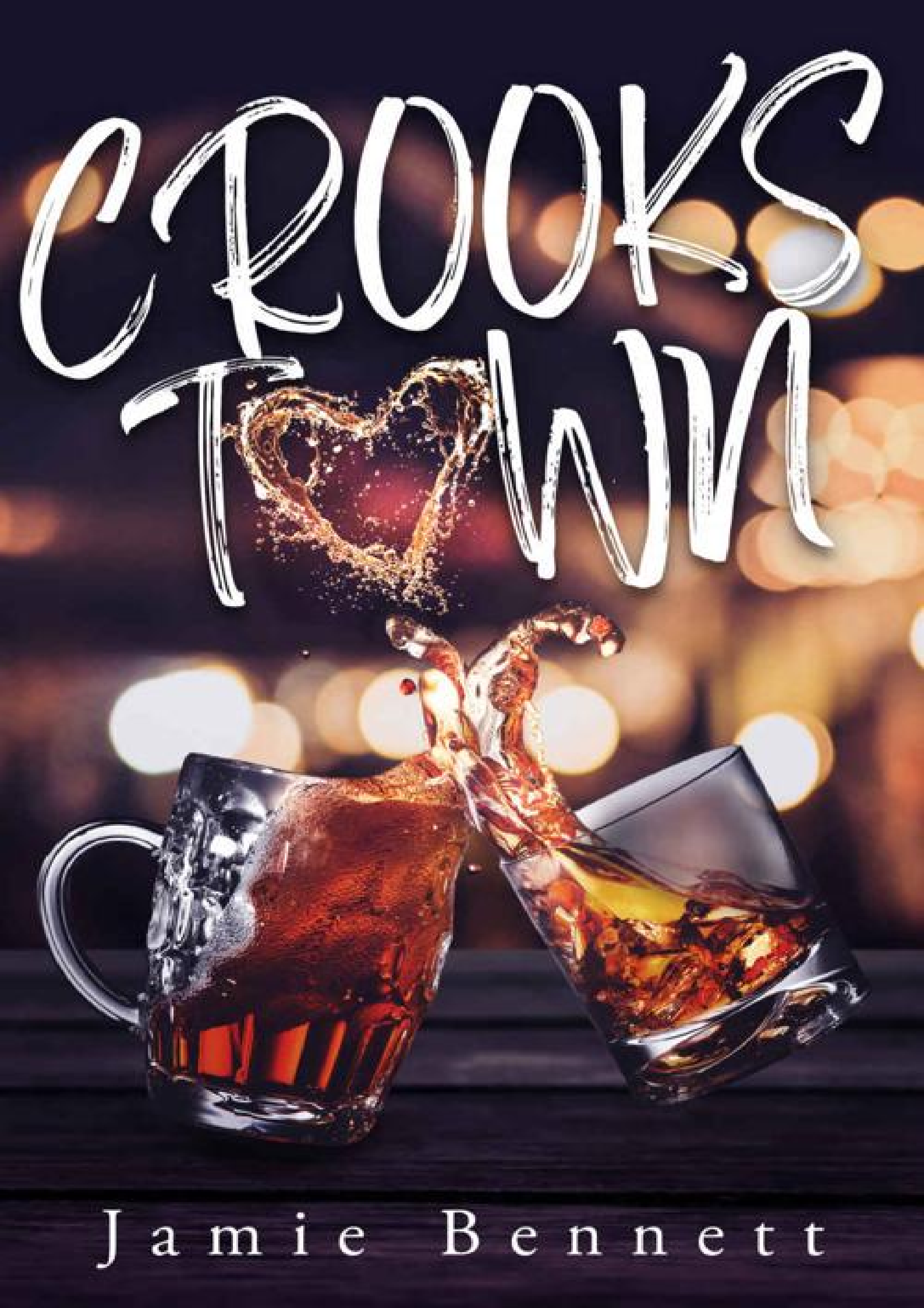


CROOKS TOWN

The image features two glasses of beer clinking together. The glass on the left is a large, textured mug filled with a dark, frothy beer. The glass on the right is a smaller, clear tumbler glass containing a golden beer with a slice of lemon. A dynamic splash of beer is captured mid-air between the two glasses, forming a heart-like shape. The background is dark with out-of-focus, warm-toned bokeh lights, suggesting an indoor setting like a bar or pub.

J a m i e B e n n e t t

Crookstown
Jamie Bennett

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Book cover by Angela Haddon Book Cover Designs.

“I’m telling you the truth,” Dex said.

“It seems like you never heard a lot of that before.”

The truth? Ok, sure, here it is: Lulu is young and beautiful, she’s living in a great city, she has the world at her feet. Her life is amazing!

Or...well, there might be another truth, and this one kind of sucks: Lulu is alone because her boyfriend dumped her and she doesn’t have any friends because other women hate her. Her parents hate her. Her boss Dex hates her.

And she hates Dex right back. She hates working in his dirty bar, that’s for sure. The Crookstown is a terrible place and as soon as she can, she’s going to move on. Move up, in fact, to all the better things that the world surely has in store for her, and Dex certainly won’t be a part of that. There’s really nothing good about him, because besides owning the terrible Crookstown, he has a car that’s falling apart, jeans full of holes, and an ex who’s the worst. Yeah, he’s not exactly a catch for a young, hot girl like she is!

But something about him does catch Lulu—something about how he loves his daughter, something about how he takes care of his bar and everyone in it, including her. Maybe things like a nice car and a great wardrobe aren’t actually as important as she has always believed. Dex’s value doesn’t seem to be something she can gauge in her usual ways, and that makes her wonder about her own value, too—and if she needs to make some changes to herself besides the color of her nail polish.

There’s a lot at stake at the Crookstown Bar: two hearts are on the line, and maybe a lifetime of happiness.

Chapter 1

“No. No, there’s still nobody there,” the echoing voice called above my head. “Some kind of prank, I guess. Maybe kids are playing a game.” Someone else answered angrily, and heavy footsteps retreated from the door.

Hello? No, it wasn’t a prank, and yes, there was someone! “*I’m here,*” I said, but there was no answer back to me. So I knocked again, now with my fist, and I stamped my heel hard on the hot sidewalk, too, which they wouldn’t have been able to hear but I had to get out my anger somehow. What the hell were they talking about that there was no one? I’d been standing in front of this dingy bar for ten minutes—at least five, and the sun burned down on my back and I felt a drop of sweat running between my shoulder blades and under my bra strap. If they wanted to hire me as a waitress, they were going to have to do a lot better than this.

“I’m right here!” I yelled. I pounded and waited. Last chance for them, and then I was going to move on. I might have already moved on, in fact, except that I’d already had several unsuccessful job interviews. Three, and that included the one when they told me that if I didn’t leave, they’d call the cops. The meeting there hadn’t been going well right from the start but it had truly taken a turn for the worse when the bar manager asked me to stand up and spin around so he could get an idea of how the uniform would look on me. He’d decided to do more than look, and no one got to touch my butt unless invited to. I could scream really, really loud and my former boyfriend had taught me some self-defense moves. I’d used them.

I thought about him and sighed. No, not that manager with the octopus hands on my ass! My former boyfriend, who—

“Hey!” A face, a man’s frowning face, appeared at the dirty front window. “There’s a woman out there,” he called. “You didn’t see her?”

And the door yanked open. A guy so tall that he looked like he was wearing stilts peered out into the street, and then

his head tilted down, way, way down, and his eyes fastened on me. “Oh. Yeah, there she is,” he said over his shoulder. He smiled at me, a very sweet smile that looked so out of place on a face that was horribly marked by scars. They started at the corners of his mouth and curled up into his cheeks, like a scary puppet. “We open at four. You have another half-hour,” he told me. “Thank you for coming and I hope you’ll return.”

“No, I’m not a customer. I came about the job,” I announced.

“What job?” the scary/sweet guy asked, and then another man, the one who’d seen me through the window, muscled his way into the opening. He wasn’t as tall as the giant, but he was still plenty big, especially looming from inside the bar with me on the sidewalk below it.

“There are no positions open here,” the smaller/not-small guy told me.

“I saw your sign, your help-wanted sign. It was stapled to the telephone pole,” I said. “It said to apply in person, no calls, texts, or emails.” I shook my head. “Did you know that you can put stuff online? There’s this thing called ‘internet.’”

“That sign got you to show up, didn’t it?” The smaller/not-small man frowned at me. “Anyway, there’s no job.”

“Da?”

It was a girl’s voice from somewhere inside that old bar. They let children drink there? But the smaller/not-small guy acted like it was normal, or anyway, he didn’t seem surprised to hear her. “What do you need, Maeve?” he asked.

“That new waitress is throwing up next to the dumpster,” the girl said. She was a teenager, a young one, but not actually a child. “It’s really...blue,” she went on. “Like the stuff you put in your Jeep in the winter.”

“Like antifreeze? Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” he swore, and disappeared from the doorway, leaving me with the big scary/sweet one. But I pushed past him and went inside, too, because one thing I was really good at was emergencies. Like,

I had saved a pregnant woman once, and I was pretty sure that if there was someone drinking antifreeze, my presence would be necessary.

So I walked swiftly through the bar in the direction of the man and the girl he'd called Maeve, past ancient posters of sports players that peeled off the walls in faded strips, past mismatched chairs and bar stools that had probably not looked good even when they were new, past a dartboard that was so well-used that it was mostly holes instead of cork. I went between two bathrooms, "Girls" and "Boys," and out another door into a filthy alley. And there was a woman there puking beside a dumpster. It was all foam now and not recognizable to me as a chemical used in a car.

"Isie?" The man took her shoulders and then reared back, grimacing. "I can smell it. That wasn't antifreeze. She was drinking." He picked up an empty bottle that lay on its side next to her. "Blue curaçao? Was this ours?" There were several more empties next to that one.

"I told you that I saw her taking stuff from behind the bar," the Maeve girl said, and I looked over at her. She was fourteen or fifteen, maybe, and she had red hair. Red. Not strawberry blonde or auburn, but rich, coppery hair that flowed down her back like fire in the sunlight. She saw me looking at her and glared back at me for a moment before she jerked her eyes away. "I told you so," she announced.

"I know you told me so," the man said wearily, then turned to the woman on the ground. "Did you drink the blue curaçao?" he asked and as a response, she bubbled up a little extra of her stomach contents and released it down her shirt. He shook his head and barked out, "Alistair!"

The giant guy, the one who hadn't been able to tell that I was there knocking, came out of the back door of the bar to join us. "Yeah, Dex?" he inquired expectantly.

"She's not going to be able to work tonight."

"No!" the red-haired girl interjected. "Not just tonight. You should fire her!"

Dex rubbed his eyes. “Yeah, she’s fired. You’re going to have to take her home,” he continued to the giant. “I must have her address on her job application.” He paused, hesitated. “Did she fill out an application?” he asked all of us, but the puker, the big guy, and I only stared blankly at him.

“No!” Maeve interjected again. “You were going to get her to fill it out, but you forgot.” She shook her head and huffed angrily. “She lives on Canfield with her mom. She mentioned that once because she hates her mother.”

“Eighty...”

We all turned to look at the woman on the ground as she slurred out the word.

“Eighty...eighty...”

“She’s off her rocker,” the man named Dex said.

She pointed at him angrily. “Eighty twenty-one Canfield,” she announced. “I live there with my mom and I hate her. And I hate you too, and I hate this shitty bar.” She looked around the alley. “There are roaches.”

I looked around too and she was right about the bugs. The alley was terrible.

“That address is over by Van Dyke,” the giant said. “I can take her in your Jeep.” He avoided the throw-up, the empty bottles, and the bugs, and hauled the woman to her feet. “Ready, Isie?” he asked politely. “If it’s all right with you, I’ll drive you home.” She didn’t object and with him mostly dragging her, they slowly went toward the street together.

I pulled my tank top up over my nose. It probably wouldn’t have smelled very good back here any day, but the late-afternoon sun was heating up the contents of the dumpster and the big puddle of retch next to it. It was bad enough to choke a horse, which I mentioned, and the smaller/not-small guy, Dex, turned to stare at me.

“What? What are you still doing here?” he asked.

“I’m here about the job.” I reached into my bag and showed him the bleached paper that I’d torn down from the

telephone pole near the bus stop. It said “Server Needed” and “Experience Required” and “Serious Applicants Only.” Then in smaller letters it continued, “Will consider any candidate.” It had the name of this place, the Crookstown Bar, and the address here on the East Side of Detroit.

“I put that up in January.” He rubbed his palm over his jaw, which was covered in dark stubble. “I think we’ve had eight servers since then.”

“Isie the Booter the makes nine,” the redhead teenager announced, and she gave me a withering glance. “Good luck with this one,” she told Dex over her shoulder as she left us. I didn’t blame her for getting her butt out of this alley because I was about to throw up myself, and I admired her grand exit. But I didn’t enjoy the look she’d given me, as if I wasn’t up to this job—of course I was! I hadn’t yet tried, but I was pretty sure that I could do anything if I wanted to.

Granted, there wasn’t a lot I wanted to do. And maybe *anything* was possible, but not *anyone*. I swept that thought from my mind because I wasn’t going to do that anymore, I wasn’t going to be sad about my relationship status. I’d relocated to Detroit to move on from the past and I had done it. I had. I placed my hands on my hips, put my chest out, and tossed back my hair. The past was over. Definitely.

Dex watched the girl leave and frowned. “I’m going inside,” he announced abruptly, swiveled, and went in the same direction that she had.

I also followed her back into the bar and it took my eyes a while to adjust to the darkness. Even with the early-summer sun strong enough to bring vomit to a boil outside, it was still murky in here, but that was fine for a drinking establishment. Most people didn’t like to get sloppy under a glare, although apparently, some people didn’t mind downing a bottle or three out in an alley in the broad daylight.

There weren’t a lot of lights in here, but there was also all kinds of stuff inside this bar that prevented the dim illumination from the old fixtures from reaching very far. There were a lot of street signs attached to the ceiling and

curling dollar bills were stapled everywhere, too. Flags from countries I didn't recognize dipped low enough that this guy Dex had to duck to avoid the grubby fabric. I was just fine, though, and went underneath them with plenty of room to spare.

"I didn't even know I had that crap. Blue curaçao," Dex snorted. He went behind the bar and started digging through bottles, raising a cloud of dust in the process. "Son of a bitch." He sat back on his heels. "Maeve was right."

"Who's that girl?" I inquired.

"My daughter," he answered, then glowered at the alcohol. "I think that there are more than a few things missing so no, this wasn't the first time that Isie had helped herself to my inventory," he went on. "I knew she was a bad waitress but I didn't know she was a thief."

"Why?"

Now he swiveled and looked at me. I'd sat myself on one of the stools so I could get a better view of what he was doing back there. Maybe I hadn't mentioned it before, but I was a little bit lacking in height. Up on this seat, I had a much-improved view.

"Why are you still here?" he asked.

"You said you were going inside," I responded. "But why didn't you know that she was stealing from you? Why did you keep her on if she was a bad employee? Why have you had nine waitresses since January?"

He tilted his head and stared at me. "Why the hell would I answer any of your questions?"

"Because if I'm going to work for you, I need to know what kind of boss you'll be," I informed him. "I don't want to work for a creeper or something. Or if you pocket the tips. Or if you—"

"I'm not and I don't. None of what you just said," he informed me back.

“Good. Are you going to have me fill out an application now?”

He stood up and blinked. “What?”

“Didn’t you just hire me?”

“No.” He wiped off his hands on his jeans. “No, I didn’t hire you. Why would I?”

“Because I need a job,” I told him. Why else would I be here in this old dump? I really needed the money, obviously.

“Sorry about that,” he said briefly, and he didn’t sound at all sorry. “I’m going to go without a waitress. I don’t need one.”

I looked around. There was a very long counter with lots of stools and at least fifteen tables. When I’d worked at my dad’s restaurant, the most I’d covered was five and maybe it was different at a bar, but that was still a lot of customers. Or did he expect them to crowd around the stools to put in the orders themselves? “You’ll regret not hiring me,” I told him, and I thought I might wait around to see that regret happen because I was not overly pleased that he was passing me up. “I guess it’s your bad choice to make since it’s your place. Isn’t it?”

He looked around proudly, a slight smile on his lips. “It is. The Crookstown is all mine.” Then his eyes went up, because something had thumped hard enough on the floor above us that I put my hands over my head in case it was coming through the ceiling. But all the vibration did was disturb the flags, street signs, and dollar bills, creating another cloud of dust which sprinkled across the scarred wooden counter in front of me. I shook it out of my hair and Dex frowned up at the origin of the sound and then turned his back. Glasses clinked and clanked pretty hard and I could hear him swearing under his breath, too.

As interviews went, this had not been a good one. I’d been pretty sure I had a job offer all wrapped up and I was a little disappointed that I’d be out looking again, but at least I hadn’t

had to put anyone in a choke hold this afternoon. Not yet, anyway. I sighed and Dex turned around.

“I think The Exile on Porter Street is hiring,” he mentioned. “Have you tried there?”

“Yeah. They wanted someone with bar experience,” I said. “I’ve only worked in my dad’s diner.”

“I’m sure there’s a diner in Detroit looking for help,” he said.

“I decided that I don’t want to work in a food establishment,” I explained. “I don’t want to pick up the dirty dishes. They’re really disgusting.”

He stared at me. “Are you joking?”

No, I hadn’t been. “I got very dry skin from having to wash my hands so often. Then I had to put on almond oil, and the plates got slippery so I dropped a lot. There was such a mess to sweep up.”

Dex stared hard for another moment, then shook his head and turned back to where it sounded like he’d been trying to break the glasses. “Ever heard that beggars can’t be choosers?”

“I’m not exactly a beggar!” I retorted. Not quite yet.

“You have to make rent, don’t you?”

“I live with my mom. She’s not going to throw me out onto the street.”

“Life’s easier when you don’t have to grow up. Like Isie,” he said over his shoulder and I sat up straight.

“I am not anything like a woman puking blue booze in an alley!” I shot back. “I’m probably going to get a different job, anyway. Waitressing in a hole like this isn’t my vocation. I moved to Detroit to get into modeling and acting and I’ll probably get hired at that soon.”

He turned to eye me, polishing a glass with a bar towel as he examined my face. “Modeling children’s clothes?”

“I’m not a child!” Although, that was a hard part about being petite. People often assumed that I was younger than I was, which was twenty-three, not thirteen. “Would you have considered hiring a minor to work in your bar?” I challenged him.

“I wasn’t ever going to hire you,” he reminded me. “Is there a big market for modeling around here? I never heard of it.”

“You probably weren’t trying to break into the business yourself,” I said and meant it to be a slur against him, but actually, he wasn’t bad looking. Not my type, since he was all unshaved and rumply, his features rough instead of regular and handsome. He was also much too old, of course—old enough to have a teenage daughter! But underneath his hockey t-shirt (full of holes) and jeans (covered in paint), I could see an impressive set of muscles. Like his arms, for example, were big and cut and his back and chest were hard and broad, his shoulders square and wide. Those kinds of things went a long way. Probably old ladies that he would date enjoyed them as much as I did.

“Are you actually serious about modeling?” Dex looked at me again. “Aren’t all those women tall?”

“Some of them,” I acknowledged. Most of them, that was the truth. “But short women need representation, too. I wouldn’t be on the runway or doing editorial stuff for fashion magazines, obviously, but I could do catalogues. Ads. The car show, maybe. I mean, I’m definitely pretty enough.”

Dex snorted. “I guess if confidence is a requirement, you’ve got that all sewn up.”

I shrugged. It was better to be honest, wasn’t it? I was pretty, after all. I had a face that people liked to look at and a body that most guys wanted to put their hands on. Not all of them, unfortunately. And unfortunately, it turned out that a nice face and a hot body weren’t the only things that men were interested in, not if you wanted to keep them for good.

But before I got all sad about things again, there was another thump above us—a crash, really, and Dex got a

furious expression on his face then checked the ancient clock with hands on the wall.

“It’s four and we’re officially open,” he announced, although there wasn’t a sudden rush of customers coming in. “Watch the till for a minute until I get back.” Then he disappeared through a door next to the register.

In my opinion, that statement was as good as me filling out an application. My dad never would have left a non-employee in charge of the register, not ever, so I hopped off the stool and walked around the side of the bar to look for an apron. I wasn’t wearing great shoes for serving since I’d imagined that this was an interview and I wouldn’t be immediately hired, but I could make it work if I took lots of breaks. I usually did that anyway during my shifts.

There was only one apron, a dirty one that looked like it should have been white, and I tied that on, crossing the straps several times around my hips to make it fit and then smoothing it over the jean shorts I wore. This was definitely a better look than the uniform I was supposed to have worn at my dad’s restaurant, except that I actually hadn’t worn it very often there. I’d personalized a lot, which was one of the perks of being the owner’s daughter.

“I’m back,” a voice announced, and the gigantically tall man with the big scars, Alistair, came in from the alley at the rear of the building. He looked at his hands. “Better wash off the puke,” he said cheerfully. He walked around the bar to join me, which made it a very tight space, but he squeezed himself next to the sink. “Hey, congratulations on getting a job here!” he said, pointing to the apron. “I didn’t think that Dex would hire you.”

“Why not?” I demanded.

“Well, you don’t look strong enough to carry a tray,” he said, sizing me up.

“I’m plenty strong. I work out every day,” I said. “And that remark was very biased. Just because I’m small, it doesn’t mean that I’m weak and I don’t appreciate that kind of comment.” I looked way up at him, which almost made my

neck hurt. The guy was like a skyscraper. “You must know how it is to have people treat you poorly because of your size,” I pointed out. “They must take advantage of you, for one thing.”

“How do you mean?” he asked thoughtfully.

“Well...” I thought about tall problems. “Do people in stores always ask you to get stuff off the high shelves?”

“Sometimes.”

Yeah, I’d done that to tall people myself. “That’s taking advantage,” I explained. “Why don’t short people figure out their own problems without bothering you? And why do stores stack the toilet paper up there, anyway? It’s bad design and you get punished for it.”

“It doesn’t feel like a punishment. I like helping people,” he told me. “They always say ‘thank you’ so nicely when I hand them the toilet paper.”

“Really?” I tried to remember if I had said it. “Well, what about other design issues? Everything for me is built too high, but I bet for you, it’s too low. Look how far you have to bend over to wash off the spew,” I pointed out, and he did examine his hands under the faucet.

“That’s true,” he said. “Chairs are also very small and I wish tables had longer legs. I always hit my knees on their tops. Some cars are too little for me to drive, because I can’t get the seat to move back far enough.”

“And I can’t get the seats to move high enough to look over the dashboard! See?” I encouraged. “We’re at opposite ends of the spectrum, but we both suffer.”

“I don’t know if I’d call it ‘suffering.’ Doesn’t everyone have problems sometimes? I think I’m lucky to be tall. There’s a tree on the corner with a bird’s nest. I’ve been looking inside to check for eggs when the mother bird is gone. I can watch them hatch.” He smiled. “If I weren’t tall, I couldn’t see in there. Maybe I’ll get to see them fly for the first time, too.” He stared off into space, enthralled for a moment, and then remembered me. “I can lift you up to see.”

“No thanks.” There were no magical nature moments for me except for a closer view of the dust bunnies on the floor of this bar, and there were many to see. “Even if you don’t agree, I still think the world is unfair,” I announced, and sniffed from anger. Or maybe from the dust.

“You’re probably right,” he placated. “But we’ll be ok. Let me show you what we’re supposed to do to open for the night.” He wiped down the counter, demonstrated how to check the taps, and tasted the beer to make sure that it hadn’t gone bad or something. He performed a few more tasks, slowly and carefully explaining each one, and then he resumed polishing glasses like Dex had been doing and I sat back on my stool and watched. After a moment, I heard feet thumping down a set of stairs, and the bar owner appeared at the door. He looked at Alistair and then at me, and he frowned.

“She’s still here?” he asked rudely.

“What do you mean?” Alistair asked back, but then an actual customer came in and they got involved in greeting him. He chose a seat two down from mine at the bar and they all talked about baseball until someone else came in, and then someone else, and then more people, too.

I was surprised by the crowd. There was no way that I would have chosen to come to an establishment like this one to hang out, with the dirty stuff hanging from the ceiling and the excess of dust bunnies on the floor. My friends and I had gone to fun, clean bars, places where we could drink and dance, too, and somewhere that the bartender was cute in a clean-shaven, clean-clothed way. A young way.

I wondered what my friends were all doing tonight and if they were at a place like that in northern Michigan where I’d grown up. I checked my phone to see if anyone had written anything yet and took a few pictures of myself, because this was a really cute tank top. Then I worked on blurring the background before I showed them off, because people like my bestie Devon didn’t need to see the yellowed poster behind me of some sports guy that no one would recognize. Hopefully, they’d all think that I was on a modeling shoot, because it was what I’d already told everyone I was doing, that I’d already

started my career. I hadn't admitted that the only thing I'd done so far in regard to modeling was to pay a bunch of money to a photographer to create a portfolio which was taking forever.

But now it was time to start this career here in the Crookstown. The bar stools had filled with customers and they were starting to fill the tables, too, so I walked around to grab the tray from next to the register.

"What do you think you're doing?" Dex stared at me, right below the waist. But not in a sexual way, not at all, and that was fortunate for him. "That's where my apron went? Why are you wearing it?"

"You hired her," Alistair told him, and I agreed.

"You told me to watch the bar, didn't you?" I asked. "But I haven't filled out any tax forms like employees did at my dad's restaurant. You run a really loose ship around here."

"I do not," he said angrily. "And she's not working here," he barked at Alistair, who looked confused. Then he turned back to me. "Give me that apron and if you're going to take up a seat, you'll have to do it as a paying customer."

That was bad news but not entirely unexpected, since I hadn't actually heard him say that I was hired. I slowly unwound the ties from my waist and climbed back onto my stool. "I'll have a lemon drop," I said.

"No, you won't. This isn't a cocktail bar and I don't have either triple sec or simple syrup. I don't keep trendy liquor here."

"You had that blue stuff," I remarked. "Your last waitress threw it up all over the ground."

"I didn't know I had that. I must have gotten it in an order by mistake, or maybe I didn't notice that it was here when I bought the bar."

"So you don't know your inventory," I said, nodding. "Well, I'm glad that you admit how bad you are at running your business, because that's probably the first step in fixing things in this place. But it doesn't mean that I don't blame you

for the damage to my hair. I think the wretch odor got into it and dirt definitely did from the crap on the ceiling. I hold you personally responsible.”

He opened his mouth to answer but then a voice from the other end of the bar called, “Dex,” so he ignored me and walked off.

“What can I get you?” Alistair asked.

I thought about the last time I’d checked on my credit card balance. That balance wasn’t leaning my way. “How about water?” I suggested, and he nodded and picked up one of the glasses he’d been carefully polishing. “I like it with two pieces of lemon, a straw, and lots of ice. But no big cubes, just little pieces.”

“We don’t have lemons. Or straws,” he added.

“Just any kind of water, then,” I said and he got it for me, very slowly and without spilling a drop. Next I watched him trying to fill a glass with beer for another customer. It ended up to be mostly foam, and he shrugged and poured it out and patiently started to try again while the customer waited not half as patiently. I also watched the bar fill up more, mostly a lot of old guys but a few women, too. Dex hurried from table to table and rushed back and forth to get their orders out. He was practically running.

“Are you always this busy?” I asked Alistair. He had given up on trying to get the beer order and was back to methodically polishing glasses.

“We always have a full house on Fridays,” he said, nodding.

“And you’re a bartender here?” I asked doubtfully. I hadn’t seen him successfully serve one person besides when he’d gotten my water. He’d listened to the orders and then reported them back to Dex, who whipped out drinks and plunked them down before speeding off to another patron.

“I’m a bartender in training,” he explained. “I’m a barback. I used to be a bouncer at the place Dex worked before, and when he bought the Crookstown, I came along,

too. He doesn't need a bouncer here so I'm learning this instead." He looked around the crowd of mostly old guys drinking pretty calmly. Only one of them appeared to be worked up, and that was because of what was happening in the baseball game on the TV.

"When did he buy this place?" I asked.

"He got it a few months ago, around Christmas. This is a great neighborhood bar," Alistair answered. "Dex knew the old owner from way back and Mr. McCarthy came to him first about buying it. It was Mr. McCarthy's dream to make the Crookstown, and buying it was also dream come true for Dex. His lifelong goal," he said, smiling in an angelic way that contrasted so sharply with the deep, angry scars on his cheeks.

"I guess it's a dream, if you dream about dirty places with slow service and ugly décor," I said.

Alistair nodded with enthusiasm. "That's the Crookstown Bar exactly! Everyone likes to be here. Except those guys at table...uh, I think it's table three? Dex gave me a chart to study."

"What's wrong at table three?" I asked.

"They don't look happy at all," he said, and Alistair himself looked worried. "I should probably go see."

I waited. He didn't move. He just stood still, holding a glass so tightly I thought it might break in his huge hand and I watched him swallow and turn red in the face. He was nervous? A guy that size was nervous about dealing with angry customers? "I can go talk to them. My tables used to get mad at me all the time and it doesn't bother me," I told him. "Give me your apron so I look official." He untied it from his waist and by the time I wrapped it around my own body enough times to make it fit, only the "Crook" from "Crookstown Bar" showed right over my stomach.

Sure, that table was really pissed that they'd waited just about forever to get their drinks and then Ally had given them the wrong ones, but I let them know that in this establishment, they needed to be careful of how they spoke to the employees.

Then they didn't appreciate that I had to bring over the next round very slowly, one glass at a time. But it felt like the tray wasn't weighted right or something, so it took me a while.

Eventually, that table got over their issues. They felt just fine after they'd all knocked back a few more drinks. It turned out that I was supposed to keep a tab somewhere but no one in a managerial position had told me how to do that and there wasn't a computer that I could see, so I thought that table did get a few rounds for free. Server training at the Crookstown was really bad.

At the end of the night, almost everyone was happy except for me and Dex. He looked exhausted from the marathon he'd run, wearing out his shoes on the dirty floor of this bar. I wasn't so great either, and was back on my stool resting my own poor feet. High-heeled sandals definitely weren't going to work for me here. I was counting out my tips to give Alistair his share, which was only fair. He'd helped me pour and between the two of us, we'd gotten most of the orders fairly right. Mostly. Dex had asked me a few times what I thought I was doing but he'd been so busy that we hadn't had time to really get into it.

Until now. "We're closed," he announced. "What's happening here?" He looked at the meager pile of dollar bills. "What are you doing with that money?"

"I'm splitting my tips," I explained.

"She did great," Alistair said, and smiled at me. "None of the other servers ever gave me any of their money."

"You took it upon yourself to join the staff here and collect tips," Dex said.

"Staff? That's a fancy word for you working your ass off and Alistair...trying," I said, because he had been.

Dex's face softened out of the mean frown he'd been wearing before as he glared at me, but he still pointed to the door. "Time to go...I don't even know your name to throw you out."

"Me neither." Alistair put out his hand. "I'm Alistair."

“Lulu,” I told him, and we shook. He was very gentle with my arm, although he looked like he could have pulled it from my body. “Ok,” I sighed. “I’ll take my tips and leave.”

“Wait a minute.” Dex came around the side of the bar. “It’s late. I’ll walk you out before I drive Alistair home. His car is in the shop again.”

He escorted me silently for a block until he announced, “You’re a terrible waitress. You really have experience?”

“Yes. I really worked in a restaurant, starting when I was nineteen.” It was a lot of years, when I thought about it. Had I really wasted my time for so long? Lucky that I’d woken up and decided to remake my life!

“I can’t do this again,” Dex said. “I can’t have another night like tonight.” He sighed. “Come back tomorrow.”

Now I put out my hand to him and we shook, too. “Lulu Zalewski.”

“Dex Connolly.” He looked at me under the streetlight. “I can’t believe I just hired you.”

“It’s your lucky night,” I told him, and maybe he didn’t believe that either, but I was sure it was true.

Chapter 2

I could tell by the look on her face.

“Did Daddy call you again?” I asked my mom, and she tried to remove the secret delight from her expression.

“We have to talk, Lulu,” she answered. “We’re still married. We have things to discuss.”

I tried not to get mad at her. I tried hard. “But you’re not going to be married much longer, right? The lawyer said that the divorce won’t be too complicated. Didn’t she?” I prompted.

My mom now refused to meet my eyes. “I better get to the salon,” she said, and picked up her purse. “I have consults for two new clients.”

“What did Daddy have to say now?” I demanded.

“He misses me. He misses both of us,” she told me, and I felt a stab of sadness that I tried to ignore. I missed him too, and I thought that my mom did. At least, she didn’t want to sever the weird connection they had. But something I’d learned over the past year was that feelings weren’t important. What your heart was so desperate to have, what you thought you’d die without—that was a separate issue from what you could live with in reality.

“Don’t you remember why we left, why we moved here to Detroit?” I asked her. “You should!”

She headed for the exit. “You should remember that I’m your mother, Lulu,” she told me. “I’m the adult.” The door closed behind her, hard.

She was an adult, but so was I, right? According to my birth certificate, I was. I sighed and continued to carefully apply my eyeliner at the table. The lighting in the dining room of the apartment we’d rented was much better than what we had in the bathroom—the one bathroom that my mom and I had to share—so I did the majority of my beauty prep in here.

Also, the bathroom sink space was just way too tiny to deal with. I needed the greater area of the table to spread out.

Because although it was even darker than our bathroom inside the Crookstown Bar, of course I still had to look my best. You never knew if someone cute would walk in by mistake, thinking that it was a fun, clean place with tasty drinks and fast service, good music to dance to, and people under the age of a million to meet and hang out with.

But no, the Crookstown wasn't any of those things. I'd been working there for the past week and had discovered that it had a boring crowd, terrible music, and a small selection of alcohol that didn't appeal to me at all. After I'd asked about daiquiris, piña coladas, and margaritas, my new boss had taped a sign on the mirror behind the bar: "NO FRUIT DRINKS." I knew who that was directed at. He'd also taped up other signs about not taking breaks, not sitting down at the tables with customers, not forgetting to write stuff on their tabs (with a pen because he seriously didn't have a computer system at all!)

I knew who those other signs were directed at, too, but sometimes I just to take a break because it was also hot in that place. Like no air conditioning, puny overhead fans, and now it was late June in the city—that kind of hot. Alistair always looked cool and pretty calm (if customers weren't talking to him) but I was getting red in the face and...sweaty. It was gross.

But as of yet, I didn't have any other means of making money. I hadn't heard from any of the modeling agents who would want to sign me and I hadn't even gotten a response to my many, many calls and texts to the photographer who was supposed to be preparing my headshots and portfolio. It had been forever since I'd paid him and if I didn't know any better, I would have thought he was avoiding me.

"Maybe he is avoiding me," I told Alistair later at the Crookstown. "I mean, I've sent him at least a hundred messages. Maybe more. And he only answered the first one, when he said that he was going to New York for a shoot but would work on my stuff when he got back and I should give

him a minute. That was, like, two weeks ago. That's just over twenty thousand minutes."

"Is it?" Alistair asked, and I explained how I'd figured out a quicker way of multiplying so I could do it in my head.

"First, we know that there are sixty minutes in an hour and twenty-four hours in a day, but—"

"What are you two doing?" Dex interrupted us.

"Math," I explained, and he pointed toward table two and told me that they'd been waiting for me to take their order for five minutes.

"Take four away from five and that's how many minutes it should have taken you to get your butt over to them. There's some math for you," he said, and stomped off to hassle someone else. No, he was really only serving them some whiskey, but I certainly felt hassled.

"Why is he in such a snit all the time?" I asked Alistair.

"Dex? Is he?" He seemed shocked by the idea.

"Alistair, I've been here for five days. That's a lot of minutes, too, and he's been pissed in almost all of them. Why? Does he ever relax?"

Alistair had to consider it. "He wasn't so pissed before he bought this bar. I know it's his dream, but maybe you're right. Maybe it makes him upset." Now he also seemed upset. "I hope that's not true. I wouldn't like to think that what he wanted for about his whole life has turned bad on him. I guess things don't always go right." He looked toward the dirty window and I knew he was thinking about the bird's nest.

"I'm sure the new eggs are fine," I assured him. The mother bird had laid three just yesterday and he had been thrilled. "Do you want to go check? I can cover for you." He didn't really do much behind the bar, anyway, so it wasn't like it was such a big deal, and he took off eagerly.

Dex stormed over again. "Did you just encourage him to leave?" He pointed at the sign, the "NO EMPLOYEE

BREAKS WITHOUT PRIOR PERMISSION OF THE OWNER” one. “It’s not bad enough that you’re sitting on your ass half the time you’re here?”

“I’m standing now,” I said haughtily, and did get to my feet to walk to table two to take their order. When I handed it to Dex on a piece of paper (no computer), he told me it couldn’t possibly be right that they’d asked for eggnog.

“It’s June.”

“Eggnog is what they said. Should I just point to the sign about no fruit drinks?” I responded, and he mentioned that eggnog didn’t have fruit and went to get the order himself.

The nest was fine and Alistair was glad when he got back, but I didn’t get to ask him more about our boss’s bad temper because Dex sent him to the storage room to work on some project there. It was a place I’d peeked into but would never actually enter because even if it was almost July, the storage room was dank and cold and dark and small, full of scurrying feet and scuttling insects and ick. Total ick. When I was asked to fetch a bottle or two, I had to pass.

So it was up to me to find out from Dex what his cranky deal was, and I did that when we were cleaning up from the night. I’d been curious for real, because it didn’t seem like he had that many problems. He worked in his dream bar and wore old t-shirts every day. How bad could his life have been?

“Did you just ask me what put the stick up my ass?” he growled at me. “Is that what you said?”

I was working on diplomacy, which meant not always saying things the way I wanted to, and I rephrased. “I mean, why are you always so pissy and upset? Why are you in a bad mood all the time and so difficult to be around?” There, that was better because I hadn’t mentioned the stick at all.

“I’m not in a bad mood.” He slammed a glass on the bar top and then looked at it and sighed. “I’m not in a bad mood all the time, but I do have things to worry about.”

“Yeah, me too.” I told him about the stuff that was on my mind, like not finding a good manicurist, the issue of having

the small bathroom that I had to share, my concern that my friends back at home up north were actually doing fun things together rather than lying about doing fun things, as I was. Also my problems with my feet, which hurt now that I was back on them all the time and my toes looked awful too, due to that inability to find a good nail salon. I ended with the way the guy in the orange hunting cap had looked at my boobs in a borderline inappropriate way as I'd given him his beer tonight and then he'd left me a terrible tip anyway.

"You're welcome to tell a customer to get the hell out if he's making you uncomfortable, or I can do it for you. But that guy left you a bad tip because you're a terrible waitress. Are you serious about that other crap? Those are your problems?" Dex asked me.

"Yes. Some of them." There were others, of course, but that was what I felt like sharing.

"I can't believe that one of the things you're worried about is where you're going to get your nails done," he said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Who gives a fuck?"

"I do, obviously! Personal care is very important for a model. Which I will be, soon."

He shook his head harder. "I'm worried about actual things. Many actual things that are actually important."

"My nails are important," I told him. "I need professional help."

"You can paint your own toes! The shit I'm worried about doesn't have an easy solution. Like my daughter failing out of school. Like paying my damn loan. Like my ex disappearing. Like Alistair's medical bills. Fuck." He put his hand over her eyes. "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

I thought back through what he'd said. I really was excellent in emergencies, and some of these issues seemed very dire. He did need solutions, immediate ones. "Do you mean that Maeve didn't pass her classes?" I asked.

"I only have the one daughter. She pulled her grades to Ds and a C so she passed in the end, but it was close."

I didn't know her except by sight, so this was going to be a difficult problem to diagnose. She didn't come around the bar very often but she did create a lot of noise on the ceiling above our heads, which was the floor of the apartment that she and Dex shared. "Why did she almost fail?" I questioned him.

"Did you do well in school yourself?" he asked me back, and his voice was full of sarcasm.

"Yes, I did! I did very well. I could have gone on to college if I'd wanted to, but I didn't."

"What did you want to do?" he asked me.

"Nothing. But I ended up working for my dad, because my mom told me that I had to do something."

"You literally wanted to do nothing? You planned to lie around all day and get that personal care you talked about?" he asked, and I shrugged. I hadn't had much idea of what I wanted except to have fun.

"What did you do after high school? I know you weren't worried about your own personal care," I sniffed, eyeing him.

"I joined up," he said. "Air Force."

"Really?"

"Why do you sound so doubtful?" He sounded offended, himself.

"I can't imagine you taking orders," I explained. "You always sound so bossy."

"I sound bossy when I talk to you because I'm your damn boss," he advised me, and I guessed that was true. "I did fine in the service, but it wasn't going to work for my whole life. There was a lot going on back then."

"Let's return to your problems now, rather than half a century ago," I suggested, and he started to tell me exactly how many years it had been since he'd left the Air Force but I interrupted. "Why did Maeve almost fail her classes?" I asked again.

“Because she had to change schools in the middle of the year and she says she hates the new place. High school is hard, isn’t it? The social stuff and the meanness. I’m glad it’s finally summer vacation. She was miserable, crying all the time.”

“And with the skin she has, you must really be able to tell,” I said, nodding in understanding. “She probably turns into a big, red blotch when she’s upset.”

Dex was already towering, like a few inches above six feet. And suddenly, he seemed to grow taller. And also, it seemed like his chest expanded until he was even wider and stronger, and he absolutely menaced. “Are you saying that my daughter is ugly?”

“No! But I’m saying that she must get red when she cries because her skin is like porcelain. I think she’s very pretty,” I volunteered, “and I’m a very critical person about looks.”

“Why?”

“Why am I critical? Because looks are so important. They’re what people care about,” I explained.

“That’s bullshit but it’s one of the things that makes Maeve upset, I think.” He put his hand up on his head, over the military-short cut he had there. “Her hair.”

“You mean she’s worried about being a redhead?” I wondered where she got the color, because his was so dark it was almost black.

“She talks about dying it and cutting it all off. But she also wants to keep it because...” He stopped staring out the window and focused on me. “Don’t you have anything to do around here? I thought I asked you to spray and wipe down the tables and chairs.”

“This is more interesting,” I said, but he slapped a rag and a bottle of disinfectant on the bar.

“Get after it,” he commanded, and maybe he wouldn’t have been good at taking orders, but he could definitely dish them out.

I did pretty much as he said, in that I sprayed the furniture. The rag was very disgusting, though, and I didn't want to touch it too much. I moved it slightly but no, I didn't ever like to wipe. Earlier in the evening, I had overheard some of the customers complaining that the tables were slightly wet and sticky due to my style of cleaning.

The bar had been busy that night, not as much as on the weekends but enough to really interfere with my breaks. I took them when I could and hung out with Alistair, but he mostly did what Dex's signs directed and kept working hard in his way. My feet and my back were both hurting now as I dabbed at the tables, but something about the way Dex watched me did make me try harder than I had at my dad's restaurant. Anyway, I seemed to be moving more and moving faster here at the Crookstown, and that made my muscles ache despite the excellent shape I was in due to my daily workouts to maintain my model figure.

Dex was behind the bar, dealing with the tabs and the till, when I sat back down in my spot at the end of the counter, sighing. "I'll have a water," I said. "Small cubes only."

"Help yourself." He stalked off toward the safe in the storage room with money from the register in his hand.

I sighed again, but I was very thirsty so I did walk behind the bar to help myself. And then I kept going through the door and up the stairs to their apartment. I hadn't been up here before but I found that unfortunately, the stairs were just as dingy as the rest of the Crookstown. There was another door at the top and I knocked on it hard enough that Maeve would hear me over the baseball game that had enthralled Alistair on the downstairs TV.

She jerked it open, and then she stared at me. "You're the waitress," she said, her mouth pursed up like she'd had it when she'd seen the former server puking up her guts in the alley.

"I am but I also have a lot of experience in hair and clothes styling," I said. "I plan to be a model."

"Yeah, I plan to be a butterfly," she said, pursing up even more.

“Your dad told me that you had trouble in school because you have self-esteem issues,” I mentioned, and she turned absolutely brick red.

“He said what?”

“So I’m here to help you,” I continued, and went ahead inside. “Where’s your closet?” Luckily I found it without her help, because she was busy sputtering in the living room. “You’re kind of Victorian-bohemian?” I asked, flicking through the hangers. “That’s the look you’re going for?”

“Get the hell out of my clothes.”

“I like that for you,” I said. “You’ve definitely got that classic bone structure. And your hair—”

“What about it?” she dared me. “Go on and say it!”

“Ok. I was going to tell you that it’s gorgeous. My mom is a stylist and she could never, ever create that color with her chemicals, no matter how she tried. Did you know that only two percent of people in the world have natural red hair? It’s a recessive gene. It’s science,” I explained.

“No one in my school does,” she muttered.

“Yeah, it’s great that you stand out like that,” I agreed. “Since I’m of slightly smaller stature and have golden brown hair, I have to employ a lot of behavioral strategies. And use my breasts, of course.”

“You’ve got a great pair,” Maeve said.

“Thanks,” I told her. “So do you.”

“Do you really think my hair is...ok?”

“I think it’s amazing,” I told her. “If I were you, I’d do long layers around my face. Do you have good scissors?”

And a few minutes later, we were in the bathroom, which was not any larger than the one I shared with my mom and was clearly split between her and her dad. There was a shaving kit on a shelf and I saw men’s underwear in the hamper, boxer briefs. I selected a towel from the rack and put it around Maeve’s shoulders.

“I can’t believe I’m letting you do this,” she said.

“I always cut my friends’ hair and I do my mom’s, too. And my dad’s. I did my boyfriend’s,” I said. I used her brush to smooth out the long, silky, red strands. It was utterly healthy.

“Who’s your boyfriend?” she asked.

“Nobody anymore.” I sighed, thinking of him. “I was with this great guy. The perfect guy.”

“Really?” For the first time that I’d seen, her face looked animated with something other than anger or disgust. She was interested. “Why did you break up? Did he dump you?”

“No! I broke up with him.” I yanked a little at a tangle.

“Ow. Why would you break up with ‘the perfect guy?’” Maeve imitated my voice when she said the words, like I talked so high or something.

“Well, it was a mutual decision.” I looked in the mirror and her blue eyes looked back steadily. “Fine! He broke up with me. I jumped in and said it first because I knew what was coming, but really...yeah. He dumped me.”

“Why? You’re so pretty. You’re beautiful,” she went on as she stared at me in the mirror. “Your skin is perfect and so’s your face. And, like, all this,” she said, waving a hand over her body. “It’s ideal.”

“I do a lot to keep all this up,” I said and also gestured over myself. “And I work hard on my skin, my hair, my nails, and my makeup. But my boyfriend still wasn’t into me. I guess he was for a while but then, no matter what I did, I couldn’t hold onto him. I played every card I knew.”

“Like what?” she asked.

I kept cutting her hair, trimming and shaping, as I detailed my boyfriend playbook for her. I’d cried, pouted, faked illness, played mute and ignored him, flirted with other guys, withheld sex, screwed his brains out, everything. “It didn’t work,” I said flatly. “Nothing worked. He didn’t want me anymore. I wasn’t...” I stopped.

“What?” she asked, but I didn’t want to say it. I wasn’t enough, ok? I wasn’t what he wanted because I didn’t have it, that quality that would have made him love me forever. Someone else did, though, and he’d wanted her, wanted her for keeps.

“He’s married now,” I concluded. “He married another girl and they have a baby, and they’re a family and they live in his house together making lasagna and cupcakes or something. That’s what he was after all along.”

“You didn’t want to get married?” She leaned forward, listening closely.

“I didn’t want his little house and I’ve never wanted a family,” I said. “But he was so damn hot.” Perfection, actually. My mouth watered when I thought of his body, his beautiful face.

Maeve sat back, her lips twisted in that disapproving look again. “He was ‘hot?’ That’s not why you’re with someone. You’re together because you love him so much that you can’t believe that you were really alive before you met him.”

“Is that right?” I kept cutting as she worked herself up.

“You were going along every day, making toast and waiting for the bus or whatever, and he was in the world but you didn’t know him and you can’t even fathom how that could be true, that you thought it was an acceptable life without him in it,” she told me. “You could also think that he’s hot, but there has to be more than that. There has to be *love*. Without it, there’s just screwing. Not that I would know.” That last part had been in almost a whisper, a sad, sullen whisper.

And I totally got it. “Oh, ok. That’s the problem you’re having,” I said. “It’s not your hair or a new school or whatever your dad thinks. You’re in love with some guy and he doesn’t love you back.”

She glared at me in the mirror, ready to fight.

“It’s ok. I get how it feels. My boyfriend dumped me, remember? And then he married someone else. I moved four

hours away because I couldn't even stand to drive on his side of town anymore. I get it," I repeated, and then tears brimmed in her ice-blue eyes. She opened her mouth but as she started to speak, we heard the door to the apartment fling open and a second later, Dex crashed into the bathroom.

