

Dear Roomie



Michelle Angelle

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A Romantic Comedy
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We dedicate this book to all the rule breakers out there.

Chapter 1-Ghita

Dying.

I am dying.

Seth runs his hands through his sun-kissed brown hair, the long layers falling effortlessly over one eye, and I salivate a bit. The dictionary would define him as the “*perfect date.*”

When he bends to pick up my golf ball, his jeans cup his adorable butt as if they were custom made for his body. I nearly squeal with excitement. Finally, my BFF app has picked a winner for me. Maybe my dating luck has changed.

“After serving in the Peace Corps, I started law school,” he says, handing me the ball as we walk to the next hole.

“And you’ve been living in Texas since?”

“Yeah, law school in Houston, then I joined a firm in Dallas right after graduation. What about you, Ghita?”

“I grew up in Dallas but went to college in California. My family lives here, so it wasn’t long before I returned home.”

My next shot rolls into a giant bear’s mouth that opens and closes on a timed loop. When the ball slides into the cup, I raise my hands in victory.

“Another hole in one?” he asks, and I notice he’s frowning. “You haven’t missed a shot yet.”

“Oh, yeah, guess I should have told you I’m the putt-putt champion in my family.” I laugh, hoping to relieve some of the tension that has appeared unexpectedly. “My siblings are a competitive bunch, so you master a skill early to survive.”

I step closer and smell his cologne, which is a pleasant smokey scent, and glance into his crisp emerald eyes, but he doesn’t meet my gaze. He hands me my beer without a word, and I’m confused as to why this date has shifted south.

“So, public interest law?” I ask, hoping to get us back on track. “How did you choose that field?”

“My mom comes from a long line of activists and advocates, so I didn’t have a choice.” Seth smiles, and his straight white teeth flash at me. “I want to effect change and make the world a better place.”

I return the smile, glad I imagined the weird friction between us.

Seth strides to the bear’s mouth and counts the seconds between the open-and-closed lips. I chuckle because I’m positive he’s performing this calculating act just for show. I mean, this is only putt-putt after all. But he turns, grimaces at me, and says, “Shhhhhh, I’m trying to concentrate, Ghita.”

I’m dumbfounded. Is Seth for real or does he have an awkward sense of humor? I put on a serious expression just in case.

He lines up his ball and knocks it directly in the mouth. He raises both hands in victory and says to no one in particular, “And that’s how it’s done.”

I go in for a high five, but he’s already moving to the next course. I quickly tuck my hand behind my back and hope no one saw him leave me hanging.

We play a couple more holes, and he matches me stroke for stroke. On the windmill course, he gives me a high five and spins me around when I sink a hole in one. Seth is a little difficult to read, but this is our first meetup. I’m sure he’s nervous and will relax on the second date.

I can’t believe I’m even considering a second activity with Seth. Usually, by now, my date has made an excuse to end the evening early. It happens often enough to make me wonder if I’m the reason my BFF app doesn’t give me decent matches. My best friend Nicole thinks I have too many dating rules, but who could blame me after hundreds of bad dates? Seth checked all the boxes during my prescreening, and this is the best match I’ve had in forever.

I step up to take my next shot. “Are you close to your family?”

“I’m one of five boys, and even though everyone lives across the country, we always make time for a sibling trip once a year. My mom lives in Houston, so I visit her often. I’m the baby of the family, and she and I have a special bond.”

He loves his family, another positive sign. My intimate relationships have been such failures in the past, that I quiz the men before agreeing to go on a date. After losing my best friend in high school because her jerky brother dumped me, I swore I would never date a man related to my friends. I thought that would be the only rule I’d need to follow, but adhering to that criterion alone hasn’t led me to my soulmate. I’ve since established more specific guidelines. I’m tired of wasting my time.

“I also come from a large family,” I say. “We’re close too.”

We reach the second to last hole, and Seth places his hand on my lower back. Chills run over my body. This instant chemistry is new to me.

“You live around here?” he asks as I sink another hole hidden behind a fake waterfall.

“I have a house in the M Streets.”

He stops mid-swing. “You own a house in that neighborhood?”

The tone of his voice has turned cold. I can’t put my finger on why it has changed, but the wording feels wrong as well. Maybe I’m reading into his question too much?

“I do. It’s a 50s ranch. I’m renovating it.”

He stands there with a club in his hand, the ball still on the turf. “Aren’t those houses ridiculously overpriced?”

The question catches me off guard. “Umm. A bit. Mine isn’t a new build though.”

He swings at the ball too hard and knocks it into the moat surrounding the course, completely missing the waterfall.

He turns his shoulder to me and chugs his beer. My gut tightens. “Have you spent time in the area?” I ask.

“I don’t own one of those houses, that’s for sure,” he says, stalking to the shed to retrieve a new ball. I stay frozen because I don’t know what else to do. Is he mad because he missed the hole?

Teen voices scream behind me, “Oh. My. God. It’s her!” I turn. “You’re Ghita Russo, right? May we take a picture with you?”

Since my app went viral, I’ve been trying to get out of the influencer game. I’m almost thirty, and I want to use my recognition to create important connections and invest in female-owned businesses. I hope to develop a more meaningful career, but having a million followers gives you a notoriety that is hard to escape.

“Of course,” I say, picking a spot in front of the waterfall. The neon lights in the water will make a fun backdrop for the photo. The girls surround me and glance around for someone to snap the photo.

“Ghita?” Seth walks over with a confused expression.

“Hey, mister,” the girls yell and wave at him. “Will you take our picture with Ghita?”

Still staring wide-eyed at me, he mechanically takes the phone and clicks.

“Thanks,” they say and run over to share the picture on their phones and probably post it on their social media.

I grin at Seth. “Thank you for indulging them. I occasionally get noticed in public.”

I rarely mention how I’ve made my money because men find the whole public persona either too intimidating, or they think the date is a publicity stunt and want me to include them in my social media posts.

He stares at me, squinting his eyes into slits. “I knew your name sounded familiar.” He snaps his fingers. “You’re

the influencer *Wall Street Journal* featured. Your app, BFF, went viral.”

I bite my bottom lip. I dread this conversation.

“I’m launching a national podcast. That’s always been my dream.” I feel my cheeks blush with heat. I’m an outwardly confident person, but inwardly, I’m like everyone else who hopes for acceptance and validation of their ideas.

“Wow,” he says, putting his new ball on the ground. “Seems all your dreams come true.”

I laugh. “If only.” I dream of finding a partner who will support my aspirations while I support theirs.

Seth doesn’t laugh. He doesn’t even smile. He shoots his ball, and although the shot is erratic, it rolls in.

When we get to the last hole, I consider letting him win so there can be a tie, and then I want to punch myself in the face for having that outdated thought. I hand him my beer and knock my next ball in without fail.

“Your turn.” I retrieve my drink while he studies the green intently. His chiseled jaw is set and his eyes are pinned on the ball. The carefree banter from before is long gone. The game is no longer about mini-golf.

He knocks his ball in, and I do a happy cheer, but he scowls.

“You won,” he says with no joy at all.

I return our putters and balls to the shed and wonder where I went wrong. Seth checks all of my dating boxes, yet I find myself at the same relationship crossroads. I don’t have to always win, but I surely can’t date a sore loser. Maybe he’s never lost at putt-putt before, and he’s surprised?

“You ready?” he asks.

“Yeah. Let’s get ice cream.”

“Um. Well. I’m gonna call it a night. I’m beat, and I have an early morning case.”

Okay, screw bad manners. What is wrong with this guy? I have nothing to lose at this point, so I ask, “Did I offend you tonight?”

“No.”

“But we clicked, and suddenly—”

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “It’s not you, it’s me.”

I push his hand off. “I can’t believe you threw that line of bullshit at me.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Sorry. It’s you. I’m looking for a more low-key and chill woman. Someone who won’t compete with me.”

Again? This is happening to me again?

Every time I match with a great guy, he finds fault in my success. I’m baffled because I would never knock a man for his achievements.

I nod, accepting defeat. “Okay. Thanks for the mini-golf.” I don’t wait for him to respond and retreat straight to my car.

When I drive past him, he’s still standing at the entrance watching a group of women entering the course. I should be used to the rejection by now, but my eyes prick with tears. I will not cry.

Instead, I stop and grab my favorite coconut gelato at The Corner Market and eat the entire container in a relaxing bubble bath. Now, that’s a perfect date.

Chapter 2-Ghita

I shake out the smooth chestnut waves in the mirror and marvel at what Megan, the stylist, did with my long hair. “Too bad you didn’t work on the shoot for *Women’s World*. The humidity in New Orleans was killer. My hair looked like a tornado ripped through it.”

She laughs. “The secret is the towel.” She raises the cute, purple microfiber turban she used on my wet hair. “The right blend of fiber gives you the absorbency you want without the breakage and the frizz.”

I check for the tag but don’t find one. “This construction is unique. Who makes it?”

Megan blushes. “Me. I did.”

“No way.” I inspect the custom elastic design of the hair wrap. “You’re a genius. Where can I buy one? My sisters would buy them too.”

“Umm.” Megan’s cheeks get redder. “I don’t sell them.”

“What? You should. Everyone with long, thick hair would use it.”

“I’m not you, Ghita. I don’t have a million followers. Who would buy my towels?”

I meet her eyes in the mirror. “Let me help you. I have followers who would be thrilled to use a reliable product.”

“Really? You’d do that for me, a total stranger?”

“First, Megan, you’re not a stranger anymore. Second, we entrepreneurial women need to stick together. This is how the sisterhood network should work.”

Megan’s eyes well up, which will make me cry and destroy the makeup she carefully applied, so I turn in my chair to face her. “Do you want to sell them?”

“Yes. Absolutely yes.”

“Let me take this turban home and make a few videos showing its effectiveness. The exposure will create a buzz that investors can’t ignore.”

She takes my hands in hers. “Wow. I mean, wow.”

“Get ready to be famous, Megan. Your special hair towels will be an internet sensation.”

“We’re ready for you, Ghita,” the photographer calls from across the studio.

“Here, let me retouch your makeup. We want those beautiful brown eyes to pop.” She dabs cream highlighter by the corners of my lids and leans away, inspecting my face. When I stand, Megan squeezes me in a tight hug. “I can’t thank you enough.”

I hold the purple towel to my chest. “Promise me I’ll be your first paying customer.”

“For sure.” She smooths out the wrinkle in the back of my skirt. “I wish I was as tall as you. Next life, that’s what I’m ordering. Long legs.”

I laugh. “Then I’m ordering,” I wiggle my adorable, yellow pump in the air where my heel hangs off by a full inch, “smaller feet. All the cute shoes stop at size nine.”

The photographer moves the light stand to the other side of the room, and the illumination hits me square in the eye, making me squint.

“Ghita, let’s take some shots with the headphones,” he says.

It’s ironic I have to pose for pictures when I’m interviewing on a podcast without a viewing audience, but the producers of *You Go, Girl* insisted. They have an extensive mailing list for their newsletter, so they need photos for this month’s release.

I put on the headphones and admire their noise-canceling effect. I should add this brand to my studio purchase list.

“Okay, Ghita, hold the microphone and pretend you’re responding to a caller’s question.”

“Excuse me?” I lift one side off my ear.

“Talk into the microphone.”

“You’re on with Ghita Russo,” I say and smile at how impressive that sounds. I can’t wait to be on air in my studio.

“Now, turn your face to the side for me. A shot of those luscious lashes is necessary.”

“How’s this?” I pivot in the chair, hoping my skirt doesn’t hike too far up my leg.

“Okay, Tammy,” he says to the producer. “We have enough shots of Ghita if you want to start the interview.”

“Great.” Tammy turns to me. “Ready?”

“Yes.” I smile so big that I’m surely showing all my teeth.

The sign reading “Live” illuminates, and I settle into my chair.

“Welcome. Today on *You Go, Girl*, you are in for a ride. We have the forward-thinking businesswoman, Ghita Russo, here with us. Thanks for joining us, Ghita.” Tammy lifts her coffee mug and takes a sip.

“Thanks for having me. I’m honored.”

“I have to say, Ghita, you do not have the face for radio.”

“Huh?” It’s rare I don’t know what to say, but her confusing statement throws me off.

“You’re gorgeous in case no one’s told you.” Tammy laughs. “You should be on television or in films, not hidden on the radio.”

“Oh,” I say, embarrassed by the comment. “I grew up listening to talk radio. Being on a podcast is a dream come true. But thank you, I think?” A nervous giggle escapes from my lips.

“So, tell us about yourself. You’re starting a podcast, correct?”

I grin even though the audience can’t see me. “Yes, I’m launching soon. It’s called Mismatched.”

“I have to ask,” Tammy says, jumping in without letting me say more, “why start a podcast when your BFF app is already so successful?” Tammy is a quick shooter with her questions. I admire her confidence.

“I developed BFF in college with one of my psych professors as a way for UCLA students to make friends on campus. It matched people who share similar interests. I never expected the prominent companies to make the app available for purchase on their platforms.”

“Most people would consider BFF a dating app. Correct?”

I always get this question in interviews. The public uses the app for dating, but I hate that it’s clumped into the swipe-right dating apps currently on the market. It’s not intended for inconsequential hookups.

“I designed the algorithm to make meaningful connections,” I say, deflecting.

“Yeah, but many people find love. Isn’t that why BFF is profitable?”

Tammy isn’t wrong. Once the celebrities announced in public that they used the app to find their partners, BFF ballooned in usage.

“If a meaningful connection leads to love, then I’m happier for it. Everyone deserves to find love.”

“Well, Ghita, that brings me to the next question. Have you found love on the app?”

I hate this question. The answer is no, Tammy, I have not found love. The app I created is a huge bust for my dating life. While the world, including my best friend, finds its soulmates, I have found no one. Even my sister has made

lifelong friends on the damn thing. Not me. Nothing. Nada. I'm defective.

"I don't really have time for a serious relationship right now," I say my standard line instead.

"You must have a lot of men beating down your door without using the app."

"Not really. My family says I'm picky, but I like to think I'm selective."

The truth is that men are initially intrigued by my internet popularity but threatened by my independence and self-sufficiency later. Decent men run away as fast as they can while the ones who stay only want to date me for name recognition. It's been a recipe for disaster.

Tammy twirls a pencil in the air. "Before BFF, you ran a fan account for the musician JD, which was extremely successful."

That time in my life seems like ages ago. I still can't believe Jacob let me follow him around on tour, posting pictures and interviews on my Insta account.

"I did. The JD exclusives allowed me to build an internet audience and learn more about interpersonal relationships in the process."

"Speaking of interpersonal, I hear there are finally wedding bells for your sister Gloria and JD. Truth or gossip?"

Thank goodness the focus is off of me. "Yes, it's true. The wedding is in a couple of months. Jacob has been part of the family for years, so we're excited they're making it official."

"I read you have five sisters and a brother?"

"Yes. The youngest, Gina, is in college, and Gabe, my brother, got married last year to Hannah Harper, the graphic novelist, so it's six sisters now."

"You have a twin, correct?"

The twin question always comes up in interviews. Gemma and I are identical in looks, but we have very different personalities. That's a hard distinction for people to make. They assume we are the same in body and mind.

“Yes. Gemma has a soft spot for animals like our brother who is a veterinarian. She is passionate about dog rescue.”

“We'll leave a link to Gemma's dog rescue in the notes, folks.”

I smile. It will thrill Gemma to find homes for her wayward friends.

“So, let's talk about Mismatched? Why a podcast?”

Finally, a question I love to answer. Tammy must see my excitement because she beams back at me.

“Mismatched extends my BFF app goals. I want to continue helping people make connections. It's important to open yourself to new opportunities and new experiences.”

My stomach tenses at those words because they are only half true. I would love to open up and find a meaningful connection for myself, but I've been disappointed too many times.

“You go, girl. Thank you, Ghita, and thank you, listeners. Tune in next week when we discuss empowerment and motherhood.”

Chapter 3-Ghita

“Why do plants have so many friends?” I pat the soil around my favorite succulent and pot a blooming quince next to it.

“Because they branch out,” yells my twin sister, Gemma, as she rounds the corner. “You talking to plants, now?”

I turn to see her. “Beats my last date.” Brushing the dirt off my pants, I admire the garden from the street. “Plants probably don’t require dating rules either.”

“Neither do you.” Gemma throws her arms wide like a television host. “Nicole should hire you to be her personal landscaper. This garden is top-of-the-line.”

“I’m not sure I have Mom’s green thumb,” I run my finger over a smooth branch, “but the plants are drought resistant, so they should be low maintenance.”

Salvia and sage border the walkway leading to the glass doors of Flavour. I’ve planted forty Texas powerhouse plants for my best friend and am energized by the results, and just in time for her restaurant opening in two weeks.

Gemma’s phone pings with a notification, and I glance over her shoulder to see the match. Gemma uses my BFF app for her entire social life. When she needed someone to attend the Dallas International Film Festival with her, BFF matched her with a lovely widow who didn’t want to go alone. Now, there is a large group called the Leading Ladies, my sister and I included, who go to the festival together every year.

“Who’s the match?” I ask, envious she never attracts slimy slugs of the universe. She blames my relationship rules, but without them, I’d be still dating mollusks.

Gemma tilts the phone so I can see the picture. “A date match? Oh, he’s dreamy.”

“No, he isn’t the match.” She scrolls to the next picture of a very well-dressed dog. “This is my match, an adorable

shih tzu named Liza. The couple is friends with one of the Leading Ladies.”

“Awwwww.” I zoom in on a picture of Liza in a purple and gold Mardi Gras headpiece. “BFF doesn’t let you upload nonhuman profiles. How’d that happen?”

“No,” my sister says. “These two are my match.” She scrolls to a picture of two elegant older gentlemen in tuxedos. “Julio and Armand are celebrating their twentieth anniversary in Palm Springs, and they want to take Liza with them, but she needs a reliable companion for the flight since their two tickets are in first class.”

“Let me get this straight. They are paying you to fly economy round-trip to Palm Springs with Liza, the dog?” I ask.

Gemma frowns. “I’m not sure I have time to go to Palm Springs.”

“No time for Palm Springs? Make the time. And it’s with Liza, the super shih tzu.”

Gemma zooms in on a picture of Liza in an Easter basket. “She’s the cutest, but what about Elmer’s walks and meds?”

“Don’t worry, I know how to walk a dog. I can take care of his meds too. Go to Palm Springs and send me tons of pictures of Liza in her designer doggie outfits.”

Gemma gives me a squeeze. “You sure?”

I squeeze her back. “Definitely. You need a change of scenery.”

Gemma hugs me tighter before replying *yes* to the app and pockets her phone. “Are you ready for the big reveal? Should I get Nicole?”

I shake my head. “Nah. She’s too busy training waitstaff. She’ll see the garden later.”

“What a great surprise. She’s going to love it. You ready to head inside?” Gemma asks, helping me gather the shovel and shears.

I glance at my clothes and dust off the grime. Luckily my jeans and T-shirt are black, so they don't look too filthy. I whip off the straw hat, and my hair tumbles over my shoulders. "Is my hair a hot mess?"

She straightens my part. "You're never a mess." Gemma tucks a lock of identical hair behind her ear.

I poke her in the ribs. "You either, dork."

I throw the supplies and hat in my car and link my arm through Gemma's as we walk inside Flavour. "I'm gonna wash my hands," I say. "You can head to the bar. Don't wait for me."

Gemma hip checks me and turns in the opposite direction.

When I reach her a few minutes later, the bar is lined with several wine glasses and too many bottles to count. "Hey. Where's Nicole?"

"She had a vendor arrive at the last second. Said she'd be a few minutes."

I glance around the industrial barn concept. It's an interior designer's dream space. I note the high ceilings, rustic exposed beams, and rows of long wooden tables, creating a modern family dining experience, which is the latest rage in Dallas. Flavour opens in two weeks, so it's only the waitstaff training today. Gemma and I are doing a special wine tasting with Nicole.

"So, tell me about your date last night," Gemma says, sniffing her wine.

"Failure to launch."

"What? Why?"

"The jerk requested a full-frontal shot twenty minutes before I was supposed to meet him." I swirl the maroon liquid in my glass before swallowing.

Gemma chokes. "That's not a nice way to make friends." She swirls her wine too. "You blocked him, right?"

“Obviously. No sense in teaching manners to rude jerks. They just turn into bigger trolls.”

I recall Chad, the last guy I attempted to teach manners. The night of our first date, he showed up and the first thing he told me was that I had great childbearing hips. When he tried to touch said hips, I slapped his hand away, thinking maybe he would self-adjust, but his rude behavior escalated. After he said I should let the man be the breadwinner in the relationship, I somehow lost one of my favorite red pumps, and now there’s a picture of me on a peg board at Barley House. The rest of the night is a blur, but Nicole says I was badass.

“Ghita, sweet, sweet Ghita,” she says in a mischievous tone, the glass pressed against her eyeball. “What did you do before you blocked him on the app?”

I avert my gaze so she won’t get a read on me and inhale my glass of white. “This pinot blanc from Tuscany has distinct vanilla and butter undertones.”

Gemma taps her pale pink fingernail on the side of her glass. “Stop obstructing my superpowers, Ghita. There’s something you’re not telling me.” She gulps her chardonnay as if it’s medicine and exhales into my face in exasperation. “Tell me what you did.”

“Fine. Fine.” I sample the rosé next, swishing the dark pink liquid in my mouth before swallowing. “I sent him a full-frontal nude.”

“Nooooo. You didn’t.”

“Not of me. Of Herbert, spread out like a centerfold.”

“Your obese stray cat?”

“Yep.” I giggle, remembering the photo.

“I bet Herbert’s dick pic shut him *down*,” Gemma says too loudly.

I cough on a small dribble of wine. “Gemma,” I say in astonishment. “Are you drunk?”

My sister barely drinks. I count our ten empty glasses and shudder. She'll be fast asleep with her head on the table if she doesn't switch to carbs and water pronto.

I grab the cold-water pitcher at the next table and fill an empty wineglass in front of her.

"Here, finish this." I top off the other glasses with water. "Better drink all of them."

After she chugs four glasses, her eyes come into focus.

"Your dating app definitely isn't fool-proof." Gemma burps, wiping her mouth with her cardigan sleeve.

"Shush." I swivel to see if anyone heard. "BFF is not a dating app. That was never the intention. It matches people, not just for dates. And it does work."

"Hold the damn phone."

"Dick" *and* "damn." Gemma is definitely drunk. My sweet sister rarely cusses.

I refill her empty glasses. "Here. Drink more water." I rub her back a little.

Gemma guzzles another glass and plops it hard on the table. She pushes her long brown locks off her shoulders and cups her hands by her ear. "Did I hear you correctly, Ghita? Or are my ears clogged with wax?"

"What do you mean?" I know what she means. She knows I know exactly what she means, but I don't want to give her the satisfaction.

Gemma purses her lips. "Is my sister, the inventor of BFF, admitting that the matching algorithm doesn't work for her?"

"Come on. The app works. People get connected in all different types of situations: dance partners, study groups, and beer brewing. Hell, you're going to Palm Springs with Liza." I point at Nicole working in the kitchen. "And Nicole found her soulmate."

Gemma chugs another flute of water. “But for some crazy reason, it doesn’t work for you, the inventor.” She cocks her head. “I wonder why?” She gives me a dopey grin.

Not this discussion again.

“I like my rules.” I hold up my phone as proof. “Look at the douchebag I weeded out last night. I might have wasted a lunch on the loser before he asked for more than a nude.” I snatch one of Gemma’s discarded wineglasses and drain it. “Maybe it’s time for me to take a dating hiatus.”

“Girl,” a crumbled white apron hits the side of my head, “regardless of your silly rules, creeps are inevitable online and off.” Nicole, my best girlfriend from college, chef extraordinaire, and the owner of Flavour, hops onto the stool across from me.

At four feet eight inches, she has to hop on every piece of furniture. She also recently dyed her black hair bright purple, so every time I see her, I’m reminded of a whimsical tooth fairy. Dressed in a white cotton camisole and a pale blue tulle skirt, she’s only missing wings. It’s unbelievable she cooks in this flammable costume.

I poke her button nose with the tip of my finger. “That’s why I need more rules. The creeps are everywhere.”

Nicole sighs and rubs her forehead. “Some rules are made to be broken.”

I scoff at this ludicrous notion.

“Remember in college when I swore off men who wrote poetry?” Nicole asks. “I mean, how pretentious. But I never would have gone out with Parker if I had kept that ridiculous rule. And his Post-it morning haikus on my mirror are the highlight of my day.”

“Parker is an exception to the rule,” I say.

“Exactly. There will always be exceptions, so why limit yourself?”

“You can be self-righteous because you already found your happily-ever-after. It’s not the same for me.” I tuck a

strand of my hair behind my ear.

Nicole's frown deepens. "Gemma," she says, tapping my sister's shoulder, "back me up."

Gemma remains quiet.

Nicole side-eyes me and asks in a low whisper, "Is she asleep?"

"What?" I try to prop Gemma on her elbows but she collapses. "Oh, shit. Nicole, please grab her a soda. Stat."

Nicole returns from the bar with a full tumbler. I poke the straw into Gemma's mouth and urge her to sip. Soda is the only thing that reverses her alcohol coma.

"How much wine did Gemma drink?" Nicole asks. "I only poured two ounces in every glass."

"She had five glasses, so ten ounces total."

"Damn. I should have known better and made hers one ounce each." She rubs Gemma's shoulder.

"She should have tasted the desserts instead of the wine," I say.

Gemma's head perks up. "Did someone say dessert?"

"Can we give her your signature cherry cheesecake?" I dislodge a piece of Gemma's hair stuck to her lip. "Those decadent carbs should soak up the wine in no time."

Nicole returns with a slice of cheesecake that could be described as a slice of orgasm on a plate: vanilla cheesecake on a fudge crust overflowing with a homemade sour cherry sauce loaded with fresh ripe cherries.

Gemma takes a bite, her mouth full of cheesecake, and says, "Your ... rules ... don't ... work." She points her fork at me like a weapon.

I ignore the threat and run my finger through the cherry sauce and lick the sweetness off. "That's why I developed more dating rules."

“More rules?” Gemma and Nicole say in unison, shaking their heads at me.

“Gemma, remember my date last week? Shane said he adored animals.”

Gemma turns to Nicole. “You can’t date a Russo without liking animals. Gabe owns a vet clinic for heaven’s sake.”

“Being an animal person makes sense. Your brother would kill you if you brought home an animal hater,” Nicole says. “And what decent human doesn’t like animals?”

“Right? But get this nonsense.” I point my finger at Nicole. “Dude showed up at Taco Diner for our date in a sexy Komodo dragon costume.”

“What? Why?”

“He’s a furry,” Gemma says as if this sex kink is something you see every day. “He really, really likes animals.”

“I should have asked if he fancied dressing as an animal.” I finish my last glass of pinot. “New dating rule: no furries.”

“Another rule?” Gemma asks, scraping the last bit of cheesecake with her fork.

“Yep.”

Nicole jumps off her stool and heads behind the bar. “This debate requires a bigger carafe.”

I shake my finger at Gemma. “No more alcohol for you, lightweight.”

“Let me eat cake,” she says, half yawning, half giggling.

“Coming right up, Marie Antoinette,” Nicole says, heading toward the kitchen.

She returns with a gigantic apple tart heaping with homemade cinnamon ice cream and a jug of German Riesling.

Gemma hugs her. “You spoil me.”

Nicole pours the wine into two empty glasses. “Okay, shoot.”

I hold up my hand and count off on my fingers. “Well, no animal costumes.”

“Nothing wrong with dressing in costumes every once in a while,” Nicole says.

“True. But animal kinks aren’t my thing,” I say.

“I might try it.” Gemma stuffs a bite of apple into her mouth.

“And they must wear a shirt and shoes,” I say, ignoring Gemma.

“Like 7-Eleven?” Nicole asks.

“Yep. No shirt. No shoes. No service.”

“All the time?” Gemma asks.

“No, but on dates.”

“Why?” Nicole sips her wine.

“Just trust me,” I say and hold up another finger. “Oh. And no hats.”

“What?” Nicole asks. “The backward baseball cap swagger is a sexy trend for men.”

“Nope. Men wear hats in their profile photos to cover their bald spots.”

“So, no bald men?” Gemma frowns. “That’s biased, Ghita.”

“I don’t care if he’s bald, but if he hides his appearance, what else is he hiding?”

Gemma nods her head. “Fair enough, no hatfishing.”

“These aren’t terrible rules,” Nicole says.

I smile at my sister. “See, Sis?”

“Why don’t you tell her about the balloon arches?” Gemma says with a smirk.

“Balloon arches?” Nicole refills her glass. “This ought to be good. Please don’t tell me they turn you on.”

“Nooooo.” I raise an eyebrow. “Do they turn anyone on?”

“I wouldn’t mind sex under a balloon arch,” Gemma says, staring seductively at her scoop of ice cream.

“Seriously, Gemma?” I grin at Nicole. “Is there liquor in this dessert?”

She shakes her head. “What’s wrong with balloon arches, sex under them aside?” Nicole asks.

“Have you ever priced a balloon arch?”

“How much can they be?” Nicole steals a scoop of Gemma’s ice cream. “A hundred bucks?”

“Nope. Over a thousand dollars.”

“Honestly?” Nicole says, looking dumbfounded. “For balloons? Who knew? What a waste of money.”

“Exactly. They clearly have no money sense.”

Nicole scrunches her tiny forehead at me. “Huge leap from balloons to financial ruin, Ghita.”

“I agree. What if the guy really loves balloons,” Gemma says, faithfully the optimist.

“Am I dating a toddler?”

Nicole laughs. “Ghita has a point there.”

“Enough talking about me,” I say to change the subject. “Let’s toast to Nicole’s success.” I raise my glass and touch it to hers.

Gemma stabs a piece of tart on her fork. “To Nicole.”

“Flavour will be a huge hit,” I say, beaming with love for my bestie.

Nicole clutches her heart. “Thanks, guys, for the support and the wine tastings. Well, minus Gemma’s bout of unconsciousness.”

“Hey, I was only resting my eyes.”

“I’ll make my flight menu and wine pairings tomorrow. Will you come next week to try the specials?”

“Of course,” Gemma says before I can agree. “Name the time, and we’ll be here. Eventually, though, you must let us pay for our meals and drinks.”

“Don’t worry about it. Someday I’ll beg for help, and I’m certain you two will be first in line.”

“Always,” I say.

“So, what’s the update with the architect?” Nicole asks me.

I’ve been purposefully quiet concerning my construction dilemma, but I guess she noticed.

“Didn’t you meet with her this morning?” Gemma takes another sip of water. “Is she able to guarantee the soundproofing?”

I shrug my shoulders. “Umm ...”

“What’s with the face?” Nicole asks.

“You don’t care for her design?” Gemma asks.

“No, just the opposite. I love it. It’s a seamless plan. There will still be space in the garage for my car and decent square footage left for the studio.”

“So, what’s the issue?” Nicole asks.

“It’s super expensive. The wiring and equipment cost a ton. To complete the entire project will require a hefty loan. My goal is no debt.”

“How much are we talking?” Gemma licks her ice cream off the spoon. “I can’t offer you thousands, but let me help. Gabe and Hannah would pitch in too. The whole family would.”

“No, but thank you. I wanna do this on my own.”

“But we want to help you,” Nicole says. “I’ll be able to pitch in too once I establish the restaurant.”

“You guys are the best. I’m extremely lucky, but really, I need this to be my project.”

Glass crashes from the kitchen, and Nicole winces. “Give me a second.” She runs toward the noise.

Gemma gives me the twin stare. “Spill it. You have a plan. It’s written on your face.”

“Mismatched is still my podcast dream, but for now, I can rely on my social media following to secure a few product endorsements to cover studio rent. I can eat ramen noodles and get a roommate to save money.”

Nicole returns with a cheese plate, hummus, and a variety of freshly baked crusty bread. “Did you say a roommate? Please tell me you aren’t taking in a Craigslist killer.”

“Nicole’s right,” Gemma says. “You can’t live with a stranger in this day and age.”

I choke on my bread. “You take in strange animals regularly. What’s the difference?” I joke.

My sweet sister is the Saint Francis of Dallas, the patron saint of abandoned animals. If there is a one-legged dog or a one-eyed cat within a five-mile radius of where Gemma is standing, the desperate animal will find its way to her. At the moment, she is nursing a blind and deaf Yorkie named Elmer.

“Elmer is not a stranger,” Gemma says, with her lips puckered. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings. Everyone in our family has a soft spot for living creatures.

“But what about Albert?” I ask.

“My llama friend? He’s not a stranger either. Anymore. Plus, I found him a forever home in Fort Worth.”

Gemma’s heart is too big for her wallet. I blow her a kiss to apologize, and she blows one back, dropping the subject.

“Maybe I can list my house as a weekend rental and crash at Mom and Dad’s with you. I just need a short bit of steady cash flow.”

“What if renters make meth in your kitchen?” Nicole asks, and Gemma stares at her in horror.

“No one makes meth in Dallas,” I say. “Do they?”

“Oh, my gosh.” Nicole slams her hand on the table. “I’ve got it. I have a solution.”

I shake my finger at her. “I’m not selling feet pictures on the internet. I don’t care how much money your cousin makes. It’s never going to happen.”

“No, not that. Hear me out.” Nicole jumps a bit in her chair like an excited child on her birthday. “It’s a solid solution, and it helps me too.”

“Nicole, I love you, but I stink at waiting tables. Remember my stint in college? I dropped every tray I carried out of the kitchen. They paid me to leave.”

“Are you kidding? I wouldn’t let you wait tables here. Well, unless I was seriously desperate.”

Gemma bursts out laughing.

“Ha. You’re no better.” I point at my sister. “Remember, you ate so many cheese biscuits at Red Lobster, they made you pay for them out of your tips.”

“*Touché*,” Gemma says, tearing off a chunk of Italian bread on the table. “But those biscuits are divine.”

“My brother’s moving here,” Nicole shouts. I haven’t seen Nicole this enthusiastic since she announced her restaurant opening.

“What?” I ask. “And you’re just now getting around to this news? You should have led with this info.”

“We’re finally going to meet the famous Logan?” Gemma finishes the tart with a delicate wipe of her mouth.

“Yes, in a few weeks. He got a job here, in Dallas.”

Gemma holds her hand in a stopping motion. “Wait. I thought he was getting married.”

Nicole shakes her head. “No. They were pretty serious but broke up a few months after he started looking for jobs all over the country.” She claps her hands. “I’m thrilled to live close again. Logan is the best big brother, and California was too far away.”

“I thought he was a big surfer,” I say.

“He’s a huge surfer. Being landlocked is going to test him for sure, but he believes saving the world is worth the sacrifice of the perfect wave.”

“Nice. Someone needs to do it.” My mind drifts to the article about atmospheric shifts I read at the dentist’s office and to the damn overpriced balloon arches everywhere.

“That’s not the best part.” Nicole rubs her hands together like a woman with a plan.

Gemma and I lean in closer.

“Logan needs somewhere to stay until he finds a permanent place to live. Since the Dallas area is enormous, he isn’t sure where he wants an apartment. Logan wants a location close to work, so he doesn’t have to drive, but he also said he could take the DART transit system if he found a place near the train line.”

“Why doesn’t he stay with you?” I ask, forgetting that she and Parker live in a closet with a bathroom.

“Where would he sleep? On the toilet? The three of us can’t fit in my place. He’s great. You’ll love him. I swear.”

“Sounds promising,” Gemma says, winking at me.

“I want to help out your brother,” I say, “but—”

“But nothing,” Nicole says. “It’s a perfect match. Total win-win. Logan could rent from you for a few weeks. Maybe a few months? You’d save money, he would be comfortable, and I could hang out with you both.”

“Maybe Logan will be the elusive unicorn and satisfy your extensive dating rules.” Gemma laughs at her joke.

I sigh and think of my last few dates. “The unicorn doesn’t exist for me.”

“Ohh, and Parker loves him,” Nicole says in a singsongy voice. “And you know how picky Parker is about people.”

“Hmm. I do trust his instincts about people.” And I trust Nicole with my life.

She squeezes my hand. “Under no circumstances would I put you in an uncomfortable position. And the roommate situation would be temporary.”

“And you’ll be able to build your studio sooner,” Gemma says, adding her hand to the stack.

“It’s a flawless plan,” Nicole says. “You both would benefit. What do you say?”

“She’ll do it,” Gemma says before I respond.

“I will?”

“Of course, you will,” she says and stands as if this is the final decision.

I raise my hands as if I’m being mugged. “Okay, okay. I’ll do it.”

Nicole leans over and hugs me tight. “You’ll love Logan.”

Chapter 4-Logan

“Wow.” I pause and recheck Google Maps on my phone. Nicole said I could stay with her best friend for a couple of months, but I wasn’t expecting an actual house. Nicole and Parker call their place an urban loft, but it’s more like a tiny glass box. The only privacy is in the bathroom. Their bed is next to the refrigerator.

Ghita’s house is an original mid-century brick piece of art. The low-pitched roof and extended soffits make it feel as if you are about to enter a secret time portal, especially after passing so many Tudors. I desperately hope she hasn’t removed any original historic elements from the inside of the house. Seeing that she kept the beautiful mature shade tree in the small front yard brings immense joy to my eco-conscious soul.

I park my ancient Corolla in the empty driveway and the bottom of my small attached U-Haul scrapes the concrete. I forgot the rickety container on wheels was secured to my bumper. I don’t own much, but I couldn’t leave my favorite chair behind in the move. I thought about tying it to the roof, but the old recliner never would have survived the two-day drive from California.

I kick back my seat to stretch my legs, and my eyes close involuntarily now that the car is stationary at last.

A horn blares behind me, and I startle awake. Great. My first day in Dallas, and I’ve already upset the neighbors. I rub my eyes and check my face in the mirror for signs of drool.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

I bolt upright, hitting my head on the car roof. Nicole and Parker are standing by the passenger window rapping on the glass and bouncing on their toes. My sister, her purple hair in a topknot and a green tulle miniskirt fluttering around her short legs, resembles Tinkerbell in a *Peter Pan* production. Whereas Parker, his long dark hair in a ponytail and sporting his signature Salvador Dali mustache, towers over my sister as

the menacing Captain Hook. These two are the craziest-looking pair.

“My big brother is finally here,” Nicole shrieks. “And you’re so tan,” she squeezes my arms, “and muscular.” She ruffles my thick hair. “You finally cut it short. I love it. Very eco-professional but still hippie adjacent.”

I smile and crawl out of the car. “Hey, Sis. I could say the same about your hair.” I’m stiff and disoriented from hours of attentive driving, but I pick her up and spin her around. She weighs nothing. It’s an old habit I keep to drive her insane.

“Did you shrink?” I ask my standard annoying-brother question and tug her closer.

“No.” She swats my shoulder. “Put me down.”

Nicole lands on her feet, an experienced cheerleader move, and Parker holds out his arms for a bear hug. I’ll never get used to this gentle giant. It’s disarming to have a man lift my 6’2” frame, swing me around, and tackle me for a hug.

“I still can’t believe you came to help me unpack with Flavour opening at the end of this week. You must be swamped.”

“Monday is the prime move-in time. Starting Friday, I’ll be drowning in work and unable to do anything but put out restaurant fires.”

I pick her up again and hold her high in the air, staring into dark brown eyes that match mine. “Annnnd ... the Best Sister of the Year award goes tooooo ... Nicole Scott.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” Parker asks as he single-handedly grabs my giant recliner from the U-Haul. “Where am I putting this beast?”

“Geez, Parker,” I say in awe of his brawn. “You missed your true calling as a professional mover.”

“Don’t listen to him, Park,” Nicole says and grabs a small handful of my hangers. “Are these all your clothes?”

“Yep, five button-downs for work.”

“But they’re all blue. The other employees will think you’re wearing the same shirt every day.”

“It’s called a capsule wardrobe. You know, like Einstein.”

“Did you just compare yourself to Einstein?” My sister bends over laughing.

“Just his wardrobe.”

“Excuse me, you two,” Parker says, readjusting the enormous chair in his arms like an unwieldy baby. “Is Ghita home? The house is dark.”

“No. She’s out, but I have my key.” Nicole waves a small stuffed sloth hanging from a key chain at me. “You’ll meet Ghita later. Since you didn’t have an exact time of arrival, I told her not to wait around for you. The girl is super busy.”

I nod. The move and the job happened so fast that I forgot to ask Nicole for details about my new roomie. But if she’s Nicole’s friend, she must be down to earth and chill.

I grab a shoe box and my mesh laundry bag filled with boxers and socks. “Okay, the car’s unpacked.”

“Seriously, Logan?”

“What?”

Nicole glances into the empty passenger seat. “This is everything you own?”

“These match my dress clothes.” I wiggle my AllBirds in the air. “And I have my Birkenstocks. Who needs more than two pairs of shoes?”

Nicole, the girl with Converse in twelve different colors, shakes her head in disbelief.

“What can I say? I’m a minimalist.”

I push open the wooden door and gasp. Ghita is definitely not a minimalist. Every square inch of the main room is styled magazine-perfect. I have walked through a time

portal. There is actual wood paneling on the wall and exposed brick. “Wow. Is Ghita an interior designer or an architect?”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? Girl has taste. The neighbors were afraid she was going to tear down this 50s masterpiece, but she surprised everyone by restoring it.”

Parker’s phone rings. “I should get this.” He drops the chair by the door. “Give me a few minutes.”

“Wow,” I say for a second time as I step farther into the house. It’s a mid-century museum. I drop my shoe box on a low glass table and sink into a decadent black leather lounge that rivals my recliner ... almost.

“Oh. My. God. Is this an Eames chair?” I jump up. “Is Ghita uber-wealthy?”

I glance around the living room, noticing a button-tufted emerald green velvet sectional, a wooden dining table that’s probably teak, and a floor lamp that looks more art-like than furniture-like. Each piece has a simple beauty, but the price tag screams anything but simple.

Nicole laughs. “I mean she makes enough money with her app to afford this house and renovate it, but she’s hardly in the one percent.” She points to the chair I just vacated. “And she definitely bought the Eames chair at a random estate sale. The surviving children probably thought it was ugly and wanted to dump it. Ghita is great at finding a diamond in the rough.”

I glance around, suddenly worried. I’m a bull in a china shop. “Ghita has been informed I’m staying with her, right? This isn’t a terrible roommate surprise?”

“Of course, she knows.”

“It feels weird to have not met yet. I’m a squatter sneaking into her impeccable house with my scant belongings and a patchwork recliner. We should have at least Zoomed.”

“Don’t be silly. You’ll Zelle her rent money every week. Easy peasy. You’ll love each other. I promise.”

“What does Ghita do for work?”

“She’s an influencer. She works her ass off. Companies reach out to her to market their products on her social media platforms. But her actual job is hosting her new podcast called Mismatched.”

“She loves to shop and play matchmaker to strangers over the radio?”

“Logan Scott, you must be tired if you’re being judgy. Ghita works hard to help people connect. She’s also industrious, refurbishing antiques and creating art out of what others consider trash. The entire blooming walkway in front of my restaurant was her design. She planted it all as a surprise for me. Wait until you meet her. Oh, and wait until you meet the rest of the Russo family. Her parents will adopt you as one of their own. That’s how they roll.”

I try to stop myself mid-yawn but can’t reverse it.

“We have lots of catching up to do,” she says, patting my arm, “but you’re exhausted.”

“I am, and hungry.”

“Dammit. I made you veggie stir-fried noodles but left them on the counter at the restaurant. I don’t mind getting them.”

“Nah. I’ll see if my new roomie has anything I can whip up.”

“Best of luck finding edible food. Ghita rarely cooks. She’s more of an eat-an-apple-and-drink-a-smoothie kind of woman.”

I follow Nicole into the kitchen. “Wow,” I say for the third time. The kitchen has wall-to-ceiling windows, overlooking a brick courtyard draped in greenery. I open the sliding glass doors and breathe in the scent of trees and plants. It’s a garden oasis.

“Meeooow.”

I turn and almost stumble into a cushioned patio chair.

“That’s Herbert,” Nicole says. “Don’t mind the cat. He’s a regular visitor to Ghita’s courtyard.”

“That’s a cat? Looks more like a bowling ball covered in fur than a feline.”

“Meeoow,” Herbert hisses as if I offended him.

“Logan, I don’t think he likes you.”

“Are you kidding? Cats love me. I’m a cat magnet.”

Nicole hands me a cat treat from a jar by the door. “I hope that’s not the line you use to get dates.”

“Ha. Ha. Funny.” I stretch down to feed Herbert, but he hisses aggressively. I retreat into the kitchen, giving him space. “I’m going to win over this cat.”

“You do love a challenge,” Nicole says.

She’s correct. I do love a challenge.

We walk back through the living room and nearly bump into my brown recliner sitting in the middle of Ghita’s curated space. “I’m worried about my lounge. Can you help me move it into my room?”

“Oh, so you are aware it’s an infected eyesore?”

“Don’t let Wilma hear you talk like that.”

“You named your ugly chair Wilma?”

“Shh, you’ll hurt her feelings, and I love her.” I sink into her worn seat cushion and sigh with relief. “I do my best thinking in this chair.”

“Fine. Let’s move Wilma to the guest bedroom.”

I grab the top, while Nicole bends toward the skirting. Luckily, Parker returns, waving his arms. “No, baby. Stop immediately,” he says.

“What?” Nicole lets go of the chair. “Why?”

“You can’t move that piece of furniture. It weighs a million tons.” He motions to me. “Come on Logan, help me.”

I grab the metal rail at the bottom and proceed to stand. It’s heavier than I remember from a few days ago when I loaded the chair in the U-Haul. Did it gain weight on the way here? If it did, the poundage is no match for Parker. He easily

lifts the other side and starts walking down the narrow hall to the bedroom. The chair sits dangerously lopsided in my arms because Parker is holding most of the weight.

Nicole runs ahead of us to guide us into the bedroom. “Watch the walls. We don’t want to chip Ghita’s paint.”

I tilt my side, but the fluffy arms of the chair hug the door frame, stopping us in our tracks.

“No way in hell this chair will fit through that opening,” Nicole says. “It’s not gonna happen. Ol’ Wilma is staying in the living room.” She points to the front door. “Or the dump.”

“The dump? What? No. I can’t. Wilma is like a sister to me.”

“Ha. Real funny,” Nicole says, pushing us into the living room.

Parker dumps Wilma next to the Eames, and we collectively shudder at the contrast between the two pieces of furniture.

“Ghita’s going to kill me in my sleep isn’t she?” I ask.

“You’re a dead man walking,” Parker says.

“Maybe if you toss a blanket on it, she won’t notice the monstrosity,” Nicole says, draping a thin, soft throw, which barely covers a fourth of the chair’s girth.

“She’ll never even see it,” Parker says, and we both stare at him.

Nicole shakes her head. “You dragged that nasty brute from California?”

“I couldn’t leave her with Mandy.”

Nicole sinks into Wilma and sighs. “Wow, it is super cozy. Hey, Park, do you think the brute will fit in our place?”

“You can’t take Wilma away from me,” I say in an embarrassing panic.

“So, is that why you two really broke up? Mandy couldn’t get past the other woman in your life?”

I stifle a yawn. “Something along those lines.”

“Nicole,” Parker says, tapping my sister on her shoulder. “Let the man rest. He’s exhausted.”

Nicole ignores him. “Was Mandy upset about your move?”

“I guess.”

“You could have left Wilma with her as a parting gift.”

Parker taps her once more. “Nicole.”

She ignores him again. “You don’t seem too heartbroken.”

“I’m not,” I reach my arms above my head and crack my neck. “We flamed out way before we broke up. You know the situation. I just couldn’t live with it anymore.”

“I’m sorry, Logan. Breakups suck. Mandy is a nice girl.”

“Yeah, but now I can focus on my dream job.”

“Yep. Saving the world.” She jumps up and kisses the top of my head.

“Welcome to Dallas.” Parker gives me another one of his bear hugs. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Nicole says, dangling the sloth key ring on the end of her finger. “You take this one. I have another spare. Oh, and the deadbolt sticks.”

“You have a spare key for your spare key?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she says and walks out the door with Parker. They look adorably cockeyed with their arms wrapped around each other.

Chapter 5-Ghita

It's midnight. My flight home to Dallas was canceled, twice, and the next one was overbooked, so I've been stuck at the LAX airport for the past fourteen hours. I smell like moldy carpet tiles, am starving, and can't keep my eyes open. There's a woman three chairs away with two small children sleeping on top of her. For some reason, I am obsessed with watching her luggage, just in case she falls asleep.

"Excuse me?"

I glance up to see a cute pre-teen girl hovering above my chair. "Umm, hi?"

"Are you ... uh, are you Ghita Russo?"

"I am." I plaster on my best public personae smile. It's not this girl's fault I'm giving off airport stink and stale coffee breath.

The young girl winds her finger in her hair, getting ready to ask me the same question I regularly get in public. "May I take a selfie with you?"

"Sure." I straighten my ruffled pink Dior T-shirt and wince. I promote Dior Addict Lip Glow, and their reps sent me this overpriced T-shirt to wear yesterday at Unicorns and Rainbows, a new boutique dedicated to only lipsticks and lip balms, and here I am, still wearing it.

"I'm not looking my best," I say.

"Are you kidding? You're beautiful. I totally want that rock'n Dior shirt."

She winds her hair again, and I remember the sample lip balms in my purse. I search for a tube as she steps from foot to foot, doing a little nervous dance.

"How about one of Dior's newest colors?"

"For me? Really?" She tentatively holds out her hand.

I pause, hoping she'll introduce herself. "Yes, I'd love for you to have it." I place the pink, jeweled canister in her

open palm. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Kaylee.” She waves as if I’m five miles from her instead of five inches.

“Hi, Kaylee. It’s nice to meet you. And of course, you can snap a photo.”

She holds her phone in front of us, and I stop her. “Here’s a pro tip. Hold the camera high above your head. No one wants double chins or crazy eyes.”

“Oh,” Kaylee says and adjusts the angle. We pose for a succession of clicks before she drops the phone into her pocket. “Thank you soooo much, Ghita. I can’t wait to tell my friends I met you. This is the best day ever.”

I grin down at her. “You are so kind, but meeting you is the real gift. In-person connections top any kind of social media friendship.” She gives me a shy side hug, but I tug her tighter. “Safe travels, Kaylee.” I wave to her as she gallops toward her dad, a middle-aged man filming us from a few feet away. He mouths the words “thank you.”

When my plane boards an hour later, I can’t wait to fall into a deep coma, but before submitting completely, I notice the woman with the two small children in the next row. I wonder if she’s been at the airport for fourteen hours too, and I remember my mother’s harrowing stories about flying alone with small children. I lean over and ask if I can help. The relief on her face is worth any sleep deprivation. I hold her two-year-old and recite *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* the entire flight back to Dallas.

It’s after 4 a.m. when I arrive home. I’m desperate to take a hot shower and dive into my bed for at least eight hours of sleep. I am so exhausted I don’t even bother to switch on the lights. I drop my overnight bag on the floor, kick off my boots in the front hallway, and head for the master bedroom. But blocking my path, in the middle of my living room, is a giant furry monster. I smack straight into it and screech in pain.

“Oh shit. Damn. Hellfire.”

Hopping around on one foot and rubbing my stubbed toe, I attempt to refocus. It's pitch dark. Did the creature retreat for another surprise attack? I swing my head from left to right. Crap. I should have turned on the damn lights.

I take a careful step, calculating how fast I can run out the front door when I hear a rustling movement down the hall. Someone is in the guest bedroom. There are two sasquatches residing in my house. I'm going to end up on the evening news.

I'm too tired for this shitshow tonight.

I tiptoe over to the light switch, afraid to alert the beast, and click on the overhead chandelier.

I freeze.

Before me isn't a Craigslist killer, nor is it a sasquatch. It's the largest, ugliest, brownest recliner ever created. The thing is hideous and enormous. It has pillowy arms with folds of extra fabric hanging off the sides. And it's occupying precious real estate in my living room. I glance around the room. The creature might have eaten a few pieces of my other furniture. It's a monster chair.

"What the hell are you doing in my living room?" I shout-whisper at it. Is Gemma playing a prank on me? Then I remember today's date. It's Roomie move-in day.

How could I forget? The sound down the hall was probably Nicole's brother moving around in his sleep. I glance at the chair, uglier in the light, and tremble. Did he bring this hideous chair all the way from California? I shift my eyes around the room. What else did he bring?

How much junk does this guy have? How long does he plan to stay? Why did he leave that giant beast in the middle of my living room? I don't even know this guy. Does he think he's staying indefinitely? I don't care if he is Nicole's brother.

I'm being irrational, but it's super late and sleep deprivation isn't doing me any favors in the patience department.

I squat next to the furry recliner to have a heart-to-heart. “Okay, demon monster, you aren’t staying, and you for sure aren’t consuming the entire living room.” I rip off my favorite blanket. “And how dare you put your grubby hands on my cashmere throw? You can’t eat that too.” I toss it on the sofa and make a note to soak the delicate fabric in hot soapy water later.

“Don’t get comfortable,” I say to the beast. “I’m pushing you out to the courtyard, so I can sleep in peace.”

I plant my bare feet on the floor and bend at my waist, bracing for impact. I push with all my might, but the woolly mammoth doesn’t budge. I need to put more power into the shove, so I reposition and bend my knees to use more of my leg muscles. Nothing.

This time, I brace my hands on the pillowy front edge, but it doesn’t even scoot an inch. I swear I hear the damn lounge laughing at me.

Yep, exhaustion is clouding my brain.

I lay on the ground and anchor my feet against the saggy arm. I take a deep breath and use my super strength, palms holding fast to the floor, and my feet giving all they’ve got.

The monster doesn’t yield.

“Fine.” I collapse on the floor. “You win this round, but you’re going down tomorrow.”

I check around the room, making sure the monster doesn’t have any shabby friends. Lucky for him, he’s a lone offender.

Hungry from the effort, I stroll into the kitchen to grab a banana. Not only are there no bananas, but there is a strong earthy odor that wasn’t in here before I left for LA. I click on the stove light and find a small, green box perched on the counter. I lift the lid and pinch my nose. Inside are my missing bananas, well, only their empty peels.

“What the hell is this? Compost on my counter?” The foul odor creeps around the kitchen, so I slam the lid. “Dude

left a monster recliner and a tub of disgusting compost?”

This is not happening. No way. He’s outta here. Is my guest room filled with recycling and patchouli?

I stride out of the kitchen and drop onto the sectional, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

My sister answers on the second ring. “You better be in jail. It’s an hour before my alarm goes off. I’ll never fall back to sleep. Wait. *Are* you in jail? If so, call Gabe. I don’t have the money to bail you out.”

“Gemma. He can’t stay,” I loud whisper into the phone.

“What? Hold on. Your voice is too soft. Who can’t stay? Gabe? Is he already there at the jail?”

“No. Enough about jail. Why is it that whenever I call you in the middle of the night you assume I’m in jail?”

“So, you’re not in jail?”

“No, but please listen. Nicole’s brother. He’s gross. He can’t stay.”

“He’s gross?”

“Big-time nasty gross. He put trash on my counter and parked Hagrid in my living room.”

“Huh? Nicole’s brother is Hagrid?”

“Gemma. Listen to me. This guy has to go. Please. Help. Me.”

“You need help? Are you in danger? Should I call the cops?” Her voice has gone high-pitched and squeaky.

“No, nothing like that. At least I don’t think so.” The last thing I need is Gemma and the cops charging into my house.

“What do you mean by help then? I’m officially worried and awake. Should I come over? Should I wake Dad?”

“No. For sure, no. Well, maybe stop by tomorrow? But how do I get rid of this monster in my living room?”

“What monster? Who’s a monster? Nicole’s brother is a monster? I thought Logan was a surfer and an environmentalist?”

“Hmm. Well, the compost sort of makes sense. I guess.”

“Ghita?”

“No. Wait. He could still be a monster. I don’t know yet.”

“What do you mean you don’t know yet?” Gemma sounds on full alert now. “Is he or isn’t he a terrible monster?”

“I don’t know,” I say.

“You better know if you’re waking me up. My sleep rhythms will be wonky for the rest of the week.”

“I haven’t met him yet.”

“What did you say?” Gemma asks into the phone.

“Shhh.”

“Why are you quieting *me*?”

I cover my head with the throw. “Ihaventmethimyet.”

“Ghita, I swear to all glazed donuts. I will put on my shoes and head over there now if you don’t tell me what’s going on.”

Letting the blanket fall off my face, I return to the smelly kitchen. “Logan moved in while I was in LA. He brought this nasty recliner, and it’s dominating my entire living room. It tried to attack me. Also, my kitchen stinks like a landfill. There is compost on my counter. And I’m so so tired.”

The phone is silent. Nothing.

“He’s in the guest room sleeping. I think. I haven’t met him yet.”

Nothing

“Gemma? Are you there?”

She clears her throat. “You woke me up about an ugly chair and smelly compost?”

“Umm ... ye ... es.”

“That’s it,” Gemma says, and I hear a door open in the background. “It’s official. I’m up. I’m going to the gym. We’ll talk later. Please get some sleep.”

“Wait. What should I do? He can’t stay.”

“He can, and he will. Even if he’s a hideous ogre, he’s staying. He’s Nicole’s brother so how bad can he be? Think of the studio. He won’t be there long. I love you, but you are acting insane. You need sleep. Go to bed. Oh, but don’t forget we are meeting at Mom’s in the morning to discuss the wedding.”

She hangs up, and I’m left leaning against the kitchen sink inhaling the smelly compost. I want the studio finished, but a shaggy monster and his stinky trash might be too much for me to handle.

Chapter 6-Ghita

“It’s about damn time,” I sing at the top of my lungs, playing the steering wheel as if it’s a drum. I’m perking up with the car windows rolled down and cool morning air blowing on my face.

I barely slept a wink because the demonic recliner haunted my dreams and kept me tossing all night. I left the house too early to meet my new roommate, although he might have stirred when the front door lock got stuck, and I had to kick the door closed.

I turn into the Kessler Park neighborhood, and the familiar tree-lined streets leading to our family home calm me even more. Mom never wants to move. She says she will die in the red brick and stucco house where she raised us. If Gemma doesn’t stop financially supporting all the stray animals in Dallas, she’ll die in our childhood house too.

I park on the curb at the same time as Gabe and Hannah. My brother and his wife are my favorite married couple. They never harp on my non-existent love life and always feed me homemade guacamole and fresh tortillas when I visit. We wave like lunatics who haven’t seen one another for ten years even though I saw them last weekend at Hannah’s baby shower.

I point at Hannah’s belly. “You should name the twins Roxy and Raven after the heroines in your graphic novels.”

“I’m not birthing twins,” she says and rubs her stomach.

Gabe swings his arm over my shoulder. “Ghita, just because we told you about the fortune teller on Bourbon Street doesn’t mean you get to mention it all the time.”

“But she said Hannah would have a little girl who resembled her friend Libby. How the hell can I let that go? It’s too magical. How could a fortune teller know about Libby?”

Hannah pretends the psychic reading about her best friend who died didn’t affect her, but she bought a chicken foot

to hang over the nursery door just in case. I should ask if she has another foot to protect me from the awful recliner parked in my living room and the man who brought the monster inside my house.

Gabe gives the top of my head a noogie. “Which evil twin are you?” The family expects Gemma and me to be joined at the hip. We were each other’s shadows throughout our school years and college too, but they still expect us to be conjoined. “Just kidding, your other nicer half is buying syrup at Trader Joe’s.”

“Oh, I could have stopped on the way over. I passed right by it.”

We climb the concrete steps and enter without knocking. “Mom, we’re here.”

“Who’s *we*?” Mom rounds the corner and folds me into a hug. “Hi, honey.” She grabs Gabe and sandwiches Hannah between them.

“Stop squeezing or a baby will pop out,” Gabe says, wriggling out of the embrace. “They need to cook for three more months.” My giant brother lifts Mom off the ground and twirls her around.

“Okay. Okay. I get your point,” Mom says, out of breath. “Put me down.”

“Get your tardy asses in here.” Gloria’s voice echoes from the kitchen.

“Gloria, watch your mouth,” Mom says.

She pokes her head around the corner. “Sorry, Mom.”

“Damn, you look good for over thirty.” I love to tease my oldest sister.

Mom gives me an evil eye.

“Sorry, Mom.”

“Looking good yourself, Ghita.” Jacob, Gloria’s gorgeous fiancé, walks into the foyer and side-hugs me. “Where’s your evil twin?” He winks as if it’s an inside joke

even though he and Gabe say it to me every time I see them without Gemma. “This is a photo-free zone today, right?”

He’s teasing me. Again. As one of the most well-known singer-songwriters in the world, Jacob helped me cull a decent following on social media which led me to create my BFF app. If it weren’t for Jacob’s role in my life, I wouldn’t be where I am professionally. Plus, he’s a great brother-in-law to be. He adores my sister Gloria and has since high school.

“Ha, ha, very funny, Jacob. No photos today. Promise. I’m on the radio now.”

“Ghita’s podcast is gonna be huge,” Mom says with her arms stretched wide.

I hug her. “I hope so.”

Jacob rubs the top of my head, making a nest of my hair. “Ghita’s a superstar at everything she does.”

“Hey, dork,” Giovanna says, peering from the open doorway. “Come scramble the eggs.”

I turn to my brother as we walk into the kitchen. “She’s talking to you.” Everyone knows the only cooking I do is in the toaster.

Giovanna points a paring knife at me. “Here, slice this apple.” She slides a cutting board in front of me, and we listen to Gloria rattle off the latest wedding details.

“We have five of Jacob’s SXSW friends from Austin driving up to play at the reception. And of course, I’m walking down the aisle to ‘Glory Road.’”

“Glory Road” is the song Jacob sang to Gloria live in concert the night they finally got their act together. The whole family still grows teary when we hear his song on the radio.

“Franny? You in here?” My dad wanders in wearing a red apron that says, “I Turn Grills On.”

“Dad?” I laugh. “What are you wearing?”

He spins around, snapping his giant tongs in the air and grabbing my mom’s bum with them. “Your mom thought the

apron was sexy.”

Everyone groans except Mom, who plants a wet kiss on his lips. “You are sexy.”

After thirty-three years of marriage, they are still madly in love.

“Why am I firing up the grill?” he asks. “I thought you wanted a big breakfast.”

“I do.” She hands him the sheet pan lined with raw bacon strips. “Everyone loves grilled bacon.”

“Roger that,” he says and walks back through the French doors to the vast outdoor kitchen.

“Your biscuit timer is finished. Your biscuit timer is finished.”

“Alexa, turn off the timer,” the entire family says in unison as if we are Amazon-trained seals.

“Turning off biscuit timer.”

Jacob grabs a mitt and slides the homemade buttermilk biscuits out of the oven.

“We’re having biscuits and pancakes?” Gloria says. “Mom, you did too much.”

“It’s not every day I have almost all my babies home for a meal. I’m sad Gina can’t make it. She has an art history exam on Monday.”

“What about Hannah’s baby shower last weekend? We were all here, even Gina.”

“My boys weren’t.” She means Gabe and Jacob. Jacob has always been a Russo boy in Mom’s mind, so she acts as if she has two sons.

“Gabe lives fifteen minutes away. He doesn’t count,” Giovanna says in an exasperated tone. “He’s here constantly.”

“Well,” Gloria says, hands on hips, “not *constantly*. That would be Gemma, our favorite freeloading twin in the family.”

I roll my eyes at Gloria.

“There are no favorites in this house, but while Gemma uses her big heart to save the world, the least I can do is let her stay here rent-free,” Mom says. “You can’t put a price on saving the world.”

The front door opens, and we hear Elmer barking.

“You can put a price on saving the world,” I say over the racket. “My new roomie allegedly saves the world for a living.”

“Oh, he moved in already?” Gloria asks.

“Yeah, and I’m suspicious,” I say, taking the butter out of the refrigerator. “This whole roommate situation might be an elaborate prank by Nicole.”

Gloria grabs a biscuit and licks her fingers. “Ouch. Hot.”

Mom stops in the middle of the kitchen. “Wait. What did you just say?” Her voice sounds firmer than usual.

Gloria puts a pat of butter on her biscuit. “Ouch?”

Giovanna takes the other half of Gloria’s biscuit and blows on it before taking a bite. “These are delicious, Mom.”

My mom shakes her head. “Stop with the biscuits. What is this about a prank? Ghita, did you say you have a roommate?”

“Huh? What?” I’m not sure how much of the conversation I missed while I was piling biscuits on my plate. You have to be quick in a crowd of hungry siblings.

Gemma rounds the corner with Elmer the rescue dog in a Baby Bjorn across her chest and waves three syrup flavors in the air. “I saved breakfast and a weary traveler.”

The entire family freezes in place and then frantically checks the kitchen, searching for either a German shepherd with mange and an eye infection or a stoned college student who needs a meal and a bus ticket home.

“Why are you staring at me?” Gemma asks and drags Gabriela into the kitchen with a soccer ball in her hand. “Look who I found wandering the streets.”

“Gabriela,” Mom says in a tone reserved for parental disappointment. “I thought you were helping your dad outside with the grill.”

“What’s the big deal?” Gabriela says with a smirk. “I took a quick break.”

Gabe and I snicker. Yeah, right? She attempted to escape the wedding planning. No one can escape this mess.

Gabriela has a one-track mind, one solely focused on soccer. Dad says she was born kicking and screaming. I’m younger, so I missed the fussy years, but there is not a free moment in life when Gabriela isn’t playing or watching soccer. A team finally recruited her to the National League, the Houston Dash, but unbeknownst to my parents, they cut her last year and Gabriela’s not taking the rejection very well.

Gemma pantomimes a knocking motion on Hannah’s belly. “Hello in there.”

“Ohhhhh,” Hannah says. “They kicked back.”

“Don’t you mean *she* kicked?” I ask.

Hannah grins at me.

“Maybe she’ll be a soccer player,” Gabriela says and throws her ball at Gabe.

“Enough.” Mom’s voice is one I haven’t heard since Christmas fifteen years ago when Gina was a baby and got lost among the presents.

“Oh no, that’s her scary Christmas voice,” Jacob says to Gloria, who heard about the ruckus later in the day. They found Gina tangled in the lights at the back of the tree. She was happy as a clam.

“You.” Mom points her finger at me. “What did you say before Gemma walked in?”

I take a small step backward and bump into Giovanna. She puts her mouth close to my ear and says, “You’re in deep shit.”

I stare at the floor, waiting for Mom’s interrogation. “How could you let someone move into your house without telling me or your father?”

“He could be a Craigslist killer,” Gloria says, loving to stir up trouble where I’m concerned.

“Logan’s not a Craigslist killer,” Gemma says.

Mom turns her head so fast her beads swing from the front to her back. “Gemma, you knew about this roommate situation?”

“Ummmm.” Gemma’s eyes go wide.

“Mom, it’s not a huge deal,” I say but take another step backward, and just like when we were kids and got into serious trouble, the room clears in less than five seconds.

“Not you two.” She points to Gemma and me. “Spill it.”

“It’s Gemma’s fault. I didn’t want to do it. She talked me into it,” I say and give my sister the twin stare.

Gemma ignores my stare and pats Elmer’s bald head. Her senior rescue dog is a great buffer in this scenario. “It’s money to finish Ghita’s sound studio. He’ll only be living with her for a month or two.”

“No way,” I say. “A few weeks tops. His monster attacked me, and he stunk up my kitchen. He might have to leave today if I don’t kill him first.”

Mom sucks in a deep breath. “What? Who attacked you? Do I need to call your father inside?”

“Nah. It’s fine,” Gemma says casually and sits.

“Logan’s ugly monster chair attacked me. The brown beast weighs a ton and fills half my living room.”

Gemma laughs. “Oh, now I get it, Hagrid.”

Mom massages her sinuses in a way I remember from our teenage years. “Hagrid? From *Harry Potter*? I thought you said his name is Logan.”

“Hagrid is his ugly chair,” Gemma says.

This time Mom exhales. She’s doing her meditative parenting breathing now.

“And who is Logan?”

“Nicole’s alleged brother,” I say. “The jury is still out. I haven’t even met him yet, but his chair made a bad first impression.”

“Logan is definitely Nicole’s brother. Why would she lie about that?” Gemma asks with a curious grin on her face that makes me think she might be in on the prank too.

“Ohhhhh.” Mom plops onto a kitchen stool. “If Logan is Nicole’s brother, I’m sure it’s fine.” She leans over to rearrange the serving platter. “Why didn’t you invite them all to breakfast?” Mom asks, the color coming back to her face.

And the roommate crisis is over.

“Nicole is swamped with Flavour’s opening preparations. Parker has an appointment with his editor. And so far, I haven’t met my elusive roommate. He was still sleeping when I left. You know what I say about late sleepers?”

“That they’re tired?” Mom says and winks at Gemma. She thinks I didn’t see it, but I did. No one respects my rules around here.

“No,” I say. “That they have nowhere to go and nothing to do. They can’t be trusted or make commitments.”

“That’s a stretch,” Mom says. “Give him a chance, honey. He might be your soul roommate.”

“That’s what I said.” Gemma kisses the top of Elmer’s head, and he licks her nose.

“Not a chance,” I say and pop the rest of the biscuit in my mouth. “And I’m still not sure he exists.” I point

accusingly at Gemma. “I bet you’re in on the joke too.”

Gemma tears a biscuit in half and laughs maniacally.

Chapter 7-Ghita

I intended to get home early, meet my potentially fake roomie, and tell him his monster chair has to go, but I got sucked into an argument over whether the bachelorette party should be low-key local or debaucherous in Mexico. I argued Gloria is too old to party in a foreign country and should stick to a tamer spa experience since her body makes awful creaking sounds. I double downed and *creeeaaaked* loudly. Suddenly, I was put in charge of all the party details.

Gloria can't take a joke.

On the way home, I stopped at the rental sound studio to record marketing promos for my first two interviews with a local therapist and a neuroscientist. I'm expanding the idea of my BFF app with a podcast about different types of connections. I can't wait to launch in my backyard studio, but I will have to wait until I save a few more thousand dollars.

At the rental, my BFF app pings with a match. I reply instantly, eager to interrogate the potential date.

Me: Hi. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?

Nathan: Okay. Shoot.

Me: Do you like animals?

Nathan: I have two black labradors. They are the loves of my life.

That's a good sign. I zoom in closer to the picture he sends of the pups. They're adorable.

Me: I love them! By chance, do you ever dress as an animal?

Nathan:

Nathan:

Nathan: Do you?

Great. Now, I sound weird. Maybe I am?

Me: Do you ever wear animal costumes?

Nathan: Like on Halloween?

I pause from typing. Great response so far, but he didn't answer the question.

Me: What about other than Halloween?

Nathan:?????

Me: Are you a "Furry"?

Nathan: LOL. You serious?

Does that mean no? Crap. I have to move on.

Me: Next question. Do you believe in aliens?

Nathan: When in doubt go with yes.

Me: Interesting.

Me: Do you sleep late?

Nathan: Random. I'm at the pool most mornings by 5 a.m.

Nice, a swimmer.

Me: What's your stance on expensive balloon arches?

Nathan: Like at a kid's party? Those things are expensive.

Me: Right?!?!

Okay, last question. This gets two different responses: a dick pic to change my mind or a blatant lie.

Me: How do you feel about sex on the first date?

Nathan:

Nathan:

Nathan: Uhh.

That's a new one.

Me:?

Nathan:

Nathan:

Nathan:

Here comes the dick pic.

But a photo doesn't come.

Nathan: I respect a woman's right to choose.

Hmm. Not a wrong answer. And he didn't run away screaming.

Me: Drinks at Bar Eden? Now?

My favorite place. Maybe this date will lead to something more.

Nathan: C U in 20

I grab the duffle I keep in my trunk for style emergencies and exchange my Converse for leather-heeled booties, my UCLA pink sweatpants for black jeans, and my super soft #Mismatched T-shirt for a white ribbed scoop-neck.

When I find street parking a block away from Bar Eden, I'm optimistic my dating luck might finally improve. Nicole says Parker defies any dating rules she's had in the past and that's why he's ideal, but my rules keep my heart safe and weed out the losers. Sure, an occasional dud gets through, but that only proves I need better rules. Maybe Nathan will be a nice change of pace.

I haven't gotten to date number two with the same guy in ages. I'd like a partner to eat Chinese takeout with me late at night, finish a puzzle, and give me a mean orgasm. Meeting people was easier in college because everyone casually dated,

but now it's impossible to find a decent guy who doesn't want to hit and run.

Nathan sees me and waves from the bar. He's hard to miss at 6'3" with golden skin and a head full of bright blond hair with bleached white tips. It's nice to see he didn't lie in his profile picture. He smiles, and I'm blinded by his shimmering flawless white teeth. He looks ready for toothpaste commercials. He should add excellent dental hygiene to his profile.

"Ghita?"

"Nathan?"

He hugs me, and I shiver with anticipation. He might make it to date two.

I quickly find out that Nathan is a civil engineer, a dog lover, and the youngest of three sons. He makes me laugh and asks thoughtful questions about my life. Two martinis later and an order of stuffed olives, the evening is going so well that I can't wait for our second date.

"So, Ghita, how about we have date number two at my house? I have a rooftop deck overlooking the city skyline."

"Sounds fun. I'm free on Thursday, but the rest of the week is chaos."

His eyes dim, and his smile disappears. "No. I mean." He waves his hands as if rolling a log.

What does that gesture mean? The next day?

"You mean tomorrow?" I ask.

He rolls his hands again. "A bit sooner."

Confused, I lean forward a little more. "Sooner than tomorrow?"

"Are we doing it or what?" he says in an impatient voice I haven't heard until now.

Did I miss a chunk of our conversation? "Doing what?" I ask.

“Ya know.”

I don't know, but the look on his face has turned lecherous.

“Ghita, I played your good girl game. Now, you play mine.”

I stand up, my spidey sense on full alert. “What game?”

“Come on, Ghita. Don't be naïve. You know how this hookup works. I buy you expensive drinks and overpriced food in exchange for—”

He doesn't finish the rest of his sentence because I jam three olives in his fat mouth, throw a \$20 on the bar, and turn on my heels to leave.

That's it.

I need better rules.

It's after midnight when I tiptoe into my house, still shaking my head at the absurdity of my terrible date. And now I have to deal with the absurdity of my unidentified roommate. I can't believe I let Nicole and Gemma talk me into this roommate business.

“It's only for a month,” I say as I step inside and pinch my nose. It smells worse than yesterday. “Why can't compost smell better?”

I drop my keys in the ceramic dish by the door and flick on a lamp in the living room. The monster chair roars at me. Between that eyesore and the smell of rot, I break out into hysterical giggles. This is the *Twilight Zone*.

“Stop looking at me, you demon,” I say to the chair in a tone to convey I'm not the least bit scared. I suspect it knows better though.

The rest of the house is dark. Is Logan here? I need to remind myself he isn't a total stranger. He is my very best friend's brother. I think. If he exists. Maybe I should have left a note welcoming him before I took off this morning.

My high heels on the hardwood floors are too loud, so I slip them off and carry them down the hall. I don't want to wake Logan, but I want to meet him. He's been in my house for over twenty-four hours, and I don't have a clue what he looks like. I should have stalked him on social media at the very least.

I quietly reach the guest room, which is now his bedroom, and find the door wide open. He isn't there, and the bed is made. I spin around to see if the hall bathroom door is closed. Nope. Logan isn't home.

"Hello?" I jog back to the living room to glance out the front window. There are no cars parked on the street.

The thought that this is some kind of Nicole and Parker prank sneaks back into my thoughts. Does a Logan even exist? Was that even Nicole's brother's name? I giggle at my own insanity.

I run back to the guest bedroom, now his room, and flip on the overhead light. What I find shocks me. I can't believe my eyes. There are no boxes, no bags, and no piles of junk. A single paperback book sits on the bedside table. I note it's the latest Andy Weir novel. The room smells of lemon and evergreen.

The closet door is ajar, and I shouldn't look, but I fling it open anyway. There are five hangers of identical blue button-downs, three pairs of jeans, and a few T-shirts. One pair of shoes sits neatly below. Where's the rest of his belongings?

The space is impeccable. The space of a serial killer.

Is Nicole's brother the Craigslist killer?

Nooooo. I shake my head. He may have only brought a few items and plans to move more to Dallas once he has a place of his own. Maybe his sad recliner is his only piece of furniture?

Or, maybe he lures unsuspecting women to the chair before he kills them?

I need more information. I pace the room, opening the drawers to the dresser. The top one holds a green toiletry bag,

a small notebook, and two pens. Does he own any socks or underwear?

Who doesn't wear underwear? Should I add this to my list of dating rules?

As I slide the smaller drawer out, I hear a loud thud and freeze. Geez. What am I doing? I turn off the bedroom light and race into my room. I stand motionless, waiting for a key to jingle in the lock.

What if he brought home a random hookup? His one-night stand could be the Craigslist killer. Why don't I have roommate rules?

I admonish myself for the wild assumptions. Maybe I should quit listening to crime podcasts. Logan is Nicole's brother. Who he sleeps with is none of my business. If the man even exists.

When there is no other sound, I sneak down the hall into the living room. Only that beast of a chair glares at me. I hear a noise coming from the kitchen and grab my vintage blue Pyrex bowl I bought for a steal at a garage sale last year. Slowly, I tiptoe toward the thump with the bowl raised high in the air. Instead of the Craigslist killer, I find Herbert skittering under the patio table as fast as his chubby body can move.

"Herbert," I say when I open the sliding glass door, beckoning him to me. "I didn't mean to scare you." He waddles over and perches in front of a plate of bacon. Bacon? "Where'd you get that treat?"

Herbert meows, and I assume he wants me to leave him alone so he can stuff his face in peace.

Chapter 8-Logan

Passing Ghita's place, I do a double-take to ensure it's the correct house. It's blazing like an overzealous Christmas tree. My new roommate has guests over. Lots of them.

I park a few blocks away and turn off the engine. I still haven't met my roomie. Last night, I helped Nicole at her new restaurant until after 2 a.m., and Ghita wasn't home when I woke up this morning. Honestly, the situation is beyond awkward. My sister said Ghita is fine with me being at her house, but I didn't think we'd still be strangers after several days of living together.

As I trudge up the sidewalk, I wonder if nightly parties are part of her repertoire. Nicole didn't mention she was a party animal, but then she didn't tell me much other than Ghita is an influencer. I'm not even sure what that word means.

The roar of voices gets louder as I approach the front door. I stop, suddenly worried I'm not invited even though it's now my home. Should I enter? Come back a few hours later? Why didn't she leave a note to let me know about a huge party?

I shuck my hesitancy and stroll through the front door as if I live here, which I do. A guy with a monocle puts a glass of stemware with bubbles in my hand. "We're doing a toast in the living room."

"A toast?"

"Ghita launched her podcast today. We're celebrating."

"Podcast?"

"Yeah."

"I thought she was an influencer."

"It's gonna be epic," the random guy says, pulling me inside.

"Epic?" I sound like an idiot mimicking this monocle-clad man.

“Everything Ghita touches is epic.”

“Yeah, sure. Okay,” I say, not understanding him.

“This is huge for her brand.” He hands a drink to another guest walking through the door.

Using the distraction to my advantage, I dart to my bedroom, close the door, and drop my computer bag on the floor. I nearly throw myself in bed for the night.

Today, I started my new job. I spent most of the day in HR getting my ID badge and security clearance and picking my insurance plan. Contrary to Nicole’s fashion concerns, I don’t think my coworkers are concerned about whether I wear the same shirt every day. They were far more excited about the compost I brought for the company’s legendary rooftop garden.

I should have left Ghita a note about the compost bucket. I hope it didn’t stink. I should ask her if she has a designated place outside to compost.

I hear a toast happening in the living room and tons of laughter. This party might go on for hours. How will I find Ghita among a crowd of people? I don’t want to embarrass myself. Maybe I’ll hide in here tonight. Or maybe I should leave?

I unlock my phone and see a bunch of missed messages from Nicole.

Nicole: Thank you for helping last night. Hope your first day went well.

Nicole: Forgot to tell you. Ghita’s having a party tonight.

Nicole: Busy at the restaurant. We’ll swing by later. Save me a glass of champagne.

There goes all hope for hiding in my room.

Smoothing my hair, so it doesn’t look like I just woke up, I head to the living room where “Since U Been Gone” by Kelly Clarkson blares, a telltale sign of a raging karaoke party.

Wall-to-wall bodies dance to the iconic song being butchered by two guys who are taking their performance very seriously. The kitchen is jammed packed with people belting out tunes too. Bottles of wine and finger foods cover every single inch of the counter space.

I wipe the sweat off my brow and someone behind me asks, “Need a beer?”

I’m so thirsty I grab the offered bottle and take a long gulp. The cold liquid soothes my nerves.

“Thanks,” I say and take another swig. “I was thirsty.”

The woman laughs, and that’s when I notice who handed me the beer. Really notice her. She’s the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen. And she’s standing in front of me next to the beer cooler. She laughs again, and her amber eyes sparkle, her soft dark waves bouncing across her shoulders.

She has kind eyes and long wavy hair, a pink mouth, and killer curves, and what the hell is wrong with me? I’m staring like an uninvited creep.

I take another sip of my beer because I can’t form coherent words and force myself to look away.

She doesn’t acknowledge my floundering and pushes a plate in my direction. “You eat cookies?”

“Who doesn’t eat cookies?” And now I sound like a smartass.

“Psychopaths?”

I laugh. This gorgeous woman has a sense of humor.

“Tiffany made these. She said they’re better than sex.” Her voice is smooth, and I feel my face flush with the mention of sex.

I reach for a cookie and hold it in my hand, afraid to eat it. Who the hell is Tiffany?

Her eyes focus on mine while she takes a slow bite, running her tongue over her bottom lip. Shit. Watching her eat this cookie might be better than sex.

“Tiffany isn’t lying,” she says. “But then again, I haven’t had sex in a while.” She taps the cookie I’m still holding. “What do you think?”

I think I won’t be able to eat cookies again without imagining this unbelievable woman in various sexual positions.

I take a bite and make a gasping sound that mortifies me, but she just smiles. “This is the best chocolate chip cookie I’ve ever eaten.”

“But is Tiffany right?” She bites her bottom lip and her lovely eyes slowly scan down my body. “Is it better than the best sex you’ve ever had?” This woman is flirting with me, and I’m loving it.

“Who’s singing next?” A man holding a mic yells into the kitchen.

“We are.” The gorgeous woman grabs my hand and yanks me behind her. The crowd parts to let us through, and I blindly obey. I’d follow this woman anywhere.

“Yay. A duet,” the man with the mic says.

“A duet?” I ask, forgetting where I am and what is happening for a second.

“Let’s do a funny song,” the gorgeous woman says and turns to me. “You’re not scared of a little country, are you?”

I’m very scared of what this woman does to me. “Country hasn’t scared me yet.”

“You know the one,” she says to the karaoke DJ. He nods at her, and I wonder if this performance is a test. I’m suddenly desperate to pass.

The title of the song appears on the screen, “You’re the Reason Our Kids are Ugly” by Loretta Lynn and Conway Twitty. I smile because if this is a test, I’m passing it with flying colors. Nicole and I loved this song as kids, and we would sing the tune in the car during countless road trips. Nicole is still obsessed with Loretta Lynn.

I step onto the makeshift stage, and she leans in closer to whisper in my ear. “I hope you can sing.” She licks her lips, and I want to fall on my knees before her. This woman is a goddess.

I can’t sing worth a damn, but I can sing karaoke like a professional. I’ve been practicing my whole life for this moment. The music starts, and the crowd goes quiet. Everyone turns to watch us. Ghita’s friends take karaoke performances seriously. These are my kind of friends.

I start, and when she turns her head in my direction, her eyes twinkling, I’m certain I nailed the country twang. She sings next with the exact Loretta pitch, and my heart takes a dive.

The rest is karaoke history.

By the time we get to the improvised part at the end of the song, the living room is going wild, and it’s like we’ve been singing this song together for a million years.

She hugs me tight. “You were incredible.” She’s taller than the average woman, and our bodies align flawlessly together.

“You were incredible yourself. That was fun.”

She nods and stares at my lips for a beat too long.

Pushing her long, dark hair away from her shoulder, I whisper in her ear, “Let’s grab a beer and go sit in the courtyard.”

She smiles at me. “Great idea. I just bought new outdoor chairs.”

Something about the statement sits wrong in my gut, but before I can figure out why, I see Nicole and Parker approaching us.

“Who knew those long car trips singing to that song would come in handy?” Nicole says and jumps up to kiss my cheek. She turns to the mystery woman. “See, Ghita, I told you Logan was great. He even passed your ridiculous karaoke test.”

The woman and I stare at each other, both processing what Nicole said at the same time. I'm certain my eyes have popped out of my head. This goddess is Ghita, my roommate.

"You're Logan?" she says, backing away like I have a contagious disease.

"I am." I can't wrap my head around the news. This gorgeous, funny woman is Nicole's best friend and my roommate.

Nicole and Parker stare at us as if we have five heads. "Did you just now meet?"

We both nod.

I stick my hand out self-consciously for a handshake. "I'm Logan, Nicole's big brother, and apparently your new roomie."

She takes my hand, and I swear I feel tingles where our skin touches. "Hi, I'm Ghita."

We stare at one another for a moment while Nicole and Parker break out into hysterics. "I told you guys this roommate setup would be perfect."

"You two are made for each other," Parker says.

"It's only temporary," I say way too fast, catching Ghita's weary expression. "I'm super grateful for your hospitality." Shit, I sound robotic.

"Welcome to Texas," Ghita says, also sounding robotic. Our eyes meet, and sparks shoot between us. "I can't believe you exist," she yells and quickly turns her head. "I mean ... I'm gonna," she swirls her finger in the air, "circulate."

Nicole tugs me by the arm and drags me to the fridge. Parker follows close behind.

"The beers are in the cooler," I say, still stunned by the situation.

"The good stuff is always in the fridge," Parker says.

Nicole hands me a can of TUPPS IPA. “Local beer. It’s tasty. You’ll dig it.”

I pop the can and take a long swig. What I dig is Ghita. And she’s my roommate. This feels inappropriate somehow.

“You two sounded great together.” Nicole points to the stage. “She loves to test guys with that song, and from what I heard, you passed with an A++.”

What does that mean?

Parker wraps his arm around Nicole’s waist. “Wouldn’t it be funny if Ghita and Logan fell in love?”

Nicole giggles. “More like a disaster. She’ll never date my brother. It’s against the rules.”

I manage a fake laugh. I’m a dead man walking. My new roommate is beautiful, charming, and apparently out of bounds.

Chapter 9-Logan

“You didn’t use paper plates,” I say to Ghita as I dump the half-filled cans into the sink.

Beer bottles, cans, wine glasses, and tiny dessert plates cover every table, cushion, and inch of counter space in the kitchen. She’s dragged out a large bin and is separating the recyclables.

“Nah. I prefer to use the china I get at thrift stores.” She holds a small plate with a farm scene painted on it. “Every piece has a unique story attached. What some people consider junk, I turn into treasure.”

It’s hard to believe anything in her house was ever considered junk, but Nicole did mention she has a flair for repurposing furniture and thrift finds.

“Like that Eames chair in the living room?” I ask.

Her mouth gapes and transforms into a crooked smile. “I’m surprised you knew that considering *your* chair.”

“No one respects Wilma.”

“Wilma?”

“It’s what Burt used to call her. He was my elderly neighbor in LA. He subscribed to the *New Yorker* his entire life, but his eyesight prevented him from reading most of the magazine in his later years. I would go over, sit in Wilma, and read articles to him.”

“How did that relationship begin?”

“Burt was a local character, always chatting with everyone. A staple of our neighborhood, you know, but he wasn’t just neighborly. He was generous with his time. Bert would grab a package for you, hold the door open when you had your hands full, and let you know about any events happening nearby. You know, watch out for you.”

Ghita smiles and hands me a garbage bag.

“I realized I hadn’t seen him in a couple of days, so I stopped by his apartment. There were fliers all over the front door. I knocked, and he called out. Burt had fallen and broken his hip. I got the landlord to open the door, and it changed our casual relationship into a real friendship.”

“I’m so glad you found him when you did.”

“Yeah, his eyesight had been failing him for a while, but he didn’t want to admit he was going blind. It took the fall to make him take it seriously. But truthfully, it was more beneficial to me. He was a great friend and mentor when I needed one.”

“I get it,” Ghita says. “I love how people come into your life unexpectedly.”

She picks up a few bottles and throws them in a bin. “Talk about a meaningful connection.”

“It was the best,” I say.

“Burt gave you the chair when you moved here?”

“He gave me Wilma when he went into hospice. He passed away a few weeks later.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Ghita says, stopping to look at me.

“He was ninety-three years old. May we all live so long?” I grab a couple of empty stemware and smile at her. “My best thinking happens in that chair. She isn’t the prettiest, but wait until you sit in her.”

Ghita chuckles. “Wilma and I don’t get along.”

I don’t know what she means, but it’s funny the way she said it.

She’s funny.

Stop.

She’s beautiful.

Stop.

I walk into the living room to grab the rest of the plates and glasses. How am I going to live with this sexy woman?

“You don’t have to help me,” she says as I stack the dishes on the counter.

“I’m happy to help. Couldn’t go to sleep with you out here cleaning. Seems wrong.”

“Thank you.” She fills the sink with soapy water. “Here.” She pulls a clean dish towel out of a drawer and throws it at me. “Let’s hand wash the stemware. The glass never comes out clean.”

“Sure.” I slide over to the sink and freeze. We’re standing side by side, an inch between us, and the sexual energy crackles. I clear my throat, but I can’t form words. Nicole said Ghita wouldn’t date me. I forget why? Because I’m her roommate?

Damn. Maybe I should move out.

She turns off the water, and the silence is thick.

“So,” Ghita says.

“So.” I glance at her. She’s avoiding my eyes, or there is buried treasure in the sink water.

“You’re Logan.”

I chuckle. “I am.”

“Nicole’s big brother.”

“Yep.”

“How have we never met?” Ghita asks.

“I left UCLA before your first year?”

“No. You were a senior when I was a freshman. I remember Nicole talking about it. But, we didn’t become best friends until the second semester of freshman year.”

She hands me a glass to dry, and our fingers touch. She pulls away, so I focus on the dish towel.

We stand side by side, her washing, me drying for what feels like years. I have to eradicate this awkwardness.

“Ghita.” I pause. What the hell am I going to say? I really like you even though I barely know you, but I think we’d be perfect for each other. “Ghita, I ...”

“Look, Logan.” She pulls the plug, letting the water swirl around the drain. “This,” she waves her hand between the two of us, “isn’t happening. Nicole is my favorite person in the world, and well, she’s family, which makes you family, and I can’t, you know, with family.”

Yikes. I’ve never been rejected so blatantly before. Damn.

“I like you, Logan, but you’re—”

“Family, I get it.” I don’t actually understand. I’ve never wanted to run my hands all over the naked body of a family member.

“We’re Roomies. Whatever that was before didn’t happen. Capeesh?”

So, she admits there was chemistry before. Maybe I do have a chance?

I shake her hand and am almost electrocuted by the current running through her soft skin. “Capeesh.” I notice her quick intake of breath and smile. “Just Roomies.”

“Right. Good.” Her face is flushed, and I can’t help but smile wider. “Well, thanks for helping me clean the kitchen.”

“Sure. I’m gonna ...” I point toward the bedroom and the smoldering look she gives me makes me question if I’ve already changed her mind about me.

“Uh. Yeah.” She’s definitely flustered. “Goodnight, Logan.”

“Goodnight, Roomie.”

I love a challenge, and winning Ghita over will be totally worth the hard work.

Chapter 10-Ghita

The clock reads 2:32 a.m. and the hour breaks my exhausted heart. I've watched the time tick by since midnight and dread my early studio day. Maybe hot tea, a bit of ashwagandha, and a few minutes of puzzle time will calm my overactive brain. It's been days since my party, and Logan and I haven't even seen each other once.

I pad out to the kitchen in my fluffy socks. The house is quiet, and I don't want to wake Logan, so I keep all the lights off. No sense in making us both miserable tomorrow.

I round the corner and slide a bit, my fuzzy socks slipping out from under me, and I slam into a pole? A wall? A psycho killer? I scream, figuring the least my roommate can do is come out and fight off an intruder.

I bat my hands at the solid mass, waiting for Logan to save the day, but then my feet slip again, and I fall hard on my ass. When long muscular arms reach for me, I scoot across the floor, kicking my llama socks in the air.

"Get away from me," I say into the darkness, still flailing my arms and legs.

"Ghita, it's okay. It's me. Logan."

He lifts me off the cold floor, and the relief of being alive makes me grab hold of his body. I inhale the lemon and evergreen scent of his warm skin against my neck, squeezing him tighter. When he does the same, wrapping his hard biceps around my waist, I snap back to reality, release my grip, and hit the kitchen lights.

I'm blinded at first but when Logan comes into focus, he's wearing loose navy blue sweatpants and nothing else. His rock-hard abs are on display for all the world to see. Okay, maybe just for me to see, but those are lick-worthy muscles. His sharp hips jut out, and a thin small trail leads into those very soft-looking pants.

Without thinking, I stretch my hand out to touch his sculpted chest and bulging biceps but stop and jerk my hand

away like he's on fire.

But I'm the one on fire. The blaze igniting my body creeps up my neck and across my cheeks.

What in the hell am I doing?

Was I about to pet Logan? My off-limits roommate?

I wipe the corner of my mouth where drool pools.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you," he says, taking a step closer.

I take a step back, but the fridge blocks me from going farther. "You didn't scare me." The heat radiating off his bare skin makes my knees weak.

"You were screaming, swatting, and kicking me," he scans my body, "with your adorable animal socks."

"It was a test, making sure you're a reliable roommate. And if you could defend us if an intruder broke into the house."

"Testing me again, huh?" He chuckles. "Did I pass?"

I swallow hard. "Yeah ... yes ... yep." The babbling must stop.

"Did I pass your other test?" he asks, and I crick my neck in confusion.

"Other test?"

"Nicole said you were testing me at the party with the karaoke song we sang together."

My face flushes with the memory of the night we met. The fateful night I learned he was Nicole's brother.

I must be staring at his naked chest because Logan says, "I'll go put on a shirt."

"No. Don't. I mean, this is your house too. Wear what makes you happy."

Wear nothing, lift me onto this counter, and have your way with me. No shirt, no shoes, no service? Gemma is

correct. That's a stupid rule. I never want Logan to put on a shirt again. I glance at his feet and even those are sexy.

Sexy feet? I must be delirious with lack of sleep.

"So?" he says.

"Huh?" I wonder how long I've been mute.

"Do you always test people you meet?"

"Oh. Um. Not really."

Yes. Always.

"I have a few rules I live by," I say. "It keeps me focused and on track in life."

"I get it," he says. "Like," his eyes travel the length of my body, "any roommate of mine must be able to pull off a pair of dalmatian scrubs." He gives me a devilish grin, and I hope he's checking me out.

I'm wearing a very tight, white cropped tank. Shit. My hard nipples beam lasers at him. Paired with the tank are dalmatian scrubs that hang off my curvy hips, revealing much of my bare abdomen.

I point to my pants and cover my breasts with my other arm. "They're my brother's. Well, they were until I stole them. He's a vet."

"In the Army?"

"No, cats and dogs. Veterinarian."

"Ahh, cool. I love animals."

I want to ask, "But do you *love* animals so much that you identify with them sexually?" I say instead, "I have a stray cat that I feed."

"Herbert? The portly black one?"

I snort at the word *portly* because that doesn't begin to describe his girth. "Wait. How do you know Herbert?"

Logan opens the fridge and takes out a jug of milk and a carton of eggs that I definitely did not buy. "I met him when

I moved in. Nicole introduced us. He hasn't warmed to me yet, but he'll come around."

"So, Herbert doesn't trust you? He's an excellent judge of character."

Logan shoots me an easy grin. "He just doesn't know me well enough yet."

I smile at his effortless calm and then stiffen. This conversation is getting a little too close for comfort. Logan is Nicole's brother, and I cannot risk our friendship over a guy, even if he's funny, attractive, and nice.

"You wanna get out the bread?" he says as he cracks three eggs in a bowl.

I break out of my reverie. "I have bread?"

He laughs. "I snagged a loaf from Nicole's restaurant."

"If we're allowed to steal food from Flavour, then I'm never cooking again."

He whisks the eggs. "Nicole said you don't cook."

"Well, no. Not really. I mostly graze and mix ingredients into a smoothie. I don't have the time or the skills."

He digs out a flat cooking pan, turns on the gas, and throws butter in.

Where did that pan come from? Is that my pan? Have I always had that pan?

"French toast is easy," he says, slicing the bread. "I'll teach you."

He takes my hand and presses my palm onto the bread so it soaks up the egg mixture. The gesture is intimate and sexy. My heart pounds in my chest and heat rushes up my neck.

"Now, the other side," he says, turning the bread.

He holds my hand there again for a few seconds. Or hours. I can't tell. Time has stopped with his touch.

He picks up the egg-dipped bread. “Drop the bread in the pan for a minute and then flip for another minute.”

I watch him, still in a trance.

He scoops the buttery toast and places it on a coastal scene plate. “Ta-da. French toast.”

I make the next batch and can’t help smiling at how much fun I have cooking with him.

“That’s probably enough,” he says after plating two more batches.

“I’ll grab the forks.” We sit at the bistro table and dig in.

After one taste, I moan with satisfaction. “Ohh, this is so yummy.”

Logan stops mid-bite, his eyes locked on mine, and watches me chew.

I have difficulty swallowing with his gaze fixed on my mouth. “You’re a wonderful teacher.”

“I can teach you much more.” His hand brushes mine as he reaches for a napkin, and I gulp in air, making a squeaking sound.

He smiles, takes a giant forkful, and without losing eye contact, brings it to his lips.

I watch him chew. The intimacy is more arousing than any foreplay I’ve ever experienced.

Several minutes go by without a word, neither of us glancing away from the other. The only sound is our sighing and swallowing until there is nothing left on our plates.

“That hit the spot,” I say, standing abruptly and taking our dishes to the kitchen sink to escape the sexual tension. Watching his Adam’s apple as he swallowed has me more excited than I care to admit. Who knew French toast would turn me on?

“I’ll clean since you cooked,” I say and turn on the faucet.

“We both cooked,” he says, joining me and taking the rinsed plate and loading the dishwasher. It takes every single bit of self-control not to drop the rest of the dirty dishes in the sink and ravish him.

What the hell is going on with me? I’ve lost my mind.

I take a long, deep breath. He’s Nicole’s brother. He’s Nicole’s brother. This needs to be my new mantra.

I hand Logan the dirty forks and throw our napkins on the counter. He watches me, never taking his gaze off my face. This is not helping me maintain the mantra.

We stand there, dishes finished, and his bare chest brushes the sensitive part of my stomach. Chills erupt on my skin.

He’s Nicole’s brother. He’s Nicole’s brother.

He rubs his hand down my arm. “Are you cold?”

I sidestep to the left of the island and skitter into the living room, my socks sliding across the floor. “No. I’m fine. Gonna work on my puzzle before bed.”

He is Nicole’s brother.

“Your puzzle?” Logan follows me with his hands deep in his pockets, revealing more of his V-cut abs below his waistband.

I force my eyes to the half-finished flamingo on my gaming table and focus on my mantra. “Yeah, I love them. All the tiny shapes that fit together in only one way calm my brain when it gets too busy in there.”

“This puzzle has six million pieces.” He holds a pink piece over the incomplete part. “And every piece is a shade of pink.”

I laugh and lift the lid. “Only six thousand pieces.”

“Well, in that case,” he scoots over an ottoman, “may I help?”

“You don’t have to.” Please don’t. His shirtless proximity is messing with my rules. I refuse to let his

provocative physique destroy my willpower.

“I’m too wired to sleep,” he says and chooses another piece. “I see what you mean.” He places the shape exactly where it belongs. “If you concentrate, the picture starts to come together.”

I keep my eyes on the flamingo but smile. That’s how puzzling works for me too.

We work in silence, fitting pieces, one after another until we complete another section.

“Ghita? You okay over there?” He leans into my personal space, and I almost kiss him.

What was that insanity?

I force myself to lean away. “Just concentrating.”

When my hand bumps his, I suck in my breath to keep him from noticing how his touch affects me. Does this man know what he’s doing to me? I focus on the puzzle piece I’m determined to find, but his exquisite masculine scent envelops me, putting me into a trance.

He is Nicole’s brother.

Logan hands me a bright pink piece, and when his fingers meet my palm, butterflies go wild in my stomach.

Geez.

My mantra is not working. What I need is a serious distraction.

I find the bottom corner shape and grab it. “So, you said you found your dream job? What makes the position so dreamy?”

“Oh, I don’t know if you’d call the job dreamy. I’m an ecological engineer, but I’ve always wanted to work for an environmental law firm. This firm in Dallas is better than I could have imagined.”

I glance at him, awestruck. “Nicole gave me the impression you were one of those conservation activists who doesn’t shower and chains himself to trees.”

Logan laughs. "I'm not opposed to chaining myself to trees. Tree murderers are the worst."

"You sound like my mom. She spent more on saving her favorite tree in our backyard than on any of our college tuitions." I fit another piece in the puzzle. "By the way, what happened to your compost?"

His face turns red. "Sorry I left the bucket in the kitchen. It was for our company's rooftop garden. I added the banana peels, so it might have smelled extra fresh."

"That's what you call fresh?" I'm teasing him because he looks so serious.

"Sorry."

"No, really, it's okay. You should keep a compost bin in the refrigerator to collect scraps for the work garden. Or you could start a bin outside?"

"Okay, yeah. I could also spread compost around the tree that's dying. Might make the backyard bloom a bit more as well."

He noticed my poor Japanese maple.

"That'd be great. I'd hate to lose her."

"Sure thing." He finds a strange trapezoidal shape and fits it next to my corner piece.

"Will you miss living in California?"

"I'll miss the warmer winters and surfing, but this is the first time a job means something to me. I'm desperate to make a difference, and this is a huge opportunity. Plus, Nicole starting Flavour is an enormous undertaking. I love that I can support her too."

He hands me a puzzle piece that fits the empty spot in front of me, and I push three edge pieces his way. He takes one but bumps his shoulder with mine in the process. We both freeze and I have to shake off the electricity flying between us.

Logan twists a shape a few times before placing the piece where it belongs. Is he aware of the sparks?

“Nicole says you’re saving for a sound studio,” he says.

I light up like Times Square. I’m happy to turn our talk to my work.

“I’m converting part of the garage into a recording studio to produce my own podcast. You know about my BFF app?”

“Not much. I’m not really into dating apps.”

“It’s not a dating app,” I say too defensively.

He shakes his head. “My mistake. Sorry. Nicole didn’t explain its purpose to me.”

I lean away from the puzzle. “No, I’m sorry for being snippy. I hate when people call BFF a dating app. It’s a matching algorithm to connect people who have compatible personalities. The app matched Nicole with Parker.”

His mouth opens into a wide smile. “Really? Wow, I didn’t realize she used your app. The algorithm must work?”

For some people. Most people. Not me.

“Yep, it works,” I say, shifting in my seat to fit a difficult piece of the puzzle.

I sort out a few more pieces. “That’s amazing. I’m impressed. So, what now? Nicole mentioned you wanted to start a new business.”

“Thanks. Yes, I’m starting a podcast.”

“Really? Is that expensive?” Logan’s turned all his attention to me. He’s listening as if he cares.

“I’m staying in the relationship world. I’ll use my BFF branding and advertisers to fund production costs, but the expense of soundproofing the studio and buying recording supplies is more than I can afford without a loan. And I don’t want a loan.”

“So, I’m supporting an emerging artist with my rent.” His face brightens hearing me share my latest project. “What’s the podcast called?”

“Mismatched. My theme is connection and the importance of building relationships.”

“Forgive me if I’m off base, but how is this different from BFF?”

“My show will focus on how connections to places, people, and experiences shape who you are and who you become.”

“Funny. Sounds similar to my job.” He runs his hand through his hair, and I wish those were my hands.

I shake my head, erasing the image of me stroking his hair.

Logan is Nicole’s brother.

“Does it? How?”

“Well, I help governments and companies build a better relationship with the environment by showing them how their business connects to broader ecological goals.”

A warmth floods my body. Logan is gorgeous, funny, insightful, and Nicole’s brother.

Logan is Nicole’s brother.

“May I interview you on my podcast?” I ask. “A segment about the environment and our connection to the planet would be engaging for the younger generation. They’re eager to make a difference.” I’m bouncing in my seat, full of this new idea.

“You don’t want me on your podcast.” He stands to stretch, and my eyes trail down his long lean torso.

He catches me staring, but he doesn’t call me out. “I do. You’d be a natural.” I must get my libido under control.

“What about you?” he asks. “Do you have any special connections right now?”

“Sure. My family and friends are my proudest relationships and the most important.”

“No boyfriend or girlfriend prospects?”

“I’m not as lucky in that department. No one plays by my rules.”

“What do you mean?” He sits back down, settling in for a conversation I’m afraid to have.

“There isn’t much to tell,” I say, trying to sound casual. “I have terrible luck dating, so I created dating rules to help me weed out the ...”

“Losers?”

“Not necessarily.” I pick another edge piece and plop the pink shade into place. “Some men aren’t a good fit for me.”

“So, you see dating as a puzzle?”

“I never compared dating to a puzzle before, but yes, exactly.”

“And what kind of rules help you find the pieces that fit in your puzzle?”

“They’re not specific.” I cross my fingers and hope he can’t tell I’m lying my ass off. “For instance, don’t go on a second date if you see a red flag on the first one.” I turn in my chair to face him.

He nods in agreement. “Red flags should be everyone’s escape rule. What else?”

“Well,” I hesitate. “I’m not a big fan of hatfishing. So, if you pretend to be someone you aren’t I’m out. Nothing wrong with being bald, just don’t hide under a hat.”

He chuckles. “So, do these rules work?”

“Yes. Well, no. Not exactly. I haven’t met *the one* yet.”

He holds eye contact with me but doesn’t say a word.

He is Nicole’s brother.

He is Nicole’s brother.

He is Nicole’s super hot, sleeping in the next room, probably with no clothes, off-limits brother.

My mind wanders to Donny, my high school boyfriend, and I frown. We only dated for ten months, but when he moved on, so did Lorna, his sister, and my best friend. Lorna was Gemma's bestie too. She dropped both of us like yesterday's news.

I refuse to lose Nicole by dating her brother. Based on my previous experience, the relationship will surely end in disaster, and so will our friendship.

I need this conversation to stop going in the relationship direction.

I clear my throat. "I'm ready for bed." I wave my hand over the half-finished flamingo. "You gonna stay up?"

"Nah."

We both stand at the same time. He gestures for me to go first. "After you."

I turn off the lights as I head down the hallway.

"Night, Ghita," I hear him say behind me.

"Goodnight, Logan," I say, but when I turn around, his bedroom door is already closed.

Chapter 11-Logan

My sister picks me up at Ghita's house without bringing a cup of Flavour's specialty coffee, but I am too tired to complain. It's Saturday, and we are headed to the flea market in a small town called Forney. Nicole wants decorative items for the courtyard garden of her restaurant, and I could use a side table next to Wilma for a reading lamp. So, we are off to find treasures at the Texas capital of antiques.

Ghita and I haven't seen much of each other since our puzzle night. She works late, and I leave for work early. Or, she's avoiding me. Not sure which is true. Either sucks. I hope she's not regretting our roommate arrangement.

"You're quiet," Nicole says, turning off the radio.

"Just need some coffee." And for Ghita to acknowledge my existence.

"La La Land is around the corner. Let's stop there." Nicole slows the car to change lanes.

"Are they going to give me shit about my travel mug?" I dig into my messenger bag and pull out my battered TreePeople insulated tumbler. Many places only let you use their branded refillable cups, but I'd have a million mugs rattling around in my car if I bought a new one at every coffee shop.

"No. It's totally fine. Their motto is *Normalize Kindness*. They train, hire, and mentor kids aging out of foster care."

"Love it," I say. "Speaking of kindness, where's Parker?" Parker is one of my favorite people. If Nicole hadn't kept him, we would still have a friendship. He brings out the best in everyone he meets. I can't wait to spend more time with him now that I live in Dallas.

"He's at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Nevada."

“I’m shocked he’s into cowboy poetry,” I say, wondering what the hell cowboy poetry is, anyway.

“Me too, but he’s been performing there for years. He says it’s the best place to find like-minded souls.”

“Hey, you never told me you met Parker on Ghita’s app.” Or that Ghita is a hottie badass.

“I did. Remember, I told you to get on BFF when you broke up with Mandy.” She thumps the steering wheel with her fingers. “And you told me no way in hell were you ready to meet other people.”

“I vaguely remember that,” I say though I remember telling everyone after my breakup I was officially and forever being a professional hermit.

Nicole glances at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired, I guess.” The urge to confess my feelings for Ghita is overwhelming, but I refuse to place my sister in the middle. Plus, I’m determined to solve the Ghita mystery on my own.

After the hour-long drive to Forney, we pull into the gravel lot, and I hand over ten bucks for parking.

“Thanks, Big Bro.”

“You bought the coffee.”

We park, and both slide out. I point to her bundle of bags. “How many items do you need?” I’m a bit worried she brought me as her sherpa. I gape at the expansive space. This flea market is enormous.

“Not too many. I’m searching for three vintage boxes to grow herbs on the west-facing wall of windows and a few rustic fixtures to weave through the lattice roof of the courtyard.”

I suck down the rest of my coffee and tuck the cup in the side pocket of my bag. “I’m searching for a beat-up tire.”

“A tire? The way your brain works baffles me, dear brother.”

“Hey, strangers,” comes a familiar voice. “Are you guys stalking me?” We turn to find Ghita running to catch up with us. She’s dressed in tight red jeans and a navy shirt that scoops at her cleavage. It’s impossible to take my eyes off her.

“If I had known you’d be here today, we could have driven together,” she says and flings herself between the two of us, wrapping her arms around our waists. I feel the press of her hand on my lower back and move a bit closer.

So, maybe she’s not avoiding me.

I lift an eyebrow at her. “You weren’t home when I left.”

“I met Gemma at Mom’s. We were supposed to have breakfast, but she bailed at the last minute for a service call. She joined an animal travel agency.”

“Travel agency?” I ask.

“It’s like Uber for pets.”

“She drives cats and dogs around?” Nicole asks.

“I guess? She takes them to their vet appointments when their owners are too busy.”

“Who knew that job existed,” I say and note her arm is still wrapped around me.

“I know, right?” Ghita says.

“Want to help me find some cool light fixtures?” Nicole asks her.

Ghita releases her grip on my waist, and the absence is palpable. “Yeah sure, but I wanna find an old tire first.”

“A tire?” Nicole and I say at the same time.

“Yeah. I saw this cool idea on Pinterest where you wrap a tire in rope and secure legs to it. And I have an antique glass top I found in Fredericksburg. I want the piece to have a retro West Coast vibe to it.”

Nicole looks at me, and I give her giant eyes back.

“What?” Ghita says, her face scrunched in confusion.

“As I said earlier,” Nicole waves her finger at us, “you two are so much alike. You were born to be Roomies.”

I watch Ghita’s face flush and wonder if mine is doing the same. We both turn our focus to the ground.

Nicole doesn’t acknowledge our awkwardness or ignores it.

“Well, I’m off. You two might as well shop together,” she says and abandons Ghita and me by the rusted mirrors.

When my gaze finally wanders back to Ghita, I find her staring at me. We hold eye contact for a minute, neither glancing away until she breaks out into her signature wide smile. “Well Roomie, let’s go find a tire.”

Suddenly, I feel energized. Or maybe it’s the coffee kicking in?

We wander past ten booths before our attention is drawn to the same tire. It’s a black beauty, round and plump with great tread.

A small weathered man with a twisted mustache and bright blue eyes wanders over to us. “I can give you the tire for a song. Only \$25.”

“I’ll give you \$4,” Ghita says quickly.

“Four bucks isn’t much, little lady.” The man tugs on his mustache. “Let’s call it \$20.”

“\$7.” Ghita hands over the money and before I wrap my head around the entire transaction, the old man is putting a “sold” sticker on her purchase.

“I’ll be here until 6:00 tonight,” he says.

“Not a problem,” she says and turns to me. “Don’t you need a tire too?”

I smirk. “One is more than enough.”

“What do you mean? Mine is for an end table I’m making. What’s yours for?”

“Don’t laugh, but a table for Wilma. Mine wouldn’t have been as nice as yours, though.”

She stops and puts her hands on her hips. “Wait a second. You came here to buy a tire to make a table too?”

I place my hand on her shoulder and hear her breath quicken. “We fit together like a puzzle. Don’t you think?” She can’t deny this chemistry between us. Can she?

“Logan, we—”

“Hey. I’m done here,” Nicole says, rounding the corner and startling us.

“Already?” I ask. My sister doesn’t mess around.

“You find the perfect tire yet?” She throws her arm around me.

“Yep,” I say, trying to catch Ghita’s eye. “Perfect.”

“Great.” Nicole waves her phone at us. “I need to get back. I have to sign for a last-minute citrus delivery.” Adjusting her bags on her shoulder, she taps Ghita’s arm. “Will you give Logan a ride home?”

For a moment, I imagine Ghita might bail as she did on the puzzle night, but she surprises me and says, “Sure, but I want to check out a few more booths. Is that okay with you, Logan?”

I lower my voice so I don’t appear too excited to spend more time with her. “It’s no problem. We don’t have to get the tire until 6:00, and I don’t have any other plans for today.”

“Okay, thanks,” Nicole says. “See ya.” She takes off with her over-flowing tote bags bumping everyone as she exits through the crowd.

Ghita clears her throat. “There’s a tile booth a few tents away I’m interested in visiting.” She points to the left, and we head in that direction.

“What’s the tile for?” I ask.

“I want to secure some tiles under the glass to give the table a pop of color. Plus, I planned to make a couple of mosaic birdbaths using my great-grandmother’s wedding candlesticks.”

“That’s clever.”

“Not really. The idea practically hit me in the head. One candlestick toppled off our hearth while I was reading next to the fireplace. My mother despises candles for this reason, so she told me to take them before they burn the house down.”

“You mean, you were hit in the head with a candlestick?”

She laughs, and the sound is melodic.

“Was it in the drawing room?” I ask.

“Of course.” She giggles, “And Colonel Mustard did the deed.”

“Glad you survived the lethal ordeal, Ms. Scarlet.”

“What makes you assume I’m Ms. Scarlet?”

I swallow hard. She is definitely the femme-fatal in this flirtatious game she’s playing with me.

“Who are you then?”

“Dr. Orchid, an unscrupulous biologist.”

“Ahhhh, so, you poisoned Colonel Mustard?”

“Yep, that’s why his aim was off, and I survived.” She halts and turns in a small circle. “We passed the tile booth.”

I follow her through several rows and stop at a tent filled with barrels and buckets overflowing with thousands of colorful Mexican Talavera tile pieces. No piece is the same size or pattern.

I glance at Ghita and find her watching me.

“It’s a beautiful jigsaw puzzle,” I say, my eyes wide.

“Right?” She steps farther inside the space, and I follow.

“How will you decide which pieces to pick?”

“Not me, we.”

I cock my head. “We?”

She smiles. “We’re making Wilma a table together, Roomie.”

“That’s not against one of your rules?” I tease.

“If I must live with an abominable beast in my beautiful living room, at the very least you should help me make a nice table for her.”

“Abominable? Don’t let Wilma hear you say that.”

“Why? She might attack me again?”

“Her only desire is for you to sit in her.” Wow, did that sound sexual?

Ghita shakes her head. “No, thanks.”

“You’re missing out on something great,” I say, talking about more than the chair. If she would relax her rules, she’d see how great we fit together. Yep, totally sexual.

She selects a tile with royal blue and bright yellow flowers surrounded by a cobalt blue lace trim. “These vivid colors are exactly what Wilma needs.”

She always does this, deflects when the conversation hits too close to home.

She grabs five tiles with comparable colors from the bin. “Now, you pick five?”

“You trust me with this important style decision?”

“I.” She clears her throat. “I trust you.”

Her gaze pierces through me, and I get a sense this is another kind of test.

Straightening, I walk around and peer inside every bin. The desperation to pick correctly makes me sweat with nervous energy.

“This one,” I say, examining a tile with colorful green peacock feathers.

Ghita’s face is expressionless while I browse, giving me no indication of whether I am on the right track.

Next, I pick a tile with red and orange fish and one with a Mediterranean scene. “And these two.”

I stop at a bin with smaller broken tiles with intricate yellow and green geometric patterns and lift three pieces for Ghita to see. She pantomimes locking her lips with a key and throwing the key away.

The couple selling the tile pieces giggles at our ridiculous shopping performance.

I decide on the two triangle patterns because pizza is my favorite shape.

Ghita grabs a handful of terracotta orange tiles before heading to the register. I follow her. “Perhaps a square pattern would have been a safer choice,” she says, twisting my two triangle tiles in her hand.

“Who says I want to play it safe?”

Her face flushes as she hands over her cash.

“Wait, let me pay,” I say.

“Nope. These extra tiles are for future projects. Plus, you’re buying dinner.”

She puts the tiles in a blue and white cotton bag, and we backtrack toward the tent with the tire.

“You know,” I say. “We have fantastic taste.”

She gives me a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“Tires, tiles, and great chairs.”

Her mouth hangs open. “Maybe the first two but chairs? Uh, no.”

“Cross my heart, Wilma is the best. You’ll grow to love her.”

“She doesn’t match my style.” Her voice is serious, but her eyes are playful.

“Your style is fairly eclectic. Maybe you should give Wilma a chance before you write her off.” I nearly say, “Give both of us a chance,” but miss my opportunity when a small child darts in front of us. He probably saved me from my stupid self.

Ghita pulls out her phone. “It’s almost 5:00.” And there she goes with deflection again. “We should grab food before retrieving the tire.”

“Sure,” I say, resigned to her dismissing Wilma and me. “Where to?”

“My favorite gyros place. Come on.” She leads me down a winding, narrow path through the flea market out onto a huge gravel opening where a line of food trucks stand.

“Wow. That’s a lot of food.”

“Yeah, but the best is the Greek food truck.”

She orders for us, and I pay. The smell makes my mouth water.

“Here’s a decent spot,” she says, settling on a patch of grass under a tree and away from everyone.

I sit cross-legged facing her. “A prime spot for a date.”

Ghita freezes. “This is not a date.”

“I didn’t mean *we* were on a date.” I totally meant date. Why won’t she admit it’s a real possibility?

She takes another bite and a dollop of tzatziki falls on her chin.

I wipe my hands on my jeans. “You have a dot.” I lean into her space and use my finger to wipe the sauce off. Without thinking, I lick my finger.

She stiffens.

Shit. I can’t read her expression. She must hear the roaring beat in my chest.

“You were right,” I say, trying to mask my thudding heart.

“Right about what?”

I still can't read her expression.

I swallow. “This is the best gyro ever made.”

Maybe deflection isn't such a bad move after all.

Chapter 12-Ghita

“Hi, you’re on with Dr. Harrison,” I say into the mic to our fourth caller of the morning.

“Hi, Ghita. I’m Ken from McKinney. Thanks for taking my call. I’m a huge fan.”

“Hello, Ken. Thank you for listening. Do you have a question for our relationship therapist?” I shift my chair closer to the desk.

He rustles paper in the background. “Yes. I, well, this is difficult to discuss.”

“We aren’t here to judge,” I say.

“Well, I’m not a very affectionate person, but my girlfriend craves PDA and lots of physical attention. I love her, and I want to show her affection, but I’m not sure it’s part of my genetic makeup.”

“Thanks for sharing, Ken. Dr. Harrison, do you have any tips for Ken’s relationship worries?” I pull my hair band tighter, settling in for the interview.

“I do, Ghita.” She swallows and adjusts the mic closer to her mouth. “Ken, affection can seem awkward or forced with other people. Is that how you feel?” she asks, and I grow more attentive.

I’ve definitely felt awkward around Logan. At the flea market, I resisted the urge to tackle him and cover his face with kisses. I have to force myself to keep my distance.

“Yeah,” Ken says, his voice a thin whisper. “All the time.”

Dr. Harrison winks at me, indicating she has an ideal solution. “Ken, do you have a pet?” she asks. Her voice is upbeat and optimistic.

“Yeah. I do. I have a black and white pug named Domino.”

“Great. How do you feel about Domino?”

“He’s the best. I adore his little face. And when he greets me at the door at the end of the day, well, there isn’t a better greeting.” Ken no longer sounds timid. His voice is strong and confident.

“Ken, you certainly don’t have a problem showing affection to your dog.”

“No, he’s my buddy. That’s easy.”

“Why not try treating your girlfriend like you treat Domino?”

Ahhh. I see where she’s going with this advice. Dr. Harrison is quite the expert.

“You want me to treat my girlfriend like a dog?”

Dr. Harrison raises her eyebrows at me. “No, not like any dog but like *your* dog.”

“Will you explain what you mean? I’m not sure people want to be treated like pets,” I say, encouraging her to expand.

“Yes, Ghita, you are correct.” She grins. “I’m not suggesting anyone treat their loved ones like animals.”

I hold in a giggle, remembering my date with Shane, the sexy Komodo dragon.

“Let me clarify.” She grabs the mic with two hands and rolls closer to the desk. “Ken, tell us again what Domino does when you get home?”

“He runs to the door, excited to see me, wagging his tail and jumping around.”

“Are you excited to see him too?”

“Yes, always.”

“And how do you respond?” she asks.

“I scoop him in my arms, give him kisses, and tell him how glad I am to see him. We go into the kitchen together, and I talk to him about my day as I feed him dinner.” Ken’s joy is contagious.

I smile, remembering how Logan left a plate of food for me last night. He always asks about my day too.

“Do you see, Ken?” Dr. Harrison asks with encouragement.

There’s a long pause before he jumps in, finally understanding. “Oh, I see.”

“That’s right, you get it, Ken. The next time you come home or your girlfriend comes home, try having a similar reunion to the one you have with Domino and see how she responds.”

“That is brilliant advice, Dr. Harrison,” I say. “We can all use a lesson in treating the humans we love with the same kindness as the animals we love.”

“That’s true, Ghita. It’s effortless to pet a cat when it curls around our leg or jumps into our laps, but when our partner asks for affection, we can be stingy. There is a fear of being vulnerable, but if we put ourselves out there in the same way we do for our pets, we might get the affection we want in return.”

“But what if I get rejected?” Ken asks, and I feel his pain.

“It’s a possibility. You can get hurt in any relationship, but if you don’t put the work in and take a chance, you might end up in the same place, regardless.”

“You mean alone?” Ken asks.

“Yes, exactly. We have to open ourselves to relationships fully and love wholeheartedly,” Dr. Harrison says.

“Okay. It’s worth trying. I love my girlfriend. Thank you, doctor.”

“Good luck, and give Domino a hug from us.” I hope Dr. Harrison’s sincerity comes across on the radio.

“Thank you, Ken.” I glance at the clock. “Seems we have time for one more caller,” I say and hit the red button. “You’re on the air with the brilliant Dr. Harrison.”

“Hi, Ghita, Dr. Harrison. I’m Claire from Grapevine.”

“Hi, Claire. How can we help you?”

“I’ve been married for twenty-five years, and I’m yearning to mix up our sexual routine, but trying new approaches doesn’t come easily for me.”

Dr. Harrison takes a sip of water and adjusts her mic. “The fact you long for new sexual adventures is an excellent first step. How is your current relationship in the bedroom?”

“Our sex life is super vanilla. Mission position all the time. I don’t want to scare my husband, and he might freak out if I tell him my true desires.”

“What do you desire?” Dr. Harrison asks, and I cringe. This interview could get X-rated fast if I’m not careful.

“I’m not sure. That’s the biggest problem. I don’t know where to begin.”

Yikes. I hope this conversation doesn’t turn into *Fifty Shades of Gray* live on air.

“I start my couples with a little food-play as foreplay when they want to overhaul the bedroom routine,” Dr. Harrison says.

I smile at the memory of making French toast with Logan. Our cooking session certainly felt like foreplay.

“Food?” Claire asks. “Sounds messy.”

“Start small. Bring chocolate-covered strawberries for breakfast in bed, or strawberries with whipped cream. Feed them to your partner. This should be a fun activity. Don’t fret over the mess. That’s what washing machines are for.” Dr. Harrison giggles into the mic.

“Seems easy enough.”

“It is, and the surprise for your partner will add to the foreplay.”

“Dr. Harrison,” I say, “are there any foods you should avoid in the bedroom?”

She laughs. “Jalapenos can be aphrodisiacs, but be careful handling peppers before handling your partner’s intimate areas.”

“Happy to know that a handjob and salsa don’t mix,” I say.

“I had a couple who ended up in the emergency room because they had a meal heavy with spicy peppers. When things got a little sexy in the kitchen, the poor guy’s penis swelled to twice its size.”

“From the peppers?” I ask.

“Yep. Keep your hands clean, ladies,” Dr. Harrison says. “Your men and their penises will thank you.”

“My husband will die if I let his wanker burst,” Claire says.

“It won’t burst, Claire, but yes, you have to be mindful of the kinds of food involved.”

“What else could I try?”

I can’t help myself from jumping in. “Toys?”

“Yes, Ghita. Toys are a great suggestion,” Dr. Harrison says.

“What kind of toys?” Claire asks.

“A vibrator might be the place to start,” I say, picturing my trusty BOB.

“Yes, or nice lingerie or costume play,” Dr. Harrison says.

“Okay. Thank you,” Claire says, sounding more relaxed than when she started.

“Great ideas, Dr. Harrison. I’ll put the links on my website. Thank you for your questions, Claire, and thank you, Dr. Harrison, for talking with us today.”

“Thank you for having me,” Dr. Harrison says, her eyes shining bright.

“And remember Mismatched listeners, don’t fall victim to ‘winter coating’ when your Serotonin levels drop. Tell old boyfriends you’re not interested in a holiday fling that will leave you with spring heartache. You deserve more than a relationship with an expiration date. Real connections matter.”

I turn off the mics and swivel around in my chair. “Having you on air was a blast. Please say you’ll come back.”

“I should say so. Your listeners had impressive questions. Count me in.”

I’m still on a radio high when I park in my driveway. The lights are on in the kitchen, so Logan must be home.

Inside, Astrud Gilberto greets me from a small speaker in the living room. Her Bossa Nova beats put me into a calm mood immediately. I’m also hit with the best smells as I round the corner into the kitchen: tomato, garlic, capers, and olives.

“Welcome home,” says Logan, wearing a red apron with a mushroom and a caption that reads, *I’m a Fungi*. “How was the podcast?” He spins away from me to grab a twig of fresh oregano. “Are you hungry?”

I can’t help but smile. This scene reminds me of the affectionate one Ken described with his pug Domino. “Where did you get the apron?”

“Nicole gave it to me when she visited LA last year. She saw me cooking shirtless and worried I’d burn myself.” So, he’s always topless in the kitchen.

“I made pasta puttanesca.”

“You made dinner?”

Logan nods. His back muscles ripple, and his biceps swell as he lifts a pot to drain the water.

“For me?”

“I did. Have a seat.” He takes my tote bag and hands me a large glass of red wine.

I kick off my boots under the bistro table and take a sip. He’s smiling as if this was part of a grand plan. I can’t get

used to this royal treatment. He'll be moving out soon.

"The pasta smells heavenly." I have my fork in the air before the plate hits the table.

"Dig in," he says, waving at my dish.

I moan as I take the first bite. "This is delicious." If the French toast was foreplay, then the puttanesca is the climax. I feel my face burning with the naughty thoughts running through my brain.

I tear off a hunk of ciabatta sitting on the table and dip it into olive oil. "You get this bread from Nicole?"

"I did. Stopped by the restaurant on my way home. She's experimenting with different dough starters. I picked up a couple of loaves for breakfast this week. I love being her test subject."

"Me too," I say, crunching on a bite of bread.

Logan takes a sip of his wine, and I watch his throat as he swallows. "Your podcast was informative."

I choke on a crumb. "You listened?"

"Of course, I did. When your roommate interviews a sex therapist, you don't miss it." He shows me a smile that would charm the devil.

I lean forward, forearms on the table. "What did you think?" I'm shocked by how much I value his opinion. When did I start trusting him so much?

"Dr. Harrison has a great sense of humor, and your guests must trust you to be so honest on the air."

"Thank you," I say. It's the best compliment. "We had a ton of callers. I put the recap on Insta. Hope the session gets a lot of interest there too."

We continue to eat until the waistline of my pants screams. I push my plate away, but Logan raises his finger for me to wait and runs to the refrigerator. He returns with a tray of chocolate-covered strawberries laid out in a skillful circular design.

“Umm.” I don’t know what else to say. He listened to my podcast. What does this mean? My head nearly spins off my neck.

“You don’t like strawberries?” he asks.

“No. I love them.” I almost scream that I love this kind of foreplay, but I bite my tongue.

“Nicole had an extra tray from the birthday brunch she hosted today.”

He lifts a strawberry from the tray, and I hope he’s placing the fruit in my mouth. My cheeks begin to water, and I clamp hard on my tongue.

He takes a slow bite, and the squelching sound of the juice makes my toes curl.

Geez. I’ll let him do whatever he wants with that bright red berry.

“Couldn’t let ripe strawberries go to waste. Right?” he says, taking another seductive bite.

My vision blurs as I watch his lips wrap around another red berry. I train my eyes on his mouth, envisioning his lips on mine. I can’t look away.

Dr. Harrison wasn’t joking about the food-play concept. It’s real.

I wipe my brow. “Is it hot in here?”

“Not to me.” He gets to his feet, draping his apron on the back of his chair, and begins clearing the table. I fixate on his hard six-pack abs and that happy trail. Logan should always be shirtless.

I bring my wineglass to the sink and struggle to keep my fingers from tracing the muscles on his back.

“Wanna puzzle for a bit?” The way he asks sounds dirty and sensual. Every moment tonight feels extra sexual.

I stutter my answer. “I—um—not—tonight—I—.”

“You okay?” He puts his hand on my forehead, and I want to climb his taut body. It isn’t a fever I have, sweet Logan. It’s the overload of pheromones.

“I’m fine,” I say and bite my bottom lip, sucking it into my mouth so I won’t lean forward and take hold of his plump lips.

“You sure?” He wrinkles his brow in concern.

“Yeah, fine.” I’m not fine. I am breathless when his skin touches mine.

Taking a deep inhale of air, I exhale loudly in what I hope mimics a yawn. “I’m more tired than I thought.” I point to the bedroom. “Shall we?”

He crooks his head.

“I mean, shall I. Me. Not you.” I giggle like a maniac. I am a maniac. I’m losing my damn mind. “Night, Logan. Thank you for dinner,” I say and dash out of the room and down the hall like my ass is on fire.

“Night, Ghita,” I hear him say behind me as I shut the bedroom door and drop to the floor.

Living with Logan is pure torture.

Chapter 13-Logan

“Hey, back of the line is over there,” an irate woman with a bouffant haircut snarls at me as I sidestep the line of customers weaving out the door and around the street corner.

“I work here,” I lie, and the sea of bodies parts for me. Once inside Flavour, I realize it isn’t a complete lie. Nicole needs staff help. Pronto.

I wander into the chaotic kitchen where plates of food are loaded high and white-shirted waitstaff hustle out of swinging doors. It’s an unorganized madhouse, but the food smells divine.

“Nicole?” I ask a sous chef with mascara sliding down her cheek.

“In the walk-in.”

My sister must be dead from exhaustion if there are dirty dishes piled in the sink and food waiting to be served.

I round the corner, fearful of a dramatic scene, but find her counting boxes of butter in her shrill, this-is-unreal voice.

“How can I help?” I ask, grabbing the butter from her hands.

“Had two busboys no-show and a waitress quit before the dinner rush started. I should have known they were flakes when they no-showed for the extra training. Foolish me gave them another chance.”

I rub her shoulders. “Where do you need me?”

“Get people seated, but please clear the tables first. I’m stalling with bread baskets at the bar, but I don’t have enough to last the night at this rate. I sent Parker to Central Market for more loaves.”

Oh shit. If she’s buying bread, it’s an extreme emergency.

“Okay. Got it.” I grab a white apron off the hook and regard my black jeans and my Planet Earth T-shirt. “I’m not in

uniform though.”

“Beggars can’t be choosers,” Nicole says and points to the bins. “If you clear the tables, Parker can load the dishwasher when he returns. You two act as busboys and dishwashers, and fill in as waitstaff or barkeep please.”

I’m off before she says another word and make quick work of two tables. I tell the hostess the sections are free and receive a strange *who are you* glare in return. I ignore the look and head to the bar to collect glassware.

“Need any fresh glasses?” I ask the bartender, but she shakes her head and points to a woman behind her hand-drying wine glasses with a terry cloth towel. The woman’s long hair is held tight in a ponytail, and the curve of her hips calls to me. She seems relaxed even though there are lines of customers waiting.

She smiles at me, and my head clears. “Ghita?”

“Hey there, Roomie.” She inspects my graphic shirt. “I see you answered Nicole’s SOS in a hurry too.” Her eyes travel the length of my body, and I swear she’s checking me out.

I glance at her purple yoga pants and matching strappy tank covered by a white apron. “You’re not in uniform either, I see.” Ghita fills out her tight stretch pants in all the right ways.

“Yep. I’d never pick Pilates over a best friend’s call for help.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Yep, the best. Plus, this is kinda fun.” She tosses a used towel in my bin and grabs a clean dry one. “And you’re a great big brother. She’s lucky to have us.” Ghita giggles, and I can’t help but laugh too.

“Yep, we’re the best.” I clear the bar of dirty plates and glasses and salute Ghita before taking off for the kitchen to unload my overflowing bin.

The next three hours pass by in a blur of beautifully plated food and loads of customers. There is only one table left

waiting for their check when Ghita slides onto an empty bench. She raises an open bottle of malbec in her hand and waves two long-stemmed wineglasses at me. The invitation stirs a swelling feeling in my chest. My heart picks up a beat.

“Come sit,” she says. “Nicole has to finish the bookkeeping and close out, but she’s bringing us a few appetizers. And I must say, I’m ready and willing to accept any and all food.”

I collapse across from her at the table, rubbing my aching biceps. “She doesn’t need us to clean anything else?” I ask, raising my head onto my elbows.

“Nope. Parker said it’s best if we get out of her way.”

I uncork the bottle and pour us both a generous glass. “Should we toast her success now or wait until she can join us?”

“Now and later.” Ghita lifts her glass. “To Nicole. May she have a million nights with a waiting crowd around the block.”

I nod. “To Nicole, my adorable and amazing baby sister. May she hire two new busboys and waitstaff before tomorrow’s dinner rush.” We laugh and clink glasses, taking long sips. I watch her lips over the rim of my glass the entire time.

“I had a few customers at the bar ask if we’re hiring. Told them to come back tomorrow morning. She might kill me for being so forward, but we have to find her help. I need a week off from standing after just one night on my feet.” She takes another sip. “Running a restaurant is hard work. I don’t know how Nicole does it night after night.”

I refill her glass. “And what about a toast to you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. I saw a construction crew working on your studio when I left for work this morning.”

“Yes. It’s finally happening.” She beams. “I signed off on the interior design yesterday. They’re doing the

construction in phases. The sound studio part will come later, but the structural building phase started today.”

I clink my glass against hers. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

Nicole appears out of nowhere and places two large dishes on the table. “Thank you for all your help tonight. I’ve made you carrot hummus sprinkled with pumpkin seeds and candied pecan deviled eggs topped with dill. *Bon appétit.*” She twirls on her heels to leave.

“Whoa, mama. Where are you going?” Ghita’s half off the bench to stop Nicole from leaving.

“I still have to close out the credit card receipts while Parker reorganizes the pantry for me. Just give me twenty more minutes then we’ll join you.”

My sister has huge dark bags under her eyes, but she’s smiling, so that’s a good sign.

“Can we help Parker?” I ask, rising from my seat.

“No. He’s almost done. We have a system, but thanks. Stay.” She waves at the table. “Eat.”

I take a huge bite of a deviled egg, and my eyes roll back in my head. “So damn delicious.”

“I’ll be back.” Nicole runs off.

“She looks exhausted but happy.” Ghita sighs and refills my empty glass. “What about you? You must be tired after a full day of saving the planet at work too?”

“Nah, I love my job. Could never tire of it,” I say and take another bite.

“Great news. You can explain your work on my podcast.”

I almost choke. “Nope ... not gonna happen.”

“What? Come on. You have so much interesting information about new technologies and innovative solutions. Like the air shooty gun thing.”

“The air shooty gun thing?” I bend over laughing at her interpretation of coral reef bleaching. “You mean cloud brightening. They’re using turbines on boats, not guns.”

“Exactly. Your scientific knowledge combined with your hippy-dippy outlook is fascinating to us laymen.”

“Ha. See, you’re already making fun of me. I don’t want to be humiliated on air. I’m not great at improvisation. If someone called in and asked a question I can’t answer or is mean, what would I do?”

“That’s my job. I have no problem saying ‘next caller.’” She winks at me, showing I’d be in capable hands.

We fall silent, watching one another drink our wine and eat the appetizers. When she digs into the hummus and moans, the sound hits me in the solar plexus. Soon my entire body will be a live wire of lust.

“I talked to The Urban Garden Initiative and they are eager to partner with urban schools. We could pair the two episodes, and you can explain the soda bottle composting idea. I won’t humiliate you, Logan.”

I’m close to telling her no again when I remember my office fundraiser the following weekend. “You interested in a trade?”

She leans forward, places her hands under her chin, and runs her tongue along her bottom lip. “Trade for what?”

“Hey, are you two trading sexual favors already?” Nicole asks loudly as she scoots in next to me. I must have an odd look on my face because she says, “Relax. I’m just joking, Logan.” She grabs my wineglass and takes a huge gulp, draining it empty. “But then again, Ghita could show you a thing or two in the bedroom.”

Ghita’s face turns beet red. “Nicole.”

Parker turns the sound system’s volume up and sambas to the table. Latin beats fill the restaurant.

Nicole grabs his hand and yanks him close for a quick kiss. “Logan needs to learn some new moves if he’s going

back on the market.”

Back on the market? What is my sister talking about? Do I need new moves? If I’m dating anyone, I want it to be Ghita.

“Oh shit, I forgot to set the door alarm.” Nicole hauls herself up, and Parker spins her into the kitchen.

Ghita has a blank expression on her face and still hasn’t said a word. I scramble for something clever to interject. “I don’t know what my sister is talking about. Ignore her.”

“You’re a catch, Logan.” She sips her wine, eyes averted away from me. “Nicole is right. You should start dating again. Try the BFF app. The algorithm works.” She points to Parker and Nicole dancing in the middle of the restaurant. They are two people madly in love, and it warms my heart to see Nicole happy. “No harm in signing up,” she says.

This conversation turned sour fast. I need to save it from the gutter. “I have a better idea. One that is beneficial for both of us.”

“Do tell.” Ghita takes another bite of hummus and crusty bread. I watch her chew for a moment, mesmerized by her soft wet lips. She waves her hand at me, encouraging me to continue.

“I’ll do your podcast if you come to my fancy office party as my plus one.” I pour myself more wine.

She takes another bite, and I can’t tell if she’s considering my proposition or figuring out how to turn me down. We sit in silence, watching Nicole and Parker dance for a few long minutes.

“This isn’t a date,” she says with a sharp tone.

Hell yes, it’s a date. “Of course not,” I say, lying my ass off. “It’s weird to attend a formal work occasion alone when everyone is coupled up.”

She twitches her nose in the most adorable way, and I have the urge to jump over the table and kiss her until she can't see straight.

“Will there be dancing?” she asks.

“Is dancing against one of your rules?”

She toys with her cloth napkin. “I can manage dancing.”

I lean forward, forcing her to meet my eyes. “So do we have a deal, Roomie?”

“You’ll do the interview? A full hour? No complaining? You promise?”

“Yep.” I hold my hand out for her to shake. “It’s a date.”

“Not a date. A deal.”

“What did I miss?” Nicole slides onto the bench with a piece of chocolate cake and four forks. “Why do I feel like something nefarious just happened?”

“We made a date,” I say, grinning at my sister.

Ghita points her reproachful finger at me. “No, Logan. We made a deal.”

“I smell trouble.” Nicole shakes her head at us. “Parker,” she yells into the kitchen, “bring out more cake.”

Chapter 14-Ghita

My Vera Wang dress flows behind me as I step onto the sidewalk of the Omni Hotel in downtown Dallas. This party was the perfect excuse to wear my favorite silver heels and borrow my sister's navy satin strapless dress. Giovanna attends countless lavish publishing parties, so she has rows of designer dresses hanging in her closet.

Logan touches my elbow and guides me to the huge glass front doors. His tall frame accentuates his well-tailored black tux. I want to run my hand along his arm and stroke the fabric under my fingers, but if I touch him I might never stop. Stroking my best friend's brother is totally against the rules.

This is a deal, not a date, I remind myself.

"Did I mention you look like a million bucks?" he says.

"Only one million?" I curtsey.

"Make that a gazillion bucks."

"Well, you clean up pretty nice as well. Did you buy the tux for this event?" I almost tell him I don't remember seeing one in his half-empty closet, but stop myself.

"It's a better economical choice to buy a tuxedo rather than to rent one," he says.

I chuckle. "You sound like an infomercial."

"The salesperson at Culwell and Son made a very compelling argument for purchasing one."

"Seems you're not entirely convinced."

"Too late now. It's a custom fit."

"Another salesperson's compelling argument?"

"Yep."

I glance around at all the other men in tuxedos. "You'll probably have to wear one again, so perhaps they were right. Plus, you're putting these other men to shame." I clamp my mouth shut before I say more.

What the hell am I doing? I can't flirt with Nicole's brother.

"Why, thank you. That's a high compliment coming from you."

He tugs on his bowtie, and I nudge him with my elbow. "Stop fidgeting."

Logan weaves his arm inside mine. "There. This will stop me."

I gasp at the sudden warmth of his body and hope he didn't hear.

"Have you been to this hotel before?" he asks as we step into the expansive modern lobby.

"Only one cataclysmic time."

Logan turns to me with questions all over his face. "Cataclysmic?"

"This is a trendy venue for weddings, and my date, Grant, thought it would be a grand idea to bring me."

"To a wedding?"

"I thought we were going to the hotel bar or eating at the restaurant."

"He didn't tell you about attending a wedding? On a date?"

"Nope. I mean, I figured it out as soon as we walked into the giant ballroom decorated in white and peach flowers."

Logan's eyes bulge.

"It gets worse. We missed the wedding ceremony at the church. This event was just the hotel reception."

He groans in what I hope is empathy.

"It gets even worse."

"Nooooo."

"Oh, yessss. We weren't listed on the guest list."

"What? Your date wasn't invited?"

“Yep. He wasn’t invited.”

“Wait. You crashed a wedding on a date?”

“Yes,” I say. “And on a first date.”

“It was your *first* date?”

“Yes. And it gets way worse.” I grimace, and his eyes grow larger.

“How could it get worse?” He must figure out the plot twist because he winces.

“Yep. Grant, the bride’s crazy ex-boyfriend, was uninvited on purpose.”

“Yikes. How did you figure it out?”

I laugh, but the sound comes out like a bark. I clear my throat. “Sorry. I still have traumatic flashbacks from that night.”

“So, what happened next?”

“Grant proceeded to drink every cocktail that passed by on a waiter’s tray and after five or ten glasses, he had serious liquid courage. I should have anticipated the tsunami coming, but the whole experience was like watching a car wreck in slow motion.”

“What did he do?”

“He punched the groom in the face. On the dance floor. In front of the guests. Blood flew all over the bride’s beautiful white wedding dress.”

“What? No. That’s horrible.” Logan clutches my arm, utterly invested in the drama.

“The police escorted us outside, and they arrested Grant for assault.”

Logan leans close to my ear, and his hot breath on my earlobe makes me shiver. “Oh shit. You’re not on some kind of Omni Hotel banned list are you?”

I shoot him a coy smile. “Maybe.”

Before he can respond, an older man with a booming voice pats him on the back. “Logan, so glad you made it.” The man tips back the ice at the bottom of his glass and starts chomping loudly. “And is this your girlfriend?”

Chomp.

Crunch.

Chomp.

“Hi, I’m Ghita, Logan’s friend.”

The man nudges Logan in the ribs. “Is that the lingo these days? Friend?”

Chomp.

Crunch.

Chomp.

“Can’t keep up with you kids.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

Logan pivots to me. “Ghita, this is Frank, our energy manager. He’s been with the company for over fifty years.”

I extend my hand. “Wow, fifty years. Nice to meet you.”

Logan told me about Frank a few days ago. Poor guy creates utter chaos on conference calls. He forgets to mute himself when he isn’t talking and when he isn’t talking, he’s munching on ice and mumbling to himself. He goes through an entire cupful of frozen shards on one call. And, he steals pens off coworkers’ desks.

“Fancy a spin on the dancefloor?” Frank lifts his wrist for me to take.

“I’ve got the first dance,” Logan interrupts and leads me quickly away.

“Has the dancing portion of the night started already?” I ask, giggling at Logan’s relieved expression.

He puts his hand on my lower back, and my laughter ceases. The confident pressure and the heat of Logan’s palm

through the silk of my dress make my heart and my stomach flutter. I place my hand on his shoulder, our eyes lock, and we move in sync with the music.

I'm no professional dancer like Gloria, but I've danced at a lot of weddings. There is nothing sexier than a man who leads. We glide effortlessly, skating across the floor. He tucks me closer to his chest and turns us in concentric circles until my head spins. I don't have to worry about where he steps next. He rocks us to the beat with our bodies pressed together.

When the song stops, I still feel like I'm flying.

"Do you want a drink?" he asks, and I realize I'm parched.

"Yes, please."

We walk over to the crowded bar, and he maneuvers to the front of the line, orders me a water, which I gulp down, and then a malbec. He orders himself a whiskey sour.

I clink my glass against his. "Malbec is my favorite."

"I remember," he says with a shy smile. "You mentioned it when we were drinking that night at Flavour after we rescued Nicole from the weeds."

I'm shocked he took any notice. We drink in silence for a few minutes, watching the crowd. The ballroom is packed with people dancing and mingling, everyone dressed in their finest.

"Should we find our table?" he asks. "I think dinner is served at 8:00."

"We have a table?"

"Yeah, with my team." I must get a worried expression on my face because he quickly says, "Don't worry. Frank will be with the electrical engineers. We, environmental engineers, are the cool kids."

I shoot him a wry grin. "I'm sure."

We find our names at table twelve by the front of the room.

“Hey, Logan.” A slender woman with auburn curly hair touches him on the forearm. She’s decked out in a low-cut emerald green gown and stylish cat-eye glasses.

“Annie.” Logan beams at her, and a tug of jealousy makes me queasy.

I mentally slap myself. Logan is Nicole’s brother and my roommate. Annie is lovely. Of course, Logan is happy to see her.

Annie bats her long eyelashes at him.

Annie is lovely, I say to myself again as my stomach turns into knots.

Logan rests his hand on my shoulder. “I’d like to introduce you to my roommate, Ghita.”

So, now I’m a roommate? What happened to friend?

Annie shakes my hand loosely with the tips of her fingers. “Roommate? How quaint.”

Annie is not that lovely after all.

“Hi, Annie. Nice to meet you.”

She glances at Logan, her eyes sparkling. “Logan, sit next to me.”

Hello? I shout at her in my head. I’m standing right here.

“You don’t have a drink?” Logan asks her.

“No.” Annie crosses her legs and her smooth pale skin peeks out from the front split of her dress. “Not yet.”

“Let me get you one,” he says and pivots to me. “Ghita, another malbec?”

So, you do remember my existence? “Yes, please.” I smile sweetly.

“I’ll be right back.” Logan leaves, and I glance sideways at Annie. I’m not this woman’s competition, yet I could fight her to the death for Logan’s attention. What the hell is wrong with me?

“So, you live with Logan?” she asks. Her voice is strong, and the flirtatious red from her cheeks is gone. This woman wants information.

“He lives with me.” I hold my smile an extra second so she understands that I’m the one with the upper hand.

“I bet he’s the best roommate.”

“The very best.”

Why am I baiting her? If Logan likes Annie, he should date her. Logan turns his head in our direction, and our eyes meet.

“You don’t like him?” Annie asks, watching me.

“No. Well, yes, of course, I like him.”

“Hmmm,” she says.

“He’s my best friend’s brother.”

“So?” She leans into my personal space.

“Well, I don’t want to ruin my relationship.”

“With your best friend or with Logan?”

“Huh?” Where is she getting this impression? Can she read the scattered emotions written on my face?

“Take my advice,” Annie says. “Logan won’t be single for long, so I wouldn’t wait to tell him how you feel.”

What the hell?

Wait. How do I feel?

My arms flail in a spasmodic way. “He’s all yours if you want him,” I say in a desperate tone. “I promise. We’re roommates. Nothing more.”

I check the bar, and Logan’s talking to the bartender. Come on, Logan. Hurry up. I need this conversation to end.

Annie stands abruptly and grabs her purse. “Keep telling yourself that, Ghita.” She passes Logan and says something I can’t make out. He watches her leave before

turning to look at me with a cocked eyebrow. I shrug my shoulders.

“What happened?” he asks, placing two glasses of malbec and another whiskey sour on the table.

“Annie has a mad crush on you.” My inner middle schooler is center stage.

Logan stirs his cocktail. “What do you mean?” He watches me, his eyebrow cocked again.

“Annie *like likes* you. She thought we were together. I corrected her. She left.”

He smiles. “Annie is beautiful.”

My heart sinks. Beautiful?

“But she doesn’t have a sense of humor,” he says, still smiling. “She isn’t funny.”

“She’s not funny?”

“Yeah. She doesn’t make me laugh.”

“But you would date her if she made you laugh?” The question slips out before I can stop it.

He doesn’t answer.

“Let’s dance,” he says, taking my hand.

“But dinner?”

“It will be here when we get back.”

He guides me onto the dance floor, and we’re skating again. We glide seamlessly step by step. I don’t know why exactly but I reach my arms around his neck, drawing him closer.

He lifts me by my waist until my lips are inches from his. My breath catches, and I smell his lemon and evergreen scent. He turns us before placing me on my feet. I study his face.

“You should give Annie a chance,” I say, pulling my gaze away.

He scrunches his forehead. “I should?”

“You can’t attend all these fancy events with me.”

He takes my hand in his and twirls me. “I can’t?”

I’m floating on air. “Where did you learn to dance?” I ask, momentarily forgetting our previous conversation.

“My mom had some dating rules of her own.”

“Really?”

“She told me that there’s nothing sexier than a man who knows how to lead.”

I swallow hard. Another song begins, but who knows what will happen if I keep dancing with this handsome man? I release his hand and stride toward our table.

“They served dinner,” I say, my stomach in so many knots I won’t be able to eat a single bite.

Several food courses later, all the higher-ups at Logan’s company have introduced themselves, and Logan’s already made plans to organize a company softball team.

His phone pings, and Logan checks the screen. “The Uber is here. Ready to head home?”

We say our goodbyes as we exit.

“I can’t believe how much fun I had tonight.” And I mean it. The night turned into a montage of dreamy rom-com moments.

“We can have more fun if you want.” Logan opens the passenger door for me.

“Such a gentleman.”

“Not always.” He lifts those expressive eyebrows again before closing the door.

The ride home is silent. The air is thick with sexual tension, but neither of us breaks.

Once inside the house, the buzz in the air heats up 100,000 degrees higher. I need to go to bed. Immediately.

“Goodnight, Logan,” I say, hastening backward down the hall until I bang into the doorjamb with my heels.

He steps closer, pressing me into the door. The heat radiates off of both of our bodies.

“Goodnight, Ghita.”

I draw in a quick intake of breath, and my lips part against my will.

I want him to kiss me.

I want to kiss him.

I close my eyes, ready to taste him, but he kisses my forehead. When I glance up, he’s already closed the door to his bedroom.

Chapter 15-Ghita

Me: Are you awake?

It's 1 a.m., and I'm still dressed in Vera Wang. I haven't been able to move from the prone position on my bed.

Me: Gemma? Gemma? Gemma? Sweet sister????

Me: Wake up. Wake up. Wake up.

I hope she doesn't have her phone on "do not disturb."

Me: I need to talk.

I kick off my sparkly shoes. Dammit. Still no response.

Me: WAKE UP. I need my sister.

Me: I'm calling. Answer please.

"What?" Gemma sounds groggy and irritated on the phone. "Why are you pinging incessantly with texts? It's annoying. And late. I was asleep."

"Sorry, but I need you," I say.

Her voice perks up. "Are you in jail?"

Jail again? Why does she always think I'm incarcerated when I call after midnight?

"No, but it's a true emergency."

"It is?" She suddenly sounds extra alert. "I'm on my way."

"Hold your horses." I can hear her rustling for clothes and shoes. "You don't need to come over," I say in a calmer voice.

"What's wrong then?" The bed springs creak on her end. She must be sitting back down. "Did you have another disaster date?"

"Just the opposite."

"Ohhhhh, a good date? Tell me everything."

“Yes. I mean no. Not a date. It was not a date. It was a deal. Only a deal.”

“A deal?”

“Well, more of a trade.”

“A trade sounds worse, Ghita. Are you safe? Say sandwich if I need to call 911.”

“It’s orange, not sandwich. Remember? We can’t make our safe word sandwich.”

“Orange? How would you work that into a casual conversation? A bad guy would assume you were calling for help if you randomly said orange.”

“How is sandwich a better option? Is the bad guy even letting me make a phone call?”

“If someone unwanted was in my bedroom and you called, I would ask, ‘Are you eating a sandwich?’ Then you would know I was in danger.”

Huh. That could actually work. “But what if you’re just hungry?”

“Nevermind. Are you eating a sandwich or not?” she asks.

“No, I am not. But I am starving. And I’m in real trouble.”

“Ghita, you are getting on my last nerve. Are you okay?”

“I went with Logan to his work gala as his plus one, and I had a wonderful time.”

“Then why the trouble?”

“Hello? What’s my number one rule, Gemma?”

“He isn’t Donny.”

We sit in silence on the phone for a while, my sister reading my mind.

“Logan’s a nice guy,” she says.

“He is.”

“It might work out with him.”

“And if it doesn’t?” I cover my face with my hands.

“Nicole would never dump you. She loves you.”

“And I love her. I can’t risk our friendship for a guy.”

“He’s not any guy. Have you ever thought Nicole might be happy to see you two date?”

“Until we crash and burn. You know my track record with men. We’ll break up eventually and then Nicole will dump me. This is one rule I can’t breach.” I grab my pillow and squeeze it into my chest.

“I understand why you made the rule, but Donny was a douche bucket. He never deserved you and neither did Lorna. Plus, it was high school. You and Logan are adults, not clueless teenagers.”

“And as an adult, I recognize it’s better to put a best friend before a boyfriend.”

“Okay. Fine. Stick to your rules. Be unhappy forever.”

“Forever? That’s harsh.” I roll over onto my side and grab a blanket from the foot of the bed.

“What if Logan is the one?”

“He’s not. He hardly wears shirts. He even cooks shirtless.”

“He cooks for you topless?”

“Yeah.”

“Does he have a six-pack?”

“Well, yeah, but what does his body matter?”

“He sounds like my dream man. Hard abs and delicious food. What more could a cisgender girl want?” She giggles into the phone.

“Well, don’t forget his ugly chair.”

“You mean the chair he adopted from his neighbor? The elderly man who needed company? The one he read to for years?”

“You’re making it sound better than it is. You saw that awful chair.”

“Yeah, I did, and it’s super comfy.” She sighs as if reliving the moment.

“You sat on the monster?”

Gemma laughs. “You haven’t even sat in it?”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is your point?”

“Come on,” I say. “You’re the one who doesn’t want to find love.”

“We aren’t talking about me. You’re the one with all the rules,” Gemma says.

I ignore her rule comment. “Herbert doesn’t like him.”

“I love you, Ghita, but you are very particular about who you open your heart to. You shut out all other possibilities. Maybe you *and* Herbert should give Logan a chance.”

“That’s the worst idea ever.”

“Or the best. I’m going to sleep. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

I end the phone call and stare down at my fancy dress. I’m too tired to change, so I tuck under the covers.

“Logan is the worst idea ever,” I say to my empty bedroom and switch off the lamp.

Chapter 16-Logan

“I’ll be the hat,” I say, settling into an empty chair at the giant Russo family dining room table. Persian rugs lie stacked on top of each other like a carpet warehouse and colorful soft pillows peek out of every nook and cranny. My sister takes the seat across from me with a secretive expression on her face.

“What?” I ask her.

“Just watching you, big brother,” Nicole says, tucking a pillow underneath her to reach the Monopoly board better.

“Thank goodness,” Franny says, distributing buttery caramel popcorn in small pottery bowls around the wooden table. “No one ever chooses the top hat. I love the cute hat, but the kids insist I stick with the wheelbarrow.”

“Eat up,” Ghita says, crunching in my ear before moving to her seat.

“Ice cream sundaes for everyone if we finish the game in under an hour,” Franny says.

“Under an hour?” one of Ghita’s sisters asks. Maybe it’s Giovanna. Nicole mentioned Ghita has six sisters, but I lost track after the first pour of wine. “That’s impossible, Mom.”

“It’s not impossible,” Ghita says, “as long as you don’t hoard the prime properties as usual.”

“But that’s the point of the game. To win.”

It’s official. I love family game night, and I adore Ghita’s family. Her mom insisted she bring me along, and I enthusiastically accepted. I won’t pass up any chance to spend more time with Ghita and meet the important people in her life. I don’t know who I appreciate the most, her parents who greeted me like a long-lost son, or her siblings who already treat me like a brother.

“Logan, tell us everything.”

“Giovanna? Right?” I ask. The siblings’ names begin with a G, which you’d think would make remembering names easier, but it does not. It’s confusing as hell.

“Right.” Giovanna turns to Ghita. “He’s a keeper.”

Ghita blushes, and I hope my luck with her will change tonight.

“What do you want to know?”

“Where would you hide a body if you killed someone?” Giovanna is intense, and her serious face tells me she is not joking.

“I wouldn’t?” I answer in case it’s a trick question. “Because I don’t kill people?”

“Great answer.” She knocks me on the shoulder with her knuckle and deals everyone the fake money.

“What’s your safe word?” Gemma asks next.

“Safe word?”

“Ghita’s word was orange, but I made her change it to sandwich.”

“Thank God,” Giovanna says. “Orange was ridiculous.”

I’m not sure sandwich is any better than orange, but her sisters agree it’s a perfect choice, so I don’t press the issue.

“So, what is your word, Logan? Do share.”

Ghita takes her stack of colorful cash. “Giovanna, give the man a break.”

“I can’t believe you told Logan Ghita’s safe word,” Gloria says, organizing her own stack of bills. “What if he’s a serial killer?” She winks at me to let me know she’s kidding. “Now she can’t use sandwich. Her dramatic rescue is shot to shit.”

A very pregnant woman leans over the board. “You shorted me twenty bucks, Giovanna.”

Nicole barks out a snort.

“No way, Hannah.” Giovanna ignores her outstretched palm. “I can’t believe you’re cheating already.” She moves the bank in front of Franny. “Mom, you have to watch Hannah like a hawk.”

“Hannah?” I ask. “I thought you were all G names?”

“We are,” Ghita says. “Gabe, my brother, married Hannah. We’ve tried to talk her into going by Gannah but she won’t answer to that name.”

“Because it isn’t my name,” Hannah says. “And you still owe me twenty bucks, Giovanna.”

Ghita’s dad steals a twenty from Franny’s stash and hands the bill to Hannah with a friendly smile.

“Dad.” Giovanna snatches the bank from her mother and gathers a stack of bills. “Then we all should get an extra twenty.”

“I’m getting the vibe this is a serious game,” I say. “Should I be worried?”

“It’s very serious,” Nicole says. “Whoever wins gets to pick the next family outing.”

“Really?”

“It’s true,” Nicole says. “That’s why some of us cheat.”

“Cheat?”

“Giovanna always wins,” Ghita says. “And she always picks the Dallas Museum of Art and Thai food.”

Gloria sighs dramatically. “I have every floor of the museum memorized. I’ve been a million times.”

“Thank God, Hannah won last time,” Ghita says

“Because she cheated,” Giovanna says, turning the board so Park Place is in front of her.

“As I said, Hannah won last time, and we had a family barbeque at the lake.”

“It was fun,” Nicole says. “They invited Parker and me too. We played corn husks and skied.”

“Just so you know, Logan,” Gemma says in a low whisper, “we’re pushing for the Grand Canyon for our next trip.”

“I heard that,” Giovanna says, swatting her sister. “Mom and Dad are too old to hike at high altitudes.”

“Excuse me?” Franny says. “Who’s too old?”

The doorbell sings a melodious song, and Ghita’s father leaves our game to answer the door. “Who doesn’t have their key?”

In walks another sister. She’s blond-haired and blue-eyed and quite a bit younger than the other siblings. This must be the baby of the family.

She runs into the room, kisses her parents on their cheeks, and jumps into the one remaining chair. She’s fast and the energy in the room picks up. Everyone smiles at her as she grabs the thimble.

“Slow down, Gina,” Ghita says.

“Hi.” She points at me. “I don’t know you.”

“I’m Logan. Nice to meet you.” I turn to Ghita. “Can we please make name tags?”

Nicole laughs. “You’ll get the hang of it. When in doubt, call them G. It works.”

“Hi, Logan,” Gina says. “Who do you belong to here?”

I gulp in too much air. Who do I belong to? That’s the million-dollar question. “Uhh.”

“He’s my brother,” Nicole says, saving me. “He moved here from California.”

I offer my hand for her to shake. “Hi.”

“Cool. Where’s Jacob?” Gina asks, releasing my hand. “Is he here?” She lifts her long hair into a knot and sticks a pencil through it.

“Jacob has a concert in Seattle tonight,” Gloria says.

Gina counts her money. “You aren’t going?”

“Nah. I have a few more local errands before the wedding. He’ll be here next week for sure.”

“Who’s performing?” I ask.

The entire table laughs, and Gloria gives Ghita an odd look. “It’s JD.”

“Nice. I love that guy’s music.” The table laughs louder, and this time I think they’re laughing at me. I see Nicole shaking her head at me like I’m an idiot. “Am I missing something?”

Ghita places her hand on top of mine. “Jacob is her fiancé.” Her grin lights up her entire face.

I nod. “Uh-huh.”

“Jacob is JD.”

“Whhattttt? Your sister is marrying JD?” I hold myself in my seat trying to stay calm and cool. “You didn’t think to tell me this small bit of mind-blowing information?”

Ghita shrugs her shoulders, “We’ve known Jacob our whole lives, so it’s not information I remember to share.”

“Uhh.” I glance around the table. “Anyone else famous here?”

“Hannah, tell him,” Giovanna says, tilting her head.

I examine Hannah’s face for something familiar. “You’re famous too?”

She frowns. “Giovanna. Stop telling the world my business. It’s weird.”

“It’s cool.” Gemma throws her arm around Hannah and pulls her in for a side hug. “She’s Hannah Harper, the famed young adult graphic novelist.”

“No way. I’ve read your entire series. Your books are wonderful. I heard Netflix is adapting the first one for film.”

Giovanna beams at Hannah. “You heard correctly.”

“Drinks anyone?” Nicole rises and gathers a few beverage orders before retreating to the kitchen.

“Gloria is famous too,” Ghita says and shoves a handful of popcorn in her mouth.

“You are?” I take a deep breath and push my sleeves up on my shirt. It’s getting hot in here.

“Just a little. In the dance world,” Gloria says and organizes her money.

“She choreographed the latest Cardi B video,” Ghita says as if it’s no big deal.

“Gabriela plays for the Houston Dash,” Franny says proudly. “Don’t forget her.”

“Played,” Gemma corrects, and I catch Ghita kicking her hard under the table.

“What did you say?” Franny asks.

“Nothing.” Gloria purses her lips at Gemma. “Logan, what about you?”

“Me? I am completely unfamous. Not important, no one.”

“But are you infamous?” Gina asks and giggles.

“I’m neither.” I shrug my shoulders to hide the bright red fire that must be blooming on my face.

“Me either,” Franny says, giving me a warm smile. “Not an ounce of fame.”

Ghita’s dad stands up. “I’m famous for my—.”

“Dad,” Gemma says. “That’s a secret.”

“A secret?” I ask Ghita. Is her family messing with me?

“Dad won an Oscar,” Gloria says with a straight face.

I freeze. “You’re joking?” I scan the table and find the entire family wearing identical grins.

“Yeah, I’m totally joking,” Gloria says.

“You had me there,” I sigh in relief, “but I wouldn’t be surprised. You all have so many talents.”

“Let’s play,” Franny says. “You girls messed with poor Logan’s head enough for one night.”

Nicole returns to the room with an armful of sodas. “Did anyone roll yet?”

“No,” two sisters answer at the same time.

“Are we waiting for Gabe?” Giovanna glances around the table.

“No. He had an emergency call. A cat swallowed a balloon,” Hannah says.

“Bummer.” Ghita’s face falls. “I wanted you to meet him,” she says to me.

Meet the big brother? This situation is improving.

“He’s a huge road cyclist. Thought the two of you might like to ride around the lake together.”

Biking? “I’m sure I’ll meet him another time.” I better start looking for a new bike.

“Is Parker coming?” Gina asks Nicole. Her cheeks turn bright pink when she says his name, and I wonder if she has a crush on him too.

“No, he’s leading a poetry critique group tonight.”

Ghita hands me the dice. “Logan, you roll first.”

We play for thirty minutes, and I quickly sink into debt. I guess I won’t be picking their next family outing.

Hannah lands on Park Place and buys it.

“Hannah, let me see your dice.” Giovanna glares at her and points at us in a you-see gesture.

Gemma bumps Hannah’s elbow, and the dice fall onto the carpet. “Oops,” Hannah says in an innocent voice. She’s the one who could win an Oscar.

Gina rolls the dice next. “A guy named Nathan called the house for you, Ghita.”

Who the hell is Nathan?

Gloria leans on her forearms. “Please tell me you aren’t dating a guy who calls our house phone.”

I feel the heat creep up my neck. Dating Nathan? What the hell? Every jealous bone in my body spikes. I bite my tongue to keep from saying something I might regret.

“Nah, he didn’t work out,” Ghita says, and I relax a bit.

“Is that why he’s calling the house?” Gemma asks. “You ghosted him, and he’s trying to find you?”

Franny takes the dice in her hand and rolls. “Bad first date, honey?”

“Yeah. You know how those go.”

“Oh, I do.” Franny gives me a side smile. “Has Ghita told you about her rules?” She moves her wheelbarrow and lands in jail.

“Here, Mom.” Gemma slides a get-out-of-jail card to Franny.

Giovanna waves her arms wildly. “You’re not even going to hide the cheating anymore?”

“See,” Hannah says to Giovanna. “That wasn’t even me.”

“But you admit you cheat?”

Franny waves her away. “Settle down, Giovanna. Everyone wants to go to the Grand Canyon.”

Giovanna huffs. “What’s wrong with the museum?”

Gloria rolls. “So, I guess Nathan’s not your date for the wedding?”

What date for the wedding? She’s bringing a date to the wedding?

“You should bring Logan since he brought you to his work party,” Gemma says with her lips curled up at the ends.

I meet her gaze and smile. Looks like I might have an ally.

Nicole claps her hands. “That’s a great idea.”

And another ally. Look at that.

“What do you think?” Franny asks me, wearing the same expression as Gemma.

“I’d love to come.” My lips stretch into a wide grin even though I’m trying to contain my excitement.

“We’ll see,” Ghita says, ignoring our eyes on her.

Franny points to Hannah’s row of properties. “It’s safe to say that Hannah’s cleaning us out in the next round. Who’s ready for ice cream?”

Gemma puts her arm through mine. “Logan, you want to come to the Grand Canyon with us?”

“Gemma.” I hear the strain in Ghita’s voice, but Gina has already laced her arm through my other free arm. “Yay, we’re going to the Grand Canyon,” she yells as we skip to the kitchen.

“Can’t wait,” I say.

Chapter 17-Ghita

The light is on in the kitchen, and the smell of apple pie fills the entire house. A loud clang echoes down the hall, and I freeze. Why am I tiptoeing into my own house late at night? Oh, yeah, because I'm avoiding Logan.

Things have been weird since family game night. I'm certain Logan wants to be my date at Gloria and Jacob's wedding. My family pushed for it hard enough, and hell, he said yes to my mom. It's as if no one cares about my rules.

Dating Logan will end in disaster. Dating always ends in disaster for me. It's why I created the rules in the first place.

"Is that you, Ghita?" Logan's voice is deep, and I can't help but get a tiny shiver hearing my name on his lips. I must remember the rules.

"Yeah." No sense in remaining quiet. "Where are you?" I call out and slip my shoes off.

"In the kitchen." His voice sounds muffled now.

I glance around for him but he's nowhere. "Logan?"

"Down here."

On the floor, with his head under the sink, Logan lies shirtless and in those damn sexy sweatpants I love. This is why I've been avoiding him.

"What happened?" I lean over and inhale his evergreen and lemon scent wafting from his bare chest.

"Did you just sniff me?"

"No—o—o."

Crap. I totally sniffed him.

"What happened?" I ask again, hoping he'll let the whole sniffing thing slide.

"Your sink is leaking. I ran to Lowe's and got a new drain pipe."

“Do you know what you’re doing?” I drop to my knees beside him and the heat radiating off his taut bare chest makes my head spin. Maybe it doesn’t matter whether he can fix the pipe. This view is exceptional.

“Umm.” Logan pulls his head out of the cabinet for a minute. “Not really.” He ducks back under the sink.

“Wait, what?” I tear my eyes away from his abs and glance under the sink as if the problem will diagnose itself.

He chuckles. “But does anyone really know what they’re doing?”

“A plumber surely does.” My voice sounds a few octaves too high. “Should I call a plumber? I’ll call a plumber.”

“You don’t need a plumber, do you old gal?”

Is he talking to the sink?

“Now, hold still while I reinstall your pipe.”

Why does that sound sexy?

“Just one more turn,” he says.

He must be talking to the sink.

“Ghita, can you push play on my phone and hold the screen where I can see it.”

“You Googled a video on plumbing?”

“Yeah. It’s fine though.”

I jam my body next to his and shove the phone into the cabinet space. “Logan, tell me you’re joking.”

He laughs and the muscles in his stomach contract. Heat flares in my gut, and I drop the phone.

“Ouch, that was my face.”

I pick it up and twist my body to the side. “Should I rewind the video?”

“Nah.” He fiddles with a wrench for a few minutes. “I think I’ve got it.”

“You think?” I scoot out and take in a deep breath. The air was thinner next to Logan.

“Let’s turn on the water,” he says.

“If you didn’t repair the leak properly, won’t water gush out over the floor?”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” He turns on the cold water and waits. It runs for two minutes and nothing shoots out of the pipes. “See? All fixed.”

The confidence of this man is staggering.

“Wow. You just repaired my plumbing.”

“Sometimes you need to throw mud at the wall and trust it will work out.” He arches an eyebrow and bites his lower lip.

I’m not sure he is talking about my pipes anymore.

“So, what’s the delicious smell?” I ask as a quick diversion. “Did you make apple pie?”

“Yeah. That’s how this whole plumbing project started.”

“But why are you baking a pie at midnight?”

“I’m not.”

I sniff the air. “I beg to differ.”

“I didn’t start baking at midnight. I cleaned the apples at 8-ish, discovered the leaking sink, went to Lowes, began work on the pipes, and now it’s midnight, and the pie is,” the timer on his phone beeps, “done.” He grabs the oven mitts and takes out a delicious-smelling apple pastry.

“Did you put cinnamon in here?” I love cinnamon in an apple pie, especially a la mode.

“Of course. And I have vanilla bean ice cream in the freezer.”

I moan with satisfaction, and I haven’t even taken a bite yet. “You read my mind.”

“Wanna piece?”

I stare up and gulp. This gorgeous shirtless man holding an apple pie is the sexiest picture I've ever seen. And he's in my kitchen. My kitchen.

"Yes, or half, please."

With a very serious expression, he cuts the pie in half and puts the giant piece on a plate. "Half for you." He puts the other half on a second plate. "And half for me."

"I was joking." He crooks his head at me. "Okay, I wasn't."

I snatch the plate and drop three giant scoops of ice cream on top of my humongous pie piece. "You want some ice cream too?"

He peers into the container. "Is there any left?"

"Hilarious. The rest is yours."

"You mean the dregs?" He shovels another three spoonfuls onto his plate.

I take a scoop of my ice cream and raise the spoon. "Our eyes might be bigger than our stomachs."

He takes a bite, licking his lips afterward.

My heart stops. Why is eating food with Logan such a turn-on?

We chew in silence for a few minutes, taking small glances at one another and smiling.

"You're home late," he says, skimming off some ice cream. "Interviewing dates for Gloria's wedding?" He's not smiling anymore, and I can't tell if he wants the answer to be yes or no.

"I was at my parents' assembling gift bags with Gemma for Gloria's spa retreat."

"So, you already found a date for the wedding?"

Man, he won't let this wedding date subject go.

"I might go alone." I take my last bite of the pie and moan again. "Oh my gosh, this is so tasty."

His cheeks turn an adorable shade of red. “Thanks. It’s my grandmother’s recipe.”

“You’re the best roommate ever.”

“I’d be the best wedding da—”

“Meeoow.”

We both startle at the sound and find Herbert scratching at the glass sliders.

“Herbert, you’re up late,” I say, opening the door.

Herbert ignores me and saunters into the kitchen like he owns the place.

“Right on time,” Logan says and grabs a covered plate by the coffeemaker.

I turn to him in surprise and then stare at Herbert with even more surprise as he begins to eat the bacon out of Logan’s hand like a domesticated pet instead of an aloof stray.

I put my hands on my hips as I watch this performative display of affection. “So, you and Herbert are friends now?”

“He just needed time to warm up to me.”

“Or bacon, apparently.”

Herbert finishes the bacon pieces and purrs as loud as a diesel engine, wrapping his tail around Logan’s leg.

I put our empty dishes in the dishwasher and click off the overhead light. “Wanna make Wilma’s table with me?”

He and Herbert follow me into the living room. “So, you’re warming up to her?”

I glare at Wilma. “Maybe if she brought me bacon,” I tease.

Herbert jumps onto the worn cushions of the monstrous chair and settles in.

“Traitor,” I say, but Herbert closes his eyes, ignoring my jab.

I hear Logan stifle a laugh behind me.

“Okay, chuckle boy, laugh it up, but I hope your rope-wrapping skills are as keen as your sense of humor.”

Logan cracks his knuckles and stretches his arms behind his back, making his muscles pulse. “Bring it on.”

I whip my head away from his toned upper torso and refocus on the table project.

“You’ll be glad to know this rope is an all-natural jute,” I say and sit next to the tire on the floor by the coil of rope.

“Ah, so you do listen to my boring lectures.”

I try to hide my smile, but it’s useless. “I told you they’re riveting, didn’t I?” I pat the ground beside me.

He examines the rope in his hand. “Are you going to take me to the wedding or not?”

“You’re very persistent.”

“No, I’m motivated.”

“You’d be peppered with a million questions the entire night. My extended family will be there, and they’ll pick you apart like vultures.” I turn on the hot glue gun and place it on a trivet. “You saw how my sisters treated you at dinner. And we aren’t even dating.”

“I loved family game night. Franny said I could come with you next week too. Someone has to keep Giovanna from winning, and it can’t always be Hannah.”

He sounds sincere. And invested.

“Maybe I should take you to the wedding with me,” I say, testing the waters.

He shoots me an exaggerated grin and makes a trail of glue inside the tread grooves. “You definitely should.”

I place the rope over the glue, and we both press our hands against it. “We should work on your interview Sunday,” I say, changing the subject.

“Sunday?” Logan has genuine fear in his eyes. “This Sunday?”

“We made a deal. You promised.”

“I’m nervous, Ghita.”

I don’t understand where this is coming from. Logan is confident in everything he does. Why would he be nervous about talking to me?

“Why are you nervous?”

“I ...”

I release a long exhale. “Shit. Sorry. You’re right. I tricked you into making a promise. That wasn’t cool. You don’t have to do the interview.”

He holds up one of his hands, keeping the other one pressed on the rope. “No. You didn’t trick me into anything. I made a promise of my own free will. You held up your end of the bargain and went to my fundraising event. We had a great time.”

I cover my face, ashamed that I pressured him into doing the interview.

He removes my hands. “At least, I had a great time,” he says.

“I did too,” I say under my breath.

I make a move for the glue gun, but he takes my hand. “I want to do your podcast, but I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?”

I notice his warm hands are giant compared to mine and he’s running his thumb along the ridge of my palm. It feels too inviting.

“I’m afraid I’ll bore your audience. I’m not interesting or famous. What if I embarrass you?”

“Logan, nothing is boring about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “You’re charming and funny. My audience will fall in love with you.”

His thumb stops moving along my hand, and we meet gazes. “That’s not who I’d be doing the podcast for.”

I pull my hand away and switch off the glue gun. “Great, Sunday it is.” I stand. “I’m going to bed. We can finish the table later.”

Logan steps closer to me. “Ghita—”

I move sideways and point to the sleeping cat. “Can you take Herbert outside?”

He glances at Herbert and then at me. “Oh. Okay.”

“Thanks,” I say as I race toward my room. “Night,” I yell over my shoulder.

“Goodnight, Ghi—”

I close my door on his words and realize my hands are shaking, and my legs are trembling.

I cannot take Logan to this wedding.

Chapter 18-Ghita

I've sorted through my interview notes ten times, checked my phone seven, and reapplied my lip balm five. Logan still isn't here. We'll be live in six minutes. Just as I'm checking my texts for the eighth time, the door swings open.

"Ghita, I know, I know. I'm late. Sorry."

"Are you late?" I try to sound casual and not as if I were scrambling for a topic to take on air.

"There was a wreck on the way here, one car in front of me, so I stopped to help."

I jump out of my chair and grab his arm. "Oh, no. Was everyone okay?" I see now he's frazzled and a bit disheveled.

"Yes. It was a mom and her daughter. Their car was hit from the side. They were shaken but physically fine. The guy who hit them ran through a light. His car is toast." He plops down into the chair next to him. "I stayed to give the police a statement."

"Oh, that's terrible." I chastise myself for assuming he was late for a trivial reason. "I'm glad you stopped to help."

"Still, sorry I'm late." He paces a little. "I should have called, but the police timing was chaotic, and the wreck happened so fast. I waited until a family member picked them up. The mother and daughter were both upset."

"I understand. You did the right thing. Do you need a few minutes before we start? Or we can reschedule?" I grab his hands and wait as he slows his breathing. We stand facing one another in silence while he collects himself.

"I'm fine," he says, his face less pale than before. "Really. We need to go on air."

"We can do this another day," I say, not wanting to pressure him like I did the last time. "I have a backup plan." It's a lie, but I'm quick on my feet and can talk about dog rescue groups in Dallas. My sister has given me enough material to last a full hour.

“No, Ghita. It’s okay. I’m ready.” Logan pushes his chair closer to the table and sits. “Bring it on.” He adjusts his headphones and nods. A tiny curve of his lips convinces me he’s truly fine.

I’m relieved his confidence has returned.

I sit next to him. “Okay, let’s do this.” I count down on my fingers.

Three.

Two.

One.

“Welcome to Mismatched. Today, our guest is Logan Scott, an environmentalist, a philosopher,” I wink at him, “and a serious hottie.” I note his cheeks burn bright red. “Logan, thanks for being here with me today.”

He clears his throat. “Thanks, Ghita. I’m happy you invited me.”

Happy might be a slight exaggeration. He keeps wringing his hands nervously in front of him. To distract him from his nerves, I hand Logan a colorful stress ball.

“Let’s open with some rapid-fire questions. Laundry pods or liquid detergent?”

Logan laughs into the mic. “Wasn’t expecting a laundry debate.”

“That’s the point. Don’t overthink. Trust your instincts.”

He bites his bottom lip in the sexy way I like. “Neither if you do your laundry in smaller loads and don’t mind pretreating heavy stains. I use Clearalif’s Laundry Detergent Sheets.”

“Did you hear that Clearalif’s marketing department, you just got free advertising? Okay, Logan. Here is a controversial question.” He gives me a panicked expression, and I wink at him. “Baths or showers?”

Logan grins at me and squeezes the toy. “A five-minute hot shower uses way less water and energy, but few people take five-minute showers.”

I immediately zone out, picturing him in the shower nude, sudsy, and wet.

He continues. “A bathtub uses on average twenty-five to fifty-two gallons depending on your water level. But if you bathe with a partner, you’ll conserve significant amounts of water.”

And now I’m imagining him in my clawfoot bathtub with me, filled with bubbles, and we’re both nude. I gulp.

Logan pulls closer to the edge of the table. “You still with us, Ghita?”

I snap back to reality and wipe the sweat off my brow with my shirtsleeve. “Yes, conserving water is good for the environment.”

“Now it’s my turn to ask some questions,” he says, taking charge of my interview.

Damn, his self-assurance is sexy. “Um. Sure.”

“Would you rather talk like Yoda or breathe like Darth Vader?”

Logan is unpredictable and funny.

“Playing hardball, huh?”

“Yep.” He points to his wrist indicating time is ticking. “Pick one.”

“Okay, do I prefer to speak in code or sound like I’m dying of emphysema?”

“Correct.” He taps his finger on the table. “Which one?”

“Code, speaking it is.”

Logan laughs at my attempt at Yodish. “A commendable choice, that is.”

We grin at each other across the table like hormone-crazy middle schoolers, and I forget we're in a recording studio, live on the radio.

“Okay, here's an easy one,” he says, his innocent grin turning wicked.

I swallow hard.

“Would you rather take a stranger, and possibly a serial killer, to your sister's wedding or your amazing roommate?”

I twist my lips in frustration and admiration. Clever move. He's put me on the spot. No dodging the question this time.

“Hmmm. Am I certain my roommate isn't a serial killer?” Take that, Logan Scott.

His wicked smile intensifies. “I just said he's amazing.”

“Amazing to you. What do I think about him?” We are blatantly flirting on live radio. How the hell did this happen?

“Earlier, you described him as charming, funny, and a 'hottie.'”

I gulp in extra air, attempting to compose myself, and pluck the stress ball from his hand.

“Ghita,” he taps on the mic, “we're waiting. Inquiring minds want to know.”

I take a calming breath, hoping my fear isn't audible. “My audience tuned in today for your expert composting tips. We don't want to disappoint them.” Yeah, back at you, Roomie. Not so clever anymore. “Tell us about your important environmental work, Logan.”

“Okay, listeners.” His face widens into a grin, and he lifts his hands in mock defeat. “Buckle your seat belts, everyone. Just like we have a symbiotic relationship with people, we have a similar relationship with our planet Earth.” Logan says this last part seriously. “Take the coral reefs. Did you know they are a barrier to storms? When they get bleached, which is how we describe their dying process, from

warming oceans they no longer protect the coastline. We must keep the ocean from warming to keep the reefs alive. This, in turn, helps the earth and humans. It's all connected."

"Living in the city of Dallas, I don't have a lot of experience with the ocean ecosystem," I say, relieved to talk about the ocean and not about Gloria's wedding.

"Ah, you aren't as far as you think. Only a hundred miles southwest of Galveston, Texas is Flower Garden Banks, a gem of a coral reef."

"What?" I'm genuinely surprised. "I've been to Galveston loads of times and never heard of this magical place."

"We should go diving there this summer," he says as if he's speaking to just me and not a chunk of the country listening on air.

I'm at a loss for words, which is unfortunate for a radio personality. I quickly leaf through the notes in front of me while I motion for Logan to describe the reefs at Flower Gardens. Time to redirect, again.

"Logan, you grew up in California, correct? Is that where you became interested in environmental issues?" I take a slow breath to reduce my beating heart and squeeze the bejesus out of the foam ball under the table.

He winks at me as if he knows I'm intentionally redirecting him. "That's correct. My mom is a huge surfer, and she would take us with her to different surf spots around the world. When I was thirteen, I became a certified scuba diver. It was after the first dive that I fell in love with the ocean and its magical creatures."

"Are you encouraging my listening audience to go scuba diving?"

"For sure. There is an entire secret world down there if you open yourself up to the possibility of new discoveries. It's life-changing, or at least it was for me."

His eyes meet mine, and the audience disappears again. We're the only people in the world at this moment.

“Thank you, Logan.” I clear my throat. “Next week, Mismatched will be talking to Glen Dunlap at the Urban Garden Initiative about their partnership with Dallas ISD schools and how other districts can implement similar programs. But before we go, Logan, why don’t you explain the soda bottle composting idea that your company is promoting in science classes.”

“Sure. The supplies are simple: a 2-liter empty soda bottle, scissors, paper shreds, soil, fruit or vegetable scraps, some water, and the sun. Ta-da. Compost.”

“Are there any rules?”

Logan smirks at me. “Only two. No dairy and no meat. Both create problems.”

“I see. So, Logan, rules are important to follow then?” I say his name a little too loudly.

“Some rules,” he says, and I hear laughter under his breath. “Compost rules protect you from harm.”

“A lot of rules protect you from harm.”

His expression darkens. “Or they keep you from enjoying life.”

I try to ignore the frown. “Thanks for being here today, Logan. We look forward to seeing how you change the world.”

“Thanks for having me, Ghita.” He sounds a bit defeated, but it’s for his own good. He should focus his sights on someone else. I’m not a good fit for him.

“Remember listeners, let’s get connected. Until next week.”

Chapter 19-Logan

“And you are?” I answer the door in an extra deep voice with my chest pushed out. Peeking behind me, I make sure Ghita can’t hear me drop those deep octaves.

“I’m Carl.” This guy has a bouquet of daffodils for Ghita and a quick grin for me. “And you must be Logan.” He leans back and clenches his hands above his head, ignoring my wide domineering stance. “Ghita told me you’re staying with her for a few weeks. You’re her best friend’s brother?”

I flash a closed-lipped smile and leave it plastered there for an awkward minute. The man doesn’t budge.

Carl dressed to impress in tailored black pants, shiny designer shoes, and a perfectly ironed dark blue button-down shirt. He must have twenty of these coiffed outfits in his closet.

But I own a tux.

I clench my hands above my head, mimicking his body language, and then drop them. Dammit. He probably owns four tuxes.

I gesture for him to enter. “Yeah, I’m Logan, Nicole’s brother. Nice to meet you.”

“Sweet digs,” Carl says, scanning the living room. He flops into Wilma, and I almost shriek. “Wow. This chair is amazing. My great-grandpa had a lounge exactly like it.” He pulls the lever to recline. “It’s a great napping chair.”

I resist the urge to dump him out of Wilma and save her from his fancy ass. “Actually, it’s my thinking chair.”

He raises the chair to the upright position. “Nice.”

Herbert waddles in from the kitchen with a soft “meeooww” sound, but when he notices Carl sitting in his chair, he hisses dramatically and pounces, swiping at his pant leg and snagging the expensive fabric with his claws.

I’m unable to move. I didn’t even know Herbert had nails. He’s so gentle with Ghita and me.

Herbert is reacting to a stranger sitting in his chair rather than Carl's presence, but Ghita doesn't need to know it's Wilma he is devoted to. I can work with this situation.

Carl yips with fear, and in his effort to escape the chair, steps on Herbert's tail and sort of kicks him across the floor. Lucky for me, that's when Ghita makes her grand entrance.

"Herbert! Carl?" She swivels her head from Carl to the floor. "What the hell are you doing to my cat?"

Carl covers his face with his hand, his cool demeanor quickly fading. "I didn't mean to kick him. The cat attacked me."

I plop onto the sofa to watch this shit show. Ghita will never believe Herbert attacked anyone, and I am here for it.

"I seriously doubt this big, sweet baby assaulted you." Ghita scoops the giant animal into her arms and cuddles him as he purrs loudly at her.

Poor Carl, pale and shamed, stammers. "He ... uh ... tore my pant leg. Look." He holds out his ankle, but it's clear the situation is going downhill for him. I ease farther into the sofa, wishing I had a bowl of popcorn for this performance.

"Maybe you should go. Tonight isn't the best for a dinner date," Ghita says, placing Herbert on the ground.

I refrain from pumping my fists in the air and giving high fives to Herbert, my favorite cat of all time.

"No, Ghita. Please. I'm sorry. Let me redeem myself," Carl says.

This guy must know Ghita is incredible, but his ship has already sunk.

"Nah. I have a lot of work I should do," she says.

"I bought tickets. There's a show at the Winspear." He gives her the once over. "You're dressed to go out already." He steps closer. "You look beautiful. I'm really sorry. Please give me a chance here."

“What’s the show?” Ghita asks with her hands on her hips.

That’s the worst question she could ask this poor guy. It’s a test. He can’t redeem himself, but maybe she won’t let good tickets go to waste.

“You’ll have a fun time. I promise.”

“What’s the show, Carl?”

Poor, poor guy covers his head in his hands, and I almost laugh. “I have season tickets, so I don’t remember.”

He doesn’t remember? It’s over dude. I want to clap my hands but sit on them instead.

“Fine, I’ll go,” she says. “Any show at the Winspear is phenomenal.”

My mouth falls open, matching Carl’s same expression. She relented. What the hell?

“But I’ll need to be home by eleven. I have an early morning.”

“Yes. Sure.” He nods, agreeing to anything she says.

This is brutal to watch and exhilarating. This is a pity date for sure. I jump up to keep from cheering, and Ghita steps next to me.

I swing an arm around her shoulder and tug her body into a side hug. “You certain about this? I can escort him out.” I raise my eyebrows at her, indicating that Carl is a hot mess.

She raises her eyebrows in what seems like agreement. “It’s fine.”

“Thanks, Carl. I mean, bye. See ya, Carl,” I say with a smile too big for my face or for this occasion. Ghita’s lips curl up a little and she relaxes into my side, but is the gesture enough to get my hopes up?

They leave, and I lean hard against the closed front door. Herbert purrs and runs his tail around my legs. I scoop him in my arms to carry him to the chair. His chair. Our chair. When the doorbell rings.

I jog over, wondering if they didn't even make it to Carl's car, but it's not Ghita at the door. It's a Ghita look alike, bizarro Ghita, her sister Gemma. It's such a strange sensation that I do a double-take.

"Hi, Logan." She gives me a finger wave.

"Hi. Ghita isn't home. You missed her by two minutes."

"She told me. I came over to borrow a sweater."

"A sweater?" I open the door wider for her to enter. "Come in."

"So, she went on a second date with Carl?"

Second date? That dude passed the first date test? Shit.

I swear sparks were flying during our podcast interview, that is until Ghita got to her damn rules. She won't allow herself to get close to me, which is frustrating because I want to be close to her. But she went on a second date with the cat kicker? Maybe I read her signals completely wrong.

"What's he like?" Gemma asks.

"Who?"

"Carl."

I shrug.

"Really? He's that pathetic?"

Herbert meows a "hello" from his chair, and Gemma rubs him behind his ears before plopping onto the sofa.

"I only met him for five minutes," I say, "but Herbert did not like him one bit."

"What?" Gemma turns toward Herbert. "You didn't like Carl?"

And on cue, as if Herbert is my feline wingman, he hisses his negative opinion about Carl.

Gemma smiles at me, and it's Ghita's smile but different. "Goodness, do we need to intervene?"

Is that sarcasm? Is she on to Herbert's and my plan to sabotage Carl?

"Nah," I say "Ghita can handle herself, and if not, she'll call for a sandwich or an orange or an orange sandwich, right?"

"Right." Gemma is wearing the same knowing smile.

"Wanna help me glue some legs to a tire?" I ask.

"What an odd question." She rubs her hands together excitedly. "For sure."

"I'll grab two beers from the fridge. Are you a golden or IPA kind of woman?"

"Golden."

When I return from the kitchen with two Blood and Honey Revolvers in my hands, Gemma already has the tire flipped over and is securing the wooden base with an electric screwdriver.

"Wait for me," I say jokingly.

"You snooze, you lose."

I laugh. Gemma is carefree. She's like a little kid with no inhibitions.

I help her assemble the legs and in no time, we're done.

"That didn't take long at all," I say, flipping the table over.

She chugs the last of her beer. "Not as long as you're taking to hook up with Ghita. That's for sure."

"What?" I can't believe she is acknowledging the sexual tension between her sister and me.

"You're a nice guy, Logan. Ghita deserves a nice man in her life."

I arch an eyebrow at her to continue, but she lies on the couch and drapes a blanket over her legs. "Beer makes me sleepy. I'm gonna rest my eyes."

“Maybe you should grab that sweater before you head home?”

Gemma snuggles farther into the couch and immediately starts snoring.

“Uh, Gemma?”

Hours later, I’ve cleaned the glass and affixed it to the table when I hear a key in the door. I freeze, but Gemma snores on. The lock clicks but the door doesn’t open. There is murmuring on the porch.

Did Carl turn the date around? Is she bringing him home? Are they out there kissing?

The door opens a crack, and I duck behind Wilma.

“Yeah. Thank you again. I loved the show. No. Yeah, I’ll call you.” Ghita’s voice is thin and tight, not her normal warm tones. “Bye.”

I don’t move a muscle as Ghita backs into the room, shutting the door behind her and locking it. She leans her forehead against the frame and grunts.

“That good?” I ask.

She yelps and jumps a foot in the air. “Shit. Logan. You scared me.” She scans the room until her eyes land on the sofa. “My sister’s here?”

“She only had one beer and passed out. It was the oddest thing. I swear, it was only one beer.”

Ghita raises the empty beer bottle and reads the label. “This has 7% alcohol. No wonder she’s fast asleep.”

“How much does she usually drink?”

Ghita tickles Herbert behind his ear, and he purrs wildly. “She’s more of a wine spritzer gal. And only one of those. She can’t hold her liquor, ever. Falls asleep instantly.”

“Good to know.”

“You finished the table?” She bends over to examine my construction.

“Gemma and I worked on it together before she passed out.”

“It’s perfect. Exactly as I imagined.” She runs her hand along the clear top. “And you put the glass on too.”

“Yep. Your cut was spot on.”

She leans against the couch and kicks off her heeled boots.

“How was your date with Carl?” I’m dying to know and afraid to hear.

“It was fine. He’s fine. I should like him.”

My heart quickens. “But you don’t?” Please say it’s because you like someone else.

“But I don’t.”

I let out a huge exhale. “Herbert didn’t like him either.”

She shoots me a wry smile. “Uh-huh.”

The room grows silent except for Gemma’s soft snoring. It takes every ounce of self-control for me to keep my hands to myself. I want to hold her in my arms and beg her to give me a chance. Instead, I direct my gaze to Gemma.

“What are we going to do with sleeping beauty?”

“Nothing. She’s slept there many nights. If we’re lucky, she’ll make us breakfast in the morning.”

“Your family is the best.”

She beams. “I think so.”

Ghita stretches her arms above her head, and I see a sliver of taut skin. Now I want to do more than hold her and beg. My fingers itch to touch that soft spot with my lips, with my hands. I clench my fists together and bite my lower lip. Must stay calm. Must not scare her away from me.

“I’m going to sleep. It’s been a long day,” she says.

“Me too.” I take a step backward, thankful she is saving me from myself.

“Thank you again, Logan. I can’t believe you finished the table.”

I nearly pull her into my body and tell her I finished the table for her, and that I would do anything for her, but I only shrug. “No problem. Goodnight, Ghita.”

Chapter 20-Ghita

“And yet you still went on a date with Carl after he kicked Herbert?” Gemma questions me for the third time today. We’ve been shopping for an hour, and she won’t quit with the constant nagging.

Mom dangles a blue wrap-around dress in front of her face. “Gemma, sweetheart, let the Carl date go. Ghita already said she wouldn’t go out with him again.” She turns to me. “Though I can’t imagine what you were thinking, honey.”

I push through the rack of clothes, lingering on a purple lace dress. “Anyway, I’m meeting a different guy for coffee tonight.”

“What? You said you were done with online dating. That decision lasted three hot minutes.” Gemma nods a firm no to the dress in my hand.

I take a maroon pleated skirt from the rack. “It’s not an online match. Dax rents time at the sound studio.”

“Ghita, should I pick a single color for the whole family to wear? I want the photos to pop. Maybe we all wear yellow?” Franny grabs a silk shirt the color of a school bus.

“Mom.” Gemma covers her eyes with her hands. “You want us to pose like a bunch of bananas in the family photo?”

“This is a giant waste of time.” I fling my hands up. “No one is wearing matching outfits, especially in bright yellow.”

Gemma wraps her arm around Mom’s shoulder. “I agree with Ghita. This shopping trip is a waste of time.”

Mom slouches. “At Gabe and Hannah’s wedding, we didn’t get enough photos of the entire family, and I regret it. I’m not risking it a second time with Gloria and Jacob’s wedding.”

“But this is the rehearsal dinner,” I say. “We’ll look hotter at the wedding, all color coordinated in our bridesmaids’ gowns and tuxedos. Let’s take the picture then.”

“Yesss,” Gemma says and kisses Mom on her cheek. “Much better option. Plus, we’ll have our hair and makeup done professionally.”

“Okay. Okay.” Mom pulls up our Russo group chat and starts tapping keys. “And now I’ve told everyone.”

“Are we finished here?” Gemma asks, already walking toward the parking lot.

“Let’s stop at Target. I want to buy a few twinkling lights for my courtyard. Logan said he would string them in the trees for me.”

“How are things going with sweet Logan?” Mom’s Cheshire cat grin shows she means more than she’s saying.

“No, Mom. It isn’t like that. We’re roommates. He’s Nicole’s big brother. You know the rules.”

“We all know the rules,” Gemma says dramatically. “Blah, blah, blah.”

Mom hugs me like she used to when I was a teenager and had boy problems. “Sometimes rules are meant to be broken, honey.”

“That’s what Nicole said.” Mom and Gemma share a glance.

“What if Nicole wants you two to date?” Gemma asks.

“It doesn’t matter what she wants. Dating always ends badly for me. I’ll lose Logan and Nicole. It’s not worth the friendship or the heartache.”

“But what do you want, Ghita?” Mom asks, opening the car door.

“Do you like him?” Gemma slides into the backseat.

“Logan is great.” I clip on my seatbelt.

“But do you like him?” My sister repeats.

“What about when he moves out? You could date him then.” Mom makes the statement as if my rule doesn’t apply if he finds his own place.

“He’ll still be Nicole’s brother,” I say.

Gemma rubs her forehead and shakes her head. “Then you can never date him.”

The way she says *never* makes me frown.

When we park at Target, I unsnap my seatbelt with a loud click. “Drop the Logan campaign. Okay?”

“Okay, honey,” Mom says, patting my hand.

But Gemma doesn’t say a word.

Back home, I take the new lights out of my cloth bag and place them on the kitchen counter. The house is quiet, so I assume Logan isn’t home. I kick off my shoes and grab a kombucha out of the fridge.

“Meow.” I hear Herbert at the sliders and open them.

“Logan isn’t home.”

Herbert purrs and runs his tail around my legs.

I check the counter by the coffee machine but don’t see a covered food plate. “There’s no bacon, sweet boy.”

Herbert glides past me into the living room and hops onto Wilma.

I lay on the sofa and stare at the ugly chair. The fact that its presence is less annoying disturbs me. Herbert purrs loudly as he settles into place. Logan and Herbert love the damn chair, so it must be comfortable. Maybe I should give it a chance? I’m ready to plop myself in the monster when my phone rings.

“Gemma? What’s up?”

“I’ve been contemplating.” She pauses.

“And ...”

I wait.

“Contemplating what, Gemma?”

I wait.

“Just spit it out.”

“Why don’t you take Logan to the wedding and see how the night goes?”

I sip my drink and crumble farther into the couch. “No. It’s obvious how the night would go.”

“It is?”

“Yep. He’ll look handsome in his tux and ask me to dance. Did I tell you he’s an amazing dancer? It will be awful.”

She sighs. “Ghita, none of this sounds awful.”

“That’s why it’s awful.” I tuck a linen pillow under my head.

“I don’t understand.”

“We don’t fit. Our puzzle is defective.”

“You do fit, and the rest of the family agrees. If you insist on being stubborn, why not invite him as a friend? That doesn’t break your stupid rule, and you’d have a fun date for the wedding at least.”

I sigh into the phone. Why won’t Gemma drop this conversation?

“Come on.” My sister’s voice is slow and low. She’s determined to break me.

“I’ll think about it.” I will not think about it.

“Great. Tell Logan to wear a coral rose in his lapel for the family photo.”

“What? Hell no. First off, I haven’t decided to ask him yet. And second, he’s definitely not going in our family photo.”

“Why not? Nicole is.”

“Geez, Gemma. Logan doesn’t want to join our family.”

“Too late. He already has. We love him.”

“That’s it. I’m hanging up. Love you.” I hit the End button and throw the phone onto a floor pillow.

“Hey there,” Logan says.

I scream and jump out of my skin.

“Sorry.” He takes a step backward. “Just wanted to let you know I’m home. Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Shit. How long has he been standing there? Did he hear me on the phone with Gemma? Damn my big mouth.

He collapses onto his giant monster chair, and Herbert climbs into his lap. We sit in silence for a few minutes before he asks, “How was your day?”

“Are you asking me or Herbert?” I relax and pick a new position on the sofa.

“Herbert’s day has been fine. You’re the one throwing phones and jumping ten feet in the air.”

“I didn’t realize you were home. Thought I was alone.”

“Sorry. Do you want to be alone? I can ...” He shifts as if to leave.

“No, no. It’s fine. You’re fine. I just didn’t expect you to be here. Stay. Please.”

We sit in silence for a few minutes while he pets Herbert who settles farther into Logan’s lap.

“What’s going on?” he asks. “You okay?” His voice is low and gentle.

“It’s nothing. My sister is being annoying.”

“Okay,” he says, crinkling his nose, not buying my excuse at all.

I fiddle with the empty kombucha bottle. Time for a diversion. “Our table turned out well.”

“It did. We make a strong team.” He cocks an eyebrow at me, and I’m tempted to throw all my rules out the window and throw myself on him.

“We do.” I hold tight to the edge of the cushion so I don’t break my number one rule.

“Want to make another table?” Logan asks. “I have an idea for a piece of wood sitting outside if you aren’t using it for another art project.”

I nod, not really hearing his words. My mouth is moving before I can think twice. “Wanna come with me to the wedding?”

Yep, that nonsense just slipped out of my mouth. What’s wrong with me? I told Gemma I’d think it over less than five minutes ago. I’ve lost my damn mind. My face flames with heat, and my eyes dart in every direction but his.

Logan leans forward, moving Herbert a little to catch my attention. “Ghita, I would love to.”

“Just as friends, of course,” I say too quickly. My voice doesn’t sound natural.

“Like at the fundraiser?” he asks with a tiny quirk on his lips.

“Yes?” I sound undecided, but I bob my head up and down in affirmation. I’m a grownup. I can keep this relationship platonic. Brilliant idea. No rules will be broken.

“Sounds fun.” He reveals a full-on grin now.

Right then, with that smile, I remember how much I wanted to kiss him at the work gala, how his body molded to mine on the dance floor. The memory of the heat radiating off his skin sends shivers down my back.

I clear my throat. “Yes, fun. Just like the fundraiser.”

Chapter 21-Logan

The Russo garden is packed. Sweat gathers around the collar of my tux as I scan the yard for a face I recognize. The wedding was originally a small intimate gathering, but the guest list kept growing. Ghita's parents seem unphased by the extra people. The swarming crowd of smiling faces suits them just fine.

"Earth to Logan?" Nicole waves her finger in my face, snapping me out of my reverie. "Logan?"

Let's be honest. I'm not searching for any familiar face but for Ghita's specific one. I haven't seen her since the ceremony ended. She took off over an hour ago to help Gloria change into her reception outfit and never returned.

Nicole grabs Parker's elbow. "Help. Logan needs a drink."

Parker salutes and takes off to the open bar. I watch him sidle up next to Jackie Venson, one of the hottest guitar players from SXSW in Austin. Parker says something to her, and she throws her head back in laughter.

"What's going on with you?" Nicole asks, pushing me behind the knee with her gold-heeled foot.

My leg collapses, and I struggle to maintain my posture. "Nothing. Just soaking in this scene of famous musicians and rock stars." I rock back on my heels. "Do I sound like a fanboy?"

"Well, if you're a fanboy, then I'm a fangirl. The talent in this backyard is incredible."

"I completely agree." I grin at her. "Nicole Scott, Dallas's newest up-and-comer on the culinary scene." I swing my arm around my sister. "I'm immensely proud of you." Her photo was on the cover of *D Magazine* this month, and the restaurant has been packed for lunch and dinner since it opened.

"You seem out of sorts," she says, ignoring my gushing. Nicole doesn't let fame go to her head.

“Nah. I’m fine.” We scan the crowd together, nudging one another when another famous musician comes into view.

“Found you,” Ghita says from behind us, grabbing both of our shoulders. I spin around and take in her flushed face. Was she looking for me or Nicole?

“Hey, there you are,” Nicole says, kissing her on the cheek. “The ceremony was beautiful.”

“I thought the same.” Ghita points to our empty hands. “No drinks?”

“Drinks for all.” Parker joins us with his arms full.

“Ah, you read my mind,” Ghita says as he hands her a glass of wine.

“Where’s Gemma?” Parker swivels his head between us. “I got her a spritzer.”

“Probably asleep in the hammock.” Ghita points to a clump of trees. “She did a shot with Gloria after the ceremony.”

We all chuckle and glance around for Gemma.

“Thanks, Parker. I’ll take Gemma’s.” Ghita takes a sip of her drink. “I have to make sure she’s awake soon.”

A new song starts, and Ghita sways. “I love this song,” she says.

I tap her on the shoulder like a stranger. I feel strange. My nerves are shot, so I chug my beer before asking, “Care to dance?”

Ghita stares at me, and I can see the wheels turning inside her head. This was a bad idea.

“Nevermind. We don’t have to.”

“No. It’s fine,” she says.

“Nevermind. Forget I asked.” This day seems like a giant test, and I’m failing.

Parker points at Ghita. “What’s with the indecision? You said Logan was a superb dancer.”

She whips her head at Nicole, and they have an entirely silent but heated discussion. When she finally turns to me, she says. "I'd love to dance, Logan."

"Really?"

"Hey, guys." Gemma joins us, stretching her arms above her head like she just woke up, which she probably did. "Whatcha doing?"

"Are you drunk?" Nicole asks.

"Drunk on this music," Gemma says, pointing to the band on stage. "Why is no one dancing?"

Ghita and I stare at each other.

"Gemma makes a valid point." Parker holds out his hand to Nicole. "Dance, my love?" She takes his hand without a word and follows him to the makeshift dance floor.

"Logan, wanna dance?" Gemma asks, already taking my hand. "Ghita says you're the best dancer."

I cock my eyebrow at Ghita. So, she told Nicole *and* Gemma that I'm a good dancer. I don't hide my smile.

"Sure." I follow Gemma onto the dance floor. Ghita watches us with an uncertain expression.

"She's gonna hate this," Gemma whispers into my ear.

"Who?"

"Ghita. Look at her face. That smile is reserved for forced politeness." I spin us in a circle, and Gemma laughs. "Wow, Logan. You *are* an amazing dancer."

"So, is this a game?" I ask. "I don't enjoy being a pawn."

"Ghita is the one playing the game. Don't worry. I'm doing this for her own good."

"What game is Ghita playing?"

"The one where her rules ruin her life."

I sigh and dip Gemma.

Her face beams with joy when she rises. “Damn, Logan. How did she keep her clothes on after dancing with you at the fundraiser?”

The heat creeps into my cheeks, remembering how warm her body felt against mine. How our lips were inches apart. How I wanted to kiss her and sensed Ghita wanted to kiss me too.

“You like my sister, don’t you?” Gemma asks.

I bite my bottom lip and contemplate my next words.

“Logan, tell me,” Gemma says. “I’m trying to help you.”

“Yeah. I do. I like her a lot.” A tremendous weight falls off my shoulder. The confession is liberating.

“Knew it. It’s sooooo obvious.”

“Really?” I chuckle, certain my face is bright red.

Gemma forces me to turn in a circle, and I see the entire Russo clan grinning at me. Is this a setup?

“The thing about Ghita,” Gemma says, “is once she sees what she’s missing, she’ll reevaluate the situation.”

“Not sure I’m following. What’s she missing?”

“You, stupid.”

“Maybe she’s not interested in me,” I say and hope I’m wrong.

“Oh, she’s interested. She’s just not ready to admit it yet.” Gemma yanks me in a little closer.

“I don’t get your angle.” I dip her again when the song ends. “How will dancing with you change Ghita’s mind?”

Gemma comes up giggling. “You’ll see.”

I join Gemma at the bar when another slow number plays, but before I can order a drink, Ghita grabs my hand. “Come on,” she says, guiding us to the dance floor. She puts her arms around my neck and says, “It’s my turn.”

I slide my hand around her waist, and her body eases into mine. Gemma gives me the thumbs-up from a few inches away. That girl is a brilliant mastermind.

Ghita draws me tighter, her body pressed against mine, and I lead us around the dance floor. Our steps move in time with the music, her heart beating in sync with mine. The space shrinks like we are the only two people dancing. Her soft amber eyes shine up at me, and her lips part in that way I find inviting. I can barely breathe for fear of ruining the moment.

“Are you having fun?” she asks, her voice wavering.

“I ...” I clear my throat. “Am now.” I hope that didn’t sound as choked as it felt. This woman takes my breath away.

Ghita’s cheeks glow. “You know, Gloria and Jacob were best friends for decades before they finally got together,” she says.

“Why did they wait so long? Does Gloria have rules too?”

Ghita pulls away to stare into my eyes. I stop dancing.

“Um. Well. She loved Jacob her whole life, and Jacob loved her.”

“Then why did they take so long?” I ask again and take her hand.

“They didn’t want to stand in the way of each other’s careers.”

“So,” I spin her in a circle, “they let that silly rule stand in the way of their love?”

“Gemma thinks I should forget my rules and give you a chance.” Her voice sounds breathy and urgent when she returns to my arms.

“You should give me a chance.”

Shit. I’m moving too fast. This is where she flees from me. But, this time, she doesn’t.

Instead, Ghita puts her arms around my neck. “I think I should too,” she says.

“Really?” The word comes out as a croak. Is this moment real?

She shoots me her signature wide smile. “Really,” she says.

An upbeat tempo takes over and the rest of the guests join the dance floor, flaying and swinging their hips. Song after song, we dance, and Ghita never lets go of my neck. Her soft fingers tickle the bare skin above my collar while throwing me looks I struggle to interpret.

I tug her to me, and she willingly falls into my body, lowering her hands to my chest. Her eyes drop to my lips. I watch, waiting for a signal, one that says, “Kiss me now.”

“Logan?” She moves her hand to my cheek. The music is fast, everyone jumping around, but we are swaying as if the music is slow and calm. My heart is a hammer in my chest. I’m certain she hears the erratic beat.

“Ghita?” I lick my lips.

“Hey, Sis.” Gloria’s suddenly standing before us. “It’s almost time for the toast.” She yanks Ghita away, and our kiss is snatched right out of the air. Ghita’s eyes catch mine, and I hold her gaze, telling her this moment isn’t over.

In fact, this thing between us has only just begun.

“Logan, right?” Jacob stands at my elbow.

I nod, still in a daze.

“So glad Ghita invited you.”

“Me too.” I reach out my hand for a shake but he grabs me for a hug as if I’m also part of the family now.

A tall, muscular guy yells over the music, “Everyone ready to give their toast?”

“Their toast?” I ask.

“Didn’t Ghita tell you?” Jacob puts a hand on my shoulder as if consoling me. “Oh, man. All the guests give a toast.”

“All the guests?” My blood runs cold, and I feel the color draining from my face.

“Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.” He claps me on the back and heads off to talk to a woman in the corner who’s signaling him.

I will not be fine. This is not fine.

The music ends, and Ghita joins me, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. “I’m so sorry I forgot to warn you. It wasn’t intentional. I wasn’t thinking. You have to ...”

“Give a toast. Yeah. Jacob told me.”

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to say much, just congrats and you’ll be done.”

Knowing the garrulous Russo family, I doubt this is true, but I try to hold my nerves together.

I scan the room in desperation. The band jumps off the stage as Jacobs’s best man, Liam, attempts to get the audience’s attention while champagne glasses on giant silver trays circulate.

I run my hands through my hair.

“Please gather by the big oak tree for the toast,” Liam says into the mic.

We follow the crowd toward the tree. What do you say to people you barely know at a wedding? I scope out the smiling guests. No one seems nervous but me. Maybe I can sneak off to the bathroom.

“You ready, Ghita?” Gemma says, joining us. “This will be fun.”

Too late for a bathroom break now. They’ll never let me sneak away.

“Of course.” Ghita smiles. “I worked on my toast all week.”

All week. This is a nightmare.

“And you, Logan? What are you going to say?”
Gemma’s excited expression has me in full panic mode.

“I have nothing prepared. No one told me I had to give a speech.”

Now, Gemma looks nervous. “Ghita, you didn’t tell him about the toast?”

She shrugs. “I forgot.”

The sweat is a river rushing down my back.

Ghita pats me on the arm. “Don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

Gemma attempts an encouraging smile, but it looks forced. “Yeah, don’t worry. You’ll be fine.”

Chapter 22-Ghita

“Gemma, quit stressing Logan out.”

“Me? You’re the one who didn’t tell him about the toast.”

“Just say congrats,” I tell Logan. “You don’t have to be deep and meaningful.”

“I’m not stressed.” Logan chugs the rest of his beer and almost drinks his champagne reserved for toasting too. I snatch away the glass.

“Are you afraid of public speaking?” I ask, noticing he’s holding his breath.

“No, I won the state championship in debate my senior year of high school.”

I tilt my head closer to his ear. “Then why does your face resemble Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*?”

Gemma looks between the two of us. “Yikes,” she says in a low voice. “I’m gonna...” She walks away without finishing her sentence.

Logan shifts from one foot to the other. “I don’t want to mess up.”

“Mess up what?”

He shakes his head, not answering.

“It’s a simple wedding toast. A congratulatory speech should be easy for a debate champion.” I grin, but he doesn’t return the smile.

“No, Ghita, not the toast. I don’t want to mess up my relationship with you.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what else to say. He stares at me, and I can’t glance away. I don’t want to ruin the relationship either, but we already broke the seal. It’s too late to rewind time.

Before he says more, Liam steps to the center of the circle and hands one of Jacob’s bandmates the mic. The crowd

grows quiet. The toasts begin with hysterical stories from his music career. Logan brushes against me and I step closer to him. Gloria and Jacob's friends recount stories of zombie adventures, hiding in trees, lost oars, and nights spent gossiping into the early morning hours. The crowd is in stitches.

Logan slips his pinkie finger around mine. The move isn't quite hand-holding, but the gesture seems important.

My mom is next. With tears in her eyes, she points to the side of the house where a huge white screen has been constructed. A video of Gloria and Jacob plays.

They are in elementary school, dressed up as peanut butter and jelly for the Halloween block party. The video changes to their middle school years. It's Talent Night, and they are reenacting Pedro's Presidential speech and Napoleon's Dynamite's dance to "Canned Heat." Everyone chuckles when Gloria mimics the dance. Then it's prom night, and the way Jacob looks at Gloria, standing in the front yard waiting for their limo, reveals the most obvious love between them. The audience swoons and gasps in awes and hoots.

The video screen goes black, and Mom reads a letter that makes everyone laugh and cry.

My dad puts his arms around her. "Best toast ever, Franny. I can't believe I have to follow you."

But Dad's speech is just as touching and funny.

My sisters' speeches leave the party guests clutching their sides in laughter, my brother Gabe hugs Jacob and welcomes him to the family, and Parker and Nicole read a poem they wrote together dedicated to the meaning of love and friendship.

The rest of the guests take their turn until it gets to the end of the line where Logan and I stand, still touching fingers.

I step forward, releasing Logan's pinkie, and notice the loss immediately. People are watching me, but my mind is focused on the absence of Logan.

"You all know what I think about rules."

My family shouts, “What rules?” And the crowd erupts in loud guffaws.

“Yeah, okay.” I hold my hands up to calm the good-natured heckling. “Rules create a successful routine.”

“That they do,” Jacob yells. He and Gloria have a very strict practice schedule, which has enabled them to tour and have a life outside work.

“Rules keep you safe,” I say.

Mom nods at me, and I know she’s remembering the one scary night when my rules saved me from a dangerous situation.

“Rules are like bumpers in bowling.” The room goes quiet. “Come on, I’m not the only one who is a terrible bowler.” I glance around the crowd until I find Giovanna and point my finger in her direction.

“Okay ... okay ... no need to rub in my bowling failures,” my sister finally says.

The guests laugh.

“Rules give you bumpers in your love life too. They keep you from heartbreak.” I stand straighter and glance at my beautiful sister in a soft pink crepe dress and my handsome brother-in-law in a dapper suit. “Gloria and Jacob threw the rules out the window and followed their hearts and even though it took them too damn long, they are here today for this special moment we’re sharing.”

Everyone claps and hoots.

“Today, we honor their love, but also their bravery and honesty, which brought them to this place of happiness.” I raise my glass. “To Gloria and Jacob, for breaking all the rules in the name of love. May you always be happy.”

A light breeze picks up, reminding me that the sun is setting and soon this celebration will be over. But not yet. Logan is the last to speak.

I peek at his face and see him roll his shoulders. Logan no longer seems stressed. He’s ready to take over the world.

“Anyone need a refill?” he asks as if he’s a professional MC.

Someone yells, “Over here,” and we wait a few minutes for the waiters to serve that section of the lawn.

When the catering staff nods at Logan, he hoists his champagne. “Another toast to Jacob and Gloria. Many people search their entire lives for *the one*, but sometimes you don’t have to search very far. Sometimes that person has been in front of you the whole time.”

I bite my lower lip. Is he talking about Jacob and Gloria or me?

“Some people,” Logan pivots and stares at me before continuing, “think that love follows a set of rules, but love defies rules. It is the absence of rules. When you love someone, you don’t need rules to justify your feelings.”

“Amen to that,” one of my sisters says.

“So true,” my dad says, and I see him wink at Logan.

I fix my gaze across the lawn. I’m afraid to move. Afraid to look at anyone.

“May Jacob and Gloria continue to fall in love again, year after year. To the newlyweds.”

I’m on autopilot as I hold up my stemware. “To the newlyweds,” I say with the crowd.

The guests take a sip of champagne and clap when Jacob and Gloria embrace in a tight hug. When they finally release one another, both beam with joy.

The crowd breaks away, everyone pleased with themselves and with the love circulating through the reception.

“How did I do?” Logan says in my ear.

“You did a remarkable job, State Champ,” I say, wondering how words are forming in my mouth when I can barely breathe.

He slips his entire hand in mine this time, and warmth washes over me in a wave of peace and joy.

Gloria jumps onto a chair. “Thank you for coming,” she says. “I’m so grateful for my friends and family.”

Jacob throws his arms around her, balancing precariously on a small corner of the chair. “We love you all. Stay. Dance. Drink. We can’t thank you enough for being here.”

“Your family rocks,” Logan says, squeezing my hand.

I grin. “I know. I lucked out.”

“Hey, nice speech, big brother.” Nicole wraps her arms around Logan’s shoulders.

He shakes them off playfully. “How come you didn’t tell me about the whole toast thing?”

Nicole nudges Ghita. “Wait. You didn’t tell him?”

“Wow, Logan,” says Parker with Nicole’s purse and a jacket in hand. “You perform well under pressure.”

Nicole throws her thumb toward the door. “We gotta head out.”

“Already?” I’m not ready to be alone with Logan yet.

“Restaurant duty calls,” says Nicole.

I give her and Parker a hug and watch as Logan does the same.

“Talk tomorrow.” Nicole waves as she walks away with Parker close on her heels.

Logan points to the dance floor where a few guests cling together swaying. “Want to take a whirl?”

“How about a walk instead?” I wouldn’t survive another dance in his arms. “The garden is in full bloom thanks to your compost pile.”

“You’re talking dirty now, Ghita.” The deepness of his voice sends shivers all over my body. “Lead the way.”

We stroll along the stone path. The band plays a familiar song, but the sound is far away. Logan grins when he spots Mom’s rain barrels and the giant compost pile.

“You’ve been sharing our compost,” he says, and there is a note of approval in his voice.

“It was too much for my one tree, and healthy compost shouldn’t go to waste.”

He nods, gripping my hand tighter.

“Mom wants to add solar panels to the house,” I say breathlessly.

“I’d love to help her with the project,” Logan says. “My company gets a discount on panels.” He points to a bench in the corner. “Want to sit for a minute?”

Suddenly it’s too quiet. I can hear myself breathing. “Maybe we should head back?” The air is charged, and the fairy lights twinkling around the garden make me dizzy.

“Just for a moment.” Logan draws me to the wooden bench where Dad has carved all our names. He runs his finger over the name that has been recently added, Jacob. Then his thumb runs along the inside of my palm.

“Ohhhhh,” I say in a low rumble.

“Ghita.” His voice is a whisper. “Did you mean what you said?”

I hold my hands up, releasing his, but now I’m flailing in an awkward, uncoordinated way. I can’t control my arms. “Yes. Yep. I’m a terrible bowler. Now you know all my secrets.”

He gently pulls down my arms, and I study the tree branch hanging over us like it is the most interesting branch ever grown.

Logan leans back, and our legs touch hip to knee. “What if I kissed you right now?”

“Huh?” I’m certain his eyes are on me, but I’m too afraid to check.

He runs his finger along my jaw and turns my head to face him. “Ghita.”

“Mmhhmm?”

He inches closer and licks his lips. My eyes are glued to his mouth.

“I want to kiss you more than anything I’ve ever wanted in my life,” he says in a hungry growl that makes me feel faint. We are less than an inch apart. His gaze flicks from my lips to my eyes.

“Say you want to kiss me too,” he says, his sweet breath on me.

My mouth parts to speak, but no words come out. Instead, I fill the space between us and place my hungry lips on his. They are soft and warm. He waits a brief second, maybe to test if I’ll retreat, but I don’t and he takes over.

His kiss goes from sweet to filled with longing in seconds. The tingle along my spine returns. His kiss lights up my entire body. His hands dive into my hair while I wrap my arms around his warm neck and let out a moan. I should be embarrassed but I’m not. I need more.

His tongue dips into my mouth, tasting of desire. He retreats for a moment, gazing into my eyes, where flames dance there. I tilt forward, tasting him again. This time, I’m the aggressor. His small moan sends me over the edge. I lift from my sitting position and place myself on his lap. We exist only as arms and limbs and fervent kisses when I hear someone on the mic saying, “Last call.”

I jump off Logan’s lap and stand, shaking and overcome with heat and passion. What the hell just happened?

“Ghita,” he says, taking my elbow. “Don’t run away from me.”

I nod, but the urge to flee is feral. This is an impossible situation.

He grabs my waist and traces his finger down my arm, taking me in a full embrace. I relent, his touch disarming my fear. We sway, dancing to music that might be coming from the stage or just inside our heads.

Chapter 23-Ghita

I hand the exhausted valet my ticket at the end of my parents' driveway. Jacob and Gloria left hours before for their honeymoon, but the rest of us danced through the night into the early morning hours.

Logan turns to me. "Best wedding ever."

I glance at the sky and note the full moon. "Howl with me?"

"Huh?"

I point at the unending sky, an orange moon peeking out behind the trees in the front yard. "Aahhoullll," I say into the sky, my head tipped back.

Logan joins me. "Ohhhhhahahhahah."

"That's more like a wolf laughing."

"That's what I was aiming for."

I smirk. "Funny."

The valet pulls my car in front of the house.

"Can you drive? I don't have any circulation left in my toes."

"Sure. I haven't had a sip of alcohol since the toast."

"And that was hours ago," I say, a warm sensation gathering in my stomach as I remember his pointed speech.

"Straight home?" he asks.

I grin when he opens my car door with a tiny bow. "Yeah." I slip inside and unbuckle the strappy torture device around my feet.

"Are you tired?" he asks, fastening his seatbelt.

"Nope."

"Stop for pancakes?"

"Um ... maybe we make some at home?" I say the word *home* and it feels different. It's our home, not just mine

anymore. “I can’t put those shoes back on.”

The drive across town is swift, my hand never leaving Logan’s. We don’t say another word as if noise will break the fragile new bond forming between us. The sexual tension in the car ramps up as we get closer, but when we walk through the door, we both fall shy.

Avoiding the awkwardness, Logan turns on a small lamp in the living room, creating a soft glow.

“You tired?” I ask him, dropping my purse on the coffee table.

He shakes his head and steps in front of me. His hand strokes my exposed arm, and goosebumps break out over my body. With one touch, this man has me.

“Hungry?” I ask, pretending his caress isn’t affecting me.

He nods yes with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Should we make breakfast?” I ask.

He shakes his head no and steps closer. There isn’t an inch of space between us. When he takes a breath, his chest presses against mine. He releases a stuttering sigh.

“Tell me I can kiss you again,” he says.

I can’t answer, but I’m afraid my body will communicate anyway. I crave his lips, his hands, his entire body over mine. There is no time for rules. I can’t stop this night from happening, and I don’t want to stop a single second.

“Ghita, I won’t touch you again unless you give me permission.” He draws away, but I put my hand on his muscled bicep.

“I don’t want—I need you to kiss me,” I say, my ravenous voice sounding foreign to my ears.

Logan doesn’t hesitate, diving for my lips. I meet him with the same level of desire. This man makes me break all my

rules, and that reason alone makes my knees tremble with even more longing.

One hand trails around my waist, and the other slides the dress strap off my shoulders, leaving my back exposed. As he caresses my skin, I find the top button of his dress shirt.

He shucks his suit jacket, and I drop my dress to the floor, standing before him in small red lace panties and no bra.

He shakes his head, taking in every inch of my body with his eyes. "You are ..." He sucks in a gulp of air, unable to finish the sentence.

"I'm what?"

"You're a marvel." He exhales the word like he's worshipping at an altar.

I unbutton his shirt, dropping it on the floor next to my discarded dress. "You are ..." The words get caught in my throat as my hands go to his chest, caressing the outline of his upper torso.

"I'm what?" he asks, mimicking me.

The pheromones in the room overwhelm my senses, and I can't form coherent thoughts. I lose my balance and stumble backward into Wilma.

"You okay?"

My body sinks into the cushions. "Damn. You're right about this chair. It's really comfortable." Am I admitting Wilma isn't a monster? The world is inside out.

His mouth widens into a smile as he reaches for my arms. He isn't just the most beautiful man I've ever seen, he's also the kindest. "I'm right about a lot of things, Ghita."

"You might have me convinced." I take hold of his hands and almost tug him on top of me but for some odd reason, I believe Wilma wouldn't approve, so I let him stand me upright.

"I might need to experience a little more of your persuasion skills." I take off running down the hall to my dark

bedroom. I'm giggling when he catches me around the waist and lifts me in his arms.

"I bet my debate skills could come in handy about now," he says and his mouth connects with the sensitive skin on my neck and collarbone.

I moan with pleasure. "Wait. Let's turn on the light." He reluctantly releases me, and I flick on the bedside lamp.

He unzips his pants and kicks his shoes off at the same time. The dark fabric pools at his feet until he's only in his boxers.

I hold up a finger, pausing him, and then laugh. "Excuse me, but are you wearing pink boxers decorated with little pigs?"

"Maybe. Will that change what you think of me?"

I climb onto my knees, landing at the end of the bed. "It makes me like you even more."

"So, you like me?" he asks.

I run my fingers underneath the waistband of his boxers. "I like you a lot."

I continue my inspection while he remains speechless. Trailing my hand farther into his waistband, I take hold of his hard length. He sighs as I push down his boxers. He helps by kicking them off at the foot of the bed. Standing in front of me, completely nude, Logan Scott is a Greek god. I might worship him all night.

He pushes me onto the bed and hovers over me, touching my body reverently, tracing each dip and curve. I shudder. With his mouth trailing down my stomach, Logan's next line of kisses sends me to another level of heat. They taste like the promise of something more to come.

He crawls back up my body. "You good with this?"

I answer by reaching into my bedside drawer for a condom. I rummage through flattened tissue boxes, a small vibrator, four lip glosses, and half-empty travel hand lotion bottles until I find the blue packet I put there long ago.

“So, is that a yes?”

I bite my bottom lip, handing the wrapper to him.

“Tell me what you want, Ghita.”

“I want you inside me,” I say, grabbing the wrapper out of his hand and ripping open the package. I take my time rolling on the condom.

He kisses another trail from my lips to my breast. He takes his time there, swirling his tongue around each tender needy nipple, tugging with his expert tongue. I love the teasing. It’s playful and real at the same time. It feels like us.

I’m hyperventilating with urgency. “You’re driving me crazy, Logan.” I moan, panting at how he takes his time, slowing us when it feels like he should go faster, quickening when I think he might stay there forever.

“I want to taste you, but I don’t think I can wait another minute to be inside you,” he says, taking my swollen lips again.

“Please,” I beg without an ounce of shame. “I need you.”

He reaches down, stroking me in just the right way, a small rhythm, igniting every single nerve in my body to high alert.

My back arches in desperation, and I call out his name.

We both sigh in relief when he pushes inside, waiting only a tiny moment before pressing in farther, deeper. I feel him everywhere.

“Ghita, you feel so damn good,” he says and increases the rhythm with his thumb like before. “Ghita, you feel so damn good,” he says again, and I respond with a nibble of his earlobe.

Liking my kiss, Logan accelerates the pace more. I wish this pleasure would last forever. Not sure if I say it out loud, but he says, “Let’s never stop doing this, right here.” He moves faster.

I can't respond, only moan in pleasure.

The pressure builds until I come apart, releasing every thought in my brain. My rules no longer exist. Nothing exists. Just this sensation. Just Logan.

Logan is close behind me, our moans overlapping each other.

I awake to a cell phone ringing, not from my bedside table but from the floor. The floor where Logan left his tux pants last night. The floor of my bedroom.

The ringing stops, and I sit up. Logan isn't in bed. No sweet love note sits on my extra pillow.

The phone goes off again. Glancing at my clock, I see it's already 11 a.m. Who needs Logan this urgently on a Sunday morning? I glance around the room and find his clothes thrown in a pile, but there's no sound of movement in the house.

Did he have an appointment this morning?

Shit.

Did he freak out and leave?

Shit.

This is what happens when I break the rules.

But last night was magical.

But he isn't here. He isn't in bed.

I put my feet on the ground just as the annoying ringing stops. I throw on a pair of pink joggers and a tank top and glance at his clothes strewn about on the floor. Should I pick them up and toss them in his room? Or in my laundry basket? Where is he? What did last night mean? Why isn't he here?

The phone rings again, interrupting my thoughts. I should leave the phone alone, but the incessant ringing could mean there's an emergency. I should at least check the screen in case it's Nicole. Maybe she needs help at the restaurant?

But wouldn't she call me? I slip his cell into my pocket and head toward the kitchen.

As I pass Logan's favorite chair I stop short and stare at Wilma. Does his chair have crazy magical powers to make me drop all defenses and rules?

"Meow," says Herbert, jumping onto Wilma and snuggling into his reserved spot.

"Good morning, Herbert," I say, scratching him behind his ears. "Did Logan let you in?"

I hear a noise and freeze. "Logan? Are you here?"

"In the kitchen."

He didn't leave. He's home. He's in the kitchen.

I round the corner and find him with a steaming cup of coffee in one hand and toast in the other.

"Hey," I say casually, not sure how to read the temperature in the room.

He points to the French press. "There's more coffee and bread." His face reveals nothing.

Should I kiss him? Is that too intentional?

Should I act like nothing happened last night?

What's he expecting?

I have no idea how I am supposed to act.

I grab a mug out of the clean dishwasher. "Thanks. I could use ten cups this morning." The phone rings in my pocket, and I jump. "Oh, yeah. This is yours. Damn thing woke me up." I hand him the ringing cell. "Someone has an urgent need for you this morning."

"Sorry, it woke you. I wanted to let you sleep in late."

Until 11:00? Was he going to let me sleep the day away?

I shrug. "I need to get moving anyway."

The phone rings again.

Why is this morning awkward? Nothing was awkward last night.

He glances at the screen, and his face turns white. “Mandy?” he says into the phone.

I still. Who’s Mandy? I lift my eyebrows at him in question, but his expression isn’t one I recognize. He turns his back as if the call is private, and I’m intruding. I detour to the kitchen island.

“You’re here? Right now?” The remaining color drains from his already pale face.

Who’s here? At the house? I wait for the doorbell to ring, but Mandy is still talking on the other end.

“Okay. Yes.” His voice is calm and smooth and doesn’t match the deep creases on his forehead. Is he worried I’m hearing this conversation?

“I hear you,” he says.

Was she the one calling a hundred times? The name Mandy sounds familiar. Why? I pour coffee from the metal pot and take a long sip, reminding myself his conversation is none of my business.

“Wait, what?” Logan looks over his shoulder at me. He’s turned a sickly shade of green. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.” His voice has dropped to a whisper.

“I don’t understand what you are saying,” I want to yell at Logan, but I rummage through the mail on the counter instead before making my way into the living room with my coffee mug. Truth is, I’m desperate to stay in the kitchen. I want to hear every single word of this intimate conversation.

My fingers itch to text Nicole. But what would I say? I slept with your super hot brother because I thought we were soulmates but now he is talking to another woman who won’t quit calling his phone.

Geez, I suck at dating ... and at being a best friend.

“Now? As in this minute?” he asks from the kitchen. “Why do you need me?” He pauses. “Wait, don’t get upset. It’s

okay.” He pauses again. “Of course, I still care. I’m here for you.”

Here for you? What the absolute hell is going on?

I pace the living room, lingering by the sofa so I can overhear his conversation. It’s rude, but this man was inside me a few hours ago, several times even, and I need to know if he’s also screwing some girl named Mandy. We didn’t talk about exclusivity, so I have no right to be upset, but my mind won’t quit racing. Does he have other “Mandys” waiting in the wings?

“Don’t be sorry. Give me a minute,” he says.

A minute to do what? Break my heart? My blood simmers with what? Fear? Anger? Humiliation? It isn’t a full boil, but it’s getting there.

“Okay, okay. I’ll be forty-five minutes to an hour.”

I suck in a huge gulp of coffee, burning my tongue.

“We’ll work it out,” he says.

Work what out?

I return to the kitchen and busy myself, refilling the pot with water.

“I’m on my way. I’ll text you when I get there.” He ends the call and slides the phone into his pocket.

“Going somewhere?” I ask. My voice is too high-pitched, but I’m on the verge of screaming or crying, not sure which.

He shakes his head and turns in a circle, disoriented. “Yeah, I gotta go.”

I wait for more information, but none comes.

“I gotta ...” Logan walks out of the kitchen without finishing his sentence.

I follow him through the living room and watch as he heads toward his bedroom.

Three seconds later, he returns wearing a shirt and his Birkenstocks. "I'll be back," he says with no explanation and no kiss goodbye. The front door closes before I can open my mouth in reply.

What just happened?

And who the fuck is Mandy?

Chapter 24-Ghita

Kneeling over the clawfoot bathtub with an old toothbrush in hand, I shake the empty bleach bottle. Grabbing my phone, I dial Gemma. “Hey. I need bleach. Can you come over and bring a jug or ten?”

“Ghita, what happened?” she asks.

“I’m cleaning my bathroom,” I say, ignoring her real question.

“You don’t deep clean with toxic bleach, especially on a Sunday, unless there’s a crisis. Spill the beans.”

My sister grasps my emotional turmoil too well. “Just come over. Will you?” It’s not quite a whine but very close.

“I’ll be there in twenty, but open a window in the bathroom so you don’t pass out before I get there. That stink will take you down if you’re not careful.”

“Okay.”

“See ya in a bit.”

She hangs up, and I slump against the wall. My phone vibrates on the tile floor, and Giovanna’s avatar appears on the screen.

“What’s the deal?” she asks when I answer with a weary hello. “Gemma said you’re using bleach.”

“Yeah, what the hell happened?” Gina says.

Gina? I slump farther down the wall. “Am I on speaker?”

“Yes, we’re still at Mom and Dad’s. We slept over because we danced until dawn.”

“You must be exhausted,” I say.

“Yeah. We watched the wedding video too.”

“Already?”

“Logan’s toast is even better the second time around,” Giovanna says.

“Great,” I say, not wanting to remember anything Logan-related.

“So, what’s going on? You either have a brilliant new business idea or you’re drowning your sorrows in bleach,” Giovanna says.

“Which one is it?” Gina asks.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“She doesn’t want to talk about it, Mom,” Giovanna yells in the background.

“Tell her to quit cleaning and come over,” Mom yells back.

“Mom says you should come over,” Gina repeats.

“Maybe I will later. Gemma is on her way here. You guys staying at the house all day?” I run the toothbrush over the floor grout.

“Nah,” they say at the same time.

“I have to work,” Giovanna says.

“And I’m heading to the downtown library,” Gina says. “Are you really keeping the story to yourself? We’re worried.”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I say again.

“Okaaaay,” Giovanna says.

“Call me later if you decide to share,” Gina says.

“We love you, honey,” Mom hollers from a distance.

“Love you.” I end the phone call and close my eyes. I have a supportive family and my dream job. What more could I ask for in life? Who cares if Logan is meeting a girl named Mandy? I have bleach.

I’ve fallen asleep on the bathroom floor with the nasty toothbrush in my hand when Gemma comes barreling inside.

“Ghita? Are you sleeping or did you pass out?” She flings open the window.

“Just sleeping, sorta.” I stumble to my feet. “I didn’t get much shut-eye last night.”

“Are you sick? Did you drink too much at the wedding?” Gemma plops a new bottle of bleach on the vanity.

“No, and no.” I glance at my reflection in the mirror and shudder. My eyes are red, and I have bags the color of bruises under them.

“What happened?” Gemma asks. “Where’s Logan?”

I press my hands to the side of my head to keep out the memories. I keep reliving our night together and the devastating phone call this morning. I have emotional whiplash.

Gemma puts her arms around my neck and her forehead against mine. “Ghita, take a long, deep breath and blurt out the story. It’s useless to keep anything from me. I’ll just read your mind anyway.”

“I broke a rule,” I say. “A huge one. And everything is ruined.”

“Which rule? What’s ruined?”

“I dated my best friend’s brother.” I slide to the ground. “And now Nicole will hate me forever.”

“Are you referring to Logan?” She pushes the bottle of bleach aside and hops onto the counter. “And Nicole definitely won’t hate you.”

“Yes, of course, Logan.”

“Oh, thank goodness. You two dragged that flirting out forever.” She digs in her bag and pulls out her one true love, butterscotch candy. “Want one?”

“No thanks. No appetite.”

She shrugs and pops one in her mouth. “Last time I saw you and Logan together, you were dancing and making googly eyes. What happened between the wedding and this morning?”

“Too damn much.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Maybe I’m being ridiculous.” I lift my nasty scrub brush. “I should finish the tub.”

“Oh, heck no.” Gemma jumps off the counter. “You’re withholding important details. Tell me everything.”

“I don’t know why I’m upset.” I throw the brush in the tub. “I should have known better. It’s why I have strict rules, so disasters like this don’t happen.”

“What disasters?”

I take a deep breath and begin coughing. “There’s too much bleach in here. Let’s go into the kitchen.”

I leave the room with Gemma close on my heels. In the kitchen, she grabs the kettle and fills it with water. She’s waiting for me to spill my guts, but I’m already gutted.

I start talking in a flurry of jumbled words. “I slept with Logan last night and the sex was extraordinary, and then it wasn’t, or it was still for me but wasn’t for him I guess because he left.”

Gemma slams the pot on the counter and spins to face me. “Rewind,” she says, crunching on her candy. “You had sex with Logan?”

“I did. We did.”

Gemma’s eyes bug out of her head. “That’s great. Of course, the sex was fantastic. I mean, he’s an amazing dancer.” She’s abandoned all coffee-making activities and scoots a stool next to me. “The way he stared at you last night was dreamy. I wish someone would look at me like he looks at you.” She peers around the sunlit room. “Logan’s not home?”

I shake my head. “No. That’s what I said. He ran out of here this morning.”

“Ran out? Did he have a meeting?”

“Nope. He just took off.”

“That doesn’t sound like Logan.”

“Well, he did, and without a word of explanation.” I cover my head with my arms.

Gemma strokes my hair. “I don’t understand.”

“Me either.” I rest my elbows on the counter and sigh.

Gemma empties the French press, refilling the pot with fresh ground beans. “Start from the top.”

“Do I have to? I’m exhausted from the replay in my head.”

“Yes, you do, and tell me specifically about the sex.”

“Specifically, the sex was mind-blowing. At least, I thought it was. Maybe he didn’t? I don’t know. There was zero discussion. We passed out after the third time.”

Gemma holds up her hand to stop me. “The third time? No one goes back for seconds and thirds if it’s terrible.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I’m positive, Ghita.” She pours the boiling water into the press and grabs two coffee mugs from the cabinet. “Let’s move to the table.”

I carry the pot of hot coffee and slump into a chair.

“So, assuming the sex isn’t the problem, why did he leave?”

“He received a call from a person named Mandy and took off without a word.” I close my eyes and cringe as the morning events flash before me in slow motion.

“Who’s Mandy?”

“I have no clue.” I gulp down my coffee and burn my tongue for the second time. “Ouch.”

Gemma pours vanilla creamer into my cup to cool it. “Mandy’s not a co-worker?”

“The conversation sounded personal. She needed his attention immediately.”

“Attention for what?”

“That’s the million-dollar question. Logan seemed unhappy with her call, but he ran off like the house was on fire.”

“Without telling you where he was going or who was on the call?”

“Just, ‘I gotta go. I’ll be back.’” I take a tentative sip of my coffee to make sure it’s cool enough to drink.

“Don’t hate me, but I have to play devil’s advocate. Maybe he was using the phone call as an excuse because he was uncomfortable?”

“What do you mean? Maybe Mandy doesn’t exist?” I place my mug too hard on the table, and the brown liquid splashes over the edge. “That’s impossible. I heard her voice over the phone.”

Gemma grabs a kitchen towel to mop the spill. “Okay. Okay. Settle down. I had to ask.”

My stomach lurches with the sickening thought, and I drop my head on the table.

“Oh, God. What if your depressing theory is correct? What if he convinced this Mandy woman to call him and play-act the entire scenario so he could escape from me.”

“No, Ghita,” Gemma says, trying to soothe me. “I’m sure that’s not true. That’s a crazy idea.”

“But he wasn’t in bed when I woke up.”

Gemma twists her lips in concern. “He wasn’t in bed? Where was he?”

“In the kitchen. I slept late, until 11. But now his absence seems deliberate.”

“Don’t jump to conclusions.”

“It’s not a far leap, Gemma. Logan figured out an escape plan while I was asleep. That’s why he was already in the kitchen.” I spring from the table and head into the living room. “Oh. My. God. Mandy was his scapegoat. The phone call from Mandy was an elaborate diversion.”

Gemma follows me to the couch and drapes the blanket over our legs, snuggling close. “I’m sorry I ever put the awful idea in your head. It’s not true.”

“It is, and now Logan will never talk to me again and neither will Nicole, all because I broke my most important rule.”

“No, Ghita.” She lays my head on her lap and strokes my hair. “Nicole isn’t Lorna. The aftermath of that relationship was motivated more by meanness than friendship.” Gemma shakes her head. “We were dramatic teenagers.”

“Donny broke my heart, but Lorna crushed the organ to bits,” I say, mashing my hands together. “I won’t survive another best-friend-breakup.”

She covers my hands with hers. “I promise this is different. Lorna was a terrible friend. Nicole is not Lorna.”

“How can I still be friends with Nicole when her brother wants nothing to do with me?”

“Ghita, we don’t know what happened with Logan this morning. You need more information before drawing conclusions, but you should talk to Nicole for sure. Tell her about your feelings for Logan. She loves you. She’ll understand.”

“What about Logan? How do I handle him living in my house?” I throw a velvet pillow at his ugly chair as if it was his accomplice.

“Ghita. Look at me. He’s one of the good ones. I believe it. Let Logan explain.”

I curl into the fetal position. “This is why I have dating rules.”

Chapter 25-Ghita

“What’s the hurry little lady?” An older man in a black suit and cowboy boots holds the door to Flavour open for me. “Come on in.” I thank him and wave like a lunatic at Nicole behind the bar. She waves back, and I rush over.

It’s 5:30, and I haven’t heard a word from Logan, but Gemma is right about Nicole. I’m going to spill my guts, tell her the entire saga, cross my fingers and toes, and hope she forgives me.

“Got your message,” Nicole says before I get a word out. “We’re booked solid and about to be swamped, but you caught me on a short break.” She pours me a large glass of malbec and points to the far side of the restaurant. “Logan and Mandy already have a table at the rear.”

Mandy and Logan are here? Now? At Flavour?

“I can’t believe she flew here from LA,” she says.

Does Nicole know Mandy? Maybe she’s a family member from California, and I overreacted for no reason?

“Let’s go.” Nicole moves around the bar and grabs my arm. I consider digging my heels into the ground like a stubborn child or fleeing like the place is infested with zombies. But my body doesn’t obey my mind, and I obligingly follow her.

We wind through the long tables, and I spy Logan and a petite golden-haired woman sitting at the end of the last row. Their heads are dipped together, and they’re whispering.

“Hey, guys. Look who’s here.” Nicole waves her arms to catch their attention. “Mandy, this is my very best friend Ghita and Logan’s roomie. Ghita, meet Mandy.”

Mandy glances up, her wavy blonde locks bouncing on her bare shoulders. Dammit. She’s adorable. Please be a cousin.

She’s wearing a cute little denim miniskirt and white sweater tank, nothing fancy but it shows off every curve. And

let me say, the woman has got some rocking curves for such a tiny little body.

I must fall into a trance because she's suddenly standing beside me, arms held out for a hug. "It's nice to meet you, Ghita."

"Uh-huh." I stare at her ideal shade of red lipstick as if in a dream.

She hugs me from the side "Logan won't stop talking about you."

I glance at Logan and find his eyes fixed on the basket of fresh garlic bread. Did he talk about the sex we had this morning? My stomach growls, but he doesn't stir.

"Ghita, sit and have some bread," Mandy says in a gracious and welcoming tone. I guess she heard my stomach.

I'm in an alternative reality. Or under a spell? Nicole snaps her fingers in front of my face and pushes me onto the bench. "Your eyes are unfocused and dazed. You must be hungry. Give me a minute. I'll return with appetizers."

I stare longingly at her retreating back and almost grab onto the ties of her apron. "Don't leave me," I'm desperate to shout but my mouth doesn't work.

"Logan says you live in a great part of town. I told him we should look at houses in the area."

Her words ring in my ears, and the noise in the restaurant becomes a low hum. Did she say *we*? As in we should look *together* at houses?

Mandy is not a cousin then. I bite my lip hard, urging the panic on my face to stay at bay.

"I'm excited to hang out," Mandy says, and I attempt a smile.

Nicole returns with hummus and an artisan cheese platter. "Here you go." *Rescue me*, I plead with my eyes. She squints and tilts her head in question. Does Nicole recognize my rising hysteria?

“I’m a huge fan of your BFF app,” Mandy says as if nothing is amiss.

Did my algorithm match them?

“I organized a knitting club using the app,” she says.

“Oh?” I’m thrown off guard. Knitting? Is that why she’s here? Does Logan knit too?

“You should see Mandy’s intricate work,” Nicole says. “She sells glamorous sweaters on Etsy.”

Mandy is an artist? Is she selling sweaters here in Dallas, at the Market Center? I glance at Logan, but he hasn’t said a word or made eye contact with anyone.

Does he want me to pretend our night tangled together in ecstasy didn’t happen? Maybe it was all in my imagination. Our chemistry and attraction, our friendship even, was simply a dream.

Mandy taps Logan on the shoulder. “Have you shown her the striped blanket I made for you?”

Logan’s head finally pops up at the sound of his name. “Huh?”

“The blue blanket with the brown stripes?”

“Oh. Uh. No. I guess it got lost in the move.”

Mandy jerks as if he slapped her. “Lost?”

Logan doesn’t answer. No one says a word.

Something is off. Logan isn’t only avoiding me. He’s avoiding everyone.

Mandy tears off a huge piece of pumpernickel bread and takes a giant bite. “Nicole, this is delicious,” she says with a hunk of bread hanging out of her mouth. “I could eat the entire basket.”

“Thank you. We bake the bread fresh here,” Nicole says.

I watch Mandy’s dainty red bowtie lips chew and the experience is out-of-body. I tear off a chunk and shove it in my

mouth just to make sure it's real.

“Nicole, you'll have to teach me how to bake when I move here.” Mandy turns to Logan. “Couldn't you eat this bread for breakfast forever? Maybe with homemade strawberry jam?” She seizes another piece and examines the crust.

I'm beyond confused. Everyone's body language is contradictory. I need to leave immediately. I rise.

“What did you say, Mandy?” Nicole frowns. “You're moving here? To Dallas?”

And now my hiney is glued to the seat.

Mandy giggles, and it sounds like small chimes. “Well, I still have to interview, but it's practically official.”

Nicole catches my eye, and I sigh with relief. Finally, an ally has joined my alternative dimension. I stare at Logan, but he is checked out.

“My interview is at Booker T. Washington,” she says oblivious to the insane awkwardness occurring in front of her. “Are you familiar with the school? They're hiring an English teacher.”

“You're a teacher?” I thought she was a knitter.

Mandy smiles. “Yes. I teach junior English.”

My stomach growls, and Nicole must hear the rumble because she pushes the appetizer plate closer.

I grab a slice of bread and drag the crusty dough through the thick hummus, but I just hold it in the air. I can't eat. My stomach is in knots.

“Logan, did you tell them about Questa Engineering?” Mandy asks.

Our heads turn in sync toward Logan, who is staring into space.

Questa? What the hell is a Questa?

“Logan?” Nicole sounds lost too.

Mandy answers for him. “He applied to work there when he was living in California, but they didn’t have an opening at the time. Since then, they created a new position. He could move home if he accepts.” She claps her hands. “Or, I can move here. Either way works.”

What. The. Hell.

Nicole clears her throat with an obnoxious sound and even Logan glances in her direction. “What time did you and Ghita get home from the wedding last night?” she asks.

I nearly choke on my tongue. I’m unsure of her line of questioning, but Nicole changed the conversation for a reason.

“Wedding?” Mandy asks, those red lips crumbling into a grimace.

“Yeah,” Nicole says. “Ghita’s sister’s wedding.”

“Logan, you didn’t tell me you went to a wedding last night,” Mandy says.

Or about the three orgasms he gave me, I say in my head.

Logan’s eyes move from me to Nicole.

“I’m sorry I missed the festivities,” Mandy says as if she would have been invited.

Nicole gives me a let’s-talk-later side-eye and checks her watch. “Duty calls. I have to get back to work.”

My legs tingle. What does she know? I’m the only person who appears to be clueless.

Mandy gives Nicole a huge hug. “It’s nice to visit with you. I love the restaurant. I’m sorry I missed the grand opening.”

“Thanks, Mandy.”

Logan gives his sister a weak salute goodbye, and suddenly, I’m the third wheel in this odd three-some.

Shit. I’ve got to bail. Can I fake an emergency?

I text, “Bring me an orange sandwich,” to Gemma, twice.

“I’m grateful Logan has his sister and a new friend here.” Mandy giggles as if this is a normal evening out.

Is she serious?

I gape at Logan, silently begging him to release me from this macabre party of three.

“We should book you a hotel room,” Logan says, finally making eye contact with me.

Has he rejoined the land of the living?

“Hotel?” Mandy says, less chipper.

“Hotel?” I repeat, and because no one slaps sense into me, I word vomit, “Stay at my place.”

He gapes at me but doesn’t reject the suggestion.

“Really?” Mandy asks.

“Really,” I say, but wish I stabbed myself with the bread knife instead.

Chapter 26-Ghita

It's 8:00 p.m., and I'm lurking at the drive-thru White Rock Coffee kiosk. My stomach churns from three vanilla soy chai lattes and no food. I should have eaten dinner at Flavour, but I was afraid chewing would lead to gagging.

I want to go home. Not my home. Home, home.

As if reading my mind, the phone screen illuminates with a text from my sister.

Gemma: How'd the talk with Nicole go? Just saw your orange sandwich message. You okay?

My thumbs are too weak for the lengthy reply. I hit Call.

Gemma answers before the second ring. "Oh no. Was it terrible?"

"Worse than terrible."

"What does that mean?"

I hit the speaker button, so I don't have to hold the phone. "It went to total shit in a matter of minutes."

"Worse than Logan running out on you because you're bad in bed?"

"Thanks, Gemma. Way to cheer me up. And yes. Way worse." I take another sip of coffee and wonder if I should switch to wine.

"You home? Want me to come over?"

"I'm never going home. Ever again."

"Uhhh. Where are you going then?" She sounds concerned.

"You at Mom and Dad's?"

"Yeah, Mom's making your favorite for dinner tonight, French onion soup. Come over or I'll come to get you?"

"I'm not ready for a family inquisition. Is anyone else there?"

“Just Dad.”

“Okay. I’ll be there in twenty.”

I hit End, and two minutes later the phone rings.

“What the hell, Ghita?” Giovanna’s voice is shrill. “Gemma sