s cool.

“I know the platinum includes three sex dates,” she calls as I shuffle to the bathroom to discard the condom, “but what about sexting? Is that the deluxe package only, or is it included

in the platinum?” She lifts a hand to illustrate her point. “You know, is it tiered? Each one building on the next?”

I laugh. I can’t help it. She’s adorable and confusing. “You want me to sext you?”

“I don’t know.” She wrinkles her nose. “Do I?”

“I don’t know. *Do you?*” I grab my boxers as I cross the room, stepping into them and pulling them to my waist. She hungrily scans my chest, so I suck in a full breath and let her look.

“I’ve never done it before but I admit, I am curious.”

“Up to you.” I lean on the bed with both fists and level my gaze on hers. “I’ll leave that ball in your court, Gracie.”

I turn and fetch my slacks and shirt, both of which I tossed over a spindly wooden chair. As I tug my socks on, she points out the obvious.

“I assume you’re leaving.”

“Yeah. I’m leaving.” I have to.

“Are you sure?”

“It’s almost midnight,” I tell her, but I don’t elaborate. I’ve watched the calendar every year for so many years, I barely have to look to know that the day is coming. I’ve never been entwined with a woman on “the” day for the last six years, and I don’t intend to start now.

Arguably, since it’s only a little after eleven, I have time to crawl into bed with Grace and talk for a while, but I know where that will lead. Then it’ll officially be “tomorrow” and I’ll have to make up a reason not to make love to her while trying not to sound like I’m having a psychotic break.

The easiest road is the one leading down her street and back to my house. I kiss her one last time. “I have a thing.”

“A thing? Tonight?”

“Tomorrow, actually, but it starts really early.” *Like at 12:01 A.M.*

A flash of what may be disappointment crosses her face before she purposefully brightens. “No problem. Maybe we can wrap up our platinum package tomorrow night.”

She lifts one eyebrow and bites her bottom lip. Waiting. I hate to tell her no. But I have to.

“Tomorrow is bad for me.”

Her smile disappears.

Shit. This is the reason I also don't get entwined with a woman on the day *before* the day. This is awkward. Grace and I don't do awkward.

“The weekend might work,” I say.

“Sure.” She nods, but she's not happy about it.

I finish buttoning my shirt and pull on my suit jacket. “I'll let myself out.”

“ ’ Kay.”

I wave over my head as I jog down the stairs. At her door I hazard one last glance up the stairs at Grace, her hair a wild tornado, her quilt piled around her gloriously nude body. Her eyes on mine.

I don't want to leave.

“Sext me,” I say. Then I leave anyway.

In my car I crank the heat—a cold spell kicked in while I was in Grace’s house. I shift into Drive as a text tone sounds from my cell. At the stop sign I check it.

An engorged purple eggplant lights my screen.

I scroll through the emojis and tap the peach, pleased when the cartoon fruit closely resembling Grace’s ass hits the screen as my reply.

I toss the phone on the seat and grin as I navigate home. The text tone sounds twice more, but I don’t check it until I’m in my own house, heading up the stairs.

As I predicted, the first one reads LOL. The second one I didn’t see coming.

Here if you need to talk. About one “thing” or another.

She’s sweet.

I’m not planning on talking about it. I’ll get through tomorrow the way I do every year. As painlessly and quickly as possible.

And a little drunk. Just a little.

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

DAVIS

Five A.M. comes early.

I leap out of bed, clap my hands together, and decide it's going to be a banner fucking day. I'm going to make my clients a shit-ton of money. I *decree* it.

I realize as I shave, dress, and tie my shoes that this is a coping mechanism. But it works—which is why coping mechanisms were invented, so here we are.

An hour into my workday, one of the guys from work calls to ask for advice on an account. I take the call. Simps (short for his last name, Simpson) is younger than me both in this business and in birthdays. I first met him at a work retreat a year or so ago, and then he came to the poker night I hosted over the summer. I work with—well, not *with*, more like alongside—some incredibly driven men and women. Simps manages to run circles around the competition without being a flaming dickweed, so points to him.

I'm hungry for lunch by eleven thanks to my early hours and the amount of pacing I've done while talking on the phone. I rinse my coffee mug and reheat a bowl of hearty chili. I pair it with a grilled cheese, and because I'm eating my feelings today, I make one layer of cheese Gruyère and the other layer Brie. I top the cheese with thin slices of Bartlett pear and the *pièce de résistance*: raspberry jam. I grill it to a buttery golden brown that would make any chef weep with joy.

I bite into my masterpiece, expecting to be so turned on by my sandwich that we might need a moment together. Instead

I'm hammered with a memory. One I didn't see coming.

One I *should have* seen coming.

It involves my ex-fiancée, Hanna, and her affinity for Brie on melba toast with a dab of raspberry jam.

The bite goes rancid in my mouth, and it was a big one. I block my throat and chew, but for all my efforts, I may as well be navigating a mouthful of setting cement.

That memory leads to another—the way Hanna used to leave her shoes scattered around the house.

And another—her voice echoing through the foyer as she spoke to her mother for an hour each Saturday morning.

I finally get the bite down, deeply in need of a wet drink to coax it to my stomach. At the fridge I overlook the pitcher of water and a container of orange juice and focus on the line of Sam Adams bottles staring back at me.

Every year I make it through this day with relatively few flashbacks. On rare occasions, thoughts of Hanna and our life together assault me. The last time it happened was four years ago. I thought I was over it. Guess not.

This is going to suck.

I swipe a bottle from the shelf and decide to start drinking sooner than I originally planned. Like now.

Now seems good.

GRACE

Margo comes in at five o'clock. She's my bartending and managerial relief. I'm so glad she's back, I could kiss her. I refrain, but I do thank her for not leaving me forever.

"How were tango lessons?" I ask.

"Good." Her eyes brighten. "My husband and I try and do things together to keep the love alive." She's never shared anything personal with me since I met her, but I try not to overreact. "He can't dance a single step, but he tries, and that means something."

I chime in with my agreement, though I can't think of a time when a boyfriend has gone out of his way to do something nice for me that didn't also benefit him. Then I think of the champagne tasting, and the way Davis was going to leave my house without sex, and wonder if that counts.

It does and I know it.

I pocket my tips and do some light cleaning. I'm about to leave when—no kidding—a gaggle of skirts and suits pour in through the doors. They're all carrying briefcases or large handbags and using very office-y words. It's rare on a Thursday to see this sort of rush early, so I offer to stay and help Margo get them settled. There's only one other server on the floor, and since Margo is chained to the bar, there's no way can she handle everyone at once.

I grab a pen and pad of paper and start toward the group, who are shoving tables together and arranging their seats, when the door swings open and Vince and Jackie rush in.

“Grace. Thank God.” Davis’s best friend looks alarmed. I’ve never seen Vince’s expression anything short of playful. A dart of dread ricochets through me as I glance over at his girlfriend. Jackie’s brown eyes are wide with alarm as well.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, business gaggle forgotten.

Vince does a quick survey of McGreevy’s. “Davis isn’t here?”

“No. He said he had a thing today.”

“Yeah. He does. He’s not at home.” Vince says this as if thinking to himself, his focus elsewhere in the room. His piercing blue eyes return to me. “When is the last time you saw him?”

I hesitate a moment before admitting, “He left my house just before midnight.”

Jackie’s alarm fades to a soft look of surprise, and even Vince forgets his immediate concerns to give me a lopsided smile.

“Nice,” he says approvingly. “When did this happen?”

“It’s pretty new,” I hedge. *And pretty temporary*, I decide not to add.

“If he comes in here, text me. Have your phone on you?” His cell is in his hand and he asks me for my phone number. I rattle it off as I pull my iPhone from my back pocket. Davis’s last text—a round peach that looks more like a lady’s derriere than a piece of fruit—sits on my screen with my follow-up texts. A new text pops up on my screen reading **Vince**.

“Got it.” Before I chicken out, I ask, “Is he okay?”

“He’ll be okay,” Vince assures me, but when he presses his lips together, I wonder if he means it. He grasps Jackie’s hand

and asks if she wants to stay here while he goes and looks for Davis. Jackie immediately turns to me.

“Grace, are you all right alone?” she asks. “I’ll stay here with you if you want me to.”

“I’m fine.” Gosh. That was nice. Jackie and I don’t know each other very well, but she’s genuinely offering to sit with me. I force a smile. “I have to get these customers settled, and then I’m done for the day.”

“You’re sure?” Jackie takes a step forward and tilts her pretty face.

“Totally sure. Thank you.” I don’t want to take her away from Vince, who looks like he might need her more than I do. I include him in my next statement. “Will you let me know he’s all right?”

“Will do, Gracie.” Vince uses Davis’s nickname for me, but it’s more brotherly coming from him.

I try not to worry about Davis as I take orders and make drinks. Vince and Jackie are on the case. After a bit of debate, I decide not to text Davis. I don’t want to bother him if he’s trying to be alone and deal with whatever “thing” he had last night.

On the drive back to my house, my evil imagination suggests he’s visiting an ex-girlfriend for some sex therapy or that he’s drunk himself into a stupor of mourning or rage, or maybe he wrecked his Mercedes and he’s lying in a ditch. I quickly dismiss the doom-filled thoughts. Davis isn’t the reckless type.

At seven o’clock I receive the text I’ve been waiting for from Vince.

Davis is at home. Fine but wants to be alone. Sorry to worry you.

I text back a simple Thanks, but my worries aren't allayed.

I understand Davis wanting to be alone. Whenever something goes awry in my life, I prefer to suffer in silence too. I thumb through the memories of my past—those times I spent enduring by myself. Whether I was holed up in my teenage bedroom while my parents screamed at each other, sobbing in the stadium's bathroom at the site of my college graduation because my father stood me up yet again, or soaking in a cooling tub of bathwater with a glass of wine after my stupid boyfriend of two years broke my stupid heart, being alone has been a horrible way to get through hard times.

What I wouldn't have given for my mother to come into my bedroom and apologize for making me endure her and my father's mutual hatred. Or for one of my friends to notice I was missing and come check on me in that stadium bathroom. I wish I'd called up Roxanne the time my stupid boyfriend broke my stupid heart. She would have listened. Sobbing on her shoulder would have helped.

I was too stubborn to admit that until now.

Davis doesn't have to spend the evening enduring whatever tough time he's going through alone. He has me.

I'm going over there. At the very least, he's my friend and I have as much of a right to check on his well-being as Vince and Jackie.

With conviction, I button my coat and grab my purse and march out to my car. I arrive at his place in less than ten minutes and decide at his doorstep that I'm going to knock

until he lets me in. If he doesn't let me in, I'm going to knock until one of his neighbors lets me in.

I rap my knuckles on the door exactly five times before it opens. Davis is standing in the foyer, keys in hand.

"You're wearing jeans," I say, surprised to see him in denim and a button-down shirt. In anything other than a pressed suit and jacket. I eye the keys in his hand. "I hope you weren't about to drive somewhere in your condition."

"What are you doing here?"

"Where were you going?"

His gray eyes narrow. "Out."

I cross the threshold and shut us inside. I worried on the way over here that Davis was sitting with whiskey bottle in hand, his tie and shirt askew, belting out show tunes. Instead he's bright-eyed and smells of his crisp, pine-y cologne. "You don't look drunk."

"I'm not drunk." His eyebrows crash over his nose. "What the hell are you doing here?" It's not exactly a yell, but his voice has lost that calm, warm quality he exudes around me. The question stings, but I stand my ground.

"Vince came into McGreevy's looking for you. He was worried." I finger the button on my coat and admit, "He made me worry."

Davis takes an intimidating step toward me, his voice a low warning. "What did he tell you?"

"Not much. That you were home and wanted to be alone." I lick my lips nervously as I peer up at him. I ignored Vince's advice, and now that I'm standing in front of Davis, I wonder if we're friends after all. Did he give Vince and Jackie the

same hard time? With no other explanation, I sort of repeat, “I was worried about you.”

“Worried I’d be drunk,” he states, his expression downgrading from enraged to peeved. “When have you ever seen me drunk, Gracie?”

I think back to all the times he’s sat at my bar and shake my head. “I haven’t.”

“Right. I drink. I don’t get drunk. I had a buzz earlier. Then I had a nap. Then I had a surprise visit from Vince and Jackie. And *then* I changed to come out and see you.”

That takes me a moment to digest.

“You were coming to see me?” I ask to be sure I heard him right.

“Yeah.”

“But you said this weekend.”

“I did.”

“Were you going to McGreevy’s?”

“I was going to start there.”

“I’m not there,” I whisper.

He catches my hand and tugs me close. His arm braces my back as his fingers slide into my hair. I’m rewarded with a soft, slow, deep Davis kiss. I sigh into his mouth and kiss him back.

When he pulls away, his fingers are massaging my scalp and his forehead is resting on mine. His arm at my back tightens. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, and we hug.

We hug for a long while.

His heart thumps heavily against my breasts and he breathes out long and slow. I bet it's the deepest breath he's taken since he left my house last night.

"Don't go" is all he says.

"I wasn't planning on it." I stroke his cheek and look into his eyes, seeing pain there.

He kisses me again before leading me up two sets of stairs to his bedroom. In front of his bed, he palms my hands and weaves our fingers together. We stand like that for a few beats before he lets go and starts on his shirt buttons. He bares his chest before he strips off my shirt. Together we unbutton and unzip our jeans, mirroring each other as we bend to slip off our shoes.

In a matter of seconds, he's in boxers, and I'm in my pale pink satin bra and panties.

He crooks a finger, beckoning me to him. I still want to know what's wrong with him. If anything is wrong with him. I don't think I'm part of what's wrong, considering he's tossing my bra aside and plunging his hand into my panties to stroke my wetness. It further confirms he wants me here when he says those very words into my ear, his breath hot as I massage his thick cock with one hand.

"I want you, Gracie," he breathes.

"You can have me, Davis," I answer.

We make love in a different way from the first two times. Davis has always been respectful of my needs, but his kisses are more reverent tonight. He holds me tighter than before. His kisses linger, and his eyes don't leave mine as we move together.

I experience that same planet-shifting sensation when we come together.

When we've recovered, he returns to bed and lies beside me, snuggling me close. I rest my head on his chest and stroke his pecs with my fingers. I decided not to bring it up—to let Davis have his secret.

Evidently he has other plans.

His chest lifts and on a quiet sigh, he announces, “Today’s my wedding day.”

My hand stills its exploration. I prop myself on one elbow and regard him.

“You were supposed to get married today?” My whisper is hollow, because—honestly?— I’m not sure what he’s confessing. That he’s had a fiancée the whole time he’s been offering “packages” to every blonde—and me—in Columbus? Or that he used to be married? That seems more likely. He doesn’t strike me as having a double life.

“Six years ago today, my life changed forever,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t know you were married.”

His eyes are warm and relaxed when he says, “I wasn’t.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

DAVIS

I've never been in bed with a woman on my wedding day. Since I stood sweating through my tuxedo jacket six years ago, I've held this day in some sort of bizarre limbo. I was supposed to spend the night undressing my bride and making love in the cabana we'd reserved for our on-site honeymoon. Instead I spent that night and the six that followed it in a rum-infused stupor.

When Grace showed up at my door this evening, I was on my way out to find her. I wasn't lying. I decided earlier that I'd no longer revere this day like a depraved holiday. It's way past time to move on.

My hand runs over Grace's bare shoulder. She waits for me to say more, her bright eyes trained on me. What do I have to lose? I've already shared more with her than I have with anyone—anyone outside of mine and Hanna's failed destination wedding. But then I didn't have to share with them because they witnessed every agonizing moment.

"I had a runaway bride." It sounds cuter than it was. "Her name was Hanna and we scheduled a destination wedding in the Bahamas. She flew in with me the day before, slept next to me in our honeymoon suite the night before, and then in the morning, she went with her sisters to have her hair and makeup done."

That was the last I saw of her.

"Her mother confirmed that Hanna was there when the photographer was snapping photos of her in her wedding dress. I was told she was in the white tent at the back of the

beach when my two best friends, Vince and her brother Roger, lined up next to me. A justice of the peace nodded and the procession music started.”

The moment the music started, my heart hit my throat and the sting of tears pricked the backs of my eyes. I was about to be married, and I was ready. Ready to start my life with Hanna and learn what the future held for us.

Not much, as it turned out.

“Thirty seconds passed. A minute. Two.” I take a breath and force myself to continue. “Hanna and her sisters didn’t emerge from the tent. Finally, Hanna’s mother stood from her seat to walk back and check on them. She returned a moment later to say they were gone.” I swallow past a very thick throat. I’ve come this far. May as well tell it all.

“After the initial panic passed, we learned from the front desk at the resort that she and her sisters had run through the lobby and climbed into a cab. They were laughing.” I shake my head, recalling the hot burn of embarrassment along my collar. “Vince was there—him and his now-ex-wife. Everyone else—Hanna’s mother and father, her brother—took Hanna’s side.”

Sympathy bends Grace’s eyebrows, but she doesn’t interrupt.

“Vince had to return home for work. Understandable. I stayed on the island. That week was the last time I remember being really drunk. I pickled myself in tropical drinks day in and day out. I returned home a week later sunburned, hungover, and delirious from dehydration. Not my finest hour.” I quirk the side of my mouth but can’t manage even the smallest smile. “Hanna had emptied our apartment of our

things—including the wedding gifts we received. And she was gone.”

“Did she contact you again?” Grace asks after a few beats.

“She called me a few weeks after that to tell me she’d changed her mind about getting married.” I manage a dry laugh, but there’s no humor in it. “No shit, right?”

“Wow,” Grace mumbles. What else is there to say?

“Since then, I haven’t spent today with anyone but myself.” Questions brew in Grace’s narrowed eyes. I wonder what she’ll say next.

“So, after you were stranded at the altar, you came home and started serial dating?”

“Later that year I ventured out, yes.”

“Was Hanna blond?” Grace asks, drawing a conclusion that would’ve made sense if I were pining or after revenge on the woman who broke my heart.

“No.” I wind a piece of Grace’s hair around my finger and tug. “She had red hair.”

Understanding dawns on her face, but her auburn brows close in over her pert nose a second later. She wants to know why her, but she doesn’t ask. I answer her unasked question.

“You’re different, Gracie. I didn’t want to be attracted to you. The moment I laid eyes on you, I couldn’t tear them away. I tried to get Vince to ask you out.”

“Vince?” Her tone is disbelieving and shocked in a way that tells me she would’ve told him no. That’s good to hear. “By way of what logic?”

“If you were taken, you’d be the woman who serves me beer, not the hot, delicious, fiery, sassy redhead turning my brains into chopped veal.”

“Charming.” She smiles.

I smile. It feels good to smile.

“Davis?” Grace wrinkles her nose.

“Yeah?”

“Are you fucked up?”

I bark a laugh, which surprises me more than the smile did.
“On whose scale?”

“It’s just... I can understand how your fiancée humiliating you and leaving you with no explanation might really fuck you up.”

“I guess that’s up to the shrinks to decide, isn’t it?” I joke, but sober quickly. “I loved her. I wanted to have a family and settle down and do the whole nine yards. She pulled that rug out from under me and I...”

I pause to think of the phrase that would describe how I felt afterward.

“I scrambled to make sense of my life for a while. Then I realized that life doesn’t make any sense, and you can only do your best each day. So I dusted off my bruised ego and my sprained pride and put myself back in the game.”

“With rules.”

“A few.” I thought they’d protect me. “It’s not about the hair color. Not really. I didn’t want the reminder of a time when my life was spiraling out of control.”

Wow. That was honest.

“That makes total sense.”

The knot in my chest loosens. It means a lot that she understands.

“You were going to be a family man, and now you spend several nights a week at a bar.” She shakes her head. “I have a lot of regulars, but you are the most attractive. The youngest. The most successful. Why do you do it? Why do you sit alone and sip Sam Adams at McGreevy’s?”

“Truth?” I ask rhetorically. We’re wading so deep in truth I’m about to need a snorkel.

She nods.

“It’s too quiet here. After that bell dings signaling the stock market is closed, I wrap up my day and then I don’t know what to do next. Some nights the TV is enough company. Others...” I shake my head, at a loss for an excuse, before resigning myself to the truth. “It’s not enough.”

Her sigh comes from the depths. It’s a lot to take in, I suppose. I wouldn’t know. My dates and I rarely cross the boundary of shallow chitchat.

Rather than sharing how she relates to my loneliness, she changes the topic. “My best friend, Roxanne, is engaged. She and Mark are considering a destination wedding.” Grace shifts away from me to pull a pillow under her head. I roll to my side to face her. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“In her defense, I’m sure my situation was the exception.”

“It’s not that. She seems to be rushing into it. He’s older than her and quieter than anyone I ever pictured her with. She’s this feisty free-spirit and he’s, I don’t know. Not right for her.”

As she describes them, my thoughts turn to us. Grace is the embodiment of feisty free-spiritedness and, while I'm not quiet, I wonder if she sees me as "not right for her."

"Why did you hesitate when I asked you out?" I ask. "Not to brag, but I don't hear no very often."

She makes a choking noise to broadcast her exasperation. "Because you're *so* irresistible to women?"

"I think it's the lack of substance they're attracted to." Apparently once I start telling the truth, I can't stop. I press my lips together to keep from saying more as Grace's exasperation evaporates and concern takes its place.

"I can't tell if you're kidding right now."

"Not kidding. Making an honest observation."

"You have plenty of substance. I wouldn't be here if you didn't." She props herself up on her elbow again, exposing her breasts as the sheet slides away. "You know what happened is Hanna's fault, right? Her walking out on you at the last minute without a word to anyone was cowardly. How hard is it to confess she's having second thoughts before you were waiting for her to walk to you on your wedding day?"

A deep pleat forms on Grace's brow.

"I can't blame you for wanting to move on. I can even understand your banning redheads. Why revisit that pain? Why subject yourself to repeating the past? We have to protect ourselves when things go wrong—no one else is going to do it for us. No one else is going to stand in our corner when we need support. We're all out here on our own making the best of things."

She grows quiet. I figure it's because she realizes she's stopped talking about me and started talking about herself.

“Who didn’t protect you when you needed them, Gracie Lou?” I ask.

She sucks in a breath before forcing a laugh. “No one.”

“Someone.” I wait. She remains silent. I’m not going to push her. It took me six years to tell someone I’m dating about Hanna. Except Grace and I aren’t dating any longer. Not after tonight. That was the deal.

I roll her to her back, me on top, and steal a kiss and her breath away. Her hands are on my face and her breasts flatten against my chest. She feels good. Smells great. That cinnamon-y floral scent punches me in the gut.

“Hell of a way to end things, huh?” I stroke her hair away from her smooth cheek.

She gives me a sad smile. “Right. I guess this was time number three.”

“You look disappointed.” That seems right. So am I.

“No, I just wasn’t thinking about the rules.”

I make myself more comfortable, pushing her legs apart and settling my hips against hers. “Rules were made to be bent.”

“Why not enjoy tonight?” she asks, but she’s not really asking. She lifts her chin to kiss me, crossing her legs around my waist at the same time.

After that, we enjoy ourselves again. And *again*.

One last night.

GRACE

Rare is the occasion that Rox and I have the same day off, but here we are, at an outdoor café enjoying the nip in the fall air during a day of intermittent sunshine. The sun ducks behind a huge gray cloud and we both reach for our coats.

“Ohio, man.” She grunts, zipping up.

“I know. Thirty-two degrees two days ago, sixty-two degrees today.”

“Winter is the new spring.” She lifts her cheeseburger and takes a hearty bite. Then she points at me with one of her onion rings. “What’s going on with you lately? Anything new?”

“I’m seeing someone. Or well, I *saw* someone. ‘Seeing’ implies present tense.” I maneuver the straw to my mouth and take a long, syrupy drink of ice-cold cola.

“When did this happen? Who is he?” She drags the onion ring through her ketchup and notices I’m practically drooling. “Here. For God’s sake, Grace, just order the damn fried food if you want it.”

I happily accept her onion ring. Rox has a point. Why do I insist on ordering a salad when I really want what she’s eating? Then again, I don’t have her natural metabolism. To keep my curves in check, I have to eat responsibly. I munch the onion ring.

Heaven.

Maybe I'll order a side of onion rings for dessert. After I finish chewing, I tell her what she's missed.

"Remember me mentioning the regular at McGreevy's who's working his way down a sexual bucket list with blondes?"

"Yes." Rox drags out the word, her excitement increasing.

"I dared him to ask out a nonblonde." I gesture to myself. "And he did."

"How was the manwhore?" she asks, using my earlier description. Only now that seems shallow. I wince.

"He's thoughtful. He's charming. He's sexy and successful." *And was stood up on his wedding day, which means he probably needs a few years' therapy.* "Anyway. We ended it last Thursday."

"Why?" Rox's forehead crinkles. "What happened?"

"It was time. We agreed on three dates," I say, simplifying for her sake. "Once we hit three, we walked away. You know, before things became complicated."

I throw a hand as if this isn't a big deal and hasn't been plaguing me for days. On the bright side I have no one to get naked for, so I steal another onion ring. The waitress stops by with refills for our drinks.

"Could you bring us another side of onion rings?" Rox asks. When the waitress leaves, she tilts her head. "Grace, it always gets complicated. You don't have to marry the guy because you continue past three dates. If he's not interested in anyone else, and you're not interested in anyone else, then why not keep dating?" She pauses before asking, "He's not interested in anyone else, is he?"

“Good question. I haven’t seen him in three days, so I guess anything could’ve happened.” I shrug, trying to play down the ache in my heart when I picture him scrolling through his phone contacts in search of his next date. I’d like to think he hasn’t moved on, but how would I know?

“Text him.” Rox tosses another onion ring on top of my ignored salad. I dip it in the ketchup on her plate. “Find out if he’s still interested and let go of this self-sabotage habit you’re so fond of.”

Around my delicious, crunchy, ketchupy onion ring, I argue, “I don’t self-sabotage.”

She gives me a look of disbelief. I think back to a few of the men I’ve dated and... Okay, I do self-sabotage.

“Cutting it short before things go bad seems smart,” I defend weakly.

“Which works,” Rox says, her voice gentle. “Until it doesn’t.”

The waitress brings fresh onion rings to the table. Steam rises from the plate between Rox and me.

“I played my share of the field, Grace; you know this. But when I saw Mark, I felt different. We were different together. If I’d cast him aside, I would’ve missed out on being engaged.” Her smile is genuine—thoroughly contented. “I’m getting married. Me! Married!”

We both chuckle, because the idea of Rox married was more preposterous at one time than the idea of me getting married. She shared my belief that love was at best temporary, at worst a fantasy.

“Send him a text. Reach out,” she tells me. “If he’s already moved on, then you’ll have the smug satisfaction of being

right. But if he hasn't..."

"If he hasn't..." I repeat, fear flooding my veins.

"It wouldn't surprise me." Rox grabs one of the piping hot onion rings. "You're kind of spectacular."

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

DAVIS

I collapse on my couch with a bottle of beer. I ate a terrible microwave dinner, then changed out of my suit and pulled on a pair of drawstring gray sweats and a tee.

Normally, Monday night would be a McGreevy's night. I've been avoiding McGreevy's. It's not that I don't want to see Grace.

It's that I *do*.

She doesn't want to date me. I'm trying to be a nice guy and respect her boundaries. Being nice sucks.

I pull my phone out and text Vince. He's been mostly MIA since his new relationship with Jackie, but there again, I'm trying to respect my best friend's boundaries. I'm the one who stepped in when he stepped *in it* a few months back, so I like to think I'm as responsible for them being together as he is.

I send the text. A simple You and Jackie-O hanging out?

A return text reads Not tonight, she's with her sister. Beer?

We only have beer at one establishment—save for that ill-advised foray to the sports bar For Puck's Sake when, also, I was avoiding Grace—so the answer is *no*.

No. At home tonight.

Weird. You and Grace?

I stare at the screen for a few beats deciding how to answer. I go with the simple truth.

Over.

A few seconds later, Vince's reply dings. Sorry, man.

Sorry man. That's me.

I toss my cell on the couch cushion next to me and reach for the remote. I don't want to watch TV. Maybe I'll go to the gym. But I don't feel like running into anyone at the gym. Especially of the female variety.

Fuck. This *sucks*.

Did I mention that already?

I've been scrolling through Netflix for about twenty minutes when my text tone sounds. I half expect Vince to tell me he's in my driveway. Which wouldn't be the worst news. I wouldn't mind throwing back a few beers with him tonight. He could choose what to watch and end the turmoil of the bottomless browse.

The text on my phone is an eggplant emoji.

I do a double, then triple, take. It's from Grace.

I pull my feet off the coffee table, holding my phone with both hands, my elbows resting on my knees.

She contacted me.

No. Not just contacted me. A wicked smile curves my mouth. She *sexted* me.

What are you wearing? I text back. I flick off the television and lounge on the sofa. This is infinitely better than Netflix.

T-shirt, no bra. My fave pair of worn-out jeans.

My cock gives a happy jump. I love the way she looks in worn-out jeans.

I picture Grace, her red hair carelessly tussled, her bare feet poking out of her jeans, her nipples testing the confines of a loose T-shirt that has slipped off one shoulder. It's a sexy picture.

She texts me back. You?

Baggy sweats. White tee.

No suit tonight?

Not tonight.

A bubble appears on my phone signifying that she's responding. Then it vanishes. Then it reappears.

Vanishes again. Reappears. Finally her text comes through. I have no idea how to do this.

I smile, glad she has no idea how to do this. Glad I'm the first to steer her through the choppy waters of vanilla kinkery.

Right this way, Miss.

Without giving it too much thought, I press the phone icon and call her instead. On the third ring, I wonder if she's at work and can't talk, but on ring number four, she answers.

"Hi."

"Hey, Gracie."

"I was almost too embarrassed to answer."

"I'm glad you did." I'm grinning. God, I miss her. "I was sitting here picturing how sexy you look in worn jeans."

"Your sweats-tee combo is doing it for me, I admit." Her voice is a purr. I'm immensely glad I shifted our sexting to real live phone sex.

"Are you on your couch or on your bed?"

“On the bed. I was thumbing through Netflix but nothing good is on.”

“Tell me about it. I considered the zombie one, but I couldn’t commit.”

“I almost watched that too!” she exclaims. I hear her smile. A comfortable silence lingers.

“Jeans don’t make sense if you’re in bed, Gracie.” I dip my voice low and add, “Take them off.”

Silence stretches for a beat, then two, before she responds. “Okay.”

“Put me on speaker,” I instruct.

I hear the slide of fabric, the sound of a metallic clink on her wood floor—belt buckle, I’ll bet.

“Off,” she breathes.

“Describe your panties to me.”

“Um. Black.”

“Lace? Silk?”

“Cotton with white bows on each side.”

I groan. “I haven’t seen those yet.”

She chuckles. “Nope, not yet.”

I like the word “yet.” It implies I’ll have another chance to see her panties in the future. Future me punches the air in celebration. That’s a hell of a lot better situation than I thought we were in when I heated my subpar dinner this evening.

“Gracie, I want you to take your shirt off.”

Her voice is breathless when she says, “Okay.” A moment later, “Now what?”

“Lie back. Leave your panties on unless I instruct you otherwise.” Once she’s settled, she tells me she’s ready. My cock stiffens at the vision of her spread out over her quilt, almost naked, pert breasts standing at attention. “If I were there I’d slide my hands between your legs. I’m betting you’re wet for me, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you touch yourself for me, Gracie?”

“Yes.” Her affirmation is followed by a long moan. “Oh, that feels good.”

I grip my dick and give it a squeeze, picturing Grace, head back, fingers in her cotton black panties with white bows on each side. This phone call might kill me.

“Keep stroking yourself,” I instruct, because death by phone sex would be a great way to go. A few tight moans whisper through the phone and trickle into my ear.

“Give your nipple a light pinch with your other hand,” I tell her.

Her moans deepen and she hisses one word. “Yes.”

I give my dick another squeeze and close my eyes.

“Keep going.” My throat is tight. She has no idea how badly I want her. How I’ve thought of her every day we’ve been apart. “You can’t come until I say. When you do, it’s going to be long, and easy, and incredible. But you’ll still want more. Do you understand?”

“I understand.” Her words are strained.

“Move to the other nipple,” I instruct. “Keep working your clit. Are you very wet, Gracie?”

“Very.”

For everything good and holy.

“I’m going to count down from five, and when I tell you to come”—I swallow past a boulder-sized lump of lust—“you’re going to do it. Do you understand?”

“Yeah.”

What I wouldn’t give to be there right now, kissing her sweet mouth and working her into a lather with my fingers instead of my words. Why did she leave? Why did I let her?

Why was I such a fucking idiot?

“Five,” I say. “It’s building, isn’t it, sweetheart?”

“Uh-huh,” she pants.

“Four. Remember, when you come it’s going to be long and easy and satisfying, but you’re going to want more.”

“I want more already.”

That makes me grin.

“Three,” I count through my incurable smile. “I’m the only one who can give you more, Grace.”

I release my cock despite the incessant throbbing. I’m not getting myself off. This is about her. “*Two*. Long and easy, Gracie. Are you ready?” An unintelligible sound comes from her, but that’s not enough for me. I want it all. “I need to hear the words, gorgeous.”

“I’m ready, Davis.” Her voice is a frustrated, strained whimper. “So ready.”

Fuck me, I love when she says my name. She sounds like she’s ready to explode. I can’t wait to hear it.

“*One,*” I growl into the phone. “Come for me, Grace.”

Her orgasm washes over her on a rogue wave paired with hoarse cries of “Davis, oh, God. Oh, Davis.”

I ball my hand into a fist and press it into a couch cushion.
I won't jack off. I won't jack off.

Her ecstasy fades into a series of long hums as I grind my molars into dust.

“That was amazing.” Her voice drips like honey. “But you're right. I want more.”

“Tell me about it.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“How soon can you be here?”

I stand up so fast my head spins. “What did you just say?”

“Come over, Davis. *Now.*”

She doesn't have to tell me again.

GRACE

I pull on my jeans and T-shirt and check my reflection. Other than my very pink cheeks and eyes bright from my self-inflicted orgasm, I look good.

Really good.

I let loose a lazy smile, jog downstairs, and peek through the curtains for Davis. He's not here, but I didn't expect him for another ten minutes. He can't be here instantly.

Dammit.

I've never done anything like that in my life. I didn't even know I was into anything like that. I'm proud of myself for taking Roxanne's advice about texting him. I didn't take her advice and find out where he and I stand, though.

I should've, but what we did was way more fun.

I didn't mean to sext him. I planned on sending a harmless text asking if he was busy, but very real fear streaked through me when I pictured him *getting busy* with someone else. I hoped Davis wouldn't have moved on in three days, but I was the one who called things quits between us. It's not as if he wouldn't be within his rights to see someone new.

I texted the eggplant emoji for one reason: If he'd moved on, I could play it off as a joke. Sometimes an eggplant is just an eggplant.

In the kitchen I fill the teakettle with water and crank the gas to high, and rummage through my cabinets for cookies.

Score! An unopened bag of Pepperidge Farm Milanos. This really is my night.

I'm tearing open the package when I hear a knock. I drop the bag onto the counter and arrive at my front door slightly out of breath.

When I open the door, Davis sweeps me into his arms and kisses me. *Hard*. I'm used to his kisses being controlled, but this one is downright *wild*. His fingers find their homes in my hair as I cling to his neck and kiss him for all he's worth. He's worth way more than I imagined he would be.

I lower to my heels when he finishes our kiss with a few tender smooches. His voice is craggy when he admits, "I missed you, Gracie Lou."

The words "I miss you too" are stuck in my throat. I can't get them out. He doesn't seem to mind. He smiles down at me and shuts the door behind him. I survey his attire with raised eyebrows.

"You were *actually* wearing a white T-shirt and sweats." And sneakers. Without socks. He pulls the leather coat from his shoulders and tosses it over the banister. "You said you needed me. I wasn't about to waste a single second changing."

I feel full and happy, and just... Yeah. Happy.

"Hang on." He leans outside, then steps back in, shutting the door behind him. "This was on your doorstep." He offers the narrow bamboo box with the word ZEN burned into the wood. "Cigars?"

"Tea." I take the box, my eyes misting over. I haven't seen one of these in years.

"Secret admirer?"

Not even close.

I clear my throat and force a smile I don't feel. "It's from my dad."

"Fancy." Davis props his hands on his narrow hips and surveys my small living room. "So. What do you want to do tonight?"

I shove my dad's unexpected gift to the side and pull a box of cheap tea from the cabinet. I won't allow him to mess up what could be a perfect evening.

Davis is handsome and charming and real and *here*. He's here because I told him I needed him. A man being here when I need him is a novelty I'll bet won't wear off anytime soon.

"How about that zombie show?" I ask.

"You're on."

A FEW HOURS LATER, we're starting episode three. I drank hot tea and Davis had a beer. Our empty bottle and mug sit side by side on the coffee table. I take my eyes from the mayhem on the screen to study the contrast between the pale pink mug with the string and tag dangling over the edge and Davis's empty Sam Adams bottle. Like us, you wouldn't expect to find them together.

He squeezes my foot where it rests on his lap. At some point, I sank onto my back on my small couch and put my legs on his lap. He let me, which I like.

In another oddly comfortable move, he leans forward to grab the remote and pause the show. "Ready for bed?"

I take my eyes off the still of a decaying zombie to focus on Davis's painfully handsome face and sexily ruffled hair.

"I'm okay." I'm tired but not ready for him to leave yet.

"You sure? You look sleepy."

"Thanks a lot!" I poke him in the chest with my big toe. He grasps my ankle and heat shoots up my leg. I want him again. This is ridiculous.

"Was that insulting?"

"When someone says you look tired, it usually implies 'haggard.'" I tug my leg out of his grip, breaking the heated connection, and sit up. I fuss over my hair and swipe the hollows of my eyes in case my mascara has migrated.

"I didn't say 'tired.' I said 'sleepy.'" He palms my neck. "Warm and cuddly and sleepy. I was implying we should go to bed."

"We?" I shift, but not to move farther away. He takes advantage of our closeness to kiss me on the mouth.

It's as incredible as every other kiss he's given me.

"Invite me to stay, Gracie," he says against my parted lips.

We're in dangerous territory. Dangerous *dating* territory. In spite of my instincts screaming at me to tell him no and go to bed by myself, I nod my affirmation.

"Need to hear the words." He pushes me to my back. Hovering over me, he slides his hand to my butt and hitches my leg over his hip. His hips settle between my legs, his weight familiar and welcome, the nudge of his budding erection even more welcome.

“Stay.” The microsecond it’s out of my mouth, he kisses me.

We kiss until my television gives up on us and winks off on its own. We’re not far behind.

Davis leads me up the stairs to my bedroom and tucks us in. The last vision before my heavy eyelids close is his incurable smile.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

DAVIS

Poker night at my place isn't a regular occurrence, but when Simps mentioned doing it again, I offered my apartment. By ten thirty, I'm sitting at my kitchen table with a few remaining core players: Simps, Charmaine, who is pretty much one of the guys, and Vince. There's rock music in the background, a bottomed-out bowl of cheese dip, and a neglected veggie tray.

"No one ever eats the vegetables except for me," Char grumbles as she snaps the lid onto the plastic container.

"I ate a carrot stick to test what it'd taste like with the cheese dip." Vince shakes his head. "Not good."

Char clucks her tongue, and next to her Simps makes a futile attempt to scrape cheese from the bare bowl before giving up and eating the chip.

"Poor Char," he says as he chews. "All that toiling you did over the supermarket cash register gone to waste."

"You're such an ass," she tells him with a roll of her eyes.

Simps dusts his hands on his jeans and turns to Vince and me. "Cigar?"

"No, I'm looking forward to kissing my girlfriend tonight, but thanks." Vince's smile is relaxed and, frankly, enviably dopey.

I open my mouth to take Simps up on the cigar, but what if Grace texts me after she's done at work? I don't want to go over there smelling of cigar and lose my chance to kiss her.

“I’m out,” I say. “But help yourself to the balcony.” At the back of the hall beyond my office is a guest bedroom with a balcony facing the city lights and the river—not a bad view for cigar smoking.

“Since these boys are wimps, allow me to take you up on the offer,” Charmaine tells Simps. She loops her arm in his and walks with him to the back of my house. I hear her add, “That way if we kiss, we’ll be on even ground.”

“She’s something else.” Vince shakes his head as we hear the balcony door open and shut. This past summer, Char offered Vince sex in no uncertain terms. He declined—he was already seeing Jackie—and then he asked why I never dated Char. The answer is simple: I don’t date or screw chicks I work with. Even if we aren’t showing up at the office together, Char is a no-go for me. She is a blonde, and an attractive one, but not my type.

Now that I think about it, I always told myself Char wasn’t my type because she was bawdy and a touch too bold. Sounds like a certain wily redhead, doesn’t it?

“I didn’t put those two together.” Vince tips his head toward the back bedroom.

“Char and Simpson,” I comment, having never thought of it before. Simps is a good guy. Smart, funny, and not a dick to women. Char is tough but prides herself on being, as she calls herself, *a classy lady*.

I notice Vince’s empty bottle. “One more?”

“Sure, why not?”

At the fridge, I answer his question. “Because Jackie has your balls in her pocket and wants you home by eleven?”

“Nice try. You’re just bitter because you’re alone.”

I hand over his beer and Vince takes the opportunity to be sincere instead of berating me further. Honestly, either was fine. I'm used to him giving me shit. Dudes aren't known for their sensitivity with each other.

"Sorry about you and Grace."

"Why?" I'm genuinely perplexed for a few seconds. I prop my feet on Char's abandoned chair and cross my legs at the ankles.

"Jackie was pretty excited when Grace mentioned you two were seeing each other. She said you were—and this is a quote—'perfect' together."

"How did she—?" and then I remember how Vince and Jackie scoured the town looking for me not too long ago. "My wedding day," I conclude, pulling a hand down my face. "You worry too much."

"Davis."

Vince was ankle deep in the sand with me on my wedding day. He witnessed every agonizing second of my waiting for my no-show bride. He was there afterward, too, for as long as he could be before he and Leslie had to fly home. And he was there way after the fact when I returned home and didn't know my ass from my elbow. It's more than I can say for every other person who attended. I don't talk to any of them anymore.

"You can alleviate Jackie-O's concerns." I drink from my fresh Sam Adams. "Grace and I picked things up again."

Vince's eyebrows climb his disgustingly handsome face. His dark hair and blue eyes make us mortal men peasantlike by comparison.

"That's great," he tells me, but I can tell he's waiting for more. When I don't offer it, he pushes. "What's going on?"

I shrug. “She chose a package and ended things and then showed up at my house on the night you told her not to.”

He ignores the package reference, because he’s busted my balls about it too many times to count. Instead he addresses the alarming fact I just shared.

“Grace came to your house on your former wedding day?”

I nod.

“And you let her in.” This is stated in rigid monotone, Vince’s narrowing gaze suggesting he’s wondering who body-snatched me.

“I was on my way out to see her anyway. No reason not to let her in.” I frown, uncomfortable with the look of alarm on my best friend’s face.

“Are you going to make me play one hundred questions, or are you going to fess up and tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“Nothing’s *going on*. We ended, then we started up again. What’s the big deal?” But as I ask, a prickling, uncomfortable sensation climbs my neck. This isn’t typical for me and we both know it.

“Oh, I don’t know, could it be because Grace is the first woman you’ve *really* dated since Hanna?”

I shrug again.

“It’s significant, Davis.”

“It’s not an issue, Carson,” I snap, using his last name.

He leans on the kitchen table, hand wrapped around his beer bottle. “I’m going to break this down for you, because you would do the same for me.”

He waits for me to argue, but I don't. He's right. I would absolutely break things down for him if there was a bigger picture to which he was blind. I care about the guy, and he cares about me too.

"Six years ago, Hanna left you standing barefoot on the beach when she didn't show up for your nuptials. You spent your honeymoon solo—unless rum counts as a companion—"

"Sometimes rum is the best companion."

"—and since then you've been face-planting onto every blonde who crosses your path without coming up for air." Vince pauses to think. "*Almost* every blonde. Charmaine wasn't on your *to-do* list."

I nod my affirmation.

"And then you start dating Grace, who you tried to get me to ask out, I might add."

"Only because someone *should*. Anyway, she bet me two hundred dollars I wouldn't ask out the next nonblonde who approached me. You know I can't pass on a sure thing."

He chuckles. "Did she pay up?"

"Not yet." I pretend to ponder. "Do you think that's why I'm letting her hang around?"

"You tell me, Price," Vince says, lobbing my last name back at me. "Is she clingy?"

Not clingy enough. I had to practically beg to stay at her house the other night.

"Not clingy," I answer.

A lengthy silence stretches between us. Simps and Char laugh and the sound carries through the glass door at the back

of the house. Since they're well out of earshot, I give my best friend another factoid I'm sure he'll be interested in.

"I told Grace about Hanna. The wedding. All of it."

I expect Vince to point out what that obviously means. Or mention how in denial I am. Or illustrate how different Grace is and tell me he understands exactly why I told her the one part of my past I'd never voluntarily tell anyone.

Instead he nods solemnly and sips his beer. What he's not saying is saying more than words could. Are my reclaimed bachelor days numbered?

"Davis," Vince starts, interrupting my thoughts.

I give him my attention, ready to hear whatever conclusion he's come up with. Ready to face the mirror he's about to hold up.

Instead of dispensing deep thoughts, he points at the annihilated food table. "Do you have any more of that cheese dip, or what?"

"You're an asshole," I tell him.

He laughs knowingly.

I love this guy.

GRACE

Candace, another part-time bartender, Lars, and I are behind the bar at McGreevy's, which makes for cramped quarters. Candace and Lars are also working the floor thanks to a new-hire waitress who called in sick. We're not only shorthanded, we're slammed.

In restaurant terms that's a nice way of saying we're fucked.

After the dining room is caught up and the patrons at the bar served, Lars tips his chin at me. "Cut?"

He wants to know if he can go home, and realistically, Candace and I should have no problem handling things from here. If Candace needs me to stick around a few hours because of another rush, I'll do it.

"Stock the beer fridge and clear out these bus tubs." I point at the dirty dishes that have collected throughout the evening. "And you're free to go."

Lars—big nose, wide jaw, and short stature—smiles and it's the biggest I've ever seen. "Thanks. Have a date."

"Congratulations."

"Everyone has a date but me," Candace grumbles as she splits us like bowling pins and marches into the dining room. Lars and I exchange surprised glances. I'm guessing he, like me, had no idea Candace was looking for a date. That's ageist of us, isn't it?

Lars piddles around for twenty minutes before he takes his tips and leaves. The dining room is starting to thin out. I'm relieved. I have one waitress, Tabby, working the floor, so Candace will be okay if I bail.

I've been here since noon so I'm past ready to go. And I'm hungry.

I'm pouring myself a cola from the soda gun at the bar and trying to decide what book I'll read in the bathtub tonight when a deep, oddly familiar voice cuts into my rambling thoughts.

"Did you get the tea?"

I lift my chin and come face to face with hazel eyes. The man in front of me has a gray goatee matching his hair—shoulder-length hair sitting on the wide shoulders of a black leather biker jacket.

"Dad?" I freeze in place, overflowing the glass I was filling with cola. "Shit."

I wipe the spill with a damp cloth, my motions jerky. What the *hell* is he doing here? The random gifts at my doorstep, yeah, okay. But showing up at my place of work? How did he know where to find me?

Mom. She's the only way.

When my mom divorced him, Raphael Buchanan did a complete one-eighty. Gone were the suits and the Volvo. He bought a Harley. A few years later, he grew out his hair and beard—not quite as long as they are right now, but I remember not recognizing him at first back then.

"You okay, sweets?" Candace asks as she returns behind the bar with an armload of dishes. I give her a nod as she rests

the dishes into an empty bus tub. Her eyes cut from me to my father, then she grins to beat all.

“Raf,” she says. “You’re a sight.”

“Hey, Candy,” he tells her. “You look like you belong here ’bout as much as I do.”

I’m not sure what’s happening. Candace knows my dad?

“Grace. Ain’t you gonna say nothin’?” he asks.

Ain’t. Nothin’. This man sounds nothing like the father I grew up with. The sharp-tongued lawyer who believed winning an argument was better than avoiding one.

“I haven’t seen you in eight years. What the hell do you expect me to say?” I bark.

“Is this—?” Candace takes a step closer to me. “Raf, is this your daughter?”

I cut a look to Candace, blinking in surprise.

“Your dad and I worked together,” she explains. “I didn’t know you were his.”

“I’m not *his*,” I snap, and Candace’s smile droops. He ceased being a part of my life when he vanished, only showing up to leave random gifts on my doorstep.

“Why are you here?” I snap at my dad. “Are you dying or something?”

“Yeah.” His already-pallid face goes more ashen as my stomach plummets to my toes. Candace touches me on the shoulder. “Sit down for a minute, Grace. I’ll buy you a drink and we can bury the hatchet.”

“I don’t have to do anything with you.” My voice is shaky. My hands too.

“I don’t have long to shuffle this mortal coil, Grace. Sit. Down.” His ain’t-you-gonna-say-nothin’ tone has shifted into the self-righteous one from the soundtrack of my childhood home.

I shake my head. This has to be a ploy. A desperate attempt for my attention. Candace’s hand squeezes my shoulder. Unable to take condolences since I’m still processing, I brush her aside.

“For years I reached out and you ignored me,” I tell my dad, my voice hard. “You made it clear you wanted nothing to do with me when you stood me up at my college graduation. And now you’re here. Why?”

“I’m your father.” I scan his hulking presence. He doesn’t look sick. “That’s forever. However long we got left.”

“I can’t do this now.” I slap the wet towel onto the bar, heat building in my eyes and tingling my nose. My mind skitters left and then right. Does Mom know? If so, why didn’t she tell me? Why didn’t *he* tell me in a note along with my tea? I snag my coat and purse from the office and rush by my father.

“Grace,” my dad bellows from behind me.

“I can’t” are the only words I can manage. “I *can’t*.”

“I don’t have much time, angel.” His face broadcasts concern, his mouth turning down.

The lump in my throat doubles in size. I turn for the door, tears obliterating my vision. Yes, I’m running. Running away from a truth I can’t handle.

“Grace!” His desperate shout causes adrenaline to dump into my bloodstream. I’m thirteen again, in my room with the

door shut, his and my mother's raised voices rattling the windowpanes.

He can't be dying. He was always invincible. *Always.*

I throw open the door as someone walks in. I have too much forward momentum to stop short, so instead I plow into him. I awkwardly apologize, my eyes on my feet as I attempt to flee, but the man in front of me scoops me against him, his arms solid and strong. He smells good.

Really good.

“Hey, hey. Gracie.”

I look up into Davis's concerned expression and practically collapse against him.

“Don't let her leave.” My father's commanding voice sends a ripple of fear through me. Not of him but *for* him.

Davis takes it as the former, his face morphing into hard planes, his jaw set and nostrils flaring.

He addresses my father, and when he does, he's not the least bit polite. “Who the fuck are you?”

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

DAVIS

Grace trembles like a leaf next to me, insisting for the umpteenth time that she's "fine." I'm not buying it. The run-in with the leather-clad mountain man, who's apparently her father, was a surprise for both of us.

At McGreevy's, she begged to leave while clinging to my coat. I was about to take her out of there when Raphael Buchanan introduced himself in such a way that I knew I couldn't take her out of there.

I'm her father. I assume you care about her. So do I. I don't have much time left on this earth, so if I could have two minutes. I don't want things to end like this.

Grace buried her face in my shirt and let out a sob that crushed my heart. In the unique position of never having said goodbye to my dad, I suggested she grant her old man two minutes and hear him out.

