

A romantic couple embracing and kissing. The woman has long blonde hair and is wearing a white tank top. The man is shirtless and has a beard. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background is a plain, light color.

BEST FRIENDS DON'T

Kiss

New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

m a x m o n r o e

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Best Friends Don't Kiss

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Author's Note

Important Warning: *This book contains the following triggers: mentions of hot chocolate and cookies that may induce cravings, enough holiday spirit to turn any Grinch into a Christmas lover, hilarious cameos from our OG Billionaires (cough Thatch cough) that may encourage a reread of the Billionaire Bad Boys Series, and last but certainly not least, downright lovable best friends turned sexy lovers that may encourage you to want to do something crazy like try to kiss your best friend.*

Best Friends Don't Kiss is a full-length romantic comedy stand-alone novel.

At the end, we've included an excerpt from *Tapping the Billionaire*, the first hilarious romantic comedy stand-alone from our best-selling *Billionaire Series*.

Now that you know all of this very important information, mind the triggers (or, maybe, don't mind the triggers and pour yourself a big ole cup of hot chocolate before diving in), and don't lose your holiday spirit when *Best Friends Don't Kiss* concludes at around 90%. As far as we know, Santa Claus doesn't bring gifts to Grinches. ;) ;)

Also, due to the hilarious and addictive nature of this book's content, the following things are not recommended: reading in public places, reading while pretending to work in your cubicle, reading while eating and/or drinking, reading while operating heavy machinery, and reading during your (or your children's/spouse's) Zoom meetings.

Happy Reading!

All our love, Max & Monroe

To our readers: We don't care what other authors try to say,
YOU are the most beautiful, funniest, smartest, most amazing,
best readers in the whole wide world.

Thank you for reading our books. We love you.

To all of our enemies: We will destroy you.

Ha. We're kidding. Seriously. We won't destroy you. We hate
confrontation.

We're, like, the epitome of that *lovers not fighters* saying.

How about you just go ahead and like us...?

Please?

We're really nice girls.

To robots: We think you're pretty cool, but you guys aren't,
like, going to try to take over the world, are you? Let us know.



Intro

Ava

When I was four years old, I wanted to be a cat.

A tabby, to be specific. Something about their sleek lines made it seem like they had secret powers, and for a girl with no siblings—yet—it seemed like the kind of thing that would give me a cool gang of feline friends.

At six, I wanted to be Joyce, the lady at my mom's favorite supermarket who sat by the candy rack and scanned people's groceries. I was convinced she snuck Twix bars when no one was watching, and I didn't think she had to listen to a baby cry all day like I did. My sister Emily had just landed in the nest, and man, she was an annoying little bird.

By the time I turned seven, I'd moved on from admiring Joyce's independent lifestyle to thinking babies were kind of cute after all. Emily was learning all sorts of new things, and I loved lording over her and playing teacher. Maybe *that* was my destiny.

It wasn't until I was eight, however, that I found my true calling—*art*.

Painting, to be exact.

Secret Twix were great and all, but they couldn't let the pressure of emotion out of my soul or give me a sense of purpose I'd never felt before. With every stroke of the paintbrush, I knew more and more—I wanted to *be* an artist. Not for work or for pleasure or anything with a defined set of lines. I wanted to smear my passion outside of them—to live and breathe the one thing that made it feel like I didn't need a street gang of cats to back me up.

So, I did.

From then on, for the last ten years, I've almost always had a paintbrush in my hands or a sketchbook in my lap. I've dared to dream of big things, worked toward them endlessly, and now, I'm seeing the fruits of all of my dedication realized.

Today is my first day at Columbia University as an art major.

I feel great. Accomplished. Proud. And I also feel the closest I've felt to winding up the Inspector Gadget phone and getting the leader of the Cat Crips on the line since I was four years old.

I need street-tough stray kittens, and I need them *now*.

I know the whole reason I'm standing here on the precipice of something new and terrifying is because my art is worthy. It got me into Columbia.

But it's not uncommon for creative personalities to struggle with self-deprecation.

Take van Gogh, for example. The man cut off his freaking ear.

I don't *think* that was the result of internal criticism, but it certainly proves that every artist has their struggles, and I can't think of a better example.

Probably because most artists internalize any toxic emotions about their craft until their organs rot rather than acknowledge that the thing that sustains them is also slowly

killing them because there's so much pressure to do better and be better with every creation.

I can totally imagine being van Gogh, living in poverty all his life while struggling to connect his art with the masses and finally just thinking, "*Fuck it. I'm cutting off my ear.*"

And then he freaking *dies*, and that's when everyone comprehends how great he is.

No doubt, I have to get over my proverbial stage fright because I'd say I'm getting the better end of the struggle deal. I have both of my ears, and Columbia, by accepting me for admission, has acknowledged my work well before I bite the big one.

I open the last moving box and pull out a plethora of randomness—half-filled sketchbooks, a coffee cup full of pens, paintbrushes, a few blank canvases, picture frames filled with photos of my parents and my two younger sisters, Kate and Emily, a bag of assorted makeup that I'm pretty sure has reached its expiration date, and a pair of dusty old flip-flops that look like they've seen better days.

Truthfully, *messy* might as well be my middle name. I sit on the queen's throne of "just toss all my crap into boxes and get this show on the road."

I glance out the window of my new dorm room, and realization hits me—*my life has seriously changed*.

Yesterday, I moved from Lakewood, my small Vermont hometown, to one of the biggest, most populated cities in the world—New York. And tomorrow, I will officially be a freshman in college.

Instead of suburban landscapes, I see skyscrapers and taxicabs and sidewalks filled with people. Instead of one coffee shop within a twenty-mile radius, there're at least twenty coffee shops within three blocks of me.

Birds chirping and the sounds of nature have been replaced by the hustle and bustle of a big city with an even bigger and brighter spirit.

Hot damn, Ava. You did it.

With a stupid smile plastered on my face, I open my laptop and hit play on my favorite mood-boosting iTunes playlist—a mix of oldies but goodies that remind me of my dad’s love for music from the fifties, sixties, and seventies—and just as the Foundations croon about Buttercup, I find a place for the pens, brushes, canvases, sketchbooks, and pictures on my shelf and toss the makeup and flip-flops where I should have left them in the first place—in the garbage.

Still, for the first time since I got here, I glance around the room and take in how different my side looks compared to my new roommate Desi’s.

Truthfully, her small half of our dorm is pristine in its organization, and it looks like Kate Spade and Martha Stewart got drunk and threw a freaking housewarming party before I arrived yesterday morning.

My side, on the other hand, is this weird, eclectic but definitely chaotic mix of art and prints and patterns that don’t really match.

Either Desi and I are going to get along splendidly, or halfway through the year, we’ll be the subject of a true-crime docuseries.

Fingers and toes crossed it’s the former.

When my stomach growls, I glance at the clock and see its already nearing ten in the evening. With my new roommate nowhere to be found and no other acquaintances to speak of, I’m not sure I’m ready to venture out into the big city at night all by myself. Since nourishment is now my main priority and the options within the walls of this room are limited, I pull out my hidden hot plate from my closet and plug it into an outlet behind my desk.

Per Columbia University’s rule book, hot plates and coffeemakers are a big no-no, but according to my dad, that’s just a ploy to get everyone to spend too much money at *their* various food and beverage vendors scattered across campus.

It’s capitalism at its finest, folks, he says.

I don't know about all that, but what's the worst that could happen with a hot plate? *Hot* soup?

A microwave would make things easier, though...

I make a mental note to buy one behind my dad's back in the next couple days, pop open a can of Campbell's vegetable soup, pour it into a small pot, and get it cooking on the hot plate.

It's practically scientific fact that my sad excuse for a dinner is going to take a little while to heat up, so I grab my laptop and plop down on my bed to scroll through my emails.

There are a couple of spam subjects about enlarging my penis, so I skip over those to the first legitimate email.

Let me tell you, it is *hardly* any better.

My great-aunt Lily from my dad's side of the family has a knack for the strange and unusual, and today, it comes in the form of showcasing random photos of her vegetable garden to our entire family. Ever the opportunist, her sister Poppy takes that odd but innocent message and drives it at a speed of ninety miles an hour onto Dirty Mind Lane.

Re: Fresh Vegetables!

Good Lord, Lil, why are you sending us pics of Don's penis?

-Poppy

Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

Don's penis? What are you talking about, Poppy?

-Lily

Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

Honestly, he's bigger than I expected. Veiny too. Isn't it Jewish practice to circumcise? Were his parents big on taking a religious stand or something?

-Poppy

Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

THAT IS A SWEET POTATO, YOU SICKO.

-Lily

I tilt my head to the side and examine the photo in question. Aunt Lily has one hell of a green thumb, but her photography skills have never exactly been *good*. Frankly, it looks like she used an actual potato to take the photo.

And that sweet potato does look disturbingly phallic-shaped...

I snort and keep reading, thankful neither of them has managed to figure out the difference between *Reply* and *Reply All*. Honestly, this is better than watching *Laguna Beach*.

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

It looks like Don's penis.

-Poppy

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

I think I know what Don's penis looks like a little better than you do, Poppy! And it does NOT look like Don's penis.

-Lily

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

Fine. Someone else's penis, then. Are you cheating on Don?

-Poppy

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

POPPY. STOP IT.

-Lily

Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Fresh Vegetables!

Imagine how I feel. Drinking my morning coffee. Scrolling through emails. And being forced to see your pool boy's sausage.

-Poppy

My late grandma Lucie's sisters' relationship revolves heavily around Poppy doing everything she can to rile her sister up. It's maybe not the healthiest thing I've ever witnessed, but I kind of hope it never ends. Though, just like all good things—including this email thread—I imagine it will have to at some point.

Real messages eventually sorted, I scroll back up to the top of my inbox to delete the spam before backing out of my email entirely and moving on to something else.

Facebook—a new website for college kids to connect with one another—is all anyone in my senior year of high school could talk about, and since I'm officially *in* college, I was invited to start my own account.

So far, I only have a handful of friends on here, but when I log in to my profile, I spot a little red icon that indicates new friend requests.

I take a swig of water as I click on it and, upon reading it, promptly spew a mixture of H₂O and spit everywhere.

You have a new friend request from Callie Camden.

Holy shit. *Callie freaking Camden.*

Her superficial smile and perfectly made-up face stare back at me from her profile picture as I wipe spittle off every neighboring surface and the front of my shirt. It's a bad idea—I can see it from a mile away—but I can't stop myself from clicking on her name and scoping out her account.

It's almost impossible to believe we used to be best friends in elementary school.

She pouts her lips and makes devil's horns in front of our high school football field, her psycho-cheerleader persona ever important in the popularity-driven appearance of her profile picture.

I scroll down her newsfeed to the notification of a new status and read through it with poorly concealed distaste.

CoLLeGe oRiEnTaTiOn LOLZ

The photo attached shows her wearing a scrap of clothing barely big enough to cover her nipples and holding up a red Solo cup while a party rages behind her.

I roll my eyes at the expected cliché. Honestly, this photo fits perfectly with the million and one annoying memories I have of her from high school.

For four years, Callie and her bitchy groupies Carrie and Connie—otherwise known as *The CiCi's*—made it a point to let me know they thought they were better than me. Prettier than me. More popular than me. *Blah, blah, blah.*

So far, I can't see that she's making any effort to change.

With a middle finger flipped toward her stupid face, I ignore her friend request—*because, no thanks, I prefer to keep my distance from satanic prom queens*—but with nothing better to do, I can't stop myself from spying on her profile a little more.

Photos of her *totally awesome* summer and her *totally hot* boyfriend Kyle. Posts about how much she loves her *totally amazing* dorm room at the University of Vermont.

Basically, everything is just *totally perfect* in Callie Camden's life.

Gag me.

Without delay, I click out of her phony profile and start to check up on a few of my *actual* friends from high school, but I don't get very far before I catch a dancing red and orange glowing light out of the corner of my eye.

My neck spasms as I jerk my head in the direction of the aura, and my eyes widen so far, they test the constraints of my lids.

Holy Shit! My hot plate is *on fire!*

I haven't even officially started college yet, and I've already set my dorm room on fire while my roommate Desi is out for the night at some frat party? And I thought my messy tendencies would be the thing to put her over the edge.

This can't be happening!

"What the hell do I do?" I screech into the void.

I try like hell to remember *anything* I've learned about fire safety in as few seconds as possible, but when all I can come up with is *Stop, Drop, and Roll*, full-blown panic sets in.

I manically search my dorm room for something, anything, to fix this, but the anxiety is too much.

Before I can stop myself, I sprint toward the door, in the direction of the hallway.

Honestly, I don't know what I'm doing or why I'm doing this, but whatever I'm planning on doing comes to a complete stop when—*bam!*—I barrel into something just outside my door.

We both grunt at the impact, and irrational hope takes hold immediately.

"Please," I beg. "Tell me you're a firefighter!"



Luke

“Please! Tell me you’re a firefighter!”

Big, entrancing blue eyes stare into mine pleadingly, but it’s my first day at college—my first day in a co-ed dorm—and I can’t help looking her over before getting into considering her question.

A cute, petite little body, long blond hair that flows past her shoulders and down her back, and the kind of full, lush lips that spur the best kind of tingle.

I’ve heard stories about what girls are like in college, and the idea of this beauty living out some closet fantasy about a firefighter with me on the first night is almost too good to be true.

“Sure I am, sweetheart,” I tease with a wink. “Where’s the fire?”

“In my dorm room!” she shouts back with little to no finesse.

I blink several times. I didn’t realize role-playing fantasies were supposed to be this realistic. “Uh...*what?*”

“The fire!” she shouts again, jogging a couple steps back and swinging open the door to her room. “It’s in here!”

I follow tentatively, and sure enough, when I peek inside, there it is.

The actual fucking *fire*.

“Holy shit!” It’s my turn to shout. “There’s a fire in your room!”

“Hello! That’s what I’ve been saying!” she yells back frantically. “How about you tell me something I don’t know,

like how to freaking stop it!”

In a rush, I storm through the door and use my dwindling Boy Scout skills to assess the urgent situation.

A small metal pot sitting on a hot plate—*on top of an insanely bright and flowery cloth on her desk, mind you*—smokes like a motherfucker while flames continue to billow from the bottom of it. I cannot fucking believe the fire alarms haven’t started going off yet.

“I know they said no hot plates in the dorm rooms, but I just figured that was some kind of stupid rule, you know. I mean, holy hell, I didn’t even know that hot plates could catch on fire! I thought they just got hot. Not burst into freaking flames! I would call the fire department, but I’m pretty sure they’d ban me from Columbia forever. Which is sad because I haven’t even experienced my first day!” she exclaims in a nearly incoherent ramble as she paces back and forth behind me. “*Gah!* Apparently, that no-hot-plate rule is for a reason.”

She’s so funny, I almost stop to laugh, but thankfully for the other occupants of this building, the growing, flickering flames somehow manage to win out as priority.

“Water!” I yell behind me to the pacing rambler as I jump toward the socket which the offending appliance is plugged into and yank it from the wall.

I hold out a hand, expecting a cup or bucket or something, but when nothing comes, I yell out my demand again. “Water! I need water!”

“Water!” she exclaims. “Oh yes, I have bottled water!”

“Get it!” I snap impatiently. In any other circumstance, I’d try harder not to be rude, but we’re about fifteen seconds from setting this whole room on fire.

After pulling several bottles from a mini fridge beside her bed, she hands them off to me one-by-one, undoing the caps frantically so I don’t have to pause to do it, and I pour them on top of the flames.

It takes seven fucking bottles before the fire is officially out, and for the first time since she rammed into me in the

hallway, I take a full breath.

“Well, fuck,” I say on a heavy sigh, and she snorts a completely unexpected and yet, somehow endearing, giggle.

“I cannot believe I almost burned down my dorm room at Columbia University on the very first night.”

“Yeah,” I reply, and I have to bite back my smile. “Not exactly the first impression they suggested we make at orientation.” I move closer to the charred mess sitting on her desk and open up a window to let out the residual smoke.

She groans and slaps a palm to her forehead. “I’m an idiot.”

“Hey, accidents happen sometimes,” I reassure her. “Do it again, and *then* you’ll be an idiot.”

She laughs, thankfully, as I intended. And now that the urgency of the emergency is over, I take the opportunity to survey her room beyond the soggy remnants of her contraband.

“I think you have a casualty,” I comment and nod toward the little green-brown plant sitting beside the out-of-commission hot plate.

“No.” She sighs and shakes her head. “Teddy 3 was already like that before I got here.”

I turn to meet her eyes. “Teddy 3?”

“My plant,” she explains. “Well, my almost-dead plant.”

I don’t know why it strikes me as cute that she names her plants, but it does.

“You brought a dead plant to college?”

She shrugs one petite shoulder. “*Almost* dead. I’m trying to stop the streak.”

I quirk an eyebrow.

“The ‘I can only seem to kill plants’ streak.”

“So, his name is *Teddy 3* because—”

She shrugs again, nodding to confirm my assumption. “Teddy and Teddy 2 are dead. Like, as a doornail. All shriveled and broken. Not even the main stems survived.”

“I see.” A smirk consumes my mouth. “Do you have another bottle of water in your fridge for him, then? I’d be happy to extend the scope of my services a little bit.”

She smiles, and when the skin at the corners of her blue eyes crinkles, a tingle shoots back into my dick—previously put into a medically induced coma by the unexpected flames.

“That’s okay,” she says, pursing her full, pink lips. “I’ll take care of Teddy 3 later...when I’ve calmed down a little bit. I’ll almost definitely remember.”

I smile. I don’t know how I can be so sure, but I’d go to Vegas and put down money that Teddy 3 doesn’t see any sort of hydration later tonight.

“Thank you, by the way,” she says bashfully. “For helping me. And sorry again for the collision in the hallway.”

“You’re welcome.” I run a hand through my hair. “I am curious, though...” I pause briefly, and she takes that as an indication that I’m looking for permission. The truth is, I don’t know what I’m waiting for. For some reason, I just feel an instinctual need to make sure she doesn’t think I’m trying to insult or disparage her.

“Shoot.”

“Where exactly were you headed?”

“Ohh,” she says, rolling her lips into her mouth. “You mean because the fire was in here?”

I nod, laughing as I do.

She lifts her shoulders helplessly. “I panicked.” The pillowy texture of her bright pink comforter fluffs as she plops down onto her bed. “And, apparently, when my fight-or-flight instincts kick in, I just run for the freaking hills.”

The corners of my mouth kick up into a smile I don’t plan. “Well...” I laugh. “I guess that’s how some people are wired.”

It's not a bad thing. As long as you're not majoring in law enforcement or medicine or something."

She grins up at me. "Art major, actually."

"Well, thank God for that." I smirk and glance around her dorm room, taking in several painted canvases above her bed and resting along the wall beside a bookshelf. I don't know a lot about art, but I know these are good. Fascinating creations with every color of the rainbow. Some abstract. Some looking more like actual photos than paintings themselves. And a few showing a viewpoint that reminds me of famous images I saw when I took an art class in high school and the teacher waxed poetic about Monet. "Did you paint these?"

She licks her lips, nodding just slightly before averting her eyes to her feet.

I open my mouth to ask her more about them, but she quickly changes the subject by standing up and holding out her hand toward me. "I'm Ava Lucie, by the way."

"Luke London." With her hand in mine, I don't miss how soft her skin feels as we punctuate our introduction with a gentle shake.

"Are you a freshman too, Luke?"

"Yep." I nod.

"Cool. What's your major? Something more attuned to someone with a fight instinct?"

I smirk.

"Engineering."

"*Dayum*, no wonder you use your brain in an emergent situation. It probably takes up your whole dang skull if you got into Columbia's engineering program."

"I do okay," I respond, actually blushing at the compliment. I slide both of my hands into the pockets of my jeans and try to return the sentiment. "And you must be really talented to get into Columbia's art program."

She ignores my comment completely. “What type of engineering are you planning on doing?”

“Aeronautical. But...well, actually...engineering isn’t my end goal.”

She tilts her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

“First, engineering,” I explain. “Then, flight school. Then, NASA.”

“NASA? As in *strap me to a rocket and shoot me to the moon?*”

I nod with a laugh. “That’s the one.”

“Wait...so, it’s possible that the next Neil Armstrong just put out a fire in my dorm room?”

A laugh bursts from my lungs. “Let’s not get too far ahead of ourselves here. I have a long, *long* way to go before I get even close to that.”

“I don’t know,” she counters. “One small dorm fire for man, one giant blaze for mankind.”

I can actually feel my smile in my cheeks. “Now, you just need to get rid of the evidence before our RA sees it.”

Her eyes nearly bug out of her head. “Oh God. How the hell am I supposed to do that?”

“How about this?” I offer. “Since there’s no way you’re going to be able to eat that soup, and I was already on my way out to get some food, you come with me to grab a slice of pizza at Antonio’s, and we’ll make a pit stop on the way to buy some shit to clean all this up.”

“Okay, yeah,” she says with a soft, adorable smile. But just as she grabs her purse off her bed, her cell phone starts to ring. With a small frown, she flashes an apology toward me with her eyes. “Do you mind if I take this real quick?”

“Of course not.” I shake my head and wait patiently by the door as she puts her phone to her ear.

“Hi, Mom,” she says quietly. “Yep. Everything is good. I’m officially all moved in... Uh-huh... Do you mind if I call

you a little later? I'm going to go grab a slice of pizza with a new friend..."

New *friend*. That's me, I guess.

I don't know why it irks me a little that I'm already friend-zoned by this gorgeous, blue-eyed firebug, but it does.

Considering I have a girlfriend by the name of Sarah at Stanford, it shouldn't bother me at all.



CHAPTER

One

October 31st

Ava

The moment any woman in the Lucie family reaches the age of thirty and is *still* single, seriously annoying complications set in.

How do I know this? Because as a thirty-three-year-old woman in the family, I took a one-way trip to hell three years ago, and my mom and great-aunts made a deal with the devil to make sure finding a husband is the only way I'm allowed to book a flight back.

A text pings in the ongoing group chat with the three clucking hens, and I sigh as I scroll to read it.

Mom: Ava, there is a cute lawyer at the dog park today!

Right below her message sits a candid photo of a guy sitting on a park bench. He's aesthetically handsome, looks to be early thirties like me, and is smiling down at something on his phone. He has no idea the photo is being taken of him, and he's a complete *stranger*.

Me: Have you lost your mind??? What if he sees you taking pictures of him and gets mad?

Aunt Poppy: Get real, Ava. We're smarter than that.

Aunt Lil: It was a top-secret mission. ;)

Looks like the whole gang is out and about today...and they're *all* clinically insane.

Mom: VERY top secret. He had no idea.

Me: Is this the only reason you guys go to the dog park? To stalk men?

Mom: Don't be ridiculous. We come to walk Bruce too. Should we give him your number?

Bruce is my mom's ten-year-old English bulldog. He's lazy as hell and enjoys walks as much as I enjoy finding out my mom and great-aunts are sneaking pictures of random dudes in the name of finding me a man—*aka: not at all*.

Lucky for him, though, the dog park is only a short walk from my parents' house. And most likely, he just lies around in

the grass while my mom and great-aunts stalk men on my unwarranted behalf.

Me: Please, I beg of you. Leave that man alone and find something else to do with your time. Pottery. Fly-fishing. I don't care, just something.

A minute passes peacefully, and naïvely, I actually think the moment has passed. I go back to lining my eyes with a bold, dark line, but I haven't even finished one of them when my phone chimes again.

Mom: Oh, whoops! Sorry, honey, he introduced himself before I got your last message. We just showed him your picture, and he thinks you're cute!

A gasp of betrayal is the only thing I manage before fully realizing they played me from the beginning. There's no way my mom would have known he was a lawyer if she hadn't talked to him *before* sending me the message in the first place.

Help me. Someone help me.

Knowing the ship has sailed on this mission, and that there's no way that poor guy is leaving there without my number and a selection of photos, I settle for reminding them of simple geography.

Me: You do realize that you guys are in Vermont and I'm in New York, right?

Aunt Poppy: That's why they make cars and planes, Ava. For hot dates.

Me: Um, no. I highly doubt Karl Benz invented the car so he could hook up more easily. But you three ARE about to have a hot date with handcuffs and jail time if you keep taking unsolicited photos of strangers.

Aunt Poppy: Loser.

Good grief. Damn, Aunt Poppy. Don't hold back.

I don't know what else I'm expecting, though. She never does. And, when it comes to their shenanigans, there's no end in sight. Thanks to my baby sister Kate and her stupid fiancé Zach, by this New Year's Eve, I'll be the oldest and only single Lucie sister left.

My other sister Emily helped seal that fate by marrying her husband Landon two years ago.

Aunt Poppy: I'm just being real, Ava. You need to find yourself a man before your little beaver shrivels up.

Dear God, is this what spontaneous combustion feels like? Is my brain matter seconds away from splattering across the room right now?

It sure feels like it. I know, once you take out the pushiness and mortification, what they're all trying to say is that they don't want me to end up alone. They were all married by the time they were my age, and they want the same security for me. But the world has changed since they were my age. Women don't need to get married right out of high school.

Frankly, women don't need to get married at all.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with being single and empowered and independent.

Truthfully, I'd love to find someone to settle down with, but I need to do it in my own time.

On a sigh, I type out a response that will put an end, albeit temporary, to the peanut gallery's opinions.

Me: Well, it's been lovely chatting with you guys about my little beaver, but I gotta run! I sure hope your husbands don't get suspicious when they find the evidence of other men in your phone.

I know well and good that my dad understands my mom is nuts when it comes to her—*very much unwanted*—mission to find me a man, and that Great-Uncle Don, Aunt Lil's husband, and Great-Uncle Al, Aunt Poppy's husband, gave up on keeping track of their nutty wives years ago. But it makes me feel better to put just a little bit of fear in their hearts.

Three more texts flash across the screen, but I ignore them and toss my phone back down onto my bed and finish getting ready for tonight's big bash at our favorite bar.

I slip on the knee-high white go-go boots I purchased at a secondhand shop and stand up to check out my appearance in the mirror.

Not too shabby, Ava.

Tonight's attire is not my usual choice in fashion, but that's because it's Halloween. A bright yellow crop top and miniskirt cover my body, and a vintage silk scarf is wrapped around my head, holding back my long blond locks so they stay behind my ears and fall behind my shoulders.

And the boots. Of course, I can't forget about these kick-ass boots. No doubt, I spent a hundred dollars too much on them, but I couldn't help myself. They are the *perfect* addition to this year's costume.

Also, I will most likely never wear them again, but no need to slave over the details of my irresponsible economics.

I do a little twirl in front of the floor-length mirror in my bedroom and grin. *Perfect.*

The heels of my boots click-clack across the hardwood floors of my apartment as I head into the kitchen to snag a bottle of yellow Fanta out of the fridge and shove it into my purse, along with my keys and wallet and phone.

But just before I can sling it over my shoulder, the all-too-familiar sounds of an incoming call stop my progress.

I reach back into the Mary Poppins-style sack and fish around until I find the noisemaker.

I just barely pull it out before my ringtone comes to an end, and I glance at the screen.

Incoming Call Emily.

I hate to admit it, but the sight of my sister's name on the screen makes me temporarily consider sending the call to voice mail.

Familial guilt stops me. I swear shared DNA is more powerful than the world's most potent drug. At least, it is when you're an eternal people-pleaser like me.

"Hey, Em," I answer finally.

"Ava!" she greets, her voice all chirpy and cheerful. "I've been trying to get ahold of you all week! Where in the hell have you been?"

I cringe, spitballing on the fly to come up with a believable lie. "Sorry about that. I've been a little busy at work."

This week at work has been one of the slowest in a while, but there's only so much I can stomach talking about Kate's wedding and my current single status with the female members of my nosy family.

It's exhausting.

"Mm-hm, sure," Luke hums behind me, startling me so much I crack my hip into the edge of the counter with my jump.

He frowns and steps forward, but I wave him away dramatically.

Go back to your apartment and wait for me to be ready! I scream with my eyes. I don't need him listening in on my conversation. After this many years of friendship, he knows me too well, and I'm really not in the mood for someone to call me on my bullshit.

He rolls his eyes as I wave my arm harder.

"So, did you get my email about the bridesmaids' dresses?" my sister asks in my ear. I turn away from Luke's painfully knowing eyes and face my cabinets to answer.

"Sure did," I respond with a nod. "I'm fine with whatever dress you guys think I should wear."

"Be serious." Em snorts. "Surely, there's one dress you like best."

The plan is for all of Kate's bridesmaids to wear black satin, but each dress will have a different silhouette —short, long, A-line, mermaid-style, that sort of thing. And since I'm the maid of honor, I'm supposed to choose first.

"They all looked great to me."

"*Ava*, tell me which one you like best."

What I want to say is that I've yet to see a bridesmaid dress that I do like. In my opinion, they're all pretty much hideous, but I bite my tongue and take a kinder approach.

A piece of paper slides across the counter in front of me, Luke's scratchy handwriting all over it in Sharpie.

Here's an idea...why don't you just tell your family the truth?

I shoo him away again and plug my ear to stop the thoughts he's insisting on putting into my head.

"Um...how about the mermaid-style?"

"Is that the one you want?"

“Yeah. Sure,” I answer and hitch my hip against the kitchen counter and start to go through my unopened mail as a distraction. “I’ll wear the mermaid-style.”

Luke tosses the piece of paper back on top of the stack of unread mail, this time turned over to the other side to reveal another message.

You know...like how you hate everything they think is great and wish they’d find something else to do with their time than bug you about relationships and shit.

I turn around again, desperate to block him out as my sister blathers on. Unlike Luke, Em is easily convinced by my act and dives into the next order of business—Kate’s bachelorette party. She gives me the lowdown on the night’s plans—dinner, drinks, dancing, no strippers—and I’m listening, even chiming in at times with suggestions.

Luke finally gives up and heads back for his apartment, the front door to my place closing with a thunk behind him.

He’s not actually angry or anything—I know, because we’ve been doing this same dance for the last fifteen years of our friendship, and he hasn’t gotten fed up with me yet.

Still hoping for a distraction in the form of the USPS, I pick up a thick envelope that has a Vermont return address of someone by the name of Callie Camden-Baccus. The name takes almost a full second to register, but when it does...my eyes damn near pop out of my head and tumble onto the counter.

Callie Camden-Baccus? As in high school, cheer-demon, soul-torturing, mean-girl Callie?

What in the hell and tarnation is she doing sending me something? And how in the actual f-word did she get my New York address?

Curiosity officially piqued, I open the envelope and pull out a thick, fancy invitation.

You're Invited!
Lakewood High's Fifteen-Year Reunion
December 26th, 7:30 p.m.

Ha! There's no way I'll be attending my high school reunion. I'd rather have all of my teeth removed and sport dentures for the rest of my life than sit through that event. Sure, I'm still friends with some select people from high school, but I don't need to go to my reunion to catch up with them. And I don't need to catch up with Callie freaking Camden—period.

I rip up the outer envelope and scoop the entire contents in both hands, propping the phone between my shoulder and my ear and head for the trash. I step on the pedal to lift the lid, poised to let her rip, but a small piece of paper falls out of the bottom of the stack and flutters to the floor. Brow furrowed, I unfold the fancy, flower-embossed stationery and read the note.

Ava,

I am so excited that you're going to help plan the big reunion!

Call me so we can figure out all of the details! (555-143-6789)

Can't wait to see you in December!

XOXO, Callie

Car tires and records screech, and a gap opens up in the space-time continuum. What in the sweet baby Jesus in a manger did I just read?

Help plan the reunion? *Me?*

No no no no no no. I don't think so.

Where in the hell did she get the idea that I would?

“Hello?” Em’s voice fills my ear. “You still there, Ava?”

“Shit. Sorry.” I shake my head to pull myself out of my spiral into the world’s worst nightmare. “I just...uh...I got this really weird invitation in the mail, and I’m...confused.”

“What invitation?”

“To my fifteen-year high school reunion.”

“Oh yeah, I think I heard Mom talking about that the other day. I—”

“Hold the phone.” I cut her off before she can continue, my spidey senses officially engaged. “How does Mom know about this?”

“I think she ran into someone you went to high school with or something,” she answers. “Why?”

Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me...

“Em, I gotta go,” I say and don’t waste any time ending the call and dialing another—more pressing—number. No offense to my sister, but I have a serious bone to pick with our mother, and justified homicide is the kind of scheduled event that really can’t wait.

I tap my fancy-booted toe and grind my teeth while the phone rings, and when she doesn’t answer her cell, I give my parents’ house phone a try.

Fifteen seconds later, my mom’s voice fills my ears.

“Hey, honey! Did you change your mind about the cute lawyer? I have his num—”

No time for pleasantries about the usual auctioning off of my flesh, I stop her before she can even get started. “Why did I get an invitation in the mail to my high school reunion? And why does it seem like someone has volunteered me to help plan it?”

“A high school reunion? How fun! I never went to any of my reunions, you know. I was too busy raising you girls—” I

know instantly by the way she's hem-hawing around, she's the culprit.

"Mom," I interrupt. "Why on *earth* would you say I would help plan this thing?"

"Who is that, Rose?" Aunt Poppy's voice chimes in from the background.

"Shh," my mom hushes her and clears a nervous titter from her throat. "Ava, honey, I ran into Callie not too long ago, and she seemed so excited to catch up with you. I know you're busy down there in New York, but I also know you're going to be up here for your sister's wedding and—"

"And, what?"

"Well..."

"*Mom.*"

"Well...we got to talking, and she said she was hoping to have a few people help her plan the big reunion, and I guess I kind of...sort of...maybe told her you'd be able to help a little."

I can't even speak, my throat is so tight.

"It's a good thing, honey! Think of all the friends you'll get to see. I really wish I'd gone to my reunions. They're a milestone—"

"You're joking, right?" I toss back. I know it's rude not to let her finish, but the beating of my heart has tripled in speed, and if I don't find a way to get out of this soon, it'll give up the fight, I know it.

"*Mom*, for the love of everything, tell me you're joking."

"Ava—"

"High school for you was very different from high school for me, Mom. You know that."

I wait for her to plead her case or apologize or something, but all she gives me is the raspy exhale of air.

“Rose Lucie, I know you’re still there. I can hear your heavy breathing on the phone.”

“I don’t breathe that loud,” she retorts through a snuffle, and I groan. *God. Why does she always have to cry when I get up the nerve to tell even an ounce of the truth?*

I try to gentle my voice as I explain all the things she should already remember. “My high school experience wasn’t all sunshine and freaking pom-poms, Mom. Callie Camden was an absolute wench to me. I already keep in contact with the people I *want* to keep in contact with. I don’t need to see anyone else.”

She snuffles again, and I close my eyes and tap my closed fist against my forehead.

“It’s just such a shame you and Callie stopped being friends when you went to high school. You girls used to be so close when you were young.”

“We stopped being close because Callie stopped treating me like a human, Mom. In fact, she was pretty much a mega bitch to everyone.”

“Ava, *language.*”

“Oh no, don’t try to avoid this conversation by pulling the language card on me, Mommy Dearest. You just volunteered me to help Jackie the Ripper plan a high school reunion.”

“Ava!” My mother bursts into laughter at my words. “*Jackie the Ripper?* That’s taking it a little far, don’t you think?”

“Nope,” I respond, popping the p. “In my opinion, referring to Callie as Jack the Ripper’s nonexistent twin sister is me being nice about it.”

“Aw, honey, I’m sorry,” she finally apologizes. “I just thought it was such perfect timing since the reunion is the day after Christmas and you’re going to be in Vermont for the holidays and Kate’s wedding. And Callie seemed so interested in seeing you. I just thought maybe you girls could use this as a chance to move on from all that ugliness. I’m really sorry if I’ve upset you. I would never try to do that.”

My shoulders sag at the sincerity in my mom's voice. Obviously, I don't want my mom to feel bad—I just want her not to volunteer me for *shit I don't want to do*.

But I'm a mere apple, right under the tree. Rose Lucie is the biggest people-pleasing woman you'll ever meet in your whole life, and in the lottery of genetics, I won that chromosome jackpot handily.

Knowing she can't help herself any more than I can, I raise my white flag in record-breaking time.

"It's fine, Mom." Honestly, it's not fine, but I can't *not* let it go. I have a best friend waiting for me next door so we can get to our Halloween party. His patience is usually pretty great, but I have to imagine it runs out at some point.

"You promise you're not mad at me?" she asks.

"Promise, Mom," I lie. I'm still mad. *Totally* mad, but I loathe making my mom feel uncomfortable. "All is forgiven."

"Oh, thank heavens," she mutters, and I don't miss the way her voice softens with relief. "And, Ava?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget to let Callie know you're not going to be attending."

"Wait...what?" I question. "Why do I have to be the one to let her know? Pretty sure that's your job."

"What was that, honey?" she asks. "You're breaking up. I can't hear you."

"Mom, I know you can hear me. You're on your house phone."

"Ava? Ava? *Hello?*"

"Mom, be serious. Your house is nowhere near any tunnels."

"Ava, honey, I can't hear anything you're saying right now!" she exclaims, continuing this insane charade of making weird noises into the receiver so I think we have a bad

connection. “I’ll call you later, okay? Don’t forget to let Callie know about the reunion. Love you, sweetie!”

Click. And just like that, she ends the damn call.

Fracking hell, Mom!

With a roughness I’ll likely regret later, I toss my cell down onto the kitchen island and groan so loudly, it echoes off the walls.

I didn’t need this in my life right now. Ughhh.

I pace back and forth as I mentally roll through my options.

One, I could demon-dial my mom until she agrees to fix this mess—*her* mess.

Two, I could just ignore it altogether but risk having to see and/or hear from Callie Camden during the two weeks I’ll be in Vermont for Christmas and Kate’s wedding.

Three, I could call her.

Or, four, I could get on Facebook, finally accept her stupid friend request that’s been sitting there for years and send her a message letting her know I won’t be helping with—*or attending*—the reunion.

The child in me wants to ignore it entirely and just forget this ever happened, but the adult in me knows that option four is the easiest, most responsible way to handle this circus. Obviously, I know that an even adultier decision would be to call her, you know, like a grown adult woman would do. But I am undeniably childish at heart. And nonconfrontational. And keyboard warrior-ing the shit out of this thing seems like the only option I’m willing to withstand.

Facebook app engaged on my phone, I scroll to my friend requests and locate Callie’s at the bottom of the pile. A moment later, I have a message box pulled up, and I type out a quick, succinct message.

Hey Callie,

I got the invitation in the mail for the high school reunion, and I just want to let you know that I won't be able to help plan the event. I believe my mother told you I would have time to help, but my schedule is downright crazy these days. So sorry for the miscommunication.

There. All set.

I'm one tap away from closing out of the message box when bubbles appear on the screen. Before I know it, a new message from Callie sits in front of me.

Shit.

Callie Camden-Baccus: Aw, that's no fun. I was really looking forward to catching up with you! Your mom says you're, like, working as a secretary at a museum now or something. I was super excited to hear all about it!

Oh, for fuck's sake, a *secretary*?

Mind you, I have zero issues with that career; it's a very noble job to keep someone else organized and on top of things, but I worked insanely hard to move up in my current career. Like, backbreakingly hard, to be honest.

Pettiness and anger flood my veins, and I can't stop myself from responding.

Me: Actually, I'm not a secretary. I'm one of the main art curators for the Met.

Apparently, she has more to say too.

Callie Camden-Baccus: Oh, that's so cool! I bet that job is tons of fun! But I'm sure it's also hard for someone like you, who moved to New York with plans of being an artist.

Don't let that get you down, though, Ava! Everyone back home doesn't think of you as, like, some failure or anything. We all know it's VERY hard to make money off art and are still super proud of you. ☺ ☺

Jesus Christ. I was definitely being too nice with the Jackie the Ripper comment.

I exhale a painful breath and stare up at the ceiling of my kitchen. Following my artistic passion has been a bit of a sore spot since I graduated from Columbia, and Callie's backhanded comments are like salt in an open wound.

Truthfully, I haven't picked up a paintbrush in over a year. I'm just...I don't know what I am. Scared? Lacking confidence? Not talented? All of the above? Whatever it is, it's been a lot easier to focus on other artists for the time being.

A sick lump feels like lead in my stomach. How is it possible that, all these years later, Callie Camden can still get so far under my skin?

I try not to be a bitter person; I really do. And I make a point to *never* hate anyone, but damn, leave it to Callie to make that feel like an *impossible* task. Another message pops up in the thread, and like some kind of masochist, I make myself read it.

Callie Camden-Baccus: And by the way, I was hopeful that you would be able to help plan the reunion but had a feeling you wouldn't be able to handle it. It's a HUGE responsibility, and you need to be really good at organization and management to deal with it. I know those have never been your strong suits, so I totally understand that you won't be able to do it. Thanks for letting me know. And don't worry, with my years of experience hosting and planning prestigious charity events, I'll be able to get it all squared away! XOXO, Callie.

There are so many things inside this message that make my brain want to short-circuit.

Instantly, I'm pissed. Beyond pissed, actually.

Like planning a high school reunion is hard? Like it takes some kind of special skill and experience to make sure there are finger foods and a freaking veggie tray?

Get over yourself, Callie. Anyone can plan a reunion.

Before I can stop myself, I'm typing out a response to her bullshit.

Me: You know what, Callie? I just took another look at my schedule, and even though I am super busy with work, I'll be in town for the two weeks prior to Kate's wedding. I'm sure that's more than enough time to help plan a simple reunion. So, scratch what I said earlier and count me in.

There. Suck on that.

Callie Camden-Baccus: Oh my goodness! This is great news, Ava! What's your email? I will send over all of the details ASAP! And phone number too, just in case I need to call you!

I stare down at her last message.

Oh, holy shit. What did I just do? WHAT DID I JUST DO?

A boulder of anxiety and regret crash-lands inside my chest, and I give it a moment, just on the off chance it'll actually kill me before I have to deal with the consequences of my hair-trigger reaction.

When I don't pass out or pass on, I have no option but to scream my frustration into the ether of my apartment while typing out the digits of my number and my email.

Callie Camden-Baccus: Perfect! Expect an email from me by tomorrow morning!

“Aw, yay!” I mutter out loud to myself, mocking Callie’s superficially cheery, fucking phony demeanor. “I, like, can’t wait. It’s all so totally awesome!”

On a sigh, I close out of the chat box and toss my phone into my purse and get ready to *finally* leave my apartment for the night.

Thank God. This is way too much unnecessary stress on Halloween.

I only get two steps toward my door when my phone starts ringing from inside my purse. I dig it back out *again* to find an unknown number with a Vermont area code flashing on the screen.

I know I should let it roll to voice mail, but Aunt Poppy called me from jail one time, and I never heard the end of how I wasted her one phone call by not answering.

Reluctantly, I hit the green button and put it to my ear.

“Ava! It’s Callie!”

Damn Aunt Poppy and her fascination with streaking!

“Oh, uh...hi, Callie...”

“Sorry to bother you, but I had one more question to ask, and since I now have your number, I figured I’d just call you really quick!”

Greattt. “Sure thing,” I say with saccharine sweetness.

“Since I have to finalize the head count for the venue by tomorrow, I need to know if I should just put you down as a single,” she begins. “Pretty sure your mom told me you weren’t married or engaged or dating anyone, but I just want to double-check that you’re *still single*. Honestly, I think you’re one of only ten people from our high school that isn’t married yet!” she exclaims through an amused giggle.

I put my phone on speaker, drop it down on my entry table, and give it the double finger with as much gusto as I can manage.

Obviously unaware of my display, she continues. “So crazy that most of us have reached the age where we’re married, and some with kids now. Which, by the way, I can’t believe your baby sister Kate is getting married before you. Soon, you’re going to be the only single Lucie left!”

My tongue is tied by an imaginary angry fist, but it doesn’t matter. One of the only positive qualities Callie possesses is the ability to carry on an entire conversation herself.

“By the way, you’re the best for helping me plan the reunion!”

“That’s me.” The best people-pleasing lunatic in NYC who really should look into finding a good therapist to help me work through all of this before I have to head home to Vermont to watch my baby sister get married in the same week I get to attend a fifteen-year high school reunion I somehow got roped into helping plan. *With* the Regina George of my high school class. In less than two short months from now.

Okay. So, I don’t need to find a therapist; I need to find Jesus. I just hope he lives in Manhattan.

“So...one or two?” Callie asks, pulling me from the deep recesses of my thoughts.

“One or two?”

She giggles again. It’s like nails on a chalkboard to my ears. “How many people should I put you down for, silly?”

This is a remake of *Nightmare on Elm Street*; it has to be. A new *Halloween* movie or something. Michael Myers himself must be right outside my freaking door. That’s the only way the universe would be cruel enough to add Callie’s interest into the swirling, boiling pot my family already has roasting over the *Ava’s Relationship Status* fire.

Just like that, it hits me. I *cannot* go to this reunion and attend my baby sister’s wedding alone in the same damn week. I just...*can’t*.

I completely break under the fucking pressure of it all, and the words blurt from my lips before I can stop them. “Two.”

“Two?”

“Uh...yeah... I’ll be bringing my...boyfriend.”

You’ll be...what? You don’t have a boyfriend, Looney Tunes!

“Your boyfriend? Oh, how exciting! Your mom didn’t tell me you were seeing someone!”

“It’s...uh...fairly new.”

Yeah, it sure is. It hasn’t even fucking started yet...

Thinking better of my answer, I add to it quickly before Callie can undercut it. “But serious. Really serious, actually. We’ve just been keeping it private so we can enjoy the perfectness by ourselves for a while.”

Dear God, Ava.

“That’s so awesome! What’s his name?”

Yeah, Ava! Tell your old archnemesis all about your imaginary boyfriend!

Panic sets in when I realize there is absolutely *no way* I can talk myself out of this conversation. So, I do what anyone in my situation would do—avoid it.

Three bangs of my fist to my own freaking door, I end the call in a rush, “Oh shoot, Callie! I have to go. My boyfriend just got here, and we’re already late for a big, fancy Halloween party in SoHo. Talk soon! Bye!” *Click.*

It’s official. I’m pathetic.

I might as well be Debra Messing’s character in *The Wedding Date*.

Sure, my sister didn’t have an affair with my ex while I was still dating him, but she *is* my baby sister whose impending nuptials will make me the oldest and last single Lucie sister. And now, because I let Callie fucking Camden get

the best of me with her backhanded bullshit, I told the snooty biotch that I have a boyfriend *and* I'd help plan the reunion.

Oy vey.

Call me crazy, but I highly doubt I can find a hot, Dermot-Mulroney-looking escort in under sixty days.

You know, you could just be an adult about this and tell Callie how you really feel—that you don't have a boyfriend and you don't want to help plan that stupid reunion with someone who was a total bitch to you in high school...

That would certainly be the easy way out, wouldn't it?

Too bad my damn pride is making that feel like an impossible option.

On a heavy sigh, I drop my phone back in my purse, sling my bag over my shoulder, snag the stupid invitation off the counter, head straight out of my apartment, and stride right across the hall, barging through my best friend's unlocked front door.

I swear, one of the best things Luke and I ever did was rent apartments in the same building—*and on the same floor*—from his rich uncle Gary. It makes freak-out moments like this a heck of a lot easier to handle.

My go-go boots pound across the hardwood floors as I make a beeline past Luke—who is standing in his living room—dump my purse, and head straight for the kitchen.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where's the fire?” he says on a laugh. “Please tell me you haven't gone old-school and brought a hot plate into your apartment.”

“Funny ha-ha, Luke,” I retort but keep it moving to the fridge. “The fire is my life. Everything is shit, I need a drink, and I'm pretty sure we're already late to the party!”

I snag a beer from his fridge and pop the top off with a bottle opener that hangs on the door by a magnet. The smell of barley and hops assaults my nose. *Ugh*. I don't even like beer, or any alcohol really, but I need something—*anything*—to take the damn edge off.



CHAPTER

Two

Luke

“Did you forget that you hate beer?” I question, but Ava is committed.

Her face crinkles up in disgust as she forces half a bottle of beer down the hatch. Once she’s officially had enough, she slams it onto my kitchen counter and swipes a hand across her mouth. “*Yuck*. That’s awful.”

“For you, maybe. I happen to think it’s the best. Which is why it’s in *my* fridge.”

She rolls her eyes at me and stomps back toward the bag she abandoned on my couch. She scoops it up, slings it back on her shoulder and gestures for the door.

I can’t help but laugh.

“Oh no. Don’t tell me you’re in a hurry now. I’ve been waiting for you for more than an hour.”

“I’m in the middle of a crisis, Luke! I don’t have the energy for your jokes.”

I shake my head with a smile. “A crisis, huh? Don’t tell me you fell in the toilet again.”

“No!” she snaps. “But wouldn’t you feel awful now if I had? You didn’t even attempt to help me.”

“I’ll go to confession tomorrow to repent.”

“You’re not Catholic.”

“Oh. That’s right.” I smile huge as I walk back to the counter and grab the half a beer she left behind and take a swig.

When I pull it away and she hitches a hip in impatience, I finally take a good look at what she’s wearing.

A tight yellow skirt, a shirt that’s more of a fucking bra than an actual shirt, and a pair of white boots that stop just below her knees, it all feels a little too sexy to be strolling around some dive bar in the middle of the city.

“What in the hell are you wearing?”

“A costume,” she retorts, rolling her eyes. “Because, as you know, we’re going to a *Halloween* party.”

Her gaze scrutinizes my outfit—my pilot’s uniform that consists of a white shirt and a black tie, slacks, and shoes. “And what are you supposed to be? Pilot Pete?”

I furrow my brow. “Who the hell is Pilot Pete? I just got home from a seven-hour flight from Paris. I’m Pilot Luke.”

An annoyed sigh leaves her pretty pink lips.

“Geez Louise, I need to make you watch more reality TV. Pilot Pete is from *The Bachelor*, and Pilot Luke is not a costume. Go change.”

“I’m going to. Into jeans and a T-shirt.”

“You’re not wearing a costume tonight?”

“Nope,” I say. “We already talked about this.”

“I thought you were joking! It’s a *Halloween* party. Costumes are required.”

I just laugh. She sighs.

“You’re going to feel so stupid when you’re the only one there without a costume.”

“I highly doubt it.” I swirl my finger at her, gesturing to the yellow getup she has on. “What are you supposed to be anyway? Some kind of sixties go-go dancer or some shit?”

She puts a defiant hand to one hip. “I’m a Fantana.”

“I’m sorry.” I quirk a brow. “Are you speaking English right now?”

“I’m one of the Fanta girls!” she exclaims and holds both hands out in the air. “You know, the drink *Fanta*. It’s a soda.”

“Ohh, yeah. I think I remember those commercials. How’s the jingle go again?”

To my utter enjoyment, Ava pulls a bottle of yellow Fanta from her purse and proceeds to sing and shake her hips. “*Don’t you wanna...wanna Fanta?*”

I smile, take another swig of beer, and toss the now-empty bottle into the trash can. “Well, you look great. Maybe a little too great. Kind of reminds me of our first Halloween at college, to be honest. Also, and this is just my personal opinion, orange Fanta is the best.”

She rolls her big, angelic eyes and tsks her lips. “I look like shit in orange, so I had to go with yellow. But this is *not* like Columbia.”

“Really? Because you look like my friend Ava and we’re going to the same bar and you have a particularly booze-desperate look in your eye—*just* like you did that night.”

“We’re *not* talking about that night right now.”

“Okay, fine. We’ll come back to that later. For now, you can just tell me what’s going on. Why are we spiraling this time?”

She huffs out a breath that blows loose strands of her blond hair out of her face. “Have you ever seen the movie *The Wedding Date*?”

I shake my head.

“Are you sure you’ve never seen it?” she questions. “Debra Messing? Dermot Mulroney? Set in a gorgeous English village?”

“Not ringing any bells.”

“Ugh!” She tosses both hands up in the air. “It would be so much easier if you watched rom-coms, you know?”

“Reality TV and rom-coms,” I comment with a smirk. “Anything else I need to add to the list?”

“Tons. But I’ve been crafting your reform very carefully over the last fifteen years, and it would really ruin my plan to get ahead of myself.”

My smile makes my cheeks hurt. “Of course. Wouldn’t want to ruin all that hard work. So, just tell me what’s going on in plain terms for now.”

She grins back before diving into the point.

“As you know, I’m the only single Lucie girl in the family —”

“Oh yeah,” I say with a grin that makes her roll her eyes. “I definitely know.”

“Well, thanks to my mom’s obsession with marrying me off, I’ve now been roped into helping plan a reunion party with my old archnemesis.”

“Reunion party?” I ask and tilt my head to the side in confusion.

“My fifteen-year high school reunion.” She pulls an invitation out of her purse and slides it across the island.

I quickly scan the gold-embossed, cursive words on the paper. It’s fancy. A little too fancy for a fucking high school reunion, but what do I know.

“Well, at least there’s an open bar,” I offer and look back up to meet her eyes.

“Oh yeah!” she exclaims in sarcasm. “Thank goodness for the open bar! Maybe I’ll be able to drink enough booze that I won’t have to remember attending it with Callie freaking Camden!”

“The chick who made your teenage years hell?”

“The one and only.”

I shake my head and lean my back into the counter, crossing my arms over my chest. “You know what I’m going to say, don’t you?”

“Don’t say it.”

“I have to, Ace. It is my obligation as your best friend to remind you that if you just stood up for yourself and voiced how you feel—you know, that you’d rather go live under a bridge—your family might just stop pressuring you so much.”

“It’s not that easy.”

For Ava? No, it’s definitely not. She hates confrontation and cannot stand making people feel bad. I know this all too well after all our years around each other.

But at some point, she’s going to have to stand up for herself and end the suffering. If she just spoke to everyone else like she does to me, she wouldn’t have a problem anymore.

“That’s not the worst of it, by the way,” she continues. “I messed up big-time when Callie insinuated that I would be attending our reunion by myself.”

“What do you mean?”

“I told Callie to put me down for two. *Two* super-in-love, coupletastic people, of which I am one.”

“I’m sorry...what?” I question on a shocked laugh. “You told Callie you’re in a relationship?”

She nods.

“You do realize you’re not in a relationship, right?”

“Don’t judge me, you jerk.” Ava pokes me in the chest with one pointed index finger. “Help me.” She sighs and stares up at me with big puppy-dog eyes. “I have sixty days to find my freaking boyfriend and no prospects on where to start.”

A weird pain tightens in my chest, but other than lifting a hand to rub at it, I don’t pay it much mind.

“Actually, less than sixty days,” I add instead.

“Ugh. Shut up,” she retorts. Then, like lightning, an idea strikes her. “Maybe you could do it!”

“Be your boyfriend?”

“*Pretend* to be my boyfriend,” she emphasizes.

“No,” I decline with a shake of my head. “No thank you.”

“What? Why not? You’re single right now, just like me. It’s not like you have to worry about a girlfriend getting mad.”

“True,” I agree. “Actually, I’m pretty sure this is the first time in forever that we’ve both been single.”

“Are you sure about that?” She tilts her head to the side. “What about when you broke up with Sarah?”

“You were already dating that douchebag Blake.”

“He wasn’t that bad.” She snorts, and I give her a pointed stare. “Okay, fine, he was a dick.”

“And when you broke up with douchebag-dickwad, I was dating Dana.”

“*Gah*. Dana.”

“What was wrong with Dana?”

“She was clingier than dog hair on a wool sweater.”

I laugh at that. She’s not wrong. Dana was so clingy, I found myself getting excited about dentist appointments because it was about the only time I could be alone.

“Wait...when did you break up with Mandy?”

“Two years ago,” I answer. “Not too long after you ended things with Matt.”

“I guess this really is the first time we’re both single,” Ava responds with a shrug, but then quickly reverts back to freaking out. “But hell’s bells, I need to break that cycle *stat*.”

“Going to your high school reunion without a boyfriend isn’t that big of a deal, Ace.”

“First of all, you need to stop calling me Ace. Your name is *Luke*. Not Logan. It makes zero sense.”

I shrug. “Well, after you made me watch all seven fucking seasons of *Gilmore Girls*, I think I have a right to use whatever I want from that awful show.”

“You loved that show, you big liar.”

“I tolerated it because *you* love that show,” I correct her. “Now, stop avoiding the subject at hand. Why the hell do you think you need to take some random guy home with you to feel validated?”

“Actually, I was trying to take *you* home to feel validated.”

“Ava.”

“Luke, if you knew Callie Camden and the crap she put me through when we were teenagers—” her voice rises with each word “—you’d one-hundred-percent understand that it’s a big deal. A big fat fucking deal.”

My face softens a little as I think of all the stories Ava shared with me throughout college about Callie. I know she put my girl through the wringer. It’s not out of the ordinary for someone to have a little PTSD.

I move from the kitchen to the living room and wrap my arm around her shoulders, tucking her close to my side. “How about, instead of standing in my apartment and drowning your sorrows in alcohol you don’t even like, we go to the Halloween party and try to enjoy ourselves? Forget about fake boyfriends for a while.”

She groans, and I gently squeeze her petite shoulder.

“C’mon, Ava, it’ll be fun. I mean, you didn’t get all dressed up for nothing, right? And who knows, maybe you’ll

meet a hot Frankenstein and fall in love, and your whole find a boyfriend in less than sixty days debacle will be solved.”

“You’re the worst best friend ever.” She snorts, and I grin down at her.

“Let’s go, yellow Fantina. It’s time to go have some fun and get you some kind of fruity drink you can actually enjoy.”

“*Fantana*.”

“Yeah. That’s what I said.”

She rolls her eyes. “Ugh. You’re such a guy.”

I smirk down at her. “If you don’t pull yourself out of this sassy mood right quick, I will have to resort to musical violence.”

She full on pouts. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Oh, but I would. Don’t try me, Ava. I’ll have Lykki Li blaring from my speakers in no time. And I won’t hesitate to pull out my best robot dance moves.”

“I Follow Rivers” by Lykki Li is, hands down, Ava’s favorite song in the world.

It’s her happy song, and she can’t *not* dance when it’s playing.

When she makes no move to take the pouty expression off her face, I pretend to head into my bedroom to change out of my pilot’s uniform.

Which I do.

But once I throw on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, I grab my phone and press play on a song—the song—in my “Cheer Up Ava” Spotify playlist. Instantly, the bouncing beat begins to filter into my apartment, and just like that, I’m right back in our dorm, fifteen years ago, right after she told me her boyfriend Blake had broken up with her before the very same bar’s Halloween party.



CHAPTER

Three

Halloween, fifteen years ago...

Luke

I make my way through the bar crowd with a tray of fresh drinks for everyone at our table, skirt around the crowd of dancing aliens at the booth next to us, and hand them off one by one. Beer for Trevor and me, wine for Claire and Desi, and a strawberry daiquiri for Ava.

Since I'm the only one with a truly passable fake ID, I'm always assigned to get the drinks.

Somehow, though, in the five minutes it took me to procure them, Ava has managed to disappear.

"Where's Ava?" I ask, holding her daiquiri in my hand as I take the available spot she likely vacated.

“Not sure.” Trevor, a guy I’ve been friends with since high school and a fellow aeronautical engineering student, is the first to answer. “Bathroom, maybe?” He runs a hand through his short blond hair and shrugs one lazy shoulder.

Ava’s *best gal pals*, as she calls them—the two craziest girls in our dorm, as I know them— immediately take notice.

“Uh oh...looks like we’re heading into karaoke round number three,” Claire mutters over her fresh glass of wine. Her shoulder-length, bright-red hair sways back and forth over her shoulders as she glances pointedly between the stage and our table.

Instantly, Desi’s hazel eyes turn big and amused when she looks toward the stage.

“I think this might be round number four, to be honest.”

When the opening beats of the all-too-familiar song “Eye of the Tiger” start to pound through the DJ’s speakers, I groan, run a hand over my face, and eventually, find the strength to look toward the stage where Ava stands with a microphone in her hand.

You know that saying, *three sheets to the wind*?

Well, when it comes to Ava, there are no sheets. They’ve blown the fuck away. No doubt, her need to drink away the thoughts of her stupid ex-boyfriend and his plans to make time to take his video game career seriously is at the heart of her efforts.

With hips shaking, she swings her tiger tail and belts the words by Survivor at the top of her lungs. We’ve been at Harry’s Bar for two hours, tops, and I swear to God, I’ve heard this damn song so many times, I’m going to be singing it on my deathbed.

“At least she looks hot,” Claire comments, and Desi nods.

“Incredibly drunk, but hot.”

“Ava always looks hot,” Trevor chimes in, and I’m about to smack him upside the head, but a finger taps me on the

shoulder. I turn to find an attractive brown-eyed brunette standing beside me.

“Hi,” she greets, a smile on her red lips.

“Hello.”

“So, I was wondering if you’d like to buy me a drink?”

Her confident approach makes me grin. “Oh really, and how long have you been wondering that?”

“For a while, actually,” she answers through a little smirk, and I don’t miss the fact that she’s joined the rest of the Halloween partygoers by dressing up in a sexy version of a Girl Scout uniform. “I’m Brooke. Brooke Evans.” She holds out her hand, and I shake it.

“Luke London.”

“So, Luke...about that drink?”

She’s forward, I’ll give her that, and I’m about two seconds away from taking her up on her offer, but when I glance toward the stage and find that Ava now has some dude dressed in a black leather jacket and aviator sunglasses up onstage with her, my focus gets sidetracked.

The jerk-off puts his hands on Ava’s hips and pulls her close to him while she continues to sing that fucking song.

I glance to everyone else to see if they see what I’m seeing, but I figure out pretty quickly I’m the only one paying attention to our little performer.

Trevor is busy flirting with a girl in a red wig and a Jessica Rabbit-style scarlet dress, and both Desi and Claire have disappeared to God knows where.

Fucking hell.

“So...how about that drink?” Brooke asks again, and I feel like a real bastard for the next words that come out of my mouth. After breaking up with Sarah last month, I should be jumping at the chance to dip my toes deeper into the college pool, but I can’t just leave Ava to fend for herself like that.

When the guy onstage with her moves his hand down her thigh, the urgency of the situation brings me to my feet.

I give Brooke a quick look of apology. “Sorry, but I’m going to have to take a rain check. I just realized I need to get my friend home.”

“Is that your friend?” she asks after following my concerned line of sight.

“Yeah,” I answer, moving to climb around Trevor.

“Wait...is she your friend or your *girl*friend?” Brooke questions skeptically.

“Could be his girlfriend, but no, they just have an incredibly weird friendship,” Trevor chimes in for me. Not exactly how I would have put it, but at least he’s saving me the effort of trying to explain it. “Probably two of the most good-looking people I know, get along better than anyone I know, yet they’re literally just friends. It boggles the mind.”

I sigh.

Brooke flashes an amused smile and pulls a pen out of her purse, jots down her number on a bar napkin, and tucks it into the pocket of my shirt as I finally make it out of the matrix of our table to head for the stage.

“Call me,” she orders with a bite of her lip. “For the rain check.”

I smile at her. “Okay.” She saunters off, and I turn back to my mission.

Trevor grabs me by the arm as I go to step away. “What the fuck, dude? Why didn’t you buy her a drink *now*?”

I glance toward the stage again, where Ava and the aviator-sunglasses-wearing douchebag have now started on a Bon Jovi duet. “Because of that.”

“What?” he questions. “She’s just having some fun.”

“She’s shit-faced,” I retort. “I’m not letting her go home with some idiot who is wearing sunglasses inside a damn bar, only to have her regret it in the morning.”

“Relax, man. I think he’s supposed to be James Dean.”

“Like I give a shit who he’s trying to be,” I grumble. “Did you make any headway with Jessica Rabbit?”

“Fucking nope. Apparently, she wasn’t digging my Fireball Mario costume.”

Personally, between the white overalls, red shirt, and fake moustache, I can understand Jessica Rabbit’s disdain.

“That’s great news,” I respond without hesitation. “Because you’re helping me get Ava home.”

“*What?*” he questions and adjusts his overalls.

“Get off your ass and help me get the dancing queen off the stage,” I say and stand to my feet.

“Dude, this night sucks balls,” he mutters but follows my lead.

Once I’m standing directly below Ava and her new karaoke friend, she glances down at me with glazed-over eyes and grins a slow, lazy smile. “Luke!”

“Hey, friend. Looks like you’re having some fun, huh?”

“Oh yeah!” she exclaims, but then two seconds later, hands the microphone off to Sunglasses and plops down into a sitting position with her legs hanging off the edge of the stage.

“Karaoke makes me tired,” she says and holds both hands out to place on my shoulders.

“You think it’s time to go home?” I whisper softly into her ear.

“Uh-huh.” Ava nods and lets her head rest on my shoulder.

“Aw. C’mon, sweetheart, we were just getting started,” Sunglasses says and sits down beside her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. The movement jostles her back to an unsupported sitting position and forces her hands to release from my shoulders. “How about you do another song with me, and then I’ll make sure you get home?”

“Nope,” I chime in before Ava can respond. “Thanks, but no thanks. I’ll make sure she gets home.”

Immediately, the guy jumps off the stage and gets in my face. “What are you, her fucking dad?” he spits, and I laugh.

Wow. This guy. He’s got some balls.

“Listen up because I’m only going to make myself clear once,” I say while Trevor helps a now-lying-down Ava off the stage and to a standing position. “She’s going home with us. End of fucking story.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right.” I barely get the words out, and the drunk caveman swings one closed fist toward my face. I dodge it with ease. Either he has the reflexes of a tortoise, or he’s had *way* more to drink than me.

Red flashes behind my eyes, and I try, *I really fucking try*, to rein in my anger and walk away, but he attempts another punch.

Again, I dodge it, but when I hear Desi shout, “*Kick his fucking ass, Luke!*” from somewhere behind us, I can’t hold myself back.

One uppercut to the jaw and a hard shove to his chest, and I knock the bastard flat on his ass. He sits there stunned, and when I realize a crowd has started to form around us and no doubt the bar owner is in the process of calling the cops, I take a half-passed-out Ava from Trevor’s hold and swing her over my shoulder.

“Let’s go.”

“You know, buddy, I think all those hours you’re spending in the gym are paying off. You can scrap with the best of ’em,” he says through a laugh. “Not sure you’re going to need all those ninja moves when you’re floating around in fucking space, but good for you, man. Good for you.”

“Hey, Trevor, I appreciate the support, but—” I glance emphatically toward the door “—I’d like to get out of here

before the cops arrive and I get kicked out of Columbia. Sound like a plan?"

He grins. "By all means, lead the way."

Fucking hell, the things I do for my best friend.



CHAPTER

four

November 1st

Ava

I take one glance in my bathroom mirror and groan.

My blond hair has wound itself into a crown of knots and tangles on top of my head. My eyes are bloodshot. My mascara has created some sort of smoky, raccoon-eye effect. And my lipstick is smeared halfway down my chin.

For shame, you really got after it last night.

This is *exactly* why I try to avoid alcohol. The bitch has never treated me right.

I'm not sure how much alcohol I consumed last night, but I know after the beer I had at Luke's apartment, I drank at least three strawberry daiquiris at the bar.

Ew. Strawberry. The mere thought of it makes my stomach curdle like days' old milk. Honestly, the daiquiris are almost always a terrible choice, but they're a Harry's Halloween tradition.

I swallow past the nausea threatening to creep up my throat, brush the awful taste out of my mouth with my toothbrush and a whole lot of toothpaste, and take a quick shower to wash the remnants of booze off my body and face.

Once I'm dressed in yoga pants and my coziest cream sweater, I head into the kitchen to make some coffee and find sustenance I can eat without wanting to puke.

But I only get halfway into my food search when my phone chimes with several texts in my group chat with Claire and Desi.

Claire: How ya feeling, honey? You had quite the night.

Desi: Oh yeah. Pretty sure you ran through a full Fantana set.

Huh?

Me: What are you talking about?

Desi: You were the karaoke queen last night. You gave your college performance days a run for their money.

Claire: Personally, I think she's even better now. All that life experience gives your performance depth.

Me: Guys, what are you talking about?

Desi: I can't believe you don't remember doing karaoke.

Claire: At least Luke didn't have to punch someone out last night LOL.

Desi: That's because Luke is looking HOT AF these days, and that guy knew not to mess with him.

Me: What guy? There was a guy?

Why don't I remember *any* of this?

Again, this is exactly why I do not like drinking.

Shit *always* ends badly.

The fear of what could've been ruined for Luke had I forced him to stand up for me physically jolts me. *His job as a pilot. The ongoing interview process with NASA. Holy hell, it could've ruined everything he's worked so hard for!*

Instantly, guilt and anxiety form a thick knot in my throat.

Desi: Don't sweat it, Ava. It was nothing.

Me: It's not nothing! I can't believe I put Luke in that position AGAIN. Almost getting him kicked out of Columbia was enough. If things had gotten out of hand, I could've made him ineligible to continue on through the candidate process with NASA!

And he's getting close. Crazy, like he's already had two in-person interviews with NASA, close.

Claire: Relax, friend. The guy was a total prick. Luke set him straight verbally, and that's all that happened. No need to worry over it.

Desi: Plus, it's not like you asked Luke to kick the guy's ass. LOL. Pretty sure you were far too blitzed to put in that request. His decision to intervene was all his. Now, Fantana song requests to the DJ? We can definitely blame you for those.

Me: Is there anything else I missed while I was blackout drunk?

Desi: Let's see...you asked a guy dressed up as Batman if he wanted to be your holiday boyfriend. He said yes, but then you took back the offer when you realized you prefer Marvel over Justice League. You bitched A LOT about going to your high school reunion.

Claire: And planning your high school reunion.

Desi: Oh yeah, that too. LOL. You almost called that chick Callie Camden to tell her she's a total bitch, which I kind of wanted to see happen. But Claire thought it was a bad idea, so we stopped you from doing it. Am I missing anything, Claire?

Claire: And once you updated us on the whole "Find a Boyfriend" mission, we decided that online dating is the best route for your search.

Oh my God. That's not happening.

Me: I'm not online dating.

Claire: That's exactly what you said last night, but then we helped you realize it was your best option.

Desi: Yep. Otherwise, you're going to end up in a relationship with someone like Tad.

Tad is the copy/mail guy at Claire and Desi's office—a small marketing firm in Manhattan.

His attire consists of tie-dye, and his days off revolve around his bong.

Bottom line, I *cannot* bring Tad home to Vermont. Rose Lucie would probably have a stroke. *Although, Aunt Poppy would get a pretty good laugh out of it...*

Me: Online dating? Seriously? You guys act like my situation is dire or something.

Desi: Well, if you're planning on going through with the whole "I'm not single" charade, you have less than two months to find yourself a boyfriend.

Claire: That isn't a lot of time.

Me: Wow. You guys really know how to make a girl feel good.

Claire: You should be thankful your friends are willing to be honest with you.

Me: Blatantly honest. Bluntly honest. Cutthroat honesty. Oh yes, I'm forever grateful. Just thanking my lucky stars right now.

Desi: Would you like the silver lining?

Me: If it doesn't involve Craigslist or banging Tad the copy guy, I'm all ears.

Desi: Everyone online dates these days.

Me: Do you?

Desi: God no.

Claire: LOL. You're not helping, Des.

Desi: Ava and I are different. I would eat online guys alive, okay?

Claire: Okay, that IS true. It could be good for you, Ava.

Oh yeah, I'm sure my soul mate is out there right now, sitting behind his laptop with Cheetos-stained fingers and a beer belly, just waiting for my profile picture to appear on his dating app.

Son of a buttered bitch.

Me: Okay, I'm done talking about this. I'll talk to you guys later.

Once I force down two pieces of toast and pour myself a fresh cup of coffee, I check on Teddy 12, my green fern that has surprisingly managed to live for two years straight. Considering there were eleven Teddys before him and I forget to water him *a lot*, it's a miracle. I swear, he's like the Incredible Hulk of plants or something.

"Way to go, buddy," I whisper to him. "Keep on keepin' on."

Lazy Sunday morning engaged, I snag my laptop off my desk and get cozy on my sofa.

Unfortunately for me, when I pull up my Google inbox to see if there are any updates about the art installation being placed in the South Wing of the Met, I come face-to-face with not one, not two, but *three* flipping emails from Callie Camden-Baccus.

First email? To tell me that I'll be in charge of name tags and balloons.

Second email? To let me know that since *she* is an expert in décor and apparently went to some kind of design class, I won't be the one handling the balloons. She'll do that. Instead, I'll be in charge of the cake and desserts.

And, last but certainly not least, the third message provides me with questions about my *and my boyfriend's* food allergies and a Callie-approved list of bakeries where I can order the desserts. And it should be noted that Lakewood has exactly two bakeries, both of which are on the list.

While I contemplate just being honest with her and avoiding this whole find-a-boyfriend and help-plan-a-stupid-high-school-reunion fiasco, I roll through my usual social media stops.

Instagram. Twitter. Facebook.

I scroll through what feels like a thousand pictures of my sister Kate and her fiancé Zach and my old high school classmates smiling in cheesy photos with their significant

others, and uninvited dread and annoyance form a fucking alliance and carve out a hole in my stomach.

It feels like everyone is in a relationship. Or engaged. Or married.

Everyone besides me.

Why does this bother me so much?

I don't know. But it does.

Before I know it, I'm Googling things like "Best Online Date Apps for NYC Singles." And it doesn't take long before I'm downloading a stupid dating app onto my phone.

Fucking hell. What has my life become?

Pathetic. Your life is pathetic.

I roll my eyes at my annoying thoughts but carry on with the insanity and scroll through the saved photos on my phone in search of the best picture to use for my brand-new profile.

A few minutes later, I have it narrowed down to a couple pictures, but the sound of keys jingling in the lock of my front door stops me from deciding on the winner. By the time I look up from the screen of my phone, Luke is already walking into my apartment.

"Hey there, sleeping beauty," he says with a smirk as he shuts the door behind himself and tosses my keys onto the table beside my coatrack. "I wasn't sure if you'd be up this early. How are you feeling?"

I ignore his question completely and get straight to the point. "I'm sorry I'm an asshole."

"You're not an asshole," he says with a smile. "You're a *Fantana*." He waggles his eyebrows when he says the word correctly, and I almost laugh.

The guilt of the position I put him in wins out, though, and a heavy sigh brings my face back to contrite.

He shakes his head and runs a hand through his messy but stylish dark hair. "Let me guess. You already talked to Desi and Claire."

“Yeah.” I nod.

“It’s no big deal, Ava.” He waves me off with a casual gesture of his arm and walks toward the couch, sitting down beside me.

“You almost got in a fight.” I narrow my eyes at him and shove his shoulder with my hand. “That sounds like a big deal, Luke. If you’d gotten arrested, it could’ve ruined *every-fucking-thing*.”

“Ava, it’s fine. Stop freaking out about it,” he retorts. “I didn’t even come close to fighting the guy, I didn’t get arrested, and now, it’s over. I imagine it’ll be another fifteen years or so before I have to save you on Halloween again, and I’ll likely have achieved all I need to with NASA by that point,” he teases.

“It’s not funny!”

“Sure it is,” he contests. “The guy got pissed when he realized I wasn’t going to let him get into your panties—*because you were way too drunk to even know what the hell was happening*—and I set him straight. The end.”

“Jesus,” I say, sinking my head into my hands. “I’m sorry I got so fucked up last night.”

“Like I said, it’s no big deal.” He reaches out to pat his hand on my thigh. “Water under the bridge. Or should I say, *Fanta* under the bridge?”

“Smartass.” I snort and nudge him gently with my shoulder. “Even though you probably shouldn’t have, thanks for coming to my rescue. Lord knows, I would’ve felt like dying if I’d woken up in some random dude’s apartment.”

“Yeah, I figured you didn’t want that.” He smirks, and his eyes make their way to the screen of my phone. “TapNext?” he questions, his mind switching focus. “Why are you on a hookup site?”

“*Dating* site,” I correct him, but he doesn’t hesitate to disagree.

“That most people use as a hookup site.”

“Well, I don’t have a lot of options,” I sass back. “I need to find a date to bring to my stupid high school reunion, and I’m running out of time.”

“You’re seriously going to go through with the planning circus?” he asks, and I nod.

“Yes.”

“Christ,” he mutters. “And you think you’re going to find a boyfriend to bring home for the holidays on TapNext?”

“What? You think I should choose Match.com?” I retort. “Courtney has been trying to find someone for, like, three freaking years now, Luke. You know I don’t have that kind of time.”

“I don’t think you should choose any of them, Ace,” he responds and wraps his arm around my shoulders. “Wouldn’t it be easier if you just came clean with everybody?” he asks and meets my eyes. “I mean... *TapNext*? You really want to go that route?”

I think of what a messy shitstorm it would be if I decided to back out of everything and told everyone how terrible this all makes me feel, and a cold sense of doom envelops me. Honestly, this is awful, but getting all the dirty laundry out in the air sounds much, much worse.

“I do.” I nod. “So, you can either be a judgy jerk, or you can help me figure out what picture to use for my profile.”

He sighs, stares at me for a long moment, then sighs again. “Fine. Hit me with the options.”

“Aw, you’re the *best* best friend in the whole wide world!” I grin and lean up to press a kiss to his cheek. “And once we choose the best picture, you can help me with my bio.”

“Lucky me,” he says through a groan, and I giggle.

“C’mon, Luke. Don’t be such a Debbie Downer. Help your bestie find a boyfriend.”

He snorts at that, and once he chooses his favorite profile picture option—a *photo he actually took of me when we went*

to the Hamptons last summer, I upload it and proceed to type out my bio.

Ava, 33

Fun-loving art history lover who thinks online dating is kind of weird but is trying to give it an honest shot.

“You do realize that most of the messages you’re going to receive will be idiots asking for nudes, right?” Luke questions, and instantly, I get an idea.

Finger to the keys, I add a little more to my bio.

IMPORTANT! READ THIS BEFORE ASKING ME FOR A NAKED PIC:

In the early 1900s, a girl let a handsome, Leonardo DiCaprio-looking boy sketch her portrait—a very risqué, very *nude* portrait. That very sketch got locked away in a safe somewhere, on a boat that sank to the bottom of the ocean. And still, nearly a century later, that top-secret, nude portrait found its way onto television.

So, no, I DO NOT SEND NUDES.

“There,” I say with a big smile on my face and hit save. “That should do it.”

A soft laugh leaves Luke’s full lips. “Just so you know, I still think this is a horrible idea.”

“Do you know how many times you’ve said that to me during the lifetime of our friendship?”

He snorts. “Too many.”

“Plenty,” I correct. “And it always works out okay.”

He shakes his head. “Yeah. But one day, you’re going to learn that if you listened to me, it might turn out even better.”



CHAPTER

five

November 2nd

Luke

The lobby of Soar Aviation at Teterboro Airport in New Jersey is a tasteful oasis of beige hues, ambient lighting, high glass ceilings, well-spaced armchairs and sofas, and a baby grand piano.

No one ever plays that damn piano, but that's beside the point.

This posh waiting room is for travelers catching private planes out of Soar, one of the five companies that flies and charters flights at one of the busiest *strictly private* airports in the world.

And since I'm one of Soar's contracted pilots, I walk through this lobby about three times a week. No doubt, it's a

striking contrast to what I used to see more than two years ago when I was still flying as a commercial pilot out of Newark International Airport.

Basically, I get paid to fly around in the clouds.

You'd think after being a pilot for eight years, the novelty of flying would wane, but it doesn't. Every time I sit in the cockpit and prepare to take off, I'm just as excited as I was my first day in flight school.

Lobby left behind, the tarmac feels like home under my feet. The moisture of dew is still ripe in the air, but after years of flying out of this airport in the mornings, I know it'll be burned off within the next thirty minutes, as soon as the sun gets high enough in the sky to put some heat into the air. I do my checks and cross-checks, circling the plane and working my way through my preflight checklist, and then head for the stairs that lead to the inside. My phone buzzes in my pocket before I get to the top, so I pull it out quickly and check the screen to find a new text.

Thatcher Kelly: Luke, my man, I have a huge favor to ask. I'm running a little late this morning. Work your magic with air traffic control?

After leaving my job with a commercial airline and signing on with Soar—a company that specializes in private flights for a lot of very wealthy clients—I've had the pleasure of flying Thatcher Kelly and the rest of his friends—*billion-dollar-bank-account friends, mind you*—around for the past two years.

Apparently, I've also become his go-to contact whenever he's running late. Which, frankly, is a lot. Thatcher Kelly runs on Thatcher Kelly time. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

Me: Sure. I assume that means you'll be handling Wes Lancaster, sir?

On this fine Monday morning, I'll be flying Thatch and several of his closest friends to LA. And Wes Lancaster, the owner of the New York Mavericks and investor in a lot of high-profile restaurants, will be on today's flight.

Wes is a stickler for time, and when his buddy Thatch is the cause for a delay? He gets *pissed*.

Thatcher Kelly: Ah, don't worry about that broody bastard. He can handle running a few minutes behind schedule today.

I'm not worried about him handling it. I'm worried about being the one to have to tell him.

Me: How many minutes are we talking exactly?

Thatcher Kelly: About twenty.

Me: Okay. I'm sure I can swing a twenty-minute maintenance delay of some sort.

Thatcher Kelly: If I weren't already married to the hottest woman on the planet, I'd get on my knees and fluffing propose to you, son. Consider dinner on me tonight.

I smirk, slide my phone back into my jacket pocket, and step inside the Bombardier Global 7500—my aircraft for the day. It's a sleek piece of machinery and the biggest, fastest aircraft in Soar's inventory.

Trevor is already in the cockpit and setting up his nest. We've been through a hell of a lot together, including doing quite a bit of growing up. After graduating from Columbia, we

both went through flight school and took the first jobs we could find as pilots. He worked for FedEx, and I started climbing the ladder of the commercial airline world, but finally, with our jobs at Soar, we're back together. He can still be a pain in the ass, but he's one of the best pilots I could hope to fly with.

"Morning," I greet, and he glances over his shoulder to grin at me.

"Hey, man."

"Just so you know, Thatch is running behind."

Trevor shakes his head. "And what's our excuse for today's delay?" he asks, more than used to faking pretend postponements on behalf of Thatcher Kelly. If he weren't such a cool-ass guy, we'd probably get really tired of his shit, but I guess that's Thatch's charismatic magic. It's impossible to dislike him. Plus, it just so happens that we get paid really well too.

"Let's go with GPS maintenance," I comment and stash my duffel and unpack the essentials from my flight bag—my headset for talking to air traffic control and my electronic flight charts.

While I enter the data about our flight into the computer system, Trev runs through our checklist.

About thirty minutes later, we're confident we're ready for the 2,454-mile flight from Teterboro to LA, and while Trevor makes a few last-minute adjustments to our GPS route, I step out of the cockpit and greet our passengers.

Kline Brooks—the CEO of the very lucrative Brooks Media—is the first to step on to the plane. He offers a smile and a nod, unbuttoning his suit jacket to prepare to take a seat. "Good to see you, Luke."

"Likewise, Kline." He's always so put together, both physically and mentally, and I have to admire the way the guy runs his life. Not to mention, he looks like he's still in his twenties, even though I'm pretty sure he's nearing forty or beyond.

“Mornin’, Captain.” Wes Lancaster is next. Formal but polite, he’s unbelievably consistent in a way I appreciate. He didn’t build the empire he did for himself by not knowing what he wanted. “We all set to take off on time?”

It takes work, but I manage a polite look of apology rather than a cringe. “We have a minor maintenance issue with the GPS but shouldn’t be running too far behind today.”

Instantly, he scowls. It feels like it’s at me, but I know the truth of the matter is that I am just the unlucky messenger. “Is it a GPS issue or a fucking Thatch issue?”

All I can do is skirt around the truth. I’d love to get it all out in the open, but Thatcher Kelly *is* the one paying my tab for this flight. “Skies are clear, though. Should be smooth flying from here to LA.”

Wes sighs and takes a seat as Milo Ives, Caplin Hawkins, Harrison Hughes, Trent Turner, Theo Cruz, and Quincy Black all file onboard. All insanely successful, wealthy guys whom I’ve come to know over the last few years as more like friends than bosses. Still, I’m always painfully careful to keep things professional on my end, even when they don’t on theirs. Maybe even especially then. It’s all fun and games until I accidentally lose my job.

While Paula and Laura, the flight attendants on today’s flight, help everyone get comfortable with drinks, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, expecting an update from Thatch, but I’m pleasantly surprised to find a text from someone else instead.

Ava: This TapNext shit is so crazy, Luke! Crazy, I tell you! So far, I’ve received two dick pics and a message from some guy who wants me to have a threesome with him and his wife.

I laugh and shake my head.

Obviously, this is shit I already knew and tried to tell her yesterday when she was adamant about starting an online

dating profile, but just before I can reply with those exact words, my phone vibrates in my hand again.

Ava: BUT despite the penis photography and marriage gangbangs, there's good news. I have matched with six guys who actually seem like normal human beings who prefer to go on an actual date before they start sharing insider photos of their genitals.

Six guys? That seems like a lot for having a profile for less than twenty-four hours. Doesn't it?

Me: Fucking hell, Ace. How many dates are you planning on going on?

Ava: As many as it takes to complete my mission.

The urge to throw out a *Mayday!* on said mission is strong, but I know it's useless. When Ava Lucie is convinced of something, there is no stopping her.

Focusing back on the task at hand—figuring out when my missing passenger will be here—I open up the chat with Thatch and send him a quick, ***ETA?***

Instead of a text back, though, a loud, boisterous, in-person voice fills my ears.

“Luke fluffing London! You ready to get this show on the road?” Thatch steps inside with a big-ass smile on his face. “How are the billionaire natives?”

I smile. “Restless.”

“Are we ready to stop acting like there's a GPS issue since the big tardy idiot has finally arrived?” Wes shouts from his seat toward the front of the plane, and I smirk at Thatch, my eyes saying, *See what I mean?*

“Ah, get over yourself, Whitney,” Thatch retorts and steps into the cabin. “You didn’t have to wait that long for me, you grumpy fluffing bastard.”

“Grumpy fluffing bastard?” Wes retorts as I head back into the cockpit and shut the door behind me. The sounds of their bickering turn muffled, and Trev grins over at me as I get myself adjusted into my seat.

“I guess it’s time to let ATC know we’re ready to taxi.”

I nod. “Let’s kick the tires and light the fires.”



After a smooth, uneventful, five-and-half-hour flight from Teterboro to Los Angeles, Trev and I checked in to our hotel—the Beverly Wilshire—and spent a few hours doing nothing but lounging by the pool and drinking a few beers.

There’s no denying that being a pilot for Soar Aviation has some serious perks.

Take right now, for example. Instead of eating takeout pizza in a Holiday Inn like Trev and I used to do back in our early days, we’re currently sitting at a table inside Prime—Wes Lancaster’s newest steakhouse—surrounded by the same hilarious guys who kept us company on this morning’s flight. Our biggest problem now is keeping ourselves out of the billionaires’ brand of trouble.

Soon, all of this could change, though...

After months of going through a barrage of tests, medical exams and physicals, psychological assessments, phone conferences, and in-person interviews, I’ve officially reached the final candidate round for NASA’s Astronaut Selection Program.

It’s between me and nineteen other men and women.

And no one knows exactly how many will be chosen.

“So, Luke, any NASA updates?” Thatch asks, taking a drink from his shiny, gold-embossed glass filled with expensive bourbon.

Can he read my fucking mind?

“Nope,” I answer with a slight shake of my head. “Not yet.”

“How many interviews have you had in Houston?” Kline asks.

“Two.”

“The final round,” Trevor chimes in helpfully and pops a piece of complimentary bread into his mouth. “You’re going to hear from them soon, my man. You’re a shoo-in.”

“I don’t know about that.” I shrug. “The competition is pretty steep. I’m up against guys with ten years of experience flying fighter jets for the navy.”

Trevor just grins at me. “Yeah, but you have a master’s in engineering from Columbia, thousands upon thousands of flight hours under your belt, your dad was pretty well-known within NASA before he died, and you’re in better shape than Rambo. I’d bet my next paycheck you’ll be living in Houston by early next year.”

“Which bookie should I sign the check over to?” Thatch teases helpfully. Trevor laughs.

“I hope you’re right, dude.” I shrug again and take a sip of my beer.

Truthfully, I *really fucking hope* he’s right. This is what I’ve been working for since I was eighteen. This is why I get up at the crack of fucking dawn every morning to run six miles around the city and weight train. Everything I do, everything I’ve accomplished, has been solely focused on getting into NASA’s Astronaut Candidate training program.

This is *the* dream. The one my father and I started to talk about when I was seven, just two years before he and my mom died in a head-on collision with a drunk driver on their way home from a work party at Johnson Space Center in Houston.

I like to think he'd be really proud of me and how close I've managed to get to that dream—*our* dream. God, I can still remember being six years old and him sneaking me into the famous NASA control room. I was mesmerized. Hooked. Determined.

“Is now the time I should disclose that I'm close friends with someone on the board?” Milo Ives offers with a little smirk on his lips, pulling me from my trip down memory lane.

It takes a minute for his words to sink in, but when they do, I furrow my brow. “Wait... Do you mean NASA's Candidate Selection Board?”

“Yep.” He nods. “You know, the board that has the final say in who gets into the program.”

“Milo, you motherfluffer,” Thatch says through a chuckle. “How did I not know this?”

It's Milo's turn to laugh. “Considering NASA is one of my company's contracts and we've just recently revamped all their security servers, I think you should have assumed I probably knew a few people on the inside.”

“So, what are you saying exactly?” I ask, and I kind of hate that hope is already blooming in my chest.

“I'm saying that you have every reason to be optimistic.”

“Yeah?” My phone vibrates in my jacket pocket, and I'm half tempted to pull it out and check it. But I ignore the urge and focus on the important conversation at hand.

“Oh, c'mon, Ives!” Cap chimes in and slams his hand onto the table. “Why are you beating around the fucking bush with this shit? Just spit it out.”

Quincy laughs. “You are slow-rolling him a bit, Ives.”

Milo just rolls his eyes. “Because we're talking about NASA, and everything in NASA is fucking classified.”

“You suck, dude,” Thatch retorts. “You suck big donkey dick right now.”

“I second that,” Cap agrees. “And this is exactly why we need to bring book club back. No doubt, we’d get Ives to crack under pressure if we were still having our regular meetings.”

“Fluffing right!” Thatch exclaims, but Wes is quick to cut them both off.

“No!” he shouts. “No more fucking book club.”

“Book club?” Trevor asks and glances around the table in confusion. “What are you guys talking about?”

“Something that never needs to be brought up again,” Wes retorts.

“We’re talking about a book club that was started *by* Cap for the sole purpose of getting *himself* laid,” Trent Turner explains through an amused laugh.

Cap waggles his brows. “It worked, by the way.”

“Yeah,” Kline Brooks chimes in with a knowing smile. “It worked so well that you ended up marrying her.”

“So, maybe I’m a little slow on the uptake, but what on earth does a book club have to do with getting laid?” I can’t stop myself from asking, and Theo Cruz bursts into laughter.

“Cap had us reading romance novels so he could use the ideas from the books to win over his now-wife.”

“My gorgeous Ruby,” Cap adds with a soft smile. “The best fucking woman on the planet.”

“Wait...you guys are being serious?” Trev questions, a smile already making itself known on his face. “This isn’t a joke?”

“No,” Wes grumbles. “And let the record show, it was the worst experience of my life.”

“You’re so full of shit,” Thatch retorts. “You loved it.”

Wes rolls his eyes. “I loved our poker nights. Not that fucking book club.”

“Speaking of poker nights,” Thatch comments and looks pointedly at Kline. “You know you’re not allowed to cancel on

poker night. Ever. Yet you have for the past two weeks. What's the story, Klinehole?"

"Oh, I don't know. My job. My wife. My girls. You know, important life shit."

"*Pfft.* Yeah, right, Special K. Pretty sure you were just getting tired of ole Thatcher here handing your ass to you every week."

"Or maybe he was getting tired of hearing *ole Thatcher* talk in third person like an idiot," Harrison suggests, and Thatch scratches the side of his face with his middle finger.

"Shut up, Harry. I think we all know you wouldn't have been able to win the heart of *the* Raquel Weaver without the knowledge you gained from book club."

"It still boggles my mind that he's married to her," Cap mutters. "Like, of all the fucking people in the world, one of Hollywood's most famous actresses chose this schmuck."

"What can I say? I got real fucking lucky." Harrison just shrugs, laughs, and takes a sip from his bourbon.

When my phone vibrates in my suit pocket again and again and *again*, I find myself tuning out the conversation and pulling out my phone to find several more texts from Ava.

The first message? ***Check out these guys and tell me what you think of them. They seem nice, right?***

Six screenshots of TapNext profiles of guys with names like Brian and Frank and Abe follow.

Frankie boy is shirtless in his profile pic, Abe's bio talks about how much he loves his cat, and Brian, well, fuck...his goddamn collar is popped, and he spends three paragraphs talking about his boat. Is she serious when she says she thinks they look nice?

Me: Do you really want to date a guy named Brian?

She responds right away.

Ava: What's wrong with the name Brian?

Me: It's a boring name, Ace. Not to mention, all the Brians I've ever known have been the friend in the group that no one really wants to be friends with. There's got to be some sort of reason for that. Plus, he's crazy about boats, and you won't even go in the water at your parents' lake house.

Ava: You know that's because I don't like to feel the weird, squishy ground between my toes when I'm in the water. Boats are a totally different story.

Ha. She's right, I guess. I type another message quickly.

Me: You're right. The problem with boats is motion sickness.

She gets motion sickness if she even glances at her phone on the subway.

Ava: It doesn't matter. I've already scheduled a date with Brian. Tomorrow.

I sigh. *Fucking Brian the Boat-Lover.* I don't even have to meet the guy to know Ava is too good for him.

"Everything okay, bud?" Thatch asks, and I glance up to find everyone at the table staring at me.

"Yeah." I swallow, tucking my phone into my pocket and screwing my face back into my best professional smile.

“You sure?” His smirk quirks up the corners of his mouth. “Because that was a lot of sighs for one man to release in the span of two minutes.”

“It’s nothing, really,” I assure everyone. Ava and her antics are nothing new in my life.

“Luke, my man, I’ve seen that look a hundred times before, and it almost always revolves around lady troubles. Possibly a little lovers’ quarrel?”

I laugh outright. “It’s nothing like that. Just some questionable decisions by my best friend Ava.”

“His best friend who might as well be his girlfriend,” Trevor adds, and I roll my eyes.

“Come on, man, not this song again. Ava and I have been friends since college. Just friends. That’s it. Just like you and me.”

“Uh-huh. *Sure*. You and Ava are not friends like you and I are friends, bro.” Trev grins. “I’ve watched you walk away from at least a hundred hot-as-hell women over the course of our friendship, and every time, it was because you were too worried about Ava.”

I wish I could refute his claim, but honestly, there have been a lot of women over the years I’ve ignored because I was preoccupied with something Ava-related. But that’s just what being a good friend is. Right?

Cap tilts his head to the side. “So, let me get this straight. You’re having best friend problems...” He pauses and searches my eyes. “And your best friend is a girl named Ava?”

“Yeah?” I respond, perplexity apparent in my voice. “And?”

Theo smirks over his glass of whiskey. “Well, in my experience, the male-female friendship dynamic rarely, if ever, stays just friends. It almost always leads to more.”

Cap snorts. “Yeah, especially when you’re *just friends* with someone’s fucking little sister.”

“*What?*” Trev questions, and Theo lets out a half sigh, half chuckle.

“Cap is referring to the fact that I married his sister.”

“My baby fucking sister,” Cap interjects.

“Jesus, you guys have quite the stories, you know that?” Trev retorts on a laugh. “Every time we hang out with you, I find out all sorts of new, interesting shit.”

“When it comes to these bastards, I have stories for days, son.” Thatch winks. “But we’ll have to save those for another time. You know, when we’re not so focused on trying to figure out why Luke is pretending he’s not in love with his best friend Ava.”

“Oh, come on!” A wolflike, incredulous laugh jumps from my lungs. “I’m not in love with Ava. It’s not like that with us. Like I said, we’ve been friends since college. Damn near fifteen years of *just* friendship.”

“Oh, okay. That explains everything.” Thatch nods, but I can tell he’s still not convinced.

“Trust me on this. Ava and I are *just* friends.”

“Okay.” Cap shrugs it off. “So, if you’re just friends with her, what has your panties in a bunch right now?”

“My panties aren’t in a bunch. Ava has officially entered the wild world of dating in the TapNext realm, and I can tell it’s heading for disaster. I’m preparing to clean up the mess. That’s all.”

“Did you hear that, Kline?” Wes responds in amusement. “His best friend is using your little dating app.”

Kline smirks, and I cringe. *Shit*. I don’t know why I forgot that TapNext was his company’s app, but I did. I hope he doesn’t take too much offense and, you know, fire me.

Thatch rubs his hands together with a smile, and Kline shrugs. Thankfully, it seems he doesn’t care about my less-than-flattering take on his life’s work. He’s maybe a little annoyed that he’s going to have to listen to Thatch and Wes volley back and forth about it, but that’s it. “What’s the

situation?” Thatch questions. “Drug dealer? Pedophile? Who’s she matching with, dude?”

Kline shakes his head and takes a swig of his drink before muttering, “We background check, T. Don’t be ridiculous with this shit.”

Thatch laughs and turns back to me. “So, what is it? Why is this going to be a disaster?”

“She’s going on a date with some guy named Brian. His profile is full of popped-collar pictures and waxing poetic about his boat.”

Trent snorts. “Popped collars? Have we gone back in time fifteen years?”

“Yeah,” I huff out. “It’s like reliving all her douchebag college boyfriends all over again.”

All the guys share a noticeable look, so much so that I have to ask, “What? What is it?”

I mean, I know the whole guy-girl friendship thing isn’t exactly the norm, but that’s all Ava and I are. Just friends. We have been for years.

Kline is the only one to answer. “It’s nothing, really. You don’t have to worry, though. Dating app or not, I have a feeling everything with your friend Ava will work out just fine.”



CHAPTER

Six

November 3rd

Ava

At a little after seven, I step through the rustic, wooden doors of Emilio's, a popular Italian restaurant located in the center of Little Italy. The establishment is packed to the gills, and I search around the medium-sized, softly lit space in search of my first official TapNext date—Brian Grove.

Otherwise known as *Boat-Lover Brian* to my best friend Luke.

I'm not sure why he's making such a big deal out of this guy having a boat. Hobbies are a *good* thing. It shows he has something to work toward. An interest to occupy his time.

My stomach twists as I rub my fingers together—an old habit I started as a kid when my nerves are running wild—and

search the restaurant for my date. To be honest, I know he has blondish hair and a clean-shaven face, but the rest of the details of his face are...*foggy*.

I try to pull up the app to take another look at him just to refresh my memory, but my phone refuses to load it for some reason. Something about the construction of the building must be jamming the data signal or something because my actual cell service seems to be just fine.

I spot a blond-headed man at the bar, but when I look closer, I realize he's an *obvious* twenty years older than my date. *Or your date is twenty years older than he claims to be...*

No. No, that can't be it. *Please*. I just need to keep looking.

Another blond head shines in the light from above a table, and my stomach flips over on itself with anxious excitement. I get up on my toes to take a better look.

Shit. Never mind. Unless Brian has a wife and two kids, I highly doubt that's him.

Maybe I should just text him. See where he is that way. I unlock my phone and open my messages, but before I can start another thread with Brian's number, a blue dot pops up next to Luke's name.

Luke: You want to grab some dinner tonight? I just got back from LA and can be changed in five minutes.

Me: I can't. I'm on a date. Almost.

Luke: Oh shit, that's right. I forgot that was tonight. Wait, what do you mean, almost?

Me: Well, I'm at the restaurant, but I'm having a hard time locating my date.

Luke: WTF? He's not there???

Me: No, he's here. I'm pretty sure anyway. I'm just kind of having a hard time remembering what he looks like.

Luke: What? LOL. You can't remember what your date looks like, Ace?

Me: Shut up. I have a general sense, but there are a lot of people here! It's harder than you think. I was just about to text him, but I'm not sure I want him to know I'm having this hard of a time if it turns out he's, like, right next to me or something.

Luke: Just look up his profile.

Me: I tried, but I'm not getting enough data service in here. Do you think...maybe you could sign in to my account and look him up for me?

Luke: Jesus.

Me: Does that mean yes?

Luke: Fine. Hold please.

Luke: Okay, I'm in.

Me: WHAT? HOW? I didn't tell you my sign-in info yet.

Luke: LOL Ava, I've known you for nearly half of my life at this point. I guessed your sign-in info. Btw, you need a stronger password.

Me: LUKE

Luke: Ok, Boat-Lover Brian's characteristics... Ruggedly douchey. Pompously strong jaw. The nose of a rhino.

Me: You're ridiculous. Just send me a picture!

It takes a minute, but finally, Luke sends the picture of Brian through so I can scrutinize it.

His hair is far darker than I thought, and his slightly scruffy jaw proves he's not exactly clean-shaven, but he's still good-looking in a boy-next-door kind of way. I'm not sure how it should make me feel that he's not at all what I thought he looked like, but I decide not to let it bother me.

Thankfully, when I give the room another once-over, I spot the real Brian Grove in the far back corner, sitting at a table with a white cloth and tealight candles flickering in the center.

He smiles and rises from his chair as I make my way toward him, evidently recognizing *me* immediately.

Yikes.

"Ava, right?" he asks, and I nod.

"You must be Brian."

"I am. It's a pleasure to meet you." His smile grows, and when he leans a little too close to my face, my heart starts to pound erratically.

Holy shit, what is he doing?

Is he trying to kiss me? Before we've even eaten?!

My instincts make me jump away from him, and his eyes go wide as he glances between my face and his hand that is now resting on the top of my chair, which he has kindly pulled out for me.

Oh Lawd, Ava. You're a lunatic.

“Uh...thank you, kind sir.” *Kind sir? What the hell was that?* I awkwardly clear my throat and try to distract him from my weirdness by abruptly taking his free hand into mine and shaking it like I'm doing those rope things at the gym.

Hell's bells, the goal isn't to break his freaking fingers!

I drop his hand like it's a literal hot potato and try to smooth it over by saying, “It's very nice to meet you.”

He's nice enough to smile like my bumbling is cute rather than embarrassing as all hell, but man, I'm not exactly batting a thousand here.

My heart flutters in my chest like a hummingbird as I try to get myself together. I feel light-headed and maybe even a little bit dizzy and beyond desperate to reverse all of it by redeeming myself.

Unfortunately, the redemption and overcompensation wires get crossed in my head, and the next thing I know, I'm curling my body downward and offering him a regal curtsy. Yes, a *curtsy*. Like, I've just been introduced to Prince William and the Queen of England.

FML.

Brian blinks a few times, his ability to ignore my mental breakdown weakening by the moment.

With nothing else to do, I fall into my chair gracelessly. As much as it would make things easier, I guess it's still a good thing there's no bed of spikes on the surface of it.

Brian gathers himself and sits back down in the seat across from mine, and I take a deep breath to try to reset myself.

A cute male waiter in a black bow tie and pressed white shirt chooses the absolute perfect time to serve as a distraction and steps up to our table. He sets a black leather menu down in

front of each of us. “Good evening. My name is Anthony, and I’ll be taking care of you tonight. Can I interest you in a bottle of wine?”

“Wine would be great,” Brian answers and peruses the list. After a minute of browsing, he scrunches up his nose in what I can only assume is disappointment. “Do you happen to have a red that’s older than a 2015?” he asks—well, scoffs. But I try my best not to judge him for it. He just sat through a full slapstick comedy routine without walking out on me.

“Actually, we do not,” Anthony responds with a neutral smile. “But we do have a white that’s from 2007.”

Brian sighs and looks at me with a tilt of his head. “Would you mind the 2007 Sauvignon Blanc, Ava? If we want to actually enjoy our wine, it’s probably our best bet tonight.”

I almost open my mouth to tell him that I don’t like wine and to remind him that Britney Spears’s shaved head and her MTV Music Awards performance made it pretty damn clear that 2007 was a bad year, but I quickly remind myself that this is a first date and I need to be on my best behavior.

“Actually, I think I’ll just start with a glass of lemonade,” I hedge. “I don’t really drink much anyway, and it’s fine if the lemonade is from this year. Actually, I’d prefer it.”

I giggle a little at my joke and expect a similar chuckle from Brian, but signs of a sense of humor never come.

Damn, tough crowd.

Our server Anthony, on the other hand, smirks down at me in amusement.

“So, you don’t want any wine?” Brian asks for clarification, and I shake my head.

“No thank you.”

“Well, if I would’ve known you didn’t drink at all, I would’ve focused on the bourbons. That’s my preferred drink anyway.” Brian sighs again and glances down at the menu. Eventually, though, after my date finds a grandpa bourbon

that's old enough to make him happy, he gives Anthony his drink order, and then, our food orders.

No joke. *Our* food orders. Apparently, I want linguine tonight.

I didn't know that, but I guess Brian has made some sort of telepathic arrangement with my stomach. It takes everything inside me to bite my tongue and let it go. Honestly, he's lucky I actually *do* like linguine.

Man, this guy isn't quite meeting my expectations thus far. It's almost like Luke was right about him.

No. I shake my head. *Just give him a chance, Ava. Maybe he's super nervous or something?*

First dates *are* really hard, and everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt.



Good God, what time is it?

“Ava, you'll never believe the kind of times my boat has been able to clock on the water since I upgraded her sails.” Brian smiles proudly.

Evidently, it's half-past hell.

Hindsight is truly 20/20.

If I could take a time machine back to the moments before I left my apartment to meet Brian on this date, I would do it, and I would barricade myself inside the damn thing.

All of my linguine is gone, I've had more than enough free bread from the center of the table, and I am *desperate* for some respite. Brian, it seems, has some of the same chromosomal qualities as my mom when it comes to maintaining a conversation without any help at all.

For the past forty minutes, my date has rambled on and on about his boat, named *The Brianna*.

Brian-na, a weird, female variation of his name.

And that's just the tip of the iceberg.

The Brianna, according to the way he speaks about it, is not an inanimate object, but a legitimate *person*.

I actually thought he was talking about his sister or his mom for the first ten minutes, but when he started saying things like "her dinghy" and "her sails," I realized I had severely misjudged the conversation.

I search the room for excuses and come up with a break to the bathroom as my best option.

"That's so great." I force a fake smile to my lips. "But if you don't mind," I add and set my napkin on the table. "I'm going to excuse myself to the ladies' room."

Brian nods and swirls his bourbon around his glass for the one-millionth time. "When you get back, I'll tell you about the time I took my boat out to Catalina. It was wild."

"Fantastic." I grit my teeth in the form of a fake smile and don't waste any more time. Instantly, I hop out of my chair and haul ass into the privacy of the restaurant's bathroom.

Good Lord, if I have to sit through coffee and dessert and listen to him ramble on about that fucking sailboat any longer, I'll die. Face first, right into some tiramisu, I'll kick the boredom bucket.

In the name of survival, I must end this date and do it soon.

With a quick, fortifying look in the mirror, I finish up in the bathroom and wash my hands. I hitch one hip against the counter, pull my cell phone out of my purse, and open up my ongoing text conversation with Luke.

My fingers hover over the screen, seconds away from typing out a *Save me!* message, but then I remember he's probably the last person I want to text about this horrible date. This situation, right here, would only prove he was right about online dating.

In the name of not hearing “I told you so,” I open up my group chat with Desi and Claire instead.

Me: Mayday! Mayday! I'm on the date from hell, and I need one of you to call me with an emergency so I can leave before I die during dessert.

When no one responds, I send another one.

Me: Hello????? This is an emergency, you guys! I need timely responses!

And over the next five or so minutes, I keep demon texting them in the same fashion.

Me: Desi! Claire! Answer your damn phones!

Me: You guys are shitty friends. The worst. Literally.

Me: I mean, what good are friends if they can't bail you out of a horrible first date with a pretend emergency?????

Me: P.S. I wouldn't even be on this stupid date if it weren't for you betches and your dumb ideas!!!

Time is not on my side, and unless I want my date to think the linguine has given me a sudden bout of diarrhea, I need to get back out there, into the sailboat-conversation trenches.

Son of a dinghy.

On a sigh, I slide my cell phone back into my purse, inhale a deep, cavernous breath, and slap a fake smile on my face as I

step back out of my bathroom and head toward *The Brianna's* biggest fan.

“Everything okay?” Brian asks as I slip into my chair. It’s not a strange question. I’ve been gone for at least fifteen minutes. He probably thinks I was in the throes of some *very* serious gastrointestinal distress in there.

“Mm-hm,” I answer with a nod, spreading my napkin out across my lap like I’m throwing a rose on my coffin.

This is it. This is my funeral.

“I guess it’s time to decide on dessert, huh?” He smiles at me as he grabs the dessert menu off the edge of the table and peruses it. “I know exactly what we’ll have,” he adds after a quiet minute and places the menu back down on the table.

We’ll.

Again. What is with this guy and ordering for me?

What if I have fucking food allergies and his dessert choice sends me into anaphylactic shock?

I mean, I don’t. I’m actually miraculously devoid of allergies of any kind, but Brian could be moments away from involuntary manslaughter if I were a different woman, for shit’s sake.

What am I still doing here?

Jesus, Ava. Just end the date if you don’t want to be here anymore. You can do it. It’s not that hard.

When Brian successfully tracks down our nice server Anthony with a *whistle* and a *wave* across the restaurant, I realize I need to woman up and tell him I don’t want dessert.

I open my mouth once, twice, three freaking times, but nothing comes out.

Just tell him already! It’s not that damn difficult!

When the words still don’t come out of my throat, I dive straight into panic mode. In a rush, I act like my phone is ringing and abruptly snatch it out of my purse and hold it up to my ear.

“Hello?” I fake answer far too loudly, and both Anthony and Brian look over at me. “Oh no! Are you okay?” I continue on with the charade. “Oh my gosh! Just stay calm, and I’ll come help you right now!”

I pretend to hit end on the call and shove it back into my purse.

“Is everything okay?” Brian asks.

“No,” I respond and force my face into a concerned frown. “I’m so sorry to cut our date short, but I need to leave.”

“What happened?”

Yeah, Ava, what happened?

Shit. I probably should’ve come up with that *before* I took the fake call.

“Uh...my best friend...he lives across the hall from me, and...he fell...off a step stool...and he can’t walk... It’s bad! *Super* bad! He needs me to take him to the hospital!”

That is probably the worst lie you’ve ever come up with in your life.

“Oh God,” Brian responds and hurriedly pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, shoving his credit card into Anthony’s hand. “Mind closing out our bill really quick? We need to leave right now.”

Wait...*what?* *We* need to leave?

But before I can ask any questions, Anthony has our bill closed out and Brian is shrugging on his suit jacket and following my lead out of the restaurant doors.

“Uh...you don’t have to go with me,” I say over my shoulder as I speedwalk onto the sidewalk. “I’ll call—”

“It’s not a problem, Ava. I’ll walk you home.”

“No, that’s okay!” I exclaim as I pick up my pace. I’m not sure why I’m walking so fast, but I think it’s a combination of trying to lose my date and continue the whole emergency façade.

But, goddamn, Brian has no problem keeping up with me.

Holy mackerel, did he train with Olympic-medal-winning speedwalkers?

“I insist, Ava. And anyway, you said your apartment was only a block from the restaurant. It’s the least I could do. I just hope your friend is okay,” he says, not even out of breath.

Me, on the other hand? I’m panting and sweating like a whore in church.

Brian follows me the whole damn way, keeping up with my quick strides like I’m merely taking a leisurely stroll through Central Park.

When I reach the door to my building, he doesn’t hesitate to follow me inside.

And when I step inside the elevator, he’s there too.

Oh, fan-fucking-tastic...

Discreetly, I pull my cell phone from my purse and type out a quick text to Luke.

Me: Unlock your apartment door and act like you’ve fallen and you can’t get up!

Luke: Huh?

Oh my God! Seriously? How hard is it not to ask any questions and act like one of the old people on those medic alert commercials?

Me: Just freaking do it! I’ll be at your door in like thirty seconds! Injure your ass right now!



CHAPTER

Seven

Luke

I reread the text messages Ava just sent for the third time to make sure what I'm seeing is real. *Unlock your apartment door and act like you've fallen and you can't get up?*

Is she serious right now?

When I hear the faint sound of the building elevator dinging its arrival, I jump up from my couch and head for the door.

The instructions are pretty clear—clearly ridiculous—but if Ava is anything like she normally is in an emergent situation, I'll have enough time to take a peek out the door, assess the seriousness, and respond accordingly.

I crack open the door just as a mess of blond hair and flailing limbs throws itself into the wood bodily, bowling me

down and, ironically, knocking me down in a way that it *will* be tough to get up.

I grunt, and she groans as she gathers herself from her spot on the floor a couple feet in front of me. She's rubbing an elbow I assume she smacked on the ground, but other than that, she seems committed to the ridiculous farce she's perpetrating.

"Ava," I say as she gets up on her knees and crawls over to me just as a man I don't know, wearing a suit and loafers, steps into the open doorway. Suddenly, it all makes sense. My adorably ridiculous friend who cannot, it seems, under any circumstances, just say how she fucking feels.

"Oh my God, Luke!" she exclaims, her words a dramatic rush. "Are you okay? I got here as quickly as I could!"

She runs her hands along my limbs as if checking to see that they're not broken. "Ava," I challenge, shaking my head.

I cannot believe the lengths she will go to in order to avoid a simple awkward moment. She just met this guy, for fuck's sake. Who gives a shit what he thinks?

"Thank you so much for walking me to my building, Brian!" she shouts over her shoulder. "I'll call you later!"

"Wait, is he okay?" the man asks. I have a sneaking suspicion that if Ava were even a little less hot than she is, he would have been gone a long-ass time ago. "Are you sure you don't need some help getting—"

"I'm fine," I interrupt bluntly, moving Ava gently to the side and standing to my feet. Her eyes bug out of her head as she silently calls me every name she can think of, but I have to stop this before I end up in an ambulance on the way to the ER to keep the viability of her story alive.

Loafer Guy's eyes narrow, but I'm a dude, and I know how dudes think. If this shit is as bad as it obviously is for Ava to go to these lengths, he'd rather just know now.

"Brian, right?" I ask, and he nods slowly, glancing between Ava and me in confusion.

“Yeah. How do you—”

I shake my head and hold up a hand. Ava is still mentally cursing my very being, but I ignore her.

“It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re best to just cut your losses, okay? Ava is not into you—”

“Luke!” she yells, embarrassed.

“Well, you’re not, are you?”

Her eyes are actual daggers as she shakes her head.

“But she’s too nice to tell people like it is. So, I’m telling you. Move on. Find someone who won’t get seasick on your boat.”

“Luke!” Ava chastises again, and I shrug.

Brian doesn’t look back as he turns and leaves.

Ava, of course, is mortified.

“What is *wrong* with you, Luke?”

“What’s wrong with me?” I question. “You should be thanking me.”

“He must think I’m such a bitch now!”

“Yeah,” I say with a wave of my arm. “And who cares? Why the fuck do you care what Boat-Lover Brian thinks of you? He’s a stranger, Ava. Who gives a fuck?”

“I do!” she snaps, and I shake my head, head back to the couch, and take a seat.

“You don’t. Or you shouldn’t anyway. Just relax and be thankful the date with loafer boy is over.”

“It was *my* date,” she says, as if she was in control of it at all.

“If you don’t want me involved next time, don’t involve me,” I say simply before turning the volume on the TV back up to an audible level.

She stays by the door, stewing for a while—I can see her out of the corner of my eye—but eventually, she gives in,

kicks off her shiny black heels, and walks toward my kitchen.

“You got any ice cream?” she asks and pads her bare feet into my kitchen. “I didn’t have dessert.”

“Ava.” A laugh jumps from my chest. “You are...”

“Enchanting?” she asks with a teasing lilt as she opens my freezer.

“You’re something, all right,” I mutter to myself.

“What was that?” she asks, walking from the kitchen to the living room and joining me on the sofa.

“I said, I guess I was right about Brian.”

She rolls her pretty sapphire eyes. “The date was horrible. He is a wine snob who kept ordering all my food and wouldn’t shut up about his goddamn boat, and I had to get out of there before I had to sit through a forty-minute dessert with him. A woman can only hear about a man’s dinghy so many times before she snaps.”

“Is dinghy a metaphor or...”

She smacks my arm, and I laugh. When she doesn’t say anything else, I venture into the dark place of our friendship where I have to slap reality across her face.

“You should’ve just told him you wanted to call it an early night, Ava. Or you needed to get home. Or, I don’t know, thanked him for dinner and just been honest that you weren’t really feeling it with him.”

“I just... I didn’t want to offend him.”

“It’s always better to be honest. Especially with guys. We’re very simple creatures, babe.”

She shoves another bite of ice cream into her mouth and mulls over my words.

“I don’t want to be the one to say I told you so, but I told you online dating wasn’t worth it.”

“Yet, here you are, saying it,” she sasses with narrowed eyes.

I shrug.

“Dating *Boat-Lover Brian* wasn’t worth it. I don’t know yet about online dating.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re going on more TapNext dates?”

“I’m no quitter, London. I wouldn’t feel right calling myself a Columbia graduate if I didn’t give this the old college try.”

My brows snap together in confusion, and if I’m honest, a little bit of unexplained, seemingly irrational anger. “You can’t be serious, Ace.”

“Oh, but I am,” she responds without hesitation. “I already have another date planned. With Abe.”

All I can do is shake my head and snag the spoon from her hands, popping a bite of ice cream into my mouth.

Christ. What kind of role am I going to be expected to play next time?



CHAPTER

Eight

November 14th

Ava

The subway at rush hour should be avoided like the plague. Any New Yorker who's worth their weight in salt knows this to be true. Unfortunately, always avoiding the subway during its busiest hours is entirely unavoidable.

Everything happens during rush hour.

Getting to work.

Leaving work.

Dinner with friends.

Cocktail hour.

My fourth TapNext date at an art gallery opening in Chelsea.

I wish I could say I'm excited about this date, but I'm not. Between smug Brian rambling about his boat, Abe trying to buy Whiskers—*his cat that he brought on our date*—a movie ticket and getting in a fight with the poor ticket-booth lady when she wouldn't sell him the ticket, and Frank showing up in a fishnet muscle shirt to Starbucks, the expectation bar is at an all-time low.

Truthfully, I'm not sure it could get any lower. Plus, Luke has officially renounced himself as my way out of any more dates I may choose to go on.

I've put him through a lot, I'll give him that—a fake injury with Brian, asking him to impersonate my doctor and tell Abe I only had one week to live, and pretending to be a jealous boyfriend who dragged me out of Starbucks in front of an agape Frank—but I wish he could just understand how hard it is for me to disappoint other people or how unwilling I am to go home for Christmas-wedding-reunion hell alone.

Though, I never seem to have that issue with him.

Why wouldn't he just agree to go with me and play my fake boyfriend? *Gah.*

The A train's brakes screech and squeak as it comes to a stop in front of me, and when I step through the doors, jockeying around the people exiting, I'm blessed with the familiar rush-hour vision—my fellow subway goers packed in like sardines.

Cheers to too many people crammed into a small metal tube, underneath the ground, which will be sent rocketing through New York's underground subway tunnels!

Honestly, it's enough to make any claustrophobe's skin crawl.

Which, thankfully, I am not.

Already knowing that every seat is full, I choose a teeny-tiny spot toward the back of the car where I can use one of the silver metal poles to keep my balance if the ride gets bumpy.

It doesn't take long before we're off, the train picking up speed through the tunnels and heading toward my final

destination in Chelsea.

The operator says something over the speakers, but like always, it sounds more like Marlon Brando talking with a mouthful of marshmallows while holding a microphone directly pressed against his lips than anything that could be deemed coherent.

Typical NYC subway.

The times you can actually hear what the operator is saying are so few and far between that most passengers just subconsciously tune out the muffled overhead voice. *Unless* the train comes to a complete stop in the middle of a dark tunnel. Then *everyone* listens. Or tries to listen. Or panics and starts asking everyone else if they can understand what is being said.

Now doesn't appear to be one of those times.

The train continues to move, and I carefully pull my cell phone out of my favorite black leather crossbody purse without bumping into my fellow subway-sardines.

When I check the screen, I find three notifications from my mom.

Mom: Ava, I just ran into Callie at the bank, and she mentioned how she's excited to meet your boyfriend...

Of course, she ran into Callie. You know, the very person who has been bombarding my email for the past two weeks about cakes and name tags and utter bullshit.

Mom: Did you forget to tell me something?

Mom: Ava Marie??? Hello????

On a sigh, I type out a response before she spams the shit out of me so much that I somehow manage to go over my unlimited text message plan.

Me: Oh yeah, Mom. I forgot to tell you that I just got back from a girls' trip to Vegas where I met a Swedish man named Sven, fell in love, and got married. Mazel Tov!

Her response is immediate.

Mom: WHAT?

Me: He's a really nice man, Mom. He had to go back to Sweden to run his Swedish Fish candy factory, but he's already applied to get me citizenship so I can move to his country soon.

Mom: Ava Marie Lucie. You better be joking.

Me: Actually, it's Ava Marie Skarsgard.

I *think* my favorite *True Blood* vampire, Alexander Skarsgard, is Swedish? Or is he Finnish?

Oh well. It doesn't matter; she won't know the difference.

Also, I'm pretty sure there's supposed to be an accent mark above one of those a's, but hell if I know what that is or how to get my iPhone to do it.

My cell buzzes with an incoming call from ***Mom***, and I can't hide my smile when I hit decline. I know I probably shouldn't mess with Rose Lucie this much, but I can't help it. Considering all the shenanigans she's recently tossed my way, my lovely mother deserves a little teasing.

Mom: Ava, why aren't you answering my call?! You better explain yourself! Fast!

Me: Fine. I can see my new marriage to Sven is upsetting to you, so I'll request an annulment. Consider my marriage canceled. No more Sven. No more free Swedish Fish. No more future citizenship to Sweden.

Mom: AVA!!!!

Me: What, Mom? I thought you wanted me to get married.

Mom: Not like this!

I can't help but laugh.

Me: Relax, Mom. I'm not married.

Mom: But you DO have a new boyfriend that you haven't told me about, right??? Can I just say that I'm so excited to meet him!

Sigh. This is exactly why you should never lie about anything. It always comes back to bite you in the ass. Not only have I hooked my reunion's hopes on finding someone, now my mother has probably blown half her money at David's Bridal "just in case."

Mom: Is it too early for me to start asking what kind of food he likes since you guys will be here for two weeks in

December? I want to make sure I have my fridge stocked with all his favorites so he feels at home! ☺

See what I mean? She's already trying to get a fucking grocery list together for a month from now.

Mom: Oh, and I want to make sure he has something under the tree from us to open on Christmas morning! You need to give me some gift ideas!

And the texts just keep on coming...

Mom: And his name! I need to know all about this new fella of yours! Oh my gosh, this is so exciting! I mean, I'm mad at you for not telling me, but I forgive you, sweetie.

Shit.

Don't lie, kids. Or else you'll have to deal with the backlash of your mom buying your imaginary boyfriend a wristwatch off Etsy and finding out on Christmas morning that you don't have a boyfriend, and then your dad will probably start wearing the damn wristwatch, and every time your meddling mother sees it, she'll remind you about that time you lied about having a boyfriend, and then it will just become this ongoing thing for the rest of your freaking life.

Although, right now, I'm going to have to not practice what I preach. Instead, I'll hold on to the fragile hope that I will somehow find the man of my dreams in the next couple days and fix all my problems the unconventional way.

Seeing that my train is only a minute away from my final stop in Chelsea, I type out a quick message that will end this insane conversation—for now.

Me: Mom, I gotta run, but I'll be sure to tell you all the details soon.

Her response—*I can't wait!*—comes a few seconds later, followed by ten freaking smiley-face emojis.

Hey, God, it's me, Ava. Can you, uh, do me a huge favor and make tonight's date with Mark be the equivalent of a real-life Hallmark movie? Or is that asking too much?

The train comes to a stop, and I slip my phone back into my purse and step onto the platform with the rest of the crowd. It takes me a good five minutes just to get up the steps and onto the sidewalk thanks to how crowded it is, but once I reach the outside, the brisk, late-fall air brushes against my face and provides a much-needed emotional cooldown.

Three blocks later, I stop in front of Art New Vogue, a popular gallery in Chelsea and the very place I'll be meeting my date.

Thankfully, this time, I had the foresight of sneaking a reminder peek at his profile picture before I hopped on the subway, and when I grab the black metal handle of the large glass door and step inside, I spot him.

Light-brown hair, gray eyes, and tanned skin covered by a white collared shirt, navy suit, and matching tie, Mark Dawson stands near the reception desk of the gallery with a khaki trench coat hanging across his arm.

Man, he's, like, crazy dressed up.

I have to admit, though, he looks really good.

I glance down at my simple black shift dress, jean jacket, and ankle boots and silently wonder if I missed the formal memo. But that thought bubble is quickly popped when Mark smiles and steps toward me.

“Ava?” he asks, and I nod.

“It's nice to finally meet you in person, Mark,” I greet and almost reach out my hand for a shake but choose a half hug in

the name of not being as formal as his suit. “Did you have any trouble finding the gallery?”

“I think I found it as well as you can find anything in Chelsea,” he responds, and I don’t miss the way he lets the name of the neighborhood roll off his tongue with a hint of disdain.

“You don’t like Chelsea?” I ask, and he scrunches up his face like he just shoved fifteen Sour Patch Kids into his mouth.

“Does anyone like Chelsea?” A stuffy laugh follows. “I think we can both agree that it’s at the bottom of the totem pole when it comes to New York hot spots.”

Actually, I can’t agree. Some of my favorite galleries, shops, and restaurants are in Chelsea, but I bite my tongue and choose a friendly, nonconfrontational direction to steer the conversation.

“So...shall we see some art?”

“Let’s do it,” Mark responds and reaches out his arm so I can slide my hand around his elbow. “Although, I have to admit, I don’t know anything about the artist. Or any art, for that matter. I’m more of a sports and numbers guy, if you know what I mean.”

A stock trader by day, my date is the opposite of me. Where he spends his days on Wall Street, I spend my days at the Met and art auctions and galleries like this. But that isn’t necessarily a bad thing, you know? Sometimes, opposites do attract.

“That’s okay,” I respond with a little wink as we stroll toward the first area of the exhibition. “Something tells me I know enough to get you up to speed.”

Mark smiles, and we come to a stop in front of the first work. It’s truly remarkable, and I observe a moment of silence to take it all in while I assume he’s doing the same.

I glance in his direction to find him looking a little lost, but I remind myself he isn’t a part of the art world, and it’s probably a lot just to be thrown into the deep end.

“The artist’s name is Juliet Seraphina,” I say. “She’s a very popular, up-and-coming artist who made big waves in Moscow, and as you can see, her popularity is spreading across the world.”

He nods at my explanation and glances back at the wall, so I take a quiet moment to soak up her first piece again—a three-dimensional wall work that layers painting, screen printing, and laser-cut wood.

This is Juliet’s signature style, and her past works grew in popularity because of the way she reimagined scenes that focused on the alchemical properties of nature, and things like water, wind, fire, and light took center stage.

This piece, while it still uses her preferred materials, is different.

With a viewpoint from space, she captures the tiny essence of Earth in such a clever, original way.

“I guess that’s supposed to be outer space?” my date asks finally, and I nod with a smile.

“Yes.” I point toward the bottom of the painting. “And that’s Earth.”

“What? That little fucking ball is Earth?”

“Uh-huh,” I answer, after giggling a little. “She’s trying to convey how small we really are in the entirety of the universe.”

“Oh, gotcha.” My date just shrugs and shoves his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

Juliet’s stuff *is* a little out there for non-artsy people, so I gesture for him to follow me, and we move on to the next installation. It’s much more aesthetically accessible.

He told me that art isn’t really his thing, but he still agreed to go on a first date to a gallery because he knew art was *my* thing. I owe him the effort to give him a fair chance at finding something he can get interested in.

We make our way through three more artists’ work, but with each one, Mark gets a little more antsy and a little less

capable of camouflaging his boredom.

When we reach the back corner of the gallery, Mark spots a small table with drinks and snacks and perks up a little.

“Would you like a glass of wine, Ava?”

I have no desire for wine, but I agree. Just for the hell of it. “Sure. Wine would be great.”

“Fantastic,” he responds, his voice the most cheerful it’s been all night. “I’ll go grab us a few drinks, then. Be right back.”

While he takes an art breather, I move to the next piece. Which, honestly, I think might be Juliet’s best at this exhibition. This work is huge, taking up an entire wall and curving around you in a way that makes you feel as if you’re within the stars. It’s amazing. Truly amazing, and I can’t stop myself from pulling my cell out of my purse, snapping a secret picture of it, and texting it to the one person it makes me think about.

Not even a minute later, my phone vibrates with a response.

Luke: That’s incredible!

Me: I know, right??? One day, this will be your view.

Soon, my best friend will be an astronaut for NASA. *And it’s probably only a matter of time before he gets the call and will have to pack up his New York apartment to move across the country to Houston...*

The thought makes my chest expand and tighten at the same time.

Of course, I love watching him soar and knowing he’s achieving all of his dreams, but what am I going to do without my best friend across the hall from me?

Luke: We don't know that yet, Ace.

Me: You don't know that yet, but I do. ;) Also, I think I want to be Juliet Seraphina when I grow up. She's so bold. So confident. And I'm officially obsessed with her art.

Luke: The only difference between you and Juliet Seraphina is that you're more talented.

I roll my eyes and type out a response.

Me: You're biased. And you lie.

Luke: I may be biased, but I don't lie. That gallery display could be yours if you'd just believe in yourself like you believe in me.

His words urge nerves to balloon inside my chest.

God, I wish I had Luke's confidence. I wish I had his attitude about chasing dreams, and I wish I believed in me like I believe in him. But it's *so* hard.

Which is probably why, instead of focusing on my own art, I got a job focusing on other peoples' art.

Luke: How's the date going, by the way? Is Marky-Mark and the Funky Bunch everything you thought he'd be?

Me: Well, he's no Mark Wahlberg and I'm pretty sure he hates art, but he didn't try to get his cat into the gallery, so I'm calling that a win for now.

Luke: LOL. Why do you think he hates art?

Me: Because he got more excited over the refreshment table than anything else in the room.

Luke: Well, you know, sometimes those art galleries serve really great wine...

Me: You and I both know that's a lie.

Luke: Yeah. Their wine is shit.

Even though I should probably get back to focusing on my date, I can't stop myself from asking him one question that's been bugging me tonight.

Me: Do you think I'm an art snob?

Luke: What do you mean by that?

Me: Like, do I act like I'm better than someone, or maybe internally think that I'm better than someone, because I'm knowledgeable about art?

Luke: No. You're the complete opposite, Ace. You go out of your way to make someone feel comfortable when they try new things.

Me: Are you sure? You're not just saying that because you're my best friend?

Luke: I know for a fact because I don't know about art, and you never make me feel inferior because of it.

Luke: You need to stop being so hard on yourself. You're amazing, beautiful, funny, smart, kind. Any guy who can't see that or thinks otherwise or makes you feel differently about yourself doesn't deserve your time, okay? Stop feeling like you have to give these guys any of your fucking energy. He doesn't make you feel good? Send his ass packing, Ace. On to the next.

Instantly, my chest expands at his kind words.

Somehow, Luke never fails to make me feel good about myself or step up to the plate and support me when I need him the most. It's like he has a sixth sense of what I'm feeling and what I need or don't need. Even after I've put him through the best friend dating wringer.

Me: Thanks, Luke.

Luke: Anytime, Ace. Ride or die, babe.

It's amazing how vivid the memory of the first time he said that to me is, back when we were sophomores in college. I smile. I can't help it, but when I spot Mark heading my way with two glasses of wine and a grin, I slip my phone back into my purse.

"I hope you don't mind, but I spotted a client of mine."

"Not a problem." I smile at him and, out of politeness, take a sip of wine from the glass he hands off to me. "And thank you. For the wine."

“So...back to the art, I guess...” he mutters, more to himself than me.

But I can't unhear it, and before we get back to looking at Seraphina's paintings, I turn to face him. “Do you want to leave?”

“Fuck, I thought you'd never ask.” A giant, relieved sigh escapes his lungs, and in an instant, semi-polite Mark goes *poof* into thin air. “Is it just me, or is time moving like a damn snail while looking at all of this shit? Shit that I'm pretty sure any-fucking-one could do, by the way.” He snorts. “Like, I think my mom has better finger paintings from when I was in kindergarten.”

He chuckles. Downs the rest of his wine. And then, holds out his hand.

“Let's blow this popsicle stand, *amiright?*”

I look at his hand and then back at him. And then back at his hand.

Out of irrational friendliness, I'm so close to just agreeing with him and leaving the gallery, but Luke's voice chastises me in my head.

Stand up for yourself, Ava. It doesn't matter what the fuck this stranger thinks. Just do it.

I want to stay at the gallery and finish walking through the exhibition. And, frankly, I kind of want to do that alone.

Time to shit or get off the pot.

“You know what?” I respond and hand my glass of wine back to Mark. “I don't really like wine. Actually, I hate wine, but I was just agreeing to be nice and because you seemed like you were insanely bored. Which, honestly, is fine. I get it. Art isn't everyone's thing.”

Mark just stares at me, disbelief making the lines at the corners of his eyes crinkle, but I keep going.

“And I don't want to leave. I want to stay. But I think you should leave.”

“You want me to leave?” he questions with narrowed eyes.
“Without you?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “I don’t think we’re really vibing, you know? So, let’s just cut our losses now.”

“That’s it?” he challenges bluntly, an edge to his voice that makes me feel even more thankful I decided to use my backbone now.

I nod again. “Mark, thank you for giving an art gallery a try, even though it isn’t really your thing. I really appreciated it. Have a good night, okay?”

“Have a good night?” he retorts on a barking laugh and downs the rest of my wine before tossing both of the cups onto a small table below an installation. “*Ha*. That’s hilarious.” He shrugs on his trench coat. “FYI, sugar, I didn’t go to an art gallery to make you feel all special and shit. I came here because I figured it’d at least get me fucking laid, and if you were lucky, I’d eat your pussy. And, by the way, every woman who gets to experience my mouth on their pussy has the time of their fucking lives.” He shakes his head at me on a sigh. Like I’m the one who’s missing out or something. “And what are you doing on TapNext anyway? It’s not some place to find your fucking Prince Charming, it’s a goddamn hookup site.”

And just like that, he’s gone. Without a goodbye, striding right out of the gallery.

It’s one of the most embarrassing scenes I’ve ever been a part of.

And yet, I feel the best I’ve felt in a while.

Maybe my ride-or-die has been right all along.



CHAPTER

Nine

Spring break, fourteen years ago...

Luke

I grab the steaming bowl of popcorn from the microwave and walk quickly toward my futon to set it down on the table. The DVD player is fired up, the menu screen for *Wedding Crashers* dancing with its readiness to be played.

The dorm is pretty quiet otherwise, with most of my fellow co-eds either at home recharging their batteries for spring break or away on nonstop booze-pounding vacations—the latter of which includes my girlfriend, Nicole. We've only been together for a couple weeks, and I probably should have taken her up on her offer to join her and seven of her friends in Cancun, but even with last-minute plane ticket and hotel costs aside, it didn't really sound like that good of a time.

Don't get me wrong, Cancun for spring break could be fucking fantastic and my uncle Gary probably would've spotted me the cash, but I've seen Nicole's friends in action and it almost always ends up in a goddamn drunken disaster. One that I would've had to help clean up...*every single night*.

Instead of a fun-filled vacation, it sounded like the kind of fucking headache Advil can't cure.

Ready to dive into the movie, I plop down on my futon and pick up the remote. My finger hovers over the play button when, like a whip of thunder in a silent sky, my door flies open and bangs into the adjacent wall with a crack. I jump at the unexpectedly violent entry, and my eyebrows knit tightly together as Ava comes whirling inside my dorm, all limbs and blustery blond hair.

"Code Blue! Code Blue!" she yells frantically, the only other explanation being a series of panting, winded breaths.

I jump to my feet and look behind her, half expecting a fire or, I don't know, a nuclear explosion, when she grabs me by the shirt and repeats her cryptic plea. "Code Blue, Luke!"

"I don't know what that means, Ava." I try to reason calmly, but that only angers her more, and the familiar little line between her eyebrows that forms in moments of extreme emotion digs deep into her otherwise perfect complexion.

"Didn't you pay any attention to *Grey's Anatomy* last week?" she screeches.

"I did. In fact, I paid loads of attention to the sexual dalliances. I don't remember paying attention to a Code Blue, though." But Meredith and Cristina and Addison and Izzie? Well, I was definitely paying attention to them.

"It means a medical emergency, you horndog!" She turns to run back out of my dorm, yelling over her shoulder, "Now, come on!"

Real concern hitting me for the first time since she thudded into my room, I grab my Nokia off the desktop in case I need to make a call and take off at a run down the hallway after her.

It doesn't surprise me that we end up at her room, what with her track record for disaster and all, but Desi is away in Destin, and Ava and Ben broke up two weeks ago. A weird, pinch-y feeling in my chest makes me nervous for whom I'm going to find in there needing assistance.

Ava bounds in the door, and I follow closely behind. We only make it three feet into the small room before I realize something strange is at play and speak up.

"Ava, there's no one here. Why on earth would you get me all worked up, thinking there's a—"

It's almost scary how close I come to saying *guy in here*. I don't even understand it, really. We're friends. But my God, I wasn't looking forward to finding some douche with a twelve-foot dick that somehow got injured during sex, lying in Ava's bed.

Finding the room empty is strangely comforting.

"A...medical emergency," I finally finish. "We could be watching *Wedding Crashers* right now, and the popcorn is getting cold."

"Shut up and get over here!" she yells, scooping a tiny, *clearly dead* goldfish out of the bowl next to Desi's bed. "Do CPR. Do mouth-to-mouth! Do something!"

Oh.

I step closer to my frantic friend's back and put a calming hand to the top of her shaking one as she tries to use her finger to perform chest compressions on Sir Swims A Lot. He's been a staple in their dorm room since freshman year, and I know Desi has a huge attachment to the little guy.

As it seems, she may not be the only one.

"He's gone, Ava. I'm sorry."

A shaky rattle betrays her emotion as she sighs. "What are we gonna do, Luke? Desi loves him. I promised I wouldn't let anything happen to him while she was gone, and now look. He's dead. Just like Teddys one through four."

"This isn't your fault, babe. Fish don't live forever."

“This one should have!” she sobs.

Heartbroken at the sight of her heartbreak, I turn her to face me and pull her into my chest and squeeze her tight.

She quivers for a couple minutes, but eventually, she manages to calm down.

It’s only then that the best plan for everyone comes to mind.

“Come on,” I say, scooping the poor little guy up in my hands and heading for the bathroom. “I’m going to help you give Sir a proper toilet burial, and then we’ll head down to the pet store and get another little guy that looks just like him.”

“What? Why would we do that?”

“Because Desi loves him. Loves his company. And because some other little fish would love to have the same from her.”

“Okay...” She pauses and searches my eyes. “But why would *you* do this, then? Help me get rid of the body and everything?”

“Because you, Ava Lucie, are my ride-or-die.”

She nods then, resolute. “Good. Because I’m pretty sure you’re mine too.”



CHAPTER

Ten

November 14th

Ava

I step off my elevator and head toward the door of my place, slightly dejected by the fact that I've gone on four TapNext dates and none of them has been a success.

I'm running out of time to find someone to take home with me who isn't a *complete* stranger, and the anxiety of possibly having to face my web of lies with Callie and my mom is nearly vomit-inducing.

I just want to get in my apartment, turn on the Kardashians, and eat twenty-three pizza bagels to ease the feeling.

But I'm stopped dead in my tracks when I find Luke in the middle of our shared hallway, lying between both of our

apartments and sprawled across the old and squeaky hardwood floor.

“Luke?” I question, and he peeks out of one eye to meet my confused gaze.

“Where’s your date?”

“Who the fuck knows, and who cares. I think the bigger question to ask right now is what are you doing?” I ask as he pulls himself off the floor and to his feet. It’s then that I notice the color red on his forehead and right arm and T-shirt. My eyes go wide. “Oh my God, are you bleeding?”

He takes one finger to swipe the red from his forehead and sticks that finger in his mouth and grins. “It’s ketchup.”

A laugh pops from my throat. “What on earth...?”

“I wasn’t sure if you needed another fake emergency.”

But he said—

“I know I said I wouldn’t do it, but Mark sounded like a douche and a half. No way I was going to let you guilt-fuck the guy.”

“Very funny,” I answer and shake my head. On the inside, I’m smiling, but after the hellish date I just had to experience, it’s hard to let happiness prevail. “Is that why you texted me about five minutes ago to see if I was on my way home?”

“Yeah.” He grins, but when he searches my eyes, that grin slips off his lips. “You okay?”

All I can do is shrug, and Luke steps toward me to wrap his big, strong arms around my shoulders, pulling me into a hug.

“What’s wrong, Ace?”

“Everything, Luke. Everything,” I say on a whisper and bury my face into his chest. “My date was awful, just the absolute worst experience ever. I have to deal with daily emails from Callie about that stupid reunion, and now my mom thinks I actually have a boyfriend and has probably

bought him fucking Pop-Tarts for breakfast and a damn stocking to put on the mantel.”

“I only understood about half of what you just said, but...” He pauses and squeezes me tighter as he gently rubs his palm down my back. “I promise everything is going to be okay.”

I sigh into his chest. “God, I hope you’re right.”

We stand like that for a long minute, and he gently sways us from side to side, like we’re slow dancing in the middle of the hallway.

“Did you eat dinner?”

I shake my head.

“You want to come over, order some takeout, and watch *Golden Girls*?”

“No thanks. I think I’m just going to call it a night and go to bed.”

“No? To the *Golden Girls*? Sophia would be so disappointed in you right now.” His words urge a giggle to my lips, and he dramatically but also tenderly checks my forehead and cheeks for a fever. “Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” he asks, and I can’t stop myself from leaning into his touch and closing my eyes.

God, that feels good...

I lean into his touch more.

So good...

“Ava?” he asks, but his voice has grown oddly quiet.

I slowly open my eyes to find him staring down at me. Brown eyes to blue, I don’t know how long we stand there like that, still in an embrace, and his hand still caressing my cheek.

We’re just looking into each other’s eyes.

And my gaze wants to move to his lips.

Just to see what they look like right now...

“Ava?” Luke whispers my name again.

I don't know what I want to say or what I want to do or what is even happening, but I *look*. At his lips. And then back at his eyes. And then back at his lips.

Uh...what are you doing...?

Yeah, what *am* I doing?

Shit. I blink my eyes once, twice, three times and gently disentangle myself from our embrace and put a few steps of distance between us.

Was I seriously just going to try to kiss my best friend?

No way. There's no freaking way...*right?*

"You all right?" he asks again.

"Uh-huh," I mutter, but I feel all out of sorts. Just...all over the damn place.

But when his eyes fill with concern, I force a little grin to my lips.

"I'm fine. Just tired is all." I try to reassure him. And fuck, probably myself too. "It's safe to say I'm ready to take a hot shower, go to bed, and pray that, tomorrow, Mr. Perfect will find me on TapNext," I attempt to add levity to the conversation, but the words feel all wrong coming off my tongue.

His brow furrows. "Still giving online dating the old college try, huh?"

"I don't know... I guess so?" I shrug, and just saying that out loud makes me feel desperate. Pathetic. Miserable. You name it, if it's a bad emotion, I'm feeling it right now.

Pretty sure all that desperation almost made you kiss your best friend...

Lord Almighty, this whole "Find a Boyfriend" circus is starting to wear on me.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Promise," I lie again, but it's more for his benefit than mine.

Because I hate to see the worry in his eyes.

Because the last thing I want to do is push my crap onto him.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” I ask and step toward my apartment to unlock the door.

“Actually, this weekend, I’m back and forth to London. But Tuesday, I’ll be around in the evening. I only have short flights to Miami.”

“Okay, well, be safe out there.” I offer him one last, small smile. “Night, Luke.”

“Night, Ava.”



CHAPTER

Eleven

November 16th

Ava

I should be working.

I should be using my Monday morning time wisely to, you know, go through work emails and walk around the museum and check out the latest art installations—*that I've been waiting to see all set up for the past three months, mind you*—in the South Wing.

But instead, I've made two phone calls to bakeries in Lakewood for my stupid high school reunion, and now, I'm busy hiding out in my office, browsing online dating profiles, and trying to avoid my mother's persistent text messages and phone calls about my nonexistent boyfriend.

Her last message? *Ava, you need to tell me his name! P.S. Does he prefer apple or cherry pie? Or maybe he doesn't like pie at all and would like something completely different for Christmas desserts??*

My response? *Apple pie is fine, Mom.*

But that's mostly because Rose Lucie makes an insanely good apple pie. Like "move over Betty Crocker, there's a new dessert sheriff in town" kind of good. It's also the only kind of pie Luke and I ever eat anymore because he's convinced himself it doesn't break his NASA preparation diet as much as chocolate or pecan or even cherry since there are apples in it.

It's dumb. But he puts up with me, and I put up with him. It's how we work.

Of course, my mom responds with another three texts about a guy who doesn't exist and whose name I don't know because he doesn't exist, but I act like a child and ignore them.

Sheesh, Ava. This is starting to get really sad.

I wholeheartedly agree with my inner subconscious, but that doesn't stop my TapNext progress. With one quick tap of my index finger, I pull up the app and go to my ever-changing list of potential matches. The first man on the list is a thirty-two-year-old guy named Henry. He's not drop-dead gorgeous, but he's not bad-looking either. I scroll down to his bio and read.

I'm looking for a beautiful woman who is sweet and kind and healthy.

Must-haves: honesty, kindness, both kidneys, be a nonsmoker and a nondrinker, have never used drugs, and loves working out and taking care of herself. Type O negative, preferred.

Holy moly. Is it just me, or is Henry planning on stealing someone's organs?

Without hesitation, I decline his match and head to the next guy on the list.

Andrew, 39

I'm a nice guy and an entrepreneur who has absolutely no interest in committing murder. I'm looking for a special someone to spend my life with, but obviously, we'll start with a lovely evening that will one-hundred-percent end with you back at your house safely! Because, again, I have no intention of committing murder.

Also, jail isn't all that bad. And I'd like the record to show that I wasn't guilty that one time I was arrested and had to do five years.

What is with these guys? Why are they advertising their vices so obviously? Andrew clearly *actually wants* to murder someone.

Next option, please!

Mike, 35

Life is all about goals.

Here are my top 3 goals:

- 1. To hold a massive python or anaconda or any huge snake, really.**
- 2. One time, to find out what it feels like to have insects on me naked.**
- 3. Breed Labrador retrievers.**

Jesus.

I'm really beginning to understand why Carrie Bradshaw had such a hard time finding a guy in New York. I used to think she was a lunatic for being so obsessed with Mr. Big

when he kept letting her down over and over *and over* again, but now, it's starting to all make sense.

At this rate, with *these* online dating pool options, I'm either going to bring home a serial killer, some guy with an animal fetish, or have to resort to calling Boat-Lover Brian back up and asking him for a second chance.

Sheesh. Where are all the good, normal single men in New York?

Well, one of them—who just so happens to be one of the best guys you know—literally lives across the hall from you, you almost tried to kiss him the other night, and you friend-zoned him years ago...

I exhale a deep sigh.

I did *not* try to kiss Luke Friday night. I just got a little too cozy with his hand on my face. I'm chalking it up to a lack of affection in general. I mean, it's been a long while since I've felt someone else's touch.

Ava, it's safe to say all the "find a boyfriend" pressure is starting to get to you.

Instantly, I close out of the TapNext app, slide my phone back into my blazer pocket, and stand up and stretch my arms above my head.

I have to do something else. Anything else. Besides this.

I glance at the clock on my desk and see it's only a little after ten. I still have another two hours before I'm supposed to meet Claire and Desi.

Instead of wallowing until my lunch date with the girls and reliving memories of Mark talking about his pussy breath, I choose to do something productive. Destination confirmed, I head out of my office and toward the South Wing.

Surely, what I'll find there will be enough to take the edge off my weird-as-fuck mood.

A girl can hope, right?



“So, how’s online dating going?”

Of. Fucking. Course. It only took ten minutes into lunch with my best gal pals before this dreaded subject came up. The one I’ve been trying *not* to think about for the past few hours.

I sigh and drop my forehead onto the table. “Horrible,” I mutter and glance up at my friends. “I’ve been on four dates, and every single one has been an absolute dud.”

“Four dates?” Desi’s eyes turn skeptical. “It’s been almost three weeks, and you’ve only been on four dates?”

“Yes. Four dates.” I lift my head off the table and narrow my eyes at her. “Which feels like an eternity when you’re stuck at dinner with some guy named Brian who talks about his sailboat like he wants to fuck it. Or Mr. Pussy Breath, who was appalled I didn’t give myself the gift of his tongue.”

Claire bursts out into laughter.

Desi grins. “Well, that’s disturbing.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” I respond through a sigh. “The odds of me finding someone to bring home for the holidays, my baby sister’s wedding, and that stupid reunion are looking dismal.”

“It can’t be that bad,” Desi chimes in. “I’m sure there’re other guys out there. You just have to try a little harder.”

“Try a little harder?” I repeat. “Des, I’ve scoured that dating app. Looked at what feels like over a thousand profiles, and unless I want to bring an ax murderer home for the holidays, I think I might be shit out of luck.”

“It’s a shame you can’t just bring Luke home with you,” Claire comments, and I tilt my head to the side.

“I asked him in the beginning. He said no.”

“Really? I wonder why. You guys do everything together anyway. You’re basically attached at the hip.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, but you know our relationship isn’t like that. We’re literally just friends. Have been for years. And you know he hates how much I avoid everything. He’d rather I just told everyone the truth.”

“Maybe he’s right,” Desi asserts with a shrug of one shoulder. “I mean, it sounds like it’s safer than bringing home a guy who’s a murder risk.”

Claire snorts. “Yeah, that would certainly put a damper on the holidays.”

“I can’t. It’s just...way too complicated at this point.”

“So, take Luke,” Claire suggests.

“I told you. I already asked. He said no.”

Desi snorts. “Ask again, then. If you really push the issue, there is no way Luke is going to tell you no.”

Claire nods her agreement avidly.

I sigh and take a sip of iced tea. “My family knows Luke, though.”

“So, tell them you’re not just friends anymore,” Desi supplies. “I mean, you guys are super close. It probably wouldn’t be that hard to fake a relationship.”

Would it really work? Fake-dating Luke?

Your lips seemed to think it would work the other night.

I shake off the thought and sigh. “I was hoping to find something *real*.”

“It’s pretty hard to force something, Ava,” Claire says, her voice soft. “Love just happens. Finding someone...just happens. On its own schedule.”

I do know that relationships generally don’t happen on a fucking deadline.

But is forcing Luke into this really the best option?

I mean, he always has my back, but this? It feels like I'd be asking for a lot. A little too much, to be honest.

I just need to put on my big-girl panties and keep trying.

I need to forget about all the prior weirdos I've been subjected to—*the Sailboat Fucker and the Cat Lover and Mr. Fishnet Tee and Señor Pussy Lover*—and chalk those up as an online dating learning curve. It's kind of like beginner's luck in poker; only, you have to get through the shit hands at the beginning instead of the end.

Surely, if I keep giving TapNext a try, I can match with someone who is nice and vaguely normal enough to bring home for the holidays...right?

God help me.



CHAPTER

Twelve

November 17th

Luke

At a little after eight in the morning, I drive my uncle Gary's Audi R8 into the Woodbridge parking lot—a short walk to Teterboro—and pull into my rented spot. It's not ideal to have a car while living in New York, but I'm willing to pay the extra monthly costs in parking garage fees for the convenience of always being able to get to the airport on time.

Normally, I'd drive my Jeep, but since my uncle has been in the Bahamas for the past year with his new—and *insanely young*—wife Claudia, I decided to take his car for a spin rather than let it sit in the parking garage of his building—which is also Ava's and my building.

It's not like he'll notice, though.

He spent most of his life on Wall Street, pinching pennies and compounding interest, and by the time he retired a few years ago, he'd accrued more money than any one person needs in their lifetime. Needless to say, he's simply living the good life, enjoying the fruits of his labor *and* a far-too-young-for-him wife.

I waste no time cutting the engine and hopping out of the driver's seat. With a quiet *beep beep*, I lock the doors and toss my leather duffel over my shoulder. But before I can start the short walk to Teterboro, my phone vibrates in my jacket pocket, and I pull it out to find *Unknown* flashing on the screen with a call.

Thinking it's probably some bullshit telemarketer asking me if I want to extend the warranty on a car I probably don't possess anymore, I almost don't answer it, but for some reason, something tells me I should.

Just in case.

So, I do.

"Hello?" I greet and resume my path toward the airport.

"Luke London?" A female voice fills my ear.

"You got him."

"Luke, I have Tim Brindle on the line for you."

I stop dead in my tracks. *Holy fucking shit.*

"Luke, it's Tim." A male voice takes over the call. But this voice isn't just any man. He's the Director of NASA's Astronaut Program. "How are you doing?"

"Well...to be honest, sir, I'm not sure if I should be excited to hear from you or worried."

Normally, the first step in finding out you're an official candidate in the program is to receive a fancy acceptance envelope in the mail. Not a phone call.

Is this how they break it to you when you don't get in?

Instantly, my bag drops off my shoulder, and I stand there and wait, in the middle of the fucking parking lot, too focused

on the future of my fate to worry if I'm standing in anyone's way.

"No need to be worried, Luke." His soft chuckles bounce around in the receiver. "I am calling to let you know that the board has decided you are one of five prime candidates, and you've officially been accepted into NASA's Astronaut Candidate training program."

Time stops.

All I can hear are the sounds of my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

And I'm still just standing in the middle of the damn parking lot, unsure of what to even do with myself.

"Luke?" Tim questions. "You still there?"

"I-I'm here," I stutter, laugh, and run a hand through my hair. I'm normally so assured, so confident. Who knew in the proudest moment of my life, I'd turn into a bumbling buffoon? "Just a little shocked."

"The shock is only temporary." He chuckles again. "And once it wears off, I suggest you start making arrangements to move to Houston. The program starts January 5th."

"Wow. January 5th?"

"Yes. Are you ready to be a NASA astronaut, Luke?"

"I've been ready for this my whole life, sir," I answer without hesitation. "Thank you for this opportunity."

"You know," he continues, "I worked with Carey London. He was a good man. One of the best. And there's no doubt he would be mighty proud of you."

I look up at the sky and smile. *Yeah. I think my dad would be pretty fucking proud of me right now.*

"Thank you, sir."

"Congratulations, Luke," he adds. "You'll be getting your official NASA acceptance in the mail in the next few days, along with everything you need to do prior to coming to Houston."

“Thank you.”

“See you in January.”

The call ends, and I don't know how long I stand there before I'm capable of having a reaction to the news.

I did it.

I got into NASA's program.

Holy fucking shit!

This is everything I've been working for since I was a teenager, and somehow, I've achieved what has felt like the impossible for the majority of this crazy journey.

A surprised laugh escapes my lungs. *Goddamn. You crazy bastard. You really did it.*

Instantly, I call the one person I have to tell this news to, but it rings and rings and rings until her voice mail picks up. *“Hey, this is Ava. Sorry I missed your call. Just leave a message, and I'll get back to you soon!”*

There's no way I'm going to tell her this in a voice mail.

I'm going to be a fucking astronaut for NASA, for fuck's sake!

In less than two months, I'm going to move to Texas.

Away from Ava.

My heart clenches and strains at the realization. Soon, I won't be living across the hall from her. I won't be in the same building. I won't even be in the same fucking state. I will literally be thousands of miles away.

My phone starts to vibrate in my hand, and I look down to find ***Incoming Call Ava*** flashing on the screen. And I just... can't answer it. A moment ago, I was ready to tell her the news and now, I...can't bring myself to do it.

This news is exciting, of course, but it changes *everything*.

Like a coward, I hit decline, and not even a minute later, she sends me a text.

Ava: Sorry I missed your call! I was in an early meeting with my director. Everything okay?

On a sigh, I toss my duffel over my shoulder and resume my walk to Teterboro.

My stomach is in a knot, which is an odd fucking feeling for what should be the best day of my life. I should be ecstatic. Cheerful. Fucking exuberant.

But something with Ava I can't quite put my finger on has me unsettled.

My mind reels with a million different things at once, and it isn't until I'm inside the airport and through the lobby that I'm able to gather my thoughts enough to text her back.

Me: Everything's good, Ace. Just wanted to see how you're doing this morning.

For whatever reason, I still can't bring myself to actually tell her my big news. But it's probably just because it's the kind of thing I should really share in person.

Ava: Meh. I've been better. What time are you getting in from Miami tonight?

Me: Probably around eight this evening. Why?

Ava: Because I made reservations at that fancy French restaurant up the street from our building, and I don't want to gorge myself on baguettes and expensive cheese alone. But I'll have to cancel because the dumb reservation was for seven.

I furrow my brow and type out a response.

Me: I take it you were supposed to go on a date?

Ava: Yeah. With a guy named Todd I met on TapNext yesterday. He seemed super nice, but all that changed this morning when he sent me over twenty questions about the size and shape of my feet.

What the fuck?

Me: That's creepy AF. You're like a magnet for these guys.

Ava: Tell me about it. He even requested that I wear open-toed shoes.

I don't know why she keeps doing this to herself. I don't even know why she's so adamant about this "Find a Boyfriend" mission, as she calls it.

Ava is gorgeous. Smart. Funny. She's all the goddamn things, and she doesn't need a man at her side to prove anything to anyone. She proves every-fucking-thing by just being her.

Me: Don't you think it's about time you toss in the TapNext towel?

Her next response is a real rambling doozy.

Ava: And do what exactly? Tell everyone I'm a big fat liar? My mom is still under the impression that I have a boyfriend, although I haven't told her anything about him.

Callie is still full steam ahead with planning emails and phone calls. Basically, I'm so far deep in my web of freaking lies, I'm not sure how to get out of it. And you said you won't pretend to be my boyfriend, so...

An overwhelming urge to take this opportunity for what it's worth overwhelms me.

I know her better than anyone, and we like spending time together. Pretending to be in a relationship with her will be a piece of cake logistically, and as a bonus, it'll be like one last hurrah before I make the move to Houston.

I can take a slightly earlier leave than I'd originally planned from Soar Aviation and spend the holidays in Vermont.

Me: I changed my mind. I'll do it.

Ava: You'll do it???

Me: Yes.

Ava: Just for clarification, what is it you're saying you'll do?

I roll my eyes.

Me: I'll be your date. To the reunion and your sister's wedding and pretend I'm your super-awesome boyfriend.

Ava: Are you being serious right now???

Me: As serious as you were the time you told me you were going to get me a kangaroo for Christmas our senior year at Columbia.

Ava: THAT WAS A GREAT GIFT.

Me: Sure. Completely impractical but fun for the day I had him before they came to pick him back up.

Ava: I'm rolling my eyes at you right now.

Me: Oh, trust me, I know you are.

Ava: Luke, you've met my family before.

Me: Do you want me to do this or not?

Ava: I do! I'm just spitballing the logistics, okay? My parents were here two summers ago, and we went to dinner.

Me: Once. They probably don't even remember.

Ava: My mom talked about you ad nauseum for months straight, AND she sends you birthday cards in the mail. Trust me, she remembers.

Me: Fine. If you'd rather keep dragging yourself on dates with guys who want to lick your fucking feet...

Ava: Ugh. Obviously, I don't want to do that!

Instead of responding, I wait patiently for Ava to work through her thoughts and come to a decision—one I'm pretty sure involves me going to Vermont.

Ava: Hypothetically speaking, if we do this, how exactly am I going to explain to my family that one day we're in a relationship, and then we're not?

And there it is. I grin.

Me: You're overthinking this.

Ava: Okay, Mr. Know-It-All, tell me how I'm supposed to be thinking about this.

Me: We'll just pretend we're in a relationship while we're in Vermont for the holidays, and then when we get back to New York, you can just tell them we decided we're better off as friends.

Or she can tell them the truth. Maybe after two weeks of pretending to be in a relationship with me, I'll actually be able to convince her that's the best option.

Ava: Do you really think it's that simple?

Me: Do you really think it's more complicated?

Ava: Okay. Can you get off work?

Me: Yes.

Ava: You're really serious about this? You want to help save my ass by coming to Vermont with me and being my fake boyfriend? You want to follow me? Deep sea, baby, into my treacherous web of holiday lies?

A laugh jumps from my throat.

Me: Ride or die, babe.



CHAPTER

Thirteen

Luke

After a thirty-minute delay getting back from Miami, I finally make home it to my building around nine in the evening, and my key is barely in the lock when Ava's door swings open from behind me.

I glance over my shoulder to find her carrying notebooks and colored highlighters and a pen tucked behind her right ear. "Sheesh! I thought you'd never get home!"

I unlock my front door, and she just barrels in past me. "We have so much to go over, Luke, but I think I've nailed down most of the details."

"Nailed down the details?" I question. "What are you talking about?" I set my keys, phone, wallet, and duffel on the kitchen island, and Ava plops down on my sofa and sets her three notebooks out across the coffee table.

Flashbacks of college hit me right in the face.

This is work-mode Ava. Which, during events like college finals, is a meticulous, not-messy-at-all, very organized version of herself.

Truthfully, it's a rare occurrence. Most of the time, my best friend has her head in the proverbial clouds, leaves piles of dishes in her kitchen sink, and lets her laundry go until she's completely out of clothes. It's not unusual for me to sneak over to her place and run the fucking dishwasher and water Teddy 12—*the small plant in her living room that's sole reason for staying alive for the past two years is all thanks to me.*

“Have you forgotten that you offered to be my fake boyfriend for the holidays?” She rolls her eyes and blows out a breath. “We literally just had the conversation this morning.”

“I remember the conversation, but that doesn't explain why you're in my apartment, acting like we have a deadline on an econ project.” I nod toward the notebooks and highlighters she's organized in record time.

“Luke, we have to go into this with a plan, or else it will end in disaster when my family starts asking us all sorts of questions about our relationship.”

“What kind of plan are you talking about?” I question with a tilt of my head. “We've known each other for fifteen years. You live across the fucking hall from me, and I see you every day. I feel like we'll be able to handle any questions your family or old high school classmates throws at us.”

She narrows her eyes. “Okay, so when my aunt Poppy asks you how we started dating, what are you going to say?”

“I don't know.” I shrug. “It just sort of happened.”

She barks out a laugh. “That's a shit answer! It doesn't even make it sound like you want to be in a relationship with me. It's more, like,” she continues on, dropping her voice a few octaves to mimic mine, “*Oh, I don't know. One day Ava said she was my girlfriend, and I figured I'd just roll with it.*”

My lips quirk up in amusement.

“This isn’t as simple as a trip to Vermont and telling my family we’re dating now, Luke. We have to have a plan.”

I sigh and drop my shoulders. “And I take it we’re figuring out that plan tonight?”

“Time is a ticking, buddy.” She taps her wrist with two fingers. “And at this point, we barely have a month to get our shit together,” she retorts, picking up a yellow highlighter and begins swiping it over notes she’s apparently already taken in one of the notebooks.

This is going to be a long night.

I rub a hand down my face and pick up my cell phone off the kitchen island.

“What are you doing?”

“Ordering some dinner,” I respond and pull up UberEats to order a pizza from the joint up the street. “I’m starving, and I have a feeling you’ve been too busy mapping out our fake relationship plan to eat dinner.”

She grins at that. “No sausage on the pizza this time.”

“How’d you know I was ordering pizza?”

She flashes a look my way. “Because it’s your go-to.”

“See?” I retort. “This is exactly what I’m talking about. If you know me so well that you know what I’m going to order for dinner, then I think we can wing the whole fake-relationship thing.”

She snorts. “You know, the sooner you order the pizza, the sooner we can get this all figured out...”

“Christ,” I mutter and submit my order on the online app.

Instantly, I receive a notification that my order is in process and will be delivered in thirty-five to forty minutes.

Once I grab two bottles of water from the fridge, I slip off my blazer and shoes and head over to sit down by the Detail Queen.

And it’s no surprise she wastes no time diving in.

“Okay, first things first, the Best Friends Don’t List.”

“The what?”

“This.” She taps her highlighter on the notebook page. “Read through it, and see if there’s anything else you want to add.”

And, sure enough, there is actually a fucking list.

The Best Friends Don’t List

- 1. Kiss.**
- 2. See each other naked.**
- 3. Have sex.**
- 4. Catch feelings.**

“If our friendship is going to come out of this pretend relationship unscathed, we have to have some rules,” she adds just as I finish reading through it. “Obviously, this is just a start, and we’ll have to add more—”

“Nope.” I laugh my refusal. “This is ridiculous.”

“*What?*” Her eyes go wide. “Why?”

“We don’t need a list of rules, Ace,” I retort on another laugh. “I’m pretty sure we both know the boundaries.”

“Luke, we need a list.”

“Ava, we don’t need a list.”

“Yes. We. Do.”

“Are you planning on trying to have sex with me?”

Her eyes turn wide and shocked. “Of course not.”

“Then we don’t need a fucking list that says not to.”

“Luke—”

“Look, I offered to go to Vermont with you and be your fake boyfriend for the holidays. And trust me, I’ll play that

part well. I'll hold your hand, do cutesy shit for you in front of your family, but I'm not going to sit back and let you write a million fucking rules that I'm supposed to remember."

"I wasn't going to write that many. There are four so far."

"Ava, c'mon," I say through a laugh. "When you're in crazy detail mode like this, your to-do lists have to-do lists. You become the queen of neurotically plotting out every single damn detail. And I know this list will be no different. Four items is just the beginning. Trust me, I'm saving us both a lot of headaches."

She stares down at the page.

"You already have another thing you want to add to that damn list, don't you?"

"Of course not." She shakes her head and digs her teeth into her bottom lip.

I grin. "Liar."

"I can't help it! When I'm stressed out like this, planning everything out makes me feel calm!"

"There's no need to stress, okay?" I wrap my arm around her shoulder and tuck her close to my side. "This trip is going to be a good trip. We're going to have fun together, and we're going to make everyone think we're in a relationship while we're doing it. We can even map out a basic plan if it makes you feel better."

"How basic?"

I sit up, snag the pen from behind her ear, and write it down.

Go to Vermont.

Enjoy Christmas.

Go to Ava's high school reunion (and tell Callie she's a bitch).

Dance, drink, eat cake at Kate's wedding.

Come back to New York.

“That’s a sad excuse for a plan.” She rolls her eyes, but then giggles. “Well, besides the telling Callie she’s a bitch part. That’s pretty good.”

“We’ve been best friends for years, Ace. I know you better than I know anyone. Hell, sometimes I know you better than I know myself,” I respond, take the highlighter out of her hand, shut the notebooks, and shove everything to the side of the coffee table. “Trust me on this. This is the only plan we need.”

“And if your plan goes up in freaking flames?”

“It won’t, but if it does, then—”

“Then I’ll put it out, just like the infamous hot plate.”

I chuckle. “Okay. Yeah.”

I smile at her hard-earned acquiescence. Honestly, I’m just looking forward to spending time with Ava before I have to leave New York for good.

Which you still haven’t told her about...

Internally, I cringe. I *will* tell her the NASA news, but not tonight.

For now, I just want to focus on reassuring Ava that we’re going to enjoy ourselves in Vermont and she has no need to be stressed out over the little shit.



CHAPTER

fourteen

November 18th

Ava

Nearly simultaneously, my laptop pings with a new email and my phone chimes with a text notification. On a sigh, I click out of the Excel spreadsheet I'm currently working through and check my inbox first.

From: Callie Camden-Baccus

Subject: Change of plans!

Ava,

I know you've already put the order in at the bakery, but I've decided we need to go with a vanilla cake instead of chocolate. And I think our additional desserts need to be a little fancier than simple cupcakes. I mean, this is our

fifteen-year high school reunion we're talking about. I'm thinking something like macarons or eclairs or miniature cheesecakes.

XOXO, Callie

For the love of everything, it's just desserts.

With the way she keeps flooding my inbox with bullshit like this, you'd think we were planning for the Queen's arrival. Pretty sure the people we went to high school with will give exactly zero fucks about what flavor cake we order. If there's free booze, which I've already ensured would be there after Miss Planner Extraordinaire tossed that onto my plate the other day, then I'd say we're good. No doubt, the alcohol is the most important part for just about anyone who is forced to attend their high school reunion.

Luckily, I kind of, sort of, *definitely* forget to order the desserts from the bakery. I called. I even got prices. But I didn't exactly follow through. *Whoops.*

I make a mental note to actually call the bakery later today and put in the order, and I take a page out of Luke's book and send Callie a short email back that consists of one thumbs-up emoji.

When I check my text messages, I'm blessed—*not really*—to find that my mom and aunts are up to their usual pestering business.

Mom: It's been FOUR days since you told me you have a boyfriend, and you've yet to tell me ANYTHING about him. I don't even know his freaking name!

Aunt Poppy: What's the story, Ava?

***Aunt Lily: Ava has a boyfriend???* Oh my goodness, if this isn't the best news I've heard all week!!!!**

Sweet Lucifer.

Technically, I never told her I had a boyfriend. I just *never* told her I didn't.

But now you can actually say Luke is your boyfriend...

A deep sigh escapes my lungs as I think about the consequences of dropping that fictional bomb. *Obviously, they're going to find out soon, you know, when you bring him with you to Vermont...*

My fate decided, I hesitantly type out a response.

Me: You actually already know him.

Mom: Who????

Mom: Oh, wait...don't tell me. ARE YOU DATING LUKE????

Aunt Poppy: Oh, please say it's true! Say you're dating that sexy pilot! Say you're dating that hot-piece-of-pilot-ass, and you'll make me the happiest old woman on this side of the Mississippi!

Aunt Lil: I'm on pins and needles over here, Ava! Tell us already!

"God help us all," I mutter to myself as I type out my next response.

Me: I am, in fact, dating Luke.

Mom: YES! YES! YES! FINALLY, YOU TWO REALIZED YOU'RE MEANT TO BE TOGETHER!

Wait...*what?* What in the hell is she talking about?

Aunt Poppy: !!!!!!!!!!!

Aunt Lil: I FEEL LIKE CHRISTMAS CAME EARLY!

Aunt Poppy: BECAUSE IT DID, LIL!

Mom: OH MY GOODNESS, I AM SO EXCITED, AVA!

Holy caps lock.

With my phone vibrating like it's turned into a freaking sex toy, I click out of the chat and drop the device back onto my desk with a soft thud. They are insanely excited, and it only makes me feel guilt. And shame.

Ugh.

I just hope it all turns out to be worth it in the end.

"Knock, knock." My boss Daphne peeks her head into my office, and I smile up at her, but also tilt my head to the side in confusion as I slip my phone into my pocket.

"I thought you had a meeting over at MoMA?"

"I do, but I wanted to let you know the newest Darrin Seals piece is up in the West Wing."

My eyes light up like Christmas. "It is?"

Darrin Seals was a famous artist who died a few years back. His impressive fifty-year career ensured that his pieces don't sell for less than seven figures.

Yes, *seven* figures.

The price of art can be truly mind-boggling. Especially after you're dead.

And needless to say, it took a lot of wheeling and dealing for me to get one of his pieces in our museum. I'm talking nearly a full year of work.

"It is." She nods, shrugs on her cream fake-fur jacket, and slips her black Chanel purse over her shoulder. "Ava, darling, you did good with this one," she adds with a wink. "It's absolutely fantastic, and I demand you see it before you leave today."

"You don't have to tell me twice," I answer and hit save on my Excel spreadsheet, a long, dull list of prospected investment pieces for the Met. "In fact, I can take a break from boring numbers and go look now."

"Enjoy." Daphne grins and offers a little wave before turning on her heel and walking down the long hallway that leads to the elevators.

Without delay, I stand up from my chair, smooth down the wrinkles of my pale pink pencil skirt, retuck in my cream silk blouse, and head out of my office and toward the West Wing of the museum where my latest curation hangs proudly on the wall.

Ten minutes later, I'm standing in front of it, staring up at the massive work in awe.

This artist, Darrin Seals, even after his untimely death, is considered one of the most prominent artists in the world. His take on surrealism is unsurpassed.

Damn, there's just something about art like this that makes all the blood, sweat, tears, and money worth it.

It just... touches you.

My eyes scan the incredibly large canvas, taking in every minute detail.

A painting of a ballerina inside a clock, one hand reaching toward the twelve and one toe pointed toward the nine. Not

only is it one of Seals' most popular works he ever created, it's the brightest and most confusing.

Which, when it comes to surrealism, is just par for the course.

This form of art expression is supposed to surpass realism by taking real objects and placing them in unreal situations. It's free of consciousness and convention. It's like living in a dream.

Frankly, in my personal opinion, surrealist art is better than drugs.

And while I'm more of an impressionist-style painter, my appreciation for this style of expression is immense.

Daphne was right. This is *fantastic*.

Once I note that a large group has entered the room, I step away from the painting, out of the way of their view, and find a small bench from which to watch their reactions to our newest piece.

And I'm not disappointed.

Like moths to a flame, everyone is drawn to this piece.

I smile to myself and watch as a thirtysomething man and woman walk toward the painting, their hands interlocked in a way that shows they're together. Sleek suit, expensive but casual designer dress, and shoes that probably cost more than most people's cars, their appearance is straight off the Fifth Avenue runway.

No doubt, they come from money. Lots of it, in fact.

The light-brown-haired woman's mauve-painted lips form a small "O" as she stands in the very same spot where I was just moments ago. And then, her mouth morphs into a big smile as she moves her eyes away from the painting and looks up toward her guy.

He leans closer to her, his lips nearly brushing her ear as he whispers something I can't perceive, and her grin only grows and it's her turn to stand up on her tippy-toes and whisper something back into his ear.

Whatever she says, he likes, his eyes heating up with something that resembles love and warmth and passion.

He discreetly pinches her side, and she giggles, her first peals of laughter bouncing off the walls of the room before she snaps her hand across her mouth in surprise.

God, they're cute.

Just...so perfect in the way they look at each other. The way that, even when they're just simply walking around a museum, their bodies move together in synchrony.

There is so much you can tell about other people by just watching them, their body language, and the way they react to stimuli around them.

And there is no denying, whether they are married or dating, these two are in love.

Undoubtedly, together. A couple. A team.

Kind of like how you and Luke are supposed to be when you're in Vermont next month...

Can Luke and I actually pull this off?

Can we look as convincing as that couple?

Or will it be painfully obvious that we're just two friends pretending to be something we're not?

Eek. I can't stop myself from pulling my cell phone out of my pocket and typing out a discreet text message.

Me: What are you doing right now?

Luke: At the gym, why?

Me: I think we need to do trial runs.

Luke: ?

I loathe when he just sends me a question mark or one single emoji.

And he knows it.

I mean, type actual words, for goodness' sake.

Me: Trial runs, as in practice dates. We need to make sure we can actually look like we're dating.



CHAPTER

fifteen

Luke

I've barely finished my second set of biceps curls when my phone buzzes with another text. Normally, after a six-mile run through Central Park, I can speed through my weight workout at the gym, but my best friend is apparently adamant on slowing me down today.

And, practice dates? Fucking hell.

I set my dumbbells back on the rack and sit down on a nearby bench to shoot her a message back.

Me: I thought we already agreed no lists or complicated plans, Ace.

Ava: Excuse me, but I recall tossing my Best Friends Don't List in the trash...

Pretty sure she didn't toss that list in the trash, and if I know Ava, she's probably hoarding it somewhere in her apartment. But I choose to pick my battles.

Me: What do these practice dates entail exactly?

Ava: I don't know. Just...practice. Like, scheduled dates where we go out in public and act like we're in a relationship. Get a feel for it, you know?

The sound of weights clinking muffles my chuckle as I shake my head.

First, lists.

Now, practice dates.

Ava obviously doesn't realize it, but the two of us? We don't need any of that shit.

We've seen each other at the highest highs and the lowest lows. We've been there for every relationship and every breakup, and at this point, I probably know more about Ava than her own mother—and that's not even an exaggeration.

“Tell me you're sexting in the middle of your workout, and I swear to God, it'll make my fluffing day.”

I look up to find Thatcher Kelly, clad in jogging pants and a T-shirt that reads *Property of Cassie*, standing directly in front of me with a big-ass grin on his face.

Because we go to the same gym, every great once in a while, we run into each other mid-workout. Well, it started out as *his* exclusive, impossible-to-get-into Manhattan gym, but he did what Thatch does best and sweet-talked the owner into

letting me become a member. Despite the fact that my bank account doesn't end in seven zeros.

“Very funny.” I bark out a laugh. “And, no. I wasn't sexting.”

“Oh, so just sending dick pics, then?”

“Texting, dude. I was just texting with Ava.”

“Ava?” He quirks a brow. “That's the best friend, right? The one who's trolling TapNext?”

“No longer trolling TapNext, but yes, my best friend Ava,” I correct, and he smiles his biggest shit-eating grin.

“No longer trolling TapNext, eh?” He winks. “I guess that means you figured it out, and you're banging.”

My eyebrows shoot together. “We're not having sex. And figured what out?”

“Oh. Whoops. What's going on, then?”

I shake my head. “It's nothing.”

“Luke, my man, I'm not walking away until you fill up my gossip cup.”

“You're impossible, you know that?” I groan and run a hand through my slightly sweaty hair, but when Thatch makes no move to respond or leave, I add, “You really want to know?”

“Are you kidding me?” he exclaims. “I *love* tea. I'll guzzle that shit any chance I can get.”

God only knows why, but I tell him the whole sordid tale.

The fact that Ava realized online dating is horrible.

That the only reason she's been online dating is to find a date to bring home to Vermont for the holidays, her high school reunion, and her sister's wedding.

And that, because I'm an awesome best friend, I offered to play the role of fake boyfriend so she didn't have to keep going on dates with idiots.

The instant I finish, Thatch starts cracking up like I'm Kevin Hart, and I've just delivered my best fucking stand-up routine.

"What?" I question in confusion. "Why is that so funny?"

"It's nothing," he responds, still laughing. "But now, I hope you realize, I will require constant updates on how this goes."

"Why in the hell would you want to know how this goes?"

He grins like the Cheshire cat. "Because this is the best fluffing thing I've heard since you told me you and Ava are just friends."

I groan. "We are. Best of."

"Uh-huh." That grin turns devilish. "You know..." He pauses and taps his chin dramatically. "I'm pretty sure I've heard this tale before. At least seven times. And every single one of them ended with me watching my buddy stand at the altar and say, *"I do."*

"Whoa. Slow your roll, Thatch." I cough on my own saliva. "While I know you have a serious soft spot for rom-coms and romance novels, my life isn't a Lifetime movie."

"Hallmark."

I blink and tilt my head to the side. "What?"

"Pretty sure you mean Hallmark," he explains. "Those are the ones with swoony happy endings. Personally, they're my favorite." He winks. "Lifetime movies usually involve someone getting murdered. Or someone trying to get someone else murdered. Or an evil twin sister faking her good twin sister's death so she can make her sister's boyfriend fall in love with her while she keeps her sister locked up in the basement."

"Was I supposed to understand anything you just said?"

"You don't watch Lifetime?"

I shake my head. "No."

“Fluffing hell, you’re missing out. That shit is like crack. My wife Cass *loves* it. Sometimes, we even role-play the angry sex scenes. It gets crazy hot, dude. Crazy hot.”

“I think my brain might be bleeding.”

It’s so not normal to have a boss like Thatcher Kelly. I literally never know what’s going to come out of his mouth.

“That’s such a fluffing Wes thing to say.” He chuckles. “Anyhoo, back to Ava, right?” he asks with a knowing smirk. “Pretty sure you have more tea to spill.”

“There is zero tea, Thatch.”

“Oh, there’s tea, Luke. So much tea to spill, you’d make the Sons of Liberty proud.”

I snort. “Did you seriously just reference the Boston Tea Party?”

“I did.” He smirks. “And I’m pretty sure you just tried to deflect my tea-spilling request by *mentioning* the Boston Tea Party, so I’d say we’re even.”

“Sometimes, you make no sense.”

“Oh, but I do, Daniel-san. Thatcher Kelly always makes sense,” he says proudly, mimicking Mr. Miyagi’s voice. “Which is why you’re going to love my next request.”

“And what’s that?”

“Come to Cass’s and my Manhattan apartment next Friday and enjoy a delicious meal with us.”

“That’s the day after Thanksgiving, dude.”

“I know. And on the day after Thanksgiving, the whole gang gets together for *Friendsgiving*. It’s become a bit of a tradition. We get babysitters for the kids, Kline’s wife Georgie cooks one hell of an awesome meal, Wes’s wife Winnie brings desserts, and my wife Cass spends most of the evening busting my balls. It’s fluffing great.”

Technically, I don’t have any plans the day after Thanksgiving. Or even on Thanksgiving, to be honest. Last year, with my uncle Gary in the Bahamas and Ava’s family in

Vermont and all our other friends having dinner with their respective families, we ended up ordering Chinese food and sneaking into the Met after hours so Ava could gush over her favorite paintings. The next day, we got up early and tried our hand at Black Friday shopping. Our first and last Black Friday shopping attempt. It only takes witnessing one fistfight over a plasma TV in the middle of Aisle 3 at a New Jersey Walmart to make you realize you're more of an online shopper than anything else.

“While I really appreciate the offer, I don't want to impose on you guys' dinner.”

“You're not imposing,” he insists without hesitation. “You're coming, *and* you're going to bring Miss Ava.” He winks. “Consider it practice for the main event.”

“I don't—”

“I'm not taking no for an answer, dude. You and Ava are joining us for Friendsgiving dinner, end of story,” he cuts me off. “I'll text you the address. See you Friday.”

And then, he's off, with his headphones in his ears and his big, tall body striding over to the treadmills.

Well, *shit*. I guess Ava and I are having dinner with a bunch of billionaires next week...?

Me: Fine. We'll do our first practice run next Friday.

Her response is immediate.

Ava: You're agreeing to this? I really expected an argument. And next Friday is the day after Thanksgiving.

Me: Hey, I can be unpredictable sometimes.

Ava: No, you can't. So, where did The Great Black Friday Trial Run come from?

I laugh. She really does know me better than anyone.

Me: You ever remember me talking about Thatcher Kelly?

Ava: Wait, is that the billionaire guy you fly around all the time? The one who's always texting you when he's running late?

Bingo. I smirk.

Me: That's him. And next Friday, we're going to have dinner with him and a bunch of his friends for something they call Friendsgiving.

Ava: Sounds just weird enough to be fun. But it'll have to be, at the very least, trial run number two.

Me: ?

Ava: Tonight, you're coming with me to an Upper East Side gallery opening.

Me: Very sneaky, Ace.

Ava: I know, right? ;) Be ready to leave by 6, boyfriend.

Boyfriend. Ha. That's cute.

But also, why in the fuck are you smiling about it?



CHAPTER

Sixteen

Ava

At a little after seven, Luke and I step inside Half Moon, a gallery on the Upper East Side. The space is small, but what it lacks in square footage, it makes up for in clean, open lines. The setup is simple, the center completely open, but each of the four walls contains six pieces by each abstract artist in the exhibition.

“This is our first official trial run, eh?” Luke whispers into my ear, and I nod, a secret smile covering my lips.

“Uh-huh. You think you can pass the boyfriend test?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” he responds with a wink. “Every person in this room will be convinced that you belong with me.” And he punctuates that statement by reaching out to gently intertwine my fingers within his. The warmth of his

hand urges goose bumps to pepper my arms and the teeniest tiniest shiver to roll up my spine.

I ignore the odd sensation and chalk it up to the fact that we just walked four blocks in the cool, late-fall air and my hands and face feel like ice cubes. Surely, a little bit of his warmth will do my chilly body some good.

“Ava, darling.” A French-accented female voice fills my ears, and I turn around to find Meadow Moon, the owner of the gallery, walking toward us. “I am so glad you could make it tonight.” She steps forward to press two European-style kisses to my cheeks, and I don’t hesitate to return the gesture.

“I wouldn’t have missed it.”

It doesn’t take long before she notices Luke standing beside me, our hands still linked. “And who is this handsome, strapping man?”

“Luke London. This beautiful woman’s boyfriend.” Luke doesn’t hesitate to respond, and I almost choke on my own saliva when the word *boyfriend* falls from his lips.

Holy hell, we’re really doing it, huh?

Luke is pretending to be my boyfriend. In public.

“Well...” Meadow reaches out to gently grasp his bicep and flashes a surreptitious smile in my direction. “Aren’t you two just the most delectable sight?”

An awkward giggle jumps from my lips, *because what in the hell am I supposed to say to that?*

But Luke is so freaking confident in his role that he doesn’t even falter.

“I think we can both agree that my Ava here is the sight. I’m just the lucky bastard who gets to stand beside her,” he says, leaning forward to press a gentle kiss to my forehead.

My Ava.

My cheeks flush, and my knees feel a little unsteady for a thirty-three-year-old woman with zero health problems.

Meadow lets out a swoony, breathy sigh.

And Luke? Well, he just grins down at me, his brown eyes warming when they meet mine.

Someone toward the back of the gallery gestures for Meadow, and she nods in their direction. “If you’ll excuse me,” she says, glancing between Luke and me with a look I can’t quite determine. “It was a true pleasure meeting you, Luke. And Ava, please let me know what you think about the exhibition.”

“Of course.”

Meadow walks away, and Luke smiles down at me.

“So, how am I doing, Ace?” he asks, his voice a mere whisper.

“Uh...great,” I say, tripping around my words a bit.

Oh yeah. So great, in fact, that you might start forgetting this is all pretend...

“Yeah?” he questions, and a handsome smile consumes his face. “I fit the boyfriend bill?”

“Mm-hmm,” I reply, and as we walk toward the first painting of the exhibition, our hands still gently locked together, my mind can’t stop thinking, *So, this is what boyfriend Luke is like...*

Affectionate.

Sweet.

Kind.

Attentive.

Basically, everything every woman on the face of the planet looks for in a man.

No wonder his old girlfriend Dana was so fucking clingy...



Our first official practice date went off without a hitch. Luke stayed by my side the entire time, carefully looking at each painting of the exhibition with me, and never hesitating to offer little public displays of affection.

A hand to the small of my back.

A tender kiss to my forehead.

His eyes and smile only directed toward me, even when female patrons inside the gallery flashed intrigued looks his way.

And none of it felt forced. It was all just...natural... comfortable...*normal*. Like we've been in a relationship for years.

Frankly, my mind is still reeling from how easy it was.

But certainly, it has more to do with our decade-and-half worth of friendship than anything else.

You sure about that? my mind questions, but I blink it away and focus on the now.

"Who was your favorite artist tonight?" I ask Luke just as the cool air brushes across my neck, and I adjust my scarf tighter around it. After spending two hours of our evening in Half Moon, night is officially upon us.

"Probably Callahan O'Malley." He grins down at me as we head up Madison Avenue. "Although, I know his pieces weren't your favorite."

I scrunch up my nose. "How do you know which ones were my favorite?"

"Get real, Ace," he says through a soft chuckle. "I even know which one was your absolute favorite."

"Okay, Mr. Know-It-All, which one?" I challenge.

"The one titled *Over-under-conscious*."

Instantly, I stop in the middle of the sidewalk and gawk at him.

"How on earth did you know that?"

Luke smirks, taking two steps back to wrap his arm around my shoulders. “I could tell by the way you were looking at it,” he says and gently nudges us back into motion. “Trust me, I’ve seen you look at enough art over the years to know when your eyes fall in love.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“To other people? No, probably not. You’ve grown to have one hell of a poker face when you’re in curator mode.”

“But to you?” I ask, and when another rush of cool air breezes past us, I shiver.

“Poker face or not, I can tell.” He winks, tucking me closer to his side.

We stay silent for another block, until Luke pops the quiet bubble with one hell of a question. “Why haven’t you been painting?”

“I don’t know.” My eyes move to the ground, watching my stiletto-covered feet tip-tap across the damp sidewalk. “I guess I just haven’t had time.”

“I don’t think that’s why.” I can feel his eyes on me. Staring at me. But I refuse to make eye contact. The whole source of this line of conversation is highlighted with shame and guilt and confusion. “And I know it’s been over a year since you last painted anything.”

That grabs my attention. I look up and meet his eyes. “How do you know that?”

Luke just smiles, a tender little curve of his lips. “Because I know you,” he says, simple as that—*He knows me*. “And I know the last painting you did was the one of your mom when she was pregnant with Kate.”

He’s right. The last painting I did was based on a candid photo of my mom, smiling with her hands on her rounded belly, and Em and me standing near her, our smiles mirroring hers.

Sadly, I haven’t painted anything else since.

“I used to love going into your spare bedroom and seeing what new things you’d created,” he comments, his voice quiet but still loud enough to hear over the street traffic. “But...it’s been a long time since I’ve seen anything new.”

I don’t know what to say to that. How can I add to the conversation when I don’t understand it myself? It was like, one day, I just stopped. Stopped painting. Stopped sketching. Just...stopped.

Because you don’t think you’re good enough.

A few moments later, we come to a stop at a crosswalk, but Luke doesn’t lead us across the street. Instead, he asks, “Do you feel like going on an adventure?”

I tilt my head to the side. “What kind of adventure?”

“One that will not keep us out in the cold.”

“Okay...?”

“You in?” he asks, and I shrug one casual shoulder.

“Sure. I’m in.”

“Stay right here,” he instructs and nods toward the Duane Reade just behind us. It’s basically New York’s version of a Walgreens or CVS. “I have to run in and grab something.”

“But I can’t come with you?” I question, my voice both amused and curious. “I thought you said this adventure was going to avoid the cold?”

“Sorry, Ace. It will ruin the adventure surprise.” Luke just grins, and then he’s off, several steps across the sidewalk and through the automatic sliding doors of the convenience store.

It only takes a few minutes before he’s stepping back outside with a paper bag clutched in his hand.

“What did you get?”

“I’ll show you in a minute,” he says, smile engaged again as he reaches out to grab my hand. “But first, we have to get to our final destination.”

Luke leads us to the closest subway station, and we jog down the steps toward the platform.

Since it's eight in the evening and the hustle-bustle of rush-hour traffic has morphed into a quiet, uncrowded lull, it's not long at all before we reach the platform and are stepping onto an awaiting train.

Luke guides us to two empty seats in the middle, and the instant we sit down, he reaches into the paper bag, pulling out his goodies—a sketchbook and a pencil.

“What are you doing?”

“This,” he says, setting the sketchbook on my lap and the pencil in my hands.

My chest grows tight with anxiety. “*This* is the adventure?”

“Uh-huh,” he says, nodding and pulling his cell phone and headphones out of his pocket.

“Luke.” I sigh. “I’m not doing this.”

But he doesn't respond. In fact, he just kind of ignores me and places one earbud in my ear and one earbud in his ear. Within seconds, the sound of *Trois Gymnopédies: Gymnopédie No. 2*, one of my favorite classical pieces by Erik Satie, vibrates inside my ear.

This, *him sitting beside me, a sketchbook in my lap, sharing music from his phone*, holds so many memories.

We did this often when we were at Columbia together. I'd drag him to the subway with me so I could sketch portraits of people on the train. And we'd sit like this. For hours. Music in our ears. Me sketching and Luke watching me sketch.

But God, it's been so long.

I just stare down at the blank page, pencil in my hand. “I... I...don't think I can do this.”

“Yes, you can,” he gently whispers into my free ear. “And you're going to.”

“Why?” I ask and turn my head to search his eyes.

My emotions feel like a damn roller coaster. I want to cry. I want to laugh. I want to flee. I want to...draw.

“Because it’s time for you to stop ignoring what you’re really meant to be doing. Deep down, you know that you need this because you love this. Art gives *you* life. Not looking at art, but *creating* art. *Your* art,” he responds without hesitation. “And because I’m a bit selfish,” he adds with a little smirk, “I want you to do it because this used to be one of my favorite things we’d do on a Sunday afternoon.”

“Are you serious?” I ask. “I always thought maybe you got bored...”

“Bored?” He shakes his head. “I was *fascinated*.”

My heart does weird things inside my chest.

Tears threaten to prick my eyes.

And my belly feels like a million little fairy wings are fluttering around inside of it.

“Just draw, Ace. Use what’s inside you.”

I search his gaze for a few more seconds, noting the way his brown eyes stare back at me with warmth and kindness and something else I can’t quite discern.

And then, on an unsteady, slightly shaky breath, I put the tip of my pencil to my sketchbook, and I draw.

First, the lady sitting at the other end of the tram. A book in her hands, her caramel-colored skin highlighting the pensive, beautiful look on her face.

Next, a small child sitting beside his mother. He looks to be five, six, maybe, and he has a dinosaur toy clasped inside his tiny hand and his head resting on his mother’s shoulder.

I don’t know how long I sketch.

I don’t know how long Luke continues to watch me sketch.

But with him by my side and the soft lilts of my favorite classical pieces in my ear, I lose myself in the simple act of tracing my pencil across the paper and creating something.

And man, does it feel good. Like relief and peace and nostalgia. Like breaking through a massive mental barrier while simultaneously reliving the good old days when Luke and I were just two young college kids with our whole lives ahead of us.



CHAPTER

Seventeen

A Sunday in August, thirteen years ago...

Luke

One of my favorite things to do in my downtime is people watch in various spots throughout the city. Central Park, coffee shops, Times Square, you name it, and I've found myself there more than a time or two in the name of observing my fellow humans in their natural habitat. Though, given the hectic nature of every weekday when you're working toward a degree in aeronautical engineering, it's been reduced to an activity that only occurs on the weekends.

These days, every Sunday, Ava lets me borrow her new—bright-pink—iPod Nano for the morning while she interns at a gallery in SoHo and then meets me at the corner café right down the street from our dorm.

I already have coffee waiting when she slides into the chair across from me and says loudly, “Nice color choice for your iPod, Luke. Real men use pink and all that.”

I roll my eyes at her lame attempt to tease me and hold it up proudly. “I know. I bet you wish it were yours.”

She sticks out her tongue, snags her iPod, and slinks back into her chair dramatically. “Man, you should have seen the pieces in the gallery today.”

“Good?”

“Beyond,” she corrects. “I almost wept at the feet of at least three artists.”

I laugh. “And someday, they’ll be weeping at yours.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “You don’t get it, Luke. These people are *so* talented.”

“So are you,” I insist. “The only difference between them and you is confidence.”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re oversimplifying it, and you know it. It’s nearly impossible to make it as an artist.”

I glance to the bustle of the street around us and then back to the sketchbook she’s placed on our table. She carries it nearly everywhere.

Somehow, it’s almost like the light of day shines too much of a spotlight on other people and their work. She needs a dark tunnel to narrow her vision.

And we *are* in New York.

An idea strikes, and I don’t waste any time letting it marinate. Lord knows, if I give her time to think and rationalize a way out of it, she’ll do it.

“Come on,” I prompt, standing from the table and grabbing her notebook and iPod. She bristles at the sketchbook, so I pull it tighter to my chest.

“If you want it back, you have to follow me.”

“What are we, nine? Stop, Luke.”

“Follow me, Ava,” I assert.

I take off for the next block over, where I know there’s a subway station, and I don’t even look back to check to see if she’s following me.

Her huffing and whining are plenty loud enough for me to tell without question.

The A train is waiting on the tracks when I get to the bottom of the stairs, but I know it won’t be for long, so I turn back, grab Ava’s hand, and hustle her aboard before it can pull out.

She grumbles quite a bit—which isn’t unexpected—but when we settle into a seat toward the end of the train car and I hand her back the sketchbook, she finally stops giving me the silent treatment.

“All right. What are we doing here?”

I shuffle through her iPod until I find a song I know she’ll like, put an earbud into her ear that faces away from me, and put the other earbud in my own. Our heads are close together, but it’s not uncomfortable, and this way, we’ll be able to hear each other when we talk.

“We’re here for a recreational Sunday that benefits us both.”

She sighs. “Say it again, but do it like you’re not as smart as you are.”

I laugh. “I’m going to people watch. And you’re going to draw.”

“Oh really?” she challenges, and I nod.

“How about her?” I suggest, nudging her attention toward a woman on the other side of the train wearing a neon jumpsuit. “Draw her but as a circus clown.”

“What?”

“Humor me, Ace. I want to see you put my imagination into art. Please?”

“Fine,” she finally agrees. “But it’s your fault if I start making you do this every Sunday.”

I smile. “That’s okay. That’s the kind of blame I’m more than willing to take.”



CHAPTER

Eighteen

November 27th, Friendsgiving

Luke

“I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore, Toto,” Ava teases as we head up twenty floors inside the sleek elevators of Thatch’s building. “Pretty sure this elevator costs more than our entire building.”

I smirk. “You act like our elevator is crap. We live in a building that costs four times what we can afford just because of my uncle.”

“And the elevator is still crap,” she insists with a wink. “We’re lucky if it’s working for three days straight.” She cracks up and slides a loose lock of blond hair behind her ear, and I can’t stop myself from taking in the view.

Clad in a pair of tight jeans, her favorite black stilettos, a ruffly top that shows a little more cleavage than I'm used to seeing, and a light sheen of makeup that only makes her big blue eyes damn near mesmerizing, Ava looks beautiful.

She always looks beautiful.

Tonight, we will spend Friendsgiving with Thatcher Kelly, his wife Cassie, and his closest friends. This definitely pushes the boundaries of a professional relationship, but knowing I've gotten into NASA takes a little pressure off. All these guys seem more like friends than wealthy passengers on my flights anyway.

The elevator dings at the Penthouse Level, and the doors slide open, *directly* into Thatch's humble abode.

Though, with the marble entryway looking like something out of *Architectural Digest*, I wouldn't exactly call it humble. Sophisticated and luxurious would certainly be better adjectives for this apartment.

"Luke, my man!" Thatch greets us with a boisterous voice and a smile as we step off the elevator. A brunette stands beside him, her eyes and mouth mischievous and excited at the same time.

"Cassie, honey, this is Luke and Ava," he introduces us.

"Of course," she responds, and her lips morph into a megawatt grin. "I've heard *so* much about you two."

"Uh...good things, I hope?" Ava questions with a slightly nervous giggle.

"*Very* good things," Cassie answers and reaches out to pull Ava into a friendly hug.

"Don't worry," Thatch says, his voice dropping to a whisper. "Cass and I are the only ones who know about your little secret." He winks, and immediately, Ava looks up at me with confusion on her face.

"Our little secret?"

"Your fake relationship arrangement," Thatch adds, still whispering.

“*Oh. That,*” Ava responds, and a giggle follows. “Well, I hope it’s not asking too much, but I’m expecting you to really put this guy to task.” She flashes a wicked smile at me. “Feel free to ask him all sorts of questions about our relationship.”

I laugh and shake my head. “You’re evil, Ace.”

“Me? Evil?” she questions like she is the definition of innocence. “I mean, you’re the one who said we didn’t need to get lost in any of the specifics. If I do recall, it was you who decided we didn’t need rules or anything. Which can only mean one thing.”

“And what’s that?” I ask, tilting my head to the side.

“That you’re crazy confident you can wing it,” she responds without hesitation. “So, by all means, wing it the fuck up, boyfriend.”

“Well, goddamn, I think I might like Ava better than you, son.” Thatch smirks like the devil.

“Oh, hell yes.” Cass bursts into laughter and reaches out to wrap her arm around Ava’s shoulders and pull her into the apartment. “Honey, I think you and I are going to get along just great. Now, if you don’t mind, I could use a little help in the kitchen. My best friend Georgie tends to turn into a spaz when we’re trying to finish up dinner.”

Ava just giggles, but as she and Cassie walk down a long hallway and toward the inside of the apartment, she glances over her shoulder to meet my amused gaze. Her eyes silently asking, *is this okay?*

I nod, and Thatch slaps his palm on my back. “This is the part where the ladies finish up dinner and the men sit around in the cigar room, playing poker and shooting the shit.”

“Sounds very 1950s,” I tease, and he just smirks, leading us down the hall but taking a right turn and going in the opposite direction of Ava and Cassie.

“Yeah, well, when we started this tradition, we tried to help the girls get dinner ready, but if you’ve ever been stuck inside a hot kitchen with Kline’s wife freaking out over the consistency of mashed potatoes and my wife fucking up said

mashed potatoes, you learn pretty quick to stay out of the way.”

The instant we step inside the cigar room, smoke coming straight from Caplin Hawkins’s cigar billows up into the air.

“Guess who finally made it?” Thatch announces as he takes a seat at the head of the poker table, where Harrison Hughes begins to deal a fresh hand.

Kline Brooks and Theo Cruz grin.

Milo Ives and Quincy Black offer a friendly wave.

Trent Turner urges me to take the empty seat beside him.

And Wes Lancaster grumbles out a hello before bitching about his hand. “Why do you always deal me shit, Hughes?”

Harrison just smirks and looks to me. “You want to play a little Texas Hold’em, Luke?”

“What’s the buy-in?”

“Today’s buy-in is courtesy of Mr. Moneybags Kline.” Cap waggles his brows and pulls his cigar out of his mouth. “So, technically, you’ll get paid to play.”

I tilt my head to the side, and Kline rolls his eyes.

“Apparently, it’s my penalty for missing the last two poker nights.”

“Aw, poor Kline...” Thatch pretends to wipe a tear from his eye. “Him’s sad because him’s skipped out on two poker nights, and now him’s has to pay the price and follow the official poker night rules.”

“There’re no fucking official rules,” Kline chimes in, looking directly at me with a half-amused, half-annoyed smirk.

“Yes, there are!” Thatch bellows.

“Oh, really?” Kline retorts. “Show me. Where the fuck are these supposed rules?”

“They’re right here.” Thatch taps the side of his head.

“And that helps me, how?” Kline snaps back. “I can’t read your mind, T.”

“Pretty sure no one on the face of Planet Earth wants to read Thatcher Kelly’s mind,” Wes chimes in, and Cap is quick to agree with a grin around the cigar in his mouth.

“True that!”

Trent slides a stack of chips in front of me, and Harrison deals me into the game.

When I lift up my cards, I’m faced with two queens. Right off the bat.

“Raise \$1000,” Cap slides four chips into the pile.

Well, fuck, it appears Kline had to pay quite the damn penalty.

“Call,” Milo agrees.

“Call.” Trent is in.

“Fold,” Wes grumbles. “Because Harrison keeps dealing me absolute shit.”

Kline, Harrison, Thatch, Quincy, and Theo also fold.

When it’s my turn to bet, I don’t hesitate to push all of my chips to the center. “All in.” Honestly, I don’t have a clue how much money this is, but if each chip is worth \$500, it’s definitely at least ten grand.

“Oh, what the fuck?” Cap questions, narrowing his eyes toward me.

I shrug and grin.

Milo laughs and folds.

Trent flips me off and folds.

But Cap stares at me like he’s trying to see inside my brain.

“What’s it going to be, Cap?” Thatch asks, his eyes bouncing back and forth between us. “You in or you out?”

“Fucking hell,” Cap mutters and glances at his cards one more time. “Your first hand, you’re really going to go all in?”

I shrug again.

“Fine. I call.”

“Show ’em, boys!” Thatch bellows and stands up from the table.

Cap tosses down two jacks.

And I flip over my two queens.

“Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha!” Trent bursts into laughter, and Cap flips him the bird.

“Oh shit, Captain,” Thatch comments. “I think you might get your ass handed to you here.”

“Just show the flop,” Cap grumbles.

Harrison turns over the first three cards—an ace, a ten, and a four.

Then, he deals the turn—a *fucking jack*.

“Ha! Who’s laughing now?” Cap hops up from his chair and starts pelvic-thrusting the air.

“Slow your roll, son,” Thatch says. “We still have the river.”

Cap keeps grinning like a loon, and Harrison slowly, so slowly, lifts the final card. And when he turns it over onto the felt? A *queen*.

“Ha! Oh yes!” Trent laughs like a hyena. “I’m laughing now, Cap! I’m motherfucking laughing now!”

“Fuck you, Turner.” Cap flips Trent off. “And you too, Luke.”

I just grin. “Sorry, man.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters and takes a puff from his cigar. “You just swaggered in here and took all my money, you bastard.”

“Pretty sure you mean *my* money,” Kline comments with a pointed look in Cap’s direction.

Cap just smirks, puffing on his cigar some more, and Trent gets ready to deal this round, gathering all the cards back up and shuffling them.

“Hey, Luke, have you heard anything from NASA?” Milo asks, taking a sip of the amber-colored liquid in front of him.

“Uh...” I pause, faltering a bit, but then quickly respond with, “Nope. Nothing yet.”

His eyes search mine, and I have a feeling, with his contact on the board and the way he’s staring at me with unsaid words, Milo knows the truth. He *knows* I got the call.

But still, I haven’t told anyone. I haven’t told Ava. And there’s no fucking way I’m going to say it out loud right now.

“Did you decide on the galleries?” Harrison pipes up with an unrelated question to Theo, and I’m thankful for the domino effect—grabbing Milo’s attention from looking at me curiously, along with everyone else’s.

I breathe a discreet sigh of relief.

Theo smiles. “Actually, I signed the contract over a week ago. Officially a fifty-percent owner.”

“What’s a tasteless, uncultured bastard like you doing investing in fluffing art galleries?” Thatch teases, and Theo just smirks.

“Well, for one, my wife Lena loves art,” he responds, and his voice warms at the word Lena. “And two, art is always a good investment, my man.”

“You invested in art galleries?” I question, and Theo nods.

“One in LA and one here in New York.”

“Really?” My mind starts to swirl with all sorts of ideas.

“You interested in buying some art, Luke?” Theo asks, his eyes curious.

“Not buying per se, but I might know of an artist who, once you see their paintings, you’ll want them in your galleries.”

“Is this a known artist?”

I shake my head. “No, but they should be.”

“Well, fluffing hell, now I want to know who this artist is, too,” Thatch chimes in, but I just shrug.

“Sorry, man, but they are wanting to remain anonymous for right now.”

“Hmmm...” Theo pauses and taps his chin with a smile. “Now I’m curious. How about you give me a call Monday, and I’ll get you connected with the director of the galleries.”

I can’t hide my smile. “Will do.”

“Uh, T-bag?” a female voice chimes from the doorway, and everyone at the table looks up to see Thatch’s wife Cassie standing there, a hand on her hip. “Were you guys throwing a rager earlier or what?”

“No rager, honey,” Thatch replies. “We were just watching Cap get his ass handed to him by Luke.”

Cassie grins at that. “Well, I’ve been instructed by Georgia to come in here and make you guys shut the hell up or else she can’t concentrate on the sweet potatoes.”

“My Georgie doing okay in there?” Kline asks.

“It’s Friendsgiving, Big Dick,” she replies with a shrug. “She’s running around my kitchen like a lunatic. But she’ll be fine once we’re sitting down to eat. Also, I might’ve given her a teensy-tiny bit of liquor and told her it’s lemonade.”

Kline quirks a brow. “How tiny?”

“Like half a glass?” She waves him off. “No big thing.”

“Great,” Kline mutters on a half laugh, half sigh and runs a hand through his hair. “Dinner should be interesting, I guess.”

Thatch smirks. “Drunk Georgie is the best.”

“Uh-huh...but do you know who’s also the best?” Cassie points her smile in my direction. “Luke’s girlfriend, Ava.”

In an instant, everyone at the table looks at me.

“I’m sorry...what?” Cap questions. “Did I hear you right, Cass? Did you just say Luke’s girlfriend Ava is here?”

“Pretty sure she said girlfriend,” Trent agrees, his mouth forming into a grin. “Not friend, but *girlfriend*.”

“As in, they’re dating?” Thatch questions, putting on a real fucking show. “But I thought you said Ava was just your friend?”

Well, son of a bitch. I probably should’ve remembered that whole conversation in LA at Prime before I agreed to take Ava’s and my fake relationship show on the road, huh?

“Luke?” Cap persists. “Mind sharing with the class?”

A laugh jumps from my lungs. I can’t help it. With the way Cassie is grinning at me like a loon and Thatch is pretending he doesn’t know what’s going down, it’s too fucking amusing.

“Yes, Ava is here,” I eventually respond. “And, well, she is, in fact—”

“His girlfriend.” An all-too-familiar voice fills my ears, and I look up to see Ava standing beside Cassie in the doorway.

“Well, I’ll be damned. I feel like a real-life book club is happening before my very eyes,” Cap replies with a smirk, wasting no time standing up to shake Ava’s hands. “I’m Caplin Hawkins,” he says. “And can I say it’s a real pleasure to finally meet Luke’s *girlfriend*? He’s already told us so much about you.”

“Honestly, he never shuts up about you,” Trent agrees, and before I know it, every single guy at the table has taken it upon himself to introduce himself to my Ava.

Your Ava?

I mean Ava. Not my Ava. Just...Ava.

Uh-huh...keep telling yourself that...

“How’s it going out there, Ace?” I ask, and Ava giggles.

“Well, Cassie here is teaching me the fine art of sneaking alcohol into people’s drinks and how to avoid ruining dinner.”

“And how exactly are you managing that, Crazy?” Thatch asks, his eyes grinning at his wife.

“Like I’d tell you my secrets,” she retorts with a roll of her eyes.

“You mean the very secrets that you use on me?”

“Exactly.” Cassie nods, unfazed. “Now, if you don’t mind, Ava and I have some more non-work work to do.”

But before they head back to the kitchen, Ava walks toward the table, leans down in front of me with the cleavage of her gorgeous breasts directly in my face and presses a soft kiss to my cheek. “Have fun, *boyfriend*,” she whispers into my ear, and her warm breath brushes the skin of my neck and the smell of her sweet and flowery perfume fills my nostrils.

Fuck, does she always smell this good?

And because I must be in an alternate-fucking-universe, my cock threatens to take notice.

Goddamn. What the hell is happening?



CHAPTER

Nineteen

Ava

Stick a fork in me because I am done with a capital D. I swear, if I try to eat even one more bite of turkey, of dressing, of pumpkin pie, I'll explode.

Which, with the way everyone else is relaxing on the sofas and the lux loungers in the Kellys' massive living room, I'd say I'm not the only one feeling more stuffed than the delicious turkey we consumed a few hours ago.

"You really outdid yourself, Georgie. I ate so much food it looks like T-bag knocked me up again," Cassie comments as she steps into the room, holding a glass of wine and a bourbon in her hands. She hands one off to her husband Thatch and proceeds to make herself cozy in his lap.

"God, I know," Winnie agrees with wide eyes, patting her stomach, and her husband Wes wraps his arm around her

shoulders and kisses her forehead. “But damn, the food was so good. Seriously, Georgie. Kudos to the chef.”

“Pretty sure my darling wife is otherwise occupied sleeping off the booze Cass gave her,” Kline teases, his voice quiet as he glances down at a sleeping Georgia in his lap.

“Crazy, is that a challenge?” Thatch asks, kissing Cassie’s cheek and resting a free hand on her knee.

“Is what a challenge?”

He waggles his brows. “Knocking you up again.”

“Um...no. Pretty sure I’m all set with your two mini-me heathens you already bestowed upon me.” Cassie snorts. Then not-so-discreetly slaps him in the crotch.

Thatch groans, but then he grins. “Yeah, but you know, what if we have a girl this time?”

“Aw, a mini-Cassie!” Ruby exclaims from the other side of the room where she’s currently cozied up with her husband Cap, who instantly starts cracking up when he takes in Thatch’s wide, terrified eyes.

“Never mind,” Thatch mutters.

“What’s that supposed to mean, Thatcher?” Cassie retorts and turns to glare at him.

“It means I literally cannot handle two Cassies in the same house.”

She sits up and glares at him. “Are you saying I’m high-maintenance, Thatcher?”

“Uh oh...” Both Lena and Theo tease from across the room, grinning at each other with amused eyes.

“Oh boy,” Greer, Trent’s wife, comments. “I think shit is about to go *down*.”

Instantly, Maybe giggles and hides her face into her husband Milo’s chest. “I’m afraid to look. I think she might really turn into a praying mantis and bite his head off.”

Emory and her husband Quincy watch on in fascination like they have popcorn in their laps, and Rocky and her husband Harrison pretty much do the same.

“*Thatcher*,” Cassie snaps, eyeing her husband with the kind of glare I think might actually singe skin.

“No, honey, I’m not saying you’re high-maintenance. I’m saying you’re a lunatic,” Thatch eventually answers, and everyone in the room just stares with wide eyes. “A beautiful, fluffing amazing lunatic whom I love dearly. But a lunatic, nonetheless.”

The room goes quiet.

But then, Cassie just shrugs and presses a hard kiss to her husband’s lips. “Yeah, I guess you have a point. Two Cassies in one house would probably be a disaster.”

If I’ve learned anything in the past few hours at the Kellys’ Friendsgiving dinner, it’s that Cassie and Thatch’s relationship is unlike anything I’ve ever seen. They bicker and flirt and bust out the most random, inappropriate but hilarious shit I’ve ever heard.

Hell, just during dinner prep alone, Cassie told more about her sex life with her *well-endowed* husband than one person should ever have to know.

How do I know he’s well-endowed? Because she legit calls it his Supercock.

Frankly, they’re crazy. But somehow, it works for them.

And the rest of their friends are...pretty damn awesome. Welcoming and friendly, they make you feel like you’ve always been a part of their little group.

“How you doing there, Ace?” Luke whispers into my ear, and I glance up to meet his eyes.

“Like I ate one too many pieces of pumpkin pie. You might have to carry me home.”

He grins down at me and gently pats my stomach. “I don’t know... I think you might still have some more room, and I’m pretty sure you didn’t try—”

“*Shh!*” I lift my hand to cover his mouth. “Don’t say it. My stomach can’t handle any more food talk.”

Luke smirks, and when he acts like he’s going to lick the palm of my hand, I quickly remove it from his face on a giggle.

“Aww...new love,” Lena comments. “Isn’t it the cutest, Maybe?”

Maybe nods in agreement. “The blessed honeymoon phase.”

I look at them both, confused, but when all the other girls start chiming in and I realize they’re staring toward us, it hits me.

They’re talking about us. Luke and me.

I almost open my mouth to correct them, but then I remember, tonight, he’s my boyfriend. Well, we’re *pretending* he’s my boyfriend.

Though, it kind of seems like you’re just being your normal, usual self with Luke...

No, I’m pretending. We’re never this physical with each other. I don’t think.

I don’t usually act this affectionate and cuddly and flirty with Luke...*right?*

News flash, sister, you actually do. All the freaking time.



CHAPTER

Twenty

December 4th

Luke

In the background, Mariah Carey sings about what she wants for Christmas, and I count fifteen Santa Clauses on the dance floor and another ten standing at the bar—trying to wave down the bartender for more booze. And I can't forget Trevor, the other jolly red-velvet-suited bastard sitting across from me at our high-top table.

Christmas season is officially upon us, and Harry's Bar is encouraging the (drunk) holiday spirit by hosting their annual Santa Claus night. Everyone inside this place is dressed up to celebrate. Hell, even Ava convinced me to wear an ugly Christmas sweater with the Golden Girls front and center and the words ***Stay Golden*** embroidered across the chest.

Well, more like, forced me to. She bought the damn thing off Amazon and all but shoved it over my head before we came here.

“Happy fucking holidays,” Trev cheers, raising his shot of tequila toward my beer and downing it without delay, his white beard slipping halfway down his chin in the process.

“Cheers, man.” I return the gesture and take a sip from my pint of Guinness.

He slams his shot glass onto the table with a groan and wipes the remnants of tequila from his beard while simultaneously adjusting it back into place. “It’s hard to believe that next year at this time, you might be in Houston.”

All I can do is nod. Fact is, I *will* be in Houston next year. This morning, I received my official packet in the mail—a thick, NASA-embossed envelope, filled with my acceptance letter, along with a lot of other material that I need to know about the program and moving to Texas.

But I still haven’t delivered that news to anyone. Not Uncle Gary. Not Trevor. Not even Ava. For the past few weeks, every time I’ve opened my mouth to tell her, it’s like my throat locks up and I can’t get the fucking words out.

This is everything I’ve worked my ass off for, and now that it’s officially here, now that I’ve actually achieved what, at times, felt like the impossible, the realization of leaving New York—*leaving my friends, leaving Ava*—for good makes me feel like I’m losing my family for a second time. I guess I never realized how much I latched on to them in the absence of my parents.

“Have you heard anything from NASA yet?” he asks, and like a coward, I shake my head.

But instead of perpetuating the lie, I switch the topic of conversation. “I’m taking a leave halfway through December. You’re going to be flying with Barry through the holidays.”

“What?” he nearly shouts. “What do you mean, I’m going to be flying with fucking Barry?”

If it isn't obvious already, Trevor isn't Barry's number one fan.

"I mean exactly what I said. I'm going on a trip. Leave the 21st and won't be back until after New Year's Eve."

Everything is true about the coming back part. Though, after the 21st, I won't be flying with Trev ever again. When Ava and I get back from Vermont, I'll have to pack up my apartment and head to Houston.

I'm going to tell him the full truth *soon*, but I have to deliver this news to Ava first.

And yet, even though you've been with her nearly every day since you found out, you still haven't told her...

He narrows his eyes. "Where are you going?"

"On a trip," I answer, purposely teasing him with the details.

"Yeah, I got that," he retorts. "But *where* is said trip?"

"On the East Coast."

"We *are* on the East Coast, you fuck."

I just grin. "I know. Talk about convenient, right?"

"Luke!" Ava's voice fills my ears, and I turn on my barstool to find her standing at the bar with Desi and Claire, gesturing toward me. "Do you guys need a refill?"

I look back at the table and take a quick inventory of our drinks and turn back toward Ava. "Two more Guinness and another shot for Trev!"

She gives me a thumbs-up and turns back around to face the bartender.

But my eyes take it upon themselves to take in the view—*her* view.

My eyes follow the length of her legs, moving up the candy-cane-striped socks that stop just below her knees, to the luscious view of trim legs that are revealed until they meet a little green velvet skirt that feels as if it just barely covers her

ass when she's leaning over the bar like that. And long blond hair falls down her back and over the tight white shirt and overalls that complete the holiday look.

Goddamn, Ava the Elf is quite the vision.

Truthfully, it should be illegal for her to make something as innocent as a fucking elf look that sexy.

I don't know how long I sit there, staring—*at your best friend's perfect ass*—but it takes the sounds of someone calling my name to pull me out of my trance.

“Luke? Bro, what's with you?” I hear Trev say. His voice changes slightly. “He's not normally like this, I swear.”

I look up to find a woman standing over us, and apparently, she's been trying to get my attention.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “Hi.”

“Luke, this is Gina,” Trev introduces. “She was just telling me how she hasn't been able to get anyone to join her for a dance.”

I nod.

“How about you join me?” Gina says, fluttering her eyelashes and moving her body a little too close to mine. “What do you say?”

“While I appreciate your offer, Gina, I'm sorry, but I can't,” I say, trying to let her down gently.

But she turns brazen, placing her hand on my bicep. “Oh, c'mon, Luke. I promise, me and you will have a *really good* time tonight.”

Translation: I want to fuck you.

And then she turns even more brazen by placing her breasts all up in my space.

Personally, I'm not a fan. If anything, it just makes me feel uncomfortable. For a brief moment, my eyes dart to where Ava still stands at the bar, trying to order our drinks.

“I’m sorry, but I have a girlfriend,” I say, still trying to ease us out of this conversation.

“You *what?*” Trev nearly shouts.

She looks deliberately around the table, between Trevor and me. “And where is this girlfriend of yours?” she asks, her voice teasing and flirtatious at the same time.

“That’s a good fucking question,” Trev comments.

But I don’t need to think twice about my answer.

I stand up from my barstool and quickly grab an unsuspecting Ava around the hips, pulling her away from the bar and back toward me until she’s pressed against my chest.

“What the...?” she questions through a giggle and looks up to meet my eyes. “What are you doing?”

“She’s right here,” I say to Gina, my hands still resting on Ava’s hips. “This is my girlfriend.”

Gina’s eyes go wide and then her face scrunches up in shock, and just as she opens her mouth to respond, Trev chokes on his beer and sprays it across the table, the mist of booze landing on everyone.

Ava dodges it by turning to press her face into my chest.

“*Ew*,” Gina mutters, swiping a hand across her forehead.

“What the fuck is happening right now?” Trevor asks, his eyes bouncing between Ava and Gina and me.

“Did he just say you’re his fucking girlfriend?” Desi shouts, her voice echoing inside the bar, over the crowd, and nearly drowning out Madonna’s voice singing “Santa Baby” from the DJ’s speakers.

Gina strides away from the circus on a huff, but the scrutiny doesn’t lessen. If anything, it just intensifies.

Desi and Claire get so close, I fear they might climb in our laps.

“Well, Ace, I guess the cat’s outta the bag, huh?”

“When I said we’d tell them about our plan tonight, I didn’t quite picture it coming off this crazy, Luke.” Ava snorts, smiling up at me.

I just shrug.

“You two have some explaining to do,” Claire says, her eyes pointedly glaring at us.

“Wait...are you two dating?” Desi asks. “Like, have you finally realized—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Ava cuts her off. “We’re not actually dating. We’re pretending to be dating.”

Claire scrunches up her nose. “Huh?”

“You know how you guys suggested that I just bring Luke to Vermont? Well, it’s happening.”

Trevor sighs and shakes his head.

“Damn, talk about a letdown,” Desi mutters, sharing a look with Claire.

“Tell me about it.”

“Wait. Why are you guys acting all weird?” I question.

“Because you two are fucking blind,” Trev retorts.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, man,” he answers through a sigh and finishes off the rest of his beer. “Fucking nothing.”

Ava quirks a brow and meets my eyes. “Is it just me, or does it seem like our friends are mad at us?”

All I can do is shrug.

But when Trevor meets my eyes, I don’t have to be a mind reader to know what he’s thinking. Or why he’s thinking it. For years, he’s been playing the same broken record, saying that I have a thing for Ava. That I see her as more than my best friend.

Sure, I can see that Ava is downright beautiful. She’s amazing, but anyone with two fucking eyes and a brain can see that.

And, obviously, I love spending time with her.

But that doesn't mean I have a thing for her.

Says the man who didn't hesitate to pull her over and introduce her as his girlfriend when another woman was coming on to him...



CHAPTER

Twenty-One

December 13th

Ava

“Pivot!” I shout toward Luke, giving my best Ross Geller impression, as I grip the top of the burlap- and rope-covered Christmas tree and lug it up the steps of our building. He stands at the bottom, carrying most of the weight, and to be honest, I’m here mostly for looks and entertainment value.

Normally, we’d, you know, take the elevator, but it’s on the fritz...*again*.

“Pivot! Pivot!” I yell over my shoulder as I round the corner and hit the second flight of stairs.

Luke’s jaw goes hard and serious, and somehow, I think my value as an entertainer is decreasing.

“I swear to God, if you say pivot one more time, I’m going to drop this tree and let it slide back down to the lobby. And then I’m going to take it outside and light the damn thing on fire.”

I giggle. “*Pivot!*”

“Ace!” Luke exclaims, his voice exasperated, but also, I can hear a teeny-tiny hint of a smile.

“I’m just trying to help you.”

He looks up the stairs and meets my eyes, his hands still gripping the bottom of the tree. “You’re trying to annoy me.”

“I can’t help it if those two things are parallel objectives.” I stop in the middle of the staircase and shrug. “You’re really funny when you get all irritated.”

“Can we keep it moving?” he questions. “I mean, after dragging this sad excuse for a tree halfway across the city, I’d like to get it into your apartment sometime today.”

I don’t move an inch. “Sad excuse for a tree? Luke London, you’re going to hurt Billy Bob’s feelings.”

My tree is a little sparse, but what he lacks in full, lush pine, he makes up for in spirit.

“Yeah, well, your pine friend Billy Bob is making my hands bleed. Surely, he can take a little ribbing.”

“I think you need to apologize to the tree, Luke. It’s not his fault you didn’t bring gloves.”

“I think you need to move your little ass up the stairs,” he retorts.

When I still don’t move, Luke jumps right into action, readjusting his position so he can lift the top of the tree from my hands and toss the whole damn thing over his shoulder.

“Christ,” he mutters and moves up the stairs with ease.

I fight the urge to giggle and follow his lead.

And, because I can’t help myself, I shout “*Pivot!*” every time he has to round a corner and start a new flight of stairs.

By the time we make it into my apartment, Luke is beyond annoyed with me.

On a huff, he sets the tree against the wall beside the large windows of my living room and strides right toward me, lifting my whole body up and over his shoulder.

I squeal.

With me in a firefighter's carry, he stomps around my apartment, exclaiming, "*Pivot, Ace! Pivot!*"

"Oh my God, Luke!" I shout. "Put me down!"

"Put you where?" he questions and spins to the right, then to the left.

"Down! Put me down, you crazy person!"

"Over here?" He moves toward the couch.

"Yes!"

"Right here? On the couch?"

"Oh my God! Yes!"

"Oh, okay," he says and unceremoniously drops me onto my sectional sofa, and my purse flies off my shoulder as my body bounces up and down on the cushions.

"You're a lunatic," I mutter through a few giggles, brushing my blond hair out of my face.

Luke just grins down at me, his hands resting firmly on his hips. "I just carried your tree fifteen blocks, and you're calling me names."

"Yes, lunatic. But thank you. I very much appreciate that." I wink and stand up from the couch to unwrap the burlap and rope from my tree.

Once Billy Bob—*whom I named after the Billy Bob Thornton from Bad Santa*—is completely unwrapped and all set up in front of the windows, I stand back and take in the view.

"He's glorious."

Luke wraps his arm around my shoulders and scoffs. “I hate to break it to ya, Ace, but he makes Charlie Brown’s Christmas tree look good.”

I slap him in the stomach, but by the way he laughs, I’d say my playful efforts have all the intensity of a gnat.

“So, now what do we do?”

“We decorate him, silly,” I reply and nudge his hip with mine.

“I know that’s what we’d do with a traditional tree. But Billy Bob?” He shakes his head. “He’ll hold what...two, maybe three ornaments, tops?”

“You’re such a grinch,” I mutter. Conveniently, I brought up the box of ornaments and tinsel and garland and lights from basement storage earlier this morning—read: I made Luke bring it up this morning—so I head right for it and get to work.

“I might be a grinch, but you and ole Billy would just be two passing ships without me. And...I guess...I’ll still help you decorate your tree.”

“Yeah?” I ask, and he nods.

“Of course. Give it water too. I didn’t put in all this work just to let him die.”

At his words, my heart does a weird flip-floppy thing inside my chest—Luke and I have been through so much together, and he *always* looks out for me. I open my mouth to say something—thank him, maybe—but my phone starts ringing from my purse that’s sitting between two couch cushions, obnoxiously shaking the bag with its vibration and pulling me out of the sentimental moment. I run over to my bag and pull out the phone to see **Incoming Call Dad** flashing on the screen.

Good ole Guy Lucie.

I just get it answered before my ringtone comes to an end.

“Ava, it’s your dad.”

I snort. Somehow, he still hasn't figured out the consequences of the information age and instant caller ID. "I know, Dad. What's up?"

"Did you get my email?"

"What email?"

"The one I just sent a few minutes ago."

"Uh...no, sorry. I've been busy putting up my Christmas tree. Haven't checked my inbox," I respond, multitasking by organizing my ornaments, rearranging them one by one on my coffee table. In true Ava Lucie fashion, they are a tangled mess from last year's lackluster effort at putting them away.

"What the hell are you putting up a Christmas tree for? You're going to be in Vermont for Christmas."

"Because I love Christmas," I retort. "Pretty sure I learned that from you, big Guy. In fact, given the timing, I have a feeling that's exactly what your email is all about."

A deep, reverberating chuckle fills my ears. "You got me. I've got our whole itinerary mapped out. It's a little truncated from last year, though. This wedding is really raining on my holiday parade. You'd think your sister would've picked a different damn month to tie the knot."

Every year, like clockwork, once Thanksgiving is over, Guy Lucie begins to prepare for his favorite holiday of the entire year—*Christmas*. And I'm not talking just a little bit of preparation. I'm talking *Christmas Vacation*-style lights on the outside of the house, four fully decorated trees *inside* the house, along with five days of fun-filled holiday activities that are mandatory for every member of the Lucie family. Even my mom's dog, Bruce.

"I'm pretty sure Kate wasn't trying to rain on your parade, Dad. She's probably just excited to marry the love of her life."

He huffs out a sigh. "Well, she sure as shit could've picked a different day. Hell, I almost went against my Christmas code and started putting my lights up before Thanksgiving."

"That's blasphemy," I tease, but it goes right over his head.

“I know! Goddamn wedding. I know my Avie wouldn’t try to pull something like this.”

“That’s probably why I’m your favorite daughter, right?”

“Shh!” he hushes me, but I can hear the smile in his voice. “You know we can’t let the others find out.”

If it isn’t obvious, I’ve always been a bit of a daddy’s girl.

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me. Your favorite daughter.”

He chuckles again. “So, you’ll read the email, right?”

“You got it.”

“And your mom was raving about you bringing some boyfriend with you... What’s that all about?”

“Well...I’ll be bringing Luke,” I answer, and at my words, I look up to find him walking out of my spare bedroom with a guilty grin on his face.

I cover the receiver with my hand. “Why are you snooping?”

“To see if you broke the streak.” His grin grows, consuming his entire handsome face. “Which you did.”

After the night on the subway with Luke, I came back to my apartment buzzing with energy. I couldn’t sleep. And next thing I knew, I found myself in my spare bedroom—*otherwise known as my makeshift art studio*—painting.

Actually putting my paintbrush to canvas.

The piece isn’t done yet, but it’s certainly a start.

“Avie?” My dad’s voice is in my ear. “You still there?”

“Yeah, Dad, I’m here.”

“Someone there with you?”

“Luke is here,” I answer honestly. “He helped me carry my tree into my apartment.”

“You know, I’ve always thought Luke was a good guy.”

“He is.”

“And now you’re with him? The two of you are a couple?”

If there is one person on the planet I have a hard time lying to, it’s my dad.

“Uh...yeah?” I answer, but he notices the uncertain inflection in my voice.

There’s a brief bout of silence, and I can picture him tapping his chin. “Why do I get the sense there’s a whole lot more to this story?”

“Probably because there is.”

“You ready to tell that story?”

“Uh...” I shake my head and stare down at my feet. “Not quite.”

“But I’ll hear all about when you come home?”

“Sure,” I answer. “I’ll tell you all about it when I come home, but that’s only if you promise to keep it between us.”

“You have my word,” he responds without hesitation. “And Avie?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“Don’t forget to check the itinerary email.”

I smile. Talking to my dad *always* makes me feel better. “I won’t, Dad.”

We end the call shortly after that, and I get back to work on making Billy Bob beautiful.

First, lights.

Then, garland.

Then, ornaments.

Luke helps with all of the above and then heads to the kitchen to do something.

I sprinkle a little tinsel and put the star on top, plug in the lights, and stand back to take in the glorious view.

“He’s perfect.” I grin.

“Not too shabby,” Luke comments and holds out a white mug toward me.

“What’s this?”

“Hot chocolate.”

My eyes go wide in surprise. “When did you make hot chocolate?”

“When you started to get a little wild with the tinsel,” he responds through a chuckle. “I feared I was going to end up a casualty.”

I giggle at that, but when I go to take a sip, I pause. Not only did Luke make hot chocolate, he made hot chocolate and dressed it all up with some serious holiday pizzaz.

“You added marshmallows? And whipped cream? And a freaking candy cane?” I glance between him and the mug. “Oh my God, you’re not the grinch! You’re a little closet Christmas lover!”

“No, Ace, you’ve got it all wrong.” He shakes his head on a chuckle, and I put a defiant hand to my hip.

“Explain it to me then, Mr. Secret Holiday Spirit.”

“I’m best friends with a Christmas lover,” he answers with a soft smile. “And it goes without saying that I like seeing you happy.”

Instantly, my heart does that weird flip-floppy thing in my chest again.

God, Luke just might be the best guy I’ve ever known.

Wake up, sister. He is the best guy you’ve ever known.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Two

December 21st

Luke

Ava fidgets beside me, her knee bouncing up and down as the rest of the passengers on our flight finish boarding the plane.

Today—*fondly called D-Day by Ava*—is the day we fly to her hometown of Lakewood, Vermont. And thanks to all my years working for this airline, we get to do it in first class.

“Hey, Ace?” I rest my hand on her thigh, gently slowing her knee’s movement to a stop. She looks over at me, and a little crinkle appears between her brows. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Are you sure?” she questions. “Because, right now, I have so much anxiety, I feel like they could forgo gasoline and just

hook *me* up to the engine. It's either that or I might run off this freaking flight before they shut the doors."

Memories of that first day in college, when she set her dorm on fire and then proceeded to run away from the flaming-hot-plate disaster, fill my mind.

"I've got an idea."

"You want to leave?" She is already nodding. "Yeah, we should definitely leave, right? I'll just tell everyone we had the flu or something and had to stay home. No big deal," she tosses back, even beginning to unbuckle the seat belt secured around her waist, but I quickly place my hand over hers to stop the mid-freak-out momentum.

"We're not leaving." I shake my head and fight the urge to burst into laughter. *Damn, she's worked up.* "But we are going to sneak a little something-something before the flight attendants start giving their spiel on no-smoking rules and emergency exit rows."

Without preamble, I lean down and pull out two small water bottles—filled with liquor—from my bag. Ones I packed in preparation for this very moment. Ava is a nervous flyer to begin with—add in the whole high school reunion, her sister's wedding, and that I've come along as her pretend boyfriend, and I knew we were sitting on the mental precipice of a disaster.

I hold one out to her and she shakes her head. "No thanks. I'm not thirsty."

"That's good. It's not water."

She studies me closely for a second, and finally, when I wink, she gets it.

"Booze?" she questions. "You brought booze?"

"It's not just *any* booze. It's *peppermint schnapps*. And I snuck it. Technically, we're not allowed to bring our own alcohol on the plane." I uncap one of the small bottles and hand it to her. "Like drinking a candy cane. So, basically, it's like Christmas in your mouth."

She stares at the bottle. “Pretty sure it’s going to taste like shit.”

“Christmas skepticism from you? Isn’t that illegal or something?”

She rolls her eyes, and I smile.

“You won’t know until you try.”

“If I puke, I’m directing it straight into your lap.”

A soft laugh escapes my lips, but I don’t say anything else. She doesn’t need to know that I’m planning the same. No longer a fidgeting, anxious mess, my ultimate “calm Ava down” mission is complete.

After a few huffs and sighs, Ava takes the bottle from my hands, pinches her nose, and places the liquor bottle to her lips, letting the peppermint schnapps flow down her throat. Once it’s empty, she takes a hard swallow and scrunches up her face into disgust. “*Yuck*. That’s horrible.”

“I know.” I grin at her and uncap the leftover bottle in my hand, and down the hatch the liquor goes. It’s too warm, too minty, too strong, and I squint my eyes and shake my head a little once I finish it off.

“That was the worst idea you’ve ever had,” Ava mutters, grabbing three sticks of gum out of her purse and shoving them into her mouth.

“Probably,” I agree.

But her knees are steady, and her pupils don’t look freakishly dilated anymore.

Bad idea or not, it worked.

While the flight attendants stay busy helping passengers shove their luggage into the overhead bins, I pull my cell phone out of my pocket to pass the time. Seeing as there are several rows behind us that have yet to be filled, I’d say it’s going to be a bit before we’re actually taking off.

A text message pops up from Theo, and a trill of nerves runs down my spine. The last time I saw him, I kind of went

behind Ava's back about her paintings. I glance over at her to make sure she's occupied before opening the message.

Chomping on gum and staring out the window, she seems at least temporarily calmed and distracted by the disgusting alcohol, so I take my chances that she'll stay that way and open the message.

Theo: They loved them. Hell, I loved them.

Yes. I have the urge to fist-pump the fucking air. I don't do it, obviously, but man, I want to. Instead, I glance over at Ava—who is still occupied with looking out the window and watching carts of luggage being wheeled to our plane—and type out a quick response.

Me: I knew they would.

Theo: My assistant will email you all of the information.

This confirmation right here was the last thing I needed to ensure that my Christmas present plans were complete. The other gift I arranged will be delivered to the Lucies' house in two days.

And Ava calls me the grinch? *Ha.* I might as well be Santa Claus right now.

Me: Thanks, Theo. I really appreciate this.

Theo: It was a true pleasure. I can't wait to see more.

“Who are you texting?” Ava asks suddenly.

Shit.

I lock the screen of my phone as casually as I can manage and flip the phone over on my thigh.

“No one.”

Her eyes scrutinize my face. “What are you up to?”

“If you must know, it’s related to a Christmas present.”

Those eyes transition from interrogation mode straight into excitement. “For me?”

“Why on earth would I get you a Christmas gift?” I ask and don’t dare to hide the teasing tone of my voice.

Ava fakes a pout. “Obviously, because I’m your favorite person on the planet.”

My favorite person on the planet. She isn’t wrong. Frustrating, thickheaded, messy-as-hell—Ava is a lot of things, not all of them good. But nobody is all good, no matter how much they claim to be, and at the end of the day, I’d rather be around Ava when she’s a mess than be around anyone else who has it all together.

“So...?” she questions, nudging my shoulder. “Are you going to tell me about my Christmas gift, or do I need to guess?”

“Neither,” I respond, delighted to have managed a secret from her for this long. “You’re just going to have to wait until it’s actually Christmas like all the other little boys and girls.”

Another fake pout. “*Boo.* You’re no fun.”

I grin, slide my phone back into the pocket of my jeans, and get lost scrolling through the in-flight entertainment screen secured to the back of the seat in front of mine. Movies, television, games, music, it has all the goods. “You want to watch a movie together?”

Her face twists adorably. “The flight isn’t *that* long.”

“Then do you want to freak out the other passengers and try out the in-flight messaging app?” I whisper. She scrunches up her nose in confusion.

“The what?”

“This,” I say, voice still quiet, and tap the screen again with my index finger. Instantly, a chat box appears. I enter my name as *Pilot*, and Ava looks at me like I’ve grown two heads. “Just trust me. I promise this will not disappoint.”

Another tap to the screen and a keyboard appears, and I quickly type out a message.

Pilot (2B): Hell yeah! You guys ready for this flight? I’m super pumped!

“*Luke!*” Ava whisper-yells and nudges me with her elbow. “People are going to think you’re actually the pilot.”

I flash a devilish smirk her way. “I know.”

Truthfully, I’m not the creator of this prank, but it *is* something Trevor and I used to crack up over when we flew commercial. The things that would be said in those in-flight messaging apps were too good to ignore. We had a pact with the flight attendants to take screenshots of anything weird, hilarious, or downright insane.

Frank (14C): Hey hey, Pilot! Get us there safely, yeah? Also, if you can let the flight attendants know the man in 14C needs a beer, it would be much appreciated.

Karen (15A): Why is the Pilot messaging us from 2B? Shouldn’t he be in the cockpit?

Rich (25D): It’s called friendly customer service, Karen.

Ava snorts and covers her mouth with her hand as she watches me type out another message and hit send.

Pilot (2B): You mind if I play a little AC/DC during the flight?

Frank (14C): You've Been Thunderstruck! Let's goooooo!

Karen (15C): This seems very unprofessional.

Rich (25D): Karen, this is the pilot being friendly. It's called customer service.

That message gets Ava good. Her giggles become too much for her to bear, and without constraint, she bursts into laughter. Loud, contagious giggles echoing from our row. *Damn, I sure do love making her laugh.*

And the fact that I get to spend the next two weeks doing just that? Best trip ever.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Three

Ava

One ninety-minute flight and a two-hour drive later, and we have officially arrived in Lakewood. *Home sweet home.*

Luke pulls our rental into my parents' circular driveway, bringing us to a stop, and the instant I open the passenger door, the brisk, fresh Vermont air fills my nose. There's no snow, but it smells like it's going to happen soon.

It's little things like knowing the weather by a smell that makes this place feel so different from New York. I've been there for so many years, and yet, somehow, this is still home.

And for as long as we've known each other, this is still Luke's first time here. It feels kind of momentous.

"It looks like Christmas threw up on your parents' house," Luke comments, staring up at my parents' two-story white brick home. An amused smile plays at his full lips.

Though, technically, you can't really see the white brick because it's covered in every holiday decoration known to man, but his observation is spot-on. Christmas is in full swing at the Lucie house.

"I told you my dad goes a little wild for the holidays."

He furrows his brow. "Am I just hearing shit, or is there Christmas music playing outside?"

"Yes, you are, in fact, hearing Michael Bublé sing *Winter Wonderland*. Not imagining it," I answer frankly. "But don't worry, the songs rotate all day, every day, until December 26th. You won't have to listen to this one more than once in a five-hour circuit."

"I've heard stories, but I'll be honest, now it all really makes sense." Luke snorts and puts two hands on his hips, taking in every inch of the view.

"What makes sense?"

"Why you forced me to drag a Christmas tree up five flights of stairs," he retorts. "Why, for the past fifteen years, you've made me do all sorts of holiday shit."

I turn back to the house and focus on Guy Lucie's handiwork. He's pulled out all the stops, and it's apparent he's even added a few new pieces to his prized décor.

Lights cover every square inch of the house and yard. I'm talking the roof, bricks, porch, shingles, gutters, the blue evergreen trees in the garden, *every-freaking-where*.

And that's not the end of it.

Placed throughout the yard are various holiday scenes with blow-up Santa Clauses and reindeer and Frosty the Snowman and a nativity scene and, well, pretty much anything you can think of. He's even created a small holiday farm scene with life-size light-up pigs and cows and goats. All embellished with red bows and jingle bells.

I'm so amused by Luke's reaction to my dad's holiday circus that I almost forget about the whole "my best friend is pretending to be my boyfriend" reality we're about to face.

That is, until Luke retrieves our luggage from the trunk, puts it up on the porch, and then comes back for me so we can walk up to the front porch together, hand in hand. My heart picks up speed, pounding faster and faster inside my chest. I force a deep, calming breath in and out of my lungs and lift my hand to knock. But before my knuckles can make contact with wood, the door swings wide open.

“Ava!” My mom appears into view, the wrinkles around her blue eyes creased into an excited smile. “You made it!”

“Hi, Mom.” I return her smile, and she steps out onto the porch to wrap me up into a tight hug. Reluctantly, I let go of Luke’s hand to curl both my arms around her.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispers into my ear and leans back to look at me. She gently brushes my blond hair behind my shoulders. “And you look so beautiful.”

“Thanks, Mom. I’ve missed you too.”

“You know, you’re positively glowing, sweetie,” she adds, and her eyes move pointedly to Luke. “Could it be because of this handsome *boyfriend* of yours?”

Oh boy. Here we go...

“Hi, Mrs. Lucie,” Luke greets, his body language all relaxed and cool.

My stomach feels like it’s twisted itself inside out, and my heart has apparently started a garage band inside my chest, inviting my lungs to join in on the anxiety-ridden fun.

“Oh, Luke!” My mom taps him playfully on the shoulder. “No need for the formalities. Call me Rose.”

“It’s good to see you, Rose,” he responds and unleashes his most irresistible smile on my mother.

It works, by the way.

All my mom can do in response is gawk. At him. At us. When Luke turns on the charm, he’s like a hypnotist of the highest order.

“I just can’t believe it,” she whispers, covering her mouth with her hand.

Oh my God, is she about to cry?

“The two of you together. Officially *together*. It just warms my heart. I’ve always hoped—”

“Rose! Who’s out there? Is that my Avie?” My dad’s jovial voice cuts her off, and it doesn’t take long before he peeks his knightly head over my mom’s shoulder. “Hey hey, it *is* my Avie girl!” he exclaims, shoving both my mom and Luke out of his way to get to me. My mom scoffs and Luke chuckles as my dad shakes me side to side in a big ole bear hug.

“Hi, Dad,” I whisper in his ear. “Missed ya.”

“I missed you too,” he answers and sets me back on my feet. “It’s not the same decorating the house without you here to help me.”

When I was a kid, I was the only one who would help him put up the Christmas decorations. Since I’ve been in New York, he’s been responsible for it all on his own.

“I can’t believe no one else helps you,” I comment, glancing pointedly at my mom. “It’s a travesty.”

My mom rolls her eyes. “Like he’d let me or your sisters touch any of his precious decorations.”

I grin. That’s also true. I’m the only one he trusts to help, but I think that’s more because I let him make all the decisions and just follow whatever instructions he tosses my way. My mom and sisters try to make *suggestions*, but when it comes to big Guy’s Christmas decorations, you *never* suggest. You acknowledge that he is the expert and just follow his lead.

“And I see you’ve brought Luke with you,” my dad comments and reaches out to shake Luke’s hand. “Good to see you, son. How have you been?”

“I’ve been good, Mr. Lucie.”

“Please, just call me Guy.” He waves him off the same way my mom did mere moments ago.

“Luke is Ava’s boyfriend now,” my mom whispers to my dad, but it’s not quiet at all.

“Is that right?” My dad feigns surprise. “You two crazy kids are an item now?”

Luke nods, and a handsome smile touches his lips. “Sir, I don’t know how it happened, but somehow, I convinced your beautiful daughter to be my girlfriend.”

My dad smiles proudly. “My Avie is the best.”

“You won’t find me denying that.” Luke winks at me and leans forward to whisper to my dad, “But how about we keep it between us that she’s too good for me, yeah?”

Guy chortles.

My mom sighs this dreamy, far-too-loud sigh and tsks her lips. “My goodness. I just...I don’t think I could be any more excited than I am right now. The only thing that would make me happier is if the two of you decided to tie the knot.”

“*Mom,*” I chastise. “Good Lord.”

“What?” she questions, looking between the three of us. “What did I say wrong?”

My dad just chuckles and wraps his arm around my mom’s shoulder, leading her through the door and down the hall toward the kitchen, and he gestures for us to follow them.

Luke just grins the whole damn way, but my mind is off to the races, mulling over the way my mother appeared so quick to sell me off like I’m a prized pig at the freaking county fair.

I mean, we’ve been here all of ten minutes, and my mom is already trying to plan our freaking wedding!

You think that’s bad? Just wait until she finds out it’s all a sham...

That thought sits like a rock in my stomach. A heavy, firm mass of guilt.

Man oh man, what have I gotten myself into?

A big fat web of lies.

“Avie, you want hot chocolate?” my dad asks, and all I can do is nod, my mind still reeling from things I’d prefer not to think about right now. “What about you, Luke? You like hot chocolate?”

“That’d be great, sir.”

While my dad makes us some fresh cocoa, we sit down at the kitchen table, and my mom doesn’t dillydally with the usual small talk. Oh no, she dives right into the relationship questions.

“So, I just have to know,” she begins, and internally I sigh, already knowing what’s about to come. “How did you two go from best friends for years to in a relationship?”

Boom. There it is. She drops the bomb right in the middle of the Christmas-décor-covered table.

“Well, Rose, I’ve always had a bit of a thing for your Ava,” Luke begins to answer and reaches out to casually wrap his arm around the back of my chair. “It just took about fifteen years for me to convince her to have a thing for me too.”

What? *That’s* our story? That he’s had a thing for me for fifteen years?

My jaw nearly hits the little snowmen embroidered into the tablecloth. That is not *at all* how I thought he’d answer that question.

But my mom, on the other hand, well, she looks like she’s about to swoon out of her freaking chair.

“Oh my goodness,” she says through a sigh and then smacks her lips together, shaking her head slightly. “I just... That is...” She meets my eyes, and I swear to God, it looks like she’s about to cry again. “Ava, honey, this has to be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. I am so happy for you two.”

I glance at Luke, and he’s just sitting there, arm still comfortably resting on the back of my chair, a smile etched on his face.

My pits are sweating like someone shoved a geyser inside my sweater, and my cheeks feel ready to burst into flames.

How on earth is he being so cool about all this?

Seriously. Is he internally freaking out like me?

Or is that just me? Am I the only one who feels like I'm one more relationship question away from being triggered into a panic attack?

"Rose, honey, mind helping me with the cocoa?" my dad asks, and thankfully, my mom hops up to assist, giving me a much-needed break from the interrogation.

"What in the hell was that?" I whisper toward Luke and tap him on the stomach with my elbow.

"What was what?" he questions back with a half shrug. "I was just answering her question."

"That was not at all how I expected you to answer."

"What? You don't like the idea of me secretly pining over you for the last fifteen years?" he asks and flashes a little smirk in my direction.

Instantly, as if it's right on cue, my heart starts to pound wildly in my chest.

"It's not that. It's just..." I pause, completely unsure of what I'm even trying to say. "I just didn't expect you to say that, is all," I mutter and fidget my fingers across the tablecloth, my index finger tracing each tiny snowman as I try to figure out what in the hell is happening inside my head right now.

Maybe him saying that freaked you out because it reminds you of someone...someone you know really fucking well... someone who refuses to admit to herself how she really feels about her best friend...

Oh, holy geez. That's crazy with a capital and bold-faced C.

I need some air.

"Be right back," I say to Luke and hop out of my chair. "Just running to the bathroom real quick."

I don't miss the way his eyes attempt to search mine, but I quickly look away from him and rush toward the bathroom in the entry hallway.

The instant I'm inside, I shut and lock the door and just stand there, hands resting on the sink and staring at my reflection in the mirror. My heart continues to pound like a kickdrum inside my chest as I try to slow my near-hyperventilating breaths.

What in the hell is happening? Am I actually having a panic attack right now?

Uh no, honey. More like, you just opened Pandora's box of emotions, and it is freaking you the fuck out.

Holy hell.

I sigh and splash a little cool water on my overheated cheeks.

"Just calm down and get it together," I whisper to myself. "It's going to be fine."

Several slow inhaleds and exhaleds later, I feel relaxed enough to step back out into the kitchen. But when I get there, I notice Luke is no longer sitting at the table.

"Where's Luke?"

"He took your suitcases and cocoa mugs upstairs to your room," my mom answers, and a tickled grin kisses her mouth. "After your dad handed him the itinerary, Luke said you guys might need a nap before diving into the first night of Christmas festivities."

The normalcy of that statement catches me off guard, but also, it makes me feel oddly at peace.

"Oh boy." I laugh. "I kind of, sort of, purposely didn't show him the itinerary before we left New York."

"That was probably smart." My mom's grin grows. "Oh, and before I forget. There are fresh towels and washcloths in your bathroom, but let me know if you guys need anything, okay?"

“Thanks, Mom.”

Out of the kitchen and up the stairs, I make my way toward my old bedroom at the end of the second-floor hallway, and when I open the door, I find Luke lying on my bed with the itinerary clutched in his hands.

“How’s it going?” I ask and gently shut the door behind myself.

“Did you see what your dad has planned?” he asks, eyes wide. “Ice-skating, caroling, cookie-baking contest...? Every day is jam-fucking-packed, Ava.”

“Well, the big Guy really loves Christmas.” I giggle and slip off my boots, setting them beside Luke’s sneakers and our suitcases.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I honestly didn’t know there were this many Christmas-themed activities to do.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised,” I answer, lying down on the bed beside him. “If there were more days, Guy Lucie would’ve found more activities. Truthfully, that final schedule probably had to be narrowed down.”

“Holy shit.” Luke bursts into laughter and sets the laminated itinerary onto my old nightstand and adjusts his arm so it’s underneath my shoulders, tucking me close to his side. “This is going to be some week, huh?”

I grin up at him. “Yeah, well, between Guy’s holiday extravaganza, my sister’s wedding, my stupid reunion, and the whole—” I drop my voice to a whisper “—*you pretending to be my boyfriend*, I’m pretty sure this week will be one for the books.”

“You want to know my favorite part of the trip so far?”

“Tell me.”

“Seeing your childhood bedroom.”

I lean back to meet his eyes. “Really?”

“Oh yeah,” he responds and glances around the room. “It’s everything I hoped it’d be and more.”

“You’ve spent that much time thinking about my childhood bedroom?”

“I’ve always wondered what young Ava was like when she was up here painting.” His smile is soft and sugary sweet. “And now I know.”

I look around my room and see that most of it hasn’t changed. Not the canvases hanging above my desk or the easel that still sits by the window. It’s a true blast from the past.

“I think ten-year-old Luke would’ve been fascinated by ten-year-old Ava.”

“You don’t know that.” I roll my eyes. “I was a weird kid.”

“All kids are weird. And your weird is the good kind,” he responds and flashes a lazy, sleepy smile toward me. “That’s what makes you special, Ace. You’ve always marched to the beat of your own drum.” A yawn escapes his throat, and it’s not long before his eyes drift closed.

After a lengthy day of traveling, I should be just as tired as he is, but I’m not.

If anything, I feel wired. Like I just drank three freaking espressos.

I should also be questioning the whole sleeping arrangement thing.

But when I look up at Luke and note the soft, even breaths moving his chest up and down in steady rhythm, I decide that we can just share my bed. It’s queen-sized, so we won’t be cramped for space, and it would be kind of cruel to drag him all the way to Vermont and make him sleep on the freaking floor.

Makes total sense...*right?*



CHAPTER

Twenty-four

December 22nd

Luke

My run around Ava's small town clocked my slowest time I've had in over two years. But I'm pretty sure that has everything to do with the massive Italian-themed holiday dinner her dad cooked for us last night. Spaghetti, lasagna, Caesar salad, fresh bread, and enough dessert cannoli and cheesecake to feed everyone in Lakewood, it was a fucking feast.

The consequences of gorging myself on that many heavy carbs and desserts equated to an incredibly painful run this morning.

Thank fuck that's over.

I undo the elastic strap that holds my phone against my arm and check the mileage and time. The mileage is good—six miles. But the time? Ha. Let's not talk about it.

As I walk up the Lucies' driveway, I scroll through a few notifications on my phone.

An email from my direct boss and one of the owners of Soar Aviation.

From: Billy Shay

Subject: Permanent Leave Paperwork

Luke,

Just confirmed with HR that everything has been filed.

I'm going to miss having you on our fleet, but I'm also incredibly excited for you. Let me know when it's okay to make the big announcement to the rest of the team.

No doubt, you will be sorely missed.

Take Care,

Billy

It's official. No longer a pilot for Soar Aviation, soon, I will be on NASA's team.

The thought is so surreal, I'm not sure I've fully processed it yet.

Yeah. And you also haven't fucking told anyone but Billy...

The inklings of guilt start to swirl around in my stomach, but I redirect my focus to a few text message notifications I missed yesterday.

Thatcher Kelly: Luke, my man, I'm running a little behind schedule. Mind working that ATC magic of yours?

Shit. I cringe when I realize I forget to tell him the dates for when I'd be heading to Vermont with Ava. Or that Barry would be flying in my place.

About thirty minutes after that initial text, he sent this.

Thatcher Kelly: What. The. Fluff? Who is this bastard Barry? He sucks, Luke. He fluffing sucks. Bitched at me for being late and shit.

And then, five minutes after that, he sent these two beauties.

Thatcher Kelly: Trevor tells me you're not coming back until AFTER the 1st of the year???? And that I'm going to have to deal with this bum Barry for the next few weeks??? Say it isn't fluffing so...

Thatcher Kelly: Just got confirmation that it IS so, and it's because you're in Vermont with Ava. I'll be honest, Lucas, ole Thatcher ain't happy about it, but he understands. ;)

I smile and shake my head. *Goddamn. Sometimes, Thatcher Kelly really is a handful.* Before I step into Ava's parents' house, I shoot him a text back, choosing to ignore the topic of Ava altogether.

Me: Sorry I missed your texts. And try to go easy on Barry, will you? He really isn't that bad when you get to know him.

I'm surprised when I get two texts back in record time.

Thatcher Kelly: You might as well give up on that pipe dream, Lucas. There is no way me and Dingle-Barry are ever going to get along.

Thatcher Kelly: Yesterday, Wes and I were trying to watch the Mavericks game on the way home from LA, and Dingle-Barry made a fluffing announcement over the speakers to tell us to turn down the volume. Wes was so pissed, I thought he was going to murder him in the cockpit. No doubt about it, we'll all be fluffing relieved when you're back.

Apparently, Barry incites the same reaction in everyone—an *instant* dislike.

Truthfully, I think he's a nice guy, maybe a little odd and stuffy and set in his ways, but a good guy, nonetheless.

Also, from here on out, a guy Thatch will probably be seeing a lot more of...

Obviously, there's no need to break that news to him just yet. I'll let him enjoy the holidays before I deliver that doozy.

When my post-run, heated skin starts to turn cool, I step out of the brisk morning air and back inside the Lucies' house.

I'm pleased to find Ava standing in the kitchen alone, wearing a tank top and Santa Claus pajama pants. She clutches a fresh cup of hot cocoa in one hand and a buttercream-frosted snowman cookie in the other.

"Mornin', Ace."

She smiles around a mouthful of cookie. "How was the run?"

"Horrible," I answer through a chuckle and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. "I feel like I did a Michael Scott carboload."

She snorts. "Yeah, that was a big meal last night."

I eye her knowingly. “If that was last night’s dinner, what in the hell am I supposed to expect on Christmas?”

“Christmas *and* Christmas Eve.”

I tilt my head to the side.

“My dad makes his biggest meals on both of those days.”

His *biggest* meals? Pretty sure the only way those meals of his could get any bigger is if he buys a fucking crane and has food dropped in through the roof.

“Good God,” I mutter as I chuckle and take a sip of water. “I might have to buy an extra ticket for the plane ride home.”

“Whatever, Mr. Six-Pack Abs.” Ava rolls her pretty blue eyes. “Your metabolism can handle a little indulgence.”

I wink. “Speaking of my glorious abs, you want to help me?”

“Help you do what?”

“Finish my workout.”

Confused, she just stands there.

“C’mon, Ace,” I cajole and gesture for her to follow me into the living room. “Since I have to skip my weight workouts, I need a little extra resistance.”

Even though she still has no idea what I’m talking about, she sets down her cup of cocoa and follows me into the living room, the half-eaten cookie still held in her hand.

I get into a push-up position and flick my head toward my back. “Hop on.”

“*Hop on?*” She scrunches up her nose, staring down at me. “You can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am,” I retort. “While I do push-ups, I want you to sit on my back. Normally, I do this with weights, but as you can see, I have no weights.”

Surprisingly, without any further argument, she climbs onto my back.

“Am I too heavy?” she asks, comically munching on that fucking cookie while I hold my body in a plank position.

“Nope,” I respond and begin my first circuit of push-ups.

“Ohh, Mr. Six-Pack Abs is just so strong!” she exclaims dramatically, and I laugh at her teasing.

Truthfully, I’m not acting like some tough guy. Ava is petite in stature. She always has been. Even the childhood pictures hanging throughout her parents’ home make it obvious that she’s always been a tiny person.

“Just eat your cookie, smartass, and enjoy the ride.”

She giggles at that and repositions herself, sitting cross-legged on my back, and I continue to move us up and down, counting each push-up silently in my head.

Once I hit one hundred, I stop and lie flat on the ground with Ava still perched on my back.

“You done?”

“Not yet,” I answer after a deep breath. “Two more sets.”

“Good Lord, are you training to be an astronaut or a freaking navy SEAL?”

I want to laugh at that, and I almost do, but my amusement is stifled when the realization that I *still* haven’t told her I’ve been accepted into the program hits me.

Fuck, you need to tell her. It’s starting to feel like I’m outright lying to her the longer I keep the news a secret. And lying to Ava just feels...wrong. Horrible. It’s the last thing I want to do.

I start into my second set of push-ups, Ava kindly counting for me this round, but the entire time, my mind urges me, *Just tell her, dude. Just fucking open your mouth and tell her. Right now.*

But when I open my mouth to do it, I promptly shut it.

And I do that two more times before we’re officially interrupted by the sounds of people walking down the entry hallway.

Did we Freaky Friday switch or some shit? Why can't I seem to follow the advice I'm always giving her and just get it all out in the open?

"Ava Marie! Are you making that man do push-ups with you on his back?"

"Hi, Aunt Lily," Ava responds, and I don't miss the amusement in her voice. "And no, I didn't make him. He made me."

"My oh my, if that isn't a sight," another female voice responds. "The things I'd do to have a man carry me on his back like that."

"Poppy!"

"What, Lil? You know it's true. Hell's bells, you're probably thinking the same thing. I mean, we all know how much you love Big Don's wiener, but there's no way in hell he can carry you on his back like that. He has the osteoporosis, for goodness' sake."

"Oh my God, you're embarrassing."

The two women, whom I can't currently see, continue to bicker, and Ava just giggles.

Eventually, once I finish my second set, I do the polite thing and stop.

But instead of shoving Ava off my back entirely, I reach back with two strong hands and grip her thighs, pulling her over my shoulders as I stand up.

"Ahh!" She squeals. "Luke, what the hell!"

And the whole time, her two great-aunts just stand there, grinning at us like it's the best show they've ever seen. I haven't seen them in person since we graduated college, but if right now is anything to go by, I'm pretty sure these two will still be just as entertaining as they were way back then.

"Aunt Poppy. Aunt Lily," I greet. "It's nice to see you ladies again."

Poppy waggles her gray eyebrows. “I think I speak for both of us when I say, it is truly a pleasure to see you, Luke. A real delicious, delectable—”

Lily slaps her arm. “Goodness, Poppy. Why are you always so inappropriate?”

“Probably because I don’t have a giant stick up my prude ass like you.”

Lily huffs. Poppy keeps smiling.

“What are you guys doing here so early?” Ava asks, still on my shoulders.

“Just dropping off some...pies...” Poppy pauses, looking at Lily with wide, animated eyes. It’s like they are trying to have a conversation telepathically.

“Okay...so where are the pies?”

The room goes silent.

The aunts keep sharing looks with each other.

“The what?” Poppy asks eventually, all of a sudden acting like she’s gone hard of hearing.

“The. Pies,” Ava repeats, skepticism apparent in the sharp inflection of her voice.

“Oh shoot, Pop,” Lily quickly chimes in with an answer. “I knew we forgot something.”

“Well, son of a nutcracker.” Poppy tsks. “How on earth did we come all this way without the pies?”

“Luke, mind putting me down so I can hug the nosy busybodies who are lying about pies?”

Gently, I ease Ava off my shoulders, and she steps forward to give both of her great-aunts a hug.

“Missed you, crazy old bats,” she teases, and they both laugh. “And you know, you don’t have to lie about pie to come and see me.”

“But we didn’t actually come to see you.” Poppy flashes a wicked grin my way. “We came to see your stud muffin pilot

boyfriend. And I have to say—” her eyes turn devilish as she gives me a wicked once-over “—our timing was impeccable.”

Ava bursts into laughter. “Well, no need to sugarcoat it.”

And all I can do is grin.

“Oh honey, you know I’m too old to sugarcoat anything.”

“More like too cranky,” Lily mutters, but Poppy ignores her completely.

“So, Luke, you’re keeping my great-niece happy, right?”

“I’m doing my best.”

Poppy leans forward, her lips close to Ava’s ear. “How’s your little beaver feeling, honey?” she asks on a whisper, but my ears don’t miss it. “I bet she’s *real* happy these days, huh?”

“Oh hell,” Ava mutters, choking on what I think is her own saliva and coughing into her hand.

“Your little beaver?” I ask and turn to smirk at her. “What’s your aunt Poppy talking about, Ace?”

Ava glares. “Oh, shut up. You know exactly what she’s talking about, which is exactly what we’re *not* going to talk about.”

“Then, what are we going to chat about, Ava?” Poppy questions.

“We’re not going to chat about anything with you, crazy lady.”

“And why is that?”

“Because Luke and I have a very important ice-skating date.”

I tilt my head to the side. “We do?”

Ava smirks and nods. “Check the itinerary, buddy. This afternoon is *ice-skating*.”

Guy Lucie’s goddamn Christmas itinerary.

I swear, it might be the death of me.

Whatever, dude. You're loving every minute you get to spend with Ava.



“I thought you were good at ice-skating, Ace!” I shout toward Ava as I round the corner of the rink and come to a stop in front of her.

She grips the waist-high wall’s edge and glares at me. “I never said I was good at it. I just said it’s a tradition we do every year.”

Her dad, her mom, and her sisters and their significant others are here. And everyone appears to be completely competent in the skill of ice-skating.

Everyone *besides* Ava.

“She’s horrible!” Guy yells across the rink. “Never managed to get it down!”

“Mind your business, Dad!”

Guy just chuckles, and I take mercy on Ava, holding out both of my hands toward her.

“I got you.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I’m fine right here. Promise. I’ll just stand here and watch you guys have fun.”

“Ace, don’t you trust me?” I question, and she rolls her eyes.

“It’s not about trust, Luke. It’s about the fact that I am incapable of doing anything else but holding on to the wall and slowly skating around the rink. That’s it. That’s all I can do without falling on my ass.”

“C’mon,” I say, voice gentle. “I promise I won’t let you fall.”

She snorts at that. “I don’t think you realize how big of a promise that actually is.”

“I do,” I retort and smile at her. “Just come on and let me help you get more comfortable on the ice. I swear, I’m a fantastic teacher.”

She quirks a brow.

But I don’t let up, keeping both of my hands stretched out toward her.

Eventually, on a sigh, she releases her death grip from the wall and puts her hands in mine. And slowly, *very* slowly, I ease us out into the middle of the rink, carefully weaving in and out of the other skaters.

“Oh no!” she whisper-yells as she falters a little, her left skate nearly slipping out from under her. But I steady her by quickly wrapping one arm around her waist and pulling her close to my chest.

“See? I got you, Ace.”

She stares up at me with those big blue eyes of hers, and for the briefest of moments, it feels like everything just... stops. The world. Time. The people skating around us.

And all I’m capable of doing is searching her eyes, my gaze occasionally flitting down to her lips.

I take in the way the cold air has tinted her cheeks pink and the way her lips look full and lush and the way the sun bounces off the ice and makes her eyes appear even bluer.

Could she be any more beautiful?

My gaze flits from her eyes to her lips again, but this time, it just stays there, fixated on that perfect mouth of hers. *Fuck me. That mouth.*

“You okay?”

“*Huh?*” I question, blinking several times to try to make sense of her words.

“Are you okay?”

Fuck. What in the hell was I just doing?

Was I going to kiss her? Right here? In the middle of the fucking skating rink?

Yeah, dude. That's exactly what you were going to do.

I push out my thoughts and force a smile to my lips. "I'm good. Ready to keep going?"

"Only if you still promise not to let go."

"That's an easy promise to make, Ace."

As we skate around the rink, Ava's hands still intertwined with mine, I can't shake the feeling that something has shifted...*changed*.

No, buddy. Nothing has changed. You're just finally starting to realize how you really feel about her...



CHAPTER

Twenty-five

December 23rd

Luke

“Okay, what on earth did you get delivered to my parents’ house this morning?” Ava asks as I pull into a parking spot in front of Lakewood’s biggest indoor mall.

At a little before nine this morning, we snuck out of her parents’ house, *promptly avoiding the planned Santa-themed breakfast on her dad’s itinerary*, so we could finish up some last-minute Christmas shopping.

“There was a delivery this morning?” I cut the engine and shrug. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play coy with me.” With her small hand to my bicep, she gives me a shove. “I saw the package. The *big*

package. I also saw you sign for it and ask my mom if you could store it in the basement.”

“You know what?” I question and tap my chin. “You’re right. A package *did* arrive this morning, and guess what?”

Her eyes light up, and she rubs her palms together in anticipation. “What?”

“You’ll get to find out what’s inside on Christmas morning.”

“*Luke.*” Her shoulders sag. “You are *so* annoying right now.” A deep sigh escapes her lungs, and she crosses her arms over her chest, acting like a petulant child. A really fucking cute child, but a child, nonetheless.

“And you are *so* impatient,” I tease her, mimicking her voice. “Anyway, do you want to sit in the car and bicker with me, or do you want to go inside that big giant mall and do some Christmas shopping?”

She glares at me, and I nudge her gently with my elbow. “Oh, come on, Ace. I know you are damn near bursting with excitement over the prospect of shopping. Especially, *Christmas shopping.* It’s one of your favorite things in the whole fucking world.”

She rolls her eyes heavenward, but also, for the briefest of seconds, a smile sparkles across her heart-shaped mouth. But it’s gone between one blink and the next, a scowl taking its place.

The dramatics of it all make me smirk.

Is it just me, or is someone in need of some holiday spirit?

Eventually, she gets out of the passenger seat and stomps her black boots across the pavement, away from the car and toward the mall’s entrance, completely leaving me in the dust.

On a soft chuckle, I follow her lead, jogging to catch up with her, and I don’t hesitate to wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her closer to me. “You mad at me?”

“Yes,” she says, flashing an irritated look in my direction.

“What can I do that will make you forgive me, even though I have no idea why I need to ask for forgiveness...”

When she doesn't offer a response, her eyes still facing forward as we step out of the cold Vermont air and into the warmth of the indoor mall, I glance around the first few stores for something involving holiday sweet treats.

If there is one way to Ava Lucie's heart, it's sugar.

Great American Cookies spotted, I tell her a little white lie on the spot. “Hey, mind waiting right here while I run to the bathroom?”

Ava just shrugs. “Sure.”

“But stay right here, okay?” I say, playfully holding on to both of her shoulders and swaying her back and forth. “Don't move a single inch.”

She almost cracks a grin. It's right there, wanting to make itself known, but Ava bites it back by digging her teeth into her bottom lip. “Just go to the damn bathroom.”

“Be right back.” I wink and head toward my fake destination. With a quick glance over my shoulder, I see that Ava has now busied herself with her phone, and I make a beeline for the cookie mecca.

Five minutes later, I make my way back over to her, a bag of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies in one hand and a cup of hot cocoa in the other.

“You still mad at me, Ace?” I ask, but she's too focused on her phone to notice what's in my hands.

“Uh-huh,” she mutters, locks the screen of her cell, and shoves it back into her purse to meet my eyes.

Instantly, she spots the bag of cookies and cocoa.

“What about now?” I grin, and when she goes to yank the bag of cookies out of my hand, I hold them high above her head. “Ah, ah, little diva. First, you have to stop being such a *grinch* and forgive me.”

“I'm not a grinch,” she retorts, and I shake my head.

“Oh, but you most certainly are. If you scowl any harder at me, I fear your gorgeous face might crack like an eggshell.”

That urges a laugh from her lips. “Fine. Okay. You’re right.”

I hand the bag of cookies to her, but before she reaches inside, she looks up at me with big, apologetic sapphire eyes.

“I’m sorry for being such a whiny baby. Do you forgive me?”

I tap my cheek. “One tiny kiss and you’re officially forgiven.”

Fully prepared for her to get grumpy with me again, I’m shocked when Ava stands up on her tippy-toes and presses a kiss to my cheek. Her lips are silk and velvet against my skin, and for the second time in the past twenty-four hours, my mind starts to wander. To places it shouldn’t.

All revolving around Ava’s perfect lips.

Completely oblivious to the inappropriate—*insanely dirty*—places my mind has taken me, she pulls a cookie out of the bag and takes a bite, and I have to watch silently on as her tongue sneaks out to lick melted chocolate off her bottom lip.

Fuck me.

It’s heaven. It’s hell. And it just keeps going.

Another bite. Another fucking lip lick. This time, her tongue sliding around both lips before she bites into her bottom lip when a crumb falls from the cookie and toward her white blouse.

“Whoops.” She reaches out to catch it, but she misses.

Of course, she fucking misses.

The damn crumb comes to a stop just above the hint of cleavage peeking out from her shirt. And my eyes can’t help themselves, moving down-down-*down* until they lock onto the soft curves of her perfect, full, perky breasts.

Fuck. What is wrong with me?

Pretty sure it's very simple, man. You're finally fucking realizing that you're crazy attracted to your best friend.

Ava swipes the cookie crumb off her skin with one index finger and slides that very finger into her mouth to suck off the melted chocolate.

Oh, for fuck's sake, is she purposely trying to make me go insane right now?

No joke. This might be the most painful thing I have ever witnessed in my life.

But I just stand there, watching Ava eat that fucking cookie and feeling like either my head or my goddamn balls are going to explode.

That is so wrong, dude. You shouldn't be that fucking turned on by watching someone eat a cookie.

My mind is right. But my body gives zero fucks.

Finally understanding her flight reaction in emergent situations, I gently grab her by the elbow and get us moving. "Where...uh...where's our first stop?"

"Not sure." Ava shrugs, still finishing off that goddamn cookie. "How about Bath & Body Works?"

"Sounds fantastic." Anything but standing around and watching you eat cookies and dropping crumbs onto your perfect tits and licking fucking chocolate off your lips. Anything but that is the best idea ever.

She looks up at me like I've grown two heads. "You want to go into Bath & Body Works?"

"Yep. Sounds great."

Her face turns into a puzzle. "Are you feeling okay?"

"Feeling great," I respond, my voice probably far too excitable, but fuck, I'm only a man. A man who apparently gets turned on by watching his best friend eat chocolate chip cookies.

She's not buying it, the look of downright confusion is still apparent on her face, but the good news is she's finished

eating that fucking cookie that apparently was made by Satan himself and sent to earth to destroy me.

Fucking hell.

Thankfully, though, I spot something in a store window before we reach Bath & Body Works and pull us to a stop.

“What are you doing?”

“We need to go in there.” I nod toward the store, and Ava furrows her brow, reading the name of it.

“Green Thumb? That’s a plant store...”

“I know.” I grin. “Come on.”

She follows me without complaint, and within thirty seconds, I have the one item that caught my eye clutched in my hand.

Ava looks at it. Then looks at me. Then looks back at it. “Why are you holding a cactus?”

“Because this is the perfect plant for you,” I respond, smiling down at the baby green cactus. It sits in a tiny terracotta pot with a red velvet bow wrapped around the edge. “Cactuses can survive any-fucking-thing, Ace. You barely need to water them.”

“But Teddy 12 has been doing so well,” She retorts and puts a hand to her hip. “He’s been living for, like, three years straight.”

Because of me.

I am literally the only one keeping that green bastard alive.

Yeah, and since you’re going to be leaving for Houston soon, it won’t be long before Teddy 12 kicks the bucket.

The mere thought makes my chest tighten with discomfort.

Who is going to keep Ava’s plant alive when I’m gone?

Who is going to be there for her when she’s freaking out about something or when she’s upset about something or when she just needs someone to watch fucking *Golden Girls* with at midnight because she can’t fall asleep?

It's nearly too much to bear, but somehow, I manage to swallow it down, all the questions, all the worries, all the discomfort about leaving Ava behind in New York, and force myself to focus on the here and now. *The present*. And not worry about the fact that I still haven't told her about NASA.

Trust me, I know. I'm a fucking asshole coward.

"I think it's time for Teddy 12 to have a friend, though," I suggest, and she mulls it over for a moment, even reaching out to take the cactus into her own hands.

She inspects it carefully, turning it from one side to the other. "You know, he probably does get lonely sometimes..." She pauses and smiles up at me. "You think we can get him on the plane without too much trouble?"

I nod.

"Okay," she says, and her responding smile is magnificent. "You've convinced me. Let's bring Tom home."

Tom.

Figures it took her all of two minutes before naming the prickly bastard.

Yeah, and it's shit like this that you love about her the most.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Six

Ava

“For two people who don’t really like to drink, we sure end up at bars a lot, huh?” Luke whispers into my ear as he opens the door to The Pub, a staple in my hometown.

I grin up at him as he places a hand to the small of my back and guides us inside. A rush of warm air hits me in the face, unthawing my cheeks and nose and ears from the blistery air.

Any day now, it’s going to snow. I just know it. Vermont *will* have a Christmas that’s so white, even Bing Crosby would be jealous.

“There they are.” I spot my sisters, Em and Kate, standing in the back corner, drinks in hand and music urging their bodies to move to the beat. Landon and Zach, their respective

men, stand beside them, drinks also in their hands and chatting animatedly with each other.

Luke leads the way, and even through the thickness of my winter coat, I can feel the warmth of his hand pressing gently against my lower back.

But I try not to think too much about it. Or how acutely aware I am of it.

Uh-huh. Keep telling yourself that.

“Ava! Luke!” Em is the first one to see us. A lazy smile spreads across her face, and she awkwardly wraps us both into a hug, one arm on my shoulder and one arm pulling Luke into the mix.

“Yay! You guys finally made it!” Kate is next, joining in on the group hug, the force of her giddy presence pushing my face to smash into Luke’s.

I burst into laughter, and he just grins at me out of the corner of his eye, his cheek literally smushed against mine.

“I think we’re behind in the drink department, Ace,” he whispers toward me once we’re released from the jaws-of-life hug

“You guys definitely are,” Zach comments and reaches out to shake Luke’s hand and offer me a friendly hug.

“Hey, guys.” Landon does the same.

“So, how was shopping?” Em asks, taking a sip from her red wine with already red-stained lips. My guess is that my sis is on glass number three for the night.

“Horrible,” Luke teases, and I nudge him in the stomach with my elbow.

“It was not that bad.”

“Nah, it wasn’t that bad.” He smirks. “We just hit every store in the mall. Twice.”

“You’re such a drama queen.” I snort. “You had fun.”

“You’re right. I did.” He wraps his arm around my shoulder and presses a kiss to my forehead. I falter a little when his lips touch my skin but remind myself this is part of the game. This is why he’s here. To make everyone believe he’s my boyfriend.

It’s actually a *good* thing that he’s able to do boyfriend-y things like that with a naturalness that keeps surprising even me. It’s good that, to an outsider, it seems like we’ve been in a relationship for years. Like we’re always this way. Touchy-feely, affectionate, *in love*.

Too bad, deep down, you’re starting to wish it wasn’t just an act...

Internally, I shake off my insane thoughts, shrug off my winter coat and hang it on the back of a chair, and proceed to tell Kate and Em a little more about my shopping trip, while Luke heads to the bar and grabs us a drink.

All in all, it was a successful trip. I was able to get our mom and two aunts Coach totes. Ones that should be perfect for their Bruce dog-park days. You know, the ones where they spend most of their time taking unsolicited pictures of strangers.

I got Guy Lucie—*the man, the myth, the holiday legend*—a few new Christmas decorations to add to his collection. Ones I’m certain he doesn’t have yet.

I found the perfect white silk robe that I had embroidered with ***Bride*** on the back for Kate to wear while she’s getting ready on her wedding day. And I got Em a gift card to *finally* get her eyelashes done. It’s something she’s been talking about for the last year and still hasn’t done it. Now, she won’t have an excuse.

Of course, those last two gifts aren’t mentioned.

“What did you end up getting Luke?” Kate asks.

I shrug, and a giggle pops from my lips. “Something I hope he’ll like. I’ll be honest, men are not easy to buy for.”

Em laughs. “I can vouch for that, sis. Every year it’s a struggle to find Landon something.”

Frankly, Luke was my biggest challenge while shopping. I had no idea what to get him, and I'm still wondering if it's too simple, but when I came up with the idea, it just felt...right.

Now, I guess I have to wait until Christmas for him to open it...

"What are you ladies giggling about?" Luke asks, a handsome smile kissing his lips.

"Something that is none of your business," I retort and take one of the glasses of Coca-Cola from his hands.

That's right. We're at a bar, and we're both drinking Coke.

Talk about lame, right?

"Could this be about you buying my Christmas present?" he asks, and his smile turns mischievous. "When you all but shoved me away and told me you needed alone time but wouldn't tell me why?"

I narrow my eyes at him. "Like I said, it's none of your business."

He just chuckles and takes a drink of his Coke.

For the first time since we've been here, the music switches over to something that isn't Christmas music. The opening, pounding beats are so very familiar, and it's a song I would never expect to hear in this bar. Instantly, I search Luke's eyes.

"Is this your doing?"

"Maybe." He shrugs off his leather jacket, sets his Coke down on the table, and holds out his hand. "Follow me, Ace?"

I giggle and set down my drink beside his. "Deep sea, baby."

"I Follow Rivers."

This is, hands down, my favorite song, and over the years, Luke has used that fact against me so many times. Whenever I'm in a pissy mood, he turns it on and forces me to dance away the negativity.

We make our way to the middle of the floor, and with my hands held high in the air, I bounce around to the beat of the song, laughing and smiling as I do.

And Luke? Well, he's always been a really good dancer. Not skilled per se, but he just knows how to move his body, and he knows how to let go without worrying about what he looks like or what anyone thinks.

Honestly, before he came into my life, I don't think I danced like I do now. I was always a little hesitant, always holding back. But with Luke, I just let go. And goddamn, it's the most fun I've ever had.

The song continues, and eventually, my sisters and their guys join us.

We're all laughing and dancing and having a good time.

But when I spot a very familiar face at the bar, my eyes go wide, and I quickly close the distance between Luke and me, hiding my body behind his.

Oh, what the hell is she doing here?!

He places his hands on my hips, still moving us to the beat, but his eyes peer down into mine with curiosity.

"Callie," I whisper.

"What?"

"Callie Camden is here. Behind you, at the bar."

"No shit?"

"*Gah.*" I press my body against his, doing everything I can to stay hidden. "She can't see me, or else she'll want to talk about that stupid reunion and the fact that I ordered the cake and desserts too last minute."

Truthfully, I almost forgot about those damn desserts. It took Luke asking me when we were waiting for our plane to start boarding for me to remember.

And because I was *so* last minute at the bakery Callie insisted we use, and said bakery is incredibly small and pretty much bakes for the whole damn town, her dessert hopes did

not come to fruition. Needless to say, her vision of macarons and cheesecakes and shit didn't happen.

We're getting cake and cupcakes. Which didn't go over too well when I broke the news to her via email. There are still several unanswered, anger-inspired messages sitting in my inbox.

Talk about a fucking mess. One I shouldn't even be involved in, to be honest.

Yeah, but if it weren't for that, you wouldn't be right here, with Luke, dancing...

"Just forget about her," he whispers into my ear, his lips nearly brushing my skin. "She can fuck right off if she thinks she's going to come over here and ruin our fun."

"What? Are you going to tell her to take a hike?" I meet his eyes, a challenging smile on my lips.

"Oh, it would be a pleasure, Ace. A real fucking pleasure."

I giggle at that, but also, I believe it. Luke is generally a pretty laid-back, relaxed kind of guy. He's level-headed and doesn't have a temper.

But he does have a limit.

And when that limit is reached, he has no qualms about speaking his mind.

Or punching some guy in the face for trying to take advantage of your inebriated state...

Yeah. That too.

The song switches over to something slower, still fast-moving, but it's more seductive, *sexier*.

"Is she still there?" he asks me, his voice quiet and warm in my ear.

I glance over his shoulder and note that Callie and someone I recognize as her husband Kyle, a guy I went to high school with, are heading toward the door.

"Uh...yeah..." I hesitate.

“Can she see you?”

“Um...I can't be sure...” I answer, even though I watch them walk out of the bar.

Miss Popularity has left the building, but for some strange reason, I don't want Luke to know that.

“Let's just keep dancing,” he whispers into my ear again, and the warmth of his breath and close proximity of his body urge a shiver up my spine. He continues to grip my hips and lead our bodies in synchrony with the beat of the song.

The aroma of his cologne—hints of cedar and vanilla and scent I can't recognize—invades my nostrils and fills my head with nostalgia and memories and familiarity and something else I can't discern.

But whatever it is, it makes my heart beat faster in my chest.

The song talks about latching on to someone, and fuck, if it isn't exactly what I want to do.

I want to latch on to him.

I want to bottle this moment and keep it forever.

I want to memorize the way I feel within his strong, muscular embrace.

I want to remember the way his brown eyes lighten beneath the bar lights and the way they darken whenever he looks down at me.

I don't ever want to forget the way his tongue sneaks out to lick across his bottom lip. Or the way his skin feels against mine when we're moving to the music.

And I don't want it to end.

He looks down at me, and I search the depths of his chocolate eyes. I don't know what I'm looking for or what I want to find, but I get the sense that he's doing the same thing.

“Luke,” I whisper his name, but I don't know why. It's like my mouth just needed to feel his name roll off my tongue.

My ears become acutely aware of the sound of my heart beating inside my chest and the addictive beat of the song. And my eyes can only see him.

Everything else around us, the other people dancing, my sisters, the crowd chatting loudly at the bar, just disappears. And we stay like that, eyes locked and bodies still moving together.

We're so close. So insanely, painfully, pleurably close.

My personal space is his personal space, and hell, I wouldn't want it any other way.

His face moves closer to mine, and his lips are right there. Just a breath away from my mouth.

We're going to kiss. Every cell inside my body tells me it's going to happen.

God, I want us to kiss.

But I can't stop myself from remembering that list I wrote, the one with the rules Luke refused to acknowledge.

"Best friends don't kiss," I whisper.

"Well, they should."

And then, he does.

He. Kisses. Me.

Lips to mine, he coaxes my mouth with the kind of soft tenderness I didn't even know was possible. His hands slide into my hair, and the teeniest of moans escapes my throat as it feels like a million goose bumps slide across my skin.

He kisses me in the kind of way I've always dreamed of being kissed. Slow and delicate at first, and then spreading like wildfire into something that smokes with passion and heat.

I have no idea what this means, if this is pretend or if this is real, but goddamn, it is the best kiss of my life. Just... making all the other important kisses of my life seem like child's play. Seem inconsequential. Seem like nothing.

When the music switches back to Christmas-themed and our kiss gradually slows and comes to an end, I lean back and look deep into his eyes and wonder if this is the one and only time I'll get to experience perfection on my lips.

And when Em grabs my attention and asks me to come to the bar with her and get another round of drinks, my mind won't stop racing with questions.

Was that real? Damn, it sure *felt* real. It felt like the realest, most powerful, most perfect thing I've ever experienced.

Did Luke feel it too? Or am I the only one who is still reeling from that kiss? Whose lips are still tingling from where his lips were on mine.

And the most important question of them all. Did that kiss solidify that what I feel for him is far deeper than just friendship?

Or has it been that way for years?



CHAPTER

Twenty-Seven

December 24th, Christmas Eve

Luke

Last night, I broke all the rules. I threw caution to the wind and just gave the fuck in to what I wanted.

Last night, I kissed my best friend, but now, it's more apparent than ever that Ava isn't *just* my best friend. She is everything I've ever wanted. She is the one girl, for the last fifteen years, who has always been on my mind and in my heart.

I have no idea what she is thinking or feeling, but I know, now more than ever, that I want her. I just *want* her. No one else.

But since we woke up this morning, her dad's itinerary has kept us otherwise distracted from that kiss. For the last twelve

hours, we've run around like Christmas lunatics, checking off every activity on her dad's silly schedule.

Baking cookies with her mom and sisters and aunts.

Standing in the front yard, freezing our asses off, and singing fucking carols at confused passersby.

Watching *White Christmas* with caramel popcorn and hot chocolate. And, honestly, I've never seen a family consume more hot chocolate in the span of mere days than the Lucies.

Basically, you name it, and we fucking did it today.

There isn't a single person in Lakewood who could accuse us of lacking holiday spirit. If anything, there might be a few people inside this small town who want to strangle the Lucie family.

"Goddamn it, Al!" Poppy's voice filters up from the downstairs den. "You should never attempt to roll for a long straight unless it's open-ended!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Poppy's getting mad because she's going to lose!" Lily exclaims.

"Shut up, Lil! Even down ten points, I'll still find a way to kick your ass!"

Though the night appears to still be young downstairs, her mom and dad and great-aunts and uncles invested in a tense game of Yahtzee, Ava and I decide to call it a night and head upstairs.

While she busies herself with a shower, most likely needing to literally wash off the overwhelming amount of Christmas spirit that's permeated her pores, I lie on her childhood bed, still fully dressed, paging through one of her old yearbooks.

When I spot her junior year picture, I grin.

Still blond, still gorgeous, but always slightly eccentric, she half smiles in her photo, and her attire consists of the most outlandish, bright-as-hell T-shirt that has the famous *Star Trek* quote, ***Beam me up, Scotty.***

For someone who isn't a Trekkie, has never been a Trekkie, she still manages to pull it off with her blond hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun.

It's things like this that make me wish I could've known Ava before college. That I could've seen in her action when she was a young teenager.

You would have loved her even then.

That thought makes me falter, hesitate, and I blink several times to clear the fog of confusion threatening to consume my brain. With a shake of my head, I continue to distract myself with pages of her yearbook.

But when the shower cuts off from the en suite bathroom, and a few minutes later, when the door opens with steam filtering into the bedroom, nothing can distract me from the sight before my eyes.

In nothing but a towel knotted above her chest, Ava stands there. Her cheeks are flushed red and her blue eyes are bright and her wet hair hangs down past her shoulders.

Fucking hell.

She is the epitome of every fantasy I've ever had, wrapped up into one tempting and irresistible package.

"What are you doing?" she asks, tilting her head to the side, and it takes me a hot minute to figure out what she's even asking, her eyes pointed toward the book in my lap.

"Uh... Just checking out your...uh...junior yearbook."

"Oh God." She groans.

"It's not that bad."

"Not that bad? I'm pretty sure I wore a *Star Trek* T-shirt for that picture."

"You did," I answer and watch on with far too much fascination as she strides over to our suitcases and bends over to riffle through her clothes.

That towel, that fucking towel, moves up her thighs and just barely keeps her perfect ass covered. And my eyes don't

miss two rogue drops of water that slip down the silky skin of her thighs.

This is not good. At all.

My mind threatens to think about last night's kiss.

My cock threatens to take *full* notice of Ava's lack of clothes.

And my fingers itch to reach out and touch her.

It's almost too much to bear.

Pretty sure it is too much to bear.

Before I know it, I'm closing the yearbook, setting it on the nightstand, and standing up to walk over to her. I wrap my arms around her waist and pull her back toward my chest.

She squeals a little in surprise, but I keep her body pressed against mine and whisper into her ear, "You want a little help?"

"Help?" she asks, leaning her head back to meet my eyes. But goddamn, it only makes her more tempting, elongating her neck and pushing her breasts up and nearly out of her towel.

"Yeah," I respond, and my voice borders on ragged. "Help. With getting dressed."

Ava turns to meet my eyes, and I just stare down at her, knowing full well my eyes are showing everything I'm thinking right now. Everything I'm feeling.

She explores my unwavering gaze, and her chest starts to rise and fall with near-panting breaths.

But then she shocks the hell out of me by placing her clothes—a pair of lacy underwear, a minuscule tank top, and sleep shorts—into my hand.

Ho-ly shit.

She undoes her towel and lets it fall to the floor. And she stands there, completely and utterly naked. Just...miles upon miles of Ava's gorgeous bare skin. Her pink nipples harden at the change in temperature and her breaths continue to come

out in pants and those sapphire eyes of hers dare me to follow through with my offer.

It feels like it takes me a whole minute before I can stop gawking and actually do something.

First, her tank top. Slowly, I slide it over her head, the backs of my hands brushing her nipples as I adjust it on her body.

Her breathing turns stuttered and shaky.

But I keep going.

Her lacy underwear next, I kneel down in front of her and, with Ava's hands gently gripping my shoulders, I slowly, *so slowly*, slide them up her legs, taking in every inch of the gorgeous view on my way back up.

I don't stop until my face is a mere breath away from the apex of her thighs.

Fuck, why are you doing this, dude?

Frankly, I don't know why I'm doing this, why I'm torturing myself—and *teasing her*—but it's the most painful pleasure I've ever felt. And my now-hard cock can certainly agree.

I want Ava. That much is apparent.

But I don't want to rush it. I don't want to rush *her*.

I want to take my time with her. I want to savor every little touch, every new discovery, just...*everything*. I feel like I've been waiting a lifetime to see her like this, and hell if I'm going to ruin it with haste.

And most importantly, I want to make sure Ava is ready. I want her to be so fucking ready that she is practically begging me.

She needs to be completely free in the moment. She needs to be willing to completely let go. And she needs to know that this isn't pretend. It's real. The way I feel about her. The way I look at her. The way I touch her. The way she makes me feel.

It's taken me fifteen years to fully give in to it, to let myself realize that I want more than friendship with her, but now I know.

I. Fucking. Know.

“You're so beautiful.” I stare up at her, still on my knees, her naked body on full display before my very eyes. The depths of her blue eyes contain everything I want to see—*passion, heat, desire*. I let out a deep exhale, and when my warm breath brushes across her, the whites of her eyes roll back ever so slightly, and her lips form a tiny O.

She wants me to touch her.

It's apparent in her now-ragged breaths, in the way her eyes darken with heat, the way her nipples harden, and the way her fingers grip my shoulders.

Fuck, the things I want to do to this woman. I want my name on her tongue. I want to see the way her eyes look when she comes. I want to feel her and taste her and make her feel things she's never felt. I want to worship at the temple that is her beautiful body and make it mine.

I want to make *her* mine.

Not fake. Not pretend. Not just friends. But *mine*.

Her dark lashes fan over her cheeks as she blinks, still staring down at me.

Her full breasts move up and down with each unsteady pant.

And I just kneel before her, lace still clutched between my fingers, wavering between moving my lips the last few inches—and finally, *fucking finally*, tasting her—and not rushing this.

My heart threatens to beat out of my fucking chest, while my body wants to react, to give in to the urge, the desire, the want, the fucking chronic need.

But not yet. Not now.

I'm ready, but Ava isn't ready. I don't know how I know this, but I do. I just...know her. I always have.

Even though my body is fucking pissed, my mind is made up.

Tenderly, I pull the lace of her underwear the rest of the way up her legs until they cover her completely. And I finish it off by slipping her sleep shorts over her hips.

She continues to watch me, confusion resting in her eyes, but I don't let that deter me. Instead, I smile and stand up to press a lingering kiss to her forehead.

"All set," I whisper against her skin.

And then, I head into the bathroom and brush my teeth and get myself ready for bed.

My balls might be fucking blue in the morning, but the seed has been planted.

I want to make her mine.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Eight

December 25th, Christmas Day

Ava

With strong arms wrapped around my waist and my back pressed against a firm chest, warm skin blankets me. I am cozy, comfortable, *cocooned*.

I could stay right here for an eternity, and I don't think I'd ever grow tired of it.

But my human blanket has other plans.

"Time to wake up, Ava," Luke's voice whispers into my ear, but I keep my eyes closed and shake my head.

"Nope." Lord knows, my desire to stay in bed is warranted. After Luke helped me "get dressed" for bed last night, his hands and his eyes teasing and taunting me until I thought I'd spontaneously combust, sleep didn't come easy.

It took me hours to turn my freaking brain off *and* for my body to stop vibrating with pent-up sexual frustration.

Frankly, I don't know why he did what he did or why he didn't do what I really wanted him to do, but it would take a lobotomy for me to forget about it. For me to forget the way he looked at me. The way his voice sounded when he told me I'm beautiful.

His words are forever ingrained in my mind.

And your heart. And hell, let's be real, your little beaver too.

I am now acutely aware that I have either already broken or want to break every damn rule on my **Best Friends Don't List**. With my eyes still closed, I visualize that list and go down each number, taking inventory of my crimes.

Kiss? Guilty.

See each other naked? Also *guilty*.

Have sex? Want to be guilty so bad that I'd volunteer as tribute to make my orange prison jumpsuit.

Catch feelings? Oh boy.

Oh boy? You should've been in handcuffs about fifteen years ago, sister.

I think I might be in trouble.

Big "I think I'm falling for my best friend" trouble.

"Ava?" Luke's voice is in my ear again. "Did you forget that it's Christmas?"

"Nope."

With his chin resting on my elbow, his soft chuckles vibrate against the skin of my bare shoulder. "Not only is it Christmas, but it looks like you got your wish."

I peer one eye open. "What wish?"

"Snow."

That urges both of my eyes to pop open. Instantly, I turn toward my bedroom window and glance over Luke's shoulder.

Through the panes of glass, I spot the thick white flakes drifting from the sky. They shimmer and dance in the light of morning as they descend past the window and toward the ground.

Snow.

“A white Christmas after all,” Luke whispers, now lying back on the bed.

“I knew Vermont wouldn’t disappoint,” I say, a sleepy smile consuming my face, and lean forward to rest my chin on his bare chest, still staring out the window.

“I took a look at the ole itinerary, and it appears we have quite the day ahead of us,” he teases, a smile cresting up the corners of his lips.

“You ready to experience a Lucie family Christmas?” I turn my head to the side, now resting my cheek against his chest, and meet his amused face.

Luke gazes down at me, reaching out to brush a few rogue pieces of blond hair off my forehead. “Is anyone really ready to experience a Christmas run by Guy Lucie?”

I giggle at that and shake my head. “Probably not.”

But when I glance out the window one more time, I get an idea.

I use his firm chest to push myself to a sitting position, and Luke tilts his head to the side in confusion as I hop off the bed.

“What are you doing?”

I slow-roll my response, waiting until I’ve tossed on a pair of flannel pajama pants and a hooded sweatshirt. It isn’t until I’m slipping on my socks that I let him know the score. “Last person to make a snow angel has to be on hot chocolate duty for the whole day.”

“Oh, what the fuck,” he questions and jumps out of bed faster than I knew was even possible.

Adrenaline rushes into my veins as I slip on my boots and try to tie the laces.

But Luke is fast. Like, insanely fast. By the time both of my shoelaces are tied, he is already dressed and damn near beating me out my bedroom door.

In a rush of giggles and shouting, I race down the steps as fast as I can, Luke right on my tail the whole way.

We are loud, probably too loud for this early in the morning, but I don't care.

During the holidays, my family consumes way too much hot chocolate. Like, Buddy the Elf kind of shit. I'd be busy all freaking day if refills became my responsibility!

Just as my hands make contact with the knob of the front door, Luke wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me back.

“No! No! *No!* That's cheating!”

He just laughs his ass off and tosses me over his shoulder.

With me shouting and laughing and punching at his back, he opens the door with ease and steps out into the frigid morning air. Snow continues to fall from the sky, and Luke just glances around the front yard like he has all the time in the world.

Even going as far as stretching his free arm into the air and pretending to yawn.

“What a beautiful morning, huh?”

“Luke London, put me down!”

“What was that, Ace?” he asks and tilts his head up toward me. “It's hard to hear you over Michael Bubl .”

He's not wrong; good old Bubl  is still blaring from the freaking speakers in the front yard, but I know the sneaky bastard can hear me.

“Put. Me. Down. Or. Else.”

“I'm sorry, I mean, I could be wrong, but it sounds like you just threatened me...”

“Because I did!”

He grins up at me, mischief and mayhem in his eyes, and before I know it, from over his shoulder to cradled like a baby against his chest, he repositions my body with ease.

And then he steps out into the front yard, grins down at me, and performs a trust fall right into the snow.

He doesn't let go until his body is imprinted into the cold, fluffy cloud that is now my parents' yard, and it is only then that he stretches out both of his arms and legs and makes a goddamn snow angel.

"I can't be sure, but this feels a lot like victory."

"You are such a cheater!" I shout at him and grab both of his shoulders, glaring down at him.

But Luke just continues making his snow angel, smiling up at me the whole time.

"This means I won, right?" he questions. "Pretty sure this means I won."

My glare flames and sparks, and still perched on his stomach, I reach down to grab two handfuls of snow in my bare hands, ready to shove them straight into his face.

The bastard is too quick, though, reaching out to stop my momentum and flipping me onto my back. His body hovers over mine, while his hands ensure my wrists can't finish the job.

"Oh my God!" I exclaim, but it becomes impossible for me to stay angry when Luke is grinning down at me like that. "Ugh! You make me so mad!" I add, but giggles follow every word.

"But you're giggling, Ace. How can you be giggling if you're mad?"

I blink my eyes several times, trying to see past the soft, dusty illusions that have settled on my eyelashes. "Because you also drive me insane."

Luke chuckles, but in an instant, his eyes go from playful to serious. He leans down to press a soft kiss to the corner of my mouth. "Merry Christmas, Ava," he whispers against my

skin. “There isn’t anyone else on the planet that I’d want to spend this day with.”

“Ditto,” I whisper, and my breath is pale against the numbing air.

His eyes search mine, and I don’t know what he’s looking for or what he finds, but whatever it is, it makes him smile.

My gaze flits to his lips, and I reach up, placing both my hands on his cool skin, and gently tug his face toward mine. But before I get to do what I really want to do—*kiss the hell out of him*—I’m startled by the sounds of the wreath on the front door jingling as it swings open.

“What the hell are you two doing out here?” I look over Luke’s shoulder to find my dad standing on the front porch, dressed head-to-toe in red velvet, black boots, and a fake white beard. A cup of hot chocolate steams from his hand.

Luke glances back toward the front of the house. “Oh, holy fuck,” he mutters, his shoulders shaking with laughter as he buries his face against my shoulder. “Am I seeing shit, or is your dad wearing a Santa suit?”

“Oh, you’re seeing crystal clear.” I giggle. “Santa Claus has officially come to town.”



Once Luke and I changed out of our wet clothes, we headed downstairs to find the whole Lucie gang—Kate and Zach, Landon and Em, and my parents—sitting around the breakfast table, feasting on Guy’s famous Christmas Day breakfast buffet.

Cinnamon rolls and pancakes.

Waffles and eggs.

Biscuits and gravy.

And well, pretty much any morning-inspired food item known to humankind.

We ate, we laughed, and we all most likely walked away from the kitchen with an extra five pounds.

But now that our bellies are full and my dad has what he calls “Guy’s Famous Christmas Tunes” playing through the Bluetooth speakers in the living room, it’s time to gather around the tree and open presents.

“Who wants to go first?” my dad asks, looking around the room, and to my utter surprise, Luke stands up from his spot beside me on the small sofa near the bay window.

“If you don’t mind, Guy, I’d like to start us off by giving Rose and your girls a gift.”

My dad’s lips curve into a smile beneath his fake white beard. “By all means, get us started, son.”

Luke walks over to the tree and picks up four large wrapped gifts, all the same size and shape, and hands one to my mom, then to Em, then to Kate, then to me. “Merry Christmas, Ace,” he says with a little wink and sits down beside me.

All four of us just kind of sit there, looking at one another, and it takes Luke saying, “Go ahead, open them” before we actually begin to tear into the wrapping paper.

But none of us anticipates what’s inside.

“Oh, Luke.” My mom gasps and puts a hand to her lips.

Em looks up at me with wide, tear-filled eyes.

Kate smiles.

And I just stare down at the gift in my lap in awe. “When did you do this? H-how did you do this?” I ask and lift my eyes to meet Luke’s soft gaze.

It’s *the* painting. The one I did of my sisters and Mom and me before I took a hiatus from painting all together.

“I saw the painting in your studio, and I just...I felt like your mom and sisters needed to have it. So, I had to *borrow* it

from your apartment for a short while to have these prints made and framed.”

“You did this, Avie?” my dad asks, and I look up to meet his eyes. They shine with pride and love, and it makes a knot form in my throat.

All I can do is nod.

“My God, Ava. Your talent takes my breath away,” my mom whispers, her voice tender. “That’s you, you know,” she says and points to Kate. “Inside my belly, that’s you.”

Kate’s eyes shine with unshed emotion as she smiles at Mom. Then, she turns her attention to Luke. “Thank you for this,” she says. “This is...the most special gift I think I’ve ever received.”

“Me too,” Em says and leans back to rest her head against her husband Landon’s shoulder. “Ava, you’re so talented, it’s unreal.”

“She certainly is,” Luke agrees, and when a single tear flows down my cheek, he wraps his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close to his chest.

Within his embrace, while I look around at my mom and my dad and my sisters and the way Luke’s gift touched them, my heart wants to climb out of my chest and burrow inside his.

A few more tears slide down my cheeks, and I reach up to turn Luke’s face toward mine, gently pressing my lips to his.

“Thank you. So much,” I whisper against his mouth, and his lips quirk up into a smile against my skin.

“This was okay?” he asks, leaning back to meet my eyes again. “It was a good gift?”

“More than good,” I whisper back. “This means everything to me.”

You are everything to me.



CHAPTER

Twenty-Nine

Luke

“I’ll be honest,” I begin and sit down on the bed while Ava finishes brushing her teeth in the bathroom. “Christmas Day with your family is wonderful, but it’s also exhausting.”

She peeks around the door, the toothbrush clutched in her hand and the bristles still moving over her teeth, and giggles. “Tired?” she asks around a mouthful of toothpaste.

“Tired is an understatement.” I laugh and run a hand through my hair. “Tomorrow, we’re sleeping in. Hell, I might even skip my workout.”

“Skip your workout? *What?*” Ava pushes a wide-eyed, albeit dramatic, shocked look to her face. “That’s blasphemous,” she adds through a giggle and moves back into the bathroom to finish her bedtime routine.

The faucet switches on, and I glance out the window to spot snow still descending from the sky. A true white Christmas in Vermont. With Ava and her holiday-crazy family. Frankly, I can't remember the last time I had this much fun.

Today's events didn't disappoint.

Between the big breakfast buffet and opening presents and drinking insane amounts of hot chocolate and her great-aunts bickering over who makes the best cookies and Ava giggling her ass off over their bickering—*while eating their cookies, mind you*—and watching her dad buzz around in his Santa suit, saying “*Ho ho ho!*” every chance he could get, this is, hands down, the best Christmas I've had in a very long time.

When I woke up this morning, I was nervous over the painting I had made into prints. I just wasn't sure how Ava would react. Lately, she's been so private and hesitant about her art. But when I spotted that painting in her makeshift studio a few weeks ago, I felt like it would be a travesty if her family never saw it.

I simply *knew* they would love it, and more than that, that they'd see what I see—Ava is incredibly talented.

So much so, that my other gift *proves* that fact.

Although, I've yet to find the right moment to give it to her.

With Ava still in the bathroom, I head over to my suitcase and pull out the white envelope wrapped with a red bow. Her name scrawled across the top in my penmanship, this present signifies so many things.

That I believe in her.

That she should believe in herself.

Inside this envelope sits what could be the start of something big. But, damn, in order to get to this point, I had to show other people her art without her knowing about it.

Her family is one thing, but strangers? In the art world? I'm not normally the type of guy to second-guess anything, but it's hard not to second-guess this.

Fuck. I want to give it to her. I'm dying to give it to her.

Yet, I have no idea what her reaction will be.

When it sounds like Ava is just about done in the bathroom, I make an impulsive decision and slide the envelope under her bed, sitting back down on the mattress.

Coward, my mind taunts me, but I shake it off and distract myself by watching her walk out of the bathroom.

Her face is scrubbed clean of makeup, her skin clear and natural. Her long blond hair flows down her back, and her ocean-blue eyes shine when they meet mine.

Goddamn, she's beautiful.

"So...I have something for you..."

"What do you mean?" I ask, and Ava turns around to pull something out of her suitcase. Holding whatever it is behind her back, she walks over to the bed and sits down beside me.

"Here," she says, setting down a small gift wrapped with a giant red bow.

"You got me something?" I stare down at the present in my hands.

"Well...don't get too excited," she answers, and I look up to meet her uncertain gaze. "I had no idea what to get you and ___"

"It's from you, Ace," I cut her off with a grin. "So, whatever it is, I'm sure it's perfect." My fingers tear into the wrapping paper, and it doesn't take long before the gift is bare, and the lid is off the top of the small box.

Inside sits a rectangular-shaped metal key chain with a leather strap.

The words *To the Moon and Mars and back* are engraved into the metal in a very familiar scrawl. And sitting right beside the words is the outline of a tiny astronaut. Hell, when I look closer, the little guy even has the words NASA and Luke inscribed in his uniform.

I look up, and she shrugs.

“You are a very hard person to buy for, but when I saw the little shop at the mall and the guy said he could easily engrave whatever I drew into metal, I just felt like maybe you’d like it.”

“This is your handiwork?” I ask, my heart warming over the thoughtfulness.

She nods, but then she frowns a little. “Do you like it?”

“Like it?” I repeat. “Ace, I love it.”

“Yeah?” she asks, the nerves sliding out of her voice. “It’s not a dumb gift?”

I shake my head. “Far from it. It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Her mouth curls up into a relieved smile, and I fixate on those lips of hers. Full, pink, perfect lips I’m starting to find drive me completely wild.

She notices my mind’s new focus, and she digs her teeth into her bottom lip, a mix of uncertainty and desire finding its way into her eyes.

Fuck.

“Luke,” she whispers my name.

“What do you want, Ava?”

Silence descends upon us, but I stay patient, letting her be the one to decide.

But eventually, she does.

“You,” she whispers, and she takes it upon herself to pluck the gift out of my hands and set it on the nightstand. She stands up in front of me, removing her tank top and pajama pants and underwear, and she doesn’t stop until she’s completely naked. Just miles upon miles of Ava’s perfect body standing in front of me.

“I want you,” she whispers again and closes the distance between us. Her hands rest on my shoulders, and her body gloriously invades my personal space.

Hands to her hips, I stare up at her. “I want you too.”

A shaky breath escapes her lungs, and I simply let the poignant silence guide our minds.

The moment my fingers ease down her hips and onto her thighs, goose bumps start to rise on her skin. I look up and watch her face as I continue to touch her, my fingers caressing her skin. Down her legs, back up her legs, and they don't stop until they sit precariously at the apex of her thighs.

Her nipples harden.

Her eyes fall shut.

Her heart-shaped lips form a small O.

And her chest rises and falls with unsteady, near-panting breaths.

Fuck, I want to take her breath away. I want to kiss her and caress her and slide inside her.

Making Ava feel good has now become my only mission in life.

“Luke, please,” she begs, and it's music to my ears.

It's also the catalyst for action.

No more teasing.

No more waiting.

No. More. Holding. Back.

Deep down, I know I am already hers.

But tonight, I'll make her mine.



CHAPTER

Thirty

Ava

Luke runs his hands up and down my bare legs, not slow, not fast, just...painfully *steady*. When soft lips follow his hands' path, electricity jump-starts my heart, and a moan escapes my throat.

I don't think I've ever wanted anyone or anything as bad as I want him right now.

Brown eyes stare up at me, their depths an endless pull of desire and passion and adoration and need. Lips hover mere inches from where I ache, where I throb, and a tremor rolls through my body.

"*Please.*" My voice is needy and desperate, and I move my hips forward, showing him, begging him, giving him permission.

“You’re so beautiful to me,” he whispers, his warm breath brushing across the apex of my thighs and causing that deep, aching throb to intensify.

With trembling fingers, I reach out to place my hands on either side of his face. And he just looks at me. *Really* looks at me. I feel no hesitation—no doubt. It doesn’t matter that there’s no turning back. I just want him to see me and touch me and taste me and feel me.

The room is quiet, and each heady breath that escapes my lungs feels slow and fast at the same time. Want morphs into need, and I have to shut my eyes and force myself to breathe through the agonizing ecstasy.

And then, like lightning, he *acts*. Hands gripping my ass, he yanks my body forward and presses his mouth against me.

Holy hell. Yes.

The shaky anticipation turns into trembling, sweet, *sweet* relief.

His tongue sneaks out past his lips, and he takes a taste.

Then another.

Then another.

And he keeps doing that until he starts up a rhythm that urges my head to fall back and my chest to move up and down with puffing breaths.

His big, sturdy hands reach up and grip my breasts, but he never stops tasting me, licking me, eating at me.

Oh fuck.

Delicious pressure builds and intensifies, and Luke doesn’t stop until my whole body explodes with the kind of orgasm that only exists in fucking fairy tales and fantasies.

My eyes roll back, and my entire body vibrates with each pleasurable wave that crashes over me.

I am no longer in my bedroom. I am no longer on Earth.

I now exist in another dimension that I never want to fucking leave.

I don't know how gets me there, but somehow, he manages to ease me back onto the bed. His body hovers over mine, and his hands caress my cheeks. And he just stares down at me with a look that is so intense, so full of affection, it's like his heart has migrated into his eyes.

He presses gentle kisses to my lips and cheeks and forehead, and eventually, I am back on Planet Earth, back in my bedroom.

Somehow, though, it's not enough.

I need more.

I need him. All of him.

I tug at his shirt until I get it over his head, tossing it on the floor.

My fingers are persistent, undoing his leather belt, then the button and zipper of his jeans. "I want to feel you," I whisper, and he obliges, standing up to remove his jeans and boxers.

And then he's right there, hovering over my body again, his skin bare of any clothes.

My gaze consumes him as I let my fingers discover every firm plane and rippled valley. Naked Luke just might be the sexiest thing I've ever seen in my life.

He is big and firm and strong...*everywhere*.

His cock is hard and aroused and it juts out from his body, and I can't stop myself from reaching down and running my fingers against him.

A deep, sexy groan escapes his lips, and it only emboldens me further. With my fingers wrapped around him, I move my hand up and down and up and down, and I don't stop until he can't take it anymore. Eyes blazing, he wraps his arms around my waist and flips us over so that he's lying on his back and my thighs straddle his hips. The tip of his cock presses right *there*, against where I am downright longing for him.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispers, and his eyes meet mine. “And whatever it is, I’ll do it, Ava.”

“*Luke*,” I say, his name a moan on my lips. “Please no more teasing,” I beg him. “I want you inside me, and fuck, I want it to happen right now. And I don’t want anything between us. I just want to feel you. All of you. Every single blessed inch.”

“Fuck, Ava.” My words urge a deep, raspy groan from his lips.

“I’m on birth control,” I whisper in a rush, pleading my case on a ramble. “And I’m clean. So clean. Like, so clean, I might as well shave my head and call myself Mrs. Clean.”

What on earth are you even saying? I silently wonder to myself. *And for the love of everything, don’t try to curtsy on his cock.*

“I know you are,” he whispers back, pulling me out of my messy, stumbling thoughts. For the briefest of moments, as his eyes search mine, an amused smile consumes his lips, but just as quick as it came, it leaves his mouth and his eyes turn hot and fiery.

He grips my hips and slowly guides my body so that just the tip of him presses inside me. Instantly, a moan shoots out of my throat and my hips quake against him. But his movements somehow manage to stay precise and meticulous.

His eyes blaze.

And then, he pushes himself All. The. Way. In.

He’s pressed to the hilt and filling and stretching me in the most delicious way, and I’m pretty much done for after that. The instant pleasure-filled gratification overwhelms me. More moans push from my lips, and with greedy hands, I grip at his chest as my body’s movements become erratic and unsteady.

Luke takes the lead, steadying my body and gently turning us over so I’m on my back and he’s on top of me, *and thank everything*, his cock stays inside me the entire time.

He reaches up and caresses my cheek with a tender hand, his eyes exploring the depths of mine. I don't know what he finds, but I can imagine it revolves around desperation and need for him to move, to slide in and out of me until pleasure makes me burst into a million tiny pieces.

"You are all I can see, Ava," he whispers and leans forward to press his lips to the corner of my mouth. "Just you." His lips brush mine. "Always you." His mouth deepens the kiss, and his tongue begs entrance into my mouth.

I whimper and claw my fingers at his back, kissing him with the kind of deep-rooted need that makes lips and teeth and tongues clash and dance.

I want to kiss him and touch him and feel him.

I want to crawl in-fucking-side him.

I want him on me and in me and just...everywhere.

We stay like that, fierce desire guiding our mouths, while Luke starts to move. Each thrust gets deeper and harder, until his hips take up a fast rhythm that has me moaning against his persistent mouth.

Pleasure builds.

I whimper and moan and dig my nails into the firm skin of his back.

Deep, sexy groans leave Luke's lips.

"I'm so close," I whimper against his mouth. "It feels too good. You feel too good."

My body tightens in anticipation, and Luke doesn't let up.

He takes me right to the edge, holding me there for what feels like an eternity.

And then, I'm *falling*, right into my climax, and my heart feels like it wants to crawl out of my body and into his. Luke is right there with me, his back muscles tightening beneath my fingertips and his breaths turning to uneven, raspy pants.

It feels like it takes hours for my mind to clear the orgasm-induced fog.

But when I do, the reality of what we just did isn't lost on me.

Holy hell. You just had the best sex of your life. With your best friend.

That truth should be *staggering*.

But it's not. It's quite the opposite, actually.

To be in Luke's arms is love, safety, comfort, and passion personified. Even from the start, he has held the power to bring me back to life, revive whatever I've lost, and restore what's become shattered.

We are born to be loved, to be cherished for who we are, unconditionally, and Luke has never failed to give me all of that and then some, even when I thought of us as just friends.

But I'm starting to realize we were never *just* friends.

We were always So. Much. More.

And though his words are precious, his laughter and smile always a remedy, it is the feel of his body, his touch, that makes our relationship feel complete. That makes *me* feel complete. Or perhaps it is all of them combined; perhaps they are more than their sum.

Either way, I don't think I want to go back to the way we were before.

I don't think I ever want this to end.



CHAPTER

Thirty-One

December 26th

Ava

I stare out the window of our rental, taking in the way the snow on the ground makes the world appear brighter than it should for this hour of the evening. Flakes swirl and dance in the air, falling onto the massive white blanket that rests on the ground.

All day, my mind has felt like a freaking ping-pong ball, bouncing back and forth between wanting to talk to Luke about last night but being afraid to ask him what he's thinking and feeling.

In my heart, it doesn't feel like we just had sex.

It feels like we made love.

Ever since we woke up this morning, I've wavered between bringing up the sparkly pink unicorn in the room and simply watching him for cues.

But Luke has appeared nothing but relaxed and laid-back.

And he's been affectionate, *so incredibly affectionate*. Stealing kisses whenever he can. Helping me get ready for tonight's big event by playfully teasing my body like he did a few days ago.

To me, he's been the opposite of a man who is internally freaking out over having sex with his best friend. He's just been Luke. *My Luke*. Handsome and funny and always finding moments to be sweet with me.

And it's those very actions that reassure me, that make me think maybe he's feeling the same way I do.

Maybe he doesn't want to go back to just friends...

Maybe he wants me like I want him...

When Luke pulls our rental into the parking lot of Crystal Gardens, I'm pulled straight out of my thoughts, and my eyes catch sight of a giant sign that reads ***Lakewood High Fifteen-Year Reunion***.

Gah.

Rapidly, nerves make themselves known inside my belly, the little bastards even having the audacity to spill into my veins and make my hands fidget and shake.

"Are you sure you want—" I start to ask, but Luke is quick to respond, not even letting me finish my thought.

"You're not going to convince me to leave without actually attending this reunion," he says and glances at me as he pulls into a parking spot and cuts the engine.

I narrow my eyes. "That wasn't what I was going to do."

A knowing smile appears on his lips. "You sure about that?"

"No," I retort because he and I both know that's exactly what I was going to try to do. I huff out a sigh and pull down

the visor to check my makeup for the one-hundredth time. When I find nothing has changed since I checked five minutes ago, I shut the visor with a flip of my hand and huff out another sigh.

“Ace, it’s going to be okay.” Luke reaches over and tenderly places his hand on my forearm. “We’re going to go in there, and we’re going to have fun.”

“You promise?”

He nods. “Promise.”

I search his eyes for a long moment, and just as I start to open my mouth with a few more distracting questions, he shakes his head.

“You got this,” he says. “And I got you.” He winks and leans forward to press a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Now, let’s go in there and show all your old high school pals how awesome Ava Lucie is fifteen years later.”

I snort, but somehow, his words provide enough comfort for me to find the strength to open the passenger door and get out.

“Attagirl,” Luke cheers me on and follows my lead, hopping out of the driver’s side and meeting me at the back of the car. He wraps his arm around my shoulders and leads us toward the entrance.

As we walk across the snow-covered pavement, I spot several of my old classmates walking into the building and send up a silent prayer that tonight isn’t a miserable experience.

But just before we step inside, Luke pauses at the entrance and places his hand to the small of my back. “Ace, I have something very important to tell you.”

I lean back slightly to meet his eyes. “Yeah?”

“You look so insanely beautiful tonight,” he whispers. “I can’t believe I’m the lucky bastard who gets to have you on his arm.”

My heart is the balloon, and his words are helium, filling me up until I feel like I can fly. “Thank you for coming with me.”

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” he says and presses a kiss to my forehead. “And just so you know, I’m not here pretending to be anything. To me, this is real. You and me and what happened last night and the way things are between us now, it’s real.”

“It’s real to me, too,” I whisper back, and a smile consumes his mouth.

“Now that we have that settled, the sooner we get this goat rodeo out of the way, the sooner I can take you back to your parents’ house and get you naked.”

“Luke London,” I chastise with a giggle. “You are bad.”

“Oh, you have no idea the things I have planned for tonight.” He winks, and then, like he didn’t just make my mind reel with all sorts of dirty thoughts, puts pressure to the hand at my back and gently leads us into the venue.

Well, hell, how am I supposed to focus on this stupid reunion now?



“Hi, everyone!” Callie greets from the stage. Her silver sequined dress sparkles beneath the lights, and with her nose held high in the air, her face has that familiar *I’m-better-than-everyone* look. “I hope you enjoyed the wonderful dinner that was put together by *moi*,” she says and gestures toward herself with a curl of her hand and a confident smile on her lips. “Now, if you would please gather around for a very important announcement!”

No one really makes a move to follow her lead, most staying put in their seats at the various tables scattered throughout the dining area of the venue, but she will not be deterred.

“Come on!” She motions with her free hand, and eventually, everyone starts to get up from their chairs and walk toward the dance floor sitting just below the stage.

Everyone but me, that is.

So far, only an hour or so into the evening, my fifteen-year high school reunion lives up to all of my lowball expectations.

Callie is just as much of a backhanded bitch in person as she was in high school.

Most of my classmates are married with kids.

And while it’s been nice catching up with some of my friends from back in the day, I’d rather be anywhere else but here.

The only thing that’s been enjoyable about the evening is the fact that Luke has been by my side the whole time. Never failing to be affectionate and playful and sweet, he’s made the night worthy of attending.

Although, I’d venture to say that we could be anywhere and still have a good time.

We certainly didn’t need to come here to have fun together.

Luke grins at me from the seat beside mine, his hand resting comfortably on my thigh. “You don’t want to go hear what she has to say?”

“Uh...” I pause and snort. “I’m pretty sure I can hear it from here.”

“Well, okay then.” He laughs and slides his hand down to squeeze my knee.

I take a sip from my glass of punch and rest my head on his shoulder, settling in for the “big announcement.”

I watch on as Connie and Carrie—*the two women who were part of Callie’s CiCi’s entourage back in the day*—step onto the stage, smiling at their old clique leader.

With Carrie standing beside her, Connie takes the microphone, and Callie strides off the stage and into the small crowd that’s formed on the dance floor.

“I am excited to tell you that we have the official tally!” Connie says, and I scrunch up my brow, glancing at Luke in confusion.

“What tally?” I ask, whispering toward him.

He smirks down at me. “For the king and queen of the reunion.”

“Are you serious?” I question with wide eyes. “When were we supposed to vote on that?”

An amused laugh pops from his throat. “When we had to take these glorious name tags,” he retorts and glances down at his chest, where a “Hello My Name Is” sticker sits on his shirt.

“I didn’t see that.”

“Because you were too busy rushing us in the door and away from Callie and her cronies.”

He’s not wrong.

The instant we stepped into the venue, I spotted the three of them standing just to the left of the sign-in table, and I made sure we didn’t dillydally with the damn name tags. It was hard enough getting myself to walk inside this shindig. If I would’ve got stuck in a conversation with those vipers within the first five minutes of arriving, my flight-or-fight response would’ve kicked in.

And my track record doesn’t exactly point to hanging around and fighting.

“Okay, everyone!” Connie smiles toward the crowd. “Tonight’s king and queen are...” She opens the envelope in her hand, and that smile only grows. “Oh my gosh! This feels like senior prom all over again! Tonight’s king and queen are Kyle and Callie!”

Oy vey. Of freaking course, it is.

“Oh my goodness!” Callie exclaims from the floor, but she doesn’t waste time grabbing her high school sweetheart and now-husband by the arm and dragging him up onto the stage.

Though, while Callie bounces around with Connie and Carrie, Kyle looks...annoyed. Or maybe, bored? Honestly, I can't be sure, but the firm line of his mouth doesn't exactly give the appearance of happy.

"That dude looks miserable," Luke whispers into my ear, a soft chuckle on his lips. "Frankly, he looks almost as miserable as you looked when I pulled into the parking lot."

I snort at that.

Crowns are placed on Callie's and Kyle's heads, and the crowd below them offers hesitant applause. The queen waves and smiles, while the king just kind of stands there.

"Kyle, blink twice if you need us to save you from this painful cliché," Luke teases into my ear, and I nearly spit out my punch, his words and the absurdity of this situation almost too much to bear.

"Now the king and queen will have their first dance," Carrie proudly announces into the mic, and besides Callie and Kyle on the dance floor, it's pretty much a mass exodus back to the tables.

Luke wraps his arm around the back of my chair and smirks down at me. "You know, I did manage to get my vote in."

I tilt my head to the side. "Yeah?"

"Oh yeah." He nods and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth.

"And who did you vote for?"

"Well, like, Callie and Kyle, of course," he replies, mimicking a Valley girl voice. "I mean, like, they just, like, totally had to win."

"Shut up." I giggle and roll my eyes, but Luke leans closer, getting all up in my personal space.

"I'm kidding."

"I knew you didn't vote, you lunatic."

“Oh, I voted. Just not for Callie.” He smirks and presses a kiss to my forehead. “I voted for Ava Lucie. The girl of my fucking dreams.”

Goodness. Be still my heart.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Two

Luke

“Uh, nice crown, man,” I say to the crowned king of the evening, otherwise known as Ava’s old archenemy’s husband. “I guess congrats are in order.”

We both stand at the bar, waiting for the bartender to take our drink orders.

And, yeah, I’m being a bit of a sarcastic dick right now, but I can’t help myself. I’ve heard too many old high school stories from Ava to want to play nice with people who tried to make her teenage years hell.

Though, to my surprise, his reaction is annoyed.

But not at me.

“My fucking wife, man.” Kyle shakes his head on a sigh. And then, without hesitation, he takes the gold crown off his

head and sets it down on top of the bar. “I’ll be glad when this damn reunion is over.”

While I didn’t exactly see that coming, I can’t say I’m surprised.

I mean, the guy looked like he was being held captive against his will when he was on the stage and a woman in a pastel-pink dress was shoving that gold plastic crown on his head.

“You’re Ava Lucie’s boyfriend, right?” he asks, and I nod, holding out my hand to shake his.

“Luke London.”

“Kyle Baccus,” he officially introduces himself. “Nice to meet you, man.”

Once the bartender takes my drink order, I turn around with a fresh glass of rum and Coke for me and a punch for Ava and note that she has been commandeered into a conversation with Callie and her cronies.

Uh oh.

But before I step in as her white knight, I stay put and admire the view that is Ava Lucie all dressed up. Her legs look a mile long in shiny black stilettos, and the black dress she chose only accentuates her insanely sexy body.

Goddamn, that body of hers. It does things to me.

“You know.” Kyle’s voice fills my ears and pulls me from my Ava fantasies. “I was surprised Ava ended up coming tonight. Callie was too, to be honest.”

“Why’s that?” I question, unsure of where he’s trying to take this conversation.

“I don’t know.” Kyle shrugs and takes a drink from his beer. “This kind of stuff was never her thing back in high school.”

I just stare at him, completely at a loss for words. He’s acting like get-togethers like this weren’t Ava’s thing because

she doesn't like to socialize or something. Which is total bullshit.

Trust me, I should know. She's dragged me to enough parties and social events over the years to comprehend that she *loves* to socialize, loves parties, loves people.

She just has an aversion to assholes. Like him and his superficial wife.

"She never went to any parties or anything back in the day. I mean, I guess she had some friends, but she never expanded her horizons in the social realm, if you know what I'm saying," he adds, and that's pretty much my breaking point.

I have zero use for this guy or this conversation.

"Did you ever think this kind of shit wasn't her thing because your wife and her little groupies were downright assholes to her?" I toss out, and Kyle's face morphs into utter shock. "Or that maybe you and your buds were total dicks to her?"

He just stares at me.

"Or, maybe, Ava was just too good for you and your wife and all your asshole friends?" I shrug. "Personally, I think it's the latter, but who knows," I add and pat him on the back. "Maybe it's a combination of all three. Anyway, enjoy your big night, Mr. Reunion King. I bet it feels really good to get that crown tonight. Certainly a huge accomplishment that in no way straddles the line of pathetic." I clink my glass against his, take one last drink of my rum and Coke, and then set both of the glasses in my hands back on the bar and head straight for Ava.

Time to go rescue my girl.

She stands in the far corner of the room, the three female-high-school-clichés chatter around her, and I'm certain I've never seen her more bored in all my life.

As I get closer to their group, I overhear some of what is being said.

“Ava, it really would have been nice if you could’ve managed to follow through with the original dessert plan,” Callie says, stupid princess crown on her head and a passive-aggressive smile on her lips. “I mean, the cupcakes look okay, I guess, but I think everyone could agree they miss the mark a little for this event.”

Good God, this woman. In a world where there are so many things we should be focusing on, she’s consumed with fucking crowns, high school reunions, and cupcakes.

“Hey, sweetheart,” I interject into their conversation and step right into the circle, grabbing Ava by her hips and pulling her close to me.

My presence disrupts the little pow-wow, and I swear I hear Callie scoff behind me.

But who the fuck cares about that woman, *right?*

I mean, Ava is in my arms, and damn, with the way she’s looking up at me with those big blue eyes and amused smile, I am utterly entranced.

And, frankly, turned the fuck on.

Yeah, it’s high time to have some real fun.

“Ladies, if you’ll excuse us,” I say and don’t even bother to look at anyone but Ava. “But I need to steal the most beautiful woman in the room away for a minute to tell her something *very* important.”

“What are you doing?” Ava giggles as I gently lead her toward the exit doors.

“Like I said, I have something important to tell you.”

When I take a quick left and shove one of the private bathroom doors open and lock us both inside, she turns toward me with her hands on her hips.

“Luke? What the hell?” she asks, looking around the small room in confusion.

But I don’t waste any time.

Between one breath and the next, I lift her up into my arms, wrap her legs around my waist and kiss the hell out of her.

“Fuck, I want you,” I whisper against her perfect, pliant mouth. “I just couldn’t take it anymore.”

She whimpers.

“You want to be bad with me?” I ask, pushing her back gently against the door and gripping her hips so that my arousal is pressed against her.

Ava giggles and smiles, and then she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me, deep and fierce. “Let’s be bad,” she says and tugs on my bottom lip with her teeth.

Oh, thank fuck.

It doesn’t take long before my hard cock is out of my pants and her underwear are pushed to the side and I’m sliding inside her.

“Oh God,” she moans against my mouth. “This reunion is turning out to be way better than I thought it would be.”

My thoughts exactly.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Three

December 28th

Luke

Fresh out of the shower, I toss on a pair of jeans and collared shirt, and when movement from the window catches my eye, I look up to find Ava's dad on a ladder, tugging Christmas lights off the house.

Mind you, the sun has set, and darkness is beginning to consume the sky, but Guy Lucie is determined to get every single decoration down.

"Son of a bitch!" he shouts, his jolly holiday demeanor long gone. Ever since Christmas came and went, his mood has taken a clear nose dive. No more Santa suits, no more hot chocolate, no more presents and cookies, Ava's dad has now hit the wall of post-holiday blues.

Poor guy.

On a quiet chuckle, I walk over to the window and slide it open. “Everything okay out here?”

He groans and meets my eyes, his body still perched on the ladder. “Gonna have to buy new lights next year because these sons of bitches are junk! Should’ve never bought lights at Big Lots!”

I bite my lip, fighting the urge to laugh. “You need some help?”

Guy shakes his head, and for the first time since Christmas Day night, a small smile lifts the corners of his lips. “Nah, son. I appreciate the offer, but I almost got it.”

I look past him, out into the yard, and disaster lays before my very eyes.

A snow-covered graveyard of deflated Santa Clauses and reindeer and snowmen is spread across the lawn.

“You sure?” I ask, even though I know I’ll have to head out soon for Zach’s bachelor party. Ava already left for Kate’s bachelorette party about two hours ago.

“It’ll be all right.” Guy shakes his head. “Think I’ll just call it a night and get it situated in the morning!” he calls up toward me as he starts to slowly descend the ladder.

I make a mental note to get up a little earlier tomorrow morning and try to fix the mess before my daily run. Surely, Mr. Christmas himself could use a little help getting through this very difficult time.

Once he reaches the bottom of the ladder safely, I shut the window and head back into the bathroom to brush my teeth, but I get sidetracked when my phone pings with a text notification.

Ava: The party hasn’t even started yet, and I’m pretty sure this is going to end in a shitshow.

I smirk.

Me: That wild?

Ava: More like, that much alcohol. We haven't even finished dinner, and both of my sisters and two of Kate's friends are already blitzed.

Me: And you?

Ava: I've been peer-pressured to join in on the shenanigans. Kate all but shoved two Jell-O shots down my throat on the damn party bus.

Me: Poor Ava. Getting bullied by the bride to drink.

Ava: Very funny.

Me: Be safe, okay?

Ava: I will.

I almost slide my phone back into my pocket, but something urges me to send another text.

Me: P.S. I miss you already.

Her response comes in quick and makes me chuckle.

Ava: I miss you too. Have fun at Zach's bachelor party, but not too much fun, okay? Don't fall in love with a stripper or something.

Me: That would be impossible.

Ava: And why's that?

She's reaching here, and I'm more than willing to lend a hand.

Me: Because I'm already in love with someone else.

Ava: Yeah?

Me: Yeah.

Ava: Me too.

Those words urge a smile to my lips.

Over the past several weeks, so much has changed between us.

No longer just friends, Ava and I have become way more than that.

And even though we haven't officially discussed what we are or where we go from here, I've never felt happier.

Me: I think I'm going to tell her soon...

Ava: Ditto.

Me: What's the girl's name that you're in love with?

Ava: Shut up. You know what I mean. But I'm not saying it through a freaking text message. ;)

Me: I do, and I agree. See you after the parties?

Ava: I can't wait.

Same, Ace. Same.

With the biggest fucking smile that's ever consumed my face, I slide my phone back into my pocket and proceed to finish getting ready for a night of bachelor debauchery.

In about thirty minutes, a stretch limo filled with Zach and Landon and a bunch of the groom's friends will arrive at the Lucie house.

But I only manage to get my teeth brushed before my phone vibrates against my hip.

Hope blooms and I check the screen, but when I see it's not Ava, my lungs deflate a little.

Trevor: I just had an interesting conversation with Billy.

With a growing tightness in my chest, I shoot him a quick response, silently praying that this conversation isn't headed where I fear it's headed.

Me: ?

Trevor: He says that December 20th was your last day. Like, for good.

Ah, *fuck*. I guess Billy didn't wait for my official go-ahead to tell the team about my permanent leave.

Trevor: Something you maybe need to tell me, man?

I stare down at the screen of my phone, trying to figure out the best way to handle this situation, but Trev doesn't give me any time. He changes tactics, and my phone begins to ring with ***Incoming Call Trevor*** flashing on the screen.

Double fuck.

My finger hovers over the decline button, almost tapping it, but the rational side of my brain reminds me this isn't something I can just avoid. Nor would it be fair to do that.

He deserves an explanation.

By the fourth ring, I hit accept on the call.

"Hey, man. What's up?" I greet, but it might as well be the catalyst to a full-on rampage.

"What. The. Fuck. Is. Going. On?" Trev responds, his voice sharp in my ear. "You have some serious explaining to do, dude."

Shit. I sigh and run a hand through my hair.

"Luke, what the fuck?" he persists. "I'm torn between being really pissed at you for not telling me *and* assuming that I should probably be really happy for you because there's only one reason you'd take a permanent leave from the company."

God, I feel like such an asshole.

"Trev, I'm really sorry," I eventually respond, my voice dripping with guilt. "I should've told you. I know I should've told you—"

“So, it’s true?” he cuts me off. “You got in? NASA chose you, and you’re going to Houston?”

“It’s true.”

“Goddamn,” he mutters. “When did you find out?”

“Honestly?” I question more to myself than him. “Way too long ago not to have told anyone yet.”

“Wait...you haven’t told *anyone*?”

“Besides telling Billy when I put in my permanent leave? No.”

“Not even Ava?”

Especially not Ava. “Nope.”

“What the fuck, Luke?” he nearly shouts.

“I know. Trust me, I know,” I agree on a sigh. “I’ve tried to tell her a million times, but every time, I just can’t get the words out. I just can’t tell her.”

The line becomes so silent that I start to think the call has ended.

“Trev?” I pull the phone away from my ear briefly to glance at the screen. “You still there?”

“You finally realized it, didn’t you?” he asks, his voice quiet.

I don’t even have to ask him what he’s talking about because I know.

I finally realized that I’m in love with Ava.

“Yeah, man. I did.”

“Well, it’s about fucking time,” he retorts through an exasperated laugh. “I mean, it’s only taken you over a decade to face the fact that you’ve been pining over Ava Lucie since college.”

I have no response to that, but he has more to say.

“That’s why you can’t tell her, isn’t it?” he questions. “Because you don’t want to leave her.”

Bingo. His words are the dart, and my chest is the bull's-eye.

“Everything is so fucked up.”

“You need to tell her,” he says, and his voice is gentle with sympathy. “She deserves to know the truth.”

“I know. I’m going to.”

“Shit, man, I hate to cut this call short, but I gotta get off here. Barry and I have to get ready for a late-nighter to Miami,” he updates. “I’m going to see you before you leave for Houston, right?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, good. And, Luke?”

“Yeah?”

“Congrats, man. I’m still pissed at you for slow-rolling that news, but mostly, I’m just super fucking happy for you. And good luck with Ava. I hope she takes the news easy.”

Yeah, you and me both.

“Thanks, Trev.”

After we end the call, all I can do is stand there, staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror and wondering if I’ve somehow screwed things up by not telling Ava about NASA yet.

Fucking hell.



At quarter till three in the morning, I hop out of the stretch limo and head toward the front porch of Ava’s parents’ house.

The night consisted of fifteen guys, lots of beer and shots, and a pub crawl that ended at a shady strip club on the outskirts of town. Not to mention, me realizing that in order

for everyone to come out of this night alive, I needed to stop drinking and play babysitter.

Truthfully, I'm thrilled it's over.

"I'm getting married, Luke!" Zach shouts, half of his body hanging out the sunroof of the stretch limo. "I'm getting fucking married!"

"You are," I respond, but understanding that it's almost three in the morning and we're in the middle of suburbia, my voice is more of a whisper than anything else. "Now, how about you go home to your beautiful bride-to-be and celebrate?"

"Holy shit, you're brilliant!" he shouts again. "Fucking brilliant! I'm going to sex Kate so hard tonight!"

I cringe a little over the fact that he's shouting that just outside of Kate's parents' house but figure it's best if I just get inside the house, so he's not tempted to keep yelling crazy shit toward me.

My fingers tap across the keypad on the garage, and I wave toward the limo driver once I'm stepping inside. As soon as the door shuts, I head into the house and, thankfully, find it to be completely silent and dark.

Quietly, I head upstairs, more than ready to climb into bed.

But when I step into Ava's bedroom, shutting the door behind me, I'm shocked to find a naked Ava sprawled out over the comforter and sheets.

Goddamn. She's beautiful.

And apparently, very awake. Her blue eyes meet mine, and a slow, slightly lazy, definitely sexy smile spreads across her lips.

"I've been waiting for you," she says, and I can tell by her eyes that she's definitely had a few drinks tonight. Not outright drunk, but certainly buzzed.

"Is that right, Ace? You've been waiting for me?"

“That’s right.” She nods and sits up on the mattress, her knees slightly spread and her feet tucked beneath her bare ass. “Get naked, Luke.”

Well, *fuck*.

“A little bossy tonight, aren’t we?” I question, but my cock has already made the decision for me, hardening beneath the zipper of my jeans.

Without delay, I slip off my T-shirt, my boots and socks, then my jeans and boxers.

“Yes, please,” Ava whispers, staring at my cock. “Get in bed with me, Luke.”

I smirk at that, but I don’t falter to oblige her request. I climb into bed beside her and pull her sexy little body over mine.

She giggles and grins and spreads her thighs over my hips so that my cock rubs against the spot where she’s already warm and wet.

Fuck, she feels so good.

Ava kisses me, her lips frantic and greedy, and I moan, my fingers gripping her hips in excitement. She rubs her body against mine, desperate for me to slip my cock inside her, but I choose to spread it out, delay the gratification.

“I’ve been waiting all night for this,” she whispers against my mouth.

“Me too.”

“Let’s do this forever, Luke.” Her blue eyes meet mine. “Me and you and a lifetime of just doing this.”

And for the second time in the span of twenty-four hours, those words are the dart, and my heart is the fucking bull’s-eye. The impact is staggering and serves as a painful reminder of everything I haven’t told her. The fact that she is going on the assumption that once we leave Vermont, we’re both headed back to New York without any other plans. Not the reality that I’ll only be in New York for a few short days before I’ll be leaving. For good.

Fuck.

The pain is acute and urges a knot to form in my throat.

I want her so bad.

I *need* her so bad.

She is the fucking world to me. I'm certain I've loved Ava for a very, *very* long time, probably since that first day, when she came barreling into my life. But I can't do this, right now, with her, no matter how badly I want her.

It just feels wrong, like I'm purposely lying to her.

So, I do what feels like the impossible.

I don't let us have sex.

Instead, I do my best to convince her that I'm tired, turn us on our sides, and keep her body cuddled against mine until we both fall asleep.

Thankfully, her slightly inebriated state makes it easy to persuade her.

But my stone-cold sober state does me zero good.

For hours, I lie wide awake, thinking about the fact that tomorrow I have to tell her the truth.



CHAPTER

Thirty-four

December 29th

Ava

The morning starts off...strange.

There's no cuddling or sweet kisses or soft and sleepy smiles.

Luke is out of bed before me, already in the bathroom brushing his teeth. And when I slide out of bed to greet him, he hardly reacts. Just a simple peck to my forehead and then he's off again, out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom, leaving me standing there feeling...confused.

I try to brush it off, I really do, but memories of last night filter into my brain and remind me that it isn't just this morning. He's been off since he got back from Zach's bachelor party late last night.

I pretty much threw myself at him, and at first, he seemed into it, even taking his clothes off to get in bed with me. But as things got more heated, something changed, and he just shut down, putting the kibosh on sex by giving an excuse of being tired.

Which, fine. I mean, it was like three in the morning, and I was definitely a bit buzzed from all the booze and Kate's bachelorette party. Truthfully, my alcohol-fogged brain didn't even think too much about it before drifting off to sleep.

Until now.

I step out of the bathroom and find Luke sitting on my bed, scrolling through something on his phone.

"What do you want to do today?" I ask, trying to lighten the mood a bit.

But all I get back is a shrug, and it feels like he can't even meet my eyes.

When I look at him closer, I note that his normally lively eyes and easy smile have been replaced by dark circles and a firm mouth.

"Luke, what's going on?" The words blurt out of my mouth before I can stop them.

That makes him look up to meet my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean," I retort. "You've been acting weird ever since you got back from Zach's bachelor party last night."

He just sits there, looking at me, his eyes glazing over with something that resembles guilt. *Or is it apology?* I don't know what it is, but the longer the silence stretches out between us, and each second that passes without him giving any sort of explanation, I start to second-guess myself.

Did I do something wrong?

Have things between us gone too fast?

Does he regret it? Does he regret *me*?

That last question chokes the breath out of me, wrapping its persistent hands around my throat and urging tears to prick my eyes.

“What’s happening right now?” I whisper, my voice so tiny. “Did I... Do you...” I pause, unable to even get the words out.

“Ava.” He says my name, immediately shaking his head. “No. Don’t you dare try to make yourself feel like you’ve done something wrong.”

“But if it’s not me, then what is it?” I ask, and in that moment, all of my worst fears fill up my mind.

Maybe he’s realized that this isn’t what he wants, that I’m not what he wants.

Maybe he just wants to be friends with me.

Maybe—

“Ava, there’s something I need to tell you.”

He has something to tell me. On the surface, those words sound so simple. But somehow, they are a finger on the trigger, quickly pulling back and firing the ultimate emotional blow.

Do not cry. Don’t you dare get all emotional and dramatic and cry.

“Okay,” I say, but I shut my eyes closed tight, using my lids as a dam against my tears.

“I got in.”

My eyes pop open, and I search his cautious gaze for more.

“NASA selected me for the program,” he adds, but his voice is so quiet, so...not at all how I’d expect it to be when he’s telling me this life-changing, he-just-achieved-all-of-his-dreams news.

I just stare at him for the longest moment, trying to understand why he looks like he just read off an obituary,

instead of telling me what should be the greatest success of his life.

A sigh escapes his lungs, and he fixates his gaze on the carpet.

“Luke?” I walk over toward him until my knees bump against his. “Why do I get the sense there’s more to this than what you’re saying?” I question. “Because this is really huge, unbelievably fantastic news, but you’re acting like it’s not.”

“Because I’ve known about it for a while.” He sighs again and reaches out to grip my hips with his fingers, his gaze eventually lifting to meet mine.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve known since November.”

“*November?*” I question.

“I got the call on November 17th.”

My mind reels. “You’ve known that long, and you didn’t tell me?”

“I’m so sorry, Ava.”

“But why...?” I question and glance around the room in confusion. “I don’t understand. We always tell each other everything. We’re each other’s biggest fans, Luke,” I challenge. “Why on earth wouldn’t you tell me?”

“I wanted to. I did. I just didn’t want to ruin... I didn’t want to turn good news sour.”

Tears burn in my nose with deep, real hurt. Somehow, somewhere, I must have gone really wrong in our friendship if Luke thought sharing the best accomplishment of his life with me would turn it bad.

I try to clear my head and focus on the details. “When does the program start?”

“January 5th.”

My stomach drops out and my head spins, and all of a sudden, I feel like breathing is an incredibly difficult thing to

achieve. “Th-that soon?”

“Ava, I’m so sorry,” he says and stands up to move closer to me. When he tries to wrap his arms around my shoulders, I back away. My emotions and thoughts are too scattered and intense to be able to handle such close proximity.

“Don’t,” I whisper and hold up both of my hands. “Just... don’t.”

“I know I should’ve told you sooner. Fuck, I wanted to tell you sooner, but every damn time I tried, I just couldn’t do it.”

A civil war erupts inside my body, my mind and my heart completely at odds and battling each other for the win.

Rationally, I know I should be happy for him. Like, really fucking happy for him. And I should be congratulating him and telling him how proud I am of him.

But it’s really hard to do that when he’s known since November that he got accepted into the program, and he didn’t tell me. He’s known since November that he’ll be leaving New York and moving across the fucking country.

He’s known since before he offered to play the role of my boyfriend.

He’s known since before he came to Vermont with me.

He’s known since *before* he kissed me.

Before he touched me.

Before he slid inside me for the first time. *And* the second time.

He’s known this whole time, and he still let me fall for him in a way that I don’t know how I’m going to stand a life without him.

Yet, that’s what I’m going to have to imagine.

Because he’s leaving New York.

He’s leaving me.



CHAPTER

Thirty-five

Luke

Tears fall down Ava's cheeks, and I feel like someone has reached inside my body and yanked my heart right the fuck out of my chest. The mere idea of hurting her is abhorrent. It is the very last thing I ever want to do, but fuck, even if it wasn't intentional, that's exactly what I've done. I've hurt her.

All throughout our friendship, trust and honesty and communication have always been at the foundation. And what I've done, keeping this a secret from her for as long as I did, goes against all that.

"Ava, I'm so sorry," I repeat, and she just shakes her head, crossing her arms over her chest and staring down at the ground.

"Why did you hide that from me?" she asks, her voice so fucking small it makes my chest feel like it might crack in

half. “I know I’ve even asked you since then if you’ve heard anything, and you straight up lied to me.”

She’s right.

“I know I did, and I never should’ve done that,” I answer, silently wishing I could wrap her up in my arms. But I can’t because that isn’t what she wants. If anything, she looks like she wants to run out of this room and away from me. “Every time I tried to tell you, I just couldn’t get the words out.”

She goes quiet for the longest moment, and I just stand there, waiting patiently, giving her time to digest all this, to process her emotions.

“And now what?” she eventually questions. “Now we go back to New York, and in mere days, you leave for Houston, and then...? That’s it? We’re done?”

Done? Fuck, that’s not what I want at all.

But my mind is having a hard time processing what is the right thing to do.

Ava’s whole life, her career, is in New York. The whole reason she moved to New York was to follow her dreams of becoming an artist.

So, because of my career, I’m supposed to ask her to give up on hers?

I’m supposed to ask her to just move to Houston with me?

That feels so wrong, it’s not even funny.

“I...” I pause, trying to find the right words to express how I feel. But my silence doesn’t help the situation. If anything, it only hurts her more.

“I feel like you’ve strung me along, made me fall in fucking love with you, and then you’re just going to up and leave. Just fucking walk away.”

“Ava, I’ve fallen for you too,” I whisper. “And trust me, that’s not what I want.”

“Trust you? That feels like a very hard thing to do right now, Luke,” she says angrily. “And if that’s not what you

want, what *do* you want? Because, I'll be honest, it's all pretty fucking hard to understand right now."

She's so worked up. *Too* worked up.

And it feels like no matter what I say, she's not actually going to hear it.

Her mind is too busy trying to process the fact that I betrayed her. That I lied to her. That I hid something from her. Me, the one person who never hides anything from her, broke her trust.

"Ava, let's just calm down and try to talk this through," I say, my voice soft and gentle.

"No." Tears well up in her eyes. "You know what? Why don't you just leave? I think that's probably best."

Her words feel like a punch to the gut. "What?"

"I think you should go, Luke," she retorts, and more tears spill down her cheeks. "I mean, you probably have so much to do to get ready for your big move to Houston."

"Wait...you want me to actually leave?" I question, shock consuming me. "Like, leave Vermont and go back to New York? Without you?"

"Yeah."

"Ava..." I start to ask, but I don't even know where to begin. I can tell her emotions are scattered all over the fucking place. And let's be real, being a flight risk is what she's known for. When things get too scary or too intense or too daunting, she runs.

Even she knows that fact.

"Just go, Luke. I'm overwhelmed and confused, and I need space from you. I can go to my sister's wedding by myself, and when I get back to New York, we'll talk."

"Don't do this, Ace." I reach out toward her, but it's useless; she steps away from me. "Please don't do this."

"Don't do what, Luke?" she spits back. "What am I doing?"

“Pushing me away.”

“Says the guy who led me on for weeks, knowing that soon, he would be moving across the fucking country.”

“You know that wasn’t what I was doing. You know—”

“I know that you lied to me.” She shakes her head. “That’s what I know.”

Fuck. “Ava, don’t make it like this.”

“Actually, *you* made it like this,” she retorts and grabs her purse off the nightstand. “And if you don’t mind, I’m going to take my dad’s truck and get some fresh air. Have a safe flight back to New York.”

“You’re fucking serious?” I question. “You just want me to leave? Like, right now? Without you?”

“Yes, that’s what I want. I need space to get my head together. I’ll see you in New York in a few days.”

I just stand there, and it feels like my jaw drops through the fucking floor.

And then she up and walks out of the bedroom.

I hear her footsteps move down the stairs and the front door slam shut and the engine of her father’s truck start up.

And when I look out the window, I have the painful view of her leaving.

Leaving her parents’ driveway.

Leaving me.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Six

December 30th

Ava

“Oh Ava, honey, have you lost weight?” my aunt Lily asks as she checks the fit on my bridesmaid dress. I stand on a step stool in the middle of my parents’ living room, and her fingers tug and pinch at the fabric around my waist.

Considering I haven’t been able to eat anything since I told Luke to leave yesterday morning, it’s possible I’ve lost a pound or two.

But I don’t tell her any of that.

“I don’t think so,” I lie out of self-preservation. There is no way in hell I’m going to tell her what’s really happened. For all my family knows, Luke had to leave yesterday because he was called in to work because another pilot was sick.

Why do they know that? Because that's what I told them when my dad noticed he hadn't seen Luke around and wanted to thank him for finishing up his Christmas décor cleanup.

The fact that he even did that for my dad makes my heart feel like glass, ready to shatter with each thick breath I inhale into my lungs.

You really screwed things up this time, didn't you? my mind taunts me. You freaked the fuck out, and instead of being a rational adult about things, you told him to leave and stormed out of the house like a child.

I wish I could say I stand behind yesterday's behavior and feel strongly that I handled it all correctly, but I can't.

After I rushed out of the house, Luke tried to call me and text me at least a hundred times. And all I did was sit in my dad's truck in a Walmart parking lot, bawling like a baby, only sending him one single response back.

I just need space, Luke. Just go back to New York, and we'll talk when I get back from my sister's wedding.

It was horrible. All of it.

And late last night, when I finally went back to my parents' house and Luke's stuff was out of my bedroom, I got one final text from him.

I just want you to know that I'm getting ready to board a flight back to New York. It's the last thing I want to do, but it's what you want. And fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Ace. I wish you would just talk to me and let me explain, but I'm going to honor your request of needing space. Even though it makes me feel like I'm leaving my heart in Vermont.

The instant I read it, everything I had just done hit me.

And I mean, it hit me *hard*.

The fact that I quite literally freaked the fuck out and turned into an impulsive, emotional mess. The fact that he was right. I *was* pushing him away.

He definitely shouldn't have lied to me about NASA, but I should've tried to understand why he kept that from me. I had a right to be hurt by it, but I also had the responsibility to control my emotions and not react in such a careless, rash way.

All night last night, our fight just kept replaying in mind, and all I could do was sit on my bed and cry. Big, sobbing, wracking cries, I'm honestly shocked my mom or dad didn't catch on to.

"You okay, honey?" Aunt Lil asks, pulling me from my thoughts, and even though it feels like my whole entire world has ended, I force a fake smile to my lips.

"I'm good," I respond. "Just a little tired from all of the fun-filled days of a Guy Lucie Christmas."

She grins at that. "Your dad sure is something when it comes to Christmas, isn't he?"

"He sure is."

"So, your mom told me Luke might not be at the wedding," she says, and her words make me cringe. But thankfully, her eyes are too fixated on the hem of my dress to notice my reaction.

"Uh...yeah," I respond and clear the cobwebs from my throat. "A pilot got sick unexpectedly, so he had to go in and help them out."

"Well, I hope he makes it back in time for the wedding."

"Me too." He won't. Because I'm the one who uninvited him.

My poor, battered heart clenches, and I swallow hard against the emotion trying to take up residence in my throat.

I will not fucking lose it while Aunt Lil is fixing my bridesmaid's dress for Kate's wedding, which just so happens to be tomorrow.

I will keep it together.

I will try not to think about the fact that I feel like I just told the love of my life to walk away from me.

I will try not to think about the fact that I miss Luke so badly, my entire body aches and the mere idea of food makes me want to vomit.

And I will try not to think about how much I love him.

Yes. I will simply avoid all of those things and focus on being there for Kate on her big day.

Ha. Good luck with that, you lunatic.

I swear, if I could find a fucking time machine on Amazon and go back to yesterday morning, I'd Prime ship that shit so fast.

If I had the choice, I'd do yesterday all over again in a heartbeat.

And instead of telling Luke to leave, I would've told him to stay. I would've told him how I really feel. That I'm in love with him. That the idea of him leaving for Houston in less than a week feels like a knife to my chest.

Sadly, though, there are no time machines.

There's a huge part of me that wants to call him and text him...just talk to him, but it doesn't feel fair to unload everything on him in any other way but face-to-face. Especially when I'm the one who made him leave Vermont in the first place.

Way to fucking go, Ava.

The sound of the front door closing shut grabs my attention, and I look up to find Aunt Poppy walking into the kitchen.

"Hey hey!" she greets. "I just talked to your mom, and she said she and your sisters are on their way back from the bridal shop with Kate's dress."

"That's great news."

“And she also mentioned that Luke had to leave yesterday,” she adds, diving into the one thing I don’t want to talk about right now. “What the hell happened?”

“He had to go back to New York early.”

“*Before* your sister’s wedding?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod and swallow against the thick knot in my throat that is starting to become a permanent resident.

“Well, what in the hell made him have to leave early?” Aunt Poppy pushes with a hand to her hip.

“He was called in to work, you nosy wench,” Aunt Lil offers, talking around the pin she holds carefully between her lips. She glances up at me and fluffs out the bottom of my bridesmaid dress. “Though, he might be able to come back for Kate’s wedding but isn’t sure yet.”

“But I thought he was able to get off work to come here? Why in the hell did they call him back in?” The explanation does nothing to quell Aunt Poppy’s questions.

“One of the pilots got sick, and he had to go back and help out,” I supply, a full-blown lie that’s beginning to fall far too easily from my lips.

“Well, that’s a damn shame,” Poppy mutters and plops down on the sofa. “I sure hope he can get his ass back in time for the wedding. I bet that man looks hot to trot in a suit.”

“Uh-huh.” I force a smile to my lips, trying to act like everything is just peachy keen, but I can feel her watching me like a hawk. So, I try my damndest to switch the freaking subject. “Are you here to let Aunt Lil do some alterations to your dress?”

“I can do my own damn alterations.” Poppy scoffs, stands up, and walks into the kitchen to grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

Aunt Lil grins at me. “She’s so full of it,” she mutters as she carefully places a few pins into the waist of my dress, pulling it in a half inch or so. “She can’t sew to save her life.”

“I can hear you!”

“I know you can hear me!”

“Well, if you know I can hear you, then why are you over there talking shit?” Poppy questions and unscrews the cap on her bottle of water and takes a sip. “Don’t make me come over there and kick your ass.”

“Bring it, you old hag.” Aunt Lil sets down the container of pins and gestures with both hands. “I dare ya.”

Poppy moves like her ass is on fire, and I burst into laughter, but also, I quickly hop down off the step stool and hold out both of my hands between them.

“Ladies, ladies, there’s no time for violence,” I interject before these two hens start to rumble in my parents’ living room. “Kate and my mom and Em are going to be here any minute, and Lord knows, it would be downright cruel for the bride-to-be to walk in on you two in a fistfight.”

My aunts continue to glare at each other.

“Hey,” I say, trying to get their attention. “*Aunt Poppy. Aunt Lil.*”

But when they don’t respond or make any move to end the standoff, I put two fingers in my mouth and let out a sharp whistle. “Cut it out!”

The sounds of the garage door echo into the kitchen, and I use that to plead my case.

“Do you really want Kate to see you two at odds the day before her wedding?”

Lil sighs.

Poppy rolls her eyes.

But eventually, the two old birds call a truce by shaking hands.

I swear to God, after all these years of being bickering, bitching sisters, it’s a miracle these two haven’t killed each other.

It’s also a miracle they helped me get out of my emotional funk for a few minutes.

Yeah, but you know that's going to be short-lived, sister.

Internally, I sigh, reminding myself that I have to hold it together today and tomorrow. If not for myself, I have to do it for Kate.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Seven

December 31st, New Year's Eve

Luke

“What are you doing here?” Trevor asks, his eyes wide when he sees me step aboard the plane.

“I...uh...convinced Barry to let me take his shift.”

Frankly, it took a lot of convincing for Barry to give up this flight, but hell, there was no fucking way I was going to be able to stay home, in my apartment, and think about how Ava is doing and how the wedding was going, and yeah, you get the idea.

It was either wallow in my own misery or try to find something to distract me.

This flight seemed like the perfect option.

And because Barry might not be as nice of a guy as I originally thought, I'm basically flying this plane for free tonight. On fucking New Year's Eve.

Trevor just sits there, staring at me like I'm not even speaking English.

"Dude, I'm so fucking confused right now," he mutters and runs a hand through his hair. "Aren't you supposed to be at Ava's sister's wedding?"

"Change of plans." I shrug and busy myself with putting my duffel in the staff closet behind the cockpit.

But my sad excuse for an explanation doesn't do anything to suppress his bewilderment.

"Luke, my man, I think we both know this wasn't just a simple change of plans," he continues, his eyes scrutinizing my face. "No offense, but you look like shit, and there is no way in hell you should be anywhere but Vermont right now."

He probably isn't off base on the whole "you look like shit" comment.

Sleep hasn't come easy since I left Vermont because I hurt Ava so badly that she told me she needed space. I feel like someone has ripped my heart out of my chest, run it through it a meat grinder, and shoved it back inside my body.

Truthfully, the only thing that's helped ease some of the discomfort is running. Needless to say, in the past twenty-four hours, I've managed three six-mile runs around the city, about four hours of sleep, and only one meal of fucking Lucky Charms cereal.

It's all pretty pathetic.

"It's a long story," I eventually answer through a sigh. I slip my hands into my pockets and stare up at the ceiling of the plane. "One that I don't want to get into right now. So, let's just focus on getting ready for the flight, okay?"

"Yeah, that's not going to work for me." Trevor shakes his head and continues to stare at me, making no move to go back to his safety checks.

“Trev, c’mon.” I try to reason with him. “Just let me be, all right?”

“What. The. Fluff?” A loud, boisterous voice fills my ears, and I turn to find Thatcher Kelly stepping onto the plane. “What in the hell are you doing here? Where’s Dingle-Barry?”

“Apparently,” Trev chimes in, “our good friend Luke here had a change of plans. So, instead of going to Ava’s sister’s wedding, he took Barry’s scheduled flight.”

Thatch’s eyes turn downright interrogatory. “I’m sorry... *what?*”

I shrug, trying to act like it’s no big thing. “I’ll be flying you guys to Vegas for New Year’s Eve.”

Thatch looks between Trevor and me, confusion written all over his face.

But when he opens his mouth to say God knows what, his wife Cassie and the rest of the gang begin to board the plane.

First, Kline and Georgia. Then, everyone else follows their lead, stepping onto the plane already coupled up. Wes and Winnie, Milo and Maybe, Trent and Greer, Quincy and Emory, Cap and Ruby, Harrison and Rocky, and lastly, Theo and Lena.

Literally, their *whole* gang.

At first, no one really notices why Thatch is standing so close to the cockpit of the plane. Hell, most of them even manage to put their bags in the overhead bins and sit down in their preferred seats.

But Thatch doesn’t let that last long.

“Guess what, guys?” he announces toward the back of the plane, stepping into the aisleway. “Guess who is flying us today?”

“Dude, you gotta stop being so hard on Barry. He’s not—”

“No,” Thatch chimes in, cutting Milo off. “Fucking Luke.”

“What?” Theo questions, and Thatch turns to point directly toward me.

“This motherfluffer isn’t in Vermont. With Ava. He’s here. Flying our fluffing plane.”

In an instant, it feels like a thousand questions are tossed my way, all revolving around why I’m here.

These fucking nosy-as-hell billionaire bastards. They know way too much about my life. But, more than that, why do they even care?

I try to move things along, to get everyone to take their seats so Trev and I can concentrate on getting the show on the road, but my copilot has other plans.

He takes off his headset, tosses it down beside his chair, and stands up.

“What are you doing?” I question, and he just strides toward the back of the plane.

What the fuck?

“This flight isn’t leaving until you tell us what is going on,” he retorts, and I stand up, out of my seat, to watch him plop down in a leather lounge across from Wes and Winnie.

I look to our passengers, you know, the ones who paid good money for this plane to take them to Las Vegas for New Year’s, but they are no help.

“Spill the tea, Luke,” Thatch says, sitting down beside Trevor. He puts his hands behind his head and stretches out his legs. “I’m prepared to sit here all night, my man.”

“Uh...what’s going on?” Cap chimes in, and Kline smirks.

“Well, Caplin, I think Luke here is in need of an intervention.”

Georgia rubs her hands together. “Oh boy, I love when I get to be a part of the interventions!”

“I don’t need an intervention.” I sigh again and run a hand through my hair. “I need to get this flight back on schedule so ATC doesn’t ream my ass.”

“Like you’re scared of ATC. Get real, man.” Trev snorts. “Anyway, it’s not like you’re going to have to deal with them

anymore. Mr. *NASA*.”

Thatch furrows his brow. “Wait...what? You’re fluffing in?”

“Yeah.” I nod, but apparently, my reaction isn’t what they were expecting.

“Dude, why do you look so fucking miserable when telling us that?” Trent questions. “I mean, you got into NASA. You’re going to be a fucking astronaut. And you look like your dog just died.”

“The tea, Luke,” Thatch insists. “Serve it up, my man.”

“Fine!” I shout, my brain feeling like it might explode. “I fucked up with Ava, okay? That’s why I’m here and not in Vermont with her. She told me she needed space from me because I. Fucked. Up.”

Those words break the dam, and I just tell them everything.

How things changed between Ava and me in Vermont.

How we became more than just friends.

How I couldn’t bring myself to tell her that I got into NASA and would be moving to Houston because she’s been the steadiest thing in my life since my parents died.

I just lay it all out there, and by the time the last word leaves my lips, Georgia and Winnie and Maybe have tears in their eyes, and Thatch is grinning like a fucking lunatic.

Cap, though, on the other hand, looks pissed. “Wait...you guys weren’t in a relationship? What the fuck, man?” he questions. “I feel had.”

“I think what Cap is trying to say is that you guys were very convincing, so convincing that it probably wasn’t ever fake, was it?” Kline interjects, his eyes kind and his words filled with his usual wisdom. “You love her.”

“Yeah. I do.” I nod. “Actually, I’ve loved her for a very long time.”

Trev smiles at me, his eyes knowing. “I’ve been trying to make you see that for years, man. For fucking years.”

I know he’s right.

“Well...I think I know what we have to do now,” Cassie announces and stands up from her chair. “Looks like we’re going to spend New Year’s in Vermont.”

Instantly, my eyes go wide. “What? No. No, that’s not—”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what we’re going to do.” Georgia is quick to jump on the insane bandwagon.

“You don’t understand. Ava wants space. She doesn’t want me in Vermont.”

“I swear, sometimes, men are so dense,” Lena comments.

“They sure are.” Maybe snorts. “But don’t feel bad, Luke. Every bastard on this plane has been in your clueless position before.”

“Excuse me?” Milo questions on a laugh, but Maybe ignores him, standing up to join the rest of the girl gang.

“Luke, honey, she wants you there,” Winnie says, her eyes serious. “She doesn’t want space. She wants you there.”

“You have to go,” Georgia adds. “You *need* to be there.”

Before I know it, Thatch and Milo and Kline and the rest of the guys are joining Team Crazy, urging a change in flight plans. And that fuck Trevor is back in the cockpit, talking to ATC to see if we can get last-minute clearance.

Which he does.

“We’re a go,” he says over his shoulder, meeting my eyes. “What do you say, Luke? Should we go get your girl?”

It’s all so fucking ridiculous.

Yeah, but you’ve never wanted to do anything more in your life.

From the instant I stepped on that plane and headed back to New York without Ava, I’ve felt like there’s a goddamn hole in my chest.

I never should've left. I know that now.

I look at everyone inside the cabin. "Are you guys sure you're okay with this?"

"Okay with this?" Thatch bellows. "Fluffing hell, this is better than book club! Let's goooooo!"

"Everything is better than book club," Wes mutters, and Thatch glares.

"Don't rain on this romantic parade, you grumpy bastard."

"But," Wes adds, a smirk cresting his lips, "this is pretty fucking fantastic. If I were in Luke's shoes and my Winnie was in Vermont, I'd be all motherfucking in. Let's go get your girl, man."

Yeah. Let's go get her.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Eight

Ava

An hour ago, my baby sister said *I do* to the man of her dreams.

The ceremony was a simple but gorgeous affair. The church was decorated with white lilies and Christmas trees covered in simple twinkle lights. And she looked downright stunning, standing on the altar in a silk wedding gown embellished with lace.

I've never seen Kate so happy. The smile on her face as she and Zach looked toward the crowd, after they shared their first kiss as husband and wife, was breathtaking.

And I'm so happy for her. But also, I need a hot minute to gather myself before I can put on a brave face and enjoy the reception. My emotional state isn't exactly pro-wedding festivities, if you know what I'm saying.

So, when my dad mentioned he had to run back to the house because he forgot to bring cash to tip the caterers, I volunteered to go with him.

The instant he pulls his truck to a stop in the driveway, I hop out and head inside the house. And while he fiddles around in his office, trying to find the envelope of money my mother put god knows where, I don't waste any time finding solace in my quiet bedroom.

Surely, the nice thing to do would be to help him, but freaking A, I just need...a minute.

I walk into my bedroom and plop down on my desk chair.

This day, while beautiful and amazing and exciting, has served as a stark reminder of the fact that Luke isn't here with me. All day, I've tried so hard not to think about it and just focus on my sister Kate, but my mind was determined, letting the painful thoughts seep in whenever it could.

God, I just want to get back to New York. Back to Luke.

Even though I know he's going to be headed to Houston soon, I just want to see him. To talk to him. To tell him everything I'm thinking and feeling. I honestly don't know what will happen between us, but I know I miss him. *Badly.*

Tears prick my eyes, and I do my best to get them under control before they ruin my makeup.

Ugh. This sucks. So hard.

I reach down to adjust my stiletto, but when I spot what looks like an envelope under my bed, I tilt my head to the side in curiosity. And then, I stand up, kneel down beside my bed, and snag the mystery item in my hands.

The name *Ava* is written on the front, and I furrow my brow as I take off the red bow and open it.

Inside sit three sheets of paper. All letters.

When I begin to read the first one, I lift my hand to my mouth as emotion overcomes me.

Ace,

This proves that I'm not the only one who believes in you.

I hope, one day soon, you'll see your art the way I see it—incredible.

This signifies the opportunity for you to finally follow your dreams.

The start of you really showing the world your awe-inspiring talent.

Merry Christmas, sweetheart.

All my love,

Luke

When I look at the other two sheets of paper, I understand what he's talking about. Letters from the curators of two very prestigious galleries—one in LA and one in New York—waxing poetic about the paintings of mine Luke showed them and enthusiastically requesting that I host an exhibition.

They want *my* art in their galleries.

Unchecked, tears stream down my cheeks. My heart twists and turns inside my chest, and I'm torn between feeling downright elated and completely heartbroken.

Luke did all of this. For me.

“Avie?” My dad's voice fills my ears, and I look up to find him standing just outside my bedroom. “What's wrong?” he asks, and a sobbing breath escapes my lungs.

“I think I ruined everything.”

“What?” he questions and steps into my bedroom to sit down beside me and pull me into a hug. “What do you think you ruined?” he asks, and I bury my face into his chest.

“Everything,” I whisper, my voice shaky.

“Is this about Luke?”

I nod.

“Is this maybe why he’s not here now? At your sister’s wedding?”

I nod again.

“Well, why don’t you give me an idea of what we’re dealing with here, and maybe I can provide a little insight...”

I inhale a deep breath and lean back to meet his eyes. “It’s a long story, Dad,” I eventually answer, and he shrugs me off.

“We’ve got a little time before we need to be back at the reception hall.”

When I don’t respond, he nudges me with his elbow. “Trust me, no one will even notice if it takes us a little longer to get there.”

The gentleness in his eyes is my undoing.

I tell him everything. The fact that Luke was just pretending to be my boyfriend because I was starting to feel pressured by Mom and Callie and everyone else about being the only single Lucie sister left.

I tell him how, eventually, all of that pretending didn’t feel so much like pretending.

That it felt real.

Because it was real.

I tell him how I think I’ve been in love with Luke for a very long time.

I tell him about Luke’s acceptance to NASA and how he didn’t tell me until two days ago.

I tell him how horribly I reacted to that news.

And then I show him the Christmas gift from Luke I just found under my bed.

By the time I’m done, I don’t feel better, but I do feel like a giant weight has been lifted off my shoulders.

“Well, that’s some story,” my dad says, a soft, sympathetic smile on his lips. “And this is some gift. Thoughtful, caring,

loving, kind of like the other gift he gave to all my girls.”

I nod. “Besides you, he’s the best man I’ve ever known.”

My dad wraps his arm around my shoulders. “You know, I can imagine it feels pretty awful right now, but I have a feeling things are going to work out, Avie.”

“I don’t know about that, Dad,” I retort, but he shakes his head.

“Listen, Avie,” he continues. “I have a lot of years of life under my belt. With your mother, I’ve experienced falling in love. And with my friends and family over the years, I’ve watched other people fall in love. I’ve witnessed relationships bloom, and I’ve seen them fall apart. I’ve seen people get married, and I’ve seen them get divorced. So, I think we can both agree that I have a little experience in the whole love department, right?”

I shrug. “I guess that’s fair.”

“And you know what all of that experience has taught me?”

“What?”

“It’s taught me that the way I saw Luke look at you, every day that he was here with us, is the look of a man who isn’t just in love but whose entire world stands right before him.”

My lip quivers, and I stare down at my lap, fidgeting with my fingers as I think about his words. “You really think so?”

“I know so, Avie,” he says and reaches out to gently lift up my chin so my eyes meet his. “When a man looks at a woman the way Luke looks at you, one fight isn’t going to stop him from loving her.”

Goodness, I hope he’s right.



CHAPTER

Thirty-Nine

Luke

This might be the craziest fucking thing I've ever done.

On a whim, we switched the Las Vegas flight plan and headed to Burlington.

But when Trevor and I started figuring out the timing of it all, we both realized we'd be cutting it real fucking close if we flew to Burlington and then made the ninety-minute drive to Lakewood.

Fortunately, Lakewood, while a small community, has a little airport almost no one ever uses. And after I worked my magic with ATC, I managed to get in touch with that tiny airport and get approval for a landing.

We're certainly going to have some explaining to do with Billy as to why one of his massive private jets ended up in Lakewood, but minor details.

By the time we got off the plane, the crazy group that's along for the ride managed to have two fucking limos sitting outside of the airport, ready and waiting for us.

And that's how we got here, pulling up to the venue for Kate and Zach's wedding reception. The beat of dance music pounds from the inside, and I don't waste any time hopping out of the limo and heading toward the reception doors.

"Go fluffing get her, man!" Thatch shouts toward me, and I swear to God, the rest of the group breaks out into hoots and hollers and applause.

I have no idea if they follow me inside or if they stay outside and keep drinking champagne in the limos.

I don't even know if anyone sees me rush through the doors like a maniac.

All I know is that I need to find Ava.

The instant I step into the venue, I spot the bride and groom on the dance floor, dancing around with friends and family, but I don't see Ava.

I keep scanning the room.

I spot her mom and her aunts by the cake.

I see her sister Emily and her husband Landon talking with another couple.

Where in the hell is she?

My heart pounds in my chest, and it breaks out into a damn near sprint when I finally find her, standing just off the dance floor with her dad.

I don't waste any time, veering between half-empty tables and attendees and quickly closing the distance between us.

And when I'm standing directly in front of her, that's when shocked blue eyes meet mine.

"Luke?" she questions and blinks several times, like what she's seeing isn't real. "W-what are you doing here?"

I have no idea if her dad notices me.

Hell, I have no idea if anyone else notices me.

All I can see is her.

“Ava, you are the only woman, the only anyone, that I’d go to my knees for,” I say and reach out to grasp her hand in mine. “I know I fucked up and I should’ve told you the truth about NASA right from the start, but see, the thing is, when I realized that I would be leaving New York to go to Houston, that I would be leaving you, it made me feel like I was losing my family all over again.”

Tears prick her eyes, but her petite hand stays in mine, so I take that as a good sign and keep going.

“I know that nothing is ideal right now. I know I’m going to be moving to Houston soon. I know that your life is in New York. But fuck, Ava, even if I don’t have a choice, I still choose you. I’ll *always* choose you.”

“What are you saying, Luke?” she asks, her blue eyes searching mine.

“I’m saying that I’m in love with you. I’m saying that I’ve loved you for a very long time. Hell, I’ve probably loved you ever since that very first day, when I had to help you hide the evidence of your hot-plate crime. I’m saying that I want to spend the rest of my life with you. You are it for me, Ava.”

My heart pounds like a fucking jackhammer inside my chest, and a low, humming ring consumes my ears as I wait in anticipation for her response.

Fuck. I just laid it all on the line, and it’s up to her to decide what she wants.

If she wants me.

Seconds feel like fucking hours.

But then, she opens her pretty pink lips and rocks my fucking world.

“I love you too, Luke. So much,” she whispers, nodding with each word. “And if you’re in Houston, then my home is no longer in New York. It’s in Texas.”

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” I ask, staring deep into her emotional blue eyes.

“I’m saying that I want to spend the rest of my life with you, too. And if we start out that life in Houston, then that’s okay with me.”

“But what about your career? What about the Met?” I ask, my heart torn between insane happiness and the fear that I’m making her give up something that’s incredibly important to her. That’s the last thing I want to do.

“I saw your gift. Under my bed,” she answers, and the smile that follows her words is enough to make my fucking heart burst. “It’s time I stop hiding behind other people’s art and do what I’ve set out to do all along. It’s time I follow my real passion. It’s time I finally get brave and put my art out into the world. And I know if there’s anyone I want by my side while I push past that fear, it’s you, Luke. It’s you.”

“You’ll follow me all the way to Houston?” I ask, and a single tear slips down her cheek.

“I’ll follow you,” she says. “Deep sea, baby. All the way to Texas.”

Before I can stop myself, I lift Ava into my arms and press my lips to hers and kiss her deeply, passionately, and show her just how much I love her. Need her. Want her.

But the kiss is interrupted by the familiar cheers of Ava’s family—her crazy aunts and her mom and dad and sisters—and the loudest cheers of all come from Thatcher fucking Kelly.

“Fluff yeah!” His loud voice booms into my ears.

“I hope your sister Kate doesn’t mind, but I brought a few friends to her reception,” I whisper against Ava’s mouth, and she giggles.

“I think she’s had enough wine tonight to not even notice,” she responds with a little smirk, leaning back to stare deep into my eyes.

Right on cue, the slightly slurred bride shouts, “DJ, play something awesome and romantic!”

Ava giggles again. “See what I mean?”

It’s my turn to laugh, and while the music switches to the song “I Got You Babe” and Sonny & Cher blare from the reception hall speakers, I pull Ava close to my chest, wrap her legs around my waist, and whisper the lyrics of the song into her ear as I move us around the dance floor.

Eventually, everyone starts to join us. First, her sister Kate and her new husband Zach. Then, Ava’s parents, my uninvited billionaire friends and their wives, Trevor, and the rest of the wedding party.

And with some of our closest friends and family surrounding us, I savor this moment. Imprint it on my mind.

This is the day that I finally got Ava Lucie, the girl of my fucking dreams.

Nothing will ever top this.

Not getting into NASA.

Not heading into space for the first time.

Nothing.



Epilogue

Three years later...

Bittersweet June

Luke

My phone vibrates in the cupholder, and once I come to a stop at a red light, I pick it up to check the screen.

Ava: Where are you?

Me: On my way home.

Ava: Geez Louise. It feels like it's taking you FOREVER.

Me: Impatient, much?

Ava: Uh, YEAH. Tonight is our last night together before you're gone for SIX WHOLE MONTHS. I need you home for all of the very bad and dirty things I have planned.

Looks like bad girl Ava will be making an appearance tonight.

Yes, please.

When the light turns green, I fire off one last response.

Me: Don't worry, Ace. I'm on my way.

About ten minutes later, I pull into the driveway of the house Ava all but demanded we buy two years ago. This home, a two-story white brick house with black trim and shutters, was her dream home. And it goes without saying, I'm always on team "make all of my wife's dreams come true."

Honestly, it's hard to believe we've been in Houston for three years now and have been living inside this house for two of them.

Between finishing NASA's Astronaut Candidate training program, Ava opening two galleries—one here in Houston and the other in Austin—that solely sell *her* art, getting married, and buying a house, it's been an adventure, to say the least.

Tomorrow marks the beginning of another huge milestone. I will take my first trip into space to visit the International Space Station to complete some important engineering work. I'm excited. Thrilled, even. But I can't say that being away from Ava for six months doesn't hurt. Because, fuck, it *definitely* hurts.

At least, though, we have tonight to soak up a little more time together before I leave.

And, trust me, I plan to do a whole lot of *soaking* when it comes to my beautiful wife.

I cut the engine to the car and rub my fingers over the now worn-out metal of the key chain Ava bought for me several Christmases ago.

To the Moon and Mars and back.

I smile down at the little astronaut engraved into the metal before hopping out of my truck and heading into the house.

In through the side door off the garage, I make my way into the kitchen, but before I can figure out where Ava is hiding inside our house, my phone pings with a text message.

Thatcher Kelly: I can't believe tomorrow is the fluffing day. My man Luke is gonna be strapped to a motherfluffing rocket and shot off into space. Safe travels, buddy. Don't forget to call me when you arrive safely.

Even though I've been in Houston for the past three years, I've still somehow managed to keep in touch with Thatch. I'm finding he's kind of like a parasite. Once you're friends with him, he latches the fuck on and never lets go.

Hell, about a year ago, when he and Cassie took a trip to Austin with their boys, they just showed up at our front door without warning. Before we knew it, their boys were running around our house like lunatics, while Thatch made himself at home on our sofa and Cass was in our kitchen, popping open a bottle of wine.

You truly never know what you're going to get with those two.

But I'm pretty sure that's what makes them so damn entertaining.

Me: Thanks, man. I appreciate it. And my safe arrival won't be until December, so it's going to be a while.

Thatcher Kelly: I'm not talking about your arrival home, dude. I mean, your arrival in space. Fluffing FaceTime me when you get there.

That's not exactly how it works. The only person I'm going to be able to stay in fairly constant contact with is Ava. Everyone else is going to have to wait until I get back home.

Me: Sorry to burst your bubble, but, uh, I won't be able to do that.

Thatcher Kelly: And why the fluff not?

Me: Them's the NASA rules, man. Something about the importance of staying focused while facing the sometimes very dangerous obstacle that is flying around in space.

Thatcher Kelly: Fluffing lame.

Me: How about this? When Ava and I are in Vermont for the holidays, we'll make a stop in New York to see you guys.

Truthfully, we're already planning on doing that because of Trevor and Desi and Claire, but he doesn't need to know that.

Thatcher Kelly: Pfft. Yeah. Whatever. That's fine.

Ha. He is so transparent it's not even funny.

Me: So, basically, what you're saying is that you mostly just wanted me to call you from space so you could be fucking nosy, not so much so you could know I've arrived to the Space Station safely?

Thatcher Kelly: Bingo bango, bud. ;) But seeing you guys in December sounds good too.

Me: LOL. I'll have Ava get it all squared away with Cassie.

“Uh, excuse me?”

I look up to find Ava standing in our kitchen, her body completely bare of clothes.

“Well, hello there, Ace.” Instantly, a devilish smirk consumes my lips, and I don't hide the fact that my eyes move down her body, taking in every inch of her glorious curves. “I see you got all dressed up for the occasion.”

“I sure did.” She nods and bites her bottom lip. But then, her lips turn down at the corners. “Although, you appear quite overdressed for the evening.”

“My apologies,” I respond and don't hesitate to remove my clothes, right there in the middle of our kitchen. First, my shirt. Then, my shoes and socks. And as I slide my pants and boxers down my legs, I ask, “And what exactly do you have planned for this evening?”

“Not sure.” Ava shrugs and bats her eyelashes. “Probably a little of this, a little of that.”

“Coy looks good on you, Mrs. London.”

“You know what else looks good, *Mr. London?*”

“What?”

“That big cock of yours inside me.”

Her words urge a raspy growl from my throat. And, if it's even possible, that big cock of mine gets even harder, jutting out from my body as I stride over to do what I do best—make all my wife's wishes and dreams come true.

With her in my arms and her legs wrapped around my hips, I lift my gorgeous, naked wife up so that her ass rests on the kitchen island, her thighs spread perfectly for me.

She is a fucking masterpiece, and I am here to worship at her perfect fucking feet.

Kneeling down before her, I place soft, openmouthed kisses from the tips of her toes all the way up her feet, her legs, and I don't stop until my mouth hovers at the apex of her thighs.

“More?” I ask, and she inhales a whimpering breath, the shaky moment making her breasts push out from her chest.

“Yes. Please.”

She doesn't have to ask me twice. My mouth is on her pussy between one blink and the next, and the taste, the smell, the feel that is all Ava fills my senses.

This is fucking heaven.

Her fingers slide into my hair, and moans escape her throat as I kiss and lick and eat at her. Her thighs tremble, and her breasts move up and down with each stuttering inhale and exhale of her lungs.

It's not long before her body clenches tight, her fingers gripping my hair tighter, as Ava shouts her climax into the silence of our kitchen.

Damn, I love making her come.

I try to give her a minute to catch her bearings, but as I stand there, pressing soft and gentle kisses to her belly and thighs and chest and neck, the need for her becomes too strong to deny.

Pulling her into my arms, I carry her from the kitchen, up the stairs, and I don't put her down until we are in our

bedroom and Ava's gorgeous body is resting on top of our white linen comforter.

"Fuck, you're beautiful," I whisper as I move my body above hers. She responds by wrapping her legs around my waist and her arms around my neck.

"So are you." Her blue eyes stare deep into mine. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"Me too, Ace. Me too." I press a soft and gentle kiss to her lips. "Can I make love to you, baby?"

"Please," she begs, and a tiny tear slips out of one of her eyes.

I lean forward to kiss it from her cheek.

"I need you, Ava," I whisper, and her legs and arms grip me tighter. "So much."

A soft little moan escapes her lips as I slowly, so slowly, slide myself inside her.

And I just stare down at her, taking in the way her blue eyes look when she's staring up at me. The way her cheeks are flushed pink. The way her lips part when I'm inside her.

I take a mental picture of every-single-fucking-thing that is my beautiful wife.

My Ava.

My *everything*.



"Soon, your life is going to seem very strange," Ava says, her head resting on my bare chest and her eyes meeting mine. "You're literally not going to be on Planet Earth. You're going to be in freaking space, Luke."

"I know." I smirk down at her and gently run my fingers up and down her back. "It's almost too surreal to think about."

“I’m proud of you,” she says, smiling up at me. That smile is equal parts happy and sad. “I mean, I’m not a fan of you leaving me for six months and I’m going to miss you like crazy, but I’m so proud of you.”

“I couldn’t have done any of this without you,” I whisper and lean down to kiss her lips. “And I’m hoping you’re going to keep yourself incredibly busy at the galleries while I’m gone.”

“That’s the plan.” She smiles. “And you’ll be back in time to celebrate Christmas with me.”

“You bet your sweet ass, I will.”

“We’ll try to find a way to talk every day?” she asks. “Even if it’s just a short message.”

I pull her closer to my chest. “I won’t let a day go by without at least saying hello and sending you a song.”

When I was in training, there were times I’d have to be away from Ava for weeks at a stretch, and I started sending her songs every day. It was a way for her to know I was thinking about her.

“A song *every day*? For six months straight?” She snorts. “That’s, like...” She pauses, and I already know the answer to the question she’s trying to calculate in her head.

“One hundred and eighty songs.” I smile down at her. “Ace, for the next six months, not a single day will go by without you knowing that I’m thinking about you,” I whisper and press a lingering kiss to her lips. “NASA might have been the dream, but you’re my world. Never forget that.”

Surprising October

Ava

Luke: Ace, I hope you have a fan-fucking-tastic time with Desi and Claire this weekend. Thinking about you always. Missing you like crazy. Loving you madly.

Luke: Ava's Daily Song: "Dream A Little Dream of Me," The Mamas & The Papas.

I smile when I read Luke's latest message and daily song on the secure platform that's allowed us to stay in contact over the past four months. In what's become my daily routine, I download the song to the Spotify playlist I've been using to collect all the tracks he's sent me.

I turn up the volume on my laptop and listen.

It starts out soft. Slow. Entrancing, even. And by the time the song builds and the lyrics fill my head, tears stream down my cheeks. They're happy. They're sad. They're bittersweet.

God, I miss him.

Four. Whole. Months.

That's how long my husband has been gone, *in freaking space.*

One hundred and twenty days without him here with me.

To say it's hard is an understatement. Honestly, I was doing okay for the first month or so, but these last two months have hit me kind of hard. I feel tired all the damn time. I cry at really weird, random things. And I've resorted to eating my feelings a little too much.

I'm doing my best to stay focused on my paintings and running the galleries, but when I come home at night to an empty house, it can be a tad bit overwhelming.

Thankfully, though, my best gal pals will be arriving here any minute to spend the week with me in Houston. Their boisterous and always fun presence will be a much-needed distraction.

Once the song ends, I let it roll over to the beginning of the playlist, and one by one, all of Luke's songs start to fill the quiet of our living room.

First, "You Are the Best Thing" by Ray LaMontagne.

Followed by "Everyday" by Slade.

Then "Waltz of the Flowers" by Tchaikovsky.

Next thing I know, the stupid tears are back, streaming down my cheeks in steady waves, and all I can think to myself is, *Damn, girl, you are emotional.*

Once I turn off the music and manage to get it together, several persistent knocks resound from the front door, and I waste no time jogging toward the entry and swinging it open.

"Oh my gosh, you're here!" I exclaim when I see the smiling faces on the other side of the door.

"Ava!" Claire shouts.

"We have arrived!" Desi exclaims.

I squeal, and then, when they pull me into a tight group hug, I start freaking crying again.

"Ava?" Desi asks, and Claire's face immediately morphs from excited to concerned.

"Ignore me," I say, gesturing with a nonchalant hand. "I'm fine. I promise."

Desi furrows her brow. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Promise." I laugh through my tears. "Lately, I've just been crazy emotional."

Eventually, I wave them both inside and help them get cozy in the house.

First, to the guest rooms where they'll both be sleeping for the next few days.

And then, into the kitchen so we can gab and chat and just catch up.

"Have no fear, I have brought the finest bottle of Riesling that Texas has to offer *and* the one wine you'll actually drink,

Ava. Purchased at a gas station about a mile from your house,” Desi teases as she unscrews the cap off a bottle of wine and begins to pour it into three glasses. “One for me, one for Claire, one for Ava.”

But when she slides the glass my way, the smell of the alcohol is so repugnant, it makes me gag.

“Ugh. I think there’s something wrong with this wine,” I say and move the glass away from my face. “Seriously, it smells fucking awful.”

And then I gag again.

And again.

Until the gagging becomes too intense that I have to sprint to the hall bathroom and freaking puke.

“Do not even take a sip of that wine!” I shout toward the kitchen as I stand up from the toilet and splash cold water on my face. “Just the damn fumes from it made me puke!”

But when I make my way back into the kitchen, both Desi and Claire are just staring at me.

“What?” I question. “What’s wrong?”

“Ava, honey,” Claire begins, “when’s the last time you had your period?”

“Excuse me?” I ask on a laugh. “That’s a bit of a ridiculous question, don’t you think?”

“Uh, no.” Desi snorts. “You’re all emotional and weepy and puking, and your boobs look crazy big right now.”

“That’s because I’ve been eating my feelings.”

Claire shakes her head. “Honey, I don’t think that’s what’s going on here.”

“You guys seriously think I’m pregnant?” I retort. “You do realize that Luke has been gone for four freaking months, right? How in the hell would I get pregnant? The immaculate conception?”

But even the words coming out of my mouth don't do anything to reassure me.

And when I start trying to remember when I last had my period...I can't remember at all. Like, *at all*.

"Oh shit," I mutter. Then my eyes go wide. "Wait, that would be crazy, right? I mean, that would mean I got pregnant the night before Luke left on his mission. Which, like, what are the odds?"

"How about this?" Desi offers and wraps an arm around my shoulder. "Let's go grab some dinner for tonight, and while we're out, we'll get a pregnancy test. Just so you can take it and see."

All I can do is shrug and nod.

I mean, the chances of it being positive are probably one in a freaking trillion, but yeah, why not just take the test so I don't have to wonder?



Less than twenty-four hours later, I find myself sitting in my gynecologist's office, my legs in stirrups and a paper gown covering my body while Desi and Claire sit in the chairs against the wall, both of them grinning at me.

"I'm not pregnant," I say and roll my eyes.

"Three pregnancy tests would disagree, my friend," Desi retorts, and Claire just keeps on smiling.

Thankfully, three soft knocks rap against the door, and Dr. Marlow walks inside, promptly ending comments from the peanut gallery in the corner of the room.

"Hi, Ava," she greets. "It looks like you're here because you got a positive pregnancy test?"

"Yeah." I nod. "Though, I would bet money on the fact that it's wrong."

“Okay.” She smiles and slips on a pair of medical gloves the nurse hands to her and sits down on a stool that’s positioned close to the exam table. “You’re just going to feel some pressure,” she says and begins her exam.

“When was your last period?” she eventually asks, looking up to meet my eyes.

“I think I had one last month,” I comment, and she tilts her head to the side.

“You can’t remember?”

I cringe and shake my head.

Once she takes off the gloves, she lifts the paper gown away from my belly and palpates my lower stomach with her bare hands.

“Betty, could you slide the ultrasound machine over?” she instructs the nurse. And a few moments later, she squirts some cold gel on my belly and begins to roll the probe over my skin.

“Well, Ava,” Dr. Marlow announces with a soft smile. “The test was right. You’re pregnant.”

“What?” My eyes go wide and turn to the side to look at the screen of the ultrasound.

“There’s your baby,” she says. “And by my calculations, I’d say you’re around four months along.”

Four months along? I do the math in my head and instantly know when it happened—our last night together back in June.

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Not kidding.” Dr. Marlow shakes her head on a laugh. “Do you hear that?” she questions, and mere seconds later, the whooshing sounds of a heartbeat fill the room. “That’s your baby’s heartbeat.”

“Holy shit, Ava,” Desi says through a quiet laugh. “You’re literally one of those people. The ones that don’t realize they’re pregnant until the baby’s head is popping out of their vaginas.”

“Desi!” Claire retorts and reaches out to slap Desi on the arm.

Normally, their bickering commentary would be entertaining, but right now, I’m a little too shocked to think about anything besides one thing—*I’m pregnant*.

Luke is in freaking outer space, won’t be back for another two months, and I just found out we’re going to have a baby.

Holy hell.

Well, at least you know why you’ve been so freaking emotional lately...

Happily Ever After December

Ava

I feel like I’ve been waiting an eternity for this day to come.

I stand in a small crowd of family members. Every single person here is waiting for one of the five astronauts who went on this mission to officially arrive home.

My heart races in anticipation, and I rub my hand over my small, rounded belly hiding beneath my jacket.

Any minute, baby, I think to myself. Any minute, your daddy will be here.

Two months ago, I found out I was pregnant.

And for the last two months, I’ve wavered on telling Luke and not telling Luke, and well, needless to say, he doesn’t know yet.

But now that I’m standing here, *definitely* pregnant, and waiting for him to arrive, I’m seriously starting to second-guess that decision.

Maybe I should've told him. But all I know is that every time I almost did, it didn't feel right not to deliver this news in person. To tell him before he was safely back home.

It's almost like I took a page out of his book when it took him so long to tell me about his NASA acceptance all those years ago.

Well, let's hope his reaction isn't as insane as yours was back then.

Internally, I cringe at that thought.

But my focus quickly changes when I look toward the hangar and see the doors starting to slide open.

Then I see him—*my Luke*. My husband is right there, looking so insanely handsome in his NASA uniform and walking toward the group. His eyes search the crowd for me.

My heart pounds like a kickdrum inside my chest, and before I know it, my feet are quickly walking toward him.

“Miss! Wait!” a male voice calls behind me, but I ignore it. I know the security guys instructed us to wait right here, but I don't care.

It's been six freaking months since I've seen my husband.

Luke's eyes lock with mine, and the biggest smile I've ever seen consumes his face.

It only makes my feet move faster.

I don't stop walking toward him until I'm wrapping my arms around his neck and letting him lift me into his arms. I wrap my legs around his hips and hug his neck so tight.

“Ava. My Ava,” he breathes into my ear. “God, I've missed you.”

Tears fall down my cheeks unchecked. “I'm so happy you're home.”

But when he goes to hug me tight, something makes him loosen his grip and look down toward my jacket-covered stomach.

“Ava?” he questions, placing one hand on my stomach, and it’s more than apparent that he can tell there isn’t just a little extra weight beneath my jacket.

Oh boy, here goes everything...

“So, uh, I have something to tell you,” I say, and he leans back to meet my eyes. “Remember the last night before you left?”

He nods and searches my eyes.

“Well...we kind of sort of maybe created a baby that night.”

“You’re pregnant?” His jaw drops, and I nod, tears still streaming down my cheeks.

“I’m about six months along now.”

“You’re six months pregnant?” he exclaims, and I’m not sure if he’s angry or excited or what.

“I found out two months ago,” I whisper, and all the worry and anxiety and guilt that have built up for the past two months urge tears to stream down my cheeks. “I wanted to tell you. I tried to tell you, but every time I started to—”

“You just couldn’t get the words out?” he supplies for me, an understanding smile on his lips, and a shocked laugh jumps from my lungs.

“It just didn’t feel right to do it during our short phone chats or through messages,” I answer honestly. “I’m sorry I didn’t—”

“Baby,” he whispers and puts one index finger gently against my mouth. “You don’t have to apologize for anything. I was gone for six months, and I fucking know that wasn’t easy on you. You did what you had to do,” he says and presses a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “Thank you for keeping yourself and our baby safe while I was gone.”

“Thank you for coming home safe.”

“I love you,” he says, and his heart is right there, inside his eyes and only fixated on me.

“I love you too,” I whisper back. “So much.”

“Ace, I am so fucking happy right now, it’s insane,” he exclaims, twirling us around and making me giggle. “You’re in my arms, and we’re having a baby. Goddamn, I’m the luckiest bastard in the universe.”

I giggle again. “And guess what?”

“What?”

“In about twenty-four hours, you get to head to Vermont with me and spend Christmas with the Lucie family again.”

Luke grins. “Bring on the hot chocolate. Bring on the decorations. Bring on that fucking itinerary. As long as I’ve got you, I’ve got everything.”

Yeah, husband of mine. My thoughts exactly.

THE END

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PREVIEW OF *TAPPING THE
BILLIONAIRE*

TAPPING
The
BILLIONAIRE

BILLIONAIRE

Bad Boys

BOOK ONE

m a x m o n r o e

INTRO

I'm Kline Brooks.

Harvard graduate.

President and CEO of Brooks Media.

Net worth: \$3.5 billion.

Devilishly handsome. How do I know this? I was promoting two years in a row.

Highly intelligent. Proof? I can solve any Rubik's Cube, in front of your face, with *magic* fingers.

Certified master of female orgasms. My fingers, my tongue, my cock—I can make you scream, "*I'm coming!*" before you even realize I've removed your panties with my teeth. Not the almost orgasms that spur a pathetic moan and half-ass whimper. *No.* I'm talking toe-curling, back-arching, earth-shattering *Os* that will leave your voice hoarse, your body shaking, and pack a punch so powerful you'll be left a sliver of intensity short of unconscious.

Am I piquing your interest?

Should I mention my cock is the kind of cock that's actually dick-pic worthy? I'm not talking an average six-inch shaft. I'm talking big. Thick. Smooth. And hard. Especially when there's work to be done.

Or maybe all I've done is turn you off. Are you thinking I'm like every classless man out there who's literally a disgrace to my gender?

The type of spineless dicks who won't call the next day. The guys who specialize in late-night booty calls but refuse to

take a woman out on an actual date. Yeah, you know exactly who I'm talking about. Those idiots who have women thinking staying single for the rest of their lives is a better alternative than dealing with the bullshit that's running rampant in the dating world.

Well, I'm not that kind of guy.

I say what I mean and mean what I say. I don't kiss and tell. I call the next day. And if I'm interested in a woman, I *will* take her out on a date. I'll open doors for her. I'll pull out her chair. And I'll never be the kind of horny bastard who texts dick pics—unless the right woman begs me for them.

Bottom line, **I'm a gentleman**. I prefer monogamy to serial dating and fucking my way through New York City. I've spent the past few years avoiding the kind of women most would label "gold diggers" and trying out a couple of girlfriends in between. I've looked for the kind of woman I want, but lately, I have to admit I haven't put in as much effort. My focus has been on my company—building it to what it is and then keeping it that way, not only for me, but for all of the people who work so hard for me.

Until Georgia Cummings.

She's fiery, beautiful, has this sassy attitude that demands attention from everyone within her orbit, and is worth way more in value of character than I am in money.

I don't know how I missed her.

I don't know why it took me so long to *really* see her.

Two years, right there in front of my face as my Director of Marketing.

Maybe it's because I need to stop drowning myself in work so much. Maybe she didn't want to be seen.

No matter the reason, it only took one spur-of-the-minute decision for this remarkable woman to come barreling into my world.

I wasn't prepared for her.

And I sure as hell had no idea she'd knock me on my fucking ass.

Because the nice guy who believes in real love enough to build his entire fortune from a dating website?

That's me.

And this story?

Well, that's us.

CHAPTER 1

Georgia

My eyes! Dear God, my eyes!

There were things in life that, once seen, were damn near impossible to forget. A bleach scrub...acid straight to the retinas...three hours of perfect porn GIFs...hell, even a lobotomy wouldn't remove those kinds of images.

Lucky for me, I had come across not one, not two, but *four* day-destroying pictures. Dick pics, to be more specific. And let's just say this latest one was *not* pic-worthy. Not by a long shot. Or a short shot, if I took size into consideration. This was the kind of pic that would leave any woman wondering why. *Why? Why would anyone want to advertise they were the owner of this?*

It was the gremlin of male members—and the sole reason my night had taken a turn for the worse. What was supposed to be a nice evening in, watching TV with my best friend and roommate, Cassie, had turned into a nightmare of pubes, wrinkled balls, and a crown that was not fit for a king.

I banged my fingers across the keypad with a response.

TAPRoseNEXT (11:37PM): Is that your dick? Really? REALLY?

TapNext was the latest and greatest dating-site-turned-app for single men and women to meet, chat, and, hopefully, find their next date. Generally speaking, it was a better alternative to nights out at a bar or club. Because, for me, those nights had the same ending—politely declining the thrilling (insert *heavy*

sarcasm) offer of hooking up with some random dude at his apartment, one hell of a hangover, and weird guys with names like Stanley or Milton sending me texts for late-night booty calls for the next month. Which I *always* ignored.

My business card said *Director of Marketing, Brooks Media*. It was a hefty title for someone just starting out in their career, but I had earned it. I worked harder than anyone else in my department, and it also may have helped that the man who held the position prior to me had been fired after being arrested for picking up a prostitute in one of the company cars. Why he had even been driving a company car in the city was still confusing to me. Seriously, even hookers cabbed it in New York.

Since Brooks Media owned TapNext, it was easy to understand why I was well versed and highly invested in the app's success. It was a requirement when hired—all single employees had to create a TapNext profile. Staff were strongly encouraged to use the app and give honest feedback about their experiences. Profile names were kept top secret and on penitentiary-style lock-down with Human Resources. And feedback stayed anonymous.

Translation: *Don't worry, **TAPRoseNEXT**, your boss doesn't know about your pervy play on words.*

At first, I'd felt it was an odd way to handle business, but after two years of working at Brooks Media, I'd found that my TapNext profile was a damn good way to do research and find promotional ideas.

My phone pinged with the offender's response.

BAD_Ruck (11:38PM): ...

Did he just ellipsis me? Really?

TAPRoseNEXT (11:38PM): Creep Threat Level MOTHERFUCKING Red.

There was no immediate response, but the rest of my rant would not be contained.

TAPRoseNEXT (11:39PM): Don't any of you know how to start conversations anymore? Jesus.

Cassie sighed beside me. "Stop slamming everything around, Wheorgiebag! I'm trying to watch *American Ninja Warrior* and you're totally messing with my pumped up vibe."

I ignored her, still focused on finding a way to erase the offending images from my brain.

She peeked over my shoulder before I could pull my phone away. "Whoa. Whoa. *Whoa*. Is that *my* picture on *your* profile?"

Creamy, perfect-skinned thighs on display, she was bent over with her dark brunette head peeking through the space between her open legs. Her hooch just barely escaped making an appearance.

"Paybacks, Casshead."

"And what did I do to deserve being your pro-bono photo ho?"

I cocked an eyebrow. "Do I have to choose just one?"

"Go ahead, give me one example. I dare ya."

"College. Sophomore year. I told you not to post those pictures on Facebook, but did you listen? Of course not."

She grinned. "Ahhhhh, yes. I remember those. I thought you looked really cute that night."

"My head was in the toilet."

"But you had those cute puppy dog eyes going on." She glanced at my phone again, dusky gray eyes hitting the phallic bull's eye. "Holy hell, what is that? Is that Quasimodo's dick?"

I stood up from the couch and began to pace in front of the TV. "Four dick pics today, Cassface. *Four!*"

Cassie scrunched her face up. “And what? You were hoping for five?”

My expression was a combination of disgusted and puzzled.

“You know,” she explained, “one to fill all the holes and one for each hand.” Easy to interpret and equally graphic hand gestures matched her words as she spoke. “Although, I’m not sure I’d want DP from *The Hunchcock of Notre Dame*.” One look at my face and she coughed out a laugh. “You’re not really a prude, but right now, you’re playing one on TV.”

I groaned and gave in, planting my ass back on the couch and burying my face in my hands. “I guess it’s because this profile is for work research. I have this unjustified sense that it should be more professional.”

She shook her head and smiled, propping her mismatched-sock feet on the arm of our couch. “I gotta say, that wiener is pretty fucking awful. But, Georgie, you work for a company that specializes in an app called *TapNext*, not the White House.”

After a brief beat of silence, we laughed at the same time, and I raised one eyebrow in question. “You’re comparing *TapNext* to the *White House*?”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “Bad analogy. There’s probably *more* dick pics there.” A giant, mischievous grin consumed Cassie’s face as she grabbed the remote.

“*Cassie...*” I pointed in her direction, but it was too late. She was already standing on top of our coffee table, using the remote for a microphone.

My best friend had this thing with making parody songs out of pretty much anything when inspired. And she didn’t do it quietly. No way, quiet was not Cassie’s style. She sang like she was Adele performing at the Grammys.

“I call this one *White House Lovin’*,” Cassie announced.

I groaned but secretly couldn’t wait to see what she would come up with. Think Kristen Wiig on *Saturday Night Live* kind of hilarious shit. That was Cass.

“Blue-dress intern, found my pants fast...”

“White House intern, it was a blast...”

She was singing her little heart out.

“This girl, she was crazy for D...”

Snapping fingers. Pelvic thrusts. Head bobs. Cassie wasn't missing a beat.

“Met the prez, down on both knees...”

One verse in and the dick pic bandit had been forgotten. I hopped off the couch and tackled her to the floor. She screamed. I laughed. And five minutes later, Cassie was back on the coffee table while I sang backup to the rest of her ridiculous song.

Tell me, whore... Tell me, whore...

Admit it, you're singing it too.

Later that night, once I had cozied myself in bed and was so very close to reaching that heavenly REM cycle, the ping of my phone pecked at me. I groaned my way out of Dreamland slowly. God, it was time to make some major life changes. For example, the alert settings for my TapNext profile in my phone. It was either that or murder, and I'm the kind of person who likes to dip a toe in the pool water to test it rather than cannonball my way in.

Rubbing a hand over my face, I forced my eyes opened and snatched the phone off my antique nightstand. I barely resisted the urge to slam it back down, thus breaking it into a million tiny pieces. Luckily, my rational thinking wasn't as sleepy as the rest of me and realized the amount of work that would result from such an impulsive decision.

Cleaning and shopping and transferring my contacts, oh my.

Yeah, screw that.

BAD_Ruck (2:09AM): It's NOT my dick.

It's not his dick?

What the double actual fuck?

No. Nope. This was *so* not the right time to deal with this bullshit.

Not. Answering.

The sides of my pillow exploded upward with the force of my punch and made the perfect cushion for my face when it slammed down beside my hand. I had so much shit to do at work tomorrow, and dealing with **BAD_Ruck** and his proclivity for awful crotch selfies and unintelligible responses was not going to be on my agenda.

I was focused on getting shut-eye, confident that sleep and I would spoon the fuck out of each other until the sun rose the following morning. I channeled Buddha for my inner Zen, humming my way toward unconscious bliss. It was either that, or grab my vibrator and participate in a ménage à moi.

Thankfully, my return to sleep came easily that night. No hands-on approach required.

The next day, while I was getting ready for work, I decided to give **BAD_Ruck** a piece of my mind. I spit toothpaste into the sink, rinsed my mouth out with water, and turned off the faucet. Striding into my room with purpose, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and sent the dick gremlin a response.

Suck. On. That. Buddy.

CHAPTER 2

Kline

TAPRoseNEXT (7:03AM): Then it's someone else's dick? WORSE. Threat Level EXPLODED.

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks.”

“Good morning, Frank,” I replied, picking my head up from the crime scene on my phone just long enough to meet his honest amber eyes before sliding into the soft leather seat of my Town Car.

Fucking Thatch.

I swear, somehow he took doing what would already be really fucking annoying and advanced it to the next level. If he didn't have the same ability with money, I probably would have dropped him by now.

To the bottom of the ocean. *With a cinder block attached to his ankles.*

She was right, of course. Sending a picture of someone else's dick *was* considerably worse than sending a picture of your own.

Especially this one.

Three rings trilled in my ear before his sleep-laden voice forced one hungover syllable past his lips. “Lo?”

“A dick, Thatch? Really?” I asked immediately, pinching the bridge of my nose to stave off a headache.

No amount of lingering alcohol could stop his answering laugh.

His throat cleared a little more with each chuckle, and by the time he responded, he was speaking clearly. “You’re the one using my picture for your profile, bro. It was only fair that I unleashed the gargoyle dick.”

Gargoyle dick. Too fucking right. A winglike knob, a hunchback, and questionable coloring all lent themselves to his description. I’d left my phone on the bar without hawk-eyeing it for *two fucking minutes*, and the asshole had somehow managed to send one of the world’s worst illicit pictures to some poor—now blind—woman in that time.

“That profile was only payback for the last awful thing you did to me.”

“Which was?” he asked, altogether too amused.

“Who knows,” I admitted, staring up at the passing high-rises and shaking my head. “I can’t keep up.”

“Then join in, K. Live a little, for fuck’s sake.”

The burgeoning sun glinted off of a pane of perfectly smooth glass at the top of a building and reflected a rainbow right into the window of my car.

“I’m living just fine,” I argued.

“Yeah.” He laughed and scoffed at once. “Say hi to Walter for me.”

That was Thatch’s version of calling me a cat lady.

“Hey, fuck you!” I said, only to be met with dead air. I pulled the phone away from my ear to discover he’d ended the call.

“Fuck that guy,” I muttered, somehow calling more of Frank’s attention to myself than I had with all the yelling.

“Sir?”

“No worries, Frank.” I paused for a second and looked back out the window. “You wouldn’t happen to know a hit man, would you?”

I glanced up front in preparation for his reaction.

“Um,” he murmured hesitantly, flicking his eyes between me and the road in the rearview mirror. “No, sir.”

I shook my head as I smiled, a brief chuckle tickling the back of my throat.

“Good. That’s good,” I remarked, just as we pulled up to the curb in front of my building.

Flexing the door handle in my hand, I shoved the door open with the toe of my shoe.

“Mr. Brooks,” Frank started to protest, as usual, jerking into motion in order to hop out to help me, but I just couldn’t get into the mindset where his *and* my time was well spent waiting on him to walk around the car just to do something my opposable thumbs and lack of paralysis made shockingly simple.

I smiled in response before he could get out, meeting his eyes in the rearview mirror before exiting.

“Have a good day, Frank. I’ll see you at six.”

With the slam of the door, I buttoned my suit jacket as I walked, twenty audible smacks of my soles eating up the concrete courtyard in front of my building in no time.

New Yorkers buzzed around me, continuing a marathon life that started the moment they opened their eyes. That was the vibe of this city—active and elite and totally fucking focused. No one had time for each other because they barely had time for themselves. And yet, each and every single one of them would still proclaim it the “best city on Earth” without prompting or persuasion.

As my hand met the metal of the handle, I surveyed the lobby of the Winthrop Building, home to Brooks Media, to find the front desk employees and security guards scurrying to make themselves look busy when they weren’t.

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. I’d never been the kind of boss to rule with an iron fist, and not once had I uttered a word of micromanagement to loyal employees like the ones practically shoving their hands in their staplers in order to look busy.

But being CEO of a company of this size and magnitude had a way of creating its own intimidation factor, whether it was intended or not. And, sometimes, the weight of unintended consequences was heavier than gold.

“Morning, Paul.”

He nodded.

“Brian.”

“Mr. Brooks.”

The button for the elevator glared its illumination prior to my arrival—more help from the overzealous employees, I’m sure—and the indicating ding of its descent to the bottom floor preceded the opening of the shiny mirrored doors by less than a second.

I stepped in promptly without another word, offering only a smile. I knew anything else I said would only cause stress or anxiety, despite my efforts to convey the opposite. For a lot of people, their boss was never going to be a comfortable fit as a friend—no matter how nice a guy he was. The best thing I could do was recognize, accept, and respect that.

I sunk my hips into the rear wall as the doors slid closed in front of me and shoved my hands into the depths of my pants pockets to keep from scrubbing them repeatedly up and down my face.

I rarely overindulged, so I wasn’t hungover, but Thatch’s antics, both in person and online, were wearing me out. It wasn’t that I didn’t think the gargoyle dick was funny—because it *was*—but it was really one of those funnier-when-it’s-not-happening-to-you things.

In fact, that rang surprisingly true for most of Thatch’s prank-veiled torture.

The direction of my thoughts and the weight of my phone bumping against my hand had me pulling it out of my pocket against my better judgment.

I hovered my thumb over the TapNext app icon.

With one quick click, I had the ability to make a bad situation worse.

The screen flashed and the app loaded as soon as my thumb made contact.

BAD_Ruck (7:26AM): Despite what the gargoyle dick conveys, I promise I'm NOT a sexual terrorist.

Clutching the phone tightly in my fist, I shamefully knocked it against my forehead multiple times.

“Fucking brilliant.”

I should have just dropped it. Moved on. I didn't fucking know this woman, for God's sake, but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't stand for even my fake dating profile persona to be remembered like this.

Here lies this man to rest. He will be remembered: Sexual Terrorist, Social Media Nuisance, Unfortunate Genital Development.

The elevator settled smoothly to rest on the fifteenth floor, and as the doors opened, I stepped out. My receptionist stood waiting with a stack of messages, having been warned of my arrival by the staff one hundred and fifty-some-odd feet below.

Neat and conservative clothes encased her sixty-eight-year-old frame, and stark white hair salted its way through her dark mocha bun.

Her smile was genuine, though, years of age, wisdom, and experience coloring her view of her thirty-four-years-young “boss.” When it came to the infrastructure and real office inner workings, she ran this show.

The ends of my lips tipped up, forming wrinkles at the corners of my eyes.

“Good morning, lovely Meryl.”

She clicked her tongue. “You better find some other roll to butter up, Mr. Brooks. It may be early, but my allowance of

saturated fats is all used up for the day.”

“Geez.” I winced, clutching my chest in imaginary pain. “You wound me.” A grin crept onto one end of my mouth and a wink briefly closed the eye on the same side. “And it’s Kline. Call me Kline, for shit’s sake.”

“Ten years. Same conversation every day for every single one of them,” she grumbled.

“There’s a lesson in there somewhere, Meryl, and I think it has to do with bending to my will.” I took the messages gently from her hand and bumped her with just the tip of my elbow.

“I’m consistently persistent.”

“So am I,” she retorted.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Four urgent messages from new potential investors on top, and multiple urgent IT problems below those,” she called to my back as I walked away.

I shook my head to myself. Potential investors were always urgent.

Pausing briefly and turning to look over my shoulder, I asked, “And *you’re* giving me the messages from IT, why?”

Things like that normally came from my personal assistant.

“Because I am,” she called back, not even looking up from her desk. “And because Pam is at home with a sick baby.”

I leaned my head back in understanding and bit my lip to stop a laugh from escaping.

“Ah. And we all know the only soft spot in your entire body is reserved for the babies.”

“Precisely,” she confirmed unapologetically, looking over the frames of her glasses and winking.

I turned to head for my office again, but she wasn’t done talking.

“But don’t you worry—”

Shit. Anything that started with Meryl telling me not to worry meant I should worry. I should *really* worry.

“Leslie’s here to pick up her slack.”

I shook my head. I didn’t know if it was in disbelief or resentment, but whatever it was, I couldn’t stop the motion.

Meryl’s eyes started to gleam.

“And since *you* hired her and all, I figured you wouldn’t mind taking her directly under your knowledgeable wing for the day.”

Fuck.

I let my head fall back with a groan briefly before resigning myself to a day from hell and getting back on my way.

One foot in front of the other, I walked toward my doom, knowing the only people I had to blame, other than myself, were my family. And I couldn’t even *really* blame them. I was an adult, a business owner, and the leader of my own goddamn life. It had been my choice to hire the airhe—*Leslie*—whether I had done it out of obligation or not.

Still. “Fuck.”

“Good morning, Mr. Brooks,” she greeted as soon as I rounded the corner, the last syllable of my name trailing straight into a giggle.

God, that’s painful.

Her eyes were bright, lips pouty, and her forearms squeezed into her breasts. Her black hair teased and sprayed, several curls rolled over her shoulders and hung nearly all the way down to her pointy nails. And she eye fucked me relentlessly, pounding me harder with every step I took.

I plastered a smile on my face and tried to make it genuine. She was really a nice person—just devoid of each and every quality I looked for in both lovers and friends.

“Come on, Leslie.” I gestured, turning away from her nearly exposed—completely office inappropriate—breasts and

walking straight into my office with efficiency I knew Cynthia, my head of Human Resources, would appreciate.

The boss in me wanted to tell her to put them away. The man in me knew I wouldn't be able to do that without opening some sort of door for a sexual harassment suit. Situations like this were ripe for postulation.

"You're with me today," I went on, walking straight to my desk and shucking the suit jacket from my shoulders to hang on the hook to the back and right of me.

"Here," I offered when she didn't move or speak, holding the messages from potential investors Meryl had handed me not five minutes ago out to her. "Take these to Dean and have him make some precursory calls. He can schedule calls for me this afternoon with any of them that show signs of legitimacy."

A fake-lashed blink followed by a blank stare.

I even shook them a little, but she didn't respond.

Right. Small words.

"Ask Dean to call these people back. He'll know if it's worth my time talking to them, and if it *is*, I'm free to do so this afternoon."

"Got it!" she said with a wink, jumping from one heel to the other, spinning, and sashaying her way out of my office.

I wasn't a psychic, but one thing was increasingly clear—I was going to need to stop and buy an extra bottle of scotch tonight.

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Acknowledgments

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XOXO,

Max & Monroe