"Where in the hell have you been?" he yelled.

"Right here!" Maeve answered. She swiped over her face with a wad of toilet paper, not sad anymore but totally pissed off. "I've been sitting on my ass in this apartment, like I always do!"

"No, not you. I'm talking about you." He pointed in my direction.

"Me? I've been here for a while, too," I said, and turned Maeve's chin so I could finish the last layer of her hair. There was quite a pile of it on the ground that someone besides me would have to deal with, but the haircut was stunning. So was she.

"You've been in this apartment the whole time?" he demanded.

"What's your problem?" I asked him.

"You disappeared! Your car is parked outside and I thought you went out and got—I didn't know what happened to you," he sputtered. "Alistair said he hadn't seen you and he's going ape shit right now."

"Oh, no! I better go tell him that I'm ok." I had to elbow my way past Dex because the bathroom wasn't big enough for one, let alone the three of us.

"Tell Alistair? First tell *me* what you're doing." He grabbed my arm. "I've been running all over the neighborhood looking for you and I was just coming up here to find my phone to call the cops. Why are you in my house with my daughter?"

"She cut my hair." Maeve also came out of the bathroom, smoothing the new layers, and her father turned her.

“She did?” He bent and studied her carefully and then said, “Look at you.” His voice was now totally calm, not angry at all, and it was very deep and nice when he wasn’t using it to yell. “It looks beautiful,” he told his daughter, and I agreed. He called her something that I didn’t understand and then they smiled at each other.

I hadn’t noticed before how alike they were. She certainly didn’t have his strong jaw and the rest of her features were also much more delicate than his hard, solid ones. But they had the same eyes, for sure, and the same smile. I guessed I’d never seen either of them with a happy expression until this moment, and they could thank me for that. I walked downstairs to tell Alistair that I was fine.

He really was upset, all red in the face like he got when customers challenged him or he messed up an order, as if I cared in the least when I brought the wrong drinks to a table. He also reached out and took my arm. “I thought you’d been...” But just like Dex, he didn’t fill in what he thought might have happened to me while I was doing my styling work.

“No, I’m totally fine,” I assured him, and patted his hand. “We were playing with Maeve’s hair.”

“Her hair is like lava,” he said, and I could tell that he meant it as a compliment.

“It looks really nice the way I did it. Next, she and I are going to talk wardrobe because I think she’s wearing clothes big enough for you.” I appreciated her stylistic direction, but I questioned the sizing.

“I gave her one of my t-shirts that she liked,” he said, and I nodded.

“Dex is still upstairs. Do you want me to drive you home instead?” I asked. That was their routine every night. Dex would lock up very carefully so that no one could get inside the building while Maeve was there, then the three of us would first walk to my car to drop me, and then they would continue to his old Jeep so he could take Alistair to wherever he lived.

Alistair had a car that had been his mom's, but he said it never worked very well.

“Do you mind?”

No, because I wanted to delay going back to my apartment. I really wasn't looking forward to having another talk with my mom about my dad. My bad breakup and desire to crack into modeling weren't the only reasons that we'd moved to Detroit—I'd also wanted to separate my parents. They'd spent so many years fighting and being miserable together, and now I had to keep my mother convinced that her current unhappiness was only temporary. A divorce was the best option.

“I want to drive new places so I can learn my way around,” I told Alistair. “What if I get a call for a photo shoot or a commercial or something? I should know the roads even without my phone helping me.” I'd be a real Detroitter, here for the long term.

“I don't have a phone like that,” he pointed out, which I knew and found extremely odd. “I know my way around because I grew up in the city and I've never lived anywhere else.”

“That's how I'm going to be from now on,” I told him.

Before we left, I wrote a note to Dex on a napkin, just in case he was going to freak again. “Taking A. Bye,” I scrawled with the pen he used to tally up the tabs, because seriously? There was really no computer here. Then Alistair locked the door carefully behind us so that no one could get in while Dex was upstairs and not guarding the place.

“If you're going to live in the city, you need to learn to be more careful,” Alistair mentioned when he saw me watching. “When you leave the bar, you never look around for trouble.”

“I guess I should start,” I said, and glanced up and down the dark street. He gave me more tips as we walked to my car and more as he put the seat back as far as it would go. He still had to sit with his knees pulled up.

“Did you ever play basketball?” I wondered. Because he was actually close to seven feet tall.

“No. I was never good at sports,” he said. “Coaches always wanted me to try out for their teams but then when they saw me play, they’d say, ‘Never mind.’ I don’t like how you have to get close to other guys and push them. I could hurt someone by mistake.”

It was surely true that he didn’t want to hurt anyone. He didn’t even like to kill the roaches that sometimes snuck into the bar from the alley, and would try to capture them and put them back outside. It was disgusting.

“Didn’t you say you used to be a bouncer at the bar where you and Dex worked before?” I asked him. “I bet you didn’t enjoy it.”

“I didn’t at all. I would try to talk to people and explain why they needed to leave or why they couldn’t have more drinks, but that didn’t work very well.”

“Drunk people are tough to reason with,” I pointed out.

“Sometimes they wanted to fight. I hate fighting,” he said, and sighed. I looked over and saw him touch his cheek.

“Did someone cut you like that? The scars look fresh.”

“A few guys did it, together. It hurt a lot and Dex had to hit them with a bat to make them stop, and somebody had a gun and he almost got shot.”

“Dex almost got *shot*?” I asked, my voice high.

“And then Mr. McCarthy offered him the Crookstown and that was when Maeve came to live with him, too, and he thought we should take it. It would be safer, he said, and I didn’t have to be a bouncer anymore.”

I had several questions but Alistair took a moment to give me directions, telling me which way to turn and which block to avoid at night. “Maeve didn’t always live with her dad?” I asked when he paused. “And what did you mean when you said that ‘we’ took the offer of the bar? Do you own part of the Crookstown with Dex?”

“I don’t own the bar. I meant that he and I go together,” Alistair explained. “For a long time, from when I was a kid, we’ve always been friends. Maeve lived with her mom, Christina, and Dex only got to see her sometimes, not as much as he wanted. Christina kept moving, all around Detroit and once to Ohio, and they were hard to find.”

“Where did she go? Where’s Maeve’s mom now?” I pressed on, because that had been one of the problems that Dex had complained about: the disappearance of his ex.

“She had difficult problems,” Alistair said, very solemn. “Problems that made it hard for her to be a good parent.”

“Like what?”

He didn’t want to tell me. He got very twisty in the seat, like he did when someone demanded a lot of drinks at the bar and Dex wasn’t there.

“Ok, you don’t have to say,” I soothed. But I really wanted to know, so I would have to try my luck with Dex later. “Where did she go this time?”

“We’re not sure. Maeve called him around Christmas and said her mom hadn’t been there for three days. She’d been alone for all that time. Poor Maeve.” And now he sounded just like he did when he worried about the eggs in the nest, his voice a little hoarse and frightened.

“She’s ok now,” I reassured him. “Wait until you see her hair. It looks beautiful.” I looked over. “I can do yours, too. I’m awesome with clippers and it kind of seems like you cut your own.”

“Dex did it.”

That explained it. Dex’s hair was so short it was nearly invisible, but Alistair’s was longer and...odd. Like maybe Dex had shut his eyes when he trimmed or hadn’t been able to reach well.

“Your name is very fancy,” I said. “Did you ever have a nickname? My real name is Luanne, but I never liked it. Everyone has always called me Lulu.”

“My mom liked fancy things, old British stuff. Alistair was a name in a book she liked. Everyone has always called me that, just Alistair.”

“Can I call you Ally? It’s friendlier,” I said. “If you don’t care.”

“Does that mean we’re friends?”

“Sure,” I told him, and I watched him nod.

“I’ll be your first friend in Detroit. Right?”

“That’s true,” I said. I’d lied to the girls up north and said that I knew plenty of people, that I was going out all the time, but not really. “Good. I’m glad we’re friends.”

And he nodded again, so he was glad, too.

Chapter 3

“You’re back? And you’ve turned my bar into a beauty parlor?”

I stared at Dex. “What do you mean? And who says ‘beauty parlor?’” I checked Ally’s sideburns in the bar mirror. “Did you want a haircut too?”

“No, I don’t,” he answered, but he ran his hand over his microscopically short hair like he was checking it. “I thought you quit last night. Instead I find you here today with your ass on the bar and clippers in your hand.”

“You look great,” I told Ally. “You’re all set. Oh, hold on.” I used the bar towel to wipe away the little hairs that might have been tickling him, adding to the brown pile on the floor. It certainly wasn’t as bad as what I’d trimmed off Maeve’s head, but there was a bit of a mess there.

“Thanks, Lulu.” He smiled at me but then looked at our boss and slid off the stool fast, forgetting to get me down as he hurried away from Dex’s anger while muttering something about a broom.

“Help me,” I told Dex, and held out my arms.

“I’ll ask again,” he said, and he didn’t make a move in my direction. He crossed his arms instead and frowned. “Why are you here with your butt up on my bar, a place where people eat and drink?”

“No one eats at this place. You don’t have a menu and they would be risking botulism from whatever food might come from that old storage room in the basement. But why did you think I wouldn’t be at work?” I asked him back.

“Your note. You said you were taking a bye,” he told me.

“I don’t know what that is, and what I wrote was that I was taking A. I meant that I was taking Ally home,” I explained, “and then I nicely added a farewell to you. Bye. Did you know that he lives in a really scary building? I didn’t like it at all.”

“He’s ok.” Dex frowned more, though. “You were driving around by yourself in his neighborhood at night?”

“He showed me where to go and told me to be careful,” I said. “Was Maeve happier today with her hair so pretty?”

His face relaxed out of the frown. “Yeah, actually. She likes what you did a lot. Thank you.”

Those last two words had been hard for him to get out. “You’re welcome,” I answered. “Ally needed a trim, too, and now he looks less like a dog cut his hair.”

“I cut his hair,” Dex said, and I shook my head.

“You’re terrible at it. I’ll take it from now on, until I get into modeling so much that I don’t have time, and then he’ll have to go to a salon. That’s what people say in this century, not ‘beauty parlor’ anymore,” I explained.

He ignored that. “When do you think you’ll start that modeling? I’m assuming it means you’ll be actually quitting here. I’ll circle the day on the calendar.”

“Right, because you use a paper one like a hundred years ago,” I agreed. “I don’t know when I’ll start my career. I’m having a hard time tracking down the guy who took the pictures for my portfolio and I really need that.”

“What do you mean that you have to track him down?”

“I mean that he was supposed to give me my shots weeks and weeks ago, and I’ve texted and called so much and he never answers. I met him on location for the photo shoot and later, when I went to the place where he’d told me that he had his office, I couldn’t find it.”

Dex’s eyes narrowed. “Did you give him a deposit?”

“I paid upfront. That’s how they do it in the business,” I explained.

“Oh, that’s what the guy who took your money told you?”

Well, yeah. I shrugged.

“How much?”

I told him and he whistled. “You had all that lying around?”

“No. I borrowed from my mom and I put more on my credit card. I owe a lot, which was why I needed a job at the Crookstown. I thought I’d get better tips here.”

“You would if you hustled a little more. What’s the guy’s name? The photographer?”

I told him that, too, and then held out my arms again, wiggling my fingers. “Can you get me down from here?”

“Yeah, because you need to wipe it again.” But he did finally come over and put his hands around my waist. He lifted me carefully and put me on the floor. “There. Now you can get to work,” he said, but we actually stood looking at each other. He wasn’t touching me anymore but it was like I could still feel his hold on me. I’d rested my own hands on his broad shoulders and had also felt the muscle beneath his ratty t-shirt, just for a moment but long enough that it had made quite an impression. My palms tingled a little.

“I’ll clean up,” Ally announced as he cautiously joined us. He’d decided that he’d given Dex long enough to cool down, I guessed, and had returned from the storage room with the broom. That meant that Dex stepped away and returned to his usual spot near the register, but only after he tossed a nasty rag and plunked down the spray bottle for me to use.

Since it was another Friday night, we were busy immediately, from almost the moment that Dex opened the door. A few regulars did voice their appreciation of Ally’s haircut, which both of us enjoyed, and I offered to do more cuts (for a fee and if I could convince Dex to let me set up a temporary station in the corner of the room).

I explained to one customer who’d asked for a trim that I did need permission from the bar owner, and I didn’t yet have it. “You can wrap Dex around your little finger,” the guy answered me. “Just flash him your...” He stopped when he must have noticed my expression. “Your pretty blue eyes.”

“They’re brown,” I let him know. “Like bourbon, the drink that’s going to end up in your lap if you mention my boobs.” He didn’t leave a very good tip after that, even though I had tried the hustle thing that Dex had talked about and was bringing orders faster and trying to take them better, too. I was definitely more tired at the end of the night and he looked at the tabs several times before he raised his eyebrows at me.

“Nice,” he said. “You served a lot more.”

I gathered the stupid sheets of paper he used instead of a computer and scanned them. “About one and a half times more than last Friday,” I said.

“Did you just do that math in your head?” he asked. He sounded shocked.

“Yeah. I think I told you that I was good in school.”

“That may have been one of the many things you congratulated yourself about, I guess,” he answered.

“I can do mental math very easily. But you obviously can’t, so it would be better if we had a computer to run all the tabs rather than using the little bits of paper you like to spread around and then you get mad if someone, totally not on purpose, spills a tiny bit of liquid—”

“You dumped three glasses. Three full glasses,” he reminded me. “Not a tiny bit of liquid. I had to dry off all the sheets then try to guess what I’d written on them.”

“Which you wouldn’t have to do, if you had a computer. I wouldn’t spill my tray on that. Probably,” I added, because you never knew. I wasn’t using the almond oil on my hands anymore which was leaving my skin not half as hydrated as it should have been, but I was also not dropping as much stuff, like trays and drinks.

“I can’t afford a computer,” Dex told me. “Not now. And I wouldn’t have time to mess with the set up and learn how to run that crap, anyway.”

“Why are you poor?”

“Because, like you, I owe people money. Unlike you, I’m hustling for it.”

“Didn’t I just figure out that I served fifty percent more drinks than last Friday?”

“That’s not saying much,” he informed me. “I served three times what you did and I was also behind the bar.”

Well, I checked his chicken scratch and that happened to be correct, so I let it go. “How much did you spend to buy this place? How much do you owe?”

Unlike me, he didn’t share the exact number. “Enough.”

“And you paid for Ally’s medical bills when he got cut?” I pressed. “He told me you saved him, too, and you almost got shot.”

“It wasn’t very close,” he said. “The guy couldn’t aim for shit. But yeah, I helped him out some. He should get the scars looked at too, like by a dermatologist or plastic surgeon or something.” He shook his head. “He doesn’t like how they make him look scary.”

“Scarier,” I corrected. “When he’s really not scary at all. I think he’s the sweetest person I’ve ever known.”

“He is,” Dex agreed. “He always has been.”

“How did you two meet?”

“Alistair has been living in that same apartment forever. He grew up there with his mom before she passed away. One of my first bartending jobs was on that block and I’d always see him wandering around looking for animals to help,” he told me. “He was growing so fast, he was always hungry and his mom didn’t have enough to keep him fed the way he needed it.”

“Did you help him then, too?” I asked.

“I mean, he was just a kid,” he answered, which meant yes.

“And you guys have been friends ever since?”

“He told me that the two of you are also friends.” And something about that statement made him get the ferocious

look again, that thing where he seemed to expand until he was double in size, like a when a frill-necked lizard stood up on its back legs and extended its ruff to seem threatening (which I'd used as an example of defensive prey behavior in a paper I'd written for my bio class). Not that Dex would ever be a prey animal! He had "predator" written all over him.

I got kind of a weird feeling in my stomach. He did, didn't he? He really looked as if he would be, like, the king of the jungle, as if he'd be throwing back his head and roaring. Powerful. Deadly. It was kind of...damn. It was kind of hot.

"Well?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

"I said, Alistair thinks that the two of you are friends. He likes that you're calling him a nickname, that you gave him a haircut. He's a good guy but he doesn't have experience with women. If you're thinking of moving in on him, think again."

"Moving in on him?" I echoed.

"I've known women like you," Dex said. "Beautiful girls who use their looks and their bodies to lead men around. And I don't want you to screw with Alistair. Do you understand now?"

The funny feeling, the warm emotion I'd had in my stomach, fled. "I'm not doing that! I did want to be his friend, only his friend. And what the hell do you mean that you've known women like me? You don't know me at all!"

"I meant that I know your type," he explained. "You're looking for some guy to take care of you, to be at your beck and call. Your parents pandered to you and you want that from a man, too. Alistair would put you on a pedestal like you want but he's not—"

"I'm not a type," I interrupted. "You don't know anything!"

He looked at the ceiling and shook his head. "One thing about working in bars for twenty years is that you see it all. I've had you pegged since the day you strutted in here, acting like you owned the place. A spoiled little girl who didn't want

to pick up dirty plates at her former job, who didn't want to get a job at all because she just wanted to do nothing. Isn't that what you said? I'm sure you've spent your life playing games with men, trying to bend them to your every whim. Don't try it with Alistair, that's all I'm saying. Don't try to use him for fun."

"Shut up."

"Lulu, come on. We're both people with some life experience and we don't have to pretend, right? I'm telling you straight and you don't have to fake tears over it."

There was nothing fake about my reaction to how he'd just insulted me. I turned and tried to grab my purse from where I always stored it in a cabinet under the register, but I had trouble getting it. I sniffed hard and pulled, and when it caught on something, I pulled harder, as hard as I could, and I heard the leather catch and maybe rip as it shot out. Damn, I loved that bag, and I hated my boss.

"Come on," he said again. "You're not really crying. Wait for me to walk you to your car—Lulu, wait!"

I wasn't waiting for him, the asshole. I would rather have fought six guys in the street than stay for another second with him in that dump of a bar. I pushed Dex out of the way when he stood in front of me and I went home. And I wasn't going back to the Crookstown, not ever.

∞

"Yes, it is the Zalewski residence," I heard my mom announce at the front door. "What did you say your name was?" I was focused on getting the corner lashes with my mascara wand and missed the response, but I did hear her continue, "Have a seat on the couch and I'll get Lulu."

She stuck her head around the corner and gestured to me. "Your boss is here," she whispered.

"What? Who?" I hissed back. Because I didn't have a boss. It had been three days since I'd quit my job at that hellhole bar. Even if I hadn't said the exact words, by now my meaning was clear, even to idiots. Idiots like—

“Dex Connolly. That’s what he said his name is,” my mom told me, her voice still low. It wasn’t that far to the living room, after all. I guessed that she hadn’t noticed that I’d quit, that I’d been around the apartment for the past few days and hanging out on the couch, mostly looking at my phone. I hadn’t been at that stupid bar and obviously, I wouldn’t be going back. “You never told me how good-looking he is!”

“He isn’t.” He was an old, mean jerk. “I’ll be out in a sec to get him to leave,” I said, and turned back to the mirror on the dining room table to finish my makeup. It was more than a few seconds before I strolled into the other room, where my mom perched in a chair with Dex across from her, looking more uncomfortable than I’d ever seen him. He was certainly out of place on my mom’s pink couch with the small arms and low back. It was really pretty but difficult to sit on even for someone smaller, and if it didn’t break under Dex’s weight I would have been surprised.

“Lulu, there you are,” he announced, and immediately stood when I came in. I’d been only ten feet away and listening to my mom question him, but he didn’t need to know that. She’d pried a little information out of him and I’d learned that he had been born and raised in Detroit but both of his parents were from Ireland (interesting), that he’d been married to Maeve’s mom (which I hadn’t known), that he was thirty-six (younger than I’d thought and as old as the hills).

“I need to get to work,” my mom said, and left reluctantly after slowly gathering up her things to bring to the salon, waiting until the last possible moment to go. We both said goodbye and Dex added that it was nice to meet her.

“Speaking of work, I haven’t seen you at the Crookstown lately,” he mentioned when she had closed the apartment door. He seated himself again very carefully on the pink couch, taking up just the very edge and not leaning back, which was smart because the wood frame really cut into you. Not that he was smart, though. He was an idiot.

“I don’t work there anymore. I quit,” I let him know, since he was obviously too dumb to figure it out for himself. “Why

are you here?”

It took him a minute to formulate the beginning of what I thought might turn into an apology. “I figured you might have been staying away because of what I said to you,” he told me.

“You mean when you suggested that I was going to use Ally because I’m a heartless slut?”

“I don’t think I said that. No, I didn’t say that,” he disagreed.

“That was what you meant, you asshole. There are plenty of other low-paying jobs I can get in places that aren’t a cesspool, with bosses who don’t insult me. Get out.” I hadn’t sat, and I stamped my foot and pointed at the door.

Dex didn’t move. “I’m sorry. Ok? I’m sorry.” He seemed annoyed at having to say the actual words.

“No, it’s not ok. I still hate you. You still think that about me, that I don’t have any feelings or something.” And then I got so mad at myself, because I started to cry in front of him, again! “You don’t know my ‘type.’ I’m not the kind of woman who would use Ally. You said I was spoiled and stupid and lazy, too. Well, you’re rude! You were mean to me for no reason at all.” I reached for some of the cotton balls I’d left on the coffee table because I’d been doing my own pedicure there, and I dabbed at my eyes. Great, I’d just ruined the makeup I’d put on! Dex was to blame for that, too.

He watched me, just sat there and watched me cry. Then he sighed. “Lulu, I am sorry. I shouldn’t have said any of that to you.”

“You shouldn’t have thought it!” I retorted.

“I was worried about Alistair,” he went on. “He gets really attached. Last year, one of his cats died and I couldn’t get him out of his apartment for a week. I figured you’d be moving on from the Crookstown soon enough and he’d be sad that his friend had gone, and I really was worried that you were going to hurt his feelings by pretending to like him.”

“I do like him.”

“I was wrong about that,” he said. “I’m sorry. He’s upset with me too, and we both want you to come back to work.”

“Even though I’m spoiled and just wanting some man to take care of me?”

He sighed again. “I still think you’re a brat. You don’t work as hard as you should and you don’t have much initiative. I know you only spray the furniture and don’t wipe it. You refuse to even think about cleaning in the bathrooms. You get your tabs mixed up. You’re impolite to customers at times and you talk back to me all the time. You’re not a good employee, just in general.”

I stamped my foot even harder. “Get the hell out of here. Now!”

He still didn’t move. “I would like you to come back and work for me.”

“Your help-wanted signs stapled on the telephone poles aren’t getting you any results?”

“I haven’t looked for another waitress. No stapling.”

“Why?” I asked him. “Why would you want me to work for you when you think I’m so awful?”

Dex took another long moment and I opened my mouth to order him out or say that I was calling the police, but then he did speak. “Maeve’s pissed at me, too. The regulars are asking where you are. They seem disappointed that no one’s there spilling on them or dropping trays.”

“I only did that three times! Maybe four.”

“I’m asking for your forgiveness.” He paused. “I don’t think I was wrong about everything, though.”

“This is a truly shitty apology,” I told him.

He kept going. “I’m sorry, very sorry, that I hurt your feelings. I really didn’t think I would.”

“You didn’t think I had any to hurt. Jerk. Asshole.”

He ignored that and took an envelope from his pocket and held it toward me. “I got something for you. A peace

offering.”

“What is that?” I didn’t move to take it until he swung it back and forth and then I grabbed the envelope and ripped it open. “Money?” I asked as I saw green bills inside.

“That’s what you paid the photographer for your pictures. He was never going to make your portfolio. It was all a scam he’s been running.”

“How did you get this?” I demanded.

“I asked for it,” he said. “Now you can pay off your debts.”

“I asked him for a refund so many times! When I went to the address he’d said was his office, it was a used car lot, not a photography studio, and no one there recognized his name. He never responded to me in any way, not ever.”

“Maybe I spoke in a manner that he understood better,” Dex answered. “I went to where he lives and he was happy to give me your money back, in cash.”

“You found out where that guy lives? You went over there to get my money for me?” I didn’t quite understand. “Why?”

“Because he shouldn’t have taken advantage of you.” He hesitated. “And I shouldn’t have been an asshole to you, and I’m very sorry. Yes, you’re a terrible waitress, and yes, you’re a brat, but I’m sorry for what I said. You’re not a type. You’re a person, and you have feelings. I’m sorry I hurt them.”

I nodded.

“Are we even?” he asked.

“I have some conditions if I’m going to come back to work at the Crookstown,” I announced. “Like I’m not going to touch that rag that you want me to use to wipe everything because it should be burned, except the smoke and flames would be toxic. And I want a raise. And designated breaks.”

“You’ll come back to the Crookstown, no conditions, same salary, no breaks. Besides the ones you’re already taking, which are too many anyway,” he countered.

I considered. “Fine. It’s a deal.”

And Dex’s lips broke into that rare smile he had. He got up and held out his hand and I shook it. His fingers clenched hard around mine for only a moment before he let go, and then we both stood in awkward silence.

He looked at our living room. “This is a very nice apartment,” he commented. “Lucky you don’t have to pay rent for it.”

Of course, he remembered me saying that. “My mom leased it because she thinks that she deserves this kind of place,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Because she and my dad are getting a divorce and she says that she wants to live a little. He always made her scrimp and scrape. He does really well with his restaurant but he still would never open up his wallet for her as much as she wanted him too, even though it was her money that started him off. It was her job doing hair that made his diner possible.”

“That’s too bad they’re splitting up.”

“No, not really. Ever since I could remember, all they’ve done is fight. Yell at the top of their lungs, throw things at the walls and at each other, that kind of fighting. I used to want them to get along. Like, you know how your parents would tell you to be friends with other kids? I didn’t understand why they couldn’t do that themselves. But now, I’m glad that they’re apart. I don’t have to referee anymore.” I shook my head. “I don’t understand why they got married in the first place.”

“My dad was married seven times.”

“Seriously? *Seven*?”

Dex nodded. “Every time, he would tell me, ‘She’s the keeper, Dexter. This is it.’ Then they’d get divorced.”

“Why didn’t he just date a lot?”

“He believed in marriage, although I can’t really understand how he kept the faith after divorce number three or

four.” He made a sound that was probably amusement, or maybe disgust.

“Where was your mom in that order?” I wondered.

“She was his first wife, so I had six stepmothers. No other brothers or sisters, though, not by blood. I have a few stepsiblings around but we don’t keep in touch. You don’t have siblings, right?”

“Is that why you think I turned out spoiled? Because I’m an only child?”

“I think your parents let you get away with murder and never made you work for anything. That’s why you’re spoiled.”

“I did work!” I protested. “At my dad’s restaurant, I worked.”

“Is that the place where he let you oil up your hands so you dropped the dishes? What else didn’t he see?” Dex asked me. “No, hold on. We’re going to get into another argument and I don’t want to. Come on, I have to pick up Maeve and then we’ll go to the Crookstown.”

Dex’s car was not as nice as the one that my dad had given me on my sixteenth birthday, the one I still drove, but it was fun to get chauffeured around. I always took the wheel for my mom and me because she hated driving in the city, and in fact the reason we’d rented our current apartment was because the salon where she’d gotten a job was on the first floor of the building. Her commute was quick.

And this commute was hot, because Dex’s car didn’t have air conditioning. Was that even possible? Didn’t every car have to by law or something? I played with the knob and the vents for a while before he barked out, “It doesn’t work. Open the window.”

“My hair!” I protested, but the heat in the car was going to melt my makeup, so I had to be ok with the tradeoff. I took a twist tie, one of the many small pieces of garbage he had floating around his car, and made a ponytail. The breeze did feel good and I enjoyed having my hair off my neck and back

for once. I almost always wore it down when I was out of my own bedroom due to the sex appeal aspect, but the moment I was alone, it went right into a knot.

A gum wrapper swirled up from the floor like a tiny tornado and I caught it before it flew out of the window. “I thought soldiers were supposed to be neat,” I commented.

“I was an airman, not a soldier. And that was a long time ago,” he answered. “I don’t have the time to be neat anymore.”

“It must have taken a while to get my money from the photographer,” I said. I’d left my mom’s share on her pillow and I could pay off my credit card, too, which made more room for pedicures. I was pretty bad at my own toes. “I can’t believe it was all a scam. He said he had so many connections, that he could help me get started in the business. I’m kind of at a disadvantage.”

“Because you’re so short?”

“I’m petite, yes, but I’m also old. Not as old as you, but old for modeling.”

“Thanks for pointing out my decrepitude. Yeah, the guy was a scam artist, and I’m glad I took the time off this morning to get your money back from him.”

“Time off from what?” I asked.

“See those tools in the back seat?” He pointed over his shoulder. “Before I go into the bar, I work as a handyman. Keeps up the cash flow.”

I twisted to stare at the big case he had on the seat behind us. “So, you have two jobs.”

“Three. The biggest one is being a dad to Maeve, and she’s working now, too. She’s doing a camp counselor thing, a junior counselor. She’s good with kids. She can play guitar really well and do all kinds of art stuff with them. I’m sure they love her.”

I heard how proud he was. His voice kind of vibrated with it. I thought about my own father and the expression on his

face when I'd dropped another load of dishes.

"We have to pick up Alistair, too, so you're going in the back with the tools," he let me know, and I closed my eyes and enjoyed the air blowing in through the window.

Maeve was waiting in front of a big elementary school, surrounded by packs of kids, parents, buses, and cars. It looked like she was trying to help organize some of the chaos, and we waited without any breeze or air conditioning until most of the crowd was gone. I used some of the papers on the floor to fan myself as they disbursed.

She still seemed reluctant to leave, though, even after Dex tapped on his horn. "Don't do that!" I ordered. "She's coming. She's not a squirrel you want to clear from the road."

"I know she's not a squirrel," he grouched at me. "We have to get to the bar." But he moved his hands away from the horn and waited more patiently, only tapping his thumbs a bunch of times in a repetitive rhythm until I pointed at them and shook my head.

"Now I can't fidget? Whose car is this?" he complained, but I grabbed his arm.

"Look! That's the guy!" I exclaimed.

"What guy?" And he totally turned the wrong way, looking across the street.

"The guy that Maeve likes! Oh, he's so cute!" I said as I watched them shyly speaking. Her hair, by the way, looked amazing.

"You're talking about my daughter, Maeve?" Dex growled. "Maeve and some man?"

"No, he's not a man! I'd say he looks about sixteen, right? Look at his shoes. I love them!"

"Sixteen? She's only fifteen!" he burst out.

"What's the difference?"

"Are you kidding me?" He grabbed the door handle like he was going to get out and I hung onto his arm with both

hands.

“Don’t you do anything! If you go over there and do your frill-necked lizard routine, she’ll never forgive you, not ever. Stay away from them and spy with me.”

“What are you saying about toads, now?”

“Lizard, not toad. You make yourself all big and scary when you get mad and if you do that to her boyfriends, she’ll kill you then die. Do not get out of this dirty car.”

“This car isn’t—”

“Oh, oh my Lord!” I clutched his arm. “Look at his body language! That’s interest. For sure.”

“He’s interested in her? What the fuck? A grown man is interested in my little girl?”

“She’s not little. She’s a woman, Dex. Almost, anyway.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” he moaned.

“Shh! She’s coming. Stop looking like that.”

“Like what? A frilly toad?”

“No, like you’re going to cry,” I said disdainfully. “Like, grow up.”

“If anyone needs to grow up, brat, it’s you. You’re the one who—”

“Oh, hi, Lulu,” Maeve said as I leaned out the window and waved. She had a flush in her beautiful skin that didn’t come from the Detroit summer heat, I was pretty sure. “Hi, Da.”

“Oh, hi,” I answered casually, and he managed a nod. “Dex is giving me a ride to the bar,” I explained.

“I thought he made you quit, like the third and fourth waitresses he had,” she commented. I climbed into the back, trying to nudge the thirty-ton toolbox out of my way.

I did not succeed in that effort. “He made them quit?” I asked her. “He pretended to me that he was the perfect employer. Like it was a mystery why there’d been nine different people in my job this year.”

“Hardly.” She told me more about the series of servers who had been my predecessors as we drove off.

“So, you go through staff like your dad did to wives?” I asked Dex, which got him talking again, mostly telling both of us how he was, in fact, the perfect employer.

I interrupted after a while. “Thank you,” I told him.

“For what?”

“Getting my money back. And rehiring me, I guess.”

He met my eyes in the rearview mirror. “You’re welcome, I guess.”

I watched out the window to learn the streets and let the wind pull my hair loose from the twist tie. It was a beautiful afternoon in the city.

Chapter 4

I looked at the name on my phone until the screen told me I had a missed call. Then I stuck it into the back pocket of my shorts.

“Lulu, may I ask you a question?”

I turned to Dex. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Do you plan to spend the rest of your shift standing at the end of the bar, or do you think you’ll actually get some of our customers served tonight?”

I rolled my eyes and tried to pick up the tray he’d already overloaded with drinks. No, it wasn’t happening. I removed two glasses, then two more. “That was my dad calling me,” I explained.

“So?”

“I know he’s calling because he’s trying to get back together with my mom.”

“Why does he want that? Don’t they argue a lot?” Ally asked, and I nodded at him. He knew a lot of the saga of my parents.

“They argue all the time and I think they hate each other,” I said. “I have no idea why he doesn’t want the divorce, unless it’s to save money. He hates spending money.”

“He got you that nice car you drive,” Dex pointed out, then shook his head. “Now is not the time for a conversation. Alistair, get another case of Seagram’s from the storage room. Lulu, take this tray. Go!”

I did spend an extra moment reminding Ally to close the door to the storage room, because there were rats in there, at least one. I knew that because he was trying to tame it like in a book he’d once read, and I was also trying to persuade him that it was a bad idea. We’d had several discussions about the Black Death.

“Why are you so involved in what your parents are doing?” Dex asked me later as we closed for the night.

“Why wouldn’t I be? I love both of them,” I answered.

“But they’re adults. You’re an adult. You should have separate lives.”

“I’ll remind you of that when Maeve’s boyfriend comes over,” I told him. No, he wasn’t a boyfriend. She and I had talked about it and I thought that he might have been interested, but so far, there was no move from him for anything more than a friendly chat. I was trying to encourage her to make a move herself, but despite how confident she acted in the bar, she was apparently very shy around this guy.

“My daughter is fifteen, not twenty.”

“I’m twenty-three,” I reminded him, and he told me that it was all the more reason that I should butt out.

“Get your own apartment. Stop putting yourself in the middle of their problems,” he advised.

“I don’t do that. They put me there,” I said. “They’ve always wanted me to take sides, like, to prove that they’re right and the other person is wrong, and I’m supposed to be the judge of it. I hate it.”

“Some people like to fight. They enjoy the arguing. My dad and his sixth wife would be an example,” he said. “They argued all the time, constantly, but they loved it.”

“Then why’d they get divorced and he moved on to number seven?”

“He loved to fight with her, but he also loved to cheat,” Dex said. “With every willing woman in the city of Detroit. His wives objected to that.”

“Yeah, I sure would. Is that why you got divorced, too?”

He stopped putting the caps on the beer taps. “What?”

“Did you cheat? Is that why you and Maeve’s mom split up? I’m sure you would have stuck around for your daughter, so I was guessing that your wife kicked you out.”

Dex got mad. Very mad. “You say the most annoying shit of anyone I’ve ever met,” he told me. “No, I didn’t cheat on Christina. I never would have done that.”

“Then what happened? Ally told me that they moved around all the time and you didn’t get to see Maeve as much as you wanted.”

“I’m going to tell him not to speak to you anymore.”

I waited.

“Christina and I got married too young. I was too young, and I was stupid.” He pointed his index finger at me. “Don’t say nothing’s changed.”

“I wasn’t saying a word.” I might have thought it, though.

“I was in the service and she thought that was exciting. The idea of it was,” he explained. “The reality wasn’t, not when I was gone and she was alone on some base, away from Detroit and all her friends. She left me. There. Are you happy?” he asked, scowling. “Now you know. I didn’t want to get a divorce, I didn’t want to break up our family, I wanted to be with Maeve. We split and Christina started to make up for the partying she’d missed out on while she’d been married to me. They moved around constantly and she hid from me, we went to court, I had lawyers and PIs and you name it. She settled down some in the last few years, though. It’s been better.”

“But you told me that she disappeared and Ally said that Maeve called you at Christmas because she’d been alone for days and she didn’t know where her mom was.”

“She told Maeve that she was going away with friends, which she wasn’t allowed to do per our custody agreement. Leaving a kid alone,” he said angrily. “If there’s a bad choice out there, Christina puts her name on it.”

“And she never came back? Did you call the police?”

“She’s texting Maeve sometimes, saying she’s ok. The police can’t do anything. She’s an adult who left voluntarily and since she’s still in contact, they’re not interested. They have actual crimes to solve without spending their time

looking for a woman who ran out on her kid and can't be bothered to come back. And that's it," he announced. "We're done talking about this."

Maybe he was, but I was still interested. I decided to save the rest of my questions for another time when he didn't look like he was going to pick me up and put me out on the sidewalk if I opened my mouth again. I only nodded.

The next day, Maeve came down to the bar while I was setting up. She'd been hanging out there more before the customers showed, helping out some and chatting, too.

"Hey," she greeted me, then looked at my arms. "What are those?"

"Gloves. I think they're supposed to be for toxic waste sites, so they should work for cleaning the Crookstown." The rubber went up over my elbows and on a day like today, humid and getting into the ninety-degree range of temperature, they were not comfortable in the least. But Dex had been all over me about really scrubbing and wiping, not just spraying and waiting for the air to do its magic.

"Did you talk to more photographers about new headshots?" she asked.

I started to peel off the gloves, and she had to help me. "I did, but the reason I picked the scammer guy in the first place was because he was so much cheaper. Everyone else I talk to wants me to pay more than I can afford."

"I know someone who takes pictures at the camp. I could ask her," Maeve suggested. "Maybe she'd do it cheap too, for practice because she's just starting her business."

"That would be great! Thanks," I said. I went behind the bar and set both of us up with waters, complete with the lemon slices that I was bringing for myself and storing in the fridge. I held the cool glass against my face, knowing how bad my makeup must be. "How was everything there today?"

"Ok." She spun her glass, making the lemon swirl. "How did you get your last boyfriend to ask you out?" she asked suddenly.

I thought back to last summer. “He used to come into the restaurant where I worked, my dad’s diner. I made the other servers switch shifts with me and switch sections so I could always wait on him.” I thought about that, too. The other women had traded with me, but not happily. I’d forced the issue because it was my dad’s place and I could.

“So what did you do to get him to fall for you?” she pressed.

“My usual stuff. You know.” I reached down my shirt and pulled my breasts higher, then I used my upper arm muscles to push them even further out. “Can I get you anything at all?” I asked in the voice I’d used on him, a lot higher than the way I normally spoke and with a lot of breath mixed into the words.

Maeve frowned, looking a lot like her father. “You shoved your boobs in his face and talked like a baby? Like you sucked on a helium balloon?”

“I didn’t sound like I’d sucked helium! He enjoyed it,” I defended myself. “Guys go for that stuff. They like the act. They definitely like these,” I added, looking down at my breasts before I released them from my hold and let them return to their usual position.

She stared down at her own chest. “I don’t know. I don’t think that would go over very well with Keenan. I think he would assume I was anxious or sick or something if I talked like that.”

“I wouldn’t do that voice again, actually,” I said. “I didn’t like to hear it coming from my mouth and I got a lot of crap about it from people. But it did work,” I stressed.

“I thought you guys broke up, though.”

I sighed. “It worked for a while. We were really happy, too. I thought we would be together forever. I had plans for us to move to Florida, for him to find a new job, for me to start my career down there.”

“But then he dumped you,” she said sympathetically, “because he liked the other girl more.”

“No, he didn’t know her yet. He dumped me because...I don’t know,” I said. “He was weird.”

“I thought you said he was perfect,” she reminded me, and I drained my water glass. I felt even hotter for some reason.

“He was. He was absolutely perfect and he broke my heart. Ok? I really, really loved him but he didn’t love me back. He didn’t want to move to Florida or get a new job. He started to get annoyed with me, like everything I did, he got annoyed. He didn’t like the voice anymore, or when I pouted, or when I cried. I’m really good at fake-crying,” I explained.

Maeve frowned at me again. “Maybe I’ll ask my dad for advice,” she said slowly. “I can’t fake-cry at all.”

“No, and you shouldn’t. The woman that my ex married didn’t do any of that. He just loved her because...I don’t know,” I repeated. “Maybe she tricked him another way.”

“I don’t want to trick Keenan at all,” she told me, and got off the bar stool. “It’s almost four so I’ll go upstairs.”

“Yeah, ok,” I muttered. That whole conversation had put me in a very bad mood, because now I was thinking about my ex again and that woman he married. She was beautiful, but he had never seemed too interested in that. He liked the way she looked, I could tell that he did, but her pretty face wasn’t what had made him love her. She dressed terribly, too, and she never wore much makeup. She didn’t ever act like she couldn’t get her car to start or that things were too heavy for her to lift. As far as I knew, she’d never asked him to switch around his work shifts because she had cramps and needed support and she had never posted almost-naked pictures on her social media to get back at him if he hadn’t texted her enough. They hung out at home together, cooking dinner and playing with their baby.

And he had married her and dumped me.

“Lulu.”

I turned to Dex. “What?”

“I said your name about ten times. Did you get the tables wiped down?” He went and inspected them and seemed both

surprised and pleased. “You did,” he said, wonder in his voice.

I could already see one of the regulars, a retired judge who Ally had said helped to fix everyone’s traffic tickets, peering through the dirty window. “I’ll unlock the door for Harold,” I sighed.

Rain started to pour down and it was slow that night, which I figured would make Dex worry about his cash drawer and made my hair, usually very reliable, start to look slightly frizzed.

“What are you doing back here?” he asked me a few hours later.

I looked up from the floor behind the counter, where I’d been crouching to dig through the cabinet under the register. “I’m looking for string or something. I have to make a ponytail.”

“Why?”

“Do you have eyes? My hair is terrible,” I said.

“Looks the same to me. I have to walk Gervais out to his car. You and Alistair are on your own and he’s down in the storage room again, trying to coax out the rat.”

“Can he coax it to live somewhere else?”

“Stand up and keep an eye on the bar,” he directed, and he also put a hand out to pull me to my feet. When I was up, he looked at me very critically. “Your hair doesn’t look bad. Why do you care, anyway? No one here gives it a second thought.”

Yeah, great.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he told me.

He was, too, but while he was gone, I made some quick decisions. “You’re right,” I told him when he came into the Crookstown.

Dex stopped dead. “What’s happening right now? Did I just hallucinate? I thought you told me I was right about

something.”

“I kind of like you better when you’re being surly. The pathetic attempts at ‘funny’ don’t really fit you,” I answered.

“What am I right about?” he asked.

“I should go out. I’m certainly not going to find another boyfriend in here. There’s no one handsome or eligible in this place.”

“Thank you very much,” he told me.

“Like you’d want to date me,” I scoffed. “I know what you think about me. You tell me all the time that I’m annoying even though I’m so beautiful.”

“Is that what I say? I don’t remember the last part.”

“Anyway, where should I go? I have to ask you because don’t know anyone cool or exciting in Detroit,” I went on.

“Again, thank you.”

“Like you’d want to do anything fun,” I said, rolling my eyes again.

“I went out quite a bit in my day,” he informed me.

“When was your day? The last century?”

“I’m not that much older than you are.” Dex’s voice had gone up. “And I like to have fun just as much as anyone else! I could take you to plenty of great places—clubs, afterhours, anywhere.”

“Fine. Where are we going?”

He blinked. “What?”

“You just invited me to go out with you. Friday after we close?”

“I don’t...I didn’t ask you out,” he said. “Did I?”

“Not like a date, but you just said we would go to a club or an afterhours thing. Maybe Ally could stay here with Maeve, and then we wouldn’t have to worry about either one of them being alone.”

“You worry about them?” he asked.

“Not her very much, because you’re here. But I don’t like his apartment building at all. The last time I drove him home, a guy stepped in front of my car and I couldn’t move it without running into him. I got a little scared.”

“You are not to drive him there anymore,” he thundered out, very frill-necked lizard-ish. “Not unless I’m with you, too.”

“See? Ally shouldn’t live at that place. Maybe it was better back when his mom was alive, but it’s pretty bad right now. Is that why he won’t move? Because he lived there with her?”

“I don’t think he’s ever considered leaving. It’s his home,” Dex said. “But to get back to your plan for us to go to a club —”

“He came out and I talked to him. I named him Nebuchadnezzar,” Ally told us as he walked in. His knees were filthy, so he’d probably gotten down to the rat’s level to speak eye to eye. I shivered, thinking about that dirty, wet storage room and the rats who lived in there.

“I really don’t want you to encourage the rat to stick around,” Dex said. “We have to deal with the Health Department, remember?” The conversation switched to rodents and we all walked to the cars together.

But I hadn’t forgotten that we were supposed to go out. That Friday, I reminded him of it.

“Ally brought his toothbrush and PJs so he can stay over and Maeve won’t be by herself. So where are we going?”

“God damn. Are you serious about that? Don’t you have any little girlfriends to trot around with you?”

No. No, and that was a problem for me. “I don’t have a lot of friends.”

The words hung there in the air above the sticky bar top. It had been too hot to wear the gloves so I hadn’t wiped it very well.

“Why the hell not?” Dex asked me, but his voice was quieter.

“I don’t know. We were all mostly...competitors, I guess. You know, wanting to date the same guys, trying out for the same spots on the cheerleading squad.”

“But that must have been high school. You still act like that?”

I shrugged. It sounded stupid, now. “I still follow them all to see what they’re doing at home. They go out together a lot and it looks like they’re having fun. Maybe they’re actually friends.” Had it been just me who was the one competing? Since I’d left northern Michigan, I hadn’t talked to any of the girls I’d hung out with since middle school, not even Devon who I’d always called my bestie. I shrugged again, thinking.

“All right.”

“All right?” I echoed.

“We’re going out,” he said grimly, and stalked off. It had sounded more like he was going to war, not dancing, and it made me wonder about his skills.

“Does Dex dance?” I asked Ally. We were really busy and I was practically running as fast as Dex was to get to customers. The bar was packed and I thought that we could have used even more tables, like if we could have had outdoor seating? Bars like that were fun.

“Dex? Dancing?” Ally considered the idea. “I’ve never seen it, personally.” We both watched him stomping across the floor. He certainly didn’t move like a dancer and Ally’s expression was also skeptical. But then Dex barked out at us that customers in the Crosstown didn’t serve themselves, so we got moving, too.

At the end of the night, I was super tired, but I was also determined. “Go get ready,” I told Dex, and he looked down at his current outfit, the old t-shirt and matching holey jeans.

“I am ready,” he told me, in that tone that meant my arguments weren’t going to have an effect. Fine, but I had to change and prep even if he wasn’t going to. The “girls”

bathroom at the Crookstown was marginally cleaner than the “boys” since not too many women came in, so I used that as my staging ground and spread paper towels under my makeup bags. It didn’t take too long, but Dex was pretty much asleep when I came out, his head resting on his folded arms at the bar.

“Hey,” I said, poking him. “Let’s go.”

He jerked up straight. “What?” Then his eyes focused on me. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Why are you naked?”

“I’m not naked! These are my going-out clothes.” Which admittedly offered much less coverage than my regular clothes, but I looked very cute.

“You can’t wear that. No,” he said, shaking his head.

“You can’t tell me what to wear. I’m not Maeve,” I reminded him. We’d made some improvements in her wardrobe, too, mostly by selecting the things that made it look like she was wearing apparel items instead of tents. But still, nothing she had in her own closet approached this level of... ok, this level of nudity. I looked down at myself. My breasts were covered, the nipples for sure. And yeah, there was a lot of leg, a lot of stomach, a lot of everything, but that was how women dressed when they went out.

But most men at clubs didn’t dress like Dex: an old t-shirt, this one for a band I didn’t know, the same old jeans with the paint on them. I recognized the color now as the light blue of Maeve’s bedroom walls in the apartment above us. “Are you really wearing that outfit?” I asked doubtfully.

“I guess neither of us is pleased with the other person’s attire. Let’s go,” he said grimly.

“You really don’t like what I’m wearing?” I asked as we walked to his car. He was driving, he’d announced.

“No, I really don’t.” He waited as I tried to get myself into the car, but this dress wasn’t made for climbing. “Stop that before you expose yourself to everyone on the block.” He lifted me up and plopped me into the seat.

“Thank you,” I told him breathlessly and we squealed off down the street. I tried to hold onto my hair to keep the

hurricane winds from the open windows from destroying it. He was driving much too fast for perfection, though.

We parked and he had to lift me down, and then Dex stuck pretty close to me as we walked toward the club. I could hear the thumping beat and I felt myself smile. I needed this. He took us right up to the front of the line of people waiting to get in and he held up a hand to greet the guy checking IDs.

“Hey, Dex Connolly!” the bouncer greeted in return. “I haven’t seen you in forever, man.” They shook hands and he ignored the three women waving their licenses at him. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“I’m out with a friend,” Dex answered, tilting his chin at me.

The bouncer’s eyes widened. “Well, hello there.”

“I’m Lulu,” I told him, and he said that I could come to the front of the line anytime. “Thanks! I’ll be back, then,” I said, and he started to get my number so that we could coordinate that visit but Dex took my arm and then kind of hip-bumped me inside.

“What?” I asked.

“I thought you came here to dance,” he said. “Let’s go.”

The place was packed and the music was so good. I got the smile again as we went through the crowd. There were plenty of guys I wouldn’t have minded meeting, but Dex kept steering me over to the bar. He knew the woman working there, too, and she came immediately to hug him and then take an order which I didn’t catch. But in a moment, he turned and gave me a glass.

“One lemon drop,” he said.

“This is my favorite drink! How did you know that?” I tried a sip and it was delicious.

“You tried to order one the first time you came into the Crookstown.”

“That’s right. You remember that?” I took another big swallow. It was hard to talk in here because it was so loud

with the beat pumping so I tipped back the rest of the lemon drop and pulled out my phone to take a quick picture of all the fun I was having so everyone could see.

Then I crooked my finger at Dex and started to wiggle my way toward the bodies moving to the music. Time to see if he could dance.

I started to rock the minute we got out on the floor but Dex only stood there. “What are you doing?” I mouthed at him. He looked at me, then he tossed back his own drink. And then...

Damn! He could really dance! I stopped dead from the shock and stared as he moved, and I wasn't the only woman watching. Within seconds he had four girls smiling at him and getting pretty close. But he wasn't the only one, because I was attracting attention, too. It was so fun! I danced and danced, not worrying that my feet were extra hurting after waitressing for those hours and now wearing my favorite pair of five-inch heels. They were killers, both in how they looked and, unfortunately, how they felt, but I didn't care. This was the best night I'd had in months.

Dex got us another round and then disappeared but I kept going, because I was like a radioactive isotope with a super long half-life when I was dancing. I was a club version of carbon-14, in fact. I met several interesting possibilities for the future and one guy went and got me a drink. I took it gratefully, because it had been hours since Dex had supplied me with a delicious margarita.

“Nope.” And there he was again, removing this new glass from my hand. “Did you have any?” he asked in my ear.

“What? No, I didn't even taste it,” I yelled back.

He glared at the person who'd handed it to me until that guy disappeared back into the crowd of partiers. “Never take a drink from a stranger. Never.” Dex tossed it out onto the floor. “Ready to leave?”

I looked longingly around, but actually, my half-life seemed to be nearing its end. Now that I'd stopped dancing, I

realized how badly my feet hurt. “Can you carry me?” I suggested.

“No. Let’s go.” He did put his hand around my arm, maybe in case I fell off my heels. I staggered a little anyway as we walked to the door, and then I held my hand up in front of my eyes. The sun hurt them.

“It’s morning?” I asked.

“It’s almost six.” He kept moving me down the sidewalk as I squinted and limped. “This place will close soon and sometimes they have problems with customers at the end of the night. It’s better to leave now,” he explained.

“How do you know that?”

“I used to work here. If you name a venue in Detroit, I’ve either been there or worked there. Are you really having that much trouble walking? You just danced for five hours in those dumb shoes.”

“They’re not dumb, they’re expensive.” But I was, in fact, having a lot of trouble. Dex slowed slightly and I wobbled less. “Where did you go for all that time when I was dancing?”

“I talked to Missy at the bar, mostly.”

I looked over, but he didn’t seem drunk. He really must have been only talking. “She gave you a big hug,” I remarked. And from what I’d been able to see in the darkness of the club, she was cute. It had been a while since he and Maeve’s mom had split up and I wondered about the women he’d been with in those years. Maybe the bartender had been one of them, but there had to have been more than that.

“You looked like you made some new friends, too,” he said. “The one in the stupid hat was grinding on you so hard you might want to take a pregnancy test.”

“Oh my Lord, you’re cranky! I guess as we age, we don’t do as well when we don’t sleep,” I answered and he said he hadn’t aged and he was just fine.

“I’m the one walking in a straight line,” he pointed out.

“I’m not drunk. I’m in pain!” But then we were at the Jeep, finally, and Dex lifted me in. I checked myself in the visor mirror. Things were never pretty in the morning after a fun night, and I was a totally smeary hag. “Ugh. Do you have any napkins? Clean ones?” I specified, and he directed me to the glove box where there was a whole lot of crap, but no clean napkins to remove some of the makeup that had drifted off my eyes and down my face. I did the best I could with my fingers and wiped the excess on the seat, which was too nasty to show new stains.

Dex glanced over at my rejuvenation efforts. “You look fine. Why are you always so concerned about that shit?”

“It’s important.” I searched through his junk for a hair tie.

“It isn’t, and I don’t want you to give that idea to Maeve. She doesn’t need to think that if she doesn’t look perfect, people won’t like her or care about her. She doesn’t need that bullshit.”

That made me sit quietly for the rest of the ride. He drove me straight to my apartment rather than to my car back at the bar, probably because it was closer and he wanted me gone faster.

“I’ll come pick you up for work tonight,” he told me.

“Don’t bother. I’ll figure it out.” I started to try to climb out, but Dex swore and came around to lift me again.

“I’ll walk you up. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I’ll carry you,” he corrected, when he saw how long that was going to take us.

“No, I don’t need...” But it did feel good to be off my feet as he carried me through the building lobby. I was quite angry at him for his rude remarks about the importance of beauty, but I didn’t object when he picked me up again when we got out of the elevator at my floor. I yawned into his shoulder and rubbed my cheek against his t-shirt, which was certainly ugly but also felt soft against my face.

“Tired? I’ve heard that when you get old, you don’t do as well with less sleep,” he mentioned.

“When you’re old, you think your jokes are funny even when they aren’t.” I rubbed my cheek again.

“When you’re old, you don’t give a shit what anyone thinks about your jokes or anything else. Here we are.” He set me down carefully. “Got your key?”

But before I opened the door, it did it for me. It opened, I meant, and there was my dad. My dad, wearing only his boxer shorts, looking just like he did when I’d gotten back past my curfew in high school: disappointed but not surprised.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, horrified. “Did you spend the night?”

“Who is this?” he asked me at the same time, pointing at Dex. “Did you spend the night with him?”

“Hello, sir,” Dex said, and offered his hand.

“Don’t shake with him!” I pushed his hand down. “Daddy, are you staying here? Because if you are, I’m not. I’m not!” I turned to Dex. “Let’s go. Right now!”

To his credit, he followed me without arguing and asking questions, and he carried me back out to the Jeep. He even found a clean napkin when he saw the tears plopping down onto my crumpled going-out clothes.

Chapter 5

I rubbed my knee again. “Can you hand me more ice, please?”

“I’m really sorry, Lulu.” Ally looked like he was about to cry, and I hurried to reassure him.

“You don’t need to be sorry! I hurt myself because I was clumsy.”

“But if my cat hadn’t been in the way, you wouldn’t have tripped over her. She can’t help it that she’s blind and deaf, though. It’s not her fault and I hope you’re not mad at her.”

I told him that I wasn’t mad at the cat. No, it wasn’t the cat’s fault, it wasn’t Ally’s fault, it wasn’t mine (it had been pitch black and I’d really needed to go to the bathroom, and I hadn’t wanted to wake him by turning on the light in the hallway of his small apartment). There was obviously only one person to blame in this situation, and he was calling me again.

“Daddy,” my phone screen read, and showed me his picture. I turned it over so I wouldn’t have to see it.

Dex frowned at my knee. “How long are you planning on imposing yourself on Alistair?” he asked me.

“She can stay as long as she wants, Dex!” Ally told him. “Everyone loves having her there, especially Leo. He really likes her a lot.”

I didn’t reciprocate those feelings. Leo was an anole and I’d held that lizard because my host had wanted me to make friends with it so, so much. I had almost thrown up as I did it, and I’d gotten into the shower afterwards.

And that, there, was another problem: Ally’s bathroom was even smaller than the one I’d shared with my mom. There was no dining room table, either, for beauty prep work. I’d been doing my makeup in the car after I arrived at the Crookstown, staring at myself in the rearview mirror which only showed

one sliver of my face at a time. It was very difficult to complete my look that way.

“I’m going to get an apartment,” I told them both and also Maeve, who sat in a bar stool sipping a pop and listening avidly.

“Why can’t you go back to the apartment you shared with your mother?” Dex asked me, for about the thousandth time.

For the thousandth and first time, I shook my head. “No. No, I can’t.” My dad had headed up north, but my mom had changed her mind about the divorce. She’d announced that she was going to stick it out in Detroit only until she could find someone to sublet, and then she was going home, too. And now she’d found that person, a guy who was coming here for a new job and was thrilled by the tiny bathroom’s lack of counter space. He was moving in on Monday and she was moving out tomorrow, leaving with her stuff in a trailer and making the four-hour drive. I’d had to come pick up the rest of my clothes and we’d gotten into another fight about everything.

“I think you should be happy for us, Lulu!” she’d scolded me. “Most children would be glad that their parents are staying together. I remember you begging me and your father to please get along, to make up and stop fighting. We’ve done that, and you still aren’t satisfied.” She’d shaken her head angrily and went back to packing.

I wasn’t happy about it, not at all. I’d done a huge amount of work to get her away and out of the situation, and how she was jumping right back in! It made me furious, actually.

“Why are you stamping your foot?” Dex asked now, and that had been a mistake because it made my knee hurt more. I had really fallen hard the night before, but Ally had slept right through it. He’d also slept through the fight in the hallway and the arrival of the police with their sirens, their loud voices and radios, and their pounding feet on the stairs and fists on the doors. After I’d lain on his couch for a while with my heart also pounding, I’d gotten up to pee. And my foot had found the cat, and luckily she was fine because Ally would have

been so upset if she'd gotten hurt. He wasn't happy that I was hurt, of course, but he would have been devastated by a cat injury.

"I'm not stamping my foot," I said, irritated at Dex, the cat, the people in the hall who'd been fighting because (it had sounded like) someone had eaten the last of the whipped cream, and also myself for stamping.

"Are you going to be ok to go shopping?" Maeve asked doubtfully, and I saw her dad start to get mad at the idea that I was going to leave her hanging. If I let his daughter down in any way, I knew he'd let me know how he felt about it. But I didn't want to let her down, either.

"I'm totally fine to go shopping," I said, making my voice non-irritated. "I'm only tired because we've done so much work already today."

"Doing the inventory was your idea," Dex reminded me. "You were the one who said we needed to count everything."

"You were the one who ran out of gin last weekend because you haven't been on top of it," I reminded him back. "You were the one who was letting Isie the Booting Waitress steal from you because you didn't know what you had. And you had the blue curaçao, which I know you didn't order on purpose."

"I think the former owner left that behind," he mumbled.

"It's a good idea, Da. You told me months ago that you needed to keep up better with the inventory. You can take a little time off from the handyman stuff to do it, right?"

And of course since Maeve said it, he agreed. It had been a good idea, actually, but I'd been amazed that Dex hadn't been on top of his supplies to begin with, even without my excellent suggestion. My dad had always...

Ugh. There I was thinking about him again and this time, in a positive way because he had been a good manager at the restaurant. Except that he let some of the employees get away with a lot. The other servers had been pissed at times because one person mostly got to do whatever she wanted, like coming

in late and/or leaving early, like wearing super cute jean shorts instead of the bottoms provided by the uniform company that were just not flattering on a body of more petite proportions, like refusing to bus some tables that were just way too gross, like making everyone change their shifts and also their sections so she could always wait on the cute blonde guy who came in (and then she landed him as her boyfriend).

That was me, I remembered. I'd gotten away with a lot because my dad had ignored any complaints against me. That had been an unusual situation for an employee but I hadn't recognized how good I'd had it until I worked for Dex, who let me get away with nothing. I sighed dramatically.

"I don't want to know what you're thinking," he spoke up immediately. "Alistair, let's go to the storage room and start counting. Grab the notebook, ok?" He spun to point a finger at me. "Not a word about computer programs. We couldn't take a computer down there anyway."

"They're called laptops," I said helpfully. And that was the reason that I wasn't going any further with the inventory today: yes, because of my injury, but also because there was no way that I was going to hang out in that disgusting, dank, dark storage room where Dex kept most of the liquor. "Maeve, we should leave," I said, before he got the idea that I should help more. We went to my car and she told me how to get to the shop she wanted to check out, because I still didn't know my way around very well.

"Are you really going to keep staying with Ally?" she asked me. "I'm not even allowed to go to his neighborhood."

"It's not very nice," I admitted.

"My dad is super pissed about it."

"About him living on a scary street?"

"I guess, but more about you staying there with him," she told me. "Turn left. Oh, shit! I meant right. Sorry."

"It's ok. We don't want to get back to the Crookstown too soon or we'll have to go with them into the storage room." I got us on the correct road and then kept asking questions.

“Why is he pissed about me being at Ally’s place? He doesn’t think...” I trailed off. Dex better not have thought again that I was putting a move on Ally. I didn’t want to suggest it to Maeve, though.

“He says it’s dangerous for you because he doesn’t believe that you have any street smarts or common sense,” she explained.

“I do so!”

“No, you suck at checking on your surroundings and being aware of what’s happening. When we left the bar just now, you didn’t even see the guy who was thinking about breaking into your car.”

“What?” My voice went very high. “There was someone who was going to break into my car?”

“You shouldn’t leave your stuff in it,” she reasoned. “It just gives people a reason to smash a window and take it.”

“I need all this for the photo shoot! And I can’t leave important things at Ally’s apartment, either. His animals keep getting into everything,” I explained.

“Then you need your own place.”

Who was the adult, here, me or a fifteen-year-old? “I know I do,” I answered, sounding irritated again.

“My dad said the apartment you used to have with your mom is really nice. Are you sure that you can’t stay there?”

“No, I really can’t. My mom and I are in a huge fight and anyway, she’s leaving tomorrow.” I sighed. “I don’t know if we’re going to make up.”

Maeve nodded knowingly. “It sucks.”

“Did you fight like that with your mom, too?”

She played with a lock of her thick hair, examining the ends. None were split. “We used to fight all the time. She did bunches of crap that my dad would have gotten so pissed about if he’d known, like the parties she had with her friends. It wasn’t the first time she’d left me, either, but I didn’t tell

him about any of it. I didn't want her to get in trouble, make him flip his shit."

"Your dad has a temper," I agreed.

"He would have been right to get mad!" she flared up. "She was totally breaking the rules in their custody agreement. She was drinking so much and..." She looked out of the window. "I was supposed to tell you to turn left back at that light."

"I'll go around. What does she say now, when she texts you? Is she apologizing? Does she tell you where she is?"

Maeve didn't answer. "Can we talk about something else? This is the shop just up here."

"Oh, my Lord, is there only parallel parking? I never learned how to do that." But I could try.

She had to get out to help me, and then several other people had to help, too, including a woman who got behind the wheel and did it herself. Eventually, we made it inside the shop, Maeve's favorite. I could definitely see her style in a lot of the olden-times clothes they had. With her classic features, she could really carry it off. But I remembered what Dex had said about not focusing on her looks, so I just told her that I liked that shirt, or that dress was a great color, and I didn't say anything about the importance of showing your breasts or how guys liked to see a lot of leg and ass.

She was a very careful shopper, checking every tag and calculating the sales tax, which I helped with. I was good at sales tax, having bought a lot of stuff in my life. Even though she spent a long time looking, she only bought a very inexpensive skirt that I helped to pick, and I didn't buy anything at all for myself. After the hell of the night prior with the fight and the cat problems, I knew that I couldn't live with Ally forever. I was going to have to get an apartment and I only had eighteen dollars to do it with at the moment.

"I'm excited to see your pictures get taken," she said as we left the shop, her with a small bag and me with none at all. It was a strange experience for me to exit a store empty-handed.

“I’m excited, too,” I agreed. Maeve’s fellow counselor, the photographer just starting out her business, was coming to the Crookstown this afternoon to take the shots for my portfolio, and when I got them back and sent them out to agents and casting directors, I was sure that my modeling and acting career would lift off and I’d be able to afford a very nice apartment, someplace way better than eighteen dollars could get me.

We drove back to the bar and I did remember the way, so I felt even better because I was becoming a real Detroiter. The two of us went upstairs, me slowly because of my knee, so I could get into my outfit and makeup for the photo shoot. Then I returned to the bar to try to make it more presentable, but it wasn’t like one woman could perform miracles, not unless she had a magic wand or a wrecking ball.

“What in the hell are you doing?”

I turned to see Dex. He was filthy from having spent so much time in the storage room, and he was...well, not shocked, but more like stupefied as he stared at me. “What are you wearing?” he asked slowly.

“This was my sweet sixteen dress,” I explained. “I was going for Disney princess at that point, so it’s large and in charge. But then I wanted to wear it to my friend’s wedding when I was twenty, so I had the neckline altered.” And now, it was open down to my belly button.

“You wore that to a wedding?” He shook his head and as I looked at the amount of skin I was currently baring to the world, I did remember the mother of the bride being a little upset. That probably hadn’t been a good decision, now that I thought about it. The next wedding I went to, I would wear something with a bit more coverage.

“Doesn’t she look pretty, Da?” Maeve prompted. “We spent forever getting ready.”

“I can tell by the amount of paint piled on your face,” Dex told me, and then looked at his daughter.

“Yes, I put on makeup, too. Not as much as Lulu! And she helped me pick out this skirt.” She swirled it around and I smiled.

“Doesn’t she look pretty, too?” It was my turn to prompt. “Even though looks aren’t very important, it’s still fun to dress up. Right, Dex? She can wear whatever she wants.” The smaller sizes I had picked for her did look better, but only because you could see that she was a girl underneath all the material.

“It’s true that looks aren’t very important, but you are beautiful. Always,” he said, smiling at his daughter. He called her something that I’d heard him say before, and she smiled back at him. But then he looked at me again, and flipped back to the frown. “My question to you still stands. What in the hell are you doing?”

Maeve answered for me again. “This is her photo shoot. I told you it was today.”

“I thought that was what you were doing at that store you went off to. Neither of you mentioned that the picture-taking was here, in the Crookstown.” He glanced at the antique clock hanging on the wall above the liquor shelves. “It’s half an hour until we open. You’re going to get it done that fast?”

“Pretty close,” I said. This was the time of day that the photographer was available and with the amazing deal she was giving me, it was going to have to work. If we ran over, it would probably be fine. The customers might be amused by watching my poses instead of another boring baseball game.

Dex rolled his eyes and went behind the bar, and in not too long, the photographer showed up and Maeve introduced me to her co-worker, Oriana.

“Oriana graduated last year from Wayne State and she’s only working at the camp until her business gets off the ground,” she explained.

Oriana dropped a piece of equipment that looked important as she held out her hand to me. “I minored in Digital Art and Photography,” she said. She dropped another piece of camera

stuff and then her backpack slid off her shoulder. She put it down and knocked into a chair. “I do know how to take pictures. I swear,” she told me. “I get slightly nervous.”

“Ok,” I said doubtfully. “Let’s get started, then.” We helped her carry in more gear from her car and set it up, and she almost broke a few more things but seemed to get into a rhythm as she worked.

As she was finishing the lighting and I was performing a final makeup check, Ally burst into the bar. “They hatched! The eggs hatched. I didn’t want to get too close, because the mother bird was nervous, but there are four babies. Do you want to come see? I can pick you up, Lulu. Oh.” He noticed the third person there, Oriana. She dropped a camera but Ally caught it before it hit the ground and she smiled at him. He froze, staring at her, but she didn’t get nervous by that or by his size. It probably helped that she was also near-giantess, like practically six feet or something. I was the only one who looked like I should have been guarding a pot of gold.

“I’ll come out later and look,” I said. “I promise. We have to take the pictures now.” My eyes slid to Dex, and of course, he was watching.

“It’s almost four o’clock,” he announced. “You need to get your ass out of that...I guess I might call it a dress. It looks like it would slow you down even more as you serve, and if that happens, you’ll move backwards into another dimension.”

“Oriana just needs to get a few shots,” I said. “It’s perfect in here, with the contrast between the background of this disgusting bar and me so elegant and beautiful.” I looked around. “There’s the dirty money that’s so old it probably can’t circulate, the street signs for places that may not exist anymore, and the posters of the dead guys—”

“They’re famous Irish footballers! They’re not dead. Not all of them,” he admitted.

“Even though the pictures are ridiculously faded from hanging up for centuries on these walls, I can still see soccer balls in them, Dex. I do know the difference between football and soccer,” I informed him.

While we argued, Oriana took some shots of Maeve and started dropping things again, but Ally explained that she didn't have to worry, that we fought all the time but that we were really friends.

"I'm her employer, not her friend," Dex said loudly. "A friend might say, 'Hey, shouldn't you be working now?' But an employer would say, 'If you don't get your ass in gear, I'll fire you.' Does everyone hear the difference?" He looked right at me when he said it.

"Dex, you open?" One of the regulars, Sean, stuck his head in the door and Dex told him yes, we were open and to come on in. He also said that Maeve had to go upstairs and repeated that I had to get off the table where I was posing provocatively and dress in my regular clothes to do my job. He added that he was going to extract his location fee from my paycheck.

"You look great," the customer said as he sat on a stool. "Real interesting juxtaposition in the styling. It's a little Helmut Newton," he told Oriana, who blushed and stuttered a thank you. We kept on shooting.

"Excuse me, Lulu? Are you almost done here with your high-fashion photography? I'd like to have my bar back." Dex's voice sounded way too polite. It was unnerving.

"I think it's very generous of you to let her use the Crookstown for her portfolio stuff, Dex," Ally told him, and no one could argue with Ally when he smiled so sweetly. Dex only looked at him for a moment and then nodded, and Oriana smiled, too. More regulars shuffled in and didn't appear at all disturbed by me posing on the tables and straddling the chairs, walking along the bar top and pretending to pour drinks. They were interested, because it was unusual that something besides watching sports, waiting to watch sports, and arguing about sports was happening at this place.

And it turned out that Sean, the guy who'd talked about Helmut Newton, had a background in art direction. He got some of the other regulars to take pictures, which Oriana was thrilled about. He even cajoled Dex into posing, with his arms

crossed in a way that made his big biceps bulge and frowning heavily as I draped myself against his side. But eventually, I did have to remove the six-inch heels and get into my old tennis shoes, which were already so messed up by beer spills that they weren't even worth keeping. The trays at this place were very unbalanced.

Oriana packed up with Ally's help and I limped off to change. "Finally," Dex commented as I came back in from the girls' room. I was already tired because modeling had been harder than I'd expected and my knee was fully killing me after the time in the heels, but I picked up my tray with very few complaints. He still managed to object and say that I shouldn't have complained at all, since he'd let me use his place of business as a backdrop.

"You should be glad about those pictures. Maybe you can use them as advertising," I pointed out. "You could be my first real client and I wouldn't even charge you very much."

"You wouldn't charge me anything, just like I didn't charge you for using my bar as your set." But he looked a little thoughtful. "I couldn't use pictures like that, could I? It would make people think that there were half-naked women in ballgowns hanging out at the Crookstown."

"Maybe it would just make them curious and want to come and then when they got here, they'd think it was so fun that they'd stay even without me partially unclothed." But I looked around. "You know, some people my age might enjoy this place, even though it's so nasty. It's, like, traditional or something. A throwback. I can't even imagine how long it took you to nail up all the dollar bills on the ceiling."

"The dollars were already up there, along with the street signs and the posters of the footballers. Which is another way to say 'soccer players,'" he continued as I opened my mouth to object that I could tell which sport they were playing. "I haven't changed anything since Art McCarthy handed me the keys."

I looked again at the faded images of the "footballers."
"Why? Because you're poor or because you're so busy?"

“Because of both. Thank you for reminding me of the poverty, though.”

“You know, most of the regulars here look like they’re an inch away from death,” I pointed out. “When they go, won’t you need new people to fill these chairs?”

“That’s a comment with a lot of compassion.” But he seemed to think about what I’d said for a moment before (again) reminding me that I was there to work for him, with effort and no breaks. I only took a few.

He returned to the topic that night while we were closing up. “I’m going to ask you something but before I do, I’m going to warn you not to answer in a way that’s rude, flippant, or thoughtless. Can you do that?”

“Yes!” Couldn’t I?

“Ok then. Do you think I should make any changes to the Crookstown?” he inquired, and rather than snapping out a quick response, I made myself think and try to formulate an answer. I really had been trying to be more diplomatic in my speech.

“You already know that I think the place is dirty and shabby,” I said. “But it’s also kind of charming. Like, it grows on you.” It had grown on me a lot, in fact. I didn’t see the dust bunnies half as much anymore.

“Do you really think so?” He seemed doubtful. “How many bars have you been to? You had two cocktails when I took you to the afterhours club and you could hardly walk to the car. They always short pour there, too.”

“I was absolutely fine that night. My only problem was shoe impairment! I’ve been to plenty of bars and done a lot of drinking,” I informed him.

“Great. Good for you.”

I sniffed. “As for your own problems, it would be good if you cleaned—”

“If *we* cleaned, since we all work here,” he interrupted, but I pressed on and ignored that, because my really good toxic

waste gloves had disappeared and I wasn't touching his sickening rags without those.

"It would be good if *you* cleaned and just did a little, like, freshening," I went on. "That's what they did in my mom's old salon up north. They weren't redoing everything all the time, but they made changes that showed, that customers might notice. Like new lamps or a new doormat, or they hung holiday stuff, seasonal stuff."

"Like me doing an Easter display in the men's room? Or wreaths on the whiskey bottles?"

I ignored him. "At her old salon, they were a brand rep for Cavolata Cosmetics and every few months, the company would send new displays for their products, new posters of women using them. That changed things up, too." I did a few poses, mimicking the girls in those ads. I'd grown up imitating the big images on the walls of that salon, wishing I could be like them with their glamorous lives and perfect looks.

"Please, no more modeling today," Dex requested. "But maybe you're right, maybe some new posters would be good."

"And since no one knows much about Irish ball boys, you could pick a different game. Everyone here likes real football, right? Baseball? I mean an actual, popular sport."

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Soccer is a real sport!" he told me. I was tired, sure, but not too tired to argue about that for a while before I started to yawn.

"I guess I could help you," I said when he finally quieted down. "Not with the cleaning, but with the freshening. I've never done that before," I admitted. "My dad was always asking me for ideas about the diner but I never had too many. I guess that I never stopped to try to think of any but I probably could have come up with something."

"Why do you always look so damn sad when you talk about your father? Why are you fighting with your mother about him?"

"Because they need to get divorced."

“And you need to stay out of their business,” he reminded me.

“I can’t! Because...” I stopped.

“Go on. I’m on pins and needles.”

“Never mind,” I said. “I’ll get Ally and go home. I mean, to his apartment.”

“Hold on, hold on.” Dex walked around the corner of the bar and leaned on his elbow next to my stool. “Tell me what’s happening with your parents. Maybe I can fix it, like how I knocked some sense into that pretend photographer.”

“Did you beat him up?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t have to do very much. He folded quick.”

“Would you really beat up my dad for me?” I asked.

“I’d rather not. Does he need a bit of a beating? Tell me,” he urged, and I hesitated for a moment, and then I did tell.

“He was cheating on my mom with another waitress at the diner. Bettina,” I hissed out. I hated that woman. “It went on for years.”

“You knew about it?”

“I didn’t until around Christmas. Everything was so awful with my boyfriend and my parents were fighting so much and then I saw them kissing, Bettina and my dad, I saw them kissing in the alley behind the diner. It wasn’t half as gross as your alley,” I explained. “I’d been working with her for all those years, and I never knew, I never saw it. But the other servers there were like, ‘Oh, of course! Your dad and Bettina. You really didn’t know?’ It was right in front of my face and I’d never noticed. I always had so much going on,” I started to explain, but then I stopped and sighed. I just hadn’t been aware of much besides my own life, that was the issue.

“Ok. He cheated and you told your mom, so the two of you moved away.”

“No,” I said, “I didn’t tell her. I tried to convince him to stop seeing that slut, to fire her and then to confess the truth. He wouldn’t, he just begged me to keep quiet, telling me how much I would hurt my mom if I said anything about his girlfriend. He told me that it had been working just fine the way things were for all these years and why would we rock the boat? But it hadn’t been working fine, not at all! My parents were always fighting, always. Always unhappy. Now she’s going to drive home and take him back and act like nothing ever happened.”

“You have to tell her the truth about his affair.”

“I tried. I can’t text something like that, so it has to be face to face. The last time I was at the apartment to pack, I got up all my courage said, ‘Mom, there’s something you should know about Daddy. I have to tell you something important.’ And then I couldn’t even get the words out. She was standing there, looking at me and waiting, and...I couldn’t.”

“I had to tell stepmother number four that it was over and done with my dad. He wouldn’t do it himself and I thought she deserved to know.” He blew out a breath. “It’s awful giving someone news that you know will hurt them.”

I nodded miserably. “My mom got mad, too, because she thought I was butting in again. She said for me to mind my own business, that I was the child and she was the parent and I should work on my own life, because as far as she could tell I was getting nowhere with modeling and was set to be a waitress in a crappy bar for the rest of my life.”

“The Crookstown being the crappy bar,” Dex filled in, and I nodded.

“I got mad back and we ended up yelling at each other and then I left. She’s wrong about my life! I don’t want to be at a crappy bar forever,” I said. “I want to have a career. Then I’ll go home, famous and beautiful and successful, and he’ll be sorry that he dumped me.”

“Are we still talking about your dad here?”

I rubbed my eyes carefully so I wouldn't smear my makeup from the photo shoot. Last I'd checked in the girls' room, it still looked pretty good, but I was close to crying now. "Uh, I think I veered off topic," I said.

"What topic are we on now?"

"My boyfriend. My ex-boyfriend from up north," I explained. "We broke up. We decided to move on from each other."

"I heard that story from Maeve," Dex said. "It sucks to get dumped."

"I wasn't! Well, maybe I was because that was what he had in mind when he wanted to talk, but I said it first. I officially broke up with him, not the other way around." I sighed. "Not that it matters. He wanted to break up and now we're done, and he got married. Married! Isn't that stupid?"

"Why?"

"You were the one who just admitted that it sucks to get dumped," I reminded him. "I assumed you meant your former wife. Would you really ever get married again after that happened?"

He thought about it. "Right after Christine left, I would have told you no, I definitely wouldn't get married ever again."

"And you've changed your mind since?"

Dex sighed and stood up straight. "I haven't met anyone who tempted me. Hearing the sad saga of your parents doesn't help to sway me, though."

"I thought that I would marry my ex," I said. "I planned for us to have this glamorous life, like, I'd be famous and we'd live in Florida and I'd be tan all the time and he'd become a private investigator for the rich people there and know all their secrets and we'd have a modern apartment overlooking the Gulf side and two or three really nice cars, but not convertibles because that would mess with my hair too much."

"Sounds like a plan."

“Only I thought so. He wanted to stay where he was, in the house where he lived, with the job and the car he already had. The only thing he didn’t want any more was me.”

Dex walked back behind the bar and selected one of the glasses he’d just polished. He set it in front of me and poured gin into it. “Go ahead.”

I picked it up and took a tiny sip. “This would be better with pineapple juice.”

“No, it wouldn’t. This is from the top shelf,” he said as I took another tiny sip and then pursed my mouth. “Don’t you know how to do a shot?”

I eyed the little glass and went ahead and gulped. Then I coughed as the fire burned down my throat.

“There you go,” he told me. “Now, here’s what we’ll do about your mom. Is she home right now?”

“Yes. She’s leaving tomorrow, though.” I scrubbed my eyes with a bar napkin. With the crying I’d done while talking about my ex and the gin-produced tears, the makeup was totally destroyed anyway.

He poured out another helping of liquor. “Drink,” he told me, and I did, knocking it back. “Alistair and you and I will go talk to her.”

“The three of us?” I pushed away my hair. “Why?”

“I’m driving you two home anyway, because he can’t handle you alone when you’re like this. And before your mother uproots her life again, you need to tell her what you just said to me about your dad’s girlfriend. Get it off your chest and make sure she goes back into the marriage with open eyes. It’s not right to withhold information that could affect her future like that.” He picked up my empty shot glass. “You’re sure she doesn’t already know?”

“Why would she stay with him if she knew?”

“Any number of reasons. Financial security? Keeping up appearances with the neighbors? Not wanting to upset her daughter?”

“No, I want them to split up,” I argued. “Because he’s a jerk.”

“So you’ve said.” He walked toward the stairs that led to the storage room and I heard him call, “Alistair! Stop making friends with that rat and come on. We have an errand to run.”

I poured myself another shot and drank it. This gin really was good, even without the pineapple juice. “I don’t agree with that statement,” I pointed out as he returned.

“I thought you were scared of the rat.”

“No, the statement that he was a good dad.” Maybe Dex hadn’t actually said it out loud himself, but it was what I’d been thinking about. “I used to believe that, because he always did what I wanted. Like my sweet sixteen party. Did you know that I wanted a car made out of ice? And I got one! Life size.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“He wouldn’t take my mom on vacation, but he gave me an ice car and a real car, a nice one. It was to get me on his side against her,” I explained. “He reminded me of that stupid frozen thing when he told me that I couldn’t snitch on his affair.”

“Maybe I do need to beat him some.”

“What makes a good dad is being good to your wife. It’s being there for your family,” I went on. “As in, not ruining your marriage so that the family stays together.”

“I think you’re right about all that,” Dex said.

“You didn’t want to break up your family.”

“No, I didn’t,” he agreed.

“Because of Maeve,” I continued, and he nodded. “What is the name you call her sometimes? It sounds like another language.”

“*A leanbh*. It’s Gaelic, what my mother used to call me. She called my father *a ghrá*.”

I tried pronouncing the last thing he'd said, but I'd never been good at other languages. I ended up with something like "I growled," and Dex laughed. "Pretty close," he said. "It means 'my love.'"

"And they got divorced anyway, even with her calling him that? What's wrong with this world?"

"She died, Lulu, and he spent the rest of his life looking for that same love."

"That's heartbreaking," I told him.

"Don't cry, brat. Let's see if we can fix things for you with your parents." He lifted me off the stool, even though I could get down from these myself. Ally arrived, knees dirty from crawling around the storage room, and we locked up and left the bar together. Really together, because they linked arms with me on either side and kind of carried me down the sidewalk. It was like flying and I didn't feel like crying anymore.

No, this was great! I leaned back my head and smiled at the sky. I had the idea that this plan was going to work, that everything was going to be absolutely wonderful. And I was pretty sure that it wasn't the gin's influence, either. Yes, everything would be great!

Chapter 6

“It’s the worst. The worst!” I slapped the rag on the bar. My manicure was shot anyway and I didn’t have the money to go get my nails done. I was tired from being kept up all night with another fight and then a fire alarm at Ally’s building. Neither of my parents was speaking to me. I had a crap job in a crap bar and no friends. And my portfolio...

I slapped the rag. “The worst!”

Oriana took a sip of the pop that Ally had set her up with and looked at me nervously. “I think the pictures are beautiful, Lulu.”

“Yes, the *pictures* are beautiful.” They were; she was very talented and had done an amazing job, and I’d told her so. “You’re a great photographer, super skilled, and the *pictures* are beautiful. But I look like a gremlin in them! I was prancing all over thinking that I was so hot but I literally could have had a bag over my head and it would have been more attractive.”

“I think that some people read better in person,” Oriana said carefully. “Not that you aren’t so, so pretty in the shots, too, but...well, maybe it’s the comparison.”

Yes, part of it was the comparison, the one between the pictures of me and the pictures of Maeve from that day. Hers were absolutely gorgeous, like, they could have been in *Vogue* kind of gorgeous. And mine were fine. I looked like I was having fun up on the tables, laughing with the regulars, hanging off Dex’s big arm and grinning at the camera lens while he frowned. That was a very cute picture, good enough to put on social media or in a frame in this bar, maybe, but not anything like something in a high-end fashion magazine. Not like anything that would be in a catalog, either. Or in a commercial, or anywhere but maybe a family Christmas card.

If Dex and I were ever to send out a Christmas card together. I sighed and slapped the rag around. “I’m still going to try this out with agents,” I said. I kind of had to, didn’t I?

And maybe someone, somehow, would see something in the pictures that I didn't. Maybe someone would see a model, a woman who might become an actress, too, a person who had star quality that was really, really hidden in these shots. So hidden that even I didn't see it, as hard as I was looking.

"What about Maeve?" Oriana asked.

"What about her?" I dropped the rag to come over and look again at the pictures, especially one of Maeve with her eyes cast up and a slight smile on her face. It was absolutely stunning. "I'm sure Dex would like to have these."

"I mean, and I don't know too much about modeling, but I was thinking that—you would probably be a better judge than I am, but—"

I got what she was trying to tell me. "She should send these to an agent," I said flatly. "She looks like an editorial model."

Oriana nodded and I tried to feel happy about what I'd just said, but I felt a wrinkle-inducing frown settle on my face. Yes, I really was happy for Maeve, but I was also unhappy that it wasn't me with the beautiful headshots.

"What is that look for?" Dex asked as he walked up from the storage room, wiping his dirty hands on his dirty jeans. "Are you still pissing and moaning about what happened the other night?" He wasn't demanding it in the voice he usually used when he spoke to me. He sounded a lot softer. Contrite, really.

As he should have been! "I'm not pissing and moaning about anything except the total loss of love and respect from my parents." I stared at him pointedly. "I think you know what I mean."

"Yes, ok? I do know what you mean and I realize now that I should have thought things through a little more," he answered. "In retrospect, maybe it wasn't the best strategy."

I turned my back to him and slopped the rag. No, in retrospect, it hadn't been a great strategy for me, drunk on gin, to go and confront my mom about my father's affair at one in

the morning after she'd been packing all day. It made it worse that my dad was, in fact, there with her in the apartment, because he'd come down to help put her stuff in the trailer and move her home.

In retrospect, the strategy had turned into a shit show of the three of us yelling at each other, Ally so upset, Dex refereeing, and then one of the neighbors calling the cops. Luckily, Dex knew the superior of the patrol officers who'd shown up and may have saved my family from charges, but it was still awful, humiliating and stressful and terrible.

And the worst part was that it hadn't succeeded at all, not in any way. I didn't think that my mom had heard me screaming the statement, "He's a fucking cheater with that bitch Bettina!" It would have been hard to catch that with the rest of the chaos as Dex carried me over his shoulder toward the elevator, the police right behind us. She still didn't know the truth about my father.

"It all sucks," I said grouchily, because it did. All of it. Slap! Dirty water poured from the rag.

"What, exactly, are you cleaning with?" Dex asked, and I decided that the answer was nothing and quit trying to do it.

"I got some of those posters you suggested," he told my back. "I'm going to phase it all in slowly so that the regulars don't get upset by the changes, though. Steve Highway is hitting the highway first," he said, and I had to turn around.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know my way around Detroit, still, not even after all this time here, so I don't know the Steve Highway."

That led to a very, very boring dissertation from him about Irish "footballers" that told me nothing in the end. "I'm just going to walk Oriana to her car," I interrupted, and Ally said that he would come, too. That left Dex talking to his posters by himself as we melted along the baking sidewalk outside. I paid her and thanked her, and when she looked questioning, I said, "Yes, I'll talk to Maeve and Dex about making a portfolio for her, too. I don't know if he'll go for it, because I don't think he's very smart."

“You know, Lulu, I don’t think it was Dex’s fault that your mom and dad got so mad,” Ally volunteered. “He didn’t know that they’d be...”

Naked. They’d been naked when I’d let us into the apartment with the key that I still had. And no, they hadn’t been only naked, because they’d been doing things with their naked bodies, too. They were really, really back together in a way that I really, really didn’t want to think about. Or talk about.

“Let’s change the subject,” I snapped, and then felt terrible because that was Ally, who didn’t have a mean bone in his body and was only trying to get us to make up so we could all be friends again. I wasn’t quite ready to do that but no, it hadn’t been Dex’s fault that we’d gone to the apartment. He’d suggested it, but I’d played along, and I’d thought it would work until we’d come upon my unclothed, busy parents and they’d thought we were intruders.

It wasn’t Dex’s fault that my parents were idiots about their marriage, either, which was what I was actually mad about.

“I’m just tired,” I said, and he helped Oriana load her things into the car, as patiently and carefully as he did everything. “I was up a lot last night because of the fire alarms and fighting and everything so I’m cranky. I’m not really mad at Dex.”

“And he’s not dumb,” Ally reminded me, and even more crankily, I agreed with that.

“He just thinks he knows everything all the time, and it does bother me.” Especially when he was right about a lot of it. But he hadn’t been right about my parents, and neither of them was currently speaking to me. That was fine because I was trying to put them out my mind, too. I kept flashing back to what I’d seen when I quietly pushed open the bedroom door, saying, “Mom?” and then, “Oh, my Lord!”

I shook my head to clear away that mental image and then I yawned. It had been a very, very long night and Ally’s couch was awful. He’d volunteered his own bed, that we could

trade, but there was no way he could ever fit on the couch himself. I'd covered it in layers of clean sheets but I still got the feeling that the funk of it was invading my dreams. When I actually got to sleep, that was.

I blinked sleepily as I waited for Ally and Oriana to finish loading, which seemed to be taking a very long time given the small amount of crap she'd carried into the bar, all by herself. They hadn't stopped talking and smiling at each other, that was what was making the moment last so long. The block was pretty quiet in the heat of the day but there was a group of boys, teenagers, out with us.

"What are they doing?" I asked vaguely. I squinted into the sun as I looked up the street at them standing under a sidewalk tree, and then I had a terrible realization. "Oh, my Lord! Is that the nest?"

I was running toward them before I knew it, and yelling, too. "Don't you mess with that nest! Get away from Ally's birds!" They looked at me and one of them laughed, and another cocked his arm back and—

"Ow!" Something had struck my head right above my temple, hit me hard enough that I covered it with my palm as I went down on my knee on the concrete. I picked up my hand and saw blood.

"Lulu! The baby birds!" Ally yelled behind me, and then someone else yelled, like a roar. Like a king-of-the-jungle kind of roar. The crowd of teenage boys scattered as feet pounded behind me on the sidewalk, and then Dex was there.

"Alistair, don't go look at that. Help me get her inside," he ordered. He picked me up from the sidewalk, roughly scooping me into his arms.

"Get him away from that nest," I gasped, because those boys had been stomping on the ground...

"Come on," Oriana said, and she steered Ally back toward the Crookstown, too. Dex sat me up on the bar and gently tilted my chin.

“What hit me?” I asked. My head throbbed and I felt pretty confused about the whole thing, like how I’d been running and then, suddenly, had been down on the hot sidewalk in a lot of pain. A lot. “Did I get shot?”

“No, you weren’t shot. I think they threw a rock at you. Oriana, put some ice in a bar towel. A clean one,” he stipulated, and even with the agony of my pounding head I was glad for that. He used the fingers that were holding my chin to wipe under my eyes. “Don’t cry, brat. You’re ok. Look at me.”

I did look into his eyes. They were the same color as Maeve’s, a polar blue, and now they stared back with a lot of worry in them. “Am I really ok?” I asked him.

“You might have a concussion,” he said. He held the clean towel of ice to my head and when I tried to pull away from it, he took my chin again. “No, let me do this.”

“The birds,” I heard Ally murmur.

“I’m going to find those boys and get them,” I told everyone.

“Later. You can do that later,” Dex said. He brushed back my hair with his other hand. “You really, really don’t have any sense of personal danger.”

“I didn’t know they were going to throw a rock at me.” I took the end of the towel and wiped my cheeks. “I can’t stop crying. And my head hurts.”

“That’s what happens when you get hit with a rock.” He asked me some questions, gauging my mental state, and then he nodded like he was satisfied. “You’re all right,” he said. I didn’t think he’d tell me that if it weren’t true, so I believed him.

“Are you still going to make me clean the tables?”

His mouth moved into a small smile. “No, we’ll do without you tonight.”

“I don’t feel that bad,” I said, and then wondered at myself. Was I actually trying to get back to work?

He moved the towel and winced. “You’re going to have one hell of a bruise.”

“Is it ugly?”

“It’s not pretty, but it will go away. Lulu, don’t cry, it will fade and be gone soon enough.”

But that wasn’t why I was crying. He was being so nice to me, it was throwing me off! “I’m fine,” I said, which was also not like me to say. I generally made a much bigger deal of any injury, but with Ally so upset, there were other things to deal with. Then I felt something roll off the side of my face and I looked down at my thigh below the frayed edge of my jean shorts.

“Did blood just drip on my leg?” I asked shakily. “How bad is that cut? Do I need stitches? Because I’ll have to see a plastic surgeon.” Then I looked over at Ally, remembering the knife marks on his cheeks. “Never mind,” I said quickly. “It doesn’t matter at all how I look! No one cares about scars, not me for sure.”

Dex got another little smile. “It’s not that bad. Heads always bleed a lot,” he told me. “I’m lifting you down and you’re going upstairs to relax.”

“Ok,” I sniffed. I walked ahead of him on the stairs and he explained to Maeve why I was so bloody. She stared at me with an open mouth and an expression that told me how bad I must look.

“Just keep an eye on her,” he told his daughter. “If she acts weird in any way, come get me. I don’t mean the usual stuff she does that we think is weird.”

“What stuff do I do that you two think is weird?” I inquired.

“You know, whining about normal, everyday things that wouldn’t upset anyone else,” Maeve filled me in, “like when you flipped out when there was dog crap near your foot, or when you couldn’t find your favorite lip gloss and you thought one of the bar regulars had taken it.”

“It’s the perfect peony pink,” I told her. “One of those guys might have been interested, I didn’t know!”

“Or how you look at yourself in the mirror behind the register all the time and do your poses.” She put her hands on her hips, thrust out her breasts, and shook back her hair. “Like that. Or when you—”

“Maybe now’s not the time,” Dex said, because I was crying harder. “Keep that ice on your head. Rest,” he told me, and led me over to their couch. After Maeve’s speech, I didn’t even say a word about how rumpled and dirty it looked, nor did I try to brush it off with my hand before I sat down.

“Are you going to check on the nest?” I asked as he prepared to leave, and he nodded.

“Don’t worry about Alistair.” Then he was gone.

“Here,” Maeve said, and she handed me a box of tissues. “You have a lot of makeup on your face mixed in with the blood. Actually, I’m going to get you a washcloth.” She did and sat down next to me on the dirty couch to gently dab at my cheeks. “Does it hurt?”

“Yes. A lot,” I told her.

“What happened?”

I filled her in and she got furious.

“Those little fuckers! I bet I know who they are. Some of them are at my school and I hate them!”

“I do too,” I said. “Is there anything we can do to get back at them?”

“Uh, Lulu, they’re in a gang. We don’t want to mess with those guys.”

“Are you serious?” I asked her. “I was in a gang fight?”

“Were you really trying to start something with them?” She shook her head. “I’m so sorry that happened to Alistair. Last year when one of his cats died, he was a mess for weeks. We got him that lizard to make up for it. My dad thought it

would be less expensive for him to feed. I know it's hard to keep paying him enough here."

"What do you mean?"

She looked embarrassed. "The Crookstown is barely making it."

"What? How do you know that?" I asked her. I moved the towel on my temple to try to find another cold spot and Maeve noticed. She went to their little refrigerator for more ice.

"One of my dad's friends is a bookkeeper and I eavesdropped on them the other night," she told me. "They sat at the table for hours trying to figure out what to do and I had to pretend to be asleep on this couch. The next day, I tried to give him my money but he says that I should save for the future, like I'm going to go to college. I won't," she assured me.

"Why?"

"My grades suck," she said blithely.

"I thought you were doing that on purpose. Your dad thinks that you were making yourself fail because you hate the school and you were mad that you had to go there after your mom took off."

"No, I've always hated every school I've gone to, and I've gone to a lot," she said. "My mom and I moved around all the time so I'm used to changing. I'm going to make it through high school, but I don't want to go to college. Did he seriously think I was doing it on purpose?" she asked me, and I nodded. "He knows how shitty my grades have always been. We fight over every report card. But I guess I was doing worse lately," she admitted. "I wasn't actually failing before, but this year, I almost didn't get to move on to tenth grade. He was pretty upset about that."

"Why? Why were you failing?"

She played with a lock of that gorgeous hair. "I'm worried about my mom," she said. "She texts me sometimes and says she's so great, but I don't believe her. She never does well when I'm not around. Like, I was the one who cooked, who

did the laundry. It drove my dad nuts because he's so in charge. He's Mr. Rule. He kept trying to get custody and they would only give him half and half. Because I wouldn't say anything bad about her." She sighed. "That made him crazy too, but he understood, kind of. She's my mom."

"Do you hate living with Mr. Rule?"

"No. I actually like it a lot more now. You know, I don't have to go from place to place, I don't have to worry about so much. I know my dad's going to take care of everything, because he always does. But he drives me crazy about my grades."

"My parents never cared much about my grades," I said. "They mostly figured that I wouldn't go on to higher education, but my mom said that I had to do something after I graduated. I couldn't do nothing, even though I wanted to."

"You wanted to do nothing?"

She'd sounded just like her dad when she'd asked me that. "I thought it would be more fun to relax and go out with my friends. Get my nails done, go to the gym, shop. You know, fun all the time."

Maeve didn't seem too know at all. "Fun, I guess, except how did you plan to eat and stuff? How would you have paid to go shopping and get your nails done? I mean, I've had a bank account for five years. I know that you have to do *something*, otherwise the balance goes to zero and you're screwed."

Yeah, ok, she was fifteen and seemed to have more of a grip on financial matters than I did. Fine. My head hurt and I closed my eyes. "I know that now, too. I have a job, here at the Crookstown."

"Right now you do. But the other night, the accountant guy said that my dad has to fire one of you," she told me. "He can't afford to keep paying you and Alistair."

My eyes flew open. "Seriously? I'm going to get fired?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I'd been pretending to be asleep for so long, I actually fell asleep and I missed how the whole

conversation ended,” she told me. “I don’t think my dad wants to fire anybody, though. He’s so soft.” That last part came out with a sneer.

“You think your dad is *soft*?” I exploded, and that made my head throb. “You just called him Mr. Rule. And he’s not soft with me, that’s for sure!”

“He has rules, but he lets me get away with things. I know he will and I can work him. He lets you get away with murder,” she pointed out. “Do you think it’s normal that a waitress could disappear for half an hour in the middle of her shift because she was having an eyebrow emergency? You were up here in the bathroom forever, tweezing and sculpting or whatever.”

“It was a serious problem,” I answered. I reached to touch them now and check on the shaping but my fingers grazed the edge of my bloody wound so I stopped. “I haven’t been able to afford professional grooming and they’re getting out of hand.” I thought back to my previous experience as a waitress. “I always used to go off and do beauty repairs when I worked for my dad,” I said. “I actually did whatever I wanted.”

“Like what?”

“Like coming and going no matter when my shift was, wearing what I wanted, refusing to do most of the stuff that the other servers had to do,” I answered. “Compared to my old job, Dex is a real hardass.”

Maeve considered that. “There’s this one junior counselor at the camp who we all think is banging the head counselor, because she gets away with everything. It’s so annoying when we always have to deal with the trash or when the toilets are clogged or something, and she never has to lift a finger. She just gets all the fun craft projects but she doesn’t have to pick glue off the tables or anything. I hate her,” she let me know.

“I feel like the other servers may not have liked me being there, either,” I admitted. “They may not have liked me very much personally. And I guess if your dad doesn’t like me

either, then I'm going to get fired from the Crookstown. Fired from the Crookstown! Could I go any lower?"

"Lulu, don't cry," she said, and handed over the tissue box again. "I'm not sure he's going to fire you."

"You really think he's going to fire Ally?" I asked skeptically, and she didn't bother to say anything because the answer was obviously "no." "Seriously, this was the worst day! I got a head wound in a gang brawl, the birds died, I lost my job."

"Do you want to watch those fashion runway shows you like?" she suggested. "I can find them on my tablet and get you water with only little pieces of ice. We don't have any lemons, though."

"I don't care about ice or lemons. Thank you," I said. Things did feel more normal once we were watching the models moving down the runway, but that also reminded me about my horrid portfolio.

"I saw my pictures today," I mentioned.

"Oriana told me that she was coming to the bar. She already showed me some of the shots on her phone and I thought you looked beautiful," she said. "I'm going to get a bowl of ice cream. Do you want some?"

"Why not," I sighed back. Why not eat ice cream, a food which hadn't crossed my lips in over seven years? I could remember the last time I'd had it, when I was sixteen—right before the big party when I'd worn the ball gown that I'd also worn in the cursed photo shoot. My friends and I had gone to the beach together and gotten ice cream afterwards, and Devon (the one who'd I'd thought was my bestie) had eyed me up and down in my bikini as I took a big lick off my chocolate with chocolate chips cone.

"Wow, Lulu, that's so brave of you," she'd said. "At your height, doesn't every extra ounce show? I would totally be thinking of that cone each time I looked down at my tummy."

I had immediately looked down and sucked in my stomach as much as I could. The chocolate ice cream lost its delicious

flavor.

“And you’re going to wear the huge gown to your party, right? The one that already adds a lot to your hips? It’s so hard to carry off a dress with that much fabric and not get swallowed up by it. Especially for someone so...”

“Petite!” I’d snapped. “I’m petite.” I’d been testing out different voices back then, trying to see which was the most appealing to men, but I’d forgotten to use one when I’d told her that. Because of course, that had been my biggest fear, that I’d look like a garden gnome masquerading as a princess. I’d tossed the cone into the garbage and bolted home, and then I’d gone into my room and cried.

The dress had fit for the party, it had zipped up just fine despite those few licks of the ice cream. And it had fit again, seven years later, when I’d put it on for those terrible pictures that Oriana had taken, the ones that I’d looked at and known that I would never make it as a model. Sure, I’d taken bad pictures before. I’d blamed them on the lighting, the lens, the photographer. But when I’d compared the shots of me to the ones of Maeve...

“Uh, I’m going to go downstairs for a minute,” Maeve said, and disappeared. After a few seconds, larger feet pounded up the stairs and Dex opened the door. He looked at me, shook his head, and sat down on the trunk they used as a coffee table.

“Damn.” He took my hand and moved the ice towel off the cut. “I should have taken you to the doctor.”

“No. It doesn’t hurt as much now.”

“Maeve just ran into the bar, which she’s not allowed to do, and said that you’re up here crying into a bowl of ice cream.” He picked it up from the table and appeared to consider eating some before he put it down again. “You must have a concussion.”

“No, I don’t. I’m very good in medical emergencies and I can tell you for sure that I don’t.”

“You’re very good in medical emergencies? You almost passed out when the blood dripped on your leg. Oh, shit,” he said, as I dissolved. “Lulu, why in the hell are you crying like this if it’s not due to your head injury? Convince me quick, otherwise, we’re heading to the ER.”

“I’m crying because my dream is ruined! My plans for the future, my path to success, my hope for wealth and fame! It’s all gone!”

“Because the rock hit you? I told you, the cut will heal and—”

“No, not the rock! The pictures.”

He looked blank. “Which ones? You mean the new posters I ordered? You’re going to like them. They’re ‘real’ football players, baseball and hockey, too.”

“I don’t care about those. I mean, it’s good that you’re taking down the feudal age décor you had, but I mean the pictures of me.”

“Oh, right.” His face cleared. “Those are pretty. What are you pissing and moaning about? Did Oriana do a bad job?”

“No, she did a great job, but the pictures show something terrible.” I took a deep breath. “It’s very clear in them that I’m not a model. I just don’t have the look.”

“I thought you already knew that you’d have to do catalogues or whatever. Not big-time stuff, like the fashion magazines. You couldn’t walk on a runway, that was what you said.”

“Yes, I know that!”

“Well, what’s the problem? You already realize how short you are,” he pointed out. “I think they’re great.”

“Do you?”

“Why do you care what I think, anyway?”

I didn’t know why, but I did. I sniffed.

“I think they’re great,” he said again. “Maybe you wouldn’t be in some dumb magazine that no one reads—”

“People do read them. They’re very, very important,” I put in.

“But I would use your pictures as an ad for my bar. You look like you were having a great time, really having fun at the Crookstown.”

“I was,” I admitted.

“Those kinds of pictures would make people want to come and have fun here, too,” Dex told me. “They might be surprised when they show up that there’s no cute little chick in a ball gown, but it would get their asses in the seats. Young asses, not only the ones on death’s door as you described them before.”

“You think I’m a cute little chick?” I sniffed again.

“You’re always telling me how beautiful you are.”

“Sure, but seeing myself in those pictures was really upsetting. I look old.”

Now he laughed. “Old?”

“Old and fat.” I looked at the ice cream bowl again and sniffed yet again, even harder, because I was crying again.

“No, you’re not either of those things. But why the hell do you care so much?”

“Because that’s it!” I exploded. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“That’s not true.”

I nodded even though it made my head hurt. “Yes, it is. If I’m not the petite, pretty one, then what am I?”

Dex looked at me and nodded. “Isn’t that the deal about life? Isn’t that what we’re all trying to figure out?”

“You already know. You have Maeve and Ally and the Crookstown,” I said. “You work very hard to make all that stuff go well.”

“I guess I do.”

I wiped my eyes. “Is he ok? Is Ally really upset?”

“Oriana hung around and they’ve been talking a lot. She was crying a little herself, so he got involved in helping her feel better and I think that helped him, too. Goddamn kids.” He put the ice back against my temple.

“Maeve said it was a gang.”

“And you ran at them like you were going to throw hands. I think you got lucky that you only were hit by a rock, brat. You can’t do shit like that.”

“Ok.”

“You’re not arguing?” His eyes widened. “Then I have a few more rules to announce. You also can’t take makeup breaks and disappear into the bathroom, or tell the customers that you can’t accept cash because it’s dirty, or announce that all orders will be at the bar for self-pickup because your feet are killing you.”

“I may be injured, but I’m not dead,” I told him. “I’ll still do those things once I recover.”

Dex laughed. He moved the ice so that his palm rested on my jaw. “Man, I’m sorry this happened to you.”

“Are you going to fire me?”

“You think I’d fire you because you got hurt? You have a high opinion of me.”

“I asked because I know you’re so poor that you have to fire someone,” I explained.

“I knew Maeve wasn’t asleep. No, I’m not going to fire anyone. I’ll figure it out.” His thumb brushed against my cheek once, but then he did it again, so I knew it was on purpose.

“Do you have to go back down right now or can you stay?” I asked.

“It’s a slow night,” he said. “I’ll leave in a minute.”

We sat together for more than a minute, and that was much better.

Chapter 7

“Wow,” I said slowly, drawing out the word to give myself more time to think. “I’m...” I couldn’t think of what I was. No, actually, I knew exactly: I was shocked. Pissed. Jealous?

Yeah, definitely. But of course, I couldn’t tell her that, so I kept searching my mind for a word.

“Happy?” Devon filled in. “Thrilled? So excited for me that you can’t believe it?”

“Oh. For sure.” I’d been caught a little flat-footed. If she’d texted, I could have crafted a great response, one outwardly expressing that I was so happy, thrilled, and excited about her news, but with definite undertones of “I know it won’t last” or “great, but I’m not even sure I believe this information because it’s totally implausible.”

“It’s just amazing, the most amazing thing that ever happened to anyone!” Devon gushed. She did that a lot—she was a real gusher. I remembered her pouring out information all the way back in fifth grade when she’d moved to our town from someplace in Ohio. She’d introduced herself at the front of the classroom by gushing about batons and international travel. Devon had been the captain of her twirling team and they’d performed in Florida, Minnesota, and even Windsor, Ontario.

“So I’ve been in two countries and I have a passport in case I might go to more someday, which I probably will because baton-twirling could take me anywhere,” she’d breathlessly explained. Her words had provoked strong feelings of jealousy then, too, because at the time, I hadn’t traveled too far over our county lines. My dad was always

working, always running the restaurant, so we had never been able to get away.

Except now I knew that he had been taking weekends off with Bettina, that whore, and they'd gone to Chicago, to Palm Springs, to—

“Hello?” Devon asked loudly. “Are you still there, Lulu?”

“Uh, yeah, I'm here. I have to get to work, though.”

“Oh, are you on set?”

I looked around Ally's apartment, and four other sets of eyes (two cat, one anole, one betta fish) stared back. Two other cats were lounging in his bedroom. The hamster was hiding under woodchip stuff and was probably asleep, which was fine with me because that animal made me even more nervous than the lizard did.

“Yes, I'm on set,” I agreed. “Congratulations, Devon.”

“Thanks, Lulu!” She said a few more braggy things before I was able to hang up. I kind of did it while she was in the middle of something about bridesmaids but that was fine, because she hadn't asked me to be one.

I heard the sound of keys and one by one, the door locks opened. “Hi, everybody,” Ally called when he walked into his apartment. I had thought that cats were supposed to be solitary and standoffish, but his immediately ran to him whenever he came in. The hamster, that semi-rat, lifted its head and even the fish seemed to perk up, interested.

“Hi, Ally. Did you guys have fun?” I asked, and he nodded hard and smiled.

“It was great,” he answered.

He had really been on a photo shoot, an actual one with Oriana. She’d gotten a break from one of the old guys in the Crookstown, the one who’d had known about famous fashion photographers and had worked in art direction. Sean still had a few friends left in the business and had suggested her as a photographer after he’d seen the shots of Maeve, those stunning pictures.

Ally told me all about the day, mostly how amazing Oriana had been, how everyone had been impressed by her, how he’d helped carry her stuff because when she got nervous, she dropped it. Also, she was a little clumsy in general, but he didn’t mind that at all. According to him, she was just about perfect.

“You really like her,” I said, and he smiled again.

“She’s amazing,” he agreed. “She’s coming over here for dinner.”

“Here?” I asked. “Tonight?”

There were several problems with that. One, it was Sunday, so I was off too and I had no place to go while he had his date. But even more importantly, this place was a dump, and he was bringing a woman he liked into it. It was almost as bad as the Crookstown, which actually had been slightly improved as of late by Dex’s new posters and the removal of a lot of the dirty, dusty dollar bills stapled everywhere. He’d insisted on leaving one section of them in the hallway to the

boys' and girls' rooms, but I'd also bargained successfully: he'd had to remove the drooping flags on the ceiling (all Irish, by the way, the country's emblem and different ones from old-time provinces there).

The compromise didn't extend to putting the ratty fabric in the trash, as I'd recommended. Dex had washed them before installing them on another wall rather than back up where they'd trailed on his head, and surprisingly, they looked good. With things freshened up like that, the Crookstown felt a trillion times brighter and less dirty, which I could actually quantify by the leaner layer of dust on the tables when I was forced to clean them.

"Oriana is coming here for the first time," Ally said, and now, instead of smiling, he looked kind of enraptured. Like the expression my ex had when he watched the woman who'd become his wife.

Oh, my Lord. "Do you have a serious thing for her?" I asked him.

"A thing? Like, am I in love with Oriana, do you mean?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess that's what I mean."

"I don't know," he answered, very thoughtful. "I think she's extremely smart. She's an excellent photographer. I'm so interested when she talks, because when she talks about things, she cares so much. When the birds died, she helped me bury them and she cried, too. She loves animals."

"She's tall, too," I noted. "And pretty."

“I guess so. She is very pretty,” he concurred, but then moved right past that quality. “She gets nervous and drops things until she focuses herself, just like her cameras. After she’s not worried, she can relax. I love when she does that because her mind works just like a camera lens too, just that fast, clicking all the time.”

“That’s really nice. That’s nice that you like so many things about her,” I said. “So much different stuff.”

“Didn’t you like your old boyfriend? All the different stuff about him?”

I thought. “Yeah, I guess I did.” He was devastatingly handsome, so that had been a big thing, of course. I’d loved to look at his perfect face, his perfect hair, and his perfect body. I liked his family, too, in that they were very important in our town and had a ton of money in the bank. He didn’t, not himself personally, but it had been fun to take advantage—

Not take advantage, I corrected myself. It had been fun to partake of the things his family had, like fancy parties, fast boats, and special boxes at the football stadium. It had also been fun to name-drop them when I posted pictures because everyone was impressed (even if they pretended that they weren’t).

But it wasn’t just his looks and his family, that wasn’t all I’d liked about him. I’d liked how he listened to me when I talked, even if I talked about something that he thought was boring, like fashion and clothes. I liked how he listened to everybody, even his great aunts who sometimes droned on and on. Once when we’d gone to the beach last summer, one of the girls had told him all about her own boyfriend problems. He’d let her use his towel to wipe her eyes and tried to help with advice, and I’d thought that was so nice. He was a nice

guy, and maybe...maybe I hadn't appreciated that enough about him, because I'd been so wrapped up in the other stuff.

"Didn't you have fun hanging out together?" Ally asked. "Because I've been thinking that the best part of my day is when I get to talk to Oriana."

"I guess so." I thought about that, too. Had we liked hanging out together? I didn't remember us really doing too much talking. "I think we were mostly a physical connection. She's your first girlfriend, right?"

He shrugged, embarrassed. "I don't know if she's my girlfriend."

Signs were positive that way, but this apartment could definitely tank things. "Well, now that you're out dating people, you'll find that not all relationships are the same. Some of them are more, like, talky, but some are more strictly physical. Making out and having sex constantly," I said, since he appeared confused. "My ex and I were mostly doing it when we were together, and it was great." I missed that a whole lot. "When we weren't naked, I guess I was usually working on things. You know, convincing him to think a different way, or getting him to change his opinion on something. Like, I really wanted him to move to Florida with me, but the stuff I did to make it happen didn't work. Nothing worked out in the end."

Ally nodded. "That's too bad. I'm sorry he broke your heart."

"Did Maeve tell you the story, too?" I asked, and he nodded. "I don't know anymore. I'm not sure if it's such a bad thing that we broke up. I don't cry now when I think about him, and that's a big step. I think it was a good idea for

me to move to Detroit.” Even if I had temporarily ended up in this apartment. “We’re going to have to do some work on this place,” I told him.

“What do you mean?”

“We have to clean, like we do at the Crookstown but for real. Then we’re going to put all the animal stuff away.”

“Oriana likes animals,” he reminded me.

“Even if she does, she’s not going to want to step on cat toys and...is that a leash for the lizard?”

“I’ve been trying to train him on it. Do you think Oriana won’t like being here?” he asked worriedly. He also looked around and frowned slightly as if he might have seen some problems for the first time.

“I think she likes you,” I told him, and he grinned. “I think she’ll like this apartment even better once it’s clean.” I put on surgical gloves, having bought a stash to carry in my purse. “Let’s get going.”

Ally talked more about his new girlfriend as we cleaned, a whole lot more. He seemed to know so much about her, little details that I hadn’t thought someone would be interested in. For example, he knew the name of her favorite teacher ever (Mrs. Smith), he knew her dream vacation spot (the Florida Keys), he knew that if she had a dog (which she wanted), she would name it “Lucinda.”

“Almost like your name,” he pointed out, and I considered that I didn’t want to be confused with a dog. We cleaned hard

and we got the apartment decluttered and shined up a lot. It wasn't exactly a palace, but it was an improvement.

"I better go down to meet her when she gets here. I don't want her in the stairwell alone," Ally said.

"Will you walk me down, too? I'm going out," I said, and did a quick check of my face in the mirror on the kitchen counter. I adjusted my hair over the cut and bruise on my temple that hadn't healed, then I put my four bags of beauty products away under the sink with all the animal food.

"Don't you want to stay and hang out with Oriana? She's really fun," he assured me, but I said that I thought they'd enjoy their time alone more if I wasn't there to share it with them.

"Anyway, I have plans. With a friend," I added.

Not really, though. I got into my car with Ally watching and then I drove off through the city, but I didn't actually have plans. And I didn't actually have any friends here besides him. Despite the dirt, the hamster which was like a rat, the lack of beauty prep space, and the noise/scariness of his apartment building, it had been fun to live with Ally. We had breakfast together, for example, which I'd never done with anyone except sometimes my ex. But Ally liked to cook and eat something big, like a few eggs and a few pieces of toast and bacon, too. That was ok for a guy of his size, but I usually stuck to one piece of toast, no butter, no jam.

It wasn't only breakfast, though. We went grocery shopping together and watched a lot of animal shows on his super old TV that was three feet deep. We watched fashion shows on my laptop, too, which I'd dropped so that it had a big crack across the screen but you could still mostly see the

clothes. He was learning a lot, I thought, but I was too—and not only about animals, although I'd gotten a real crash course in the care and feeding of various creatures. I'd learned how to live with someone, which I'd never ever done before, and I'd also learned about being friends.

Ally and I were friends, but if Oriana was going to be his girlfriend, then it would be over. Women did not enjoy when their boyfriends had other women hanging around, as I knew well from my ex. His best friend had been a girl and I'd hated her. They'd always had so much damn fun together! I'd been so jealous...

Which was stupid, since that woman wasn't half as pretty as I was. But that didn't seem to matter to anyone, because now she was dating some superstar football player and she was still best friends with my ex, and now he was married, and who was the person left alone?

Me. Damn.

I rolled down the windows like I did in Dex's car, and I headed off in a different direction from how Ally and I went to the Crookstown together. We always took my car, because the one he had from his mom was messed up and Dex didn't trust it. And my ride was awesome. I remembered when my dad had given it to me on my sixteenth birthday, with me in my big dress and all my friends—well, the girls I knew—clustered around and squealing about how cool it was, and already asking me to drive them places.

I'd squealed too and hugged my dad and he'd said, "I guess I showed all those fuckers who told me that I wouldn't make it." And my mom had been furious with both of us because she'd wanted to get a new car for herself for two years, and he'd always told her that they couldn't afford it.

No, I wasn't going to think about my parents. I focused on the road instead because I really needed to know my way around. Even if I never got a response to the thousand emails I'd sent out to agents, casting call people, businesses, ad agencies, and everyone else, I was staying. I looked around to memorize landmarks and street signs and I thought a lot about Ally, his apartment, his car, and Oriana being his first girlfriend. Then I dug in my purse with one hand and found my phone.

“What do you need from me on our one day off?” Dex answered.

“Hello to you,” I said back. “And you're welcome for calling you. First of all, this is a reminder that we're doing inventory next week, so you're not supposed to be having a day off right now. You're supposed to be getting the rats out of your gross storage room and then fumigating it so I can get close enough to watch you count everything, because I think you and Ally did it wrong before.”

“Yeah, I'll get right on that when the ballgame's over. Anything else?”

I could tell by his tone that he was not going to get right on anything, except maybe another beer. “I wanted to talk to you about Ally, too,” I continued. “You know he's seeing Oriana.”

“He told me about her and she seems like a nice woman. Are you pissed at her because of how your portfolio turned out?”

“No, that wasn't her fault.” I sighed, though, as I thought about those pictures. It was still hard to get over the

disappointment. And it was equally disappointing that Maeve and Dex had both said no to her trying out a modeling career herself, despite how I'd promised that I'd shepherd her through it with my greater experience. "It wasn't Oriana's fault," I echoed. "The lighting she did was amazing. My hair and makeup were flawless. The dress is...well, I hesitate to say 'masterpiece—'"

"Then don't say it. What's your problem with Oriana?"

Nothing, except I would lose a friend over her, but that was just the way of the world. "No problem. I just think you should talk to Ally about sex with her. Or have you already done that?"

There was a silence that stretched long enough that I pounded my phone on the dashboard, because it had been blinking off at times and a good whack could get it restarted.

"What the hell was that?" Dex demanded. "Are you trying to burst my eardrums?"

"You weren't answering," I explained, and he huffed into the phone.

"Alistair is a grown man. He knows about sex," he told me.

"Are you sure? He's never had a girlfriend before."

"He had sex-ed at school. They teach condoms."

“Ok, good, he knows about birth control,” I said. “But what about other stuff? Don’t you think that someone should tell him the real stuff about sex? Like, where to touch a woman, where to lick and suck—”

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” Dex interrupted loudly. “If he doesn’t know everything, he’ll learn. I’m not going to tell him what to suck...Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. I’m not having this conversation with you.”

“So you mentioned, but you’re still talking. Oh, my Lord, I already went down this street. Why am I here again?” I glanced around. Was I lost?

“What are you doing right now?” he asked.

“I’m learning my way around the city.” I told him the name of the street I was on and the one I was currently crossing.

“Lulu, what in the hell are you doing there? Turn around, immediately,” he ordered.

“This is a one-way street,” I said. “I’ll pull over and put Ally’s address into my phone.”

“No, don’t stop the car! I’ll give you directions. Do not stop. Lulu! Did you hear me?”

“It’s hard to hear you with the windows down,” I explained. “Someone just yelled right by the car.”

“God damn it, put up your windows, right now! You have the doors locked, correct?”

I did after he said it. “I forgot. I have to leave the windows down, though, to save on gas. Ally told me about that.”

“If you want to save on gas, don’t go out driving. Put up your damn windows!”

He gave me directions and I saw a lot of the city that afternoon, because I’d gone a long way while I’d been thinking so much. But finally, I got to a street that looked very familiar, and then after I made one more turn, I arrived at the Crookstown. Dex stood in front of the bar with his phone to his ear, frowning horrifically.

“Hi,” I said as I got out.

“What in the hell—”

“I told you, I’m trying to learn more of the city,” I said. “I was thinking that maybe I could start working for a delivery service. I would pick up food and groceries and stuff, and drop them off at people’s houses.”

“I understand how deliveries work.”

“But my service would be different, because I could also give hair and makeup advice. Styling tips for fashion, too,” I explained. “It would be like a good deed. I’d be like a fairy godmother, except younger and more attractive. And real.”

“You think people would enjoy having the takeout girl criticize their outfits like you do to the regulars in the bar?”

“I’ll have to know all the streets really well to do that,” I continued. “Also, I want to know the city where I live, because I’m a Detroiter now.”

He took a deep breath, looking up at the sky like he was seeking guidance there or something. “You’re a Detroiter who’s going to get her car stolen if you keep acting like you did today,” he said finally. “I grew up here and I love this city, but there are streets I won’t go near. Next time you want to explore, I’ll come. I’ll drive, in fact.”

“Ok,” I said, and went around to the passenger side. “Where are we going?”

“Did you consider that I might be doing something myself this afternoon? Something other than chauffeuring your ass around?”

“Are you?” I asked. “Am I pulling you away from catching the rats?”

Dex hesitated. “No, I was still watching the ballgame.”

“There’s really another one? Doesn’t it feel like they play, like, a hundred of those boring things?”

He rolled his eyes but managed to see well enough to walk around to the driver’s seat. “Ok, brat, I’ll give up on the game. We’re up six runs in the ninth, so I think it’s safe.”

“You could catch a few rats and it would be even safer for everyone,” I suggested, but he pretended not to hear that.

It ended up being a great afternoon. He drove me all over the city and he told me about everything as he did, like he showed me Hitsville, USA, the actual building where they’d recorded all the Motown songs that my grandmother had liked to sing to me. We saw the Spirit of Detroit sculpture, and drove past places where Pewabic Pottery and Model T cars were made. We went through neighborhoods with huge, beautiful homes.

“I want to live in that one,” I said, pointing to a house that looked like a castle. “Actually, I want to live anywhere but Ally’s apartment.”

“I thought you two got along.”

“We do.” I leaned my head back against the seat and felt the wind ruin my hair some more. “But now, there’s Oriana. He and I can’t be friends anymore.”

“Is there a rule I don’t know about?”

“She won’t like it. I didn’t want any of my boyfriends to have female friends,” I said. “Anyway, when you’re with someone, you drop people you’d hung out with before.”

“You say asinine shit.”

“I don’t!”

“You do,” Dex told me. “Why shouldn’t Alistair stay friends with you? Oriana will know that you’re not after him. I know that, now,” he added. “I get that it’s not like what I said before when you wanted to quit. And I know that he won’t drop you, either. He wouldn’t treat a friend like that.”

I knew he wouldn’t plan to, because he’d never be deliberately cruel, but he seemed pretty crazy about Oriana—and I’d seen plenty how relationships took center stage. A couple could ignore everything around them because they were so wrapped up in each other, their love and also their problems. “You just don’t remember, because it was so long ago that you were with someone. You were young then,” I pointed out.

“Then?” I’m not old now,” he told me. His voice was quite loud, even with the rushing air from the open windows. “I was married a while ago, but I’ve been with plenty of women since. I’m not a monk.”

“Sure, you’re super virile,” I assured him, which sent him on another minor tirade but my mind went elsewhere as I thought about what kind of women would he have been with. Someone pretty, because he was so good-looking himself in that unkempt kind of way, with his beard growing in and the scar over his eye. I pictured a beautiful blonde, tall and with a great ass. She’d be demure, someone who didn’t always fight with him, and that meant she’d be sweet to Maeve. Which Maeve probably wouldn’t have cared for, because she enjoyed a bit of a spat. I liked hanging out with her because she had a lot of what my grandma would have called “salt.”

“Where’s Maeve today?” I asked, interrupting. I wasn’t so interested in the story of how a woman at the grocery store had just asked him out, because she did in fact think he was virile.

“She’s with that man,” he growled.

“Her teenage coworker?” I interpreted, and he nodded.

“They went to the DIA to look at the Diego Rivera murals. The Detroit Institute of Arts in Midtown,” he translated. “We could go, too.” He started to signal and change lanes.

I put my hand on the wheel to put a stop to that. “I think she’s safe in a famous museum surrounded by art and other people. I’m not going to let you go spy on your daughter. Don’t be asinine,” I recommended, using his word. “Since you’re going to talk to Ally about sex, I can also talk to Maeve for you.”

“What on God’s green Earth would you have to tell her?”

“You know! Just tips about what to do—”

“No. Absolutely not.”

“I meant birth control stuff! I wouldn’t be inappropriate,” I told him.

“No one is going to talk to anyone about sex,” he answered with finality.

Well, I was going to talk to Maeve, and I absolutely thought Dex should have a man-to-man talk with Ally. We argued about that until he pointed out the house where Aretha Franklin had grown up and he played one of her songs on his phone, played it too loudly to permit more conversation. It

was about a woman who was really, really into a guy who made her feel amazing.

“That was good,” I said, surprised.

“Yeah, you wouldn’t be the first to like Aretha Franklin.”

“It would be nice to feel like that song. I wish I had someone like that,” I sighed. “I need a boyfriend of my own.”

“Are you still thinking about Alistair and Oriana?”

“No.” I sighed again. “My friend Devon...I guess she’s my friend.” I paused to consider. “I’ve known her since fifth grade, after all, and we used to hang out all the time.” But I’d never really talked to her in the way that Dex and Ally talked together, for example, easy and relaxed and having fun. Devon and I had mostly sniped at each other, looking for ways to get our digs in, and of course we’d always competed in terms of hair, makeup, clothes, shoes, and men.

“What about this Devon?” Dex prompted.

“She’s getting married. She’s getting *married*,” I repeated with emphasis. “She met some guy only a month ago and they’re so in love, so happy. She told me that about a thousand times, how he’s so crazy about her.”

“Great, good for them.”

“No, it’s not good! She called to tell me because she wanted to hear my reaction. She wanted me to know that she’s

getting married first so she could rub it in my face,” I clarified, and he seemed to understand because he got mad.

“Why is she rubbing anything in your face when you’re both grown women? Why in the hell are you still in competition with a girl from fifth grade?”

“Because...because!” Because it had always seemed so important, and I tried to explain that to him. “It’s like how the baseball players get paid more if they hit a lot of balls, right? That means they’re better. I want to be better than my friends.”

“You’re not comparing batting averages, so what makes you ‘better’ than they are?” he asked skeptically, and I found that I didn’t have a good answer.

“You know,” I told him. “You know what I mean.” When he kept saying no, he didn’t, I explained a little further. “The guys you date show a lot about you. Like my ex came from a really important family and he was so, so good looking. Those things matter. They’re better and they make me better in my friends’ opinions. I care about their opinions, and I care that Devon’s fiancé does some kind of internet thing and they’re going to get married in a place that I’ve never even heard of except she said it was an island in the Caribbean and he’s flying her whole family down there.” I puffed an angry breath. “She kept telling me how they’re in love, blah, blah, in between repeating how many karats her ring is. Four,” I let him know.

Dex was silent. I waited, but he was apparently too impressed by the diamond’s size to answer.

“Do you have any friends who I could go out with?” I asked after a while.

And now, his answer shot out before the words finished coming from my mouth: “No.”

“You don’t have any friends besides Ally?” I wondered.

“I have a lot more friends. You see guys I know all the time,” he reminded me, and that was true. They popped in a lot to have a beer or a drink and say hello, maybe to watch one of the interminable baseball games.

“So what? Are all of them secretly weird or something? Big losers? On drugs? Felons? Fugitives?”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, of course not! You’ve met two firefighters and a cop. They’re not fugitives.” He shook his head and then it dawned on me.

“You don’t think I’m good enough to date one of your friends. Is that right?” I asked angrily. “You don’t want to introduce me because you don’t think I’m good enough for them!”

And he didn’t answer.

“Stop this car right now!”

He did, but only because we’d pulled up to the Crookstown. “Hold on, don’t get out,” he told me. “It isn’t that I think you’re not good enough. I don’t think you’re a bad person, not at all. I see how much you care about Alistair, for example. And you’re always trying to help Maeve. You’re nice to the regulars, even when they bother you. I watched

you walk Harold to his car the other night and I know he always stiffs on tips, but you did it anyway.”

“His hip was hurting after sitting on the stool for so long and he needed to lean on my arm,” I said. “So what?”

“Then there’s the other side of you,” he continued.

“The side that’s wrong and bad?”

“Think back through what you just said to me,” Dex told me. “You said you’re not glad for your friend because she’s getting married, you’re mad because you aren’t yourself. She’s doing it first and to a rich guy so you’re pissed, no matter how much she tells you that they’re in love and happy. You want me to introduce you to a man, not so that you two will also fall in love and start a life together, but because you want to show your old crowd back home that you’re ‘better.’ Does that sound like a mature woman, someone my friends would want to date? None of them would be buying you a four-karat ring, that’s for sure. You’ll have to look elsewhere.”

I got out of the car because it was too hot to stay in there without the motion making the wind blow, and because I was so hot with anger that I was almost on fire. “Give me those keys,” I told him, and when he didn’t immediately relinquish them, I stamped my foot before I realized that action didn’t help me look any more mature, and that was what Dex thought my problem was.

He got out and walked around the car. “You’re always talking about that ex-boyfriend you had, but did you really love him? Or were you only using him because he had that rich family that you told me about?”

“I love him! I mean, I did love him, and I wasn’t using him.” If I hadn’t loved him, then why had every bit of my body hurt to see him with someone else?

He shrugged, like he didn’t believe me. “Does that competition shit with your friends really make you happy? How can you actually be friends if you’re always trying to best each other?”

“Give me the keys.”

Dex sighed. “I don’t know why I bother to argue with you. I didn’t say all that to piss you off.”

“But you succeeded in doing it,” I answered. “I’m leaving.”

“Where are you going to go if Oriana is still over with Alistair?”

“I’m going to do what you said,” I told him. “I’m going to look elsewhere. I’m going to meet someone, get another boyfriend who I really love, get married, and get a beautiful house like those ones you showed me in Palmer Park. You’ll see.”

“I’m sure you will meet someone,” he said. “I don’t have any doubt.”

“I will!” I said angrily, like he was disagreeing with me. “I will, and my life will be great, but you’ll still live in a hot apartment over a bar with new posters that don’t make much of a difference, dragging Harold to his car because he refuses to get hip replacement surgery because he says he’s not old.

And your storage room has rats!” I grabbed the keys from his hand, even more pissed off because none of what I was saying was helping me sound any more mature, not any more at all.

“Wherever you’re going right now, be careful.”

“What do you care how careful I am? You take any chance you get to insult me!” I said.

“I’m not insulting you. I’m telling you the truth,” Dex said. “It seems like you never heard a lot of that before.”

“The truth?” I was so mad that I hardly got that question out of my mouth. “The truth is that I’m too good for all of this! I will be a model, I will get myself out of Ally’s apartment, and I will have better life than everyone. You, especially! The truth is that you’re—you’re—”

What was he? Not right, not correct in what he’d said, that was for sure! I couldn’t find the words, but he just waited. He wasn’t getting mad back at me or arguing, he just stood there looking—

Disappointed. So I got in the car and left with the windows rolled down, ruining my hair beyond any fixing.

Chapter 8

I looked at myself in the mirror, wondering if it was too much. Too much lipstick, too much eyeliner, too much highlighter, too much hair, too much breasts?

Maybe. The guy for tonight had said this date would be casual, which might have meant that he just wanted to go back to his place and sleep with me. Lately, I'd had several of those types of "dates," and although some had been tempting, my mom had pounded into my brain that instantaneous sex was not the way to start a relationship. I'd turned them down and gone home, and then I'd kept trying for more. There had to be a perfect man out there, someone who would overlook all the problems that Dex had brought up, all the things that were wrong with me. There had to be someone who would love me in spite of all that, and I was going to find him, damn it.

Even though Ally had helped me replace the lightbulbs in the Crookstown's girls' room, it was still dark and too hard to fully judge how I looked. I smoothed the top of my dress and walked back into the bar to get a second opinion, and a third and maybe a fourth. "Well?" I asked, and spun in a circle. "What do you think?"

Sean, the regular/former art director, looked me over critically. "You know I think that pink—"

Yes, I knew that he thought baby pink was "insipid" on me, but I loved this dress. I told him that and he shook his head, but then shrugged and went back to his drink. I turned to my third opinion source. "Ally, about you?"

"You always look pretty, Lulu," he said, smiling. I smiled back, because his comment was very nice but it also wasn't the help I was looking for. I had to go to the fourth person.

I lost the smile as I turned to him. "Dex?" I asked. "Any critical remarks to make?"

He looked me over, frowning. "Is your dress supposed to be that short and, uh, low on the top?"

“You’re right.” I tugged the neckline lower still and shimmied my hips to make the skirt shorter. “There, perfect.” Now I smiled, because he looked so pissed.

“Where, exactly, are you going in that getup?”

“I’m not sure,” I answered. “This is a new guy. He may just want to head right back to his apartment, but I won’t do that.”

“I always make the ladies buy me dinner first,” Reuben let me know, and I told him that was a good plan.

“What happened to the nice guy from last week?” Ally asked, and Dex snorted.

“The one who had his sister drive him here or the one who was only wearing a robe and nothing else?” he asked.

That one had been an example of a date who wasn’t interested in dinner first. I ignored Dex and jumped in with my own response to Ally’s question. “I haven’t really connected with anyone specific,” I explained to him and to the bar regulars, who all were taking way too much interest in my dating life. It gave everyone here a new subject of conversation besides baseball, football trades, the hockey draft, and other equally boring topics. Since I worked almost every night at the Crookstown, a lot of the potential suitors came here for my preapproval process—I had to meet them someplace public before I decided if it would go any further as an actual date—so everyone got an eyeful.

That meant they all had opinions to share. “I liked the one who wore the bow tie,” a voice called from table four, and they got involved in a discussion of the bow-tie guy rather than leaving so we could close, as Dex was trying to do.

Closing time got delayed even further because there really were a lot of men to discuss after they were done with that one. I’d gotten a great response to my profile when I’d posted it on the dating app and I’d been going out constantly. But as I’d told Ally, I really hadn’t made any great connections, and I really was trying to do that. I was trying to focus not as much on how someone’s ass looked in his jeans and more on his

personality, if he did things like open a door for me or if he did things like show up with a wedding ring. I didn't mean one for me, no—I meant his own, already put on his finger by his wife. Yes, one of my dates had forgotten to remove that gold band.

I'd actually been going out enough that I was getting a little tired. It had been fun for the first six or seven times, or maybe even eight. But now, I was starting to feel a bit of dread as closing time approached and I had to go to the girls' room to dress.

But maybe the magic would happen tonight. "Maybe this will be the guy," I said to Ally. Hopefully, we would instantly fall in love. Like, he would look at me and know that I was it, and I'd feel the same way about him, and it would be this spectacular thing of shooting stars and rainbows and unicorns. Then we'd go off to an island in the Caribbean to get married —

I snapped out of that daydream when Dex snapped his fingers in front of my face. "Hey. Is that your boy?"

I looked at the man he pointed to. If that was my boy from the dating app, then his profile picture had been really, really flattering, so good that I would probably want to find the photographer who'd taken it to redo my modeling portfolio. I wasn't getting any responses to what I was currently sending out.

I stared at the guy, who was nowhere near the six feet of height he'd described, and also wasn't as close to thirty years old as he'd also stated. That probably meant that he wasn't an executive at one of the car companies, either, and hadn't been a college baseball player.

The differences from his profile and his reality were so pronounced that I was willing to bet his picture was actually a totally different person altogether, and that the job, history, and everything else he'd typed in had been more like fantasy. He just wasn't cute. At all. And neither was lying.

"Lulu?" His eyes swept over me and he appeared to enjoy what he saw. He rubbed his hands together and smiled.

But maybe he really had done the Iditarod race as he'd said, and maybe he really did have a vacation home in Costa Rica. And no, I wasn't as impressed by the view I was getting, but that didn't matter, I told myself. Looks didn't matter to me anymore, which was something I was going to repeat in my mind until I actually believed it.

My looks would matter to him, of course, so I turned and quickly added more gloss before I walked across the bar. "Hobie?" I asked, smiling.

"Yeah," he answered, nodding hard. "You look just like your picture." He stepped closer to me. "I can't believe it. I was sure you were ly—"

"Da!" The door from the upstairs apartment flew open and Maeve burst into the bar.

"I'm not quite done," Dex started to tell her, and she grabbed handfuls of his t-shirt.

"Mom just texted me. Something's wrong, like I think she got arrested or she's in a hospital, something happened to her!" She was crying so much that it was hard to understand her words, and I pushed this latest date out of my path so I could get around the side of the bar.

"Ok, calm down!" I ordered, and I took her hands and removed them from her dad's shirt. "Come sit." I moved my date again as I put her into a bar stool, then I turned and looked at the crowd still in the Crookstown. "Everyone leave! Bar's closed. Now!" I stamped my foot for emphasis. "You, too, Hobie. We're not going out. Sorry." I wasn't, not really.

He did try to argue, but Harold and Sean and the other regulars moved him out along with them and I locked the door behind them all, even though several loitered on the sidewalk to see what was happening, the busybodies. By this point, Maeve was sobbing in Ally's arms as Dex shook her phone, like that would make it function for him.

"Give me that." I peeled her thumb off Ally to open the phone and I read the text from Christina, Maeve's mom, out

loud: “I need help. Can you come? Bring money.” There was an address, too, and an amount. It was a big, big amount, big enough that my voice squeaked as I said it.

Oh, my Lord. I looked at Dex. “What are we going to do?”

He and Ally stared at each other. “I’ll go, Maeve,” he said, and Ally said that he would, too. “I’ll fix it.”

“Ok,” she said, and tried hard to stop crying. “Can you? Can you really?”

He turned to me. “Will you stay here with her?”

I nodded but I had so many questions that as they left, with Dex telling the last of the regulars on the sidewalk to get the hell home, I followed.

“Why are you out here? You’re staying with Maeve,” he said, and kept moving fast toward his car.

“She locked the door behind me.” It was really hard to keep up in my date shoes. “Are you going to that address? I haven’t learned that neighborhood,” I panted. “I don’t think it’s a police station or a hospital.”

“No, Christina isn’t at a police station,” he said grimly. “Not yet. And you’re never going to that neighborhood.”

“Where is she? My phone doesn’t show anything at that address except a house.” But I hadn’t had time to do a lot of research.

“That’s probably a drug house,” Ally said. Even in the muted light of the streetlamps, I could see how upset he was. “I think Christina is using again, Dex.”

“Yeah, I’ve thought that for a long time. I’ve been checking her usual spots for months.” He stopped. “Lulu, you have to stay with Maeve.”

“She was asking her daughter to go to a drug house with money?” I shook my head. What was the matter with that woman? “Do you have your phone?” I asked him. “Text me. Text us, I mean. Let us know.” I put out my hand, like I was

going to grab him, but then tightened my fingers into a fist. “Will you two be ok?”

Dex put his hand over mine and squeezed it. I felt energy thrumming through him. “We’ll be ok. Make sure Maeve is. Get inside now while I can watch you walk there.”

I hurried back to the bar so that they could leave but I looked over my shoulder a lot while I did, and once she unlocked the door for me, we both watched the Jeep speed off down the street.

“I hope he finds her.” Her voice shook and I heard her gulp.

I turned to Maeve. “He will. Should we go upstairs to wait for them?”

She shook her head. “I can’t sit up there. I have to do something.”

Yeah, I didn’t want to sit still either, which was weird for me. “Let’s close up the bar, then,” I suggested. I’d done a little of that before, and I’d certainly watched Dex run through a mental checklist as I’d nursed a glass of water at the end of my shift. Maeve and I worked together and I thought about him doing this almost every night of his life after a long day, first out on construction and handyman jobs, taking care of problems for his daughter, then coming here to the Crookstown to deal with the customers and sometimes the problems of the staff, too.

“He works really hard,” I said out loud.

She looked up from the table she was scrubbing better than I ever did. “Do you mean my dad? Yeah, he always has. But if I have something important, like a conference or a recital or something, he comes. He never missed anything for me, not ever.” More tears ran down her face. “I always knew that I would have someone there, no matter how fucked up my mom was. I should have lived with him all along. It was like I felt...”

“Responsible,” I filled in. “You felt responsible for her. I do for my parents, too. Not in the same way, but I get the

feeling.”

“She’s always been so wrapped up in her own shit!” Maeve exploded, and wiped under her nose. “She’s always cared so much more about everything else instead of caring about me.”

Again, I got that. My parents had been wrapped up in each other, no matter how hard I’d tried to get their attention. I’d tried to get everyone’s attention.

“What?” she asked me. “Why do you look so weird?”

“I was just thinking about your dad’s phone. He can track you, right? Can we track him on yours?”

She put down the spray bottle and opened the app. We saw Dex make several stops before he went to the address that Christina, Maeve’s mom, had sent. The dot halted on the street.

“They’re at the place,” she pointed out, and I nodded. We watched as the dot on the screen covered the square of the house. She blew up the image and we both stared at it, unwilling to look away. But it didn’t move again for so long that Maeve had refreshed the app at least ten times before it showed Dex going. He must have been in his car...

Or at least, his phone was moving. What if he’d been separated from it? What if someone had stolen the phone, hurt him and Ally, and was taking off in the Jeep right now? And where was Maeve’s mom?

“What?” she asked me again, and I saw that my knuckles were white where I held the bar top.

“Nothing.” I smiled at her. “Looks like he got her! Maybe you should go to bed.”

“Are you joking?”

“Yeah, I’m not going either.” Instead, we watched the dot some more. It moved across the city and then it stopped again.

“That’s Saint Camillus Hospital,” Maeve said, reading from her screen. She looked up at me, her blue eyes terrified. “Is someone hurt?”

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I said, and my dumb voice squeaked again. “I’ll text your dad while you watch the dot.”

“RU at the hospital we see you!!!” I typed.

It took a minute, with me gripping my phone tightly and boring holes in it with my eyes, before an answer appeared.

“What the hell are you doing here at St Cam? I don’t see you anywhere.”

I sighed in relief. That was definitely Dex, not a robber with his phone. “Your dad’s ok,” I said happily, and I wrote to him, “We r not there, we r tracking u! How is Ally? And that woman?” I felt too angry at her at the moment to write her name.

There was an even longer pause and I felt Maeve’s eyes boring into me, now.

“He’s good. Christina is going to be admitted. Tell Maeve she’s ok. I’ll be home when I get this settled.”

I did and I hugged Maeve, too. “See? It’s all going to be great,” I said, and petted her beautiful hair.

“It’s drugs, right?” she asked me. “My mom OD’d again.” She shook with crying. “She’ll have to go to rehab and my dad will probably pay for it because he always tries to get her back on her feet. I know he gave her way more than what their divorce stuff said he had to, and he doesn’t have any money because of this stupid bar. I hate the Crookstown. I hate it!”

Oh, my Lord. “We’ll figure it out. You don’t need to worry about the money,” I told her.

“Of course I’m worried!” She jerked away from me, angry now. “It’s about my mom! And my dad, and he’s going to fuck up his life to try to help her! I know that’s why he works so hard, because he’s always trying to fix everything for her. He tells me not to worry just like you did, like that’s going to make it better.”

I hugged her again and she put her head back on my shoulder to cry. “We’ll fix it together,” I said. “I swear,

Maeve.” But I was crying, too. “Money won’t be a problem. I’ll help out and it will all be ok.”

“How?”

“I have a bunch saved that I don’t need,” I lied. I did have some money saved, but “bunch” was a very large overstatement. “I have a ton saved for a new apartment but actually, I really like living with Ally. He’s great and I’m getting very interested in hamsters and other rodents, so why would I move?”

“Really?” There was hope in her voice now and she sat up slowly again to look at me. “You have money and you’d give it to my dad?”

“Sure! Of course! I’d be so happy to!” I used a cleanish bar towel to wipe my eyes and then did hers, too. “See? It’s going to be totally fine.”

I got her to go upstairs and get into bed, even though she said that she wasn’t tired at all and that she was going to wait up for her dad and Ally to get back. I went to their tiny kitchen to get her some water, because all that crying had been rough on her perfect skin and I knew she needed to hydrate. By the time I got back to her little bedroom, though, she was fast asleep.

I pulled the sheet up over her and put the glass next to her bed so she’d drink it when she woke up, and then I returned to the Crookstown with Maeve’s phone still open so I could watch where they were. I finished closing down the bar by wiping off the liquor bottles and then balancing the register. It had been a good night monetarily—maybe that would make everyone feel better. I looked at the pile of grubby bills. Probably this wouldn’t be sufficient, though. I didn’t know the combination to the safe in the storage room so I hid that cash where no one would ever want to look, in a plastic bag underneath the disgusting rags and bar towels.

Then I got water for myself because I also needed hydration, and I sat on a stool to watch the dot at the hospital slowly blink. They had been there for at least an hour now and that dot hadn’t moved from the front part of the building,

which must have been the emergency department. The street outside the Crookstown was much quieter than Ally's apartment, and it was darker in here than it was in his living room with the lights from the cages or habitats or whatever they all were. Oddly, the bar was probably better for sleeping.

But I was going to wait up for them for sure. I rested my forehead on my hand and used my own phone to look up private rehab centers and how much they cost...oh, my Lord! That much? Yeah, the couple hundred from the register and the money I'd squirreled away for my security deposit weren't going to cut it. I looked for other rehab options that would be cheaper and it seemed like she might be able to go to a public facility and Wayne County would pick up the tab.

But then that woman would need support, like therapists and meetings, and some of it might be free but some would cost something. She'd need a new apartment and probably possessions to fill it. She'd need money, basically, and she'd turn to Dex because Maeve said that he'd always been there to support her, which was making me furious as I thought about it. Why did he have to be in charge of her messy life? Why didn't they just cut her off like I'd done to my dad? But I hadn't done that, not totally. Every time I thought of him, I felt a strong pang—not only anger, but sadness, too.

I sighed. That whole thing sucked, and so did this thing. And now I'd told Maeve that I would be able to work out the money problem for her and Dex. I looked at the street and tried to come up with some ways to get my hands on enough cash to pull them through this. While I was at it, maybe I could come up with enough to help with Ally's scars, and I could pay someone to fix the air conditioning in Dex's car because his own repairs hadn't worked at all. Maybe I'd be able to pay off the loan on the Crookstown. Maybe I'd be able to buy a house like Aretha Franklin's and we'd have a pool, maybe I'd take us all to some island I'd never heard of in the Caribbean for vacation and Ally could see new animals there.

"Lulu. Lulu, wake up." Someone's hand patted my back. Then it shook my shoulder. "Lulu."

I opened my eyes and saw wood instead of pillow. “What?” I groaned. “Where am I?” I sat up slowly, frowning into the soft darkness of the Crookstown. Oh, that was why my head hurt: I’d been sleeping on the bar top. My butt hurt too, from sleeping in the bar stool. Grey light filtered through the windows and Dex stood next to me. He looked about as bad as I felt, and I hoped that I didn’t look that bad, too.

“I was watching your dot at the hospital,” I said, and he nodded.

“I’m here now. Everything’s ok,” he told me. “It’s time for bed for you.”

I let him get me down and he waited while I stretched and yawned. “Where are we going?”

“Upstairs. Come on, move your ass.”

“It hurts from that dumb stool. Did you ever think of cushions?” But I did stumble toward the stairs without really considering why I’d be walking there. I was just so tired.

Ally was on the floor on an air mattress that was at least a foot too short for him, but he was dead asleep. “Maeve?” I asked, and Dex pointed to her bedroom. She was asleep, too.

“This is you,” he told me, and his hand between my shoulder blades directed me into the other bedroom.

“Oh, great. A real mattress,” I said, and got right onto it.

“Make yourself at home,” I heard him say, but I was already falling back asleep. Oh, this was so much better than my bar stool and it was also a huge step up from the lumpy couch in Ally’s apartment. It was like heaven.

“A real mattress,” I repeated, and that was the last thing I did before I was out.

I opened my eyes to very, very bright sunshine and had no idea where I was again. A pile of t-shirts crumpled in the corner of the room along with some men’s underwear, and a pair of jeans I recognized hung on the back of a chair.

Dex’s jeans? I sat up. I was in his room. My head whipped around toward the other side of the bed, which was

empty and undisturbed. I was in his room but he hadn't been.

I slipped out from under the sheet, frowning at the tangles of hair which blocked my vision and the wrinkled shirt I wore from the night before. I hardly remembered coming to this apartment but I did recall a little bit of light in the sky, like the sun had had started its rise. His hand on my back had guided me, which made it easier to get up the stairs because I'd leaned against it. I'd known that he wasn't going to let go.

Ally lay on the air mattress, snoring slightly, and Maeve's door was closed. Dex sat on his couch, his forehead resting on his palm. He looked up at my step and held up his hand to greet me. I stepped over the huge body on the floor, and knowing that Ally didn't stir an eyelash at the noise in his apartment building, I felt it was ok to whisper.

"Where did you sleep?" I asked.

Dex patted the couch cushions. "Right here."

"You didn't have to do that." I'd sat on that couch and knew it wasn't very comfortable, especially for someone as big as he was. I could see his size very, very well because his shirt was off this morning. He was just as muscular as I'd imagined...had I been imagining him without a shirt on?

Well, yes, I had. I'd been thinking about Dex minus some clothing as I'd watched him pick up cases of liquor and his arms and back had flexed. I'd considered the idea again when he'd reached up to remove dollar bills from the ceiling and I'd gotten a good look at the square abs over the waistband of his jeans. Now I could really see the tattoo that had peeked above the necklines of his t-shirts, and what I'd thought was a snake's body was actually part of an intricate drawing of lines and knots that went over his pec and shoulder, too. Those thick, steely muscles of his pec and shoulder. Maybe he was old—older, I should have said, like a little older than I was—but oh, my Lord. He was also...appetizing.

"Lulu?"

I snapped to attention and discretely checked my chin for drool. "What happened last night?"

“Nothing good.” He rubbed his hand over his own chin, where a black beard was growing in thick and prickly. “Christina owed a whole lot of money and they weren’t letting her leave.”

I settled on the couch next to him. “She owed drug money? Did you have to pay her dealer to get her out? That’s so dangerous!” My voice had gone up and Ally snorted on the floor. I pointed to him. “Did he go into the house with you?”

“No, I made him stay at the wheel of the car so we could drive away fast. I had to pay some of it, not all. We talked it out and came to an agreement.”

I was pretty sure that didn’t mean a verbal negotiation. “Where did you get the money?”

He didn’t directly answer. “I’m going to have to pay it back pretty quick.”

That didn’t sound good. I sucked in an anxious breath. “Did you get hurt?”

Dex shook his head. “I’m good. But Christina was out of it enough that we brought her to the hospital and they admitted her. It’s not just that she was high. They think something might be wrong with her kidneys, but they’re not going to keep her there any longer than they have to. I have to get back before they discharge her and she’s out on the streets alone. I found a spot in a rehab place and I’ll take her over there, if she’ll go this time.”

“Why wouldn’t she?”

“She doesn’t like it. Doesn’t like being told what to do, doesn’t like the party to stop.” He rubbed his chin again, wincing a little like that hurt or his thoughts did. “The last time I got her a bed at a place, she said no at the last minute. Maybe she’ll agree to it if I bring up Maeve again. She does feel guilty about our daughter, so that might work.”

“Maeve’s really worried,” I said, then wished I hadn’t. His face seemed to get both harder and more tired at my words.

“I’ll figure this out,” he said.

“Did you get any rest at all? You got in late and sleeping on this...you didn’t have to give up your bed. I would have fit on the couch better than you did, due to my petiteness.” I hit it with my fist. “Now you’re tired. Ally looks dead. Everyone is such a mess! This is such a mess for you.”

Dex looked over at me. “Are you worried too, brat? Are you worried about me?”

I started to say no, that of course I didn’t care about his overgrown self, but when I opened my mouth, I only said, “Yes.”

His eyebrows raised in surprise. I turned so that he couldn’t look into my eyes anymore and leaned back against the hard cushion. “Anyway, you’re here at the Crookstown now,” I told him. “Do you really have to leave again?”

He leaned back, too. “In a minute.” His chest rose and fell as he sighed. “It was a long night. I’m glad to be home.”

And I was so relieved that he was, that he was next to me on the couch and Ally was there safe on the floor, snoring more. I was going to have to keep it this way for sure. “Maeve thinks you’re going to need money,” I mentioned, and Dex sighed again.

“I can handle it.”

“No, you can’t, because I know that you don’t have any. So it’s lucky for everyone that I do. I have a bunch that I don’t need to spend on anything in particular.”

“Before your shift last night, you showed Maeve pictures of the new three-hundred-dollar hairdryer you want to buy because Detroit’s more humid than where you used to live.”

“It’s just a different kind of humidity here,” I explained again. “But I don’t actually need that hairdryer and I’m not going to buy it. I want to use all my money for something else.”

“All your money? You don’t have squat. You were driving with the windows down to save on gas.”

“I do have money!” I furiously protested. “I have bunches and bunches.”

“Then why are you still living at Alistair’s apartment?”

“Um, I really like the cats,” I answered.

“Yeah, sure you do. He told me how you’re scared of the hamster getting out.”

“Everyone’s scared of hamsters,” I said.

“He also told me how you’ve been giving him rent. And he said you’ve been helping him with Oriana,” Dex told me. “We had a while to talk in that hospital waiting room.”

“He doesn’t need help with Oriana,” I answered. “She really likes him.”

“It’s mutual. Fuck, if she breaks his heart...”

“You can’t stop that from happening,” I said. “Or with Maeve, either, which I know you’re scared about with that boy.”

“You mean with the man she says is not really her boyfriend? That little dickweed better not hurt her.”

“People are going to do shitty things to them sometimes,” I said. “You can’t stop it from happening. But they both know that they have you, so they’ll be ok in the end.” I nodded. “Maeve and Ally will be just fine, I’m sure of it.”

“Thank you for saying that.” His voice was very quiet. “I hope it’s true.”

It was. But for Dex to be ok in the end, he needed to have the Crookstown. It was still ugly and still a little dirty, and there were still no good fruit drinks, but it was everything to him. So that meant that he had to be careful about how much he helped that ex-wife, and it meant he was going to need financial help himself.

“About my money,” I started off again. “I really am very happy living with Ally so I don’t need to buy a house right away or anything like that. You can have what I’ve saved for my mortgage.”

“There’s no way in hell you have enough to buy a house when last week you were complaining that you’ve had to cut down your pedicures to only once a month.”

“I’ve become very frugal since that time,” I let him know.

“No. I’m not taking anything from you, brat.” He shook his head. “No.”

“If I say you are, you are!” I announced. “You can’t say no.”

“No. No, I’m not. No.”

“I just told you not to say that word. Stop saying no! You *will* take my help because I’m going to make you.”

“Are you two fighting?” Ally picked his head up from the floor and looked at us out of one sleepy eye.

“We’re just talking,” Dex said. “Nobody’s mad.”

“Speak for yourself,” I told him. “I want you to do as I say.” And if I said he should take money from me that I didn’t actually have yet, then he would! “You better accept my help, Dex Connolly.”

He turned his head on the cushion and looked at me for a moment, and then he smiled. “You really are a brat.”

“That’s not nice,” Ally told him, and then yawned.

“I meant it as a compliment.” Dex picked up the fist I’d made and looked at my clenched fingers, and then he squeezed them. “You’ve been pretty mad at me lately.”

Yes, that was true.

“I wasn’t trying to hurt your feelings that day,” he continued.

“I know.”

“I’m trying to tell you the truth. It’s not to hurt you, though. I don’t want to do that.”

I nodded. I knew that, I really did. And I’d thought a lot about what he’d said, the things about me competing with people and maybe caring about the wrong stuff. At first, I had

been super mad but then, yes, it was mostly just hurt. He hadn't tried to hurt my feelings, but they were. It had been hard to hear, but not because it was all wrong.

He squeezed again. "Thank you, Lulu."

I wasn't sure if that meant he was going to listen and do what I said, so I opened my mouth to argue again. But then he straightened out my fingers one by one before he wove them together with his. Still holding my hand, he closed his eyes. Ally had put his own head down and in a moment, I heard him snore again, and Dex's breath slowed with sleep, too.

I sat for a moment, watching both of them, thinking about Maeve in her little bed. Someone was going to have to step in and fix this emergency, and emergencies were where I really shone, of course.

I rested my head on the cushion too and then slowly leaned until it was on Dex's shoulder instead. That was better. I had a lot of planning to accomplish, but before I got too far, I fell asleep again myself.

Chapter 9

The man turned, looking back and forth in the mirror. “It really does look good.”

I nodded. Of course it did. “Tell your friends. Lulu’s Barbery is open for business,” I said, and removed the cape. Then I looked at the clock. “Time to go, right now,” I told him, and pocketed the money as I pushed him out the door. Ally was already stowing the clippers, scissors, neck duster, and other tools into my case, and carrying the case out to hide in our trunk.

I’d just finished sweeping and straightening the chairs when Dex came in from the back. I jumped at least a foot in the air—he usually parked in the front so we hadn’t seen him pull up, and we’d been watching because this was the time he generally arrived after his carpentry jobs.

“Oh!” I burst out. My eyes darted around, but there was no evidence of what I’d been doing, so I smiled and spoke more calmly. “Hello there, Dex,” I said.

He looked at me for a moment, frowning and standing with his arms crossed, and he didn’t answer.

“Sure is hot out there today,” I said to fill the silence. “Lucky I brought my fan.” I picked it up and waved it at my face, which also felt hot. And Dex just kept staring at me, so it got even hotter. “I came in early again to get a jumpstart on work. It’s like a New Year’s resolution I’m trying out, except that it’s only August. I’m getting a jumpstart on resolutions, too.”

Nothing.

“Ally’s here. I think he’s talking to the rat again,” I went on. “Maeve will be back late, did she tell you that? Yeah, Oriana is taking her to an art show. It’s this local painter from Hamtramck, Ione someone, who’s getting famous and they’re all excited. I don’t know much about Hamtramck. Or art. I like art, I guess. Maybe I’d like Hamtramck, too. Do you?”

He still didn't answer.

I fanned vigorously. "Yeah. So..."

"What are you up to, Lulu? Alistair can't look me in the face and you've been sweeping the floor constantly. Don't tell me that's another August resolution, because I know something's going on."

Three hundred dollars so far this week, that was what was going on. I'd had to spend a little to get my tools, but I'd cleared two-fifty and I had requests for three haircuts tomorrow. "I have no idea what you mean," I announced.

He held up a white neck strip, the kind I wrapped around my clients before I put the cape on them. "I've found two of these in the bathroom. Anything you want to explain?"

"Damn! I mean...they're for a female problem," I said haughtily.

"They were in the men's room."

"Oh." I hesitated. "Yeah, sometimes I go in there."

He didn't uncross his arms. "I have a daughter and I've had a wife. What specific female problem are you having?"

"Uh..."

"Lulu, Dex's Jeep is—" Ally froze as he burst in through the back. "Oh. Hi, Dex."

Now our boss stared between the two of us. "What the hell is happening?"

There was really no way I was going to keep this from him. He had eyes to see the evidence and definitely ears to hear it. One my clients was going to blab for sure because none of those Crookstown regulars could keep their mouths shut about anything else. Also, Ally looked ready to cry, right at this moment, so I couldn't force him to stay quiet.

"I've been running an illegal business operation on this premises," I announced. "I've been breaking the law as an unlicensed barber."

"I already knew that."

“You did?” I shot a look at Ally, but he shook his head and said he hadn’t told. “Why were you putting me through that grilling, then?”

“That wasn’t a grilling. That was me giving you the opportunity to come clean.”

“Look,” I told him, and pulled the bills from my pocket. “See?”

“You can afford that new anti-humidity hairdryer now.”

“No, you idiot!” I stomped over and slapped the wad into his hand. “It’s for you!”

“What?” He stared at the money in his palm. “What are you talking about?”

“I told you that I was going to do this. I told Maeve I was going to do this. And I am.”

“You don’t need to give me money,” he said, and tried to shove it over to me.

I refused to accept it. “No, it’s for you! Stop trying to give it back.”

“First of all, I can take care of my own problems,” he stated, and I started to argue but he kept on going. “I also don’t want you to run your business in my bar. I could get spot-checked and if I did, you’d get caught and my ass would be in sling, too.”

“I think the words you meant to say were, ‘Thank you,’” I said. “‘Thank you for trying to help me, Lulu. You know I’m broke because I paid my ex-wife’s drug debts and now I’m getting her life restarted. Just this week you saw me cancel a liquor delivery because I couldn’t cover the cost and you also eavesdropped on me talking to the bank to try to get out of this month’s loan payment.’ And now I can say, ‘You’re welcome, Dex.’”

“You were eavesdropping on my phone conversations?” He swelled in anger. “Listen to me, brat, you better—”

“No, you better!” I said furiously, even though it didn’t make much sense. “That’s a drop in the bucket compared to

what you need. So Ally and I did something else.”

“Oh, fuck. What? What did you do?” He turned on poor Ally. “Did you let her commit a crime? We talked about this!”

“No, I didn’t let her do anything illegal except the haircuts, and I didn’t think it was so bad,” Ally told him. “She’s trying to help you, Dex. She did something great.”

Dex rubbed his eyes. “I’m afraid to ask. What is it?”

I pulled a cashier’s check out of my other pocket. “Here. This will cover what you owe to the bank for this month and next month and the liquor delivery, too. You can pay me back later.”

He stared at the paper. “This is for eight thousand dollars. Where did you get this?”

“I sold stuff.”

“What, your organs? How else could you get so much money? Lulu, I’m serious, what...oh, fuck,” he said again. “Where’s your car?”

He turned around and bolted out of the front door, but he certainly wasn’t going to find it parked on the street outside the Crookstown. In a moment, he came thundering back in.

“Did you sell it? Is that where you got this money?” He waved the check at me.

Yes, I’d sold it about an hour ago and the check had been burning a hole in my jean shorts. “That car was from my dad, and I decided that I’m going to get a car of my own. I’m an adult now. It’s time,” I told him.

He paused. “Well, I agree with that. But how in the hell are you going to buy a new car if you’re giving me the proceeds from the old one?”

“We have the Eagle,” Ally jumped in, and I turned to him in horror.

“Oh, my Lord. Did you really get an eagle, Ally? How are we going to keep a bird like that in the apartment?”

“He means his mother’s car, the 1981 AMC Eagle,” Dex said, his voice very tight. “The car that runs, at best, sporadically. The car with three hundred thousand miles on it even though it sat on blocks for seven years, not running at all.”

“I got it fixed,” Ally piped in again.

“You got it partially repaired but as I remember, Digger told you that someday soon, it was going to strand your ass on the side of the road. The floor has holes. The windows won’t go down. It gets about six miles per gallon. Should I go on?” He turned on me. “That’s the car you’re going to use to get to work? That’s the car you’re going to depend on to drive you home at one in the morning in the city? What were you thinking?” He shook his head. “I don’t understand this.”

“What’s to understand?” I asked. “I’m helping a friend.”

But he shook his head again. “No, we’re not friends,” he said. “You don’t even know me, Lulu. I don’t know you, either. We’re practically strangers and you’re giving me more than eight thousand bucks?”

I stared at him. “You’re right. I guess I don’t know you very well at all.” He made another gesture with the bills but I waved my hand. “Keep it. You’ll pay me back. Maybe we’re practically strangers, but I’m sure about that.”

“Dex, she was helping you. Why are you acting this way?” Ally asked him, but I didn’t care. I walked back behind the bar and took out my phone, hoping that I’d gotten a response from one of the modeling agents. Maybe Detroit was just too small for me and I would have to go bigger. Chicago? New York? Paris? After all, there was nothing to keep me in this place. I didn’t have a car, a home, a family. Ally and Oriana were only getting closer and Maeve and her guy were getting tight, too, so they wouldn’t want me as a friend, either. Why wouldn’t I leave? I started looking at plane tickets but then remembered I’d just put all my money into Dex’s hand, that big asshole.

That big asshole walked around to join me. “I know you’re trying to help,” he said.

I turned the other way, toward the wall of flags. “Yeah, whatever.”

He didn’t say anything more, but he didn’t move, either.

“What?” I asked. “My shift doesn’t start for another half-hour. Are you going to carp at me about something while I’m not on the clock or are you breathing down my neck for another reason?”

“No. No, you can do what you want.”

“I plan to.” I did keep making plans, like I looked at modeling agencies in all different cities, all over the world. Tokyo. Berlin. Lisbon. Sure, I was truly terrible with languages, but there were apps for that, right? “*Adeus*,” I muttered as I heard him move away. What was “asshole” in Portuguese?

“Lulu?” Ally asked quietly.

“Hey. Want my help getting the glasses ready?” I tried to smile at him.

“I’m sorry Dex acted like that.” He looked sorry, and also very upset. “I don’t know why. You were being so nice to him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I assured Ally. “The thing is, he has a really poor opinion of me. He probably thinks that taking my money is lowering, like he’s hitting rock bottom if he’s accepting my help. I get it.”

“That’s not right, though,” Ally said. “I don’t think he has a bad opinion of you, and it’s not lowering to accept help from a friend.”

“You just heard him say that we’re not friends.” The things I’d been imagining about this ugly bar, that it was special or a family or whatever, those things were totally wrong. I was Dex’s employee, that was all, just another bad employee at the Crookstown. I kept scrolling. “Have you ever been to Mexico City?”

“The farthest I’ve been is Franklin, Kentucky to visit my mom’s cousin. The Eagle broke down there,” he said.

It would be tough for me to travel without money, and also because I didn't have a passport (like my not-friend Devon did) since I still had never been out of the country. I sighed but then sat up straight as a notification popped onto my screen. "Oh, my Lord! Ally, I just got offered a modeling job right here in Detroit!" My eyes almost dropped out of my head as I looked at the email. "It pays so well, too!"

"Really?" He beamed. "That's great, Lulu!"

I swiped down the screen, then paused to whack my phone on the bar to get it restarted. "And they want me there right now!"

"What?" Now his face crinkled with confusion. "That's not how Oriana's jobs work. Everything is scheduled way far out in the future when she takes pictures."

"Maybe the model they'd gotten dropped out and left them in the lurch or something." I read more. "They want me to do my own styling and I'm supposed to get there as soon as possible, so I better hurry." I had decided to take a break from the dating app so I hadn't carried all my beauty supplies here today, but I had my travel bag, of course. "I'll be in the girls' room," I told Ally, and ran to get my purse. I worked quickly, but I already had a good foundation of makeup and my hair looked great even without the expensive dryer. That was lucky, because I couldn't afford to buy one since I'd mistakenly given my money to a jerk who didn't appreciate it.

That jerk was waiting for me outside the girls' room, crowding the small hallway. "What are you doing, Lulu?"

"None of your business." I elbowed past him and into the bar.

"It is my business, because we open soon and Alistair tells me that you got an email about a modeling shoot. You got another job?"

"I did, but I'm not officially quitting here yet," I said loftily. "I'm only taking the night off for now."

"Good of you to let me know," he told me. "What's this modeling thing? It starts immediately, with no notice? Where

is it?”

“It’s none of your business,” I told him again.

“Where are you going, Lulu?” Ally asked, and I did tell him.

The two of them looked at each other. “Let me see that email,” Dex ordered and held out his hand.

“No. Ally, I’ll be here at the end of the night to drive us home.”

“I’ll drive you there,” Dex said, and I shook my head. No way in hell was I going anywhere with him. “Lulu, that’s an industrial part of town, really rundown. Not the kind of place where you’d find a photography studio.”

“It’s just the location,” I dismissed that. “You don’t know anything about modeling.”

“Neither do you,” he reminded me. “If I remember right, you’ve never done it before. You don’t have an agent. You don’t—”

“Ok, I’ll see you later, Ally,” I said loudly.

“You can’t leave,” Dex announced. “You have a shift here. I could fire you for this.”

I stopped dead in the doorway of the Crookstown and turned to look at him as he went frill-necked lizard in the middle of the bar, all big and threatening. He didn’t scare me in the least.

“Go ahead,” I told him. “Do it.” We stared at each other for a long moment and neither of us said a word.

“Lulu,” Ally murmured, and I raised a hand goodbye to him before I turned and left. I was fuming so hard that it took a few blocks before I realized that I hadn’t put the address in my phone for directions to the photo shoot, and I didn’t know my way to this place. That man had a lot of nerve, thinking that he could tell me what I could do. He wasn’t in charge of me!

Well, he was my boss at the bar, I remembered as my phone said to go past this light and then make a left turn. But he wasn't anything else besides that. I raced through the streets, bumping over potholes that got more numerous as I neared my destination. That was all Dex was to me, a mean, bad boss who looked like a lizard. Or like a lion, because I still got that king-of-the-jungle vibe from—no, no I didn't. He was just a bad boss.

I focused my attention on the directions and my location. This place really was industrial, like the asshole had said. More like formerly industrial, with a lot of buildings that looked like they must have been functioning factories and warehouses but maybe decades ago. There were no houses, no open businesses, no people except for one car that went past me very slowly as the driver stared hard through my windshield. But the phone was telling me that I had arrived, so I slowed to a stop outside a building that looked just as abandoned as the rest of them.

I sat in the car for a moment, not really sure what I was waiting for. I watched a woman come out of the door and light up a cigarette, but she didn't look like someone who would be involved in fashion. She looked kind of disheveled and kind of dirty, more like she might be living in one of these abandoned factories rather than someone running a photo shoot there. But an actual person meant that something was happening inside that address, so I got out of Ally's car and locked it with the key before I called to the smoker.

“Hi. Is this the photo shoot?”

She squinted at me. “The what? Who are you?”

“Lulu Zalewski. I'm the model.”

She still stared like she didn't understand. “Uh, hold on.” She disappeared into the building and then a man came out instead.

“You're Lucy?” he asked.

“Lulu, yes. You said that I was supposed to do my own hair and makeup. Is it ok? Is it the look you were going for?”

You weren't very specific."

"Yeah, sure," he said, but I didn't think he'd actually even glanced at my styling. "Come in. Did you need a written invitation?" He went back in through the rusted door and I followed, thinking that fashion people were super temperamental.

The man pointed at me. "Lucy, you're up." He looked me over so carefully that I squirmed. "Any track marks we need to cover?"

"What?"

"We'll see soon enough," he remarked to the other woman, who shrugged.

"What?" I said again. Track marks? "Who are you?"

"I'm the director," he told me, then looked at his phone as I looked around at the set. There was some lighting set up around a few pieces of furniture, like a couch, chairs, and bed. All of it looked grubby.

"What is this campaign for?" I asked.

But the two of them had gone off into a corner together, both of them now studying the director's phone. I stared around the cavernous room, totally confused. This place was even dirtier than the Crookstown had been the first day I walked in, really kind of scary looking. I swallowed. This was not the kind of modeling career I'd been anticipating. These people were weird and the woman was stoned, I was pretty sure.

"What am I supposed to do?" I called over to them.

"Go ahead and change," the man answered. "The outfits are all in there." He pointed vaguely toward an open door and I walked through it into a small office. There was a file cabinet on its side, a few rusty chairs that must have dated from when this place was in use as a warehouse, and also a new metal rack with clothes on hangers.

I was supposed to pick anything at all? Despite what I'd said about my modeling career, how I'd tried to come off as

knowledgeable about the business, I didn't really have any experience. This job was just starting off at the bottom, I guessed. I didn't think I'd be on a runway, right? I nodded and walked toward the clothes rack.

"Hey."

I jumped and turned around. A different man stood in the doorway, and he was obviously coming to change for the shoot too because he only wore a towel around his waist. "I'm Bertram."

"I'm Lulu," I answered.

"Good one," he told me. "I'm using Antonio Biggo. Antonio Bigg-o," he repeated slowly. "Get it?"

"What?" I asked again. It was like these people were speaking a different language, and I was so bad at anything outside of plain old English. "Using it? Get what?"

He joined me on the other side of the clothes rack. "Antonio Biggo sounds good, right? Do you hear it now? Big O?" He smiled. "What's your real name?"

"Lulu," I repeated. "Lulu Zalewski."

"Yeah, you can't use that," he said, making a face. "Zalewski? Nah. You want something better."

"I do?" I asked. Maybe a stage name was a good idea.

"What about Lulu Licker?" Bertram/Antonio suggested. "Lulu Likes It?" And then, before I could respond to either of those ideas, he dropped the towel.

"Oh, my Lord!" My eyes bugged as I saw what had been under that little bit of terrycloth. "I...oh, that's..." I stopped. "I'm just going to have to get used to coed changing rooms, I guess."

He laughed. "You better get used to me." He grabbed an outfit from the rack. "I always deliver," he said, looking at the shirt and matching hat, then he laughed again. "The same old thing, always."

I stared at him and the “Joe’s Pizza” shirt on the hanger, and then I saw what was happening. It was really very obvious, but I hadn’t recognized it until now. “Oh,” I said slowly. “Oh. This is a porn set. They’re filming a porno here.”

“*We* are filming here.” He stared back. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No,” I said, and tried really hard to make eye contact as I spoke to him instead of looking at his huge dong. “I thought this was a modeling thing. A non-naked, no-sex kind of deal. I’m not going to do porn.”

“Shit,” Bertram /Antonio said sympathetically. “That’s too bad. I thought we’d have some good chemistry.” He glanced down at his penis as he said it and so did I. There was a lot to see there. “You really don’t want to do it? It’s good money, and I think you’d look really hot on camera. You’ve got a great bod for it,” he told me. “Got any track marks?”

I shook my head, watching his crotch. “I’m not going to do porn,” I repeated.

“Not yet, you mean,” Bertram/Antonio said. “Not many of us plan for this.” He looked over his shoulder at the deserted warehouse. “I mean, I went to Juilliard.”

“Are you kidding?”

“Yeah.” He laughed again. “I started out thinking I’d model, go to Hollywood, but I need the cash. And I’ve got this.” He gestured toward his crotch and I had to agree, it was something that people would pay to watch.

“Ok, well, I’m going to go,” I said. He was still blocking the door and I made a gesture with my hand, like I was clearing him away. “Sorry I won’t be, uh, acting with you.”

“Can I have your number? We could go out or just fuck. Not on film,” he said.

Still looking at his penis, I briefly considered the offer. “No, thanks. I’d better leave.” I thought about the man and woman in the warehouse. “Are they going to try to stop me?”

“Nah, but they’ll be pissed off that shooting is delayed again. The girl before you was too high to put on camera. They’ll just call the next name on the list,” he assured me.

I was on a porno list? In case the director was actually going to try to get me to stay and participate, I moved fast through the warehouse, which was easier because I had my bar shoes on. “Call the next girl,” I yelled over my shoulder when the woman asked me where I was going, and I made it to the Eagle and peeled out even faster than I’d left the Crookstown.

I drove for a while and ended up on a street I knew a little better, away from those empty, deserted hulks of factories and back in a part of the city that looked more familiar. My phone had been making noise and I looked at the screen at a red light. It was Maeve texting me, asking if I really quit working at the bar.

“I took the night off,” I wrote. I wasn’t sure if I was going back, but I didn’t need to—oops! The road I’d almost turned on might have led to the tunnel to Windsor, Canada and I still didn’t have a passport. “I can’t text right now,” I wrote. “Busy.”

I was driving next to the river and the sight of the water reminded me a little of Lake Michigan back home. I pulled over to park and it took a little while for me to get into the space since it was parallel, like maybe ten or twelve attempts. But finally I could leave the Eagle and I ran across the street to stand at the riverbank and look. Then I walked a while, watching the sun sink lower, and I sat on a bench as pink and peach clouds filled the sky.

Porn. Was that the only option open to me? Bertram/Antonio had said I had a good bod for it. No one else seemed interested in picking me up as a client, and would I get the same reaction in Dublin, Singapore, or Sidney?

Probably. Damn! I’d been so sure, so positive that this was going to work out. For as long as I could remember, everyone had always told me how cute I was. I was the pretty one, I was the beautiful one, I was the one with that hot body, I was the one...

I was the one sitting on a park bench, alone in a city I didn't know very well, with no friends except a fifteen-year-old and a guy who also wanted to be friends with a rat. No family, either, since my dad had stopped trying to get in touch now that he had my mom back, and she hadn't picked up or responded to a text since I'd walked in on her and Daddy doing it. *It*. I rubbed my eyes, ruining my makeup and probably making wrinkles in my future. I was going to be twenty-four soon, too, and how long did a modeling career even last? Mine had been one afternoon, not even an hour.

I sighed. Maybe I should have gotten Bertram/Antonio's number. He seemed to like me. Maybe I should have stayed on that set and tried it out—I liked sex, after all. How bad would it have been? I pictured their dirty bed, me naked on it with the director staring and that woman smoking, a stranger touching me while I pretended to feel excitement and pleasure. Then I pictured everyone at home finding out that Lulu Zalewski was now Lulu Likes It, my parents and my not-really-friends and my ex all knowing that I'd headed off for success and ended up in an abandoned warehouse while I faked the Big O with Antonio Bigg-o.

Oh, my Lord. I needed a new plan. I stayed on the bench as the colors of the sunset faded to grey, then the sky turned to black with only a few stars. I looked at my phone for a while and then pressed on one of the names.

To my surprise, she answered. "Hello, Lulu."

"Hi, Mom."

Silence.

"What do you need? Are you out of money?" she asked me.

"No. I was just calling to say hi and see how you are," I said.

"Really?" She sounded very surprised, like she was shocked, and it made me wonder how many times I'd called her if it wasn't for a reason related to something I wanted or needed. "Well, your father and I are doing very well," she

said, adding him into the conversation. “We’re thinking about a trip to Mexico.” She sounded defensive, like she was waiting for me to argue about him.

I didn’t want to argue, but I did want to try to get through to her one more time. “Mom, if I knew something—”

“Lulu, mind your own business,” she interrupted. “I don’t need you in the middle of the relationship I have with your father.”

And my old anger boiled up. “Are you joking? That’s where I’ve always been! I’m like a...whatever the name is of the piece you always lose first in that board game. A checker. No, a pawn! I’m like a pawn between you two and I have been for as long as I can remember. You and Daddy argue and then you want me to take sides, you try to win me over so I’ll be mad at the other person and it makes me feel—hello? Hello?” I gave the phone a good whack, but she was gone. Maybe it was because it had cut out again, but more probably, she’d just hung up. I sat on the bench for a while longer, looking at the dark screen.

Now it was extremely dark outside, too, so I wandered back to the Eagle and then since I knew I would have to pick up Ally at closing, I went in the direction of the Crookstown. I pulled up on the street outside of the bar, watching everyone under the lights inside for a while. They were busy—they probably could have used another set of hands carrying a tray. Hands with a really bad manicure, since I couldn’t afford them because I’d given that asshole Dex all my money. What a mistake that had been! He’d pay me back, I was sure of it, even if I did think he was such a total, utter asshole. It was the perfect word for him.

“Asshole,” I muttered as I watched him pour another beer, probably his hundredth of the night, and then hurry it over to table six. Ally was looking worried, maybe because I wasn’t there to be the buffer for a pissy customer. He still got so upset when someone was even a little bit peeved at him, but I was always ready to step in and defend him. Maeve had texted me a few more times asking about the modeling shoot

but I'd told her I'd talk to her tomorrow, that I really would be back at work.

I probably would, too, since I didn't have anything else to do or anywhere else to go, and no one was interested in me, either. I should have gone out with that Hobie. Maybe he had been the one, the love of my life! Or maybe Bertram/Antonio was. As Dex the asshole had said to me once, beggars couldn't be choosers. I covered my face with my hands.

Then someone knocked on the car window and I screamed.

"Turn down the volume, brat. It's me," Dex said. "What are you doing sitting out here?" He leaned over and got close enough that his breath misted the glass. "Are you crying?"

"No!" It was too dark for him to see anything.

He tried the door, and then he swore at me because I'd been sitting there with the car unlocked. "How many times have I told you not to do that?" he demanded, and it was a lot of times.

"I didn't expect you to come yanking on the handle!" I told him. "Get back into your ugly bar."

"You like the Crookstown. You told me it was charming."

"I think I said that it had a little bit of charm. I was feeling very charitable that day, but I don't see it now."

"Come on out of there," he said, and held out his hand. I ignored it, but did remove myself from the Eagle. It was getting hot in the car and it was also boring.

"I'm not going into that stupid bar," I informed him.

"You're not staying out here on the street until closing, either. Come on, you can sit at a stool. You're still having your night off." He put his hand around my arm and started tugging me towards the entrance.

"I don't want to go in there," I said, my feet dragging. "Stop yanking on me! I'm not going in there!"

"Ok, ok." He stopped propelling me along the sidewalk and instead bent down again, this time to look closely into my

face. “Damn, you are crying. Why were you sitting in the car so upset? What the hell happened on that modeling shoot? What did they do to you?” He swelled dangerously, growing at least a few inches in height and breadth.

“Why do you care if I’m sitting in a car and crying?” I asked him. “Which I wasn’t! But I’m nothing to you, remember? You took my money, but you don’t care about me.”

“Is that what this is about? I’m not keeping your money. I have it in an envelope in the storage room safe—”

“Screw you, Dex Connolly!” I shoved against his chest, which didn’t move him an inch. “I’m not taking that check back!” My hair was in my face, looking terrible, and the makeup job I’d so carefully done for the fake photo shoot was ruined. “I can’t go in there looking like this. I can’t go in there and everyone will ask me what happened today.”

“Lulu, what happened today?”

“Exactly!” I told him. “See? My mom told me that this was in my future. It’s exactly like she said! ‘Lulu, you’re going to end up working in that hole of a bar for the rest of your life, spending your time with degenerates.’”

“And the hole is the Crookstown, and I’m the degenerate,” Dex translated.

“Exactly!” I said again. “And I don’t want her to be right. Didn’t you think that I could make a career out of this and be famous? I did. I thought I really had something. Something more than porn, anyway.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding you. What did you just say about porn?” He swelled even more. “Fuck, Lulu! Is that what you did today? Is that what the modeling job was?”

“Can you get Ally?”

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because I don’t want to tell you this. I don’t want to stand here crying with you.” Which I was still doing, hard enough that it was getting difficult to talk. “You don’t even

know me and I don't know you. We're not friends. Can you go get Ally? Please? Now?"

He made a move towards me instead, stepping closer and with his arms out in a way that made me think he might hug me. But then he stopped. Silence stretched for a moment before he spoke again.

"Stay right here. Don't move from this spot," he ordered.

I watched him go inside and say something to Ally, who came right out to meet me on the sidewalk.

"Lulu? Dex told me to take you home. Why are you crying?"

"I'll tell you in the car. Let's go," I said. As we crossed the street to the Eagle, I looked back over my shoulder into the lighted window of the Crookstown. Dex was watching us, but then he took a glass and started to fill it.

Screw him and his stupid bar, anyway.

Chapter 10

“It’s really fun. You’d really like it,” Maeve told me.

“Yeah?” I waved the rag over the surface of the table. Maybe the fumes from the industrial cleaning spray would be enough to kill the germs there, but if not, I didn’t care too much. Everything felt like that, lately, everything felt wrong and useless. It wasn’t just the unrelenting heat coming out of the city’s pavement that was bothering me so much.

“Are you sure? I bet you have really cute suits,” she tempted, and it was true, I did have a nice selection of swimwear with very tiny bikinis. I just didn’t feel like putting one on my body right now.

“Dex, is it really ok?” Ally asked him again.

“Yeah, we’re good here. Feels like it’s going to be a slow night,” our boss assured him. “Have fun.”

I was glad that Ally was taking the time off. He deserved it, I thought, because he never did stuff like only waving the rag above the table instead of actually wiping. And I was glad because he loved spending time with Oriana so much, and Maeve would get to spend time with her boyfriend, too. The four of them definitely didn’t need me hanging around as they had fun together at the beach. Ally carried Maeve’s bag, which was heavy with many hats, umbrellas, and large bottles of sunscreen, and I watched as they went out to the Eagle.

It took a moment before I realized that Dex was talking to me. “For five minutes,” he remarked.

“What?”

“I said, you’ve been flapping your rag over that spot for five minutes. What are you doing?”

“Cleaning,” I said coldly, and went to wave it over the next table.

“Lulu, are you still mad at me? Really?”

I shrugged.

“I’ll say it again, then. Thank you for giving me that money. I don’t like that you sold your car to get it, but I’m very grateful. I’m keeping your check in the safe, and—”

“Don’t tell me that you’re giving it back. It’s for you to use because you need it.”

I heard him sigh. “Everything will settle down once I get the situation with Christina worked out.”

It wasn’t working out very well. She’d gone to the rehab place he’d found, but after three days, she’d decided that it was too “confining” and she wanted to leave. So he’d found another place for her, except that one was private and expensive. She’d refused to get out of the car when he’d taken her there. Now she was at an apartment he’d rented, saying she could get clean on her own, which no one seemed to believe—except maybe her daughter. Christina had gone to some meetings, though, which made Maeve so happy.

“I’m sorry,” Dex told me. “I’m sorry I hurt your feelings.”

I didn’t answer. At least now he seemed to really believe that I had them.

“I guess I say that to you a lot. I’m sorry I’m such an asshole, too. I didn’t mean what I said.”

Yeah, he had meant it, every word. He was being honest when he’d told me that we didn’t really know each other, that I was crazy and stupid to give him so much money when we weren’t even friends. It really had been a ridiculous thing to do, and I’d only realized later why I’d done it. It was just like when my dad had given me that car, the one I’d sold. He’d been trying to sew up my affections and get me on his side.

I’d been doing the same thing to Dex: I wanted him to like me. He didn’t, and buying him hadn’t worked. Maybe I should have done some of the things I’d used on my ex, like leaning over to give him a good view of cleavage, or leaning over in the other direction to give him a good view of ass. Or I could have used the little-girl voice that my boyfriend thought was so cute...at first. Sure, he’d liked it in the beginning but then, toward the end of our relationship, he’d

asked me if I had to talk like that. “I know you can speak normally,” he’d told me. “Can’t you do that with me? Can I hear your real voice?” He’d shaken his head. “It’s like I don’t even know you, after all this time.”

“Brat, are you hearing me?” Dex broke into my memories.

“Sure,” I answered, and put down the rag. “You don’t have to say those things anymore. I get that you’re sorry and whatever.”

“I do have to keep saying it, because I don’t think you’re believing—fuck.” He picked up his phone from the bar top. He read the message there and his frown got worse, so I knew it was about his ex-wife.

“It’s the landlord. Christina had a party...” He slammed his phone down onto the polished wood and I watched him take a deep breath. “I’m going to go try to talk him out of putting her crap onto the curb. You ok alone until I get back? I shouldn’t be that long.” He looked at the old clock on the wall. “We have a few hours until we open and I’ll be here before then.”

I’d come in early so that Ally and Maeve could use the car to have their beach day. “Sure. It’s fine.”

He was already partway out the door. “Lulu.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m—fuck,” he swore again. “I’ll talk to you when I get back.” He rushed out, almost running over to his Jeep. The landlord must have been pretty close to putting Christina’s crap on the sidewalk. I felt like I knew her a little, even though we’d never met. Maeve and Dex had been talking about her a lot together, with Maeve happy and excited and thinking her mom was on the right track, and Dex a lot more reserved but trying not to be a killjoy about his ex-wife’s recovery. I’d learned that Maeve got her artistic streak from her mom, that Christina had been a talented sculptor but that things had gotten in the way of her success as an artist.

“She got married instead of pursuing her career,” Maeve had explained, and Dex had literally bitten his tongue to stop

what he was going to say about that. “But I’ve seen pictures of her pieces, and she could have been great. Oriana has contacts in the art world and maybe she could help Mom get started out again, right, Da?” she’d prompted, and he’d pretended to agree. No one mentioned to him that Maeve had already spent a ton of her own money on art supplies for her mom.

She had such hopes for her mother’s future. I’d watched Dex bite his tongue again and again as her expectations rose higher and higher, and Ally got more and more nervous as he listened, too. He twisted a bar towel in his hands and turned red.

“I don’t know if Christina will be able to stay sober,” he’d said quietly one night after Maeve had gone upstairs. “If she doesn’t...” He’d looked at the door that led to the apartment above us.

It would break Maeve’s heart, again. That was why Dex was running over to prevent his ex’s stuff from getting thrown out into the street, that was why he was spending even more money to try to get her to go to a private counselor, that was why he was texting her all the time, calling her and talking in a tone that didn’t sound at all like his normal one because it was very even and calm. I guessed I wasn’t the only one who faked voices to get what I wanted.

But maybe that wasn’t everything there was to the story. Maybe he still felt something. I considered that as I watched the dust float around in the air. Maybe there was still a tie between Dex and Christina, a connection between them that was more than the daughter they shared. An emotional connection. Love? I didn’t usually spend a lot of time analyzing my own emotions, but I realized that I found that idea very bothersome. It made me frown, which was not at all good for wrinkle prevention.

The bar was a little eerie with no one else in it, even with daylight streaming through the windows, even with it cleaned up a whole lot. Dex had put the pause on updates, since all his money was going to his ex-wife, but while he worked on cleaning her up he’d also cleaned up the Crookstown. He and

Maeve had taken one whole Sunday and scrubbed it practically from top to bottom, even using a leaf blower to get the dust off the ancient dollar bills left on the wall.

I had to admit that the place did look pretty nice, although it was way too empty in here now. There was always someone else, either Ally or almost constantly, Dex. He had a big presence, one that I seemed to miss even when I was so mad at him.

I jumped down from the stool and as I did, I heard a faint noise from the back of the building. I listened, wondering what it was. Ally had made inroads in his relationship with the rat, Nebuchadnezzar, and the animal came out more now (to my horror). But it had sounded different from a rat. I hoped.

“Dex?” I called. Had he forgotten his phone again or his wallet to make the payouts to save Christina’s ass? “Are you back?” There was no answer. “Hello?” I called. He hadn’t said that he was getting a delivery this afternoon, even though he was able to pay for them now with the money from my car. “No haircuts today. Lulu’s Barbery is temporarily closed!”

And then I said, “Who are you?” Because a man had walked in that I didn’t recognize. He wasn’t one of the regulars, he wasn’t the delivery guy who always brought the booze, and he definitely wasn’t Dex. He slouched in, his eyes darting from side to side. “Sorry, we’re closed. We don’t open until four,” I said.

And then I saw what he had in his hand. “Oh, my Lord!” I shrieked. “Are you pointing a gun at me?”

He looked at his hand, too, like he was checking. His pupils were huge in his eyes and his fingers around the gun shook.

“Uh, yeah,” he said, and stood up straighter. “Give me the fucking money.”

“What? There’s no money here!” But before I could remember any street-smart stuff, like to be cool and not give anything away, my gaze slid to the register.

“Open it up,” the guy told me immediately, and when I didn’t move, he held the gun higher.

“I think you’re making a mistake. The man who owns this bar—he works really hard,” I said, my voice trembling. “He works so hard for his money and he’s having family issues, so you can’t take—”

“Shut the fuck up!” he barked at me, and he waved the gun. “Go open that register.”

The cash drawer was full. Dex had already prepped it for the day, laying out the ones, fives, tens, and twenties. The old people who came to the Crookstown didn’t usually use their cards, so we always had lots of bills in the drawer. It had taken Dex three weeks before he let me use it, though, before he believed that I really was figuring the change out in my head like I said I could.

I turned slowly, the money in my hand, and the guy jerked forward to grab it and stuff it into a bag he had over his shoulder. “Can we talk for a minute about what you’re doing?” I asked, making my voice slow and calm. “You’re taking this from a family, from a father and daughter who need —”

“Shut the fuck up!” he exploded again. His head swiveled quickly, right and left, right and left. “She said there’s a safe in the storage room. Take me there.”

Oh, my Lord. “The door is locked to that room.”

“I know there’s a key. Get it.”

My eyes sought out my phone. I’d left it where I’d been sitting on the other end of the bar top and it was now out of reach, so I couldn’t call for help. Ok, I could hit him with a bottle. My hand reached for a glass neck and the gun cocked, the sound so close. I froze.

“Where’s the key?” he demanded.

“Here.” I took it off the little hook next to the register. “But once we get in, I don’t know the combin—”

“Move!”

I did, through the bar and down the steps to the storage room, but I stopped outside the door. “Listen, please. I don’t know the combination to the safe. Only Dex, the owner, does.”

“You better pray that you can get it open.”

I was mostly praying that Dex hadn’t left it open by mistake. I was sure he hadn’t gone to the bank today so Friday night’s profits were sitting inside the dented metal walls and he’d just said that my cashier’s check was there, too. He was always careful to lock—

“Why are you standing there?” Something cold and hard poked me in the back. He was pushing me with the gun.

I turned on the light switch outside of the room and we walked inside. Boxes and bottles lined the shelves on the walls, neat now since I’d been insisting on the inventory checks, and the old safe sat bolted to the damp concrete floor in the corner. I heard rodent feet scurry away from the light and I shivered.

“Open it!” The gun at my back pressed down, forcing me to my knees.

“I don’t know—”

“Open it!”

I put my fingers on the number dial. “I’m sorry. Dex won’t let anybody use this but him. He didn’t tell me the combination.”

“Bullshit.”

“No, he really didn’t! He doesn’t trust me. He doesn’t even like me.”

There was silence behind me and my hand shook, making the dial tremble. I heard him fumble for something in his pocket and then he spoke.

“The girl here says she doesn’t know how to open the safe.” Pause. “No, she has brown hair, not red.”

Maeve? How did he know about Maeve? Who was he talking to? He'd told me that "she" had said there was a safe

"Is, I don't know what the fuck to do!" he yelled into his phone, and then listened. "Ok. I'll try that." He used the hand with the phone to push me to the side, knocking me off my knees and onto my ass on the wet floor.

"What are you doing?" I asked as I watched him aim his gun at the dial. "No, don't shoot that! The bullet will bounce off and hit us!"

He paused. "It will?"

"It could! I'd have to know the mathematical model for bullet ricochet, the metal composition of your ammunition, and the Brinell hardness value of that safe to tell you for sure. But do you want to risk it? You'd shoot yourself," I told him.

"It would work," he said, but he didn't sound very certain.

"Think of what people would say about you," I urged.

"What do you mean?"

"They'd see you and laugh!" I said. "They'd whisper, 'Oh, there's that guy who shot himself trying to rob a bar for a hundred dollars.'"

"That's all that's in there?" He looked at the safe and then the gun, and I nodded hard.

"There's hardly any money in this place. The Crookstown is a shitty bar that no one comes to, so what was in the register was almost everything there is. You would shoot yourself over practically nothing and it would be so awful. Everyone laughing," I reiterated, because he'd started to look pretty pissed.

"Nobody's going to laugh at me." He pulled the phone out of his pocket and then held it to his ear, distracted, but he still stood only inches away and I didn't think I could run without him immediately catching me.

"Is, I'm not shooting the safe!" he told the person on the other end of the call. "Because the bullet could ricochet and

hit me, that's why not! People would laugh and say I'm the guy who shot himself trying to rob a fucking bar that nobody likes." Pause. "Then why don't you come and do it yourself, bitch?" Another pause and he listened for a while, and then his eyes moved away from the safe and met mine. "What am I supposed to do with this girl?" he asked, and then he nodded, still watching me. "Ok. I'll do it," he said, and he put the phone away.

Oh, my Lord. I heard my heart pounding and the drip of water somewhere. Time seemed to drag as we stared at each other.

"Stop looking at me. Get on your knees and turn around the other way," he ordered.

"Please don't do this," I said. "Please don't. You don't want a murder charge—"

"Shut up! Turn around." He grabbed my arm and jerked on it, spinning me to face the wall.

Dex would find me here. He'd find my dead body with rats on it, and I'd be gone—I never did half the things I meant to—I needed to tell my parents that I loved them, maybe I was mad but I loved them—I needed to apologize—I had to find someone who loved—

"Sorry," I heard the guy mutter. Then I heard him move, and then I felt the pain in my skull. Then it was over.

∞

Was this what hell was? It was so dark here. That made sense, since it was underground. Right?

But it should have been hot, and I was freezing. I was freezing and I was on my back, lying on something hard. Everything felt damp, my skin and my clothes and my hair. I shifted my head slightly and pain shot through it. Shot? Had I been shot?

Carefully, I moved my arm, and since I could do that, I figured that I wasn't actually dead. I gently felt around my

skull, but there was no bullet hole, only a throbbing, giant lump on the crown of it.

He had hit me with the gun. He had hit me instead of shooting me, and I'd never been happier to be in pain than I was right at that moment. I rolled to my side, very slowly, and then even more slowly and carefully I got up on my hands and knees. Nausea rolled through my stomach and into my throat, and I almost fell to the other side with dizziness.

“Oh,” I moaned. Oh, I was ok. I wasn't dead. I hadn't gone to hell, I had time to accomplish all the things that I'd thought of, I had time to work on all the regrets that had passed through my mind as I knelt on the floor and waited for the bullet.

But first I had to get out of the storage room. It was pitch black and I started to crawl toward the wall to flip on the light, before I remembered that the switch was outside. I felt my way to the door instead and reached for the handle.

It was locked. He'd locked me in here in the dark. I leaned against the door, panting with the effort of making it across the damp floor. How long had I been knocked out? Could the guy with the gun still be out there? No, he would have run right away, taking the money from the register with him. My mind rolled like my stomach as I tried to think. He stole all that money when Dex needed every damn nickel! I hit the door with my fist. It only made a muffled thud because this side of it was covered in old sheets of metal—this room had been a kind of ancient refrigeration system when the bar was first built, way before it was the Crookstown. And my whole body felt weak, so I couldn't pound very hard.

Still, I could yell really loud, so I tried to do that. “Help! Dex! I'm in here!”

The words didn't emerge with the volume I'd wanted and my head ached with the effort. Would he be back yet? Would he think that I'd gone, taken off? Ally had the car so there would be no sign of me...except I didn't have my phone. It was still sitting on the bar top. He would see it there, he'd see the empty register that I'd left open on purpose, and he'd

know that something was wrong. Then he would come down here and find me. He'd open the door and light would flood in, and this would be ok.

I wiped at the tears dripping down my face. I hated this room. Even when the light was on and Dex sat on the chair as he and Ally did the inventory, I wouldn't come in. I hated the darkness, the dampness, the closeness of it. I hated the—

Something squeaked and scabbled in the pitch blackness. Yes, that was what I hated most of all: the rats. Oh, my Lord, they were coming out, and not just the one who was Ally's friend. There were a lot of them, he'd secretly told me, enough that he was going to start setting live traps to remove them from the building before Dex called in an exterminator.

“Shoo!” I said. I'd tried to yell it, but the word came out weak and shaky again. I used the doorknob to pull myself to my feet and I leaned against the cold metal for a moment as dizziness swirled through me. Then I started to take little steps out into the room, my arms waving in front as I walked towards where I thought Dex's chair had been. I could sit in it, pulling up my knees and yelling at the animals to keep their distance.

I tripped on its leg, banging my shin hard and making the metal scrape across the concrete floor. And I sat down, sobbing now, and put my face against my knees.

I didn't know how long I was down there. At one point, I tried to tap out the seconds and minutes on my leg but when I heard a squeaky, snarly fight in the corner, and then when something ran by the bottom of the chair, I lost track of the numbers. I shivered hard in the chill of the room and I started to think I could see things in the total darkness, maybe wings? Something fluttering? Something coming toward me?

And the rats, they were scratching on the floor and on the shelves, making bottles clink together, climbing on the wall behind me—and over me? Were they above me, scurrying along the ceiling where they might fall down through the dark until they landed on me with their greasy fur bodies, their

sharp teeth, their clawing rodent feet? I sat in the chair and shook and tried to make enough noise to keep them away.

When I finally heard something outside the room, I thought my mind was playing tricks. I'd been falling asleep, drifting in and out, and I thought I was having another dream.

Until I heard it again. "Lulu? Lulu!" A fist pounded on the door. "Lulu! Are you in there?"

Dex. It was Dex. "I'm here!" I tried to say. I got up off the chair and stumbled to the door on frozen legs that barely kept me up.

"The key's gone," he said through the wood and metal. "I have another one upstairs in the apartment. I'll be right back."

"No," I tried to tell him. "Don't leave!" But he was already gone. I heard his feet on the stairs and then, very faintly, I thought I could also hear him in the barroom. I grabbed the doorknob and shook it, pulling on it as hard as I could. I had to get out, I had to get out now. Now!

"Lulu, I'm here." The bolt slid and then the handle turned under my fingers. I fell forward into the light and into Dex, who caught me.

"Oh, fuck," he was saying, "oh, fuck. Lulu."

"He took the money," I tried to tell him. "He took the money from the register. I'm sorry."

"What did he do to you?" Dex picked me up before I could answer and ran up the stairs with me in his arms. My stomach flipped with the jerky movement and I groaned against his shoulder.

"What's the matter? What's hurt? What's wrong?" He sat me on the bar top. "What happened?"

I looked at his face, at the dark beard creeping across his cheeks, at the blue eyes that didn't miss any of my tricks. They were so worried now. His whole face was full of concern, for me.

I put my head down on his shoulder and bawled.

“Lulu, it’s ok,” he said, and I ended up in his lap as he sat in a bar stool, his arms around me and my face pressed against him. “What happened, baby? You can tell me.”

“He took your money,” I choked out. “He stole it and I didn’t stop him.”

“No, I need to know what did to you,” Dex said again, and I let go of my grip on him with one hand to carefully feel my head. “There? He hurt you there?” Then when he gently touched the area, he swore a whole lot. “We’re going to the hospital.”

I clutched his shirt. “He wanted to get into the safe but I didn’t know the combination.”

“I’m sorry,” he told me, but I said no.

“He would have taken everything inside there, too. I’m glad I didn’t know it but I thought he was going to shoot me.”

Dex’s body got very still, like maybe even his breathing stopped. “He had a gun? He pointed a gun at you?”

I nodded a little, but it hurt a lot to move my head. “He locked me in there with the rats and I was so cold. I knew you would come but I didn’t know when,” I said, and although I’d thought that I’d cried every last tear that I had in my body, a lot more came out onto the soft, old t-shirt beneath my cheek.

“You’re safe now,” he crooned. It was like how Ally talked to his pets, and it seemed to calm me like it did to them. “He’s gone.”

“But he took your money!”

“I don’t care about the money.” Very carefully, he shifted his body so that he could look down into my face. “He hit you on the head? Is that all he did?”

“Yes.” I nodded a little again. And then I remembered the facts I’d been trying to cling to, the things the guy had said that I’d recognized as clues even when I had been so afraid that I’d almost thrown up. “He walked in and knew about the safe. He thought Maeve had the combination.”

Dex’s arms jerked. “Maeve?”

“He thought I was her at first, and that I would be able to open it. So he knows about you, Dex. He knows how stuff works in this bar. And then, when we were in the storage room and I couldn’t unlock it, he called someone to ask what he should do. He was talking a woman, because he said she was a bitch. He called her something else, too.” I’d been trying to think of what it was. “My head hurts but when it feels better, I’ll remember.”

“Stop thinking,” he said immediately.

“Don’t tell me to stop thinking. I’m not on the clock yet.”

“You’re getting bratty again,” he said with relief. “Now I feel like you’re going to be ok.”

But I kept my head on his shoulder. “Am I actually on the clock? Do we have to open the bar now?” I asked.

“No, we’re going to the hospital now. Come on.” He brought me to his car and we went, with me yawning a lot and him pretty worried.

“Talk to me,” he kept ordering, and shaking my knee.

“So damn bossy,” I muttered, but I did try to. I told him about the guy who’d come in with the gun, because I remembered a lot about his clothes, his features, and especially the awful, DIY, bleach highlights in his hair. While we were at the hospital, we talked to one of Dex’s friends, a police officer named Ash, and I told him what I remembered, too. He asked me a lot more questions while Dex told him to go easy and let me rest.

“I have to answer so he can solve the case,” I said irritably. “Don’t you want to get the money back?”

“I’m thinking more about getting you back.” But he frowned. “The guy knew about Maeve.”

“Because he knew someone who knew the bar.” I tried to think but my head hurt so much. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Dex put his arm around me again and I wished I could crawl into his lap. I did rest my head on his

biceps and closed my eyes, but I kept thinking I heard rats again.

“Don’t let them get on me,” I mumbled. And then I heard something else. Very clearly in my mind, I heard the guy’s voice speaking into the phone, asking someone for directions. “Is.”

“Is what?” the officer asked.

“That’s what he said. That’s what he said into the phone when he was calling her a bitch,” I answered. “He said, ‘Is, I don’t know what to do.’ And she told him to knock me out, I guess, because he did.”

“Isie.” Dex looked at his friend. “She was a waitress at the Crookstown and I fired her. She stole liquor, too.”

“Maybe now they can find the money,” I said, and he told me to stop worrying about the damn register. I did allow him to boss me regarding that and I pressed my cheek against his arm and closed my eyes.

It was a concussion, we found out after several hours, but nothing more. I could go home, but Dex drove back to the Crookstown when we were done at the hospital.

“Are you going to open late?” I asked. It was very late, like eleven o’clock, so he’d missed all that time on a Saturday night.

“No, I’m not opening tonight.” He eased to a stop at a light. He’d been driving very, very carefully.

“What are all the regulars going to do?”

“They’ll be ok for one night,” he told me.

“I bet there was a game on,” I noted.

“They’ll have to watch it on their own TVs. Or go to a different bar,” he said. “There are others in Detroit.”

“The Crookstown is better.” I yawned.

“Put your seat back so you can rest.” But the lever was jammed, so at the next light he reached over and did it for me. I pressed my cheek against his arm. “Lulu, you ok?”

“I’m ok.” I closed my eyes again. “They said I should sleep.”

“Yeah, you go to sleep.”

“We don’t need to get all new people to come to the bar,” I mentioned. “I said that before, but it was wrong. I like the old guys.”

“A mix might be nice. Keep the old guys and have some fresh blood in there, too. I’m going to use those pictures of you, if it’s ok. Oriana wants to make some ads, send them out on the social media crap.”

I smiled. “That would be good.”

“I’ll pay you for the images.”

“No, you won’t.” I yawned again. “I’m sorry.”

“If you keep saying you’re sorry that we got robbed, I’m going to put you out of this car at the next corner.”

He wouldn’t do that, and it wasn’t the only thing I was sorry about. But I was so tired, I couldn’t explain right now.

“She’s ok,” Dex said. He was carrying me again, right into the bar where Ally, Maeve, and Oriana waited. “She got hit in the head.”

“Why is she so dirty?” Maeve asked him.

“I am?” I put my hand on my cheek. “I was in the storage room for a while.”

“With Nebuchadnezzar?” I heard Ally whisper. “She’s scared of him.” Then he spoke louder. “I’m going to get all the rats out. You’ll be able to go into the storage room, Lulu.”

I was never going in there again, not ever. I shuddered.

“Time for bed,” Dex said immediately, and all of us went upstairs, me walking slowly because the stairs were too narrow for him to carry me. But he kept his hand on my back, so I knew I wouldn’t fall.

Maeve helped me clean up and get into some of her clothes, but when she tried to tell me to lay in her bed, her dad

said no and directed me again, right over to his.

“You can’t fit on that couch,” I said sleepily.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

“Did you hear if they caught Isie yet? Did she have your money?”

“Don’t worry about that, either,” he ordered me. “Go to sleep. Now.”

“You’re not the boss unless we’re in the Crookstown. Not anywhere else.”

“We’ll see about that.”

I opened one eye. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’re resting. Now.”

“Are you staying?”

He sat on the edge of his bed. “Yeah, I am.” He put his hand around my jaw and gently stroked across my cheekbone with his thumb. “I’m sorry this happened. I’m so sorry. I’m not going to leave you.”

If Dex said something, he meant it. I went to sleep knowing that he would be there, no matter what.

Chapter 11

I could feel the eyes on me, six of them. Not a lizard, hamster, and cat in the apartment, not this time. These were human eyes: Ally's, Oriana's, and Maeve's.

I turned to look back at them. "I'm good," I said, which was really out of character. Not too long ago, if I'd been locked in a tiny room and gotten a concussion from being smacked by the butt of gun, I would have milked it for everything I was worth. I would have lain in bed, moaning and asking for everything, I would have refused to work for weeks, I would have referred to the incident constantly.

But now I didn't want to talk about it. According to the doctor that Dex had made me go see, my head was mostly all better. It definitely felt better, and I was exercising and doing my hair and coming to work here at the Crookstown. But I didn't go near the back door of the bar because from there, I could see the stairs to the storage room. I didn't want to touch the register. At night, at Ally's apartment, I was glad for the animal habitats with their different lights because darkness scared me so much. He'd put the hamster in his bedroom so I wouldn't have to hear it scratching but I still thought I could.

"I'm good," I repeated to the three people watching me. Someone was always watching, now, because Dex had taped up a new paper behind the bar with a new rule: "NEVER ALONE." Like the ones about employees taking breaks and the lack of fruit drinks, this one was also directed at me, but Maeve was included in it, too. Neither of us could ever be alone in the bar, which meant that he or Ally was always there.

Right now, the three of them were waiting for Dex so that they could leave and go to a job that Oriana had picked up. There would be models there, and Maeve had suggested that she could take a look at what they were doing and maybe it would be interesting, something she might want to try herself. I thought she might be more interested in the money, because Dex was working his butt off to make more and she saw that. I saw how worried she was about her father.

He would be back here soon, but he'd had to run off this morning to solve yet another problem for Christina, the ex who would never go away. Like, anyone who had Dex in her life would also have Christina because she still meant so much to Maeve—and maybe to him as well? Was that another reason that he dropped everything to rush off to help her? Maybe.

The back door slammed, making me jump, but at the same time we heard Dex call hello to us. A moment later, he walked into the barroom.

“Why the hell are you standing there like that?” he asked the three onlookers.

“No reason,” Maeve answered. “We were just going to that model thing. That’s it.” They were all still watching me.

“So go,” he told them. “Go on.” He kissed Maeve’s cheek, and they said goodbye and trooped out to the street. They looked back at the Crookstown as they went.

“I’m sick of that.”

Dex turned to look at me, too. “They’re worried about you.”

“I don’t need them to worry about me.” But I got so angry, all of a sudden, that I wanted to stamp my foot. I held it steady on the floor. “All that stuff with the gun happened so long ago.”

“Two weeks,” he told me. “That’s not very long. I’m worried about you, too.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re not acting like yourself, brat. You’re not arguing with me about anything, for example,” he said. “You haven’t said a word about heavy trays, shitty tips, or taking another break.”

“You always complain about what a bad waitress I am. I would think you’d be glad.”

“I’m not glad,” Dex answered. “Yeah, you’re a terrible waitress for sure. But I don’t mind the arguing. So what’s

going on? You still thinking about that guy? They caught him and Isie.”

“They’re out on bail.”

“Nobody’s coming around here. I’m sure of that,” he said. “I made sure of it. Don’t you trust me?”

I did trust him. “If it’s not him, it could be someone else.” I moved restlessly, jerking my shoulders. “I keep thinking I hear something, some sound like when he broke in. It was just a quiet noise but I should have called you right away. Or the police, or I should have left.”

“I’ve been robbed before,” he mentioned. “I was held up at gunpoint at a bar I used to tend. I had my wallet grabbed on the street by a guy with a knife, too, and I got my car stolen. I stood at my apartment window and watched it drive away.”

“Really?” I stared. I couldn’t imagine anyone trying to steal from him, let alone getting away with it. “You didn’t fight back?”

“What was I going to do?” he reasoned. “I didn’t want to get hurt. I had a daughter who needed me.”

I shut my eyes.

“Lulu.” His hand closed over my arm. “What?”

“That’s another problem. There isn’t anyone,” I said. “That kept running through my mind when I thought he was going to shoot me. I thought I needed to say goodbye to my parents and tell them that I love them, but I wasn’t sure if they’d care I was gone.”

“Of course they would care.”

“They’re not speaking to me. Anything could happen and they wouldn’t even know. Something did happen and they don’t know, because they don’t care. I could be dead and it wouldn’t make a difference in their lives,” I told him, and he opened his mouth and then closed it. There was really nothing to argue with there. “And I don’t have friends—”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Dex asked, but not like he was mad at me. “Did you just see me throw those three

guys out of here? They're your friends. They're worried about you because they're your friends."

"They have each other. I mean, they're in love and they have other priorities." Why would they need an extra person when they had their relationships? My parents hadn't even loved each other and they'd been too busy with their own crap to care very much about the kid they'd had.

Dex was looking shocked. "Maeve's in love?"

"Have you seen her and Keenan together? Have you seen the look on her face?" I asked.

"But she's...she's too young! She's not even driving yet."

"Because you won't let her learn how. She could have a permit, right at this moment," I pointed out.

"She's too young," he repeated stubbornly.

"Not according to the laws of the state of Michigan. It's in our vehicle code. I think it's chapter two hundred fifty-seven."

He stared. "How do you know that?" Then he shook his head. "What were we talking about before you delved into the vehicle code?"

"Nothing." I picked up a glass to polish it. "I'm going to work on the bathrooms."

"You mean your makeup?"

"No, I mean the bathrooms need to be scrubbed. I still have surgical gloves in my purse."

Dex walked around the bar top and put the back of his hand against my forehead. Then he leaned down and looked into my eyes. "Is your head hurting again? Do you feel dizzy?"

"No, I'm fine!"

He took the glass and towel from me. "We're need to get out of here. Grab your bag."

"Where are we going?"

"To get some fresh air, for you to clear your thoughts."

“Right now?” I asked.

“Right now. You need it.” He locked up the Crookstown and we walked to where he’d parked his Jeep, right under the tree where the birds had lived at the beginning of the summer. I stopped and looked up into the branches, but the nest looked withered and abandoned.

“She left after the babies died,” I said. “After those boys stomped on them, and no one did anything. I didn’t do anything.”

“They hit you on the head with a rock! Lulu, you’ve had enough happen to you this summer. Let’s not get you involved in anything else.” He held out his arm so I could get myself in to the passenger seat and we drove through the hot city. August was stifling.

“Last summer, I didn’t get hit on the head even once,” I mentioned. “On a day like today, I probably would have gone out on the water. I spent so much time on boats. My ex’s family had sailboats and big motorboats, and we were on the lake all the time.” A car honked loudly near the open window and I flinched.

“I don’t have a boat. I never will,” he said.

“Why would you?” I asked, and watched him shrug. “I like the water, though.”

“That’s where we’re going. Not sailing,” he cautioned, “but you’ll like it.”

I liked being out of the bar and feeling the wind blowing on my face, cooling me down. I liked being with Dex too, because even though I’d made a few remarks about how the new “NEVER ALONE” sign wasn’t necessary, it did feel better when he was around. He’d started picking me and Ally up for work because he said that he didn’t trust the Eagle. I enjoyed knowing that he’d be sitting in the Jeep, annoyed because I’d taken another moment to apply lip gloss and muttering that the bar wasn’t going to run itself. I liked when he waited outside the apartment building after he dropped us

off and I would go to the front window to wave before he drove away and flashed his brights back to me.

He just wasn't going anywhere, that was the thing about Dex. He showed up and he kept on doing it.

"This is Belle Isle," he said as we drove over a bridge. "And we're taking a walk."

"A walk? I already exercised today."

"We're here for the scenery," he explained.

It really was beautiful in this place—it felt like we weren't in the city at all. I'd never considered myself to be a real nature girl but after we'd parked and walked for a while, I realized how good it felt to be outside. I looked at the river, the trees, the blue sky above us, and Dex next to me. This was much better.

His words broke into my thoughts. "You don't have to work there. You don't have to keep coming into the Crookstown."

"I know."

"You could get a job somewhere else, where everything didn't remind you of that fucker who robbed us."

"I know," I said again. "But I like working there."

"I don't know why," he said. "The pay is terrible and so are most of the tips. The owner's a real asshole at times."

"At times?" I echoed, and he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Not all the time. Is that true?"

"That's true," I agreed. "Plus, Ally is there, and Maeve."

"That's a bonus for anyone. Me, especially." He made his amused noise. "I remember the day you first walked in and decided to give yourself a job."

"You didn't have to hire me for real," I told him.

"Yeah, well, I saw you splitting your tips with Alistair. And he told me how a customer had been giving him a hard time about his beer pour."

“He still can’t do it very well,” I said, and Dex nodded.

“He said that you told the customer to shut the hell up or get the hell out, that nobody talked to an employee of the Crookstown like that.”

I kind of remembered it, too. “But you didn’t like me.”

“I thought you were a terrible waitress. I thought you had some wrong ideas, that you cared about things that weren’t all that important.” His palm slid down my arm until we were holding hands. “But you also cared about a lot of things that were important. Like Harold getting to his car on his bad hip. Like the baby birds. Like Maeve being happy and comfortable, like Alistair falling in love. I still think you’re a terrible waitress,” he cautioned, and I elbowed his ribs. But I really was pretty bad. My calling was elsewhere, not modeling or porn, though. I’d have to look around for it.

“Christina never stood up to me,” he said suddenly. “I’d act like...”

“Yourself?” I filled in, and he smiled.

“Just myself,” he agreed. “She’d get so upset and I didn’t know how to fix it. She thought I was an asshole for real. When we spilt, she hated me.”

“You’re actually not so bad,” I told him. “I don’t mind you most of the time.”

“That feeling is mutual.” We kept walking, listening to the birds and the sounds of the river.

“Do you ever worry that she was it?” I asked him. “I remember you saying that you didn’t want to get married again—”

“I said that when we first spilt, I didn’t think I’d ever want that again. I’ve changed my opinion as the years went on.”

“But what if you don’t find that person?” I continued. “What if you’re just alone?”

“I won’t be. I have Maeve and Alistair.”

He was lucky, I thought. “When I was kneeling on the floor of the storage room, that was what went through my mind,” I said, and Dex’s fingers squeezed mine hard. “I thought I was going to die alone.”

“You’re not alone.”

I breathed out my impatience rather than stamping my foot. “You just told me that when you and Christina divorced, she hated you. But that was because she loved you, too. That was why you got married, because you loved each other so much. There was still so much emotion there between you, even if things had gone bad. But I’ve never had that. Never.”

“What about that old boyfriend you’re always talking about?”

“No.” I shook my head. “When we broke up, it wasn’t hatred. It was just...nothing. He didn’t feel anything about me. He hadn’t ever loved me at all. When I look back on my boyfriends, it was always like that, like it was over and who cared? They didn’t. They were wrapped up in me for a while, but then it was over. Nothing.”

“I can’t imagine someone not having strong feelings about you, one way or another.”

I stared up at him, unsure if that was a compliment or an insult.

“How well did that guy even know you?” he asked.

“We were together for months.” I thought about him asking to hear my real voice. “I guess we didn’t spend that much time talking. We were busy...you know.”

“No, I don’t want to know.” And after we’d walked a little way, he changed the subject slightly to a different relationship. “I talked to Alistair about sex.”

“Ally told me. He was so embarrassed but he wanted to make sure you were right, that you actually knew what you were talking about.”

“What?” Dex was scandalized. “Why wouldn’t I know what I was talking about?”

“He seemed to think it had been a long time since you’d been with a woman and maybe you’d forgotten. Or things had changed and you hadn’t kept up with the times,” I explained, and it was like throwing gasoline on a fire.

“It has not been a long time—it hasn’t been that long,” he blustered. “What would have changed? Biology is biology.”

“I told him how long the evolutionary process is. Things like that would take thousands of years,” I said.

“Things like what?”

“The clitoris, for example—”

“No. Stop.” He paused. “What did you tell him about my advice?”

“Well, it seemed like most of the tips you had weren’t bad.”

“Weren’t *bad*?” he asked, his voice rising. “I have never, ever left a woman unsatisfied. Never. Every woman comes, and not just once. Again and again, guaranteed.”

“Who would guarantee that?” I asked curiously. “Is there an outside agency? Like, a branch of city government?”

“No, there’s me!” he answered loudly. “I guarantee it. Every woman, multiple times. Coming all over the damn place, screaming in pleasure, crossing their eyes, fainting! Yes, I made a woman faint with orgasm before, and that was just hands, no tongue.”

I raised my own hand to an older couple passing us on the trail. “Hello. Beautiful day,” I greeted them, and they gaped at Dex. “I totally believe you and I’m super impressed,” I said to him.

“You would be, if we ever...”

He let the words die off as I stared up at him again. His steps slowed.

“Lulu,” he started to tell me, but then his face changed, eyebrows drawing down. “Hold on.” He reached into his back pocket for the phone he carried constantly now, and then

he swore a whole lot. “It’s Christina again,” he said, as if I couldn’t have guessed it from that reaction. “She’s—fuck! She needs me.” He looked up at the sky and then down to meet my eyes. “I’m sorry. I wanted to give you a minute of something fun.”

“You did,” I told him. “Let’s go so you can save her ass. Again.” He nodded and we turned around in the direction we’d come from, but we walked a lot faster on the path back.

He’d found her a place in a building that had been a pretty house but was now converted into studio apartments. She had decent neighbors and lived on a quiet street, in a neighborhood that felt a lot nicer than Ally’s. I knew all that because I’d looked it up, of course, and had coerced Ally into driving with me past the address so that I could see it in person.

“It’s nice,” I’d said jealously as I slowed the Eagle to a crawl to examine the building, and also to try to get a glimpse of Christina. I was curious about her. Who wouldn’t be?

“I hope she’ll stay here,” Ally had answered, his voice very solemn. “I hope she stays here for a long time and makes things easier on Dex and Maeve.”

So far, that wasn’t happening. Dex swore softly as we got closer to that nice, quiet street, and his knuckles were white where he gripped the steering wheel. “She’s saying that one of the neighbors is threatening her, so she’s threatening to leave,” he told me. “She’s saying that there’s bad light for her art, too, and after Maeve spent all that on supplies.” He sighed. “Fuck.”

“You knew she bought that stuff?” Maeve had shopped for her mom with Oriana, and it was supposed to have been a secret from her father.

“I know she should have saved her money. Christina has been dicking around with her ‘art’ for years, never doing it seriously, never having any purpose. Maybe she is talented, but what the fuck does that matter if she’s not working hard?”

That mattered so much to him. That was what he respected in a person, someone who would work as hard as he

did. “You have to hustle,” I said.

“She never has,” he answered, and I looked out the window and didn’t add that some other people hadn’t, either. But they could start.

A woman stood on the curb outside of the apartment house. She held a bag, a big one, with something that looked like a scarf caught in the zipper. It swirled up in the wind and so did her red hair—bright, lava-red, just like her daughter’s.

“Oh,” I said out loud. “That was why Maeve was growing it. That was why she didn’t want to dye it even when she said she hated the color.”

“Because of her mother,” Dex said grimly. “Because it reminded her of her mother. Stay here and let me talk to her.”

I did stay in the Jeep, but only because I wanted to observe the two of them together. He’d said that she had left him, that he hadn’t wanted their marriage to be over. If anyone understood about holding on, I did. Maybe all this stuff, answering her texts and calls, running over to jump into the middle of her problems—maybe his need to take care of her was because Dex wasn’t able to pry her out of his heart.

Christina had started to drag her bag over the moment he stopped the car at the curb. “No, nope,” he called as he got out. “I’m not taking you anywhere. This is where you live.”

“I can’t live here anymore,” she told him. She had a pretty voice, low and a little hoarse, but kind of musical, like she might have been able to sing well. My own singing was difficult for a cat to listen to. And she was just as beautiful as Maeve was—or she had been, probably. She just looked kind of tired, kind of haggard, kind of like the years of partying, drinking, and using was now starting to show on her face.

They got into an argument, with his voice growing louder as he frill-necked himself larger, and hers falling to a whisper as she seemed to shrink. Then she started crying, looking up through her eyelashes at him as delicate droplets trickled down her cheeks and oh, my Lord.

I knew that trick. I'd played it so often and on so many different men, I might have patented it. And I watched Dex start to struggle as he tried to insist that she was fine where she was in the apartment he'd rented. The apartment he'd had to pay three months of security deposit on because the landlord had gotten an idea of her history, a place where she could easily walk to a bus stop because of course she didn't have a driver's license, one only a stone's throw from a church where she could attend her sobriety meetings.

But the neighbor was mean, she was telling him softly, huskily, her voice breaking with sadness. He thumped on the wall sometimes. She thought he might be smoking and she couldn't stand cigarette smoke, Dex knew that.

In terms of "threats," though, the evidence was slim. I hadn't heard anything in her story that suggested that she actually needed to get away from the apartment, nothing besides vague ideas about people not liking her, about general unhappiness, about bad vibrations and bad lighting. It was a pile of crap.

But, unbelievably, the act was working. She kept crying, sniffing and throwing in soft sobs, and I could see Dex weaken. Dex Connolly, giving in over a few tears! It made me so angry I stamped my foot on the floor of the Jeep. Then I got out and stamped again on the sidewalk, and I stamped my way over to them.

"What's going on here?"

Both of them looked at me. "Who is this, Dexter?" she asked in that pretty voice, and sniffled.

"Christina, meet Lulu," he said briefly. "Listen, I'll talk to your neighbor. I can—"

"You talk to your neighbor," I told Christina. "If you have a problem with someone, you deal with it."

"What?" Her head snapped around and she stared at me. "What did you just say?"

"You're an adult," I announced. Just like I was, and we grown-ass women needed to solve our own problems. "Go tell

him to stop thumping if you don't like it. He probably didn't like the party you threw, either, the one that almost got you kicked out."

The tears magically stopped. "Who the fuck are you to talk to me like that?"

"Lulu," I repeated. "I'm Lulu. You just heard Dex say that. He came running over here because he thinks you need help but I think you're manipulative. I've heard that word a lot and it was mostly applied to me, so I know exactly what's going on. Except, our situations are different because I'm a lot younger. *A lot*," I emphasized, and her cheeks flamed red. "And I also don't have a daughter who's getting hurt by my bullshit, like you do. You have to stop this stuff and work on being a good mom to Maeve. She deserves it."

Christina had opened her mouth to argue with me but she stopped when I said that last part. Her eyes filled with tears, real ones this time, because the tip of her nose also turned red. "I'm not trying to hurt Maeve." Her voice got very hoarse. "I'm not doing this on purpose. I love her."

"Every time you have another meltdown, every time you party, every time you relapse, you are hurting her," I said. "I love her too, and I don't want to see it happen anymore. She's not giving up on you. She believes in you. Can't you try to do better, for her?"

There was a huge silence, then Dex said, "She'll try. Right, Christina? Could you try for Maeve?"

We both watched her nod, and I saw his body relax a little. At least this crisis seemed to be over.

We left a while later, after he went with her to bargain with the neighbor, and the landlord again, and to sit at her kitchen table so the two of them could talk together. I waited on the porch steps and played with my phone for a long, long time, and he looked tired when we finally left. Tired, but hopeful.

"She told me that she knows she can't do it on her own, that she's going to slip up soon. I think she already has been.

So I'm going to drive her to rehab again tomorrow," he said. "She let me know that she didn't want to see your butt again."

I stood up and brushed dust off that butt. "Well, I'm glad I said all that to her, even if she does want to kill me in my sleep."

"She doesn't want to kill you, but I'm sure it was hard to hear it from you."

It had been a little hard to say, too, because it had made me think a lot. I'd hated seeing Dex get twisted up by her tears just now, to see her use his own big heart against him. "I used to do that, too," I said as we were getting in the car.

He turned to me. "Huh? I didn't catch that."

"Nothing." I looked at the old clock on the dashboard, but unlike Ally's car, this one worked. "We're going to be late opening the bar."

"Yeah, I know. That's ok." We rode the rest of the way in silence, each of us caught up in our own thoughts, I guessed.

And when we got back, everyone else was already there. "They didn't get permits to shoot today," Oriana explained. "It was kind of a shoestring operation." She looked very sad, because I guessed that meant that she wasn't getting paid, either.

"Where have you guys been?" Maeve asked. "There are literally people waiting outside."

"Yeah, I know," Dex said.

"You're not flipping your shit?" she continued, confused. "Why not?"

"There are more important things than opening the bar on time," he told her, and she answered that she wasn't sure what those things would be.

"We already started working," she told him. "If we're all here, it'll get done pretty quick."

"Thanks, *a leanbh*," he said, and they smiled at each other. He still looked so tired.

“Did you get to talk to the models today? What agency were they from?” I asked casually, and she and Oriana glanced at each other.

“I talked to them a little. Not too much,” she answered, and then jumped off the bar stool. “I’ll go to the storage room for supplies,” she announced, and immediately shot through the door towards the stairs.

“Don’t let her go alone,” I said to Ally.

“There are no more rats. I’m positive,” he said, and followed Maeve. He’d worked very hard on trapping each one and rehoming them before Dex hired a real exterminator for a bunch of money. It had been difficult to let Nebuchadnezzar go.

“You stay here,” Dex directed me. “No more storage room for you.”

“I don’t want to go. But I am good to be here, at the Crookstown. You don’t need to worry about that.” I searched in my purse for my bag of gloves. “I guess I’ll do the tables. Oriana, you can take a pair.”

“Here.” From deep inside a high cabinet, he pulled out my old toxic waste gloves. “Before you say anything about me hiding them from you, it was for your own good. You were going to get heat stroke wearing them.” He paused. “I also found it disturbing that you thought the bar was dirty enough that you needed them.”

“It’s a lot better, now. The first time I walked in here, I was wearing very cute sandals and the floor was so thick with dust bunnies that I thought there was carpet.”

“Oh, ew!” Oriana squealed. “And you still came to work in this place?”

Dex angrily grew larger but I nodded and liked her even more. “It’s much better than it was back then,” I said again. “Times have changed since I arrived.”

“That was the beginning of the summer,” he reminded me, but I ignored it. So much had happened, it was more like years had passed.

“I have a good idea for us, after we finish opening,” I said to Oriana. “We should sit down and think about a social media advertising campaign for the Crookstown, now that the dust carpet is gone and so are most of the pictures of the dead ball boys.”

“They’re footballers, and they’re not dead!” Dex complained loudly. “Not all of them,” he added more quietly. “And let me remind you, brat, that you have a job to do after we finish opening. It’s what I pay you for: serving our customers.”

“Sure, sure,” I soothed, but after we opened the doors and didn’t get inundated by thirsty regulars, Oriana and I did sit at one of the tables to talk about an advertising campaign. I didn’t really know what I was doing, but I’d never let that stop me before. Dex even joined us for a while to hear our ideas, and Oriana had a lot of good ones.

“Look at this,” she said, and opened an image on her laptop screen. It was a collage of some of the pictures she’d taken for my portfolio. There was one of me alone, but there were a lot more of the regulars laughing and having fun. In the middle, she’d put the shot of me hanging onto Dex’s big arm. I was grinning hugely at him while he frowned directly at the camera.

“I love that one,” she said. “If it’s ok with you, I want to use it on my business website.”

“That one? Really?” I asked doubtfully.

“There’s so much emotion,” she said. “You look kind of... I don’t want to say ‘posed’ in your other pictures but...kind of stiff? Not stiff,” she amended. “Kind of rigid. Unnatural.”

“Got it,” I ground out.

“That was why they didn’t turn out so well, I think. You looked like you were trying.”

“Yeah. Got it.”

“But in this one, it’s really the two of you. Your personalities,” she explained. “It’s really the Crookstown to a T.”

Dex looked at it. “I like that one, too,” he said, and then he got up to serve another beer.

“That’s why I never got a call from an agent,” I said. “I don’t look like a person in most of the pictures. I look plastic.”

“I didn’t say that!” Oriana quickly objected, which was why she and Ally were good together. She was almost as nice as he was. “It doesn’t mean that you’re not pretty. I think you’re beautiful, Lulu, and so does everyone else.”

I enlarged the picture on her screen. You could see Dex’s eyes better when it was larger, and you could see that maybe he was frowning, but it wasn’t like he was actually mad. He could grouse and yell at you—like he was at this very moment, calling to me from the bar to tell me to get off my butt and pick up my tray. But there was something in his eyes that showed more than that.

“I like this one, too,” I said. I liked it a lot.

Chapter 12

There was quite a line. That was gratifying, but also a little uncomfortable. This wasn't a very big apartment and the animals and their various habitats really bit into the space. And sometimes the animals tried to bite into my clients, too, so I had to keep an eye on that.

"Best haircut I've had in months," Mitchell told me, admiring his new look in the mirror that Ally had attached to the refrigerator door.

"I know you haven't actually had a haircut in months," I answered. "I've been telling you that you needed one since I started working at the Crookstown. Next time, don't wait so long between trims and remember that Lulu's Barbery is still accepting new clients, so if your wife is interested, I'm great with women's hair, too."

"I'll let her know," he said, but someone else in the line yelled at him to quit his yapping and get out of the chair.

"That's not very nice," Ally informed the yeller. "Please use your inside voice." He'd been forced back into his old role as bouncer, and he was very bad at it. Asking politely for good behavior did work better with older men waiting in line for haircuts than it did for drunk people in bars, but it still wasn't a great approach.

But we had to be in the apartment, since we weren't going to involve Dex and the Crookstown in the illegal business anymore. I'd decided that Ally needed a share of the profits—obviously, since I was using his home and his cats were highly annoyed by all the sweeping that we had to do. And no, Dex wasn't aware of what was happening every morning before we rushed down to his car to get a ride to the bar. He was still picking us up and taking us home which I liked a lot even though I told him it wasn't necessary anymore, because I was also feeling a lot better about the robbery. Better, sure, but I still liked having Dex around, and when I announced that I was fine and he didn't need to drive us, he pointed to the

“NEVER ALONE” sign and then said that he’d be there tomorrow to pick us up.

“And don’t make me sit there and wait,” he’d added, but we both knew that I would.

We talked a lot in the car together, which meant me doing a little lying about the resumption of Lulu’s Barbery and Ally getting red. It wasn’t a situation that could last and Dex would find out soon enough what we were up to again. First, as I’d said, none of my clients, the bar regulars, could keep his mouth shut, so someone would blab about my business. But I had to also think that Dex would notice their superior grooming. Maybe. Anyway, Ally was going to crack under the pressure, too, and I’d told him that if asked directly, he didn’t have to lie. Not that it was really Dex’s business what we did in our time off from the bar—but it seemed to be. It seemed like our lives were pretty intertwined.

I couldn’t get to all the men waiting and we had to tell them to come back the next day, and to please keep their mouths shut about the pop-up salon. Ally and I rushed around cleaning (mostly I did that, while he soothed his animals) and then down to the car to meet Dex. August had rolled into September but the temperature hadn’t seemed to dip yet, and I stood in the shade with my fan as we waited. Which was weird, because Dex was always the one waiting for us.

“Ally, come out of the sun,” I told him.

“Huh?” He looked up at me, startled.

“Come here,” I said, gesturing to him, and he ambled over to stand under the tattered awning with me. “What’s going on? Are you worried about the cats again?”

“Philomena still seems mad, doesn’t she? I wish that José hadn’t stepped on her tail yesterday.”

“She’ll be ok. I saw her making friends with Sean on the couch,” I said. The couch that was my bed and was also now our waiting room. “Is that what’s bothering you?”

He shrugged, obviously distracted and worried.

“Is dealing with the crowd getting on your nerves? I started messing with an appointment app. That way there wouldn’t be so many people hanging out in your apartment.”

Another shrug. “There’s Dex,” he said, and we both watched the Jeep come up the street, faster than it usually arrived at the apartment building. The tires squawked as it jerked to a stop in front of us.

“What?” I asked Dex when we got into the car, me in the back with the tools, as always. “Is it Christina?” She’d stuck it out at the rehab place so far and with her there, the number of hysterical texts and calls that he was getting had dropped drastically. It was a relief, for him and for me because I didn’t like to see that crap.

Dex shook his head. “As far as I know, she’s good.” He frowned.

“Then what is it?” I asked, but he only shrugged. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!” I threw up my hands as I borrowed his expression. “Everyone’s in a snit, I guess.” Everyone except for me, because my pocket was full of bills that I was going to put in the cash register at the bar, something I’d been doing every day that Lulu’s Barbery was open. It was the easiest way to give Dex his share and avoid the argument that it was my money and he didn’t need it. Whatever, I was giving it to him anyway.

“It’s Maeve,” he said finally. “Something’s wrong. She’s not saying but I can tell it’s something, and it’s probably that man she’s seeing.” Dex hadn’t warmed up much to Keenan, although the rest of us liked the guy and Maeve was clearly crazy for him.

“He’s sixteen,” I reminded him. “More of a kid than a man.”

“I was a man at sixteen,” he answered. “I worked full-time and paid our rent. I dealt with our dick of a landlord, I made sure the pipes didn’t freeze, I got the car going when it broke down. That Keenan is soft.”

“Maybe you were a man at sixteen, but he isn’t yet. That’s ok,” I argued. “Maeve isn’t quite an adult yet, either.”

“Of course she isn’t! She’s still a little girl,” he snarled over his shoulder, and I threw up my hands again and leaned back against the toolbox. There was no talking to him when he was in a mood like this, and Ally was still obviously preoccupied and upset himself.

But if anyone could take on an emergency, it was me. I was successfully dealing with Dex’s financial problems and had practically forced his ex-wife into rehab, so if Maeve had an issue, I was also on it. “I’m going upstairs,” I announced when we arrived at the Crookstown, and he didn’t dispute the idea or say anything about my usual chores.

Maeve lay on their hard couch, two fans directed at her body and her arm over her eyes. “I knew you’d show up,” she said without removing that arm, and she sounded exactly like her father.

“Yeah, Dex is having a fit about you, so I’m here to fix it,” I agreed, and placed myself on a kitchen chair. She was taking up all the living room seating.

“Is he mad at Keenan?”

“Always,” I said. “But should he be, this time?”

She didn’t directly answer that. “I thought my dad was getting better. I mean, I thought he was starting to realize that I’m an adult. He’s been giving me the driving lessons.”

Dex had been taking her out to drive, sometimes alone but mostly with me. He was such a nervous wreck with her behind the wheel that Maeve and I had ganged up on him and made him wait on the steps of the church while we worked on braking and gentle acceleration together in the building’s parking lot. “Gentle acceleration” was something she hadn’t picked up yet. Neither was “braking.”

“You’re getting to be an adult, but you’re not quite there yet,” I cautioned. “It takes a while. It took me until, like, last week or so to really do it myself.”

She shook her head, turning it from side to side on the couch. “You and I were raised differently. I had to take care of my mom as well as myself and you...did you take care of anyone or anything? Or were you mostly just trying to avoid working?”

“It was a different kind of childhood,” I answered. “Let’s leave it at that. What’s going on with Keenan?”

Maeve removed her arm from her face and I saw the red around her eyes. Dex had been right that there was something wrong, because she’d been crying. “He’s acting weird. I don’t know what’s up!”

“Weird, how?”

She described it to me and the signs weren’t good. Summer camp was over and they were back at school. That meant negotiating their relationship among a lot more people, including his friends who mostly seemed like assholes.

“They’re all athletes. Jocks,” she said. “Keenan is too, I guess, but I’m certainly not. And they think I’m weird that I don’t want to go to the football game this Friday, and they keep calling me ‘Art Girl.’” She swung her feet to the floor and sat up angrily. “And I tell them to fuck off but he doesn’t say anything at all! He just sits there and then, last night, I texted him but he didn’t answer. So I did it again, and he still didn’t answer. And I did it again—”

“Stop texting him,” I said immediately.

“I did. I put my phone in the freezer so I couldn’t anymore.”

I took it out because that location couldn’t have been good for it. “I’ll keep it for you instead,” I suggested.

“Why is he doing this?” She looked so young and miserable, I moved to sit next to her on the couch and put my arm around her.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “He’s acting like a boy. A little boy. He’s afraid to stand up to his friends.”

“I guess it’s good that I don’t have any to stand up to.” She put her head on my shoulder.

“You have me as your friend. I think you’re the coolest girl I ever met. But when I was in high school, I would have been intimidated by you, just like Keenan’s friends are.”

“Why?”

“Because I was so worried about being better than everyone. The prettiest, the one with the hottest body, the best clothes and car, the cutest boyfriend. All the regular things. You just tell all that to fuck off. So I would have made fun of you, probably, because I wouldn’t have been able to understand why you didn’t care about the stuff that I did, and I wouldn’t have known how to be better than you.”

“Then I’m glad I didn’t know you then because I would have told you to fuck off, too.”

“I’m glad I didn’t know you then, either.” But I was very glad that I knew her now.

“You have a lot of tricks and strategies. What should I use on Keenan?” she asked me. “Crying? Pouting? Flirting with his asshole friends? Flashing him?”

“No, don’t do any of that. This is going to sound like Dex, but if he can’t see how cool you are—you, with no tricks—then what the hell do you want with him?”

“That did sound like my dad,” she agreed and laughed a little, but then she drew in a breath that shook. “But I do want him. I want Keenan.”

“Yeah. I know,” I said.

“Do you think I should break up with him before he does it to me?”

“Do you want to break up with him?” I asked.

“No. I really, really like him.” She sucked in a breath that was even shakier. “I love him, Lulu.”

“Yeah. I know,” I said again. “I know how you feel.”

She sniffled and wiped her eyes with her t-shirt. “I’m glad I have you to talk to. My dad would just try to go beat him up if I said this shit to him.”

“He may try that anyway. We’re going to have to keep an eye on him,” I said.

“Yeah.” She sighed. “I’m really glad we’re friends.”

I was, too.

Dex was desperate to get information from me about his daughter but he tried to play it cool, as if he wasn’t dying to rock Maeve in his arms like a baby and then go rip Keenan’s head off his body. He managed to contain his questions until the end of the night as we were closing up. Oriana had come by to get Ally, and clearly something was going on between them too because they had their heads together, conspiring before they even got out of the door of the Crookstown.

So it was just Dex and me, and his coolness lasted up until I started whistling an Aretha Franklin song about a bad boyfriend. When I sang a little bit out loud about a woman being treated wrong, he broke.

“What the hell is going on with Maeve and that man?” he demanded.

“Between Maeve and her teenage boyfriend? Teenage stuff,” I said, and he started to get larger. “Ok, calm down! She and Keenan might be breaking up.”

“Oh.” He shrunk to normal size, which was still three sizes larger than most men I knew. “That’s good news.”

“Is it? She’s pretty miserable,” I pointed out.

“She shouldn’t be sad about that little punk,” he scoffed.

“Who was your first girlfriend?”

“What? What does that have to do with anything? You really want to know?” He thought back. “Leslie Krychowiak in ninth grade.”

“Late starter,” I commented. “My first boyfriend was when I was ten. What did you think of her?”

“I thought she was it,” he said. “She used to wear these jeans...” He trailed off. “Never mind.”

“No, go ahead and tell me all about her ass,” I urged.

“I couldn’t keep my hands off it,” he answered. “I was crazy for her ass and for her. For about two months I was out of my mind and we were inseparable.”

“What happened after two months?” I asked.

“Well, then baseball season started, and I kind of forgot her.” He squinted. “She wasn’t real happy about that as I remember, and I didn’t get why at the time.”

“Exactly. See? That’s how teenage boys act. That’s what Keenan’s doing with Maeve—not the ass part,” I added quickly, although I’d heard a lot from Maeve about that part of their relationship, things I would not be sharing with Dex. “You keep saying that he’s a man but of course he isn’t, he’s just a dumb teenager making dumb mistakes because that’s, like, what you do to become an adult. She’s doing it, too. That’s how you grow up.”

He looked into the distance, then he untied his apron and sat down at a table. His shoulders slumped as he rubbed his eyes.

“What? What’s the matter?” I asked him. I’d never seen him like this, actually—not when he first got the news about his ex-wife relapsing, and not all the times he’d had to run over and help her with her various crises. Not even when I’d been in my situation when the bar was robbed. He looked... shocked? I didn’t mean he looked surprised, but more like in a state of shock, like kind of blank and confused. I gladly dropped the toxic waste gloves and walked quickly to his table. “Dex? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” But he kept staring off, eyes unfocused.

“Dex! You’re freaking me out.”

He looked up at me. “She really is, right?”

“Huh? Who, Maeve? She’s what?”

“She’s growing up. You keep telling me so,” he said. “She’s almost the same age that I was when my mom got real sick and I took over. The same age as when I first saw Leslie Krychowiak’s ass.” He rubbed his eyes again. “Maeve was such a little baby. I was deployed in the Middle East and a nurse held up a phone so I could hear her cry for the first time, but I didn’t get to meet her until she was seven weeks old. She was so tiny and so pissed off. Christina was proud of her but she was pissed at me, too, for leaving them both. I missed so much of her life and I kept on missing it. For years.”

“Not on purpose. And there’s a lot more for you to be a part of,” I told him. “She’s not that old.”

“You just finished saying that she’s an adult now.”

“No,” I told him, “she’s not, not really. I don’t think I said that. I said that she was almost there, but she’s still learning. And you’re old, but you’re not *that* old. You have a lot of good years left with Maeve before you die.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph! Thank you, Lulu.” When he said that, he went back to his normal self, but the sad, lost look on his face returned when he started talking again. “You know what I keep thinking about? That nest. Ally’s bird nest,” he explained. “That mother bird, there wasn’t jack shit she could do when those punks—”

“Dex, come on! Maeve and her boyfriend had a fight.” I put my hand on his big shoulder and rubbed. I hoped that made him feel better, because I didn’t know what words would work. “It was nothing. It was a fight between teenagers who have to mature a lot before they’re real adults. You know, it takes some people years to grow up. Maybe you did when you were fifteen, but some people? It’s like twenty-three, twenty-four.”

“Is that right?”

“That’s right,” I answered confidently. “It was a minor problem, that’s all. That’s all!”

∞

That was not all.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Dex whispered at me a few nights later. His whisper was more like a normal speaking voice, though, so everyone could hear him. I put my finger to my lips and actually whispered an answer.

“I have no idea why Ally wanted to come in early to talk to you. He practically dragged me out of the apartment.” It had really cut into my barbery time and I’d had to cancel several appointments I’d set up through the new app I was using, which was a particular shame since I’d had to bully a lot of the old guys into installing it on their phones.

And now, rather than talking to our boss, Ally stood at the window of the Crookstown, anxiously watching the street. It was raining and slightly cooler today, and it felt like maybe fall was coming to this baking city. I had always loved the change of seasons, when I put away my bikinis and took out my long-sleeved cropped shirts for winter, and I exchanged my high-heeled sandals for high-heeled boots. But this rain today felt more like the end of an era. Not that the summer had been chock full of giggles, what with me getting dropped by my parents and assaulted in a rat-filled room. Still, it had been kind of special, hadn’t it? I didn’t want it to end.

“She’s here,” Ally announced at the window, and he sounded extremely relieved. In another moment, Oriana came rushing through the rain to the bar’s front door. When he let her in, she looked just as nervous. I glanced over at Dex and he met my eyes and shrugged slightly. No idea, his shoulders told me.

We all said hello and then stood awkwardly. “Should we go upstairs to talk?” Dex asked finally, and they both agreed to do that. Holding hands tightly, Ally and Oriana walked ahead and Dex shot me one more look of utter confusion before he followed them.

“Come right back down here and tell me everything!” I hissed, but he waved that off. It better not have been a secret for long, though. How was I going to live with Ally if he was hiding something big, and how could I keep being friendly with Oriana if she was shrouded in the same mystery? How

could I work for Dex without niggling at him incessantly to tell me what was happening?

I couldn't do that last one, of course, but I didn't have to worry about finding out the truth. In less than five minutes, I heard the deep-voiced roar from above: "Are you fucking serious?"

And a few moments later, Oriana pelted downstairs, tears streaming out of her eyes, followed by Ally, who wasn't crying but looked equally upset. She ran out into the rain and he was only a step behind her, and I saw her headlights flash on as her car whipped away from the curb.

"What?" I asked after them, and then Dex pounded into the room.

"Did you know about this? Did Alistair tell you?"

"What?" I answered. "What is going on here?"

"You didn't know," he stated, and I swung my head back and forth.

"I have no idea what's happening but I'm almost dying to find out." I really was. "Are they ok?"

"No, they're not ok! They're having a baby!"

I clapped my hands to my chest and if I'd had pearls, I would have clutched them. "Oh, my Lord!"

"Exactly!" he told me.

"It's so—that's just—" I sputtered.

"Terrible? Frightening? The worst idea in the world?" he supplied.

"No, it's wonderful! Oh, Ally's going to be the best father!"

Dex blinked. "What? He is?"

"Have you seen how much he loves all those animals? Can you imagine him with a kid, how sweet and patient he'll be?" My eyes filled up with tears. "Could I be an aunt, do you think? I'm an only child, so—"

“You’re missing the point here,” Dex interrupted. “The point is, it’s an awful thing to happen.”

“What?” I asked again. “Why?”

“They’re too young, for one thing!”

“Ally’s twenty-four. That’s older than you were when you had Maeve,” I said.

He blinked. “But it was different.”

“How?” When I saw him get mad, I held up my hands. “I’m seriously asking. How is it different with Ally?”

“I’d been on my own for years.”

“He’s been living alone. He only recently got a roommate. Me,” I pointed out, and pointed at my breasts for emphasis. It never hurt to draw someone’s eyes there, since they were probably my most important feature, and Dex looked. He looked for more than a few seconds, and the moment stretched.

He finally tilted up his chin and met my gaze. “What were you saying?” he asked.

“Um, I don’t remember.” My mind was blank but my body, breasts included, felt warm. Hot, actually.

He shook his head and coughed. “Alistair, as a father.”

“Oh, right. What did you say to them?”

“I was surprised,” he told me, and yes, I’d heard that shocked bellow. “Then I think I asked them something like, ‘What were you thinking?’ and I probably said, ‘Alistair, you knew better than this.’ From their answers, I know it wasn’t planned, but what the fuck? Really? He and I had specific discussions about condom usage and rule number one was cover it up, every time. Every single time.”

“Things happen,” I told him. “Unplanned things. I had a scare, once.”

“How?”

“Well, my boyfriend and I were in the back seat of his SUV and I had stripped off everything until I was only wearing—”

“I don’t need that level of detail.”

I shrugged. It had been a fun time, but the part afterwards had been scary. “I don’t know exactly what happened but when we were done, the condom wasn’t right. Think of a ring around your—”

“Again, too many particulars. Move on to the upshot.”

“The upshot is that things happen,” I concluded. “And it would have been terrible for me to get pregnant then, but I don’t see how it’s so awful that it happened to Oriana and Ally now. Are they upset?”

“No,” he admitted. “They’re scared but thrilled.”

I nodded. “They love each other and they’ll love a baby so much. It will be great.”

Dex huffed, exasperated. “You’re glossing over the problems. Think of where they’ll live.”

I did, and it wasn’t ideal. Really, if you thought of ideal and then imagined the opposite, that was the current situation. Oriana lived with her sister, a single mom with four kids, three dogs, and a home-based business. Another baby and a person the size of Ally weren’t going to fit in there. And then there was Ally’s apartment, which was small, dark, and pretty unsafe. Like, he didn’t let me or Oriana walk out in the hallways alone, so he wouldn’t want their child there. That apartment was also full of animals and one other important thing: me. It was a one-bedroom. Where would we all fit?

“I see what you mean...” I started.

“She’s just starting a business, and she doesn’t make shit for money. He works here, and we both know what I pay him. Not enough,” Dex filled in. “I can’t afford to give him more, either. I don’t have it, even if I used what you’ve been slipping into the register. I’ve been keeping track of that.”

“We’ll figure it out. We can,” I answered him.

“We can,” he repeated, and got a funny expression, kind of amazed. “You know, when you walked into the Crookstown at the beginning of the summer, I never would have thought that you’d be the person I’d turn to when the shit was going down.”

I got a little breathless with happiness to hear that, in spite of the problems at hand. “I’m glad I could help you,” I said. “But you’d better hurry.”

“Hurry?”

“You have to go and apologize to Oriana and Ally,” I stated. Obviously.

“Apologize? Why?” Dex asked me, astonished. “They told me the news, I told them what I thought.”

“You think that Maeve is the most wonderful thing in your life. What if someone had said to you, ‘Oh, no, you idiot! You shouldn’t have a baby. You’re so gruff and you dress so terribly. Your t-shirt collection is an abomination.’”

“Why would my t-shirts matter?” he asked tightly.

“They matter to me,” I said. “But imagine if someone had told you that you shouldn’t have Maeve.”

“I probably shouldn’t have. I already knew that Christina and I weren’t built to last, and I knew I was going overseas.”

“So you’re saying that you’re sorry now, that you wish you hadn’t had her,” I interpreted.

“You know I’d never say that, brat.” He sighed. “How are we going to work this out?”

“Apologize first. We’ll plot later,” I said, and he noted that he had just enough time to make it over to Oriana’s house before we had to open.

“Come with me,” he said.

“Are you scared of them so you need me to hold your hand?”

He pointed to the sign behind the register: NEVER ALONE. “I don’t want to leave you here by yourself.”

I looked at the white paper with Dex's heavy, quick lettering on it and I could feel his eyes on me. "No, I don't mind."

"You don't mind being here without me?" He reached out and to my surprise, he very gently tucked my hair behind my ear. "Now I can see you better," he explained, but he kept his hand on my shoulder like I'd done for him before. It was very comforting.

"I don't really want to be here alone, but I also want that. I mean, I want you to be able to leave," I told him. "Do you understand?"

"Sure. You want to be ok with this. It's pretty soon, though." His thumb gently stroked my collarbone.

"The guy's in jail." They'd picked him back up for something else, and this time, he hadn't been able to make bail. "Isie isn't going to do anything herself. I got the feeling that she didn't want to get her own hands dirty."

"Like someone else I know," Dex pointed out. "Lucky she never discovered those elbow-length rubber gloves." He still didn't move to leave. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. You better hurry to apologize, because he's your best friend."

"He's like my brother. He *is* my brother."

"So, you'll have a niece or a nephew," I said, and Dex smiled, erasing all the anger and unhappiness on his face.

"I guess I will. But—"

"It's happening," I said. "Just like when I told you that yes, I would need time off for waxing, this is also happening whether you want it to or not."

"It's not that I don't want them to be happy. It's not that I don't think they would love the baby," he tried to explain.

"You just want everyone to do everything the way you would do it, because you think you know better than the rest of us."

“Due to my advanced age bringing wisdom.”

“That’s what you think, anyway,” I agreed.

He nodded. “That’s what I think.” He walked to the door but stopped. “I feel like...damn, brat, I don’t want to leave you.”

“Well, I’ll be right here when you get back,” I told him. I smiled too, because I would be. The Crookstown was ok. I wasn’t going to like being alone here now, alone for the first time in forever, but I would be ok as well.

Dex still paused, though.

“What?” I asked him. “You better go before Ally and Oriana revoke your uncle-ness.”

“I’ll go,” he agreed. “But I’ll always come back.”

I smiled as he left for real. I already knew that.

Chapter 13

My phone lit up with a number, and I recognized it even though I'd taken the name and picture out of my contact list. I looked at it and frowned and Maeve saw me do it.

“Who’s that?” she asked. “What area code is two-three-one?”

“Northern Michigan.” I held up my right hand, palm facing her, and pointed to my pinkie to show her the location in our mitten-shaped state.

“That’s where you’re from, right? Was that someone you knew?”

Yeah, I’d thought I had. “It was my dad. I wonder why he was calling.”

She frowned exactly like her own father. “The easy way to find out would be to answer and talk to him. It’s really a bad idea to avoid problems, Lulu.”

I stuck out my tongue at her, but she didn’t see because I was bent over her foot again. We were doing pedicures, and honestly? I was excellent at it. My skills in the nail arena had gone up to the stars.

Maeve leaned down and also admired my work. “You’re not bad at all,” she said. “My toes look great.”

And I was glad, because she’d needed a little pick-me-up. Keenan was now “that jackass Keenan” as far as we were concerned, because he had broken up with her. That jackass. And Maeve had been totally sad, like a total mess, which had turned Dex into an angry, scary frill-necked lizard that Ally and I had to watch constantly because we really thought he might do something to that jackass Keenan. Who deserved it, of course, but nobody wanted Dex to go to jail.

“Sorry yours kind of suck,” she went on, and yes, mine were not great. Maeve was honing her skills, but they weren’t up to par as a pedicurist, which was ok. High-heeled sandal season was definitely over.

“Oh, Lulu,” Dex called up the stairs. He sounded frighteningly polite. “Do you think you might be joining us at work anytime soon?”

“No, I can’t,” I called back. “It’s going to be a long time before I can put on my socks and shoes or my toes will get ruined.”

It turned out that he wasn’t that concerned about the state of my nail polish and wanted me to work immediately. And actually, that was ok, because I had things to do beyond the usual drink toting I did.

“Ready, Ally?” I asked him as I tied on an apron.

“That’s mine,” Dex said, and he tried to take it back. He had to stand close behind me to do it, his big body almost touching mine as he worked on the knot. I’d pulled it very, very tight. “What the hell did you do here?” he muttered, and then he must have looked down because he asked, “And what the hell do you have on your damn feet?”

“Flip flops.”

“For a server in a bar? Flip flops? And they’re mine, they’re double the size of your foot. You’re going to trip on them and fall on your ass.”

“I told you about my toes. Beauty is more important than physical—”

He gave up on the knot. “Go upstairs and get Maeve to take this off you, then put on your actual shoes. Pedicure be damned.”

Well, he was in a snit, but now, so was I. The apron thing hadn’t worked at all. I stomped into the stairwell and paused for a moment to untie the knot myself before I got my shoes and ruined the pedicure.

“I did a really bad job, anyway,” Maeve consoled me. “It was mostly on your skin, not the nail part.”

I nodded. That was true, and the night wasn’t over. There were plenty more things I’d thought of besides the apron.

As we'd been doing for the past few shifts, Ally shadowed me as I worked my tables. Tonight we upped the ante: he had to speak to the customers. Business was slow, again, so there wasn't any time pressure. Not that I felt a lot of that anyway, but Ally did. We went to José's table first, because he was nice and always left great tips. He'd been a waiter himself at a steakhouse downtown where actual athletes and celebrities and politicians had gone, and he could tell good stories, too.

"What can I get you?" Ally murmured, and that was a start. Before, he'd only stood next to the tables without speaking, a giant statue of a server. Then, when I made sure he had it down, we went back behind the bar.

"Are you two doing that again?" Dex asked as he drew the beer from the tap.

"We're training, yes," I said. Ally could be a good waiter if he got over the nerves that made him mumble, turn red, drop trays, and refuse to approach the tables.

"I've tried for years," Dex started to tell me in his quietest voice, but that wasn't a very quiet voice.

"I know," I whispered back. "But I think he can do it now. He has motivation."

The baby was the motivation, of course. Ally would do anything for that baby, and if he had to deal with customers to help out his new family, then he would. Dex pressed his mouth closed when I said that, because he was trying his hardest not to inject himself into the Oriana/Ally situation since it had gone so wrong for him before. He had apologized, real apologies and not like the ones he given me where he'd said he was sorry but also right. He might have been right sometimes, but those were bad ways to say sorry.

Anyway, he and Ally had made up and Oriana had forgiven him, too, but I knew that Dex still felt as if he was on thin ice. Which was true. Oriana was wary around him and when they'd started planning their wedding, they hadn't gone to Dex to talk about it.

No they hadn't asked Dex for help: they'd come to me! Now I was embarking on a brief career as a wedding planner, because since so many of my friends had gotten married and I'd attended, I was the one with the most experience in this type of event. Even if I hadn't ever been a bridesmaid... because when I'd thought about it, I realized that none of them had ever wanted me in their wedding parties. I'd been thinking about that quite a bit, actually.

I wasn't going to be in this wedding, either, because Oriana didn't want any bridesmaids at all. This wasn't going to be a very fancy affair. I didn't have to find horses for them to ride in on (like the maid of honor had done for Skyler's wedding), and I didn't have to organize the gold coin toss to shower the bride and groom (Tera's best friend did that), or figure out how the wedding would be in the Caribbean but the flowers would have to be imported from Hawaii where they were more luscious (three of Devon's bridesmaids were working as a team to accomplish it).

My job now was mostly just making sure we had an officiant and decorating the Crookstown. I'd already coerced Howard (a regular who was a retired judge) to preside, and I'd gotten Glenn (whose family owned a wholesale food business) to provide the refreshments at a much-reduced cost. I just had to get in a bunch of haircuts to pay for that, and then also figure out the cake—

“Lulu!” Dex barked, and Ally and I went off to practice waitressing more. Dex had made a few comments about the trainer needing some training herself, but I was really doing my best hustle to show Ally a good example. I had plans beyond the wedding planner gig, so he needed to learn to be a successful server.

My phone rang again with that two-three-one area code number, my dad's, but I still didn't answer. “We're not supposed to take personal calls when we're working,” I explained to Ally, who nodded seriously and then Dex chimed in that everyone already knew that, and why was the phone in my hand in the first place, and were we seriously taking

another break? No, because we did go back to work then, and I thought that Ally improved steadily for the whole night.

That gave me more time to work on my other project besides the wedding planning. “Oh, this is so high! I can’t reach it!” I said as I went on my tiptoes, stretched my arms, and arched my back.

“Why in the hell are you trying to get the top shelf tequila? No one’s ordering that,” Dex said, but he grabbed it for me without even looking at my pose.

Ok, fine. Later, I tried another one.

“Oh, I better lean across this table to pick up this thing I see,” I announced. But when I stood straight again, the only one watching was Rodney, and I already knew he was a lech and would drool over my ass even when I wasn’t displaying it so prominently. Damn.

“Why do you keep staring at your phone?” Ally asked me at the end of the night, as I sat in the bar stool sipping my water and also checking on my ruined toes.

“My dad has called five times. After not talking to me for almost three months, he called me five times in one night alone.”

Ally got worried. “When Dex and I worked at Bar Borrachera, I got six calls one night and it was about my mom.”

I could tell from his face that they hadn’t given him good news, and it did make me nervous. “Will you sit here with me while I call him back?” I asked, and Ally took another bar stool.

“I’m here,” he said seriously, so I did it.

“Is your mother with you?” my dad answered immediately, and I jolted a little.

“What? No, I haven’t seen her since she left Detroit in July. What are you talking about?” I asked him. “Where is she?”

He didn't know, that was the problem. "She's not answering her goddamn phone." He paused. "I haven't heard from her in three days."

"What?" I exploded. "She's been missing for three days and you're just realizing that it's a problem?"

"She took off in a huff," he told me.

"Did something happen? What happened?" I looked down and realized that I had a talon-grip on Ally's arm, but he only patted my hand like it was ok.

"We had an argument."

"About Bettina? Is that what went on?" When he didn't answer, I shouted, "Tell me!"

"Bettina and I are going to be parents," he said, and then I didn't speak. I sat frozen, words clogging up my throat like the nasty sinks in the boys' room here at the Crookstown. "I was going to do it myself, but Bettina went ahead and told your mother before I could. It didn't go down well."

Maybe I hadn't understood correctly. "You and Bettina are having a baby?" I asked. No, that couldn't have been right.

It was right. And that motherfucker had the nerve to tell me how excited he was, how much he was looking forward to becoming a father.

"Again," I croaked out. "Becoming a father again."

"Right, yeah. But about your mother—"

"Fuck you," I told him. "Fuck you." Then I threw the phone across the room and put my head down on the bar.

"What's going on? Lulu? Why is she crying?" I heard Dex ask, sounding frantic and loud. I picked up my head.

"My mother's missing! My slutty father is having a baby with his slutty girlfriend and is excited about starting a family! And my mother's missing!" I said.

"Ok, ok," he said. "Did you call her?"

“She threw the phone,” Ally said apologetically, and got up to retrieve it.

“He said he was happy to become a father. I guess he forgot that he already is,” I told Dex, who said that my dad was an asshole and he better not show his face in Detroit.

“Would you beat him up for me?” I sniffed.

“I’d send his body—no, I’m not going to beat him up. Call your mom,” he ordered, and to my shock and happiness, she answered.

“Hello, Lulu.”

“Mom?” I hollered into the phone. “Where are you?”

“I’m at a hotel in Birmingham.”

I held my hand over the phone. “Where’s Birmingham?” I mouthed to Dex.

“Twenty minutes, half an hour from here,” he said back. “Is that where she is?”

My mom was talking more. “I left your father,” she told me.

“I know. He called and told me what happened.”

“Well, he couldn’t have told you everything!” But she did. She recounted every last detail of how my dad had cheated on her, starting almost when they first got married twenty-four years before. She told me about the long-term girlfriends, the one-night stands, the constant disease testing she’d insisted on.

“Wait, you knew?” I asked, confused. “You knew what he was doing, but you didn’t leave him? Or kill him? Like, you could have run him over with your car. Or if you didn’t want to dent the bumper, what about sprinkling poison in his smoothies? Or putting slippery spray in the bathtub so that he would fall, or jamming the hinges so he couldn’t get out of the sauna, or—”

Dex and Ally were staring at me in horror and my mom was telling me more about Bettina, how ugly she was, how

fat. How my mother was so much better in every way because of her looks, her clothes, her hair, her makeup.

“But he’s with *her* instead of me! He doesn’t care about anything important!” She paused. “Hello? Lulu?”

“I don’t—do you really think—” I stopped and tried again. “Why did you stay with him for all this time with him stepping out on you?”

“We had a wonderful life!” she said, and talked about her wardrobe, the nice house, the good car (when he finally deigned to buy her one). The fact that they might have taken a cruise next spring in the Mexican Riviera, his willingness to pay for the lipo she’d had the previous winter.

“But you hated each other!” I protested. “You two never liked each other at all.”

“He was awful, wasn’t he?” she agreed. “I’m so glad that you’re on my side about this, honey.”

Was I? “Did you know that I knew? I mean, did you get that I was trying to tell you about Bettina? Is that why you never listened to me?”

“I knew that your father would come crawling back if we left and went to Detroit, and he did,” she said. “With a diamond bracelet in his pocket, too! There was no sense in you rocking the boat.”

“So when you agreed to move with me to Detroit, that was just a ploy?” I asked, confused. “Was it a trick you were pulling on him?”

“And it worked,” she said triumphantly. “But I made the mistake last time of letting him know where we were. You’re not to tell him that you and I spoke tonight,” she warned. She started in on a new batch of terrible stories of things he’d done, but I couldn’t listen anymore.

“If you’re really all right, then I have to go and get back to work,” I said loudly over her words.

“Are you still at the nasty bar, Lulu? Is that where you’re calling from? You really haven’t moved on from there yet?”

“No.” I looked at Dex, at his icy blue eyes staring into mine with a whole lot of concern in them. “No, not yet. I have to go,” I said again, and even though I heard her start into a little speech about my dead-end life, I hung up.

“She’s ok,” Dex stated.

“Fine,” I agreed. “Great. She’s working on a plan for my dad.”

“A plan?” Ally asked.

“Yeah, a plan. A strategy. A way to trick him back into loving her or at least wanting her. Everything’s fine.” I stood. “We should get going, Ally.” We were back to driving ourselves home in the Eagle, but Dex hadn’t quite given up on the “NEVER ALONE” thing. Instead of chauffeuring us, he followed our car in his Jeep, watching until we arrived at the apartment building. He stood up to do that now but I told him no. No, we were going on our own.

“Are you ok, Lulu?” Ally asked me when we were on the road.

“Yeah,” I sighed. I was thinking about my parents, relationships, and the trickery that got them started and kept them going. “How did Oriana get you to fall in love with her and want to marry her?”

“How?” He seemed puzzled. “Just because she’s Oriana. She’s so...Oriana.” He laughed. “I don’t know how to put it in words. Because of her, I’m happy. Knowing that she’s there in the world makes me happy. Then there’s the baby,” he added, beaming. “It will be more of Oriana.” But he stopped grinning as he looked at me. “Lulu, don’t cry. Dex told me that you’re worried that we won’t be friends anymore, but we always will be. And you’ll have another friend when we have our son or daughter. You’ll be an aunt,” he said.

“I know we’ll be friends,” I said. My voice sounded hoarse, but not on purpose. I’d tried some of my old voices this week, testing them out for effect, but the only result I got was the offer of a cough drop. “I know we’ll be friends no matter where I end up.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’ve been thinking about where I’m going to move,” I explained. “You need to be thinking about that, too.”

“I know.” I heard the worry in his voice. “Dex keeps talking to me about it.”

“Dex keeps harping on you,” I translated, and Ally nodded.

“He has a strong opinion that Oriana and I should be in our own apartment. Not the one I have now, I mean.”

Dex had strong opinions about everything. “I feel that way, too. It’s not a good building for a baby. What if you could be in your own house? One near a park, where you could go and play? Maybe near a school and you could walk there every day and wave goodbye and blow kisses,” I suggested.

“I would love to do that.”

“Don’t you have any money saved?” I asked.

“There were a lot of hospital bills from my mom,” he said. “Dex tried to help us, but it wasn’t enough. I couldn’t work as much because I was taking care of her, and we never had a lot of savings.” He looked down at his big hands and then moved one to touch the scars on his cheek. “I had medical bills, too. I should go back to the doctor before the baby’s born.”

“You know, I don’t even see those anymore. Not at all.”

“Do you think the baby will be scared?”

“Of you?” I asked, astonished. “No! Oh my Lord, no! She won’t see them either. Or he,” I added.

“Thanks, Lulu.” But then he sighed. “I wish I could give them a house. My mom always wanted us to move out of our apartment, to live somewhere that had a place for her to grow roses like she read about in her British books. We would drive this car around the city and look at the old houses. Some of them look like castles.”

“I know. Can you imagine if we lived there? I would have one of those pointy hats.”

“A dunce cap?” he asked.

“No!” I protested. “I mean a pointy one with a veil coming out of the top, a hennin.” I’d done a lot of fashion research. “Like what a princess would have. I’d wear a gown but it would also be low-cut because you can’t cover everything. I’d channel Agnès Sorel.” But then I thought of my mom with her tricks to get my dad back. I thought of what I’d tried today, what I’d been trying out for the last week or so. It hadn’t worked. I hadn’t wanted Maeve to behave like that—I’d told her that Keenan should like her, without any tricks.

“No, never mind about that outfit,” I told Ally. “I could wear whatever. That crap doesn’t work anyway, not in the long-term.” A prime example? My parents. All they did was play games, fooling each other to get what they wanted, and all it had done was to make them unhappy. Maybe they would even get back together again now, but maybe not.

“What crap are you talking about?” he asked, but I got him talking about a mythical castle house in Detroit again to distract him.

I had to do something, I thought that night as I lay on the couch in his apartment. This situation couldn’t go on. Ally and Oriana and the baby needed somewhere new to live, which meant that I, also, would need somewhere new to live. Dex had to get his finances back under control so that he wasn’t so worried every single day of his life about providing for Maeve and Ally, and now the baby—while also agonizing over the looming threat of losing the Crookstown, his lifelong dream. Ugh! It was a lot, but someone had to take it on, and of course, I was the person to do it.

And it was easier to try to solve all those problems than take on another one which had occurred lately...no, it had probably been brewing since the first day I came to that bar, when I’d pounded on the old, brown door of the Crookstown and then Dex had started growling that I wasn’t hired.

Damn it. I turned over on the couch and tried to adjust the lump that dug into my hip. Another fight started in the hallway, this one about missing ice cream, and I put the pillow over my head to drown it out.

“What was that about?” Dex asked me the next day.

“What was what about? Have you seen this?” I pointed to my toenails, which I was scrubbing with polish remover to repair the ravages of the tennis shoes that he’d forced me to wear in order to “do my job.” “My personal grooming is frightening,” I said. “People would see my toes and cry.”

“The fact that you’re sitting in my bar and feel it’s a good place to give yourself a pedicure, that’s about to make me cry.” He pointed at Harold, the retired judge at table four. “What were you two talking about? Planning Ally’s ceremony again? If Harold doesn’t want to sing, you can’t make him.”

“No, I already gave up on that idea. We had other things to discuss because Harold is very savvy,” I said. “Not just with law stuff, either. Did you know that he was one of the first investors in the internet? Like, when it was invented!”

Dex frowned in Harold’s direction. “Is that a real thing?”

“The internet? Yes, it is. Most people use it on a daily basis,” I explained. “You can buy things, look up answers to questions, watch a lot of porn. I’m not in any of that, of course.”

“No, brat, you’re not, and you won’t be.” But he stuck to the original subject. “Why are you and Harold talking so much?”

Maybe it was all those years working in a bar and dealing with customers. Dex really did have the ability to sniff out a lie. “I had some questions for him about finances.”

“Yours? Is he telling you to stop putting all your illegally gained money in my cash register?”

“It’s called ‘under-the-table,’ not illegal,” I informed him. “We didn’t discuss that topic. I felt that Lulu’s Barbery was something he shouldn’t know too much about and anyway,

wherever he goes for his cuts, they're doing a great job with his cowlicks. But we did get into that, too."

"Harold's haircuts?"

"No, me working at a salon. I was thinking about becoming a stylist, having my own chair." I waited to hear what he would say to that.

"I think it's a great idea," Dex told me.

"You do?"

"Sure. You're obviously good at it. The Crookstown regulars have never looked better and neither has Ally or Maeve. You've got the hustle."

I stared. "You think I have hustle?"

"Sure," he said again. "You're moving through clients pretty quick, according to all the money you keep leaving in the drawer."

"I like it," I said. "I like the work, I like talking to people, and I like the money." It felt good to see the pile of cash at the end of the session of clipping and trimming.

Dex smiled. "See? The job thing's not all bad. And Harold has advice about beauty school or something?"

"He has lots of good advice. Like, one thing he said is that there might be an answer to your cash flow issues. One that's not me hiding money from the government."

"Really?" He looked intrigued. "What's that?"

"A partner," I said, and before he could argue, I jumped in for more. "A silent partner, he meant. Someone who is interested in keeping the bar open and making an investment in its future."

"I don't want a partner. This is my place, only mine. It's been my dream for the past twenty years."

"I know that," I said. "That's why you can't lose it."

"I won't," he said stubbornly.

I stamped my foot. “How hard is it going to be for you to make the payment to the bank next month, even with my tax-free money in the drawer? If you can’t, they’ll start procedures to take back the building. Not just the Crookstown, but also the place where you and Maeve live.”

Those words made him stop and think. “Who in the hell would want to be a silent partner?”

“Harold, for one, because from what he’s told me, he has a very empty life. And he has all that internet money. All that internet money, and he leaves the shittiest tips of anyone.” I shrugged. “Anyway, he said that he’s interested in maintaining the institution of the Crookstown. He doesn’t want it to close.”

“Did you tell him—”

“Not that much,” I said. “I only told him that you were in dire straits and were going to lose your shirt very soon. I said that the Crookstown was teetering on the edge of the cliff of financial disaster because you weren’t taking in enough to pay for everything, including the bank loan, your employees, insurance, utilities, and supplies. I gave him a description of how your ex-wife is a bloodsucking leach and you support her, but only in general terms. I think I said ‘bloodsucking’ but not ‘leach.’ He got the picture.”

“Thank you, Lulu.” But he shook his head. “I don’t want to give up my bar. I can’t just sign away the ownership of it for nothing.”

“You wouldn’t be signing it away for nothing. You would get an infusion of money, that’s how he described it, which just means a wheelbarrow full of cash. Think of it: bills paid, decent beer, enough left over for you to improve your wardrobe, money to spare to help out Ally and the baby, even some to take Maeve on a trip. You know how she wants to see Santa Fe. And I wouldn’t mind that, either,” I threw in. “It sounds foreign, but you don’t need a passport because New Mexico was admitted to the Union in 1912, although Santa Fe was founded in 1610. That makes it the oldest capital in the United States.”

Dex heard none of that interesting historical information. “It would be great to pay for that shit, sure, but I’d lose control of my bar. What if he decided to sell his half? Or give it away?”

“Well, we discussed that. Harold said he could write up papers so that neither of you could sell without the other’s approval, and we also discussed what would happen at the end of the partnership. You know, when he croaks. He said it in a nicer way, but that was what he meant.”

“Great.”

I continued. “We decided that this was the best course of action, because everything else I thought of, like taking up a collection, or selling more stuff, or whatever other illegal businesses I could run—those are all short-term solutions. We need to plan for the long-term so that the Crookstown is around forever.”

“I guess we should,” he said, the words slow and deep, and I nodded. He sat down at a table. “I’m so tired,” he told me. “I look at what I’m doing right now, how I’m running around the city unclogging drains and hanging shelves in someone’s garage...and I don’t know what I’m doing. I was actually thinking about selling this place.”

“You can’t!” What about Ally? And this was Dex’s dream! “At least talk to Harold about the partnership idea. It will probably sound better when he explains it.” I really had been working on my diplomacy, which was not saying things exactly as they sprang to my mind, but the words still sometimes came out in ways that pissed people off.

Dex wasn’t pissed, though. He only looked very thoughtful, not mad. “I will talk to him. I’m not saying that I’m doing it, but I’m interested in what he has to say.” He got up but then stopped and looked down at me. “Thank you, Lulu.”

I could tell that he meant it this time. “I didn’t do anything,” I answered, which was not like me at all. One thing I was especially good at was tooting my own horn.

“Thank you for taking an interest. I appreciate it.” He walked off toward the storage room, leaving me to consider the rest of my plans. Creating a partnership to save the Crookstown was only part of what I was up to, of course. I had several more things to accomplish before I could consider our problems solved, but I was making a good start. As for the larger problem...

Yes, it was hard to believe, but there was a much larger problem than a lack of money. That problem had just walked down the stairs toward the storage room, which I knew because he always called, “It’s only me, brat,” when he got there so I wouldn’t be scared of the noises he made.

I wasn’t quite sure when he had become endearing instead of annoying. It hadn’t been one exact moment, not really. It was more like I started to see all the love and worry that went into everything he did, even when he bitched at me. I saw how that bitching wasn’t just to make me miserable, but was to try to make something better for his daughter and everyone else—me included. I saw how he’d been right about some things, some things about me and how I’d been caring about all the wrong stuff for my whole life.

I saw that the rest of my life had better be with him, because it was like how Maeve had explained to me so many weeks before. I’d been going along every day, getting my nails done and drinking lemon drops and whatever, and he was in the world but I didn’t know him yet. I couldn’t even fathom how that could be true, that I’d thought it was an acceptable life without him in it.

Oh, my Lord. How was I going to solve the problem of Dex?

Chapter 14

“I’m not sure how I feel about it.” I looked around, trying to imagine how it would look if there weren’t piles of trash on the floor. Big piles.

“I think someone was using this place to party a little,” my real estate agent said, and that was probably not true. It wasn’t “someone,” because I doubted that one person could have made a mess like this as hard as he or she tried, and the party hadn’t been “little.” It looked more like a circus had made its home here for a while. The animal part of a circus, too.

“I hadn’t shown this listing before today.” The agent wrinkled his nose but then smiled at me. “Cleaned up,” he went on, “this place could be great. It’s been on the market for longer than I would have expected. Buyers may have been turned off by the...”

Smell. That was what he didn’t say, but he didn’t have to. You could have cut it with a knife, and I bet you could have found a knife to use somewhere in the garbage piles.

“Cleaned up,” he repeated, “I think you’d have a gem. According to the listing, all the systems are in good repair. I believe that’s true, to the best of my knowledge,” he qualified. “The roof is fairly new, as per the sellers’ report, and the windows were recently replaced. I haven’t independently verified that information. It says they moved out about six months ago and the home sat empty.”

No, not empty. Someone had definitely been in here.

“I’ll let the listing agent know about the...” He wrinkled his nose again and started to open the windows. “I’ll tell her about the current issues, in case she’s not aware. But this is a great street, isn’t it? Did you see the park down the block and the beautiful trees lining the sidewalk? It’s a better location than the other places we’ve seen, isn’t it?”

I nodded. The street was nice, I supposed, but I was having a very hard time looking past the problems inside this house. Those recently replaced (to the best of his knowledge)

windows were smeared with...something. With them wide open to let in the air, it did feel slightly better inside here, though. The end of September had brought much cooler temperatures to the city and today, it was also bringing a lot of rain on those beautiful trees outside and the fairly new (probably but not independently confirmed) roof over our heads.

“I think you and your husband would be happy here,” the agent said, glancing up with more than a little fear in his face as he looked at that “husband.” This was the first time I’d brought him along house-hunting so they hadn’t met before today.

Ally got a frown on his own face that made the agent cower. “I’m not her husband,” he stated. “I would never marry Lulu.”

“I would never marry you either. I’d be pretty mad that you were in love with someone else,” I told him, and we smiled at each other. I didn’t usually see the scars on his cheeks anymore but this real estate agent did, and the fact that Ally was eight or so feet tall had definitely added to the fear factor. He had seemed fairly terrified from the moment Ally had gotten out of the Eagle.

We ditched him and did our own tour of the rest of the house. Ally helpfully lifted me over some piles of garbage into a bedroom and pointed out something that he didn’t identify but said I should avoid, and I was pretty sure it was a poop.

He also opened windows, but then he said the same thing that the agent had. “This is nice, Lulu,” he told me. “It’s very nice.”

I was realizing that it was, even with that poop, and the trash, and the smell. “I don’t think I’d be wearing a hennin and gown here,” I noted. “It’s not a castle.”

“I wouldn’t really want a castle,” Ally confided.

“No, I guess I would get pretty tired of cleaning it. I’d probably have to actually clean, not like at the Crookstown.”

“Do you really want to buy a house?” His forehead furrowed. “How can you?”

“I got a loan,” I explained. “I’m going to pay it back regularly, every month. Harold helped me write up an official agreement.” He and I had met at the library at his house, and I’d given him a haircut to compensate him for all the legal help. I owed him a few more, too, because he’d done a lot for me and for Dex as well.

Ally didn’t bother to ask if the loan was from a bank. He had been sitting next to me when I’d tried online places and gotten an automated hard no in response. Then I’d gone to talk to an actual human, because I thought I might have an advantage person-to-person with my breasts and overall cuteness. The bank officer had practically fallen off her chair with laughter when she saw my application, so I’d thought I was out of the game until another path had opened up.

“My dad offered it,” I explained. He’d called again, and again, and again—not to check on my mom, but just to talk, and eventually I’d started responding. Because I loved him, ok? I loved him and I missed him and I was tired of trying to punish him, I was tired of being in the middle of the argument, and I wanted that to be over. I wanted to have parents.

“Oh, that was nice of him!” Ally smiled. “I’m so glad you made up.”

“I guess we did. Kind of. We’re talking, anyway, and I’m trying to separate out what he and my mom and Bettina and everyone else are doing from his relationship with me. But this isn’t how I used to take money from him, just holding out my hand and pouting. This is legal and binding and I’m paying him back. He got worried about where I was living and he didn’t, um, he thought it wasn’t ideal, how I’m on the couch and you having a baby and everything.” It had felt really nice that he was worried, too, that he cared about what I was doing.

Ally nodded. It wasn’t ideal, and no one could argue with it.

“So I said that I wanted to buy a house and my dad offered the money for it. He’s trying to buy me off,” I explained, “but this isn’t that. I mean, it isn’t the same now as before, when he got me the ice car.”

“What? A car made of ice?”

I gave a short synopsis of my sweet sixteen party and then returned to my home purchase. “I said that I wouldn’t just take money from him. This would be a loan, not a gift, and I explained why I was a good investment risk for him. We talked about how much interest I would accrue and my long-term goals. He was impressed,” I added, because that had also felt so good. We’d discussed it like we were both adults, which we were, of course, and he’d listened to me and I had heard him in return. I liked having this as a tie between us, too. Now he definitely wouldn’t forget that he had me as a child, not when I owed him so much money.

So, so much money. Paying him back was going to take a long time, even though the houses I was looking at were not expensive (not in terms of how much houses could cost, which I’d been researching). A place where I’d need to wear a hennin was way, way out of my league, but it was also possible that a pointed hat with a veil wouldn’t have been the most comfortable.

Ally nodded thoughtfully. He’d seen me using my phone to talk, which I didn’t used to do a lot of. My dad and I had ventured beyond financial matters in our conversations. He’d told me about Bettina, how happy he was with her and how excited he was about the baby.

“It’s hard to believe that I’ll be a father,” he’d told me.

“Again. You already have me, right?” I’d reminded him, and he’d said of course, he’d only meant that the gap was so big, and at his age, et cetera.

“Are you going to apologize?” I asked him then.

“To your mother? I already have. I am sorry, but we’re not good together. We should have divorced years ago instead of making each other unhappy for all this time.”

They'd made each other miserable, yes, but they'd made other people feel that way, too. "I meant you could apologize to me," I'd explained, and there was a big silence before he told me that what happened between my mom and him was their business and didn't affect me. It had, but neither of them seemed to understand that.

"I'm sorry if I made you upset," he finally told me gruffly. "I guess I did, and that wasn't my intention."

It also wasn't a very good apology, but the conversation had improved when we were talking business, so that was where I kept us. My dad had the restaurant, but he'd also invested in a marina, vacation rentals, and all kinds of other ventures, and he hadn't succeeded without a lot of smarts. We'd had several productive discussions about running the Crookstown, for example, and I'd taken notes like I was back in school. But mostly, we'd focused on my personal finances, which before, I had generally ignored instead of "managing" or "paying attention to."

But I was going to have to do that now. I was going to buy a house, for one thing, and for another, I'd already enrolled in cosmetology school. I had a new app on my phone, a money one so I could really keep track. Even, for example, when I'd recently bought a really, really cute skirt for Maeve at the store she liked. I'd faithfully recorded the purchase and then frowned at the screen as the balance dropped. I could have done the math in my head but seeing the numbers right there in pink and teal (you could customize the app's colors) made me accountable for them. It was not as fun at all as just spending and not paying attention.

"How's your mother?" my dad had asked me once, and I'd said that she was ok, I supposed, and then I'd changed the subject. I'd been talking to her a little, too, and although she was only half an hour away now, I hadn't yet visited. Every time we had spoken, she'd also asked me about him, but I'd told her that I didn't want to get in the middle of them. Again.

The real estate agent took this moment to stick his head into the bedroom and smile at us. "The interior was recently painted, as per the seller's disclosure." He studied the graffiti

that decorated one wall. “You might want to redo it. But this is a good size,” he remarked as he started toward the closet. I’d already checked that; it was small, but ok. He sniffed. “What is that sme—”

“Watch where you step!” I yelled, and we all decided that it was time to go.

“What have you two been up to today?” Dex asked when we came into the bar, and he didn’t sound suspicious at all. Ally’s eyes slid to me anyway and I saw guilt in them. There was nothing to feel guilty about, and he and I had already talked about that fact so he wouldn’t turn red and refuse to look at Dex. He did both of those things now and then took off for the back.

Dex turned on me. “What’s happening?” he demanded.

“Nothing you need to be concerned about,” I answered. He didn’t need to know quite yet, not until I was ready to tell him. “Did you meet with Harold today?”

They were supposed to be working on the partnership, but every previous meeting had been cancelled—by Dex. Once, there was a liquor delivery and he needed to be at the bar for it, and no, neither Ally or I could stand in for him. Then he got a great carpentry job, redoing someone’s entire laundry room, which was too much money to pass up. Then Maeve had gotten in trouble at school...but that one I was upset about, too. She’d stood up for herself a little too much, and it had almost turned physical.

“I could have taken her,” she told me confidently, and I told her back that it really, really hurt to have your hair pulled out (yes, I’d had that happen to me, back in high school. It was an unfortunate incident regarding a shared boyfriend. The other girl hadn’t really known that we were sharing until he became entirely mine, and when I thought about it now, I considered that I might have deserved to lose that hunk of golden-brown strands from my head).

“Your dad almost passed out when he got the call from the office,” I’d said, and that made more of an impression on Maeve than anything that he’d yelled or I’d said about

potential follicle damage and bald spots. I was pretty sure she wouldn't get into an almost-fight again.

Dex now changed the subject from the bar partnership, changed it by telling me he wasn't going to talk about it anymore and that I needed to get my butt into gear because Ally and I were late, and what had we been doing? I changed it too, by discussing the wedding (which was in one week, and there was a lot to accomplish mani/pedi-wise and Oriana was not being overly cooperative about our makeup scheme, and also I didn't have a cake yet. That was a big one).

"After that, the next big event will be my birthday," I announced.

"Your birthday is a big event?"

"It is for me. I'll be twenty-four."

Dex huffed. "You said that like you were giving someone a diagnosis of a fatal illness," he noted, and I shrugged. "You think you're so old? What about me? No, don't say it," he continued before I could. "What's the problem with twenty-four?"

I shrugged. That number had seemed to weigh on me lately. "Modeling is dead for me. Have you ever heard of such an old model? It was never going to go anywhere, anyway."

"You're doing other stuff. You're a semi-productive employee of the Crookstown," he told me. "Are you still worried about that friend who's getting married in the Bahamas? Stop comparing yourself and ignore her."

"It's the Caribbean, not the Bahamas," I informed him, and it was hard to ignore the event because she posted updates all the damn time. Yes, I was doing things now, making my own future—but there were still major issues. Some big holes to fill in. "I don't even have a boyfriend," I pointed out. I looked at him, waiting for some kind of response.

"I don't think you should do that dating app anymore," he told me. "Those guys weren't good for you."

“No, I’m not going to.” I didn’t have any urge to open that again. I thought of the house I’d seen today, with the place in the kitchen where you could have a table and eat breakfast with someone, someone not from the dating app. I thought that maybe I was getting there. “I’m making strides in the right direction,” I said out loud.

“What does that mean?”

“I signed up for the cosmetology school. It starts in January but it’s in the mornings, so I’ll still be able to work nights.”

“Good,” Dex said. “Did you give them a deposit?”

“Not yet,” I admitted. I was saving what I had for the down payment for the house.

“Good,” he repeated. “I’ll do it for you. I set aside all the cash you’ve been putting into the register and we’ll use that.”

“No, that money is for you!” I said furiously. “And you better not say that I can’t give it to you because we don’t know each other and you don’t even like me.”

He stopped. “I was pretty angry that day about you selling your car for me, but did I say that I don’t like you? That’s not true.”

“You didn’t like me at first,” I said. “You thought I was utterly stunning, of course, but you didn’t like me.”

“I did like you,” he told me. “Maybe not the first moment we met, when you were insulting my bar and my management skills. I thought that you were a huge pain in the ass, sure, but it didn’t take long for you to grow on me. And that didn’t have anything to do with you being so beautiful.”

I swallowed. “Do you really think I am?”

“Everyone thinks you are,” Dex said. “And I don’t give one single shit about that.” He looked at the hands on the antique clock. “We need to start working. Both of us, because Ally’s probably off talking to Oriana and they never want to hang up.” But he smiled, because he was much more at ease with their wedding and with the baby. He’d even gotten a

very, very ugly stuffed animal for them and a book that he used to read to Maeve about a blue truck, and things like that had gone a long way with Oriana getting more at ease with him, too.

We did go to work, and since both of us were avoiding specific topics, we kept our arguments to the usual stuff (breaks, makeup, et cetera). And the next day I texted the real estate agent. “I’m in,” I wrote, which sounded confident only because he couldn’t see that I was holding Ally’s hand while I typed with my other. “I want that last house with the poop in it. Could we ask the sellers to clean it first?” I sent it.

“Good for you, Lulu,” Ally told me, and I nodded, feeling like I didn’t want to open my mouth to speak in case I threw up. I breathed through my nose until the feeling passed.

“Do you think this is a good idea or do you think that I made a deal with a devil? Like, I’m taking my dad’s money and he’s the devil?” I explained.

“Is he a devil? Don’t you love your dad?” Ally asked me. “I thought that was why you were so sad about the divorce.”

“He’s really not a terrible person but he’s done some awful stuff, like having the affairs, like having a baby with another woman. And I am sad about all that because I do love him,” I admitted. “I was trying to punish him for how he was acting by leaving and making my mom leave him, too. If I’m talking to him and getting a loan from him, maybe it’s a sign that I’m ok with all that. But we’ve argued and argued about everything and he keeps telling me that his life with my mom is a separate issue. It isn’t,” I told Ally. “It’s all tied up together.”

“Doesn’t Dex tell you to stay out of their problems?”

“Yes. Constantly.”

Ally looked at me.

“Ok! Ok, you’re probably right.” Which meant that I probably shouldn’t have told my mom that I would go over to her new apartment tomorrow, when the Crookstown closed down for one damn day of the week. She would definitely

want me to get involved, maybe act as an emissary between them like I'd done as a kid: "Mommy doesn't want you to know that she's upstairs crying," or, "Daddy says he hopes we don't go bankrupt and lose the house because of all the money you spent today." Their favorite had always been to get me to beg, "If you love me, please do what [Mommy/Daddy] wants!"

I thought about all that while I drove north on I-75. It hadn't been fair to me and I wasn't going to do anything like that again, for sure not. When I finally found my mom's house, which was hard because my phone and its directions kept cutting out no matter how many times I hit it on the red dashboard of the Eagle, I even said it out loud.

"I'm not going to let you manipulate me." Which was kind of funny, actually, because that was what my ex had also said to me when we mutually broke up. When he dumped me, I meant.

"I'm not interested in the tears anymore, Lulu," he'd announced. "I'm sorry, but it's not going to work. I'm not going to let you manipulate me."

I didn't want to think about that anymore. I got out of the car as my mom opened the front door and the first of the fall leaves skittered across the path that led to it. She looked beautiful—she and I were practically twins, so, of course—and her house was beautiful, too. Very stately and a lot like a castle, with a stone turret on one side and windows with diamond-shaped panes.

"It's Tudor style," she explained after she hugged me. "From 1920. Isn't it adorable?"

"It's huge," I said, because the entryway alone was larger than the combined living room and kitchen of the house I'd just made an offer on.

"It's not that big," she scolded. "Smaller than my former home up north."

She meant our house, the one I'd grown up in, the one my dad still owned and (I suspected) had moved his former

mistress and mother of his child into.

“Come into the solarium,” she said, and we went to a room at the back of the house with a whole wall of windows that looked out onto a manicured back yard. “Let’s sit on the settee.” She gestured around, smiling. “Well? What do you think?”

“This is very nice,” I said. Nice, but strangely empty. Like, there was a little metal couch in this room, but that was the only thing here, and it looked pretty old and rusty. There hadn’t been any furniture in the entry, either, which had helped it to look so big, and I had seen only other empty rooms as we walked to this solarium.

My mom and I sat together on the uncomfortable bench, sat pretty close because even with our petiteness, it was a small settee. “This is a rental, right?” I asked her. “It came unfurnished?”

“Yes,” she confirmed, “but I’m looking for something more permanent. I would love to buy this house.”

“You can pay for this?” The skepticism was clear in my voice and she flared up in anger.

“Your father can! He certainly can, as soon as he stops throwing away his money on that woman.”

“Did you find a job down here?”

“Not yet,” she said, and bit her lip a little before she smiled again. “I have a lot of irons in the fire.”

“Mom, I hope one of those irons isn’t getting back together with Daddy.” Damn! I’d already stepped back into it.

She didn’t immediately have an answer, and then when she did, it was not a good one. “Why would you say that?”

“Because he’s with someone else now! It’s like when my ex went and met that woman. I kept trying and I wasted so much time because I wouldn’t admit that it was really over.” I paused. “I think it’s really over between you and Daddy.”

“You don’t know what goes on in our relationship.”

“Unfortunately, I know a lot. I know way more than I want to,” I said, and my mind flashed back to finding the two of them really, really together in the bed in our old apartment...ugh. “You guys have always kept me pretty well-informed of what was happening.”

“What’s he saying about me now?” she asked eagerly.

“Mom! You sound like you’re—” I stopped. She sounded like she was a teenager, like Maeve but worse. She sounded like me, like how I’d talked about my former boyfriends with the girls back home. “Why would you want him now, anyway? Habit?”

“It’s not just habit! He owes me,” she said, and I nodded. I thought he did, too.

“So take it out of him in the divorce! Have your lawyer gut him like a fish!” I said. “You probably have years of evidence of him cheating and he’ll give you whatever you want. An attorney could seriously fillet him over the infidelity, right? You’re all set, then!”

She got a funny, odd look on her face and again, she didn’t have an answer. She didn’t have to because I’d been interpreting their emotions for enough years to understand what I saw: guilt.

“Oh, my Lord,” I breathed. “You, too?”

“I was lonely,” she said primly. “And I think he did it first. What’s he saying, Lulu? Is he really interested in this new girl?”

The “new girl” was in her early forties. “Yeah, I think he is. I know you must have been so upset to learn about the baby from her.”

“I’ve known that for months,” she dismissed me. “She tried to warn me off him by waving that big belly at me, and I decided it was a good moment to disappear and redirect his attention. You should tell him that you don’t want a sibling and you—”

“Mom, you knew about the baby? And you still had him down here and you, uh, did what you were doing in the

apartment when I walked in on you?” I put my hand to my chest.

“Pearl clutching, Lulu? This is just the ebb and flow of a marriage. We’ll work it out, you’ll see.”

I didn’t really want to see or hear anything else. I checked my phone and pretended to read something on the screen. “Oh, I just got a message that I have to get back to the Crookstown.”

“That dump is open on Sundays?”

“It’s not a dump! It’s a great neighborhood bar,” I said angrily. “We have long hours because we have a family to support, and we have to work hard to do it.”

My mom stared at me. “What are you talking about, Lulu? The people at that bar aren’t your family!”

They damn well were. “I better go,” I said. “Just so you know, I’m really sorry about you and Daddy. I always did want you guys to get along. But I think it’s better for you to be apart, Mom, and you should divorce him and end it even if you can’t get all the money that you think you deserve. Move into a place that you could afford to have furnished and start something new for yourself. You were always so unhappy when you two were together. Do you really want more of that? More of the same?”

“Lulu, you don’t understand...” she started to tell me again, and I stood up. She was right. I didn’t understand them at all. Why would they have gotten married if they wanted other people? Why would they have stayed together and unhappy for so long? There was something between them besides the misery and hate, some kind of love there. But no, I didn’t understand it.

“I better go,” I repeated, and went out to where I’d parked the Eagle at the curb. I slid into the red seat, grateful that I could drive away from this empty house and her empty life. I put the key into the ignition and turned it.

And the car didn’t start. There was nothing, no sound at all. “Come on,” I told it. September was definitely cooler but

I felt hot and cranked down the window. My mom stood in her front door, watching.

“What’s wrong with the engine?” I heard her ask. “Where is your car?”

I waved and nodded as if I knew the answers to both of those questions. Then I reached for my phone again.

“Hey, brat,” Dex answered.

“Hi. Are you anywhere near Birmingham right now?”

“Well, I’m in the right state. What’s wrong?”

In a few minutes, and with a few complaints about people needing him during baseball because it was the finals or something, he was on the road to my mom’s house. “I have to wait here for the roadside assistance,” I called to her and waved her inside. She went, but stood at the window.

Dex arrived a lot faster than I had and I was thrilled to see his Jeep coming up the street. “Tell me you didn’t take the Eagle on the freeway,” he said first.

“It wouldn’t go over fifty-five no matter where I drove,” I answered, and he shook his head and opened the hood. I had faith that he could get it going again.

“Nope,” he proclaimed later, much later. He’d tried everything he knew, too, with me watching from the curb and my mom from her front porch. She’d offered refreshments several times and had told him that she was sure someone so big and strong could fix it.

“Nope?”

“I think it’s really dead this time,” he told me, and wiped grease from his hands onto his paint-flecked jeans to make them even worse. “There may be no way to resuscitate it again.”

“No, that can’t be true!” I told him. “That can’t be right!” I couldn’t have ruined Ally’s car.

“I told you two before, many times, that this car was not going to work for you,” he said. “It was on its last legs ten

years ago.”

“But, no,” I protested. “He needs it. He’s going to have a baby and he needs reliable transportation!”

“Then he won’t be driving the Eagle. Hold on there, Lulu, are you—”

“Is it really broken?” my mom asked. Her voice was higher than usual and she’d put a lot more air into it, a lot of breath. She walked across the lawn, her lips in a pout. That was a really nice shade of gloss on them, too.

“It is,” Dex agreed. “It’s really broken. I’m going to call someone to come out and get it.” He walked off.

My mom turned to me, smiling. “Good job, honey. I was wondering why you’d driven this old hooptie over here.”

“I didn’t do this on purpose,” I told her, and wiped under my eyes very carefully. I couldn’t have ruined Ally’s car.

“My friend is going to come tow it, but he can’t be here until tomorrow,” Dex told us. He shoved the phone into the pocket of those awful jeans as he walked across the green lawn. “Do you mind if I push the car into your driveway and out of the street, ma’am?”

I could tell from the way she’d been eying him that she wasn’t interested in the idea of being a “ma’am” to him. “As long as it doesn’t stay here too long,” she told him shortly, and sniffed like the Eagle smelled bad. It did, but you couldn’t catch that from as far away as she stood. Anyway, I’d sprayed plenty of perfume in there, too. “I’ll talk to you soon, Lulu.”

“Bye, Mom. Will you—” She’d already walked to the porch and closed the front door before I could finish asking her to think about what I’d said, to give up on trying to win back my dad.

I sat and steered as Dex pushed the car into the driveway, but he had to yell at me to pay attention a few times. I was so upset that I was sniffing a lot, which was not good for my makeup at all. I locked the Eagle when he reminded me to, although there wasn’t much chance of someone stealing it in

this neighborhood where the next driveway over was full of Mercedes and BMWs, symbols I easily recognized.

“Is your nose all red because you’re upset about something?” Dex asked me when we got into his Jeep.

“Is it?” I put my hand over my face. “I’m very, very upset that I ruined Ally’s car,” I informed him, my voice slightly muffled.

“You didn’t. It was already ruined because his mother drove in low gear a hundred percent of the time, and because no one in its lifespan has ever kept up on maintenance or repairs. I told you both that it was a matter of time until it blew up. That’s one reason that I didn’t touch the eight thousand dollars you got for selling your former car. Now you can buy a new one.”

I turned in the seat and my mouth dropped. “Dex! I gave you that money to use!”

“I know you did. But after I got over being ashamed of myself—”

“Why? For what reason?”

“Because you thought I was so desperate that you were selling your belongings to save my weak ass,” he said. “But then I realized that there was a bigger takeaway. I realized that it was about the sweetest thing anyone had ever done for me, ever. I put the check in the safe with the cash you’ve been sneaking into the register from your illegal haircut business and it’s all ready for you to get a car, pay for your beauty school, pay for your new apartment.”

“But how have you been keeping up with your bills?”

“I’ve been hustling a little more than usual,” he said. “Taking some early construction shifts, shit like that.”

After he worked at the bar until the morning, he got up early again to go work more. “I don’t want you to do that anymore,” I said, and my voice caught. My nose was going to be totally red, just awful! I put my hand over it again.

He looked over at me and took it away from my face to hold in his own. “Are you still worried about me?”

I nodded.

“You don’t have to be. You’ve been working that cute tail off to help out and I see it. But I’m ok, and so is Maeve, and Alistair will be, too. Just a few more months, and I’ll be able to relax.”

Nope. No, that was not acceptable for me, but I had other ideas up my sleeve—no, not up there today, because I was wearing a really cute tank with my jeans. But I was going to help Dex, and he would see...

Me. I wanted him to see me, and I was going to make him. Not by tricking him or fooling him, but by proving myself, by hustling and succeeding. Then he would notice what was right in front of his eyes: a woman who loved him.

Chapter 15

“Are you ready?”

Oriana looked up at me. Her eyes were huge, like a deer’s. “I’m ready.”

Maeve handed me the mirror and I held it up to show Oriana her reflection. There was a short silence.

“Is that me?” she asked, bewildered. “Is that really me?” She held up one shaking hand and let it hover above her head. “Wow, Lulu. I love it. My makeup and my hair...I love it.”

I breathed out in relief. I knew I had serious skills, of course, but I’d never helped anyone get ready for her wedding before.

“Can you please pass the garbage can again?” she asked politely, and Maeve grabbed it to hold under her mouth while she wretched. Pregnancy was hitting her hard but she was determined that she was going to have a great day, in spite of the nausea and vomiting. I handed her a napkin and then a glass of water with small ice cubes, two slices of lemon, and a straw. It was her day, after all.

“Do I still look ok even after the puking?” she asked. Her voice shook now, too.

“You look so beautiful,” Maeve said. “It’s like you’re a princess.”

“But it doesn’t even matter,” I added. “Ally loves you so much, you could go downstairs with puke all over your face and he’d be the happiest man in the world to marry you.”

She smiled. “I think you’re right. I feel the same way about him.”

“But it’s better without the puke,” I said, and dabbed at her mouth.

The wedding was as beautiful as Oriana. We had cleaned the Crookstown until there was not a dust bunny within twenty miles of the place. The bride and groom looked at each other

during Harold's ceremony with so much joy that everyone watching was either smiling along with them or crying tears of happiness.

I was in that last camp. "Here," Maeve whispered, and shoved something into my hand. "My dad gave them to me for you." I used the bar napkins to wipe my eyes, not just dab, because I was actually bawling. Dex stood up at the front next to Ally, his hands clasped in front of him, his face set in not quite a frown, which was his happy expression. Everyone in the place went wild when Ally and Oriana kissed, with all the guests standing and cheering.

I climbed up on a chair so I could watch too and I saw them hugging each other, then hugging Oriana's mom, her sister, Dex, Harold, and everyone else nearby. I wanted to get up there and hug them also, but there were so many people surging around me that I was momentarily stuck where I was. I watched Dex move through the crowd, now fully grinning in happiness. He reached us and hugged Maeve, and then looked at me. I held out my arms.

"You can't get down?" he asked, and lifted me to the floor. I'd actually been going for a hug as well, but ok. I fought my way over to Ally and got one from him and from Oriana, to whom I also did a quick makeup/hair check. She looked beautiful and not nauseated at all.

The party started immediately after that. One of Dex's friends had set up a small DJ booth behind the bar and got music cranking, louder than this place had probably ever had it and definitely songs of a vintage not heard in the Crookstown before. Maeve looked at me and nodded and we went nuts. She seemed to have the same half-life that I did while dancing and she even outlasted me. Or actually, she outlasted my shoes. Due to her already stunning height, she was in flats, but I had to give my arches a bit of a break.

I sidled over to the bar and gratefully slid onto a stool. Dex was there in his usual spot, filling a glass for someone. "You can't even take off for the wedding?" I asked him.

He set me up with a water, just the way I liked it, and I chugged. We had plenty of lemons for this special occasion. “I was subbing in for a minute,” he said. “I’m done now.” He turned to his DJ friend, who moved one headphone away so that Dex could speak into his ear.

“He’s going to play something different.” Dex walked around to my stool. “Want to dance?”

Screw my sore feet. I remembered his moves from when we’d gone to the club. “Yes!” I said, and as I did, the music slowed down, slowed a lot. It sounded very old-fashioned and some of the bar regulars clapped.

“This was one of my grandmother’s favorite songs,” Dex said. He led me to a small opening on the dance floor we’d created in the middle of the bar. I stood there awkwardly. We were going to dance to a slow song? But then he held out his arms and I kind of melted against him, my palm in his, my other hand resting on the back of his neck, our bodies pressed close. Oh. I breathed in and out. Oh.

“Do you like this?”

“Yes, I love it,” I breathed.

“I didn’t know if you’d appreciate it, since it’s not the teenage crap you usually listen to.”

He meant the song. “What language is it?” I asked. It was beautiful. “What is she singing?”

“It’s French,” he answered. So close, his deep voice throbbed through me, too. “‘*La Vie en rose*.’ It’s kind of the same message as that Aretha Franklin song you like so much, about love. About being in love and how good it feels.”

I understood that. It felt so good at this moment that I was almost quivering with it. “Mmm,” I murmured, and closed my eyes. His arm around my back anchored me to him and I snuggled even closer.

“I told Harold no.”

I picked up my head. “What?”

“I let him know that I’m not interested in a partnership, that I appreciated the effort he’d put in for me, but I’m not giving up any ownership of the Crookstown. I can’t do it. I’ve worked for twenty years to be my own boss, to have my own place. I can’t.”

“But...” But it was the perfect solution. But he couldn’t go on like he was.

“I didn’t want him to say anything to you before I got a chance to tell you myself. I appreciate your effort too, Lulu. I appreciate the time you’ve put into helping me.”

“But...” But was he just going to keep working so hard, doing double or triple what a normal person would? But what about all my plans?

“I know you really wanted me to do it, and I did give it a lot of thought,” he told me. Then he asked, “Do you know why this place is called the Crookstown?”

“No.”

“It’s a town in Ireland, where the previous owner grew up. He started a new life here in Detroit but he always missed his home, he always dreamed about going back. The Crookstown became his new dream, and that’s what it is for me. I can’t let someone else have half. I’ve got to keep fighting for it.” His arm tightened. “I sound pretty stubborn. Probably this is stupid and I should listen to you and Harold.”

“No. No, you shouldn’t.” But I knew what I had to do. “Dex?”

He looked down at me. “Yes, baby?”

“I quit.”

He jerked us to a stop. At that moment, the beautiful, slow song ended and a new, faster beat kicked up. “What did you just say?” he demanded.

“I quit. I quit working here at the Crookstown.”

Dex grabbed my arm and propelled me out of the bar to the sidewalk. The lights and laughter from inside spilled out

of the door with us. “I thought you just told me that you quit, but I couldn’t have heard that right,” he announced.

“You did,” I said. “I do quit. You don’t have enough money coming in to keep paying both me and Ally. I’ve been working hard with him to teach him my job, and he can do it now.” Kind of. “So I’ll go work somewhere else. I think I could do pretty well at a diner again, now that I have a little more hustle.”

“No,” he said, and shook his head. “No, I don’t accept this. No, you can’t quit.”

“You can’t stop me.”

“The hell I can’t! No!”

“Dex, you can’t afford us. With a new wife and the baby coming, Ally needs to be here with you. He needs your support, and you know that. And I have a lot of other plans. Like, one day, I’m going to open my own salon. I’ve been thinking about names, because Lulu’s Barbery just doesn’t have the zing I need.”

He shook his head again, impatiently. “No.”

“Yes,” I said, very calmly, and I patted his chest. I happened to leave my hand there. “This is the best decision for sure. I’ll stay for a little bit, until Ally’s totally ok alone and I have my new job lined up.” Because now I had a payment to make to my dad every month, and I’d have a car payment, and Ally needed a car too...oh, my Lord! How did adults do all this?

Dex put his hand over mine. “Maybe I should take the partnership deal.”

“No, you were right about that.”

His fingers clenched. “Lulu—”

“They’re about to cut the cake!” Maeve announced excitedly from the door, and gestured at us to come inside. “What are you guys doing?”

“Nothing. We’re coming,” he said, but he still didn’t move when she went back in. “This is a shit plan. But I’ll convince

you to stay.”

And he did his best. For the rest of the night, he was at my side and he bombarded me with reasons why I should be a waitress at the Crookstown. He had previously insisted that I stay at the apartment with him and Maeve for safety while the happy couple was off for a short honeymoon in Saugatuck, and I was happy to do that because being in Ally’s place alone didn’t appeal. But Dex used the entire time we cleaned up post-wedding to continue haranguing me, and he kept at it while I was brushing my teeth, and he hadn’t yet quit when I was trying to find a comfortable spot to sleep on their hard couch, too.

“Any other boss will insist on a doctor’s note if you say that you have a skin allergy to toilet bowl cleaner,” he reminded me. “No one else will lift you down when you sit on the bar to do your makeup because the light is better up high, either.”

“Go to bed,” I told him grumpily, and wiggled until I’d made the cushion feel slightly softer.

He kept it up the next week, also, and when Ally came back and found out about my plan, then they both argued that I couldn’t go. Well, Ally didn’t have to argue. He only looked at me with so much unhappiness that I couldn’t stand to look back at him.

“Don’t do that,” I said. “You know I have to!” I was implementing the changes I’d dreamed up, starting immediately. I’d put on the rest of the toxic waste suit that came with the gloves and my new house was clean, so that part of the plan was good to go, too. Almost. I just had to air it out due to the fumes from the industrial cleaner I’d used.

“But don’t you love the Crookstown?” he asked.

“Yes, ok? Yes,” I hissed. “But don’t tell Dex that and give him more ammo. He can’t afford to have me work here. That’s the end of the story!”

It wasn’t. Because when he saw that arguing wouldn’t work, Dex switched strategies.

“Hey, brat,” he greeted me at the beginning of the shift on Wednesday.

“Hey. Ally’s not coming in,” I announced. “Oriana isn’t feeling right and I told him to stay home.”

“Oh, really?”

Wait a minute. He wasn’t going to argue about that? And he was standing very close, I noticed. I waited for him to begin another round of reasons why I shouldn’t quit, but he didn’t do that, either. No, but he did reach out with his index finger and start to trace a design on my arm, from my wrist up to the bend of my elbow.

“What are you doing?” I asked him. My voice was high.

“What do you mean?” He used two fingers to gently draw a figure-eight on my skin, and it tingled beneath his touch. Oh, he was good! This was smoother than I ever thought he could have been. He could have tutored me, for sure.

I watched his hand and my breath got heavier. “I mean...” What did I mean?

“Let’s talk about what we’re going to do without Alistair.” He kept saying words but they’d stopped making sense to me, because he stepped even closer, almost like how we’d been dancing together at the wedding. I felt the heat from his body and my nostrils flared as I breathed in his scent. It made me get a little dizzy.

Things only got worse as the night went on—or maybe better? It discombobulated me, that was for sure, even though I saw through it. I knew exactly what he was doing, because I’d done the same things in the past. And it was working anyway! Like, every chance he got, Dex touched me somehow, and when he did...

“I thought you were going to fall,” he explained, when I looked down at his palm on my hip. “Sorry.” Then he smiled at me.

Him so close, his blue eyes pinning me, the warmth of his touch, his aroma, that smile? “What are you doing?” I asked him. The words shook.

He bent down, way down so that his mouth was at my ear. “What do you want me to do, Lulu?” he asked. I felt his breath against my neck and my hands clenched into fists. I was going to rip the clothes off his body and lick—

“I’m home,” Maeve said, slamming the door to the bar behind herself. “Da, did you go to the grocery store? Do we have anything to eat?”

Dex stood up and stepped back. “Fridge is full,” he told her.

“Good, I’m starving. Hey, Lulu.” She told us a few things about school and then pounded up the stairs.

Her entrance had broken the spell, temporarily—but I had no doubt he’d be able to cast it over me again. My knees still felt weak. “Dex, what are you doing?” I asked him again.

“There are benefits to working here, benefits beyond the shitty paycheck,” he said.

“Like sleeping with you, you mean?”

“Do you want to sleep with me, Lulu?” he asked and oh, my Lord, he was getting closer again.

“Yes! No! I mean—I have plans and you’re going to mess them up!”

He stopped and frowned. There, that was normal. “What plans?”

“For one thing, I bought a house. I signed the papers and it’s mine.”

“What the hell are you talking about, brat? You don’t have the money to buy a house!”

This was me and Dex again, him calling names and shaking his finger at me. Perfect, now I could think. “I bought a house for us to live in. You and me and Maeve, and I borrowed the money from my dad to do it. It’s not a gift, it’s a loan that Harold helped me to figure out, and it’s good because my dad and I have this now—we’re tied together now. He’s not going to forget me again when I owe him so much.”

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Are you serious? You borrowed money from your dad to buy a house? For us?”

I nodded. “Ally and Oriana can live in your old apartment with the baby. They could pay you a little rent, just a little so they have enough for another car.” I also planned to help with that. “The house isn’t too far from here so you’d be close to the Crookstown to always keep an eye on it and Maeve wouldn’t have to change schools again.”

“You planned all that.”

I nodded. “I’m really good in emergencies,” I explained. “This will work. And I was going to stay here at the bar until I could finish beauty school and get my own business going, but now, since you won’t take the money from Harold, I’ll have to quit sooner than I’d thought. It will still all work, though. It will be good, Dex.”

He was just staring at me. “Lulu,” he said, but suddenly his expression changed. I knew what that signaled, even before he reached into his back pocket to take out his phone. “Hold on,” he told me. “We’re going to talk about this more.”

Maeve thumped back into the bar. “Da, you didn’t get—” She broke off when she saw his hunched shoulders as he spoke low into the phone. “Is it my mom?” she asked me, and I nodded slowly. It was always Christina.

“I need to go over to her apartment,” Dex told both of us. He shoved the phone back into his pocket with so much force that he could have torn his old jeans.

“I’ll go too,” Maeve said. “I want to talk to her.”

“Maeve, *a leanbh*,” he started to argue, and she responded by grabbing the keys to the Jeep and walking toward the door.

“I’ll drive,” she announced over her shoulder.

“Don’t let her drive,” I said immediately. She was getting better in the parking lot, but she was in no way street-ready.

“We have more to discuss,” he said, but his attention was divided between me and the sidewalk. I knew he wanted to rush over and save Christina again.

“Do you still love her?” I asked. “Is that why you keep doing this, always running to her rescue? Do you still love your ex-wife?” We both heard the heavy rumble as the Jeep’s engine started. Maeve must have decided she was definitely taking the wheel. “Go or she’ll leave without you,” I said.

“I’ll be back soon.” And he was gone. I was alone in the Crookstown, thinking that I might have made a huge mistake, with everything.

Of course, there were chores to do to open the bar and that kept me busy as I mostly did them, but the hands on the clock kept moving closer to the hour when the door was supposed to open to customers, and Dex still wasn’t there. I held my phone and looked at the screen, wanting to text him, wanting to know what was happening with him and Maeve, but I stopped myself from writing to either of them. They had bigger issues going on than dealing with the regulars.

Those guys weren’t entirely happy when I unlocked the door myself and announced, “You can come in, but I can’t serve you anything other than water. It’s part of the Michigan Liquor Control Code of 1998.”

“She’s right about that,” Harold told everyone. They took their usual seats with a minimum of grumbling and I set them up with glasses garnished with the lemon slices leftover from the wedding.

“Lulu, have you made a choice about the paint color for the bathrooms?” Sean asked me.

“I probably shouldn’t be the one to make that decision anymore,” I answered. “I’m not going to be working here much longer.”

“God damn Dex!” José yelled. “He fired you for dropping that tray? What was one more after you’ve already lost so many?”

“No, he didn’t fire me. I’m going to find another job because he can’t afford to have two servers. He’s only keeping me on because...I don’t know why. Maybe it’s like

how Ally just took in another blind cat. He felt so sorry for it because it couldn't make it on its own."

"Bullshit," Mitchell said. "Dex isn't looking at you like he would a blind cat."

"Yeah, I guess he's mostly angry when he sees me," I agreed.

There was a general clamor of "no." "He's crazy about you, Lulu," Sean told me. "He would have fired you ten dropped trays ago if he wasn't."

"I know he doesn't want me to quit. He's making it really hard to leave, in fact. But I don't think he liked my plan, buying the house for us and everything," I said to Harold.

"I told you weeks ago that you should explain it to him."

"He doesn't explain to me why he's always taking care of Christina!" I snapped. "I know Maeve wants her to be ok, and maybe that's the only reason, but maybe it's because Dex wishes they hadn't ever divorced. He didn't want to."

"I've known Dex for a lot of years, for longer than he's owned this joint," Sean told me. "You're wrong if you think he wants her still. He's over Christina. I'm sure of it."

We all turned as quick footsteps approached from the back. Maeve entered first with her face blotchy and swollen from crying, and Dex was right behind her looking pissed out of his mind.

"Let her go," he ordered when I started to follow his daughter up the stairs to their apartment. "We had to..." He stopped and looked at the regulars, all of them on tenterhooks to hear the gossip. "I tell you about it in private," he concluded, and there was a collective sigh.

I did sneak up later that night to check on Maeve. "Sneak" wasn't really the word for it, since Dex did see me open the door to their stairs and I waved to him as I went through it, without him voicing any objection. She sat on their couch in a ball, not crying anymore but looking like it hadn't been so long since she'd stopped.

“Hey,” I said. “Let me get you some water and revitalizing facial cream.”

“No, I’m ok.” She sighed as I sat down on the couch next to her. “I got into a fight with her. With my mom.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I guess it was, like, too much. She was complaining again about her apartment but that’s not why she texts my dad all the time. She just wants his attention on her because she doesn’t have a boyfriend right now. She always does this when she’s single, using him for a while. And she needs his money, too. She says she can’t get a job...I just got so mad. I told her to clean her ass up and we started yelling —”

“She yelled at you?” I interrupted furiously. “Dex didn’t let her do that!”

“Not for long,” Maeve agreed. “He got her to be quiet pretty quickly and we left. But then, we drove around for a long time and talked about stuff. He said he feels responsible for her because they got married so young and then she got pregnant really fast. He feels like neither of them did a good job with their relationship but he has a lot of guilt, like that might be the cause of why she acts this way now. And he said that he wants to take care of her for me, so that I still have a functioning mother.”

“What did you say back?”

She shrugged a little and sighed. “He doesn’t need to do all this for my sake. Maybe she’d help herself more if he did less, that was what I told him. I said that she was using him and I could see it, that it drove me crazy to watch her manipulate him. You know the tricks you used to talk about?”

“Yeah. But I’m not doing that anymore,” I said.

“I don’t want my dad to get tricked,” she said. “Not by anyone.” She looked at me pointedly.

“I swear I wouldn’t do that to Dex. Not just because it doesn’t really work but also because...” Because I wanted him to love me for being me. Not because I was so pretty, or

had good boobs or a cute ass, or because I was helpless and had car trouble, or because I flirted with someone else or for any other dumb reason.

I just wanted him to love me.

“Are you ok?” I asked Maeve.

“Yes,” she sighed, and I hugged her hard. “I don’t know how this is going to work out.”

“I don’t either but I know your dad will be there with you through everything. I will too, if you need me,” I said.

“Everyone all right?” Dex asked when I came back downstairs. He cupped my chin in one hand and used a bar towel, a clean one, to wipe under my eyes.

“She’s all right. She doesn’t expect you to fix her mom, you know.”

“I don’t want anything to hurt Maeve.”

I put my own hand over his. “I understand that, and so does she. But...” I turned my chin in his palm and caught the five guys in the bar stools watching us intently. “We can talk later,” I said. There was a lot we had to go over.

But oddly for me, when we’d cleared the crowd out of the bar at the end of the night (and suspecting something was going to happen, they really didn’t want to leave), I found myself a little speechless. I stood with my toxic waste gloves in one hand and tried to think of what I could say to Dex now. I didn’t know where to start.

We stared at each other. “The thing is, I didn’t want to be my mother,” I blurted out at the same time that he said, “I’ve always been afraid of turning into my own da.”

“Huh?” I asked him, and he simultaneously demanded, “What in the hell do you mean? You’re not!”

We both looked at each other, and then he leveled his index finger at me. My turn first. Ok.

“I started to see how she makes herself miserable—not that my dad isn’t responsible for their mess, too, but she’s in it with

him. She kind of wants him, but it's not just because she loves him. It's more that she knows what he could do for her. If he'd spend the money," I clarified. "I don't think that they even know each other very well. And I don't want to be that. I don't want to be with someone like that, either, and I have been before. You know, with me talking in a different voice and pushing up my boobs and the guy always playing me, too, and telling me what I want to hear. Flirting with me to get what he wants," I said pointedly. "Almost kissing me."

"I wasn't almost kissing you to get what I wanted. I decided that if you were going to leave for real, I had to get my ass in gear."

"What?" I asked. "Your ass?"

"I thought I might lose the opportunity," Dex said. He stepped closer to me and untied the apron from around his waist. "It took me a minute to get over the fact that you think you have to save it all the time."

"You mean, save your ass?"

"Yeah. This one," he told me, pointing to it. Oh, my Lord, it was such a nice one, too. "I was pretty pissed today when you told me that, once again, you'd spent all your money to try to help me. That you borrowed more from your dad to solve my problems. You've been working off your own ass, selling your possessions, and sleeping on an old couch surrounded by blind cats to save up more. For me."

"And you're pissed about that?" I demanded. "How dare you! I think the words you meant to say were, 'Thank you, Lulu!'"

"Thank you, Lulu. No, I'm not pissed about that at all, not when I realized why you were doing it. I knew it was wonderful, and then I got why." He put the apron on the bar top and stepped even closer to me. I started to pick up his heat again, his scent, and I breathed deeply. "You don't want to be your mom, and I don't want to be my dad. I didn't want to spend my whole life chasing after some dream. When he lost my mother, he went on this quest to replace her, to find that

love again. I made the Crookstown my dream instead, because I can touch it, I can control it. Kind of,” he amended.

“Your dream already came true. That was what Ally told me the first day I worked here. You got what you wanted.”

“I didn’t know what I wanted. But I thought I knew what *didn’t* want,” he said. “I didn’t want some rude girl from out of town telling me what was wrong with my bar. I didn’t need advice about my daughter from my employee, the one who refused to pick up change if it fell on the floor because of the dust bunnies. I didn’t need to hear that I treated Alistair like a child. I didn’t want any of that.”

“Me,” I interpreted. “You didn’t want me.” When I thought back to how I’d been acting, I could understand it. “I might have been, at times and just slightly, uh...selfish. Or maybe immature.”

“Yeah, slightly. But beyond all that crap, there was a lot more to you that I hadn’t seen,” Dex answered. “Actually, it turns out there was a lot I didn’t know back then. Like, have you heard that almond oil is very good for your skin? I’ve been using it.”

“Really?” I picked up his hand and examined it. It did seem smoother, and he took the opportunity to move again so that now, our bodies brushed together.

“I wasn’t aware that good hydration required lemon slices and small cubes of ice. But it is more fun to drink water that way. I didn’t know how my daughter would love to dress up, if she got the chance, and I didn’t understand that Alistair really, really needed a roommate. Living with you made him so happy and I think that was what made him open to loving Oriana. He’d only been with his animals for so long, he didn’t know how good it would be to have a friend, someone there for the long haul, for keeps.”

“I guess I was a good substitute,” I said.

“Yeah, he had to find the perfect woman for him,” Dex agreed. “Lately, I started to think that there is a perfect person out there for all of us. You may not know it the first time you

see her, even if you're already thinking that she's so pretty in her cutoff jeans and those high shoes. You only get to know how much you love someone when you're around her, seeing the real person behind all that cuteness. The person who may be a large pain in your ass," he added, "but you love her so much, you can't stand the idea of her going to work in somebody else's bar."

"I..." Why was I leaving for another bar? Oh, right. "I have to, because you can't afford to pay me," I said.

He nudged our hips together. "You probably should have told Alistair about that part of your plan. He let me know that he doesn't want to work as a server, because he hates it. He'll do it until the baby's born and then he's going to be a full-time dad, part-time Crookstown employee. He'll help in the storage room, with the inventory, doing the opening, but he doesn't want your job. We're going to have to figure out how to make this work—all of us, not just you plotting alone. We'll do it together."

"Oh." I was thinking that I should have argued, or said something that made a little more sense, but Dex had put his hands on my waist and was moving them up and down, stroking my sides.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Want to stay on with me?"

I looked up into his blue eyes. I saw what I needed to. "I have some conditions if I'm going to keep working at the Crookstown."

"I have one, too. We're going to start fraternizing a lot. A whole lot." He picked me up and put me on the counter.

"Well, that was what I was going to say also." I heard my voice shake, with emotion and excitement. His hands were on my thighs.

"There's never going to be a four-karat ring. No boat, no big house, no wedding in the Bahamas. I have a car with no air conditioning, a kid, a bar with debt, and a lot of posters of dead ball boys."

“I know all that. I don’t want a big ring or a wedding in the Caribbean. I love your daughter and I love the Crookstown, even if you won’t get rid of all the bad wall décor.”

“You’re turning twenty-four next week and I’m more than a decade older than you,” he pointed out.

“And you’re not really young at heart, either,” I added.

“Thank you, Lulu.”

“I guess it’s lucky for you that I love you anyway. I love you so much, in spite of all that,” I said. “Because of all that, that’s why I love you.”

“I figured,” he said, and smiled at me. That statement would have made me argue that he shouldn’t have “figured” anything and that he was all too sure of himself, but then his hands pulled me tightly against him. I wrapped my legs around his waist and his hands gripped my ass. He started doing that thing again, that thing where he moved his lips around my neck, not kissing or even touching. Close, so close that it was like electricity sparked between us. It made me move my hips, grinding against him.

“Hi, brat,” he murmured next to my ear. His lips finally touched me, gliding across my skin. I tilted back my head and moaned. Dex leaned me in his arms and kissed me when he heard the sound. His tongue played with mine, gently at first—but then we lost it. I started to yank at his decrepit t-shirt and I heard it tear as I jerked it over his head, and while my hands were on the zipper of his jeans, he was busy removing my bra. He touched my breasts, slid his palms over and under and around, then massaged.

“Oh,” I gasped, and he moved lower and suckled with his mouth. His jaw rasped against my skin and his short hair tickled me, and I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and asked for more. I needed a lot more of this.

He picked me up again and sat me on the bar top, and then he pulled off my tennis shoes and peeled down my jeans,

taking my thong with them. “We’re doing it right here,” he announced, and stripped down himself.

“Yes! Yes, we’re doing it,” I answered, reaching for him, and he obliged by lying across my body and kissing me, hard and deep. He rocked and I moaned louder as he stroked against me. I reached for his ass—oh, his ass was so nice in my hands—and held tightly because I wanted it again, and more. Dex pulled my leg up over his arm to bring us closer.

“Lulu, you’re mine. Mine,” he panted. He palmed my breast and kneaded gently, then took my nipple between his fingers and teased until I started to moan in rhythm with his touch.

“Yours,” I answered, the word shuddering out. “You’re mine, Dex. All mine.”

“Every part of me.”

My hands roamed to feel those parts, up his sides and down his back, holding his hips. I tried to reach between our bodies—

“The second you touch me, I’ll come,” he said, “and you need to, first.”

“Right. You were telling me how women always come. Oh,” I groaned in disappointment. He had rolled off me and onto his side, and he smiled down at my body in the dim light. He nuzzled his face against my breasts while his fingers stroked over my thighs, already parted for him. He really was an expert—there wasn’t any hesitation as he found my clit, and he handled it like a pro. No wonder he gave guarantees—

“Dex!” I rode the thick fingers that he’d slid inside me, and when he kissed me again—

“Told you,” he said, as I lay shaking, my body clenching inside as the bliss of it overwhelmed me. “Hang on.”

I picked up my head. “Hang on?” I asked confusedly.

But he was only getting his jeans, and getting a condom out of the pocket. And then he was sliding inside me, so deeply, so fully.

“More,” I said, and he drove hard, and there was so much more. I heard myself start to scream and he put his mouth over mine and I came again, and maybe again, but I wasn’t sure what was happening, where I was, if I was still in my body. I only knew that I had Dex.

He rested his forehead on the wood bar top, breathing hard. “We’re really going to need to wipe this down,” he said. Then he kissed me, and smiled.

I was still quivering inside and my limbs shook. “You can do the wiping.”

“Next time, we’ll use a bed.”

“The bed at the house,” I said. “It could be our house.”

“Is this what you want, baby?” He kissed me. “Am I what you want?”

“Yes. You, and only you.” I sighed, full of pleasure and love. “This is like a dream.”

“If your dream is a guy who only has the Crookstown to his name.” Dex looked down at me. “But I love you, Lulu. I love you.”

It was a dream. A new one for me, maybe, but one that I would hold onto for the rest of my life.

Epilogue

“Where should I put this one?” Dex asked. He grinned at me.

Well, he was certainly in a good mood, and everyone had me to thank for it. I’d known that today would be difficult, so I’d woken him up in his favorite way.

“Good morning,” I’d announced as I’d kissed up his thighs. Then I worked his boxer briefs down them.

“Good morning,” he’d said back, or at least, he’d tried to say it. By that point, I’d been licking him, using my tongue to flick and caress his hardening shaft, using my hands to massage his ass and balls. Yes, it was a good morning for him.

“Lulu...” he’d moaned as he came, holding the pillow over his face so he wouldn’t make too much noise. At least we wouldn’t have to worry about that anymore, which was one of the only good things about today. But I’d been determinedly cheerful and upbeat about this change, because Dex himself had been pretty much despondent about it.

“You’ll see her every day. Every day!” I’d reminded him again and again, and he’d growled back that it wasn’t the same and I knew it. I did know it, and secretly, like when Ally and I were alone, I’d gotten sniffly, too, and my nose had been red a whole lot. But this was going to be awesome for everyone.

And my morning had been awesome as well, because Dex had announced that it was my turn. He’d flipped me onto my side and put his knee between my thighs to hold them open. Then he touched me with his lips, fingers, and tongue, and he’d also whispered how much he loved me. It had ended with me coming, the pillow clamped over my own mouth as I wailed in pleasure, and him ready again so that he’d entered me. And made me come again, even harder.

“Twice,” he’d said smugly. “So far.”

That kind of remark boded well for the evening. But we had to get through today, first.

“That’s it,” Ally said. “That was last box.” He patted it and then turned to his daughter. “Aimee, honey, don’t eat a bug off the ground.” He squatted next to her and she put her little arm around his neck and rested her smooth cheek against his scarred one. “That bug is probably going home to its family. It might be a mama bug.”

Aimee turned and looked for her own mama. Oriana sat resting at a table, our new, more powerful fans helping to keep her cool even in the July heat inside the Crookstown. She was eight months pregnant with their son and was a little testy about it, but she smiled at her husband and daughter. Fortunately, her chair was more comfortable than our old ones would have been, because we’d replaced all the seating the summer before. We’d been making changes, slowly but surely, so that the Crookstown still looked like itself—only better.

“Last box?” Maeve echoed. She picked it up off the bar top. “Ok, I guess I’m in, then.” She grinned happily. “Kateryna’s already got everything unpacked in your old room, Da. She’s going to be a great roommate. She knows tons of guys.”

“Great,” her dad answered weakly as she bounded up the stairs to the apartment. It wasn’t like Maeve hadn’t been dating for the last few years, but it also wasn’t like he enjoyed hearing about it. He suddenly looked bleak and I walked over to him.

“You’ll still know what’s happening with her, because you’ll be back here to work on Tuesday,” I reminded him. “You can surveil her then to your heart’s content.” She’d have a day of freedom, at least, since the Crookstown shut down on Mondays now, just like I did at the hair salon so that Dex and I had the time off together. The other parts of my schedule were very full, though. My business had picked up enough that we were considering opening a salon, with me as the lead stylist, of course. Maybe, but we had a lot of projects in the works.

But if we did open a salon, I already had a very experienced candidate ready to work with me: my mom. She’d stayed in the Detroit area, but not in the expensive

rental. We were getting along better now that she'd decided to move along from my dad. Not totally, because she still liked to try to get information from me about his new family, but I stayed out of it. As best I could. And my dad and I were ok, too. We generally stuck to business topics when we talked, but we did talk.

So Dex and I were already ahead of the game with employees and financial advice. And I had the perfect name for a potential salon: Crookstown Hair Bar. Clients could get confused between the two businesses, but if they ended up drinking at the bar instead of getting lowlights put in, even better. They could tell their friends about the awesome throwback where they'd had so much fun, where the regulars mixed easily with the much-younger crowd that Oriana's social media campaign had lured in. Business was booming.

Dex looked down at me and kissed the top of my head. "I'm not going to surveil Maeve. I know that it's good for her to move out on her own and live apart from us, even if I don't like it. At all."

"I love this sudden maturity." I put my arms around his waist and his own arms circled me, drawing me close. He had a few more things to say, letting me know that in fact, he had always been mature, and he also made several other remarks about how the head of the family needed to lead by example. I smiled against his chest and let him think he was leading.

"Ally, we have to get home," Oriana said, and he went to help his wife get to her feet. They were going to the new home they'd purchased with some help from me and Dex. We'd been able to pay off our own place, which had felt wonderful, and it had been even better to pay it forward for them. "We'll see you tonight. I want to take the four-month pictures of you," she reminded me.

"Alistair, don't let her carry anything to our place," Dex instructed because he still liked to boss, even though Ally wasn't really an employee anymore. He was part-time helping Oriana's photography business, and full-time parenting. Ally didn't even let her carry their daughter, but they walked close

enough that Aimee could put her hand on her mama's shoulder.

After the three of them left, then it was up to me to get Dex to go, too. And he really, really didn't want to. There were several things he suddenly remembered that he had to do around the bar, and then a few repairs he wanted to make in the apartment that he used to share with Maeve before the three of us had moved into our house. Now that she'd graduated from high school, she was taking a few classes in photography and doing a little modeling, making enough that she could afford to live above the Crookstown with a roommate.

At first, we'd been afraid that she'd want her mom to live with her, but Christina was still in the studio that Dex had found years before. She'd stayed there and stayed clean, mostly, and she was doing ok. I still liked her none, but she did love Maeve and since I did too, we maintained a truce.

Eventually, I got tired of trying to cajole him out of the apartment. "Dex, we're leaving," I announced. "Now. I need you to help me into the Jeep." I could do it myself, but it was more fun his way.

"Right," he said. "Yeah, we're leaving." It took another few minutes of both of us kissing and hugging Maeve, though, before we actually made an exit.

"You're not so tough," he told me on the way to the car. He let me use his grungy t-shirt to wipe the tears from my cheeks and then he put his arm around me. "She'll be great, won't she?"

"She will. Because she has you," I answered.

"She has *us*," he corrected. "She has all of us." His palm moved from my shoulder down to my tummy, where the newest member of our family was starting to make an appearance in the form of a little bump under my very cute tank top. Maeve had been just about as thrilled as Dex and I were.

“She has us,” I agreed. “All of us. But it’s kind of weird,” I mentioned as he helped me into the car. Lifted me, actually, and then gave me a kiss, too. It was a great way to do it.

“What’s weird, *a ghrá*?”

“Like, think back to when I came here the first time, when I walked up to the Crookstown and knocked on the door. Do you remember my shoes? They were great,” I reminisced. “I really wish the straps hadn’t broken that night we went to the afterhours again.”

“Yeah, sure. What are you talking about?”

“Did you ever think all this would happen? Ally meeting Oriana. Their family.” I smiled, thinking of how happy they were. “Our house and our beautiful wedding in Harold’s back yard. Maeve graduating and living on her own. Our baby.”

“I didn’t have a clue that this would happen. I don’t remember the shoes, but I do remember you pounding on the door.” He reached across the Jeep and took my hand. “That was a great day.”

“That was a great day,” I agreed. I put his knuckles against my cheek and then kissed them.

“All this is like a dream,” Dex said. “Isn’t it?”

“If your dream is a little house in Detroit with a wife who likes to argue with you, a daughter who won’t always listen to you, and a baby who’s going to cry a lot, I’m guessing.”

“That’s exactly my dream,” he told me, and we smiled at each other.

The wind blew through the open windows and ruined my hair, but that was fine with me. I nodded at Dex and held his hand tighter. This was our dream. We were living it.

About the Author

Jamie Bennett (that's me!) is the author of a lot of super-great books, including [a bunch about football](#) and a bunch of other ones, too, like the story of Lulu's ex, [The Wrong Track](#). You would really love them. In fact, you should probably read them right now, immediately.

Seriously. Go find them [on Amazon](#).

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