Two minutes turned into two hours with Raphael. Pancreatic cancer. They've given him six months.

I offered to excuse myself several times to give them their privacy, but Grace had a hold of my hand so tightly, I didn't go anywhere. She listened. She even smiled. Her father apologized and explained.

Then she and I left McGreevy's for my place. At her request.

After everyone slipped out at the end of poker night, I didn't bother cleaning up, which I explained as we stepped into my house. She didn't care about the mess, and after I took

in the hollow look in her eyes, I didn't care either. All I cared about was getting that hollow look out of her eyes.

We walked inside and collapsed on the couch. She clung to me then and clings to me still. She hasn't spoken in a long while. I rub my hand up and down her arm and wait.

Against me now, she lets out a sigh. The tremors subside. She untangles herself from my torso to sit on the couch cushion next to me, swiping her hands over her face and resting her elbows on her knees.

"I can't decide if your timing is perfect or horrible," she says, her words slightly garbled from her hands pressed to her cheeks.

"I'd say my timing was damn near perfect, considering."

She nods but doesn't look at me, her focus off in the distance. I take her one of her hands. "Hey."

She blinks at me like she forgot what I looked like.

"Remember that time I told you about my runaway bride?" I lift my eyebrows.

One side of her mouth quirks. "Are you saying I owe you a story?"

"You don't owe me anything, Gracie." Talking to her made everything better, and I want to be here for her in case unloading on me sets her mind at ease. "But yeah. Why don't you tell me a story?"

Her shoulders lift and drop with a heavy sigh. I'm not sure if she's going to tell me any more or not. Then she does.

"My father used to be a suit-and-tie guy like you. He was a lawyer. He and my mom had one of the worst marriages on the planet. They stayed together for me, or so they said, but I

didn't reap many benefits from the additional years of them fighting."

Her eyes lose focus across the room again. I squeeze her hand to bring her back to me.

"Did he...hit you? Did he...?" I can hardly ask, but I have to know. It's clear there's a chasm between her and her father. I want to know how wide it is. "Did he *hurt* you?"

Her face broadcasts so much surprise, I know I'm wrong. Thank God.

"No. Not like you mean. He was loud, and he was angry a lot, but he never laid a hand on me."

I let out a breath that I was holding hostage in my lungs.

"Thanks for worrying." She touches my chest.

"Can't help it." I care about Grace. I don't want anyone to hurt her—past, present, or future. She deserves happiness. Safety. A future free of worry. I feel my eyebrows pull together as I consider being the person to give her those things. It's not a bad consideration.

"Once he left my mom, he changed. Swapped the sedan for a motorcycle. Started hanging around a rougher crowd. Quit his job. My mom and I thought he was on drugs, and he probably was for a while there. I don't know. He popped into my life once or twice a year at first, and I tried to reel him back in. Tried to make it work between us even though he was the one digging the divide.

"The last straw came when I invited him to my college graduation. He never showed." She shakes her head, sadness wafting off of her. "That sounds petty now."

I squeeze her hand in support.

“Anyway, I expected him to show up for my graduation. I *needed* him to show. Christmases, birthdays could fall by the wayside because there was always another coming the next year. But I worked hard for my degree. I wanted him to be there and... I don’t know. It’s stupid.”

“You wanted him to be proud of you. It’s not stupid.”

“He came to see me at my apartment a few days after that.” She bites the side of her cheek as tears pool in her eyes. “With a huge frame for my degree. I didn’t answer the door, so he left it by the mat. Every other year or so, I’ll find an expensive gift on my doorstep. A fountain pen. A leather journal. Fancy tea.”

Her lashes flutter and a tear escapes. She brushes it away, almost angrily. “He never shows up. Never.”

“I’m so sorry, Grace.” What else is there to say? The father who should’ve been there for her only ever showed up on his terms. Even tonight, he delivered the worst possible news in the worst possible way.

It’s bullshit, but she’s processing a lot right now. My being pissed off isn’t going to help, no matter how tempted I am to remind her what a fucknugget he is for neglecting her.

“I’ve taken up enough of your evening with this stuff.” She stands and physically distances herself from me, grabbing her coat and purse from the other side of the room. “Thanks for the bailout. I owe you one.”

As she slides her arms into her coat, I stand and cram my hands into my pants pockets. “You don’t owe me anything.”

I don’t want her to go. I don’t want her to climb into her bed and cry herself to sleep. I don’t want her to be alone.

“You went above and beyond,” she tells me, her armor locking into place. She shoulders her purse, and when she grasps the handrail for the stairs, I say the first thing I think of that might get her to stay a few minutes longer.

“My dad died when I was nine.”

Her grip tightens on the railing. She looks over her shoulder at me, her red hair bright against her gray jacket, her green eyes flooding with concern.

“He was in a car accident and my mom, who was always flighty and had one foot out the door as it was, showed up to the hospital for about fifteen minutes before she skipped town for good. I was there with my grandmother—my dad’s mom—and after my mom left, Grandma Rose raised me.” Hands in my pockets, I shrug. “I didn’t get to say goodbye to him. He never woke up.”

Her brows bend in sympathy.

“My mom left and never came back,” I say. “If she showed up out of the blue today and told me she had six months to live, I’d...” I shake my head, at a loss. “I have no clue how I’d react.” I push a curl from Grace’s cheek. “I’d probably go home with you and shake in your arms.”

She gives me a weak smile.

“You don’t have to know what to do right now. You don’t have to be in control of your feelings. Hell, you don’t have to *do* anything. He laid this at your feet, Gracie. It’s not your battle to shoulder. But one thing is certain.”

I tip her chin so that she’s looking at me. “You don’t have to be alone tonight.”

GRACE

I stayed.

I couldn't look into Davis's kind gray eyes and turn him down. He's so warm and careful with me, it hurts. I'm not used to being handled with that much care.

My past turmoil—arguing parents and my dad bailing on my graduation—plays in the back of my mind like the world's tiniest violin, knowing my father faces his final days.

Knowing I swapped years with him for what now amounts to days.

Over breakfast—Davis makes Belgian waffles and espresso (though he adds hot water to mine, since it's way too strong)—I decide to come out with it and thank him. It's the least he deserves.

"These are incredible." I point at the perfectly golden, fluffy waffles with my fork.

He's wiping down the waffle iron. "It's just waffles, Grace. Not like I made you a quiche."

"It's not just waffles."

He dries his hands and sits at the table next to me. "I know."

"Can you really make quiche?"

"I can."

"Wow."

“I’m a man of many talents. None of my skills should surprise you.” He pours maple syrup into the squares of his waffle.

We eat in silence. I’m comfortable with him. Here. Not talking. Eating waffles. Even though we haven’t been dating long. The urge to duck and run hits me square in the chest, and a little harder than it usually does. I’m no psychiatrist, but I’m assuming my dad returning to surprise me might have something to do with the urge to flee.

I spread more butter on my waffle. I refuse to allow fear to take me away from Davis. He hasn’t asked anything of me, and I haven’t asked anything of him. We can exist in this pleasant friends-with-benefits pocket for a good long while.

Probably.

“What time’s work?” he asks, knowing that Saturday is a busy day for me.

“Ten.” I eye the clock. It’s eight thirty. Early for breakfast for me, but I didn’t want to be rude. Davis was up clattering around at six thirty (I checked the time on my phone when I heard him).

I stand to join him at the sink, where he washes his plate, and he takes mine from me. I smile at his attire—slacks and a button-down. He looks sure and strong, relaxed in a Davis way.

I’m in my bar clothes from last night. If I leave now, I’ll have enough time for a quick shower at home before changing for work.

“I should get going.” I don’t want to, though. I’d rather stay here with him.

“Call me if you need me, okay?” He ducks his head and kisses me.

“You mean if my big, burly dad comes in and gives me horrible, life-altering news?” I offer a sad smile Davis doesn’t return.

“Yes. That’s what I mean.”

“Thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder.” I woke feeling embarrassed about it. “I guess I needed a friend.”

“Anytime, tough girl.”

That’s nice. Legitimately, completely nice.

I put another kiss on the center of his lips, gather my things, and leave his house.

I don’t have to work another twelve-hour shift today, so by four o’clock I’m en route to pay a visit to my mother.

I’m owed an explanation if she knew about this. And if she didn’t, she’s owed the consideration of my breaking the news in person.

At least she didn’t ask me to meet her at Buchanan and Roe, her firm, like she usually does. My mother is a divorce lawyer, and makes a living of severing relationships and divvying up belongings, pets, and children.

For not the first time, I wonder which of my parents I take after. The idea of being a woman with ice in her veins like my mother doesn’t appeal, but neither does my father’s duck-and-run free-spiritedness. Maybe I’m like neither of them.

Since my mother is always incredibly busy (and makes a point of telling me how incredibly busy she is), I meet her at a Starbucks near the courthouse. As I reach for the handle of the

coffee shop door and pull, she bursts out of it, a white-with-green-logo cup in each hand.

“You’re late.” She thrusts one of the cups at me. “I ordered for you. Nonfat latte, and none of that sugary syrup. As a girl your age knows, we can’t afford to drink the extra calories.”

I hate that I look down at my hips with disdain after she says that.

“Let’s grab one of these seats.” Dawn Buchanan leads the way and I follow. We sit at a small patio table for two. It’s a fairly warm October day, but still too breezy for me. I hunch, wishing my leather jacket had a lining. Suddenly I’m glad for my bland nonfat coffee. I sip the hot liquid and try to warm up.

“What’s new, Jellybean?” Lawyer Mom smiles. My mother has short, dark hair with thick blond highlights. Her makeup is just so, her suit expensive, the heels on her shoes high and spindly. The nickname is a nice reminder that my mom isn’t one note. She’s the woman who bought me a car for graduation. She’s the woman who held me when I cried after I found out my boyfriend of two years was moving to Spain. Yes, *that* Spain. She’s the woman who made horrible, dry pancakes every Sunday.

The point is, she tried.

“Work is great.” A generic answer is always the safest, and quite frankly, I don’t want to talk about Dad just yet.

“That’s lovely. Are you dating anyone?”

“Oh, you know,” I stall. Sometimes she asks; sometimes she doesn’t. Usually I give her very little information and she moves on to the next question. Today that’s not the case.

“Who is he?” Her tone hints that we’re besties, but of all the hats my mother wears, BFF isn’t one of them. Still, I see

no harm in sharing about Davis.

“He’s a stock analyst. We’ve only been out a handful of times. He’s nice.” It’s not an inaccurate description for Davis, but he’s so much more than a “nice stock analyst.” He’s becoming important to me—more so every day.

“A guy with money. I like it. Especially for a girl like you, without a career.”

Ah, there’s the dig I’ve been waiting for.

“Gee, look at the time.” I stand from my chair. Maybe today isn’t the best day to share what I know about Dad.

“Grace. I’m sorry. Sit.” Mom tips her chin at my vacated chair. I count to three before lowering myself into it.

“It’s this case I’m handling,” she explains. “Divorce after forty years of marriage. They hate each other. Three grown kids, a cabin in Maine. They shared a business, have six grandchildren. It’s heartbreaking that no one makes it anymore.” She sips her coffee. “Whatever you do, never get married.”

I’ve been receiving the same advice since I was in the eighth grade. That was the year my parents chose to stay together “for me.” Both of them were particularly bitter from that point forward.

“Dad stopped by McGreevy’s,” I blurt, knowing if I don’t blurt it, I’ll never say it.

“What the hell did that bastard want?” Her lip curls.

My cheeks heat. She doesn’t know. My mother is a lot of things, but cold-blooded isn’t one of them.

“Leave it to him to crash into my world without notice,” she continues. “Just like when he left all of his things behind

when he moved out and *then* expected me to give them back when I hadn't seen him in two years."

This is the side of Dawn Buchanan that makes it hard to remember she can be sweet. Her bitterness and resentment of my father overshadow every aspect of her life. The fact that my father came to see me doesn't even register as being my issue rather than hers.

"Let's focus on the present here, Mom."

Some of the anger seeps from her expression. "Sorry, dear. You know what that man does to me."

"Do you know why he came to see me?" I ask.

"Why does he do anything?"

Real helpful.

"Mom. He's...he's sick. Pancreatic cancer."

Her eyes widen. She blinks. Then she presses her lips into a line and regards her cup. "How do you know?"

"Because he told me?"

Her next breath is heavy.

"Grace." She puts a hand over mine. "Your father has always been a martyr. I don't want him using an elaborate excuse to worm his way back into your life."

"He wouldn't lie about this." After speaking with him at length about his illness, I knew there was no way he was being anything less than truthful. I tell her he only has a few months to live and then share the details that he shared with me.

She must agree that the details alone are too compelling to believe he concocted an illness out of thin air. My mother's

face changes. Devastation overtakes her pretty features. “Uh, I have to go, actually.”

“Mom.”

“Thank you for letting me know.” She gives me a brittle smile. “Take care of yourself and I’ll be in touch.” She stands, kisses my cheek, and clicks off in her high heels.

“Mom.” I stand. She turns and gives me a watery smile.

“I’m sorry, Grace. I can’t deal with this today.” She swipes her eyes and turns away and I’m left alone to handle things without her. Yet again.

Well, screw that.

I lift my phone and call Davis and ask what he’s doing tonight. His smooth voice sinks into my bones and makes me feel better about everything.

I’m not alone, I think with a smile as I end the call. I have a nice stock analyst to lean on.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

GRACE

Davis, in his assigned seat on the opposite side of the bar, eyes on the overhead television, holds a Sam Adams beer bottle in one hand.

It's been two weeks since my dad unexpectedly popped in. True to form, he never returned, but he did throw me the curveball of a text message. We'd exchanged phone numbers that night we spoke. He wanted open communication, just in case.

I've spoken to Candace about him. Turns out they bartended together at the Bad Penny. She's saddened by his news in a way you would be about a distant acquaintance. I'm more saddened than she is, but my grief is similarly distant. It's weird.

Candace has been more supportive than my mother recently. She's been the one explaining that he still loves me even though he had better things to do for the majority of my twenties. Instead of offering platitudes, Candace listens.

In her defense, my mom has been checking in more often than usual. Mostly from her work email, and mostly asking if I'm handling everything okay or if I need anything. I reply succinctly, but I can't bring myself to lie. Yes, I'm handling it. No, I don't need anything. As far as her question about whether I'm still seeing "the analyst"?

I deliver a glass of wine and catch Davis watching me. Yeah. We're still seeing each other.

“Looking low, cowboy.” I gesture to his bottle, which is a quarter full.

“Just one tonight.”

“Really?” The disappointment in my voice is pronounced. I don’t want him to leave. “Who will banter with me when you go?” I prop my hands on my hips and hope that shows how devil-may-care I am.

“Early morning. I’m flying to San Francisco.”

I blink, stunned. “San Francisco? In California?”

“Last I checked.”

“Oh.” He didn’t mention a trip, and I’ve seen him steadily over the last few weeks.

“My boss is based out of San Fran, so once every six to twelve months I fly out. He likes face-to-face meetings.”

“How long will you be gone?” I try to sound casual as I swipe the bar top with a towel.

“A week.”

“A *week*?” Okay, that sounded not-casual-at-all. A smile spreads Davis’s perfect mouth.

“Gracie.” He squints one eye. “Are you going to miss me?”

I snort. “Your cooking, maybe.”

His cocksure smile endures.

“If I would’ve known, I could have traded my schedule.” I close tonight. I’ll be lucky to be home by two A.M.

“The week’ll go fast. And give you time to hang out with your friends instead of me.”

I try not to let that comment sting. Is he tiring of me already?

He swipes his phone off the bar and stands.

“You’re leaving *now*?” Also: When did I become so desperate?

He leans forward on the bar. “Kiss me, woman.”

“I can’t. I’m in charge,” I mumble.

“Come on.” His gray eyes sparkle.

I give in and kiss him. It’s too brief.

“Text me if you get lonely.” It’s the last thing he says to me as he walks for the door. I watch him go, liking his long-legged, confident stride. Hating how much I like it because it serves to remind me how much I’ll miss him.

Across the room, a cute blonde and her other cute blond friend give me the stink eye. I don’t like that.

I love it.

Rox and I are at Paddington’s, a fancy wedding dress shop in South Columbus. The amount of tulle in here could filter the water for a small country.

Yikes.

“I want something slim and slinky,” she says as she makes a mortified face at a pale pink puffy dress on a mannequin.

“If you end up doing the destination wedding thing, you should go for something short and sassy,” I correct.

“Maybe. But I still want to feel bridelike. I’m not sure cocktail length is going to cut it.”

We each take a rack, sliding bagged dress after bagged dress aside before settling on a few contenders. Rox has a great figure (the bitch), so she can pull off anything. I’m kidding about the bitch thing. I have a great figure too; it’s just that hers is more on par with designer fashion than mine.

“What do you think?” She steps out of the dressing room in a floor-length, backless white gown. The front dips low to show off her generous cleavage, and lace and pearls decorate the bodice.

“Roxanne,” I breathe, my hand clasped at my heart. “You’re beautiful.”

She grins and sweeps her long dark hair to one side, viewing the back in a three-way mirror. “Is it unreasonable to buy the first dress I try on?” she asks. I can hear in her tone she wants permission to do just that.

“Not if it’s as perfect as that one.”

“I’m doing it.” She grins, and I helpfully return the other dresses to the rack.

An hour later, we’re at an oyster bar drinking champagne and celebrating Rox’s purchase: a Vera Wang wedding dress for her to-be-determined wedding date.

“I’m so glad you’re sharing this with me!” Rox says. “My mom would have loved to see this day.” Her expression is wistful. Her mom died of cancer when Rox was in junior high. I say a silent thanks to the universe for my mom—she can be a pill, but I’m glad I have her. Rox trades wistfulness for a good-natured eye roll. “My dad and brothers are too busy hunting and fishing to wedding dress shop with me.”

“Happy to fill the role,” I tell her. “I don’t think dress shopping is supposed to include dads and brothers anyway.”

She smiles. “So what’s new with you and the business guy? I haven’t heard the latest.”

“Oh, nothing much. Dating Still.”

“*Still?*” Her eyebrows climb her forehead.

“He’s sort of incredible.” I called her last week and filled her in on my dad showing up and how Davis sat with me while I found out more about why my dad had shown up.

She listened and told me to cry if I wanted to, and I did.

We order another round of champagne when our cheese plate arrives. Rockford, Brie, cubes of mango habanero cheddar, roasted almonds and honey, and fresh fruit.

“My mouth is literally watering,” she says as we both go for the cheese. “So, tell me more about Davis. What do you do on your dates?”

“We go out. We stay in. Mostly we sleep over at each other’s houses.” I shrug as I spread Brie on a slice of baguette. I take a bite, feeling Roxanne’s eyes on me.

“What?” I ask around a bite.

“You’re sleeping over? Often?”

“Mm-hmm.” I nod as I chew, then take a drink of champagne. *Perfection.*

“That’s serious, Grace. I thought he was a manwhore. Manwhores don’t encourage sleepovers.”

“He was. He is. I don’t know.” The description doesn’t fit what I know of Davis. Has he changed, or am I seeing another

layer of him now that we're close? "We were only going to see each other three times, but then things evolved."

"Sounds like it." She eats an almond and sucks the honey off her thumb.

I eye her suspiciously. "Rox."

"What?"

"Don't *what* me. *Tell me*. What are you thinking? Something, and it's not good." My hands start to sweat at the idea she might share exactly what I don't want to hear. I don't know what I *want* to hear, but I'd rather know the truth than be in the dark.

"I think you should guard your heart."

"My heart?" I let out a hearty laugh and lift my champagne flute again. "I'm in no danger of losing my heart."

Said heart gives a dangerous surge at the idea of falling for Davis Price. Of losing Davis Price. At one point our having a future would've been a laughable fantasy. Now, though, it could happen. And if it happened, that means when it ended, heartbreak could follow.

Or worse, I think morbidly as my dad comes to mind again.

"Are you sure you haven't lost your heart to him already?" Rox asks with so much concern I have to ask myself the same question. "He's being really good to you, Grace. What if he comes back from this trip to California and pulls away? What will you do?"

My friend isn't doing a good job of easing my nerves.

"I'll pull back too," I say. I mean, *duh*. This isn't my first rodeo. Rox knows that. "I'm capable of unstringing myself

from a man. I've been doing it since I was fifteen."

Starting with a boyfriend, followed by dad and several other boyfriends.

"I appreciate your concern." I continue defending myself. "Honestly. But there's no need to worry."

"I'm not *concerned*. I want to make sure you don't end up in a situation you don't mean to get into. Cornered." She forlornly eyes a cube of cheese in her hand. "With no way out."

My spidey sense is tingling. "What kind of corner?"

She drops the cheese cube on her plate. "Okay, so what if you wanted to *just* date him? Or *just* have sex with him? It should be perfectly acceptable to keep things light. Staying over can turn into moving in." Her voice takes on a slightly hysterical edge. "Moving in can turn into an engagement!"

"Rox." I hate to bring up the obvious, considering she just bought her wedding dress, but she's my friend and something is amiss. "Rox, are you regretting your engagement to Mark?"

"What! No." She lets out a loud lough that dies a quick death. "Not every day." Her smile turns sickly. "Sometimes?"

She drops her face into her hands before smoothing her hair behind her ears.

By the time she looks at me, she's reclaimed her composure. "I have cold feet. I used to be the girl who dated and liked dating. I *liked* mixing things up. Now I'm engaged and my mixing days are over." She gives the ring on her finger a long, somber study. "I thought buying the dress would make this more real. Would make me more ready. Is this part of the process?"

“Well, parting with three grand tends to help things sink in,” I tease. I reroute when she pales.

As future maid of honor, I’ve got her back.

“Roxanne. Listen to me.” I reach over the table and clasp her hand in mine. “You were a dating phenomenon. I learned most of my best moves from you. But when you met Mark—after that first date—do you remember what you said?”

Eyes wide, she shakes her head.

“Yes you do. About the way he moved toward you after class?”

Her panic melts away and her face softens. “He moved toward me like he was meant to walk toward me. *Only* me.”

“Does he still make you feel like the only woman he should walk toward?” I ask.

“Every day.” She shakes her head and closes her eyes. “I’m freaking out. It’s too soon for a freak-out.”

“No. It’s the perfect time to freak out,” I say in her defense. “The wedding dress did what you wanted it to do—your future wedding became more real. And when you set a date and send your announcements and book your destination, it’ll become even more real. Until we’re on a beach and you’re exchanging your vows. Then it’ll *be* real.”

“You’re right. It’s new. Change is scary no matter what, right?”

“Exactly.”

“Look at you!” She gestures to me. “Miss I-don’t-want-to-date-nobody—”

“Anybody,” I correct.

“—and you’re practically living with a stock analyst.” Rox is grinning. “We’re going to get through this.”

I guzzle down the rest of the champagne as my friend releases a happy sigh.

“First me, then you, right?” she says.

That’s a horrifying thought.

Our waitress appears and Rox orders the salmon. I order the chicken and another glass of champagne. Then I reconsider. “Actually, can you bring the bottle?”

At Rox’s eyebrow lift, I add, “We’re celebrating your wedding dress!”

That’s an easier explanation than telling her that her panic attack transferred to me.

DAVIS

Ross Vancouver is in his early forties, hair sun bleached, skin a deep tan. The not-native Californian looks as if he belongs here. He even surfs.

My boss's house, located an hour north of San Francisco, is a massive white and glass shrine facing the ocean he worships. His mansion has nine bedrooms, ten bathrooms, two kitchens, and a patio grilling area with a pool and loungers. It's paradise. I booked a room at a nearby luxury hotel, but after a week's worth of meetings at headquarters, Ross invited everyone at the retreat back to his place for cocktails.

This getaway is for his ten top earners of the year, and for the fifth year in a row, I'm number one.

The other nine dropped off one by one last night, but Ross and I were too engrossed in conversation to disengage. He offered a wave goodbye as his guests left, but we went back to our conversation and our bourbon. Ross is a Kentucky-born guy. I guess some habits never die.

He's single, happily so, and I've been joking for years that I want to be like him when I grow up.

"Price," he greets me, swaggering outside in a pair of board shorts and a long-sleeve swim shirt, surfboard under his arm. He leans the board on the stone wall surrounding his back patio and squints out at the ocean.

"Morning." I had my choice of rooms last night. Ross and I were awake until three, and I wandered into one and crashed. Bourbon hangovers aren't something I'm accustomed to, but

given Ross's alertness (and the surfboard), I'm guessing he fared better than I.

"Found the coffee, I see." He gestures to the steaming mug in front of me. I haven't been able to take a sip of it yet because my stomach is doing its impersonation of a Cirque du Soleil performer.

"Yeah." The only way to describe my voice is "craggy."

He notices and chuckles. "When's your flight?"

"Noon." It's eight and traffic is going to be hell. I need to leave soon.

"Don't bother." He brushes the idea aside with the wave of an arm. "Take my jet."

Ross has money to burn, but I didn't know he had a jet.

"Stick around for lunch. My chef is coming over to fix the latest fad superfood meal."

I smile. "California by way of Kentucky."

"I acclimated. So could you."

Not the first time he's suggested as much. He's the happiest West Coast transplant I know. "Thanks for the offer, but I have to go home sooner than later."

He eyes me for a long moment. I test my coffee to see if it'll stay down. It does. "Who is she?"

His question startles me and I look up to find him grinning.

"Only one reason to go back to dreary, gray Ohio at the end of October, and that's a woman."

"The consummate bachelor knows about women?"

“I know more about them than you’d think.” He waggles his left hand in a gesture I assume to mean he was married at some point.

“Her name’s Grace,” I confess. I’ve been texting her all week—tame stuff. She sent me the eggplant emoji and I sent her the peach, and the next text that came through was her saying it wasn’t the same at McGreevy’s without me.

Doesn’t sound like much, but it made my day. Nay, my *week*.

The texts and one phone call that followed were innocuous. Pleasant. Friendly. No reason for me to feel as if my heart was scooped out and residing on her nightstand.

Save one.

“How long?” Ross asks, doing some sort of presurf stretching.

I do a quick calculation. “A month plus.”

“Sounds serious.”

I think back to her leaning on me after the run-in with her father. How much time we spend at each other’s houses. The fact that we’ve been exclusive without defining it.

“It is,” I admit.

“Well.” Ross snags the board and claps me on the shoulder as he walks by. “Don’t keep her waiting.” He jogs out to the sand.

Through my massive, brain-splitting, bourbon-induced headache, I manage a smile. “I won’t,” I say aloud.

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

GRACE

McGreevy's is dead. Sunday afternoons are hit-or-miss. While I wait for someone (anyone) to come in, I scroll through the photos Davis sent me from San Francisco. My favorite one is of his feet in the sand, the sparkling Pacific Ocean in the background. His suit pants are hiked to his shins in the foreground. Suit pants. On the beach. It's so *him*.

A week lasts longer when you miss someone. Time passed in excruciatingly slow, incremental chunks. I worked, went grocery shopping, cleaned my house. Not all that different from the way I spent my time pre-Davis, but now something is missing.

Him.

He called on Friday, and in the background I heard chatter. He said he was in a meeting with several other people who do what he does. I finally pried out of him that the gathering was for the top earners of the company, but when I congratulated him, he shrugged it off.

"Not a big deal," he said.

But it was a big deal. A bigger deal than he makes it. He's incredible.

The door opens and I click off my phone as I call, "Welcome to McGreevy's," but when I turn to greet the newcomer, I'm floored by a ruffled, sexy, suited man wearing a tired smile.

“Davis!” I run from behind the bar and give in to the urge and leap into his arms. He catches me, holding me as I kiss his sleepy face. “You liar!”

He grins.

He told me his flight was a red-eye and not to expect him until very late tonight or early tomorrow morning.

“Wanted to surprise you,” he says. “Sorry if I smell like bourbon.”

I’m still holding onto him, and I bury my nose in his collar. He smells like sun and cologne and Davis. The best scent of all.

“You are cruel. I have to work all day and here you are.” I pout and straighten his crooked tie.

“Don’t worry, Gracie Lou, I’ll be sleeping most of the day. You won’t miss much.” I’ll still miss him. Even sleeping.

He kisses me, minty fresh from either brushing his teeth on the plane or eating a handful of Altoids. I don’t care. He tastes amazing.

“Can I get you anything at all?” I ask. “Lunch?”

He shakes his head. “You’re the only reason I came here.”

My heart squeezes. “Maybe after I’m done—”

“Come over,” he finishes for me. “I’ll make you dinner.”

“I can’t ask you to make me dinner.”

“You didn’t.”

“Eight thirty too late?” I’m smiling like an idiot.

“Eight thirty is perfect.” Another kiss for me, and he steps aside to allow three patrons inside.

“Shit,” I whisper.

“It’s okay, Gracie.” He gives me a wink.

I invite my new customers to have a seat wherever they’d like. Davis turns to leave. I hope the rest of this day goes faster than the six days that preceded it.

AFTER THE QUICKEST wardrobe change in history, I hustle over to Davis’s house. I’ve shelved my mini anxiety issue about hurtling toward matrimony since my day spent with Rox.

Probably because she’s snapped back to her normal self and is again super excited about marrying Mark.

Cold feet is a real thing. Who knew?

At Davis’s place, I step from my car and force an air of cool and calm. No sense in behaving like a squealing teenager when we’re both adults. No need to draw a red glitter heart around every minute we spend together.

Speaking of hearts, mine betrays me, *rat-a-tat-tating* against my ribs as I knock on the door. I hear music and a muffled “Come in!” and assume Davis has his hands full at the stove.

I half-expect to be hit with a wall of fragrance. Roast duck? The rich scent of tomatoes and garlic bubbling away in a homemade lasagna?

Instead I smell nothing. Nothing at all.

Davis arrives in the living room at the same time I crest the top step. He’s dressed in jeans and a black button-down shirt. His shoes are black leather. He looks... *Damn*.

Delicious.

At the look of confusion on my face, he offers an explanation.

“I changed my mind about the dinner thing. We’re going out. There’s a concert tonight at Bicentennial Park.”

“Um...” I glance down at my little black dress and heels. “I’m not dressed for a concert.”

“Are you kidding me?” He pulls me close, an arm lashed around my back, and lowers his lips to mine. My poor heart can’t beat any faster, so she settles on beating harder, each pound leaving me a bit more breathless. “Tell me you can’t dance in those shoes, Gracie Lou.”

“I can dance in these shoes,” I answer with a smile.

BICENTENNIAL PARK’S outdoor pavilion is packed when we arrive downtown at the Scioto Mile. The band has a folksy, rockabilly beat I can totally get into. The fountains, normally shooting high into the air and accompanied by fog machines and colored lights, are silent, the chilly fall weather not ideal for spraying water.

“Oh, man,” Davis says as we survey the tightly packed crowd. “I don’t see anywhere to smash in. Guess we’ll have to check in for our reservations.”

His sly smile is a look I’m growing used to.

He takes my hand and leads us to a glass-enclosed restaurant with a covered dining terrace and a drool-worthy panoramic view of the Scioto Mile, the fountain, and the downtown skyline.

“Ever been to Milestone before?” He asks, referring to Milestone 299, a restaurant I’ve long wanted to experience.

“Not yet.”

“Now’s your chance.”

Inside, the decor is regal. Napkins stand on end like the skyscrapers in the city, and formal silverware arrangements flank elegant white plates on top of smooth teak tables and rigid high-backed chairs.

“How about that?” Davis asks as we pull our napkins into our laps. “You’re dressed perfectly for tonight after all.”

“Are you getting a kick out of being this sneaky?” I ask as an attentive waiter fills our water goblets.

He holds his fingers an inch apart. “Li’l bit.”

We start with Gorgonzola-stuffed dates wrapped in bacon and, as if that weren’t orgasm-inducing enough, move to wedge salads sprinkled with blue cheese and crisp bacon. Dinner is croquettes for me and ahi tuna for him. For dessert, Milestone has a doughnut bread pudding we admit we’re too full for but order anyway.

It’s as mouthwateringly incredible as it sounds.

“Look at this!” I gesture to my stomach as we exit the restaurant for the concert. The crowd is less packed in than before, but we choose to watch from the comfort of an abandoned bench.

“Honey, I’m looking.” Davis’s eyes don’t leave mine.

“I mean I ate too much,” I mumble, pressing on my protruding stomach. “Is that a deterrent for you?”

“Grace,” he says on a laugh. “I’ve been calculating how much of this fancy stuff we have to do before I can take you home and get you out of that dress.”

A shiver works its way up my spine as I pull my shawl around my shoulders. He notices and scoots closer, wrapping an arm around me. We listen to the band, watching couples dance and sway to a slow song.

I lean in to whisper in his ear. “I say you’ve done enough.” His grip on my shoulder grows tighter, more desperate. “Your place?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” he answers. “But first things first.”

DAVIS

There was one activity I promised myself I'd introduce Grace to, so as much as I want to have her home and under me, we can't leave just yet. Over a bite of my seared ahi tuna, she mentioned she'd never indulged in Bicentennial Park's premier offering.

In a fit of new construction last summer, the city of Columbus installed none other than a Ferris wheel. It rises high over the pavilion, and Grace pointed it out while we ate. "That looks fun" was what she said.

"I have to do it" is what I heard.

When I purchase a ticket at the booth, a combination of excitement and anticipation radiates from the beautiful woman to my left. She bounces on the balls of her feet when the man running the wheel opens the gate.

I gird my loins and give her a smile, trying to hide that I'm more than a little alarmed at being high in the air in a swinging metal basket.

"A woman who loves champagne but never drinks it. Likes Ferris wheels but never rides them," I say as the bar is lowered over our laps. "You should indulge more."

She gives me a sideways glance as the ride takes off. I cling to the bar in front of us with a death grip.

"You okay?"

I chuff a sound that's supposed to imply that *of course I'm okay*, but I'm not sure if "okay" is the best term for what I'm

feeling. Airplane heights I can handle. Heights on an unstable carnival ride? Not my favorite thing.

We are swept slowly but efficiently into the air and given a supreme view of the lit buildings of downtown and the concert below. Even the quiet fountains are breathtaking at this height. Literally, in my case.

Fuck, it's high up here.

“This is the most singularly incredible experience.” Her unblinking eyes are wide, like she doesn’t want to miss a single second of what’s around us. It’s breezier up here than on the ground. The wind lifts her hair and her curls brush her face. She pushes them behind her ear and gives me the most genuine smile.

That’s why I did this. Why I risked life and limb to sit atop the Scioto Mile with her. She’s happy. I think I’d do just about anything to make this woman happy.

I haven’t felt like that in a long, long time. Not about anyone.

The wheel comes to a halt with us one carriage from the top, and I focus intently on Grace and the stars over her shoulder.

She leans forward and tips us enough that I open my mouth to say her name, but no sound comes out.

“The view up here is incredible!” She leans farther forward and my fingers tense around the lap bar. “Do you—” she starts, then frowns. I’m probably a sweaty, pale sight. “Davis? Are you okay? You look not okay.” She leans back and my equilibrium returns.

“I’m okay.” I suck in a breath and nod tightly.

Her eyes narrow. “You don’t like heights, do you?”

I release a defiant laugh.

She puts her hand over mine, where I’m half certain rigor mortis has set in. “It’s romantic up here.”

“You find the potential of plummeting to our deaths romantic?”

Her laugh eases the tension in my chest. Jade green eyes lock on mine a moment before I palm her nape and tug her closer.

I kiss her, releasing the bar to hold onto Grace instead. We’re making out, the breeze cool over our heated skin. She tastes like the sweet dessert and espresso we enjoyed moments ago. She tastes like the woman I missed when I was in San Francisco, in spite of my having taken that trip four years in a row and never once coming home early.

The ride starts to move again and I latch onto the bar with one hand as we sweep backward toward the ground. She takes my other hand in hers and weaves our fingers together.

Her eyes sparkle with mischief and happiness.

“Thanks for this.” I’m not sure if it’s the cool air or the moment, but tears shimmer along her lash line.

“Anytime, Gracie.”

On the ground we lift the bar and step out, making our way to the valet. “You could have told me you didn’t like high places, Davis.”

I hand the ticket to the valet and touch the side of her mouth with one finger. “Yeah, but I would have missed out on this. And that was worth the price of admission.”

This time when she kisses me, I don't expect it. She jumps to her toes and slams into my mouth. I stumble back a few steps before catching her against me.

“Now your place,” she purrs.

The valet arrives with my car and I do as the lady asks.

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

DAVIS

Grace's fingernails rake across my shoulders as I plunge deep again. I search her face for signs she's close, but she tells me instead.

"Almost there."

Her panted words are paired with her beautiful tits bouncing as I continue working us closer and closer to bliss.

"Yes," she hisses, clutching me tightly with her thighs and clawing at my back. Then I'm rewarded with my name, again and again—"Davis, oh God. Oh, Davis. Yes!"—as I follow her into oblivion.

In the middle of catching my breath, I kiss her neck, breathing her in. We're still connected where it counts.

"Worth the Ferris wheel," I joke.

Her rich-as-chocolate-mousse laughter coats the room. "You're too much."

So are you.

I don't say it out loud because there's some truth there I'm not sure I want to acknowledge. I've arrived at a conclusion about Grace and me. It's against my better judgment and sense of self-preservation, but I'm telling her tonight.

"Are you staying?" I pace to the bathroom to toss the condom. I check my reflection to find scratch marks down my back and grin. Is there anything better than a sex injury?

"Do you want me to stay?"

I poke my head around the corner of the en suite to find Grace draped on my charcoal gray sheets, her curves still tempting, though I sampled each and every one of them.

“Do *you* want to stay?” I lob back.

She smiles, tugs the sheet over her breasts—*bummer*—and nods. “I guess. I wasn’t sure if we were picking up where we left off before California or...”

When she doesn’t finish her thought, I go to her and sit on the edge of the bed. “What would my going to California have changed?” I’m honestly curious.

“Distance can make things clearer,” she answers cryptically.

Distance made things clearer for me, but not in the way she’s implying. I push a rogue curl out of her eye—the one I’m going to nickname “Jyn” after a character from one of my favorite *Star Wars* movies. Such a rebel.

Another thought occurs, and it’s not a good one. “What became clear to you, Gracie?”

I can take it. Even if she wants to back off—I can take it. Hanna didn’t clue me in at all, which left me eager to know the score sooner rather than later.

“Wasn’t that obvious when you surprised me at the bar?” Grace asks.

I think back to catching her against me in a hug—her arms choking my neck. “You’re wondering where I stand.”

She nods, uncertain. It’s cute that she’s uncertain, but only because I can ease her worries.

“I was going to invite you out with me Wednesday. If you’re free?”

“Wednesday is my day off,” she says. “What’s the occasion?”

This is a big step. *Huge*. I won’t be deterred from what I decided in San Francisco.

“It’s my grandmother’s eighty-fourth birthday. She lives south of Dayton, so I figured we could go hang out with her during the day and then get a nice hotel for overnight. I’ll have you home in time for your Thursday shift at noon.”

Her mouth drops open. “You know my schedule.”

“Dax told me.”

Her shock fades to hesitation. Meeting the family is a big ask. Then Grace does that thing where she surprises me—though I shouldn’t be surprised by her responses any longer.

“I’d love to meet your grandmother—especially if she’s the one who raised you.”

“One and the same,” I say, thinking, *She’s going to love you.*

“I hope she has a few old photo albums with pictures of you with buckteeth and bad haircuts.”

“Oh, she has those.” I slide into bed next to Grace. “She’s as sharp as a Ginsu knife too, so she’ll probably regale you with several unflattering stories about me.”

“*Now* I’m excited,” Grace says with a husky giggle.

“Yeah.” I give her a kiss. “So am I.”

Wednesday comes and Grace and I make the two-hour drive to the small town of Mysticburg. My grandmother raised me here until she peaced out when I turned nineteen. First she moved into a really cool condo, and then as her health started

becoming a challenge and she needed more constant care, she moved to an assisted-living facility.

She's as sharp as I promised Grace she is. I always suspected Grandma Rose moved to that tiny condo to force me out on my own. She didn't want me beholden to her.

I am. But not in the way she thinks. I don't feel obligated or inconvenienced by her. It's an honor to help pay for her care. I've been doing her finances and making sure she has what she needs since I was twenty-one and beginning to excel in my field. She argued at first, but I was as clear about my wishes as she was about hers. I wanted to help. She honored me by allowing me to help.

“Facility” is a cold word for where Grandma Rose lives. The manicured grounds, even in the midst of autumn's shedding leaves, are immaculate. The burnt auburn, golden yellow, russet brown, and even the festive orange of the porch pumpkins are movie-set perfect.

Black and orange balloons are tied around one of the porch's columns, a Mylar skull-printed one reading: HAPPY BIRTHDAY.

I pull my grandmother's wrapped gift from the backseat. From a shopping bag I remove a headband with red sequined devil horns and hand it to Grace.

“What?” She laughs as she puts it on, the horns poking up from her red hair. Just as devilish as I imagined her. My headgear is classic—the arrow-through-the-head bit that Steve Martin used to do onstage. Grandma loves him.

“You look ridiculous.” Grace is still laughing.

“That's the idea.” I take her hand and walk with her to the porch. “Not only is her party on Halloween,” I tell Grace.

“Halloween is her actual birthday.”

“Your grandma has a Halloween birthday. I’m so jealous!”

“It suits her,” I say as we enter.

The place is modern and clean, the nursing staff friendly and smiley, but there’s no escaping that beef-broth scent of an old folks’ home. The good news is that this place is only for the firm of mind. I’m glad Grandma Rose isn’t suffering from memory loss.

In the common room, a Bose speaker pipes “Monster Mash” into the air, and a few couples sway and shake their hips as much as Mother Nature allows. My grandmother is among them. I smile the moment I spot her.

“Which one is she?” Grace leans in to whisper.

“The one wearing a halo.” A white pipe-cleaner ring attached to a headband pokes out of my grandmother’s short, white hair. “Don’t buy that lie for a second.”

Before I can issue more of a warning than that, my grandmother throws both arms into the air, nearly opening the white silky bathrobe acting as her angel garb in the process.

“Davis!” She bursts through the crowd, and one older gentleman wobbles dangerously before a nurse catches him by the arm and stands him upright.

“Breakin’ hips and takin’ names.” I bend at the waist to envelop my diminutive grandmother in a hug. She doesn’t smell like beef soup. She smells like Chanel No. 5, the classy broad.

“Steve Martin.” She taps the pointy end of the arrow headband I’m wearing.

“Rose Price, Davis’s grandmother.” She offers a hand—one tipped in orange and black manicured nails, and Grace shakes it. “I like those horns.”

“Thank you.” The wonderment on my girl’s face is priceless.

“Well? Introduce yourself!” Grandma Rose demands.

“Sorry. I’m Grace Buchanan.”

“Oh, sounds regal.” My grandmother tips her head in my direction. “What are you doing with this louse?”

Grace laughs, probably unsure how to respond.

“Be nice.” I hold up my grandmother’s gift. “Where does this go?”

“To my room!” she announces, one arthritic finger pointing into the air.

“What about the party?” I ask as I follow her down the hallway. She may be eighty-four, but she moves *fast*.

“Eh, it’s dead in there. That’s a dangerous joke to tell in a place like this.” She winks over her shoulder at Grace but doesn’t stop her forward movement. “Said that at a party two weeks ago and I was right. Maybelline Wolf dropped dead on the spot.”

Grace covers her mouth, smothering a laugh that’s likely a combination of shock and amusement. I give her a quick lift of my eyebrows as if to say, *I warned you*.

She squeezes my hand in hers and we follow my grandmother into her room.

GRACE

What a cool lady.

No kidding, just the coolest.

If I'm fortunate enough to reach my eighties, I hope to do so with the class, fortitude, and mindfulness of Rose Price.

Take right now, for instance. She's bent over her new birthday gift—an Apple laptop with an extra-large screen—while Davis shows her the ins and outs of FaceTime. He's talking to her from his phone about three feet away, which is adorable.

She's scrawled a few notes on a pad of paper labeled “scratch pad” that features a cartoon drawing of a naked backside and a cat clawing its way down one of the thighs.

What a character.

Davis excuses himself to fetch us ladies glasses of punch, and Rose promptly rolls her desk chair to the bed where I've been sitting.

“Okay, gorgeous. Out with it. How hot is this relationship? You two are positively decadent together. I can only imagine how much heat there is in the bedroom.”

My mouth goes dry with shock. I hope Davis returns to save me soon. I'm not sure how to handle this much eye contact and genuine interest from someone older than me. My parents are infamous for their narcissism.

“Uh...” I say, but nothing follows it.

“What do you do for a living, dear?”

Much easier question. “I bartend.”

“Do you love it?”

“I love it,” I say.

“Good. You should spend as much of your life as possible doing what you love. Even if you have a family telling you not to because they want you to do something different.”

“You mean like a mother who wants me to be a lawyer?”

Rose pats my hand. She nods her head, the pipe-cleaner halo waving to and fro in her cotton ball hairdo. “That’s exactly what I mean. Don’t do it.”

“No worries. My degree is in communications anyway.”

“What do you love about being behind the bar? I’ve never been much of a bargoer. I like my whiskey now and again, but I drink at home while watching *Jeopardy!*”

That’s the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard.

“I like people. I like interacting with them. Even the ones that are pains in the ass.”

Rose lets out a chortle. “That’s most of them, isn’t it?”

“Are you kidding me?” I banter back. “How do you think I met Davis? He sat at my bar and wouldn’t leave me alone. Nothing shocked me more than when he asked me out.”

“I’ll bet.” She studies me, her eyes trained on my hair.

“He’s not fond of redheads, I hear.” She may as well know that I know. I remove my headband and fiddle with the sequined horns.

“He was quite fond of a redhead at one time, but she did him wrong. She left a scar. A deep one.”

That's one way of putting it.

“Almost as deep as when my Bartram died.”

“Your husband?” I guess.

She shakes her head. “My son. Davis's father.”

“Right. I'm so sorry.”

“You know about him too?” Her white eyebrows lift into her whiter hair, her surprise evident.

“Davis told me about the accident, the coma, and his mother leaving. My dad's sick. I just found out.”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart.” Rose smiles—her warmth and tenderness reminiscent of her grandson's. She takes my hand in both of hers. “Davis likes you, Grace Buchanan.”

“I like him too.” I beam, feeling special because being liked by Davis is singularly thrilling.

“Grace?”

“Yes, Grandma Rose?”

She lives up to her reputation and draws an amused laugh from me when she says, “Don't fuck it up.”

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

DAVIS

I hesitated outside my grandma's door to give her and Grace a few minutes together. What I heard was no less than I expected.

Rose has been trying to make sure I'm over my ex for some time. I used to worry that she was fixated on it more than I was, or that it was causing her undue stress.

I thought about asking one of my dates along to visit my grandmother for her sake, but I didn't want to lie. Introducing Rose to a woman I didn't care about deeply would be a lie.

My grandmother is a human lie detector.

I heard her tell Grace I like her, and I heard Grace admit she liked me. I lingered in that hallway, in my stupid arrow headband, two glasses of punch in my hands, and smiled down at my shoes.

It's heady what the right girl can do to you.

"She's cool," Grace declares after we check into the hotel. She puts her bag on a pleather bench next to the dresser. I set mine on the office chair. A suite is overkill for one night, but so is the suitcase, because neither of us is going to be wearing any clothing while in this room.

I tell Grace as much and she laughs.

"I'm completely serious."

"Hmm." Her soft hum is paired with a demure smile. Demure on Grace looks naughty in the most inviting way. "I was hoping you'd allow *some* clothing, though."

“Why’s that? Are you going to put the devil horns back on?”

“Better,” she promises with the quirk of one eyebrow.

I’m standing with my back to the bed, and she gives my chest a shove with both hands. When my butt hits the mattress, she reaches for her sweater. It flies through the air and hits me square in the face. As I pull the fabric away, I see what Grace means about my wanting her to stay partially clothed.

She reaches for the zipper on her skirt and pushes it to her ankles, and then my girl is standing in front of me wearing a lacy push-up bra, and tiny, strappy panties—both white and stark against the pale pink tones of her skin.

I fold my hands in front of me like I’m praying. “Please, *please* keep those on for a while.” She slinks toward me. She has the power and she knows it.

I’m totally okay with that.

She reaches for my tie and tugs. I tilt my head back and get a close-up of breasts encased in white lace. It’s a great view. She unknits the length of silk around my neck.

“Take off your jacket, Mr. Price.”

I obey.

“I have a very special surprise for you.”

“I love surprises.” I’m hoarse, which is laughable, except I can’t laugh because I’m too turned on. She starts on the buttons of my shirt and then pushes it from my shoulders.

It hits the floor next.

Parting my knees, she slips between them. I smooth my hands over the globes of her ass. And squeeze.

“Strip, Mr. Price.” Her tone is not teasing. I love that her tone is not teasing.

Fingers on the button of my pants, I draw the zipper down and strip my socks and pants off, along with my shoes.

Every thought zooms out of my head the moment Grace goes to her knees before me. She’s a gorgeous sight, looking up at me with those jade greens, her red hair in bright contrast with her pale skin and winter white lingerie.

She reaches behind her and unclasps her bra, and I’m rewarded with a view of her naked breasts.

I reach for her but she takes my hands, pressing them to the bed.

“No touching, Mr. Price.” That smirk. She’ll pay for this in the most orgasmic way possible.

She pulls my boxer briefs free and my erection salutes her. He’s been standing at attention since she ditched the sweater.

“Oh, my,” she purrs. “What have we here?”

Eyes on mine, she lowers her red mouth to the head of my dick and delivers a long, intentional, mind-erasing lick. I mangle the bedding, balling it in my fists as I watch, captivated.

She opens her mouth wide, takes the head onto her tongue, and then, so slowly my hips lift off the bed, sucks my cock into her mouth.

“Gracie.” Her name bursts from my lips.

I anchor myself to the bed while she works me into a brainless lost cause. She watches me the entire time. When I’m going to come, I warn her by palming the back of her head.

She doesn't stop so I shift my palm to encourage her instead. She accepts the encouragement.

A few minutes later, I'm pumping into her mouth, and Grace, her hands braced on my thighs, is letting me, greedily swallowing all I have to give.

My mind blanks as borderline animalistic sounds emit from my throat. When I finally come to, I'm on my back looking at the stomped plaster ceiling.

Grace appears in my line of vision a moment later, rosebud pink nipples puckered and her smile smug.

Her red curls tickle my face as she brings her lips to mine for a kiss. I swear on everything holy, I love this girl.

GRACE

Davis and I enjoy a shower. The hotel stall is narrow but the ceiling is high. We soap each other's naked bodies, a pastime I'm not sure I'll tire of anytime soon.

"Ms. Buchanan," he says with a lopsided grin—the same one he's been wearing since I went down on him. "The decks are unevenly stacked."

He pairs this statement with his fingers between my legs. I admit, I've been wanting him since we set foot in the hotel. His pleasure is all mine, trust me on that one. I'm primed and ready to go.

Another slide of his fingers through my silken wetness and I'm tilting my hips in the direction of his hand. Nothing feels as good as him touching me.

He soaps my breasts and then his other hand goes to my nipple and pulls sudsy bubbles over the taut peak. Nerve endings pop and sizzle as his fingers find my clit and massage.

"Gracie," comes his reverent growl. "You've been holding out on me."

"I wanted to treat you." I hold on to his shoulders so I don't slip and fall. Davis continues touching me—alternating between rubbing and plunging two fingers deep into my core.

"Honey, you treated me."

He picks up the pace and a shudder overtakes me. Trying to hold myself up while I let go is no easy task.

“You know what, Gracie?” His gray eyes are filled to the brim with heat.

I can't speak. I'm too busy begging for relief. No wonder “please” is the favored cry during lovemaking. I might explode if I don't come soon. The pleasure is so intense, it borders on painful.

“You're the most beautiful woman.” His fingers glide over my pussy. “You're incredible. I'm glad we're here. Glad *you're* here,” he whispers before he consumes me with a deep kiss.

I let go, an electric bolt zipping down my legs. He doesn't stop kissing me. Not even when my knees buckle. He simply relocates his hands to my ass to hold me in place.

Lazily I open my eyes, my skin chilling in the lukewarm spray. We're losing our hot water. “Your lips are turning blue,” I joke, but he doesn't crack a smile.

Instead his controlled expression shifts to awestruck. In a tone that smacks of that same wonder, he says, “I love you, Grace.”

I was numb before with pleasure, but now it spreads through my body, fanning out from the center of my soul to encapsulate him.

“I love you too,” I whisper back, my voice as awed as his. Davis grins and kisses me hard. Sheer joy explodes in my chest.

Love. I'm in love.

He shuts off the water and steps out, handing me a towel and taking one for himself. “I didn't expect to say that,” he muses as he swipes the towel down his legs.

I step out and mimic his movements. “I didn’t expect you to say that. Did you mean it?” I bite the inside of my cheek. “Or were you caught up?”

“I was completely caught up. And”—he palms my cheek —“I meant it. Did you?”

“I did.” I let out a thin laugh. “It’s soon, right?”

“Not for me” is all he says before dropping his towel on the floor and exiting our tiny hotel bathroom. I watch his flexing butt as he leaves.

Is it too soon for me?

There’s a danger in overthinking it, so I don’t. I drop my towel next to his and follow him into the room.

DAVIS LOGS into his streaming service on the TV and pulls up the zombie series we started watching together.

It’s a strange choice for “our show.” Imagine, if things work out between us, we could someday tell our grandkids how we bonded over rotting, flesh-eating cannibals and a group of plucky survivors.

A shadow crosses my mind at the thought. It’s in the shape of my parents and the love that rotted in much the same way as the on-screen walking dead. My mother and father’s marriage ended long before they divorced.

Did they start out in love? They would have had to have, right? My mom says most of her clients start out very much in love and devolve as the years pass. By the time they come to her, all that’s left is a bickering, petty couple who can barely agree on an appointment time with their respective lawyers.

“What episode are you on?” Davis asks. I’m in bed, leaning against his chest. We’re both wearing the fluffy bathrobes we found hanging in the closet. White bathrobes and white bedding. It’s all so *lush*.

“Same episode as you, I imagine.”

“You didn’t watch without me?” He angles his face to look down at me and I shake my head. “Wow. Gracie Lou, you *must* love me.” We share a smile as three quick knocks on the door alert us that our room service has arrived.

Davis climbs out of bed and tightens the belt on his robe so as not to flash the delivery guy.

The other man wheels in a cart holding a single red rose in a vase and four platters with domed metal covers. He exits to the hall, only to return pushing a second cart with two more covered dishes and a chilling bottle of champagne on ice. We sort of went crazy on the ordering.

“Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Just your absence, friend.” Davis palms a bill into the guy’s hand. It must have been a large one because the guy doesn’t hesitate in leaving us to our food and our show.

Davis and I watch our show, eating on the bed, each taking bites from one of four entrée plates. We ordered filet mignon and smashed garlic potatoes, teriyaki salmon with asparagus, a buffalo mushroom Swiss burger and truffled fries, and vegetable croquettes that I was hoping would taste as heavenly as the ones at Milestone 299. Sadly, not even close.

I express as much to Davis, who saws off a sliver of filet and feeds me from his fork. “We’ll go back to Milestone,” he promises.

“And the Ferris wheel?”

He slides me a stern look.

I smile, satisfied and happy.

We finish our food and, after three back-to-back episodes, our cuddling turns to kissing. The kissing leads to touching.

The robes hit the floor.

Television forgotten, we opt to feast on each other instead. Maybe a zombie show *is* a good foundation for our relationship.

I think Davis was right. I *must* love him.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

GRACE

“Gracie Lou!”

Davis’s bellow carries over the Friday-night din of patrons drinking, laughing, and asking for beers. I cash out my current customer and smile before sending him a good-natured glare.

Vince and Jackie are at the bar with him, the three of them wearing fresh-from-work clothes.

My people: the young professionals.

In front of Davis’s seat, I pause. “You rang?”

“He’s an ass,” Vince offers in explanation.

“I have a nice ass.” Davis pegs me with a smirk. “Don’t I, Gracie?”

I don’t answer, instead rolling my eyes at Jackie.

She shakes her head in agreement. “They really are Neanderthals.”

“They are, aren’t they?” I move closer to a woman I hope soon to call my friend. I like her. A lot. She’s sharp. Feisty. Puts up with Vince, who I bet in his own way can be as big of a pill as Davis. “What can I get you to drink, miss? I feel as if you’ve earned it. What with babysitting these man-children and all.”

Jackie laughs and Vince emits an insulted “Hey!”

Davis leans past Vince to say, “Jackie-O is right at home, aren’t you, darlin’?”

“*Darlin*’?” Jackie lifts her eyebrows at me. “How about a shot of tequila?”

“Make it two,” Vince says. “On Davis.”

“Make it four,” Davis says. “Gracie, you’re doing one too.”

“I’m on the clock,” I argue lamely. I’m almost done, and he knows it.

He only smiles and, as if beckoned, Candace taps me on the shoulder. “Get out of here, gorgeous.”

“Four shots it is.” I snatch up the bottle of Patrón, line up four shot glasses, and fill them.

I HAVE a hard time relaxing in my place of work. I suspect the tequila shot has gone a long way toward letting me. For example, I *barely* notice the guy who’s been waiting a few minutes too long for his drinks at the bar, and I can *almost* tune out the woman behind us who is complaining about her food arriving late.

I close my eyes and pull in a breath, endeavoring to stay in the moment with Vince and Jackie and Davis, whose hand hasn’t left my thigh since I sat next to him.

“I’m so glad we got to do this!” Jackie exclaims out of nowhere. Her gaze softens on me. “I’m also glad you and Davis worked things out.”

“Couples who work out, you know. *Work out.*” Vince lifts and drops his brows three times and I burst into laughter.

Davis chuckles too. Vince has used that joke before, but Davis didn't find it funny when he and I were dancing around the sexual tension. Now I'm part of the group. I like being part of the group.

"Seriously," Jackie leans forward in her seat so she can look past the two men between us. "Neanderthals."

"Darts?" Vince asks Davis.

"Yeah."

"Shouldn't we be invited?" Jackie asks, offense lining her pretty features.

Vince is standing next to his barstool looking slightly perplexed. "Do you *want* to play darts?"

"No." She gives him a sweet smile. "But it's nice to be asked."

He narrows his eyes and steals a kiss. I'm aware of Davis's hand on the back of my barstool, so I study my empty shot glass, embarrassed. Not because Vince and Jackie are kissing but because I'm not sure if Davis and I are going to kiss in front of them. It's been awhile since I've been in a "relationship." The guidelines are fuzzy.

"Gracie. Another drink?" Davis offers, his low voice at my ear.

I turn my head to say yes, but before the utterance is out of my mouth, his lips are on mine. The kiss goes on for so long, and his possessive hand is wound in the back of my hair so obviously, that the guys at the L-shaped end of the bar clap and whistle.

Davis smiles down at me and finishes with a soft, full-lipped peck as my cheeks heat. Jackie shoos the guys away

and asks Candace to bring us two beers. Once Davis and Vince are set up at the back of the bar at the dartboard, Jackie relocates to the seat next to mine.

“I like that you two are dating,” she tells me.

“He’s... surprising.”

“He is.” Jackie’s thoughtful for a moment. “He intervened when Vince and I were going through some things. I didn’t even know him that well then, but he showed up at my place—and at Vince’s—trying to set things straight. He didn’t want either of us to be unhappy.”

“Sounds like him.” I smile and take a swig of my beer. It’s ice cold and damn refreshing. It’s been a long night.

“He likes to take care of people.” She takes a swallow of her beer and we glance over at our guys. Davis throws every dart so close to center, Vince drops his head in defeat and covers his face with both hands. “I bet you they have money on this game. I know Vince’s I’m-losing-money face.”

“Davis likes to bet.” I smile at the memory of our own bet. “How do you think he got me to go out with him in the first place?”

“That’s not how I heard it,” she sings. “I heard you bet him money he wouldn’t take you out.”

“Not true,” I correct, enjoying her being in the know. “I bet him he wouldn’t ask out a nonblonde, and I offered to double his money if he asked out a redhead. I didn’t mean *me*.”

“Oh, come on. You had to at least hope it’d be you.”

I bite my lip, recalling the warmth in his eyes, his sexy lean with his elbow on the bar. The husk in his voice when he said, *I win*.

“Okay. A little,” I admit. “But he didn’t waste any time when I issued that bet.”

“Davis likes challenge. Likes to push himself. I’ll bet the bedroom is fun for you guys.” Her saucy wink is harmless but her words are heavy—like an elephant sitting on my chest.

“Challenge. Right,” I comment, my mouth turning down.

“I’m sorry. I don’t mean *you’re* a challenge.”

“I didn’t think that.”

“Good.” Jackie pushes her shiny brown hair behind her ear. “I just meant that if there’s a way to excel, Davis will find it.”

“You mean like the way he was trying to date every blonde in the state?” I take a brief inventory around McGreevy’s and spot two single blond ladies, white wine in their hands, their eyes on Davis.

“Grace.”

I turn to Jackie to find her expression one of concern.

“I’ve known Davis for a couple of years, not as well as Vince, but enough to know that he acts *totally* different with you. Those two”— she tips her chin at the pair of blondes she also noticed—“have nothing on you. And the way Davis dotes on you makes me doubt they’ll even turn his head.”

“Thank you for saying that.” Oddly enough, I feel better. “I have a slight streak of jealousy because I’m nothing like those girls. How can he want them and me? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Well.” She checks to be sure our guys are still out of earshot—they are. Vince pulls money out of his wallet and Davis snatches the bill with a grin. “Vince had a few flings

after his divorce. We were best friends at the time, and he never told me. I found out and called him on it, and he said he slept with them so he could find his mojo or something.” She rolls her eyes and lifts her beer bottle. “Boys are dumb.”

I can’t help laughing at her astute observation.

“Boys *are* dumb,” I confirm, clinking the neck of my bottle with hers.

“I’m not sure what’s been going on with me lately,” I say after we drink. “Since things have...progressed. I think I’m nervous.”

Interest sparks in Jackie’s eyes. “What progressed?”

My laugh is born of nerves. “Oh, you know. Meeting the woman who raised him, sharing almost every night together...” *Exchanging I love yous*, I mentally add.

“It’s hard to cross boundaries at first, especially if there’s pain in your past. And who among us escapes pain?”

I picture my father and nod. She’s right.

“Did you date much before?” Jackie asks.

“Not much. A few first, second, and even third dates. Some mediocre sex.”

“Right?” Jackie practically exclaims in agreement. “The awkward front-door drop-off.”

“Ugh. The worst.”

“The absolute worst.”

I smile at my newfound comrade. Yes, Rox is and always will be my bestie, but with her betrothal and all, I’m in the dust. Jackie and I are on the same page. Her relationship with

Vince is new. Mine with Davis is new. And our guys are friends, so we have that in common as well.

“It’s nice when it’s not awkward, isn’t it?” she asks.

I assume Jackie is referring to our blossoming friendship until her eyes go to Vince, who does a silly dance as he plucks his darts from the board. Jackie’s brown eyes go melted-chocolate warm and she releases a contented sigh.

“When it clicks,” she says, “when things flow, there’s nothing better.”

Davis winks at me as he positions himself for his next throw. My heart fills and a similar contented sigh presses against my throat.

“It is nice,” I admit, propping my elbow on the back of my stool. It’s time to give myself permission to let things be nice for a while.

DAVIS

Grace's elbows are on my dining room table, the remnants of a *homemade* (thank you very much) steak dinner on her plate. Her chin is on her fist and she's talking animatedly about what I missed at her shift tonight. I invited her here rather than go to McGreevy's.

"And *then*," she says with a laugh, "Dax comes out from the office and admits he found his keys. They were in the safe."

I laugh with her. Not because the owner of McGreevy's locked his keys in the safe but because Grace is gorgeous when she's turned on. I like turning her on—it's my favorite pastime—but she's equally gorgeous when she's turned on by her work. She loves her job as much as I love mine.

"Do you have any aspirations to own your own bar someday?" I ask.

Her smile holds, but there's a tremor of concern behind it.

"I didn't mean for that to sound like you don't have any. I'm just curious."

"Oh." She blinks and shakes her head slightly, confirming that was exactly where her mind went. "Sorry. My mother has been down my throat to become a lawyer for years, so my career is a bit of a sore topic."

"Ah, parents."

"Your grandmother encouraged you, didn't she?"

I nod. “She told me life was short and to make sure to do something I loved.”

“What did she do before she retired?”

“She was a teacher and a poet—still is a poet.”

“Really?” Grace leans on her folded arms, stretching closer to me. I can’t blame her interest—my grandmother is fascinating.

“Yup. She was published several times under a pen name, but she kept her day job teaching because she loved encouraging the country’s youth—her words.”

“I like her so much.” Grace’s smile is reverent.

“Yeah, so do I.”

“She told me the same thing she told you, you know. Only do work you love.”

I know. I overheard. I opt not to share that with Grace.

“I don’t want to own a bar.” She says it like it’s a major confession. “I don’t want the headache. I like showing up and then leaving. I’m a manager, but other than scheduling snafus, there aren’t too many issues to worry about. Once I ordered vodka instead of rum and we had to buy bottles from a local liquor store. If running out of rum is the worst of my fears, I’m okay.”

“Captain Jack Sparrow would disagree.”

She grins. “Why is all the rum gone?”

“Your pirate accent needs work.”

“Yeah. I’m rusty.” She wrinkles her cute nose. Just fucking adorable.

“It suits you, Gracie—the bar gig. You’re great at what you do.” I lift my brows. “Plus, you look smokin’ hot doing it.”

“What about you? Are you going to *analyze stocks* forever?”

I laugh at her generic term. “You have no idea what I do, do you?”

“Not completely. But the details of your work don’t matter to me. You’re great at it, and you do well.”

“I do very well.” Hey, it’s not bragging if it’s true.

“Number one.”

Yeah, she pried that nugget out of me.

“*And* you’re good to your grandmother. Quite the catch.”

I resist the urge to toe the linoleum. I’m fine with complimenting myself and behaving like a cocky ass. I’m always uncomfortable when someone else does it.

“Not only because you bought her a fifteen-hundred-dollar computer. She relies on you for more than that, doesn’t she?” Grace waits for my answer. Reluctantly, I nod. “Those facilities aren’t cheap. My grandmother—my dad’s mom—was in a place half that nice. She had dementia. The expense of her care was substantial, and a topic of grief between my parents for years.”

This isn’t the first time Grace has brought up her parents’ fighting. “Your dad liked to argue, I take it.”

“He was a lawyer,” she says in explanation. “So’s my mother. She *excels* at it.”

“Is that why you didn’t go into law?”

“Arguing for a living doesn’t hold much appeal.” She shakes her head. “I don’t want to be anything like them. I suppose that’s unavoidable, isn’t it?” Worry creases her brow.

“Gracie.” I reach for her hand on the table. “You’re not going to turn into either of your parents. Yes, you’re like them—that *is* unavoidable. I bet your mother is drop-dead gorgeous, yeah?”

A soft blush dusts her cheekbones.

“That’s what I thought.” I wink. “We inherit some things, but others we do on our own.” I swallow after the words are out, because for years I didn’t believe that. I thought I inherited my dad’s poor taste in flighty women after Hanna hightailed it from our wedding. I wondered if I was doomed to repeat his past—a tragic love story preceding my untimely death. Things aren’t turning out too badly for me.

“My dad texted me.”

“When?” This is the first I’m hearing about it.

“Last night. He wants to see me on occasion. For tea.” She grunts.

“What’d you tell him?”

“I told him I’d think about it.” She gives me a tight smile. “I want to, but I’m scared.”

“Of getting close and then losing him.”

She nods, her eyes going to where my hand rests on hers. I give her fingers a tender squeeze.

“Better to have this time with him than not. Even if it hurts,” I offer.

“Maybe you’re right.”

I stroke her thumb with mine for a few seconds until she pulls away. The topic drops along with her hand into her lap.

Grace inhales and does that cute move where she hoists her shoulders and drops them again. “So now what do we do?”

“Three guesses, and your first two don’t count.”

“Zombie television? Sex? Oh! Scrabble.”

“You ordered those in a curious fashion,” I point out. “It’s like you put the sex in the second slot because I specifically said it wouldn’t count.”

She stands and sits on my lap. I pull her close and she kisses me. I love to kiss Grace. She kisses with her whole body. Her hips wiggle, her fingers explore my hair, and her tongue and lips fight for the lead.

It’s intoxicating.

When she finishes the kiss, she slides from my lap and takes the dishes, telling me not to move. *You cooked, I clean.* I let her do it. Watching her ass move side to side while she scrubs a plate is damn fun.

My mind wanders, though, and soon it’s back on the night at the hotel. The “I love you” I didn’t plan on saying.

I hadn’t dropped that three-word bomb since Hanna. By the time we were about to get married, she recited it like it was a chore. I’m not sure if she meant it at the end. She couldn’t have, right? Or she wouldn’t have left.

An ugly thought creeps in. Did Grace echo what I said to avoid an awkward silence? That doesn’t sound like her, but we haven’t exchanged *I love yous* since. I won’t corner her again.

She pauses in her dish washing to look over her shoulder and shake her ass. Those three words lunge against my tight-

lipped smile.

I'm not going to say it. Not because I don't mean it but because I don't want to trap her. She's already trapped me. And I don't even mind.

"I was thinking." She rinses a dish and rests it in the wooden drainer. I stand and grab a dish towel. She makes a scolding *tsk* sound but lets me help.

"What were you thinking?" I ask as I stack the plate on top of the others in the cabinet.

"Oh, um, that we could go out with Rox and Mark sometime?"

The emphasis she put on making that a question was excessive.

"Sure." I take a wet plate from her hand. I'm playing it cool here, because I sense that she doesn't normally introduce her dates to...whoever those people are. "Who are Rox and Mark?"

"Roxanne is my best friend. Mark is her fiancé." She dips her head in a curt nod.

"Awesome." I'm unsure what the nerves are about. "Are they weirdos or something?"

"What? No!" She laughs and some of the tension releases from her shoulders. "I just don't... I'm not usually..." She shuts off the water and takes the towel from me to dry her hands. "I'm not used to having a boyfriend."

The word reverberates off the ceiling and bounces around the room a few times.

Boyfriend.

It's almost ominous.

I hadn't thought of us being boyfriend-girlfriend. The rational part of my brain insists it isn't a big deal, so what's with the sudden onslaught of PTSD?

"Davis?"

"Right. I know. No boyfriends."

"I've dated. I just never labeled it." Her voice dips, cautious now. "Anyway. Now that you and I are, I don't know, dating or whatever, I thought it'd be nice if I introduced you to them. I don't have any rad grandmas tucked away."

At the mention of Grandma Rose, I shake off my bizarre reaction to the "bf" thing. God. I can't even think the word. That's weird, right? I'm being weird?

"I'm your guy, Gracie." That moniker doesn't cause a rogue wave of panic. "I'll meet your friends. Name the time and place."

"Well." She clenches her teeth and grimaces. "It's an engagement party." I wait for the full-on Nam flashback to hit.

Nothing.

Huh.

I shrug. "So I'll wear a suit."

"Yeah?" Her eyes brighten.

"I'll even let you pick."

"Hmm. I like this one." She walks her fingers up my tie as she steps into the circle of my arms. "But I prefer your birthday suit."

"You don't say."

“Mm-hm.” She nods as she wraps her arms around my neck. “But I don’t want anyone else to see it but me.”

“That rule goes for you too.” I palm her supple hips, taking possession of what’s mine. “No one but me, Gracie.”

“No one but you, Davis.”

“We’re officially exclusive,” I say.

“We were exclusive a long time ago,” she says, and she’s one-hundred percent right. She tugs my tie, and me with it, and I follow her upstairs to the bedroom.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

GRACE

It's Saturday afternoon and it's *freezing*.

The weather is a sloppy mix of rainy, snowy sleet, and the wind coming off the water is bone-chillingly frigid. I'm wearing my favorite black boots and little black dress, but my puffy down coat is killing the look. Davis is suited, as per his usual. His long, dark wool coat isn't ruining his look but complementing it.

I express how much his sheer masculine beauty peeves me as we enter the hotel lobby and follow the signs that read ROXANNE AND MARK'S ENGAGEMENT PARTY.

"You're insane. You look amazing," Davis argues. "I nearly stopped the car three times to try and convince you to have sex with me in the backseat."

"In this huge, dumb coat?" I closely resemble the kid from *A Christmas Story*.

The party is in full swing. Davis unzips my jacket and slides it from my arms, revealing my knee-length, curve-hugging black dress. "I knew this was underneath your huge, dumb coat."

He's smooth.

He shrugs off his own coat and checks it with an attendant at the door. The atmosphere is very uppity for Roxanne. She's my funky friend—the one who would handcraft every invitation, party decoration, and table centerpiece before she would have someone else cater it for her.

This room smacks of money. Mark's doing, I imagine. Does his family have a ton of cash or something? I've never seen evidence that he's loaded, but now that the wedding planning is in full swing, I'm suspicious.

Rox bounces over to me the moment I make eye contact.

"Grace!" Champagne sloshes out of the flute in her hand as she strangles me in the crook of her other arm. Her pupils are blown out like maybe this isn't her first glass. She tilts her head to take in Davis's height. "Hiya."

"Hiya," he repeats just as easy as you please. Gosh, he's sexy. "Davis Price."

"Roxanne Moore. My fiancé, Mark, is around here somewhere." She waves a hand in the direction of the six-piece band.

Six band members. Jeez Louise.

"Did your very wealthy distant aunt die and leave you her entire fortune to plan your wedding?" I ask.

Davis shoots me a look at my lack of decorum, but Rox takes it in stride. "Mark's mother's doing. She's sort of awesome."

I take a gander around at the finely dressed staff. "I guess so."

Rox hoists her glass as she threads her arm through one of mine. "I'm drinking as much expensive booze as I can. You should too." She leads me away but first calls back to Davis, "Come on, hot stock guy!"

"Yeah, hot stock guy," I tell him. "Come on."

He plunges his hands into his suit pockets and swaggers behind us. I nearly trip and fall over Rox's feet because I'd

much rather watch his confident walk than look where I'm going.

This boyfriend thing has its perks.

Mark is talking with a group of guy friends when we approach. He gives me a pleasant smile and shakes Davis's hand, then Mark pulls Roxanne close to proudly introduce her to the circle. She beams.

I love how happy she is. I'm glad her minor case of cold feet evaporated.

I step back and join Davis, giving Rox a moment to regale Mark's buddies with the tale of the engagement.

"Can I get you a drink?" Davis takes my hand and walks me to the open bar.

"I'd be remiss not to try the champagne."

"Especially since you're a connoisseur now." Davis places an order. As we wait to be served, I think back to the night at Bubbly's and how my main concern that evening was how to wrap up seeing the man at my side now.

I shake off the unsettling thought and accept the glass, cheersing with Davis's standby bottle of Sam Adams before we both take a drink. *Not all things have to end instantly*, I think as the bubbles pop on my tongue.

"Haven't been to an engagement party in a while," he murmurs. "I half expected Vince to be the next."

"That wouldn't surprise me. They're perfect for each other." Vince and Jackie fit together. Their journey was a bit of a bumbling one, but once she learned that Vince wanted her as much as she wanted him, she didn't hold back.

“Their movie nights were basically dates dressed up as friendship. As tuned in as they were to one another, things were bound to develop.”

I ponder Davis’s comment and the way things are developing between him and me. Before I’m too deep into my thoughts, the sound system crackles and a voice comes over the speaker.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Mark says into the microphone, “I’d like to say a few words about my beautiful fiancée. Rox, honey, come up here.”

Mark gestures and Roxanne places her hands on her pinkening cheeks as she strolls toward her future husband. There’s a bit of a wobble to her walk, but I’m sure no one can tell. She manages a fairly straight line and elegantly steps onto the stage, her palm in Mark’s.

“When we met,” Mark starts, and I become hyperaware of Davis beside me, his hand on my back. “I knew instantly that I was in love with this woman. I was told we fell too fast, too soon. That we rushed. That it’d never last. Two of those I’ve debunked and the third will take a lifetime to refute, but I’m willing. How about you, babe?”

Rox grins and the crowd cheers.

Mark continues gushing, and I blink away the mist in my eyes. True love is rare. But not impossible.

It gives me hope.

DAVIS

I shove two fingers in my collar, tugging as I swallow around the lump in my throat like they do in cartoons.

Mark's speech to Roxanne was heartfelt, and Roxanne's humble reaction was genuine, soaked in expensive champagne, and adorable. The couple earned applause that died down long before their kiss ended.

I expected an attack of Hanna-infused memories tonight. She was elated about our future plans together. At our engagement party, I gave a similar speech to Mark's, and though mine was laced with cheap jokes practically begging for a snare drum, it was every ounce as meaningful. Hanna and I wrote our own vows, but I never found out what hers said. Later I bitterly quipped to Vince that they were "See ya! Wouldn't want to be ya!"

So, yeah, I expected unsavory memories to come. They did, but they didn't circle like hungry sharks. They hovered in the distance, fuzzy. Barely discernible. And they didn't accompany loss or humiliation.

My thoughts shift into *What if?* territory. It's easy to imagine a day like this in my future. A speech that would eclipse my former speech. A wedding that would put my previous attempt at matrimony to shame. Vows written from a deeper part of my soul than before. All of this I can easily picture with the most unlikely of brides.

A redhead named Grace Buchanan.

That idea is nuts, I know. Grace and I have known each other a handful of months—dated only a handful of *weeks*. And yet picturing her in my house on a permanent basis isn't as heart-stopping as I would've guessed.

It sounds awesome.

Roxanne and Mark glide over to us. She turns circles as he holds her hand over her head like she's a pirouetting ballerina. When she stumbles, he catches her, and she lets out an effervescent laugh.

A resonant surety in my gut tells me they're going to make it.

“Nice speech,” I tell him. “When's the big day?”

Mark cuts his gaze to his future bride. “Soon. Just finishing up my master's degree. Roxanne wants a destination wedding.”

Next to me, Grace stiffens. Not for herself but out of concern for me. It's sweet. I tuck her close to my side, my hand rubbing up and down her arm.

“The Bahamas are beautiful.” In my periphery, Grace tips her chin to study me. What'd she expect, that I'd burst into tears? Duck and run? “Or Tahiti. Jamaica's nice.”

“You know your wedding-destination locales,” Roxanne observes with a smile. Her eyes cut to Grace and they have a silent conversation. I take it Rox knows.

“I've done my research.” My comment invites a prying question. I'm not entirely sure why I invited it, but I'm not nervous about answering.

Mark's eyes go to Grace, then me. “For an upcoming wedding?”

“Past wedding. It didn’t happen.” I’m alarmed by how unalarmed I am. Mark nods, taking my answer in stride. For years my biggest shame was admitting failure. Not only at getting married but at keeping my fiancée by my side. That seems so petty now. Who gives a shit?

“I’m sorry,” Roxanne says kindly.

“Don’t be.” I slide my hand onto Grace’s shoulder. “It was a long time ago.”

Roxanne deftly steers the conversation in another direction. “Grace has to go no matter where it is. She’s my maid of honor.”

“I am?” I hear surprise in Grace’s voice.

Rox throws a hand. “I was going to ask you this week in a big to-do over drinks and dinner and a gift, but I couldn’t wait.”

“I could have guessed you’d jump the gun.” But Grace is all smiles.

“I couldn’t get married without you there! I’ll still buy you drinks and dinner if you say yes.”

“Yes!” Grace exclaims and then runs into her friend’s arms. She bats watery eyes and hugs Roxanne close. “How soon should we start planning?”

“Never too soon!” They erupt into breathless giggles and I swear to God my heart dips like it’s too full to stay suspended in my chest.

“You’re invited to come with her,” Mark offers.

“Oh. Uh. Thank you.”

I'm able to picture it in Technicolor clarity. An island wedding, only I'm in a guest chair, and Grace is walking down a white runner wearing a linen dress with flowers in her hair.

Again—no alarm bells sound.

“Be honest, Mark.” I lean in while our girls chatter animatedly. “Is one of the reasons you proposed so that she wouldn't call you her ‘boyfriend’?”

Mark lets out a sound between a cough and a laugh. “That's the worst, isn't it?”

“Horrible,” I agree.

“No. ‘Man friend.’ That's horrible.”

“No shit.” I chuckle. “Grace and I haven't agreed on a title yet.”

“Roxanne loves her. I've only met her a few times, but I can see why.”

“Yeah, she's easy to love.” I mutter those words to myself, but he hears me. I receive a hard clap on the back—harder than I would have expected from a buttoned-up college professor. Who would've guessed the guy worked out?

“It won't be long for you, pal.” He signals a waiter and takes a flute of champagne from a passing tray. “You remind me of me when I first started seeing Rox.” He blows out a breath of disbelief. “I couldn't believe she was talking to me. I knew I couldn't do better.”

Exactly how I feel about Grace. Much like my memories of Hanna, the women who distracted me on and off over the last six years have faded, their faces grainy and blurring together.

Grace, by comparison, is a buzzing neon sign. She couldn't fade out or blur if she wanted to.

A pregnant pause hangs in the air, and then Mark recovers our limping conversation with "You like football?"

"Go Bucks," I answer, raising my beer bottle.

He offers an "O-H!" and I answer with a hearty "I-O!" Much easier than talking about girls.

I TAKE advantage of the band playing a slow song to pull Grace onto the dance floor with me. We fit together like jigsaw pieces, her hips aligning with mine, her fingers linked comfortably at my neck.

"You're the perfect height." She sounds captivated, which is a win. If there's any pursuit worth following, it's captivating the woman who captivated me first. "I always worried you'd be too tall. Unmanageably tall."

Always? Interesting.

"When did you think this?" I ask.

"Whenever you were taking drinks to another woman at McGreevy's." Her top lip curls the slightest bit. "Though they were unusually tiny. How you liked those tiny blondes!" she chastises with a head shake.

"I was in a rut, I admit."

"You were in a tiny-blond rut?"

I bark a laugh that's a touch loud in this reserved crowd.

"It may have looked like I was working a plan of some sort, but I never thought much about it. The company was

nice, the ‘packages’ born of necessity. I couldn’t risk things turning serious.”

She hums her understanding.

We sway to the music and I tug her closer. Lowering my lips to her ear, I say, “Until now.”

She misses the next dance step but recovers easily. Her head jerks back on her neck so she can focus on my face.

“I worried that tonight might send you running for the hills.” She glances around. “Yet here you are.”

“Were you trying to make me to run for the hills? Was this a test?”

“Not an intentional one.” Her eyes crinkle at the corners when she smiles. “I suppose we’ll have to wait and see.”

“What about you? You dropped the boyfriend bomb the other night at my place, and now you’re inviting me to an island to watch your friends get married. Correct me if I’m wrong, but this is starting to sound serious.”

“We haven’t exactly been comfortable with the next-level stuff, have we?”

“We? You’re the one used to blowing off dates.” I give her a pointed look.

“Me?”

“Yes, *you*. You dated and dumped everyone, didn’t you? Were you ever dumped?”

“Yes. A couple of times. I was a heartbroken teen.”

“Poor Gracie.” I offer a pout.

“What about you? How many times have you been dumped? I bet...” She trails off as she realizes her glaring faux

pas. “Hm. I guess you were the ultimate dumpee, weren’t you?”

“If they handed out engraved gold cups for that kind of thing, I’d have one.”

Grace doesn’t miss a beat. “The kind with a handle on each side?”

“That’s the one.”

Her green eyes hold mine.

Captivated.

“You don’t like being called ‘boyfriend,’ do you?”

“It’s emasculating. And ‘man friend’ is geriatric,” I toss in before she tries that one out.

“Agreed.” She purses her lips as she thinks. “What if I introduce you as ‘my guy’?”

“It’s accurate. I am your guy.” We turn another circle, her smaller hand resting comfortably in mine.

“Are you?” she asks. “Mine?”

I let go of her hand to lift her chin. I don’t break eye contact when I confirm. “Gracie Lou Buchanan. I’m your guy.”

We kiss as the song winds to an end, parting when the beat picks up. Moments end, and this one is no exception.

“You two are positively delicious!” Roxanne says as she and Mark go swing-dancing by.

“Think we can take ’em?” I ask Grace.

She hoists a brow in challenge. “I think we should try.”

I take both her hands and we do just that.

Try.

It's what we're doing with everything—the dating thing. The us thing. We're trying. From my point of view, it would appear we're succeeding.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

GRACE

Once we returned to my place, I invited Davis in for a nightcap.

He followed me to the refrigerator, pulled my hand off the handle, and prodded me upstairs by poking me between the ribs as I giggled uncontrollably. I'm ticklish, and made the mistake of admitting it a few days ago.

He won't let me live it down.

He removes my dress, taking his time kissing my neck as I cup his manhood and massage his swelling erection through his suit pants. He rakes his teeth over my collarbone as he slides his hands around my ass. Then I'm in the air, being lifted and placed over his lap.

We half fall onto the bed before he sits up again and arranges my knees on either side of his thighs.

"I want you on top," he rasps.

I look down at him, admiring his painfully handsome face, clean-shaven jaw, and eyes the color of cloudy skies in the winter. Except there's nothing cold hovering in Davis's eyes. Especially now.

He unhooks my bra—black to match my dress and heels, both long gone. He pulls the straps down my arms and his eyes darken hungrily when my breasts are bared.

He ducks his head and takes a nipple on his tongue, and I rake my hands into his thick hair. Pleasure shoots like lightning from my breasts to between my legs. His attention

goes there next, and he watches me openly while slipping his fingers past the barrier of a scant pair of silken panties.

My breaths are truncated, shortened by lust and an emotion far more dangerous than lust. In the desire-soaked air between us, he seems to share that thought. It's scary and titillating and distracting and exciting. It's the Ferris wheel all over again—the instability of the carriage, the intoxication of being up so high.

With one role reversal.

At the top of that Ferris wheel it was Davis holding tight, nervous about being so high. I was the one who embraced it. I was the one empowered by it.

Love, for us, elicits the opposite response.

My contemplation evaporates with the next sweep of his fingers against my center. Heat builds as he suckles my breasts—first one, then the other.

“Condom,” he says as the air chills my damp nipples.

“Nightstand.”

“Get it.”

“Yes, sir.” Fire consumes me when I crawl from his lap and earn a smack on the ass. I dig the condom out of the drawer—buried beneath a brush, nail file, lotion, and several other random single-woman paraphernalia.

Back on the bed, I tear the packet open as Davis kicks off his boxer briefs. Even though I've seen it repeatedly, the sight of his cock renders me speechless.

Jutting out from between his legs, it promises pleasure. He fills me like no one else. He wraps his fist around his thick

shaft and gives one tug—then another. Between my legs, another surge of pressure pulses.

“You make me so fucking hot, Gracie.”

I roll the condom on him, taking my time at the ridge along the head before easing it over his length. He watches. I lift my eyes to his when I’m done, then move to straddle him. He surprises me by rolling on top and pressing my back into the bed.

“I thought you wanted me on top,” I breathe.

“Changed my mind.” He pins me with his weight, hooking one of my legs over his hip and tilting his pelvis forward in one firm thrust.

I gasp. I’m *his*.

He rocks into me again in one long, hard thrust. Over and over until the air swells with sounds of pleasure—mine and his.

His guttural growls mingle with my breathy moans. Soon we’re working up a sweat, pillows tumbling to the ground as our flesh slaps. I shove against his chest to push him over, to *take over*, but he doesn’t allow it. Trapping my hands over my head, he gives me a cocky smile and purposely slows his movements.

A sluggish reverse out, then a quick plunge in. “Ohh.”

He extracts the sound from me without trying, and then does it again.

“Come for me, Gracie.” He glides back, then forward, this time adding a trick we’ve tried once before. “I’m going to count down from three, and you’re going to come so hard, you’ll beg me to stop.”

I think back to the hottest phone sex I've ever had—okay the *only* phone sex I've ever had—and a ripple of pleasure blasts through me at the idea of coming so hard I'll be begging him to stop.

Worth a try.

“Three,” he commands. “You’re so fucking gorgeous.”

“Two.” He releases my wrist and teases my breast. “Feel it building?” He’s as breathless as I am.

I manage a weak nod.

“Gracie.” He rewards me with another thrust, and another. “Give it to me.”

That’s all it takes.

I coil, clinging to his back as wave after wave of my orgasm washes over me. And when he continues working toward his own release, I coil tighter still, my spent muscles spasming within until I’m sure I can’t take it anymore.

I come again, begging him to finish because I can’t take another second of pleasure. Finally he gives in.

Even during his orgasm, my body greedily takes another. Sweat coats my hairline, my breasts, my stomach. A ragged breath wrings itself from my lungs. My arms and legs go limp from exhaustion.

Davis gives me his weight, lying against me, embedded deep. His lips find my neck, his warm breath tickling my skin.

“Fuck, we’re good at that,” he says.

“Yeah, we are.”

He pushes to his elbows and studies me for a long moment. I can see what he’s not saying as plain as day. My

heart kicks my ribs in terrified anticipation, but instead of saying the three words that could send me into a panic attack, he says three very different ones.

“Zombies and beer?”

It’s a cowardly move on my part, but I take the reprieve. “Zombies and beer.”

I HAVE MONDAY OFF, which is a dream, considering McGreevy’s will be slow and I wouldn’t make much money anyway.

I’m at Davis’s house. He sits on the floor between my legs, his eyes on the screen as another hapless zombie meets a swift and merciless end. I’m massaging a particularly troublesome spot on Davis’s right shoulder, which must be tender given the way he grunts.

Lightening my touch, I lean to whisper into his ear, “Office work is killing you.”

“I don’t work that hard.”

He does so. I harrumph.

“Eight to five at a desk isn’t exactly coal mining.”

“No, but moving that mouse all day and not moving your hot body isn’t doing you any favors.”

“I work out.” He digs a handful of potato chips out of the bag and munches.

“I’m jealous of your metabolism,” I grumble. “I too would like to sit on the floor and eat an entire bag of calories.”

He drops the bag to the coffee table and turns, wrapping his arms around my waist and looking up at me.

“Then do it,” he says.

I snort. “In case you haven’t noticed, my hips aren’t as narrow as yours.”

He grabs a handful of my ass-slash-thigh and squeezes. “And thank God for that. Your body is my dream. Or do you need me to prove it to you?”

I brought takeout from McGreevy’s for our dinner. We ate sandwiches, then collapsed on the couch. We haven’t taken our clothes off yet, which is a record for us.

“Why the smile, Gracie Lou?”

At a loss for a clever response, I decide to be frank. “Just you.”

His eyes grow warm, long lashes dipping low as his mouth spreads into a slow smile. “Are you staying?”

“Why?” My eyes go to the screen. “Going to have nightmares if I don’t?”

“Possibly. I have a nightlight, though, so don’t feel pressured to stay if you can’t manage.”

I run my fingers through his respectably messy hair, thinking of reasons to go home. I come up blank.

“I brought a change of clothes.”

“Good.” He joins me on the couch and drops the chip bag onto my lap. “Eat all the chips you want.”

I lean against him and pluck a few crisp, round chips from the bag. His heart thuds against my back. On TV a *katana* blade slices the air and blood spurts from one of the zombies.

My shoulders shake with laughter.

“Like that?” Davis asks.

“I don’t know about us, Price.” I snuggle deeper against him. His arms lock around my stomach. I pull out another potato chip, reach over my head, and feed it to him. He crunches it happily.

“I do, Gracie,” he finally says.

Happy, eating potato chips, and resting on Davis’s solid form, I decide that his knowing might be enough for both of us.

DAVIS

I'm finishing my espresso two minutes before work when Grace comes downstairs wearing my T-shirt and her own floral pajama bottoms. I freeze at the bottom of the stairs, smiling at her messy hair as much as the cute, sleepy expression on her face.

"I won't disturb you," she says as she steps into the kitchen. "I know you have to work, like, now. You should have woken me up and told me to leave."

God. She's my favorite habit.

I kiss her forehead and cuddle her warm, cotton-clad body closer. "You don't have to leave, Gracie. You won't bother me."

"How do you know? I can be obnoxious." Her hands find my suit jacket sleeves, and the contrast between me dressed to the hilt and her barely dressed is nothing short of charming.

"I like you obnoxious." I deliver another kiss, this one to her mouth, and walk to my office. "It's your best quality." At the doorway I turn. "I'll break for lunch. If you leave before then, don't you dare do it without saying goodbye."

"Okay."

I nod and duck into my office, log on, and crack my knuckles. It's go time.

By lunchtime I'm ready to call it a day, which never happens. I'm aware of Grace in my house. She's quiet, but

every time I hear the ripple of the newspaper or the clink of a spoon on the edge of a coffee mug, I want to go to her.

I send a quick email and give myself permission to stop for thirty minutes.

Grace is in the living room, spraying a plant with a mister. She's standing on her toes to reach it, which has the added effect of raising her red long-sleeved shirt a few inches and showing off her lower back. The jeans cup her round bottom and her hair is down, her waves chaotic.

"I go away for a few hours and come back to you more beautiful. What gives?"

Her smile bursts onto her face, the sun streaming through the window catching the diamond stud in her nose.

"I was going to leave, but I didn't want to leave without saying goodbye, and I didn't want to interrupt you. Plus, I make amazing grilled cheese sandwiches. Want one?" She relinquishes my mister to the plant stand and walks by me en route to the kitchen.

"I can't turn down grilled cheese."

She chatters about various cheese types and mayo, then tomato and pickles and the preference of one over the other. Each has its merits, we decide.

While she talks, I remember the Grilled Cheese of Doom on the anniversary of my equally doomed wedding day. I can't call up the loneliness, though. Especially with Grace here. It's great to have her here.

Here, in my bed, in my kitchen—in my life, is... Well. She makes everything full instead of empty.

I could get used to it.

I think I'm already used to it.

When Hanna left me at the altar, Grandma Rose was the first person I saw when I flew home. I had to sober up for a few days first before breaking the news to her. She took the news well. With a head shake and a cluck of the tongue. Then she gave me a piece of advice I didn't believe at the time.

There'll be a woman, Davis, who will come along and make you rethink love and marriage.

At the time, I swore I'd never succumb to either of those plagues again.

Now, watching Grace carefully cut my sandwich into triangles, I know I was remiss to disregard the advice of the wisest senior citizen I know.

“Voilà,” Grace announces with flair. She slices her own sandwich before settling at the kitchen table, her plate next to mine. Our two sandwiches, plates, and glasses of water, side by side.

I take my seat. I take a bite. I reward her with an ecstasy-infused moan and exaggerated eye roll. “Best sandwich of my life.”

She playfully shoves my shoulder.

I polish off the first half and wipe my buttery fingers on a paper napkin. “You're welcome to leave a few things here, you know.”

Grace, sandwich in hand, blinks at me.

“You wouldn't have to pack a bag every time you wanted to stay if you kept a change of clothes and a toothbrush here.”

“You have to work.” She puts her sandwich down and brushes her fingers together.

“So do you. But in between you’re welcome here. Hell, I come to your work all the time and hang around.”

This earns me a brittle smile.

“What would that look like?” she asks. “Would I call first? Swing by unannounced? Are you going to give me a key?”

I hadn’t thought that far ahead, but... “Sure. You can have a key.”

“Davis.” Her tone is exasperated. She bites the corner of her lip like she’s deciding whether or not she should say what’s on her mind. Then she does. “Are you saying you want me to move in?”

“Gracie, no. I’m trying to be pragmatic.” Moving in is an extreme step, even for me. But just as I’m about to tell her I’m not remotely interested in her living here, I realize I kind of am. I sure as hell can’t tell her *that*. “All I know is that I want more.”

An expression akin to panic contorts her features.

“Whatever that looks like to you,” I clarify.

She doesn’t answer. She doesn’t look at me.

“Think about it,” I say easily. I hope I’m broadcasting calm I don’t feel. “Thanks for the sammie.”

She’s still not looking at me.

“Gracie?”

“I’ll think about it,” she promises.

My desk phone purrs one ring, then two. I leave her at my kitchen table and jog to my office to answer. Fifteen minutes later, call complete, I stick my head out of the door to find Grace, but she’s gone.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

DAVIS

“He’s not ready,” I tell Vince.

S We’re at the bar at McGreevy’s. Grace isn’t working tonight, but her brethren are. Whenever Candace or the other girl wanders by, I change the subject.

“I can sense it. I rushed it.”

“You’re going to have to back up.” Vince takes his coat off and sits down. This isn’t the first time I’ve bombarded him the second he enters the room. “What did you rush?”

I take a drink of my beer and then another as Vince raises his hand to get Candace’s attention.

“What can I getcha, sugar?” she asks him. He orders a draft and Candace pours his beer. She delivers it and pats my hand before walking away.

“What was that about?” Vince asks.

I shrug. “Beats me.”

“Looked like she was consoling you.”

I laugh, but *was* she consoling me?

“You do look a little George Bailey sitting there.”

I meet the eyes of my reflection in the mirror behind the bar. My tie is loose and the collar of my jacket is sticking up on one side. I jerk it into place, but Vince has a point. My posture is a cross between *It’s a Wonderful Life*’s downtrodden protagonist and *Lord of the Rings*’ lurching Gollum. I straighten my tie, then my back.

“How long did you wait to tell Jackie you loved her?”

“Fuck me, *that’s* what this is about?” Vince’s eyes go wide.

“Thanks a lot,” I grumble, feeling worse.

“It was after our ‘dark moment of the soul.’” He says it so seriously, I scrunch my face.

“After you tried to pry my head out of my ass and it didn’t work,” he explains. “And after you appealed to Jackie’s sensibility. I owe you for that one. I’ll buy your beer.”

“You’re going to have to do more than buy me a beer.” I shake my head at my own stupidity. “Grace is freaking out.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Let’s just say I know what it looks like when a woman is about to freak out.” My tone is martini dry.

“Fair enough.” Vince lifts his glass. “When are you seeing her next?”

“I haven’t talked to her since she left my place without a goodbye yesterday.”

My best friend’s expression is foreboding.

“What?” I bark.

“Nothing. Jesus! Calm down.” Vince laughs. I might be overreacting. I’d love it if I were overreacting. “Everything is *fine*. So you love her? So what? At least you told her that instead of cramming your head in your ass.”

He gulps his beer before continuing.

“Here’s the deal. Tonight, meet with her. If she starts any sentence with the words ‘I’ve been thinking,’ interrupt and tell her you’ve been thinking too. Tell her you didn’t mean to

smother her. That you're just so into her you got ahead of yourself."

His logic is stunning in its simplicity. My rigid shoulders lower a few inches.

"It's hard to know what to do," he continues. "You were almost *married*. Then you went from forever with Hanna to being content to bang every broad in town and not be tied down."

"*Broad?* What is this? Film noir?"

Vince laughs.

"I don't feel tied down." It may be the first time I've admitted it aloud. "And this will not surprise you at all, but the women I dated before? I was just killing time."

"We don't think deeply about that kind of stuff. We just do it. We're doers." Vince stops short of banging his chest like King Kong.

"How did you make those women want you, Davis?" he asks, his smile smug.

I narrow my eyes. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you a dose of your own advice. How did you keep them wanting more?"

I take a breath and blow it out. I didn't sit and psychoanalyze every nuance of what we did together, that's how. A night of sex was followed by a normal morning, not second-guessing.

"Shut up," I tell my best buddy.

"You're worrying too much."

"Fuck off."

He spares me his next bout of laughter. We turn our attention to the television. But he's smiling. I can sense it.

The bastard.

GRACE

It's a rare occasion when my mother and I get together, but she's throwing a ladies' luncheon for a few of her single clients and asked me to help her plan. If anything can bond the Buchanan women, it's planning a party.

"You're welcome to come, even though you've never been divorced. All single woman are welcome."

We're in a spice store. I stop at a rack of various hot chocolate mixes. I've had my eye on the cayenne one since we set foot in here. I pretend to be fascinated with the ingredients on the back of the tin.

"Grace." She drags out my name like she's scolding me.

"Yes, Mom?" I place the tin on the shelf.

"What's going on?"

I could lie. I *should* lie. But I don't. I put two tins of the hot chocolate into my basket and tell her the summarized truth.

"Davis and I are serious. I think. I've concluded that I've never been serious with anyone. Not like this." I frown in thought before whispering the rest of it. "He offered me his house key."

"Oh." She purses her lips. "That is serious. We need to sit down and talk."

My mother takes the shopping basket from my hands, swipes in two more tins of hot cocoa, and starts for the cash register.

Back at her house, she pours steamed milk into four mugs and stirs in each powdered concoction. She arranges them on a tray, tops them with marshmallows, and brings them to me.

I'm curled on her couch like a croissant. Talk about conversations you don't want to have. And yet I'm here, because I need to talk about it. I can't talk to Rox and I don't know Jackie well enough, and Grandma Rose would totally rat me out. Her loyalty lies with Davis.

I have no choice, really.

"It's soon," I tell my mother. "I've only been seeing him a few months."

"I only saw your father a few months." Her face darkens as the room fills with what we aren't saying.

"He and I have lunch next week," I tell her. "He wants to repair our relationship before...*before*."

My mother bats her eyes and offers a watery smile. "Good. That's good, honey."

A beat of uncomfortable silence passes, then another before she takes control of the conversation again. "So. Davis?"

"Davis. Well, we've got a great thing going." I opt for bluntness. "Great sex. Overnights. We laugh. We have fun. He takes care of me."

"I suppose you don't want to hear 'So did your father and I.'"

"No thanks," I give her a soft smile.

"Grace, Grace, Grace." She sits with me and hands over one of the mugs. I sip. It's the peppermint cocoa and pretty damn delicious. "Davis is a stock analyst, right?"

“Yes. The best in his company.”

“He’s an overachiever.”

“Completely. He’s dedicated. A hard worker,” I say, proud.
“And he had a false start down the aisle.”

I probably shouldn’t have shared that with her. I’ve had a few bouts of weakness where Davis is concerned.

“Does he truly care about you? Or are you his next challenge?”

I stop blowing on my hot beverage and face my mother, whose expression is stony and serious. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that Davis may not want *you*; he may simply be conquering his next challenge. He failed to take a woman down the aisle. Maybe he wants to see how far he can go with you.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say.” My heart clutches. I don’t believe Davis is using me as an experiment. Then I think of the women he used to date. Were they experiments?

I close my eyes. I will not let my mother burrow into my psyche.

“I’d rather you know now than find out in your own divorce proceedings.” Dawn Buchanan sets her mug down and stands from the couch.

“That’s pessimistic.”

“It’s realistic, Grace.”

“Divorce isn’t inevitable, Mom.” I’m on my feet and pulling on my coat before I can talk myself out of it. “I’m more to Davis than a goal to check off his bucket list.”

“And what is he to you?”

I frown.

“Because if he’s serious about you and you’re not serious about him, that’s not fair either. Do you know what love is, Grace? Do you know how to love him the way he loves you?”

I wonder if I’m visibly deflating. I am on the inside. I told Davis I loved him. I meant it.

Didn’t I?

“Don’t toy with him,” my mother warns. “Especially if he’s serious. You know firsthand how bad a marriage can look when two people aren’t on the same page.”

“Thanks to you.” I grab my purse and start for the door.

“Remember what I said!” she calls as I leave her house.

I drive home, thinking that my mother is both certifiable and possibly right.

Davis has been good to me. I’ve been cagey. *Squirrelly*. Everything he does—every thoughtful, selfless thing—causes me to twitch with alarm.

In the shower I scrub my hair and push my visit with my mother to the back of my mind. I remember the bet I made with Davis and the way he leaped at the idea of taking me out. The way he offered me his “packages” and how I didn’t accept.

The champagne night. Meeting his grandmother.

The hotel where he said he loved me.

I rinse my hair and stand under the spray, hot water cocooning me. My mother is right.

Davis is being honest. It’s time for me to be honest.

I climb out of the shower, wrap myself in a towel, and, dripping, go to my cellphone where it sits on my bed.

Hands shaking, I draw a deep breath. I punch a button and make the outgoing call I should've made a long time ago.

“Gracie Lou,” he answers.

“What are you doing?” My voice shakes, but I clear my throat and try again. “Are you busy?”

“I’m coming to your place,” he says, his voice sexy and suggestive.

I manage a curt “I’m waiting.”

“See you in ten.”

Ten.

I have ten minutes to think of what to say.

DAVIS

Grace inviting me over goes a long way toward soothing my ragged nerves. The other day I overthought myself into a tizzy.

Tizzies are not manly.

I park at the curb and walk to her door. I notice I'm whistling—how about that? I'm not sure “chipper” is manly either, but I'm going with it.

Grace answers with wet hair, wearing jeans, a sweatshirt, and fluffy blue socks. I hold up the fall bouquet in my hand. “For you.”

Her eyes go to the blooms and then lift to my face. “We need to talk, Davis.”

A jolt shocks my system. My brain scrambles to remember what Vince said the other night. Something about cutting her off to tell her I was wrong. Was that it? Something about how I was the one who jumped the gun?

“We do need to talk,” I say. On the cusp of eating the *I love you* that I said a long time ago and meant ever since, I hesitate. I could tell her the offer of my house key was premature, but that too feels like the wrong move.

I'm not going to lie to Grace. I'm not going to say I didn't mean any of it when I meant all of it.

“Come in.”

I step into her house and close the door behind me. I follow her to the kitchen, where she's pulling a glass vase

down from an overhead cabinet. She rinses it and fills it with water, and I hand over the flowers.

We stand in silence while she unwraps them and takes the extra step of trimming the ends with shears. I keep my mouth shut. No good can come of my speaking first. She's the one with something to say. I'm going to let her say it.

"They're beautiful." She looks sad. A bizarre spark of hope comes when I wonder if she's upset about her father, not me.

"Is this about your dad?" My heart thuds hard, then harder when she shakes her head no. That means it's about me. *Well, shit.*

I take her hand and lead her to the sofa. I shrug out of my coat. She sits, looks at her lap, and fidgets with the pocket on the front of her sweatshirt.

"Tell me, Gracie."

She inhales. I steel my spine. I'd rather know what's going on in her head than not know. Not knowing sucks.

"You said you wanted more," she starts. "With me."

"Yes." I did say that.

"Why?"

"Why?" I repeat. She needs clarity on *that?* "I thought the *why* was clear."

"The thing is, Davis..."

Hell. This is going from bad to worse.

"More could mean a lot of things," I interrupt. "More could mean you have my key or stay the whole weekend. More could mean trips together. More could mean..."

Marriage, kids, a future. “Whatever we want it to mean,” I finish lamely. I don’t want to spook her. Given the dark circles under her eyes, I might be too late.

“I’ve seen the *more*. I’ve witnessed firsthand when love leads to destruction, then to compromise, and then to ambivalence. Every stage is uglier than the last.”

She’s talking about her parents. “You’ve seen one version of it, Gracie.”

“You’ve seen another,” she fires back.

“And I’m willing to try again.”

Her eyes widen in alarm. “You can’t mean marriage?”

“Breathe.” I grip her arm. I can’t not touch her. She leans into me despite her uncertainty. “I don’t want to get married. Not yet. But in the future, who knows? I’m willing to see what happens. We haven’t exactly been sticking to the script here.”

Everything about Grace and me is different.

“You love me; I love you. We’ve got this.” I wrap my arm around her but she twists away.

“I don’t—” Her fists are curled in the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She shakes them at me. “I shouldn’t have said it back.”

“Grace.” The word is a warning. I’m not playing around with this and neither should she. Years ago my heart was destroyed, and it took a lot for me to reach this point. “Be very certain that you mean what you say next.”

She swallows, then meets my eyes. “What if we back off? What if I choose a package and we start from there?”

Her voice is infused with hope. Hope, while devastation wreaks havoc in my chest cavity. “You’re serious.”

“It’s a good compromise.” She lifts her eyebrows. Like I’m going to agree to this bullshit?

“I don’t want to offer you a *package*. I’m done with the way I used to date. I’m done taking out random women. I’m over being lonely.”

“You’re lonely and I’m convenient, is that it? The girl without a career or hobbies? The one woman who can seamlessly fuse into your life while leaving hers behind?”

Wait. *What?*

“What the fuck, Grace? I never said any of that.”

“You didn’t have to, Davis!” She bursts off the sofa. “You’re not in love with me, admit it. I’m another challenge for you to overcome.”

“I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone,” I all but shout as I stand with her. She shrinks back.

“No. You like having a sex partner and a person to watch TV with.”

When I confront her next, my voice shakes with anger. “This is bullshit. You know it. You’re scared and you’re nervous and you’re looking for a way to sabotage what we have.”

“It’s doomed anyway!”

I lock my jaw and lean in. “You don’t believe that.”

She’s silent.

“You dared me to date you, Grace. *You*. You decided to stay with me past the agreed-upon *package*. And when your

dad showed up out of the blue with news he wasn't going to be around much longer, who did you run to? *Me.*"

"I shouldn't have put that on you."

I grip her shoulders. "Yes. You should have. That's the goddamn point! It's okay to lean on the person you love. It's okay to be vulnerable. It's okay to take my house key. It's okay to fight and have uncomfortable conversations about our future."

I lower my face to hers.

"Gracie," I say softly. She's still in there. The woman I've fallen for—I can see her beyond the fear. "Don't do this. We're okay. We're better than okay now that this is out in the open."

Just when I think I'm reaching her, she shakes her head solemnly.

"Ending it now is better than ending it later. I don't want to be a bitter divorcée whose only bright spot in life is eating lunch with a bunch of other bitter divorcées."

I have no idea what she's talking about. She steps away from me, her eyes damp, but no tears fall.

"Your solution is to never try again. Is that it?" I ask.

"You and I, Davis, we're not Rox and Mark."

"What the hell does this have to do with Rox and Mark?" I practically shout.

"He's perfect for her. A harmless guy with a bland past and a normal family. Our dynamics... We'll never survive."

Fury roars within me, though I suspect beneath it is pain—a truckload of it. The deep, dark hurt I once buried and swore

never to unearth.

“I can’t help who I am, Gracie. I can’t change my mother leaving or my father dying. I can’t change your parents either.”

She juts her chin stubbornly.

“You’re right, though. If you kill what we have before it starts, we won’t survive.”

“I couldn’t lie to you any longer.”

“Lying to me should be the least of your concerns.” I snatch my coat off the couch and march for the door. “Lying to yourself, on the other hand—that shit leaves a scar.”

I open the door, a cold breeze slapping me in the face and slicing through my thin shirt. I should walk out without looking back. I *should*, but I don’t. I turn and look over my shoulder, half in, half out.

“Last chance, Grace. Do you love me or not?” I brace myself for her answer, remind myself of my new motto: I’d rather know than not know.

“I *can’t*.” Tears spill down her cheeks. She covers her mouth like she’s trying to keep from taking it back.

“All right, then.” I feel the wall going up—the stones stacking from my gut to my neck and enclosing my heart along the way. “I guess we’re done.”

I shut the door firmly, the silence feeling final. I feel fucking horrible. But. I was eviscerated once before and lived to tell the tale. I can do it again.

I don’t bother pulling on my coat. I climb into my car and start driving aimlessly until, two hours later, I arrive in Mysticburg, Ohio, and I’m knocking on my grandmother’s bedroom door.

She takes one look at me and her eyes brim with concern.
“What happened?”

“Grace” is all my shaky voice manages.

“I told her not to fuck it up.” My grandmother grabs my arm and I allow her to drag me inside.

“It’s not her fault. Hell, maybe it’s no one’s fault. Maybe we were doomed from the start because of our checkered pasts.”

“Don’t be an idiot. It’s unflattering.”

I sink into an armchair and cover my eyes with my hand.
“I loved her.”

“I know.” My grandmother pulls my hand away from my eyes and quirks one white eyebrow. “Want a shot of whiskey?”

I laugh but choke on it a moment later as the severity of what I’ve lost sinks in. “I lost her.”

“Davis, no.”

It’s no use. My eyes blur and my gut hollows out. “I lost her, Rose. For good.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

TEN DAYS LATER.

DAVIS

I tilt my head and wince as a sickening crunch comes from the top of my spinal cord.

That can't be good.

I rub my eyes and that's worse. My vision is grainy from staring at a computer screen for—I check the clock on my phone—twelve hours plus. My throat is dry, the empty water bottle at my left elbow one I never bothered refilling. My heart...

You know what? Let's not talk about that.

Since Grace dumped me on my ass and I drove to cry on my grandmother's shoulder, I'm doing better. I'm handling it. I navigated out of the shit pile that was my life six years ago—this is no different.

No.

It's *better*.

Better in the sense that I found out early. That I wasn't standing at the end of an aisle like a complete schmuck while Grace sneaked out of the church, or out of the courtroom, or off the beach. I saved myself another six years of pain by taking the brunt of her breakup square on the chin.

That's my lucid argument of late.

I'm not going to climb into a bottle of rum. I'm not drinking more than one or two beers. I'm not suffering from insomnia.

My coping mechanism this time? Work.

I normally never work past five. Lately I'm hunched over my keyboard until nine or ten. Last night I didn't stop until after midnight.

The television blares in the background. I let the drone of bad news wash over me as I analyze and overanalyze and reanalyze data.

I have no more control over stocks than I have in the real world, but the act of striking keys and placing calls makes me feel in control. Downtime is the worst. Staying busy is the only way I'll make it through.

The stock market is volatile. Its tectonic plates shift drastically, whether we're talking about an act of war or a Kardashian getting her feelings hurt. That kind of unpredictability means it's safe to play the middle.

I haven't been safe.

My boss called earlier this afternoon. He's seen my numbers. My percentage has tanked. Customer satisfaction is down. *What happened?* he wanted to know. *Do you need a break?* he asked.

I explained that I hit a bump in the road. I told him I plan on being back to top ten, back down to my lean, mean fighting weight, in no time.

He seemed to believe me.

He invited me to his house, and I told him I'd think about it. Being a country's width away from Grace is tempting.

Standing isn't easy, but I do it anyway. My knee wobbles and I straighten it, grab my empty water bottle, and tuck my phone into my pocket.

Over the sink I fill the bottle, my mind wandering.

Other than the voice of a miserable reporter (are they ever happy about anything?), my house is quiet. It's been quiet for too long.

I remember Grace's tear-streaked face in the diminishing crack of her front door as I closed it for the last time. I wonder if she's lonely. If she's thought of me.

I shut off the sink when the bottle overflows, a frown pulling my mouth. It doesn't matter how she is. It only matters how I am.

Since my visit with my grandmother, I've avoided bars. All of them, especially my favorite bar in town. How shortsighted is that? Just because Grace decided to squash my heart like wine grapes, I no longer go to a place I enjoy? I was there *first*. If anyone should leave McGreevy's, it should be her. Not me.

Righteous indignation is the worst kind, but that's what I cling to as I suck a deep breath in through my nostrils.

I have to get over this before I lose my job or take off for California and turn into a tofu-eating hippie like my boss. I don't thrive on mellow vibes. I live for action.

I pull my phone out and text Vince one word: **Beer**. An almost immediate text back reads **Where?**

Where do you think?

After a lengthy pause, Vince responds: **Dude. Seriously?**

I'll be there in fifteen, I text back.

Decision made.

Outside my former favorite bar, I survey the crowd through the windows. McGreevy's is busy, especially for a

weekday. Grace is behind the bar, her hair curled the way I like it.

The way I *used to* like it.

Standing there, watching her fluid movements, I remember how soft and giving she felt against me. When we danced. When we made love. When she leaned on me and I wrapped her in my arms.

My shoes may as well be cemented to the sidewalk. I set my jaw and will my feet to move forward, but they don't. Grace glances up and my heart lodges in my throat. She can't see me through the glass. It's dark out here and light in there.

I watch her for a few more seconds, indecision immobilizing me. A shadow lengthens on the sidewalk, and I turn my head to see Vince, his hands in his black leather jacket's pockets.

"You don't have to go in there," he says.

"Where's Jackie?" I'm going in and he's not talking me out of it. It's just taking me a minute to find my nerve. That's all.

"She's at home. She thought it'd be best if she doesn't interrupt our guy time."

"Guy time." I make a face.

"Her words."

"Let's do this." Finally I'm able to take one step forward. Then another. Vince's hand lands on my shoulder as I reach for the handle.

He's concerned. His expression of worry isn't unlike the one he wore on my wedding day. My *nonwedding* day.

“I’m thirsty, Vince.” So not the issue. “What is it?”

“Are you sure you want to see her?”

Through the window, I watch as Grace slides past a coworker. She pulls a draft beer and offers a tight smile to a customer.

I’m not sure about anything except that I refuse to let her rule my decisions any longer. Without a word to Vince, I pull open the glass door and step inside.

GRACE

For the second time in recent history, the door to McGreevy's swings open and deposits an unexpected male visitor into my bar. Only it's not my dad this time. It's Davis.

Davis Price, in his tall, lean, muscular glory. He's clad in a charcoal suit, sharp red tie, and pressed white shirt. His hair is in disarray. His eyes are tired.

He's too beautiful for words.

My heart stops beating as he moves toward me, but his eyes are on the man behind him. Vince Carson. I blink a few times to jar my brain. I didn't notice Vince at first. At least he has the decency to wave rather than ignore me.

Vince points out one of the few open tables at the far end of the room—one that Lars is wiping down. Davis shakes his head. I can't hear him but his head shake is clear. He doesn't want to sit there. He gestures to my bar instead.

We're packed to the walls tonight, but the couple in front of me just paid. Their glasses are empty. They move to vacate the stools—ironically the woman's seat is Davis's usual one—and I panic, my mind racing for a ploy to keep them here. Before I can offer them refills on the house, the man nods and offers a thank-you. The moment he and his lady friend start walking for the door, Davis slides into his seat.

Vince has the good sense to look apologetic as he climbs onto a stool and sits next to his friend.

"Hey, Gracie Lou." Davis's greeting is casual, but his words are coated in steel. "The usual for me. Vince?"

After a second of hesitation, Vince orders his usual draft.

I move like I'm running underwater. Every step feels bloated and sluggish. But then I've felt like that since I broke up with Davis. I thought I'd be over it by now—though being face to face with him makes me realize how foolish it was to believe I'd bounce back from what we had.

It was real. I know that now.

I've been thinking of that old adage lately. The one about how you don't know what you've got until it's gone. I *had* Davis.

I had his attention, his presence, and his love. And then I threw it all away.

I didn't expect him to ever set foot in here again. Of the two of us, I was clearly the winner of McGreevy's in the breakup. I figured I'd see Vince and Jackie eventually, and I readied myself with a few canned answers in case they asked how I was doing. I had a plan for randomly running into Davis at the park or in passing on the street. I truly never imagined he'd have the balls to show up *here*.

Every day since we split, I've come into work and been confronted by his empty seat. I've considered texting him. Imagined smoothing things over between us. I pulled out my phone several times to do just that, but I chickened out. I didn't know what to say then. I definitely don't know what to say now.

How stupid of me to believe he'd forgive my betrayal. I lied to myself when I thought it wasn't as big as leaving him at the altar. It was different, but every bit as big. I took his trust, his love, and threw it in his face.

I wouldn't forgive me if I were him.

I deliver the beers to Vince and Davis. I can do this. I can do my job. I open my mouth to ask if they need menus. The words turn sour on my tongue.

I'm overcome with the urge to ask Davis if he's been eating. If he's been sleeping. If he's okay, and if I can have another chance. Followed by *Please, please, give me another chance.*

Up until thirty seconds ago, I didn't believe that was a possibility. Confusion reigned supreme whenever I thought of us and what our future looked like. Then things fell apart and I tried to accept what was. Now, looking at him, I'm no longer confused. My heart overflows with longing.

I know what I want. Is it too late?

"Carson ditched his girl for the night," Davis tells me, his tone casual. He turns to punch Vince in the arm. "The cats will play!"

Vince emits an uncomfortable laugh. His presence is literally the only thing keeping me from bursting into tears.

Davis is trying to behave as if he's unaffected, but I know him. He's affected. He's also trying to get past this stage and move on with his life. That's my fault.

One hundred million percent my fault.

"Honey, are you all right?" Candace asks when I turn toward the cash register facing the wall. I grip the counter's edge and force myself to breathe in and out. I can't look at Davis without knowing I made a tragic error.

"I'm fine." I clear my throat. "Can you, um, take care of the two guys over there?"

Candace looks in the direction of my head tilt. “You mean your boyfriend?”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” Regret, like shards of glass, pierces my chest.

“I’m sorry, doll. Things didn’t end well, then?”

I confirm with a choked “No.”

“I got it, sweets. Don’t worry about a thing.” Candace moves away and my vision blurs, tears filling my eyes.

Shit! I’m about to cry and he’s going to see me. I can’t allow it.

I slide past Candace and out from behind the bar, but not before I hear her tell Lars to “hold down the fort.” I’m aware of her on my heels as I dash for the office. Thankfully, Dax isn’t here tonight. I unlock the door and barely make it over the threshold before a sob pushes its way out of my throat.

“Oh, sweetie.” Candace rubs my back as I sink into the task chair at the desk. I drop my face in my hands and just bawl.

There’s no other word for it.

“I-I don’t have makeup with me,” I say on a hoarse cry.

“Don’t worry about that.” Candace is so short, she doesn’t have to bend far to meet my eyes. My tears keep coming, and her face goes wavy. “Lars and I can handle things tonight. Go on and sneak out the back.”

Gosh, that sounds *heavenly*.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asks.

I shake my head, but as another teardrop tumbles down my cheek, I open my mouth and tell her everything.

My mother's warning. My vow to never get married. My blurted *I love you*, and the offer of Davis's house key that scared me half to death.

"Aw, hon. You were caught up, that's all." She strokes my hair and offers a kind smile. "He's a beautiful man. Who could blame ya?"

"I meant it." I whisper my confession. When I manage to stop the flash flood from my eyes, I lift my chin to face my friend. "I meant it when I said I loved him back. I let him go because I'm terrified of screwing up. I'm... I'm"—I gesture uselessly for a few beats before finishing—"I'm like a piñata, but filled with terror instead of candy."

"A terror-filled piñata. That's a new one." Candace swipes a few cardboardlike paper towels from the dispenser on the wall and offers them to me.

I scrape them over my face, doing a good job of removing my makeup and the first layer of my epidermis.

"What is he doing here? Did he come to get you back?"

Devastation covers me like a thick blanket as I shake my head. "I don't think so. I think he's trying to go back to the way things were before we... before we..."

Fell in love and I ruined it all.

I mop at another surge of tears.

"You take all the time you need. I mean it." Candace peeks out of the office door and down the hallway. "I'm going to go out there. Lars is slammed, sweetie. Are you going to be okay for a minute?"

I'm not even in the same stratosphere as "okay."

“Yep.” I give an exaggerated thumbs-up. Once she’s out the of the office and shuts the door behind her, I sniff and take a few deep breaths. I pull my purse out of the desk drawer and do some rummaging. I find a powder compact and dust on a layer, muting the red in my cheeks and around my eyes. A tube of copper lipstick serves as emergency eye makeup, and—would you look at that?—my new waterproof mascara lived up to its promise. It’s still there.

I don’t feel better about Davis being here, but I refuse to hide in the office or sneak out the back. I fucked up, but I’m a big girl. I can own it.

I just need a little more time.

I rifle through the paper piles on the desk that Dax didn’t put away—and busy myself in mindless accounting for about twenty minutes. Before too long, I’m feeling human again.

I can do this. Davis startled me, that’s all. And hell, who knows? Maybe he left already.

In the hall I flip my hair over my shoulder, examining an inventory sheet as I walk. Candace shoots me a compassionate glance as she simultaneously makes three cocktails. I hold up the paper and announce, “Found it!”

Candace and Lars frown in confusion. That’s okay. I was only pretending to find a paper so Davis wouldn’t think I ran away from him.

Which I totally did.

But when I turn to meet his eyes across the bar, one look at him proves he’s not paying attention to me at all. Vince is talking with his hands, and Davis’s attention is all on him.

Until it’s not.

I've tossed the paper in the trash can and am moving to help my fellow barkeeps when Davis glances over, catches my eye, and holds me hostage.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

DAVIS

She's been crying. Her eyes are red rimmed and her face is pale from too much makeup.

This is why I came in here. I wanted a reaction—confirmation that she meant what she said to me a week and a half ago. I was looking for closure. I was willing to have her lash out at me so we could have it out in one final verbal brawl. Then I could soundly shut the door on what we had.

Grace's jade green irises were welling with tears when she darted into that hallway. What she didn't know was that she took my heart with her. I have my confirmation, but it's the opposite of what I expected. She's hurting.

She breaks eye contact first, asking the guy next to me what she can get him to drink.

"The promotion was unexpected," Vince is saying. He's taken on the mission of talking about anything and everything except Grace. A challenge, since she's right fucking in front of me. "Unexpected, but nice. Who can turn down free money, right?"

"Thanks, man," I mumble, because he's a good friend.

Vince takes my out-of-the-blue gratitude in stride. "Anytime."

"Go home to her."

"Jackie's fine." He gives me an exaggerated shrug. "I'm your wingman, Davis. I can't leave until I know you're okay."

I'm not going to be okay until I win Grace back. I know that. Hell, I've known that. She's in as much pain as I am—regretting ending things and afraid that if she admits it, I'll reject her in turn.

“I'm almost done here anyway.” A heaping helping of sadness creeps into my voice. I'm not confident I can win her back. Not tonight. Not ever. But I have to try. “I have an early-ass morning tomorrow. The twelve-hour days are killing me.”

“I thought you looked sleep deprived.” Grace stands in front of me, her jaw set stubbornly. Look who else is pretending to be fine. I wonder if I look half as unconvincing as her. “Can I get you another beer?”

“Give him another. On me.” Vince climbs off his seat and tosses a twenty on the bar. “I'm heading home.”

“Tell Jackie I said hello.” Grace's smile is wistful. Because she misses the way things were between us?

“I will, Gracie.” With that, Vince leaves.

Grace swipes the money off the bar, sets me up with another beer, and goes back to ignoring me.

I take my time nursing the beer. The next mouthful I take is disgustingly warm. The crowd has thinned considerably, which makes sense. Nine o'clock on a weekday isn't the busiest time for a pub in a business district.

A few more patrons slide from their seats to take their leave as a woman sits next to me, her flowery perfume scenting the air.

“Been awhile since I've seen you in here,” the blonde says. I look not at her but at her reflection in the mirror in front of us.

I take another swallow of my warm beer. “How have you been?” I wish I didn’t know her, but I do.

Biblically.

Her name’s Kara. We spent a few nights together a while back. My eyes flick to Grace as she pours drinks in the background. She hasn’t looked over here yet.

“What are you up to these days?” Kara holds a five-dollar bill in her hand.

“Working,” I answer, unable to be unkind.

Grace appears in front of us a moment later. “What do you need?”

“Change for the jukebox.” Kara hands Grace the bill. Grace turns to the cash register and then Kara turns to me. “I’m interested in a package this weekend if you’re available.”

If that offer’s not poorly timed enough, Kara runs her finger over my sleeve as Grace returns with five ones.

“The platinum,” Kara says.

Fuck. There’s no way Grace didn’t hear that. There’s also no way she doesn’t know what Kara’s referring to.

Grace’s face goes blank before she walks over to the older woman she works with.

“I don’t know if you remember, but we had some fun,” Kara is saying.

The older bartender, Candace, shoots daggers at me over her shoulder.

Grace takes to the same hallway again, her steps accelerated.

“...thought you might be up for an encore.”

I leap off my barstool and leave Kara talking to herself.

“You can’t go back there!” Candace warns in a husky voice that, I admit, holds enough authority that I almost stop.

“Two minutes,” I call as I traipse down the hallway. “Then you can kick me out.”

I enter the mouth of the hallway as Grace exits the office door, purse and keys in hand, coat on, and—God help me—tears running down her cheeks.

“Gracie,” I say. It’s a plea.

“Don’t.” She huffs in an uneven breath.

“Come on, Gracie.”

She starts toward the red-lit exit sign, calling back to me, “I don’t want to talk to you. You’re only back here because you saw me cry.”

“So?”

She pivots—which means she’s stopped. I’ll take it. I’ll take whatever delay I can get. She swipes the tears from her face and none take their place. Which is a relief.

“Who’s the girl?” she asks.

I’ve never lied to Grace. I’m not starting now.

“Kara,” I admit, and it’s like chewing thumbtacks. “We dated, for lack of a better word. She just asked me out.”

A bitter laugh escapes Grace’s throat and she looks at the ceiling—for strength? For patience? Hard to say. She probably wants to brain me with her handbag right about now. I would deserve it. I’ve been a selfish ass.

“And what did you tell her?” Grace asks.

“I didn’t answer her. I ran after you. Which is an answer in itself.”

The purse in her hand drops a few inches as she straightens her arm. She’s no longer darting for the door.

So.

I guess we’re doing this right here. Right now.

I don’t have a speech planned, but one tumbles from my lips anyway.

“Here’s the thing, Gracie. You hurt me. And when it happened, it felt very similar to the way Hanna hurt me.”

She flinches.

“I took your rejection like a man. I stood firm while you peppered me with buckshot. While you delivered a waking nightmare at my feet. I loved you, but you didn’t love me back.”

She swallows but says nothing. I feel like I’m dangling from a cliff face by a thread, but I’m not done yet.

“After I walked out of your house, I vowed to get over you. I got over Hanna. And we weren’t just dating. We were *engaged*.”

Grace feels guilty. She feels like our splitting up is her fault. I can see it in the lines creasing her forehead—she worries she broke me. But she’s the one who’s broken.

I love this woman. Still.

Forever.

I take a step closer to her and keep explaining.

“For a while after the wedding, every time I pictured Hanna, I ached. Every time I saw something that was hers in

my house that she'd left behind, it hurt. I once found a plastic spatula from our gift registry and put a hole in the wall. But the anger eventually faded. The pain. The ache. It all subsided. Soon she didn't take up as much headspace as she used to. She became less and less a part of my day, then less and less a part of my week, until finally, her image blurred completely. Even now, if I try to picture her, I can't quite fill in the gaps."

Grace nods, still looking miserable. And I haven't yet delivered the news she *really* doesn't want to hear.

"Given enough time," I tell her, "I imagine you'll fade from my memory in the same way."

Her shoulders roll forward with the blow, telling me everything I need to know. Everything I knew already.

Grace is terrified of loving me. But she may still love me.

God, I hope she loves me.

"Gracie Lou, I need you to hear me." I want to touch her so badly I have to ball my fists at my sides to keep from doing it. She stands rigidly before me, afraid of what she thinks I'm going to say.

My girl bravely meets my eyes like she's facing a firing squad. But she's got it all wrong.

"I don't want you to fade. I never want to forget the exact way you look when you say my name."

Her expression softens.

"I don't want any part of you to blur in my memory—not your beautiful face or when you wear your hair curly. I never want to forget what you feel like against me when we dance." I swallow around a thick lump of anxiety and add, "I never want to forget the way it felt when you told me you loved me."

Her eyelashes flutter and she sucks in a shaky breath. “Davis,” she whispers.

“Like that.” I take her purse, freeing her hands in case she wants to touch me. “What I should have told you the other night was that I don’t accept the terms of the breakup. What I did instead was believe you when you weren’t telling either one of us the truth.”

Please, God, let me be right about this.

“I’m not risk averse, Gracie. I’m a betting man. I’ll venture to guess you regret saying goodbye to me.”

“I...” she starts, then has to lick her lips to continue. “I don’t want a Mark.”

“I’m glad. I don’t think I can be Mark.” I smile cautiously. We’re not out of the woods yet.

“Grace? Do you need me to kick his ass out of here?” comes a raspy call from behind me. My two minutes must be up.

Grace doesn’t take her eyes off me when she answers Candace with a “Not yet!”

That’s a good sign.

“I lied to you.” Grace’s voice is small. I can barely hear it over the bar racket. It grows smaller still when she all but mouths the words “I love you.”

Those tears—now *those* are beautiful.

“I lied to you too.” I thumb away one tear as she steps into the circle of my arms. I lower my lips to her forehead. “That wasn’t your last chance.”

She wraps her arms around my back and squeezes. I hold her to me and damn, she's perfect.

Like she was molded to fit against me.

My eyes close and I breathe in her scent. Cinnamon and flowers or vanilla and amber. Hell, I don't know. She smells like Grace. She smells like *mine*.

"Davis?" She lifts her face to mine.

"Yeah."

"No more blondes, okay?"

I chuckle as I take her face in my hands. "I love you. *Only* you. Unless you change your hair color, there aren't going to be any blondes in my future."

She smiles and I smile, and when neither of us looks away for a very long time, I know we're going to be okay.

We're *back*.

Bigger and better than ever.

EPILOGUE

DAVIS

My shoes are filled with powdery white sand as I watch the end of a long, white runner for Grace to appear.

The eighty-degree weather makes Cancún a welcome destination in February, but even so, sweat prickles my brow. I've been in a frighteningly similar situation before—at the end of the aisle, waiting for a woman to advance toward me.

But this is Gracie we're talking about. She's not going to let me down.

The music swells and she steps out of the resort's main building and glides toward me like she's walking on air. Grace is like a living, breathing flame.

Her smile is a million watts, her bouquet shades of robust red matching her hair, and her bridesmaid dress a deep rust-orange. Ruby lips part to smile and she winks at me. From my seat in the second row on the bride's side, I wink back.

Roxanne and Mark kept their wedding party small, but an impressive twenty-some friends and family members were able to make the trip on short notice.

One other bridesmaid follows behind Grace, but my eyes never leave my girl. She maneuvers to the front and stands, her creamy shoulders bare, her hair curled and pinned close to her head, her smile genuine.

She's happy for Roxanne.

But also: She's just plain happy. I'm happy. *We're* happy.

Grace's father passed away last month. I was there for her at the funeral and afterward. When she grieved, I held her. Even then I didn't doubt that she'd find her happiness again. She went to a few lunches and several coffees with Raphael Buchanan. He made his peace, and she accepted him for who he was. It's all any of us can ask.

Roxanne makes her bridal debut to the tune of a Red Hot Chili Peppers song in lieu of the traditional "Wedding March," and I have to smile. The crowd applauds, and then they applaud again when Mark kisses his bride.

After the formalities, when the guests have filtered to the reception area farther down the beach, Grace wraps her arms around my neck, compliments my beach-inspired linen suit, and thanks me again for coming with her.

"I know you had reservations about coming." Her eyes gleam as she watches Rox and Mark dance in the sand. "But I didn't want to be here without you."

I understand what she means. I don't want to be anywhere without her.

She kisses me and strokes my cheek. "I love you."

I close my eyes and let her words soak in like the warmth from the setting sun. "I love you too."

"I love you *so much*." Her tone is teasing, and I open my eyes to find the orange glow on her skin as soothing as the tropical backdrop. "That when we get married, I'm not going to make you do it on a beach."

My hands, resting on her hips, ball into fists, gathering the fabric of her dress. Shock must've set in, because when I open my mouth to ask her to repeat what she said, I can't speak.

“A wedding in a park would be nice,” she says conversationally. “If that’s your thing.”

“A park?” I repeat, trying to get my bearings. A wedding—in a park or otherwise—hasn’t been discussed. Ever.

“I have one caveat,” she continues with an apologetic twist of her lips. “We have to say our vows at the top of the Ferris wheel.”

The Ferris wheel.

I bite my tongue and let out a brief laugh. I admit, she had me going.

“You’re teasing me. I thought you were serious.” I take her hand. “Come on. Let’s dance.”

She doesn’t budge, squeezing my fingers. “I’m serious.”

My mouth goes bone-dry as I turn to face her. “You’re serious?”

The DJ announces the chicken dance into a microphone and Grace’s face lights up, talk of matrimony temporarily forgotten. “I love this song! We have to!”

She pulls me to the “dance floor” in the sand.

“Gracie. Wait.”

“The park for sure,” she calls as she bocks at me while pumping her arms. “The Ferris wheel is a nice touch, though, don’t you think? You overcoming your fears after I overcame mine of proposing?”

She wiggles her hips and encourages me to do the same. I love this woman so much I’d do just about anything for her.

Just about.

“What about the carousel?” I ask.

She stops dancing to crinkle her nose. “You want to marry me on the carousel?”

“Why not?”

She blinks a few times in succession. I’ve flipped her proposal on its ear.

“Hmm,” she agrees with a grin. “I don’t know. I feel like the Ferris wheel is more sentimental.”

Guests sweep by, elbow in elbow. Roxanne’s grandmother catches my arm and we spin. I search for Grace as I turn, finding her in the crook of Mark’s arm.

“No blondes,” she mouths.

I look down at the elderly lady in my arms, her hair platinum thanks to her hairdresser granddaughter, and lose my battle with the smile spreading my mouth.

Another twirl and I release her, catching Grace before someone else can grab her. Rather than lock elbows, I lift her off the ground and kiss her while everyone chicken dances around us.

Once her feet hit the sand, her hands grip my biceps. “Maybe we should make a bet.”

“Gracie Lou, you still owe me two hundred dollars from our original bet.” I catch one of her curls and twist it around my finger.

“Right. I forgot about that.” Her eyes sparkle. I see my future reflected in them.

“Okay,” I concede. “I’ll marry you on the Ferris wheel, but you have to move in with me.”

She gives me a shaky smile. “And the two hundred dollars?”

I shrug with my mouth. “You can pay it back in sexual favors if you prefer.”

She tosses her head back and lets loose one of her bawdy, contagious laughs before sobering, rising to her toes, and touching her nose to mine.

“You’ve got yourself a deal, Davis Price.”

DEDICATION

For Nic

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Huge, rib-crushing hugs to my readers. You spend your time and hard-earned dollars on my books. I endeavor to make you laugh and maybe even cry a little, and you brave souls stick with me the entire way— thank you.

Nicole, agent of the millennium, thank you for listening and imparting your wisdom. This one is for you.

Thanks to author friends (and keepers of my sanity) Lauren Layne, Jules Bennett, Shannon Richard, Katee Robert, and Maisey Yates, to name a few.

MAN CANDY - EXCERPT

*Don't miss the next installment in the Real Love series by
Jessica Lemmon! Please enjoy this excerpt from Man Candy.*

FRIDAY NIGHT

BECCA

“You are fired!” My brother’s neck is beet red, his nostrils flared. He’s the picture of incensed at the moment. But. He loves me. I excel at finding Tad’s heart.

“The traffic on the way in—” I start.

“I’m not joking, Becca.” His eyebrows go higher, his mouth half open for a beat before he finishes his thought. “I can’t deal with this right now.”

I’m at the entrance of Grand Lark Retreat, where the unmanned front desk sits empty. The bar-slash-restaurant beyond holds a total of seven human beings—including the staff: my brother and Dominic, who’s busy holding up a wall.

Every pair of eyes is on me, but I walk in, head held high after being called out in the least subtle way ever.

“Can’t deal with what?” I ask Tad when I reach the far, unpopulated end of the bar. “This rush you and Dominic can’t handle without me?” I rest my bag on an empty barstool and swipe my hands over my soaking-wet arms. “I *swam* here. It took extra time. Sue me.”

“I’m not suing you, Bec.” He washes a glass in the angriest way possible. “I’m firing you.” He dries it in the same manner.

I flick my eyes around the room. A couple sits at the bar, ignoring my drama. An older guy occupies a booth in the corner, also ignoring me. The single woman at the bar watches me unabashedly. I pull my eyes from her judgy ones and reroute to the only patron left—an incredibly attractive guy

who narrows his focus on me before returning it to the screen of his phone.

I experience a whole-body *oomph* like someone knocked the wind out of me. My gaze snags on his broad shoulders and square jaw a little longer than appropriate before I force myself to deal with my brother.

“You don’t want to fire me. You need me!” I try grinning.

Tad glares.

“You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.” He snaps his arm straight and points at the office where our shared desk sits. “Any phone calls that come in are supposed to be answered by *you*. Not by me. Not by Dominic. That’s why I pay you.”

“Which I totally appreciate and need,” I chirp.

My brother is a taller, angrier version of me. Darker blond hair that’s much, much shorter than my own. Flat line of a mouth where I mostly show off my smile. I’m chipper; he’s more of a wood chipper.

Grand Lark Retreat’s phones weren’t exactly ringing off the hook until recently. Forest fires damaged a portion of Gatlinburg’s rental properties, which made vacationers venture away from the familiar and give us smaller outfits a try. We’re grateful for the bump in popularity, but we all wish it hadn’t come as a result of someone else’s nightmare come true.

“I grabbed the phone a few times. It was no big deal,” Dominic mutters in the soft-spoken way he has. He pushes off the wall where he was leaning. He’s been my brother’s best friend for most of my life, so I know him well.

“Hey, Bec.” He shoves his hands in his pockets.

“Hi, Dom. I appreciate it.”

“Regardless.” Tad marches out from behind the bar and I follow. He clears the dishes off a vacated table with angry, jerky motions and then points at me with a spoon and a fork. “It’s not like this is your first warning.”

I wince because it’s totally not my first warning. It’s not my second either. It’s not even my third. I know. I *know*. Believe me when I say I’m doing my best.

I came back to Tennessee to lay low for a while. My brother and his wife (and my two adorable, angelic nieces) were nice enough to let me move in while I figure a few things out and save some money. I’ve been doing the latter—not so much the former. It’s been more fun lately *not* figuring things out. Letting myself blow in the breeze. Go where the wind takes me...

Tad delivers a bottle of beer to the guy in the corner booth and I smile sweetly at him. He grimaces.

Does everyone on the planet think I’m a screwup?

“Tad—”

“Not now, Becca.”

With a sigh, I head back in the direction of the office, only to become distracted by the Magic Mike look-alike hunkered over my brother’s bar. I should grab my bag, walk directly to the office, and start returning emails. Instead I grab a discarded towel and surreptitiously check him out while pretending to wipe down the barstools.

At second sight, I reconsider the Magic Mike comparison. He’s not quite pretty enough to be a stripper. He’s rugged. Has a *presence*. Everything around him suggests he’s not only strong but also warm. Kind.

I pull in a deep breath as I consider that tantalizing possibility. Kindness is a dwindling resource. Sure, Dominic is nice to me, but he has to be. He's known me forever.

Tad, on the other hand, has been so short fused lately that "kind" isn't in his vocabulary. I suppose that's deserved. I'm not exactly a shining example of a woman who has her life figured out. I truly have been trying, but I don't fit into his mold...or any.

It's still not a good reason to fire me. I'll talk him out of it.

I wiggle my shoulders and straighten my spine. No one is better at faking it until making it than I am. Even if I haven't "made it" anywhere yet.

I wipe the seat of a barstool and peek through my lashes at the stranger at the bar. I wonder where he's from. No wedding band on his left finger. His attention has been glued to his phone, so other than the brief glance at me a few minutes ago, his head's been down.

A loud laugh burbles out of a drunk-and-getting-drunker woman at the bar. The stranger's eyebrows crash down over a strong nose as he drags his eyes up at the sound. Strong nose below a strong brow and a firm jaw to match.

Holy...

He's freakin' *hot*.

I move toward him as I polish the shiny wood of the bar, taking him in below the neck. He's less Magic Mike there, more lumberjack. An absolute hulk of a guy. I'm hovering around five feet nine inches, so I'm not impressed by merely tall.

But this guy? His width is as impressive as his height. Round, strong shoulders testing the seams of his T-shirt. Back

bent, his phone dwarfed in one large hand. He's almost slouching but there's nothing weak about his posture. His back is as wide and sturdy as a support beam.

I work in the office most of the time, but I take breaks and wander out here to people-watch. I've witnessed plenty of guys checking their phones at this bar. Some of them have been attractive guys—but no one has ever snagged my unwavering attention. Not until tonight.

What gives?

I'm not lonely. Not desperate. I don't make a habit of approaching men I don't know in bars. And yet that's exactly where my mind goes. Approaching him. Finding out how his jeans became ragged at the bottoms and worn at his heavy thighs. Finding out if he owns a motorcycle. He's wearing a pair of motorcycle boots with buckles on the sides, one foot on the floor, the other hooked by the heel on the lower rung of the stool.

I automatically cast my eyes to the parking area out front. Only two trucks and a Jeep sit in the lot. No bike. That's his Jeep, I'd bet. It's deep gray hardtop attached to thwart the never-ending rain. I imagine him in it. It suits him, top on or off. My imagination supplies a visual of him with *his* top off and that's even better. In the sun or the rain. Oh, the *rain*.

My teeth stab my bottom lip as the images come without my trying—a welcome reprieve from the here and now.

The stranger. The rain. His shirt's off as he twists the bolts off a flat tire. I'm about to cast myself as a passerby who's going to offer help when my brother's voice booms like thunder.

“Becca!”

I jerk out of my fantasy to find the stranger looking right at me. He meets my gaze and holds it. Heat licks up my thighs and teases there so intensely, I almost forget why Tad is pissed at me.

“*Becca*,” he repeats, minus the exclamation point.

“Yes, Chosen One?” It’s been my nickname for him since I discovered he was our parents’ favorite.

He frowns and sneers—a typical Tad combo—and tosses a bar towel over his shoulder.

“Why are you cleaning if I fired your ass?” he asks. Loudly.

Okay, that’s embarrassing. I sneak a glance at the stranger to find he’s still looking in my direction. His brow crashes down again and his curved back goes straight, like he’s ready to speak out in my defense. Interesting. Nay... *intriguing*. With an audience, I can’t resist being cheeky.

“Is that what I’m doing?” I regard the cloth in my hand in faux shock. “I must’ve been sleep-dusting again.”

Tad snarls a few sentences. It’s not that I’m ignoring him so much as that what he’s saying is zapped from my head by two heat-seeking silver-blue irises that vanish beneath narrowed lids.

The stranger’s not only watching me now. He’s *smiling* at me.

It’s brief, but I’m rewarded by the flash of white teeth before they vanish behind full lips. He snaps those gorgeous eyes away from me and back to his phone.

I hope he’s not texting his girlfriend.

I'm struck with the overwhelming need to approach him. If I don't, I'll forever regret not seizing the moment—a moment that could result in finding out if Magic Mike has anything to offer other than an amazing physique. Is he kind? Is he smart? Is he willing to give his phone number to a virtual stranger?

Sky's the limit, really. I'll never know unless I approach him.

There's a *ping* in the center of my chest telling me that's exactly what I need to do. I've followed that *ping* to several states. Into several jobs. Except when I returned home. That wasn't a *ping* so much as a deflating balloon. It felt like giving up, but I was unmotivated and out of money. At least I followed my gut to New York in the first place and made amazing friends as a result.

The *ping* happens again and my gut resonates with certainty. I have to approach him. I'll forever kick my own ass if I don't.

I drop the cloth back onto the bar top. I've taken two steps in his direction when he asks Tad for another beer. My next step falters. His voice is *rich*. As thick as honey. Heavy, dark, amber-colored honey that takes its time sliding out of the jar while you anticipate the first taste.

Oh, man.

I bet his laugh is *phenomenal*. I bet if he let loose that chuckle into my ear—complete with warm exhale—I'd go up in flames.

Only one way to find out.

DAX

The rain started when I crossed the Ohio border into Kentucky. Light at first, then heavy and pelting, accompanying some wind that at one point had me wondering if I'd make it down here at all. I did, but the storm followed me to Tennessee.

Some vacation weather.

I rented a cabin, but I also brought my tent and camping gear. I'm planning to find a nice spot under the stars in the woods to sleep for a night or two. I need a break.

From *everything*.

From my buddy Barrett, who's staying at my apartment thanks to a messy breakup with his on-again, off-again girlfriend, and from my mother's constantly asking me if I'm hungry or if she can make me something to eat.

My dad died recently. I spent early spring living back home, helping my mom clean out the shed and the garage. A task I thought would take two weeks but ended up taking two *months*.

Barrett's timing wasn't the best—he asked if he could crash on my couch for a week or so. I'd just returned home from my mother's house and was looking forward to peace and quiet.

My friend is still bunking on my couch and watching countless hours of television. It was either blow my stack and kick him out on his sorry ass or take myself on a much-needed vacation.

So here I am.

The bartender, a slight guy in his late thirties, brings me another beer. I started a tab. As ready as I thought I was to have solitude, postdrive beers taste better in public. I'm a bar owner. Drinking in public feels normal.

I remember my dad as I sip my fresh mug of Miller Lite—his beer of choice. My throat tightens with grief and sorrow. The kind that hooks into you and forces you to pay attention to it. There's no escaping missing him.

Losing him meant losing our weekly phone calls. Football season is really going to suck. We used to watch a lot of games together. Picturing myself alone on the couch with a beer is a sad sight indeed.

Bubbly laughter drifts my way from the girl on my right. She works here—or did until about ten minutes ago when the bartender who refilled my beer fired her. She's dressed in dark, slim jeans accentuating long legs below a white, flowy top. The second she set one high-heeled sandal in this place, that guy laid into her, much like he did a minute ago when he yelled her name.

He called her Becca.

I wonder if it's short for Rebecca.

Anyway, I'm not much for disrespecting women, and this jerk seemed to do it no problem, but I didn't see a reason to intervene. His harsh attitude rolled off Becca's back like she was coated in oil.

She didn't stomp out or raise her voice. She handled him respectfully, quietly stating her case. If anything, he was the one stomping around and raising his voice. After he unprofessionally pitched his fit, Becca maintained a bounce in

her step and a smile on her pretty face. That made me smile, which is a feat lately, let me tell you. My employees have taken to calling me “Grumpy Dax,” which is not only uninventive but also telling.

Becca is chatting up the other guy who works here. He leans a hip on the bar and sends the stink eye to the bartender who served me—their boss. They don’t seem to like him much.

Boss Man steps in front of me now, cellphone in hand, and informs me of some bad news. “Mr. Vaughn, I need to swap keys with you.”

He pockets his cell and slaps down a key on a red key fob reading GRAND LARK. It’s exactly like the one he gave me earlier, only that one’s yellow.

“I’m moving you to cabin thirteen,” he tells me. “I received a text from maintenance. The rain has made the hill impassable.”

The key to cabin 7 is still in my pocket from when I checked in (from this very seat, since the front desk was empty). Not that I’m superstitious, but cabin 7 sounds a hell of a lot luckier than cabin 13.

“Mine’s the Jeep,” I tell him, jerking my chin toward the parking lot. “I can make it up there.”

“I doubt it.” He smiles but there’s no humor there.

“Guess we’ll find out.” I handpicked cabin 7 because of the location. It sits deep in the woods, well off the main road, and the view beyond the balcony is breathtaking. I don’t use that word *ever*; so it has to be true.

“Sorry.” He shakes his head. “Company policy. If you and your Jeep go sliding off the mountain, we’ll be liable. I’m not

only the manager of this fine drinking establishment, but I'm also the owner of Grand Lark."

Well. Shit.

With a heavy exhale, I reach into my pocket. I surrender the yellow key fob, laying it on the bar. "If it opens up..."

"We'll move you immediately," he finishes for me.

Lightning illuminates the entire bar, a loud peal of thunder following right behind it. Becca lets out a startled yip before settling a hand on her chest and bursting into laughter. Her laugh transforms her face, brightens the color in her cheeks. I reluctantly tear my eyes off her as Boss Man spouts directions for my new (and unwanted) digs.

I take the red key fob and cram it in my pocket as he slides a map across the bar and points out cabin 13. It's closer to the main office than I'd like, with other cabins nearby. I'm not happy about the change, which he must've discerned.

"I know it's not ideal," he tells me. "We should be able to open up the road in the next day, maybe two."

I dip my chin in a nod. It'll have to do. I'm not willing to start my six-hour-plus drive back to Ohio now, nor am I going to look for another cabin rental this late at night. Getting this one was a bitch considering the recent Gatlinburg forest fires. I was lucky to find an opening.

He asks if he can get me anything else before he clocks off for the night. I say no, and he tells me Dominic can help me with anything else I need.

I'm assuming Dominic is the besotted Italian-looking guy mesmerized by Becca. He likes her. Probably hasn't dated her yet. That look in his eyes is more pining than reminiscent.

She's either cruel or doesn't recognize his suffering, because next she squeezes his biceps and walks away. He inspects his arm after she goes, pulling his shoulders back like his day has just been made.

He's young. Probably closer to her age than I am. I'm thirty-three; she can't be older than midtwenties.

I glance up from my phone again to watch her. At first blush, she's what you might call "cute." Tall, her chin-length light-blond hair cut at choppy angles. But if you watch her for longer than five seconds, the cuteness morphs into more.

Becca moves with grace, like a dancer or an athlete. She's lithe, not skinny, and it only takes one glance down those long legs to notice the muscles in her calves, even beneath her jeans.

She's a beauty.

Though the "cute" assessment reemerges the moment she opens her mouth. From the small amount of conversing I've overheard, I know she has a sharp wit and a sharper tongue. She's funny.

And in the face of being fired by her weak-chinned boss, she hasn't abandoned the premises yet. Which also means she has balls.

Figuratively speaking, I like a woman with balls.

I don't like them meek. I don't like when they play dumb. And thanks to my last relationship, I *really* don't like when they treat me like I'm a big, oafish former jock who doesn't understand how relationships work.

I understand, all right.

It's an understanding that keeps me from wanting to enter another one. They're good and fine for a great many people, but I'm not one of them.

The only relationships I'm interested in are the ones I have with my bartenders and other staff and maybe, on occasion, if the mood is right, the one I have with a woman on a temporary, no-strings basis.

A flash of blond catches my eye. I turn my head to find Becca, her glossed lips hitched, approaching me with a confident, easy walk.

I straighten in my seat, ignoring the text that just buzzed my phone.

Looks like the mood could be right for a little no-strings fun tonight.

[Buy Man Candy.](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Lemmon is a former job-hopper who resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dogs. She holds a degree in graphic design currently gathering dust in an impressive frame. When she's not writing emotionally-charged stories, she spends her time drawing, drinking coffee, and laughing with friends. Her motto is *Read for fun*, and she believes we should all do more of what makes us happy.

Jessica Lemmon's romance novels have been praised as "purely delicious fun" and "lavish, indulgence-fueled romance" by *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as "wonderfully entertaining" and "a whole lot of fun!" by *RT Book Reviews*. She is the bestselling author of over forty books that have been translated into a dozen languages and sold in over 30 different countries worldwide, with her debut novel releasing in January of 2013.

Her work has been honored with awards such as a *Library Journal* starred review, an *RT Top Pick!*, *Apple Books Best Book of the Month*, and *Amazon Best Book of the Month*. She has been recommended by *USA Today* and *NPR.com*, and has achieved the rank of #1 bestseller on *Nook* as well as earned a seal of excellence nomination from *RT Book Reviews*.

Through witty banter and fun, realistic situations and characters you'll want to "sit down and have a drink with," Jessica tackles tough relationship issues and

complicated human emotions while delivering a deep, satisfying experience for readers.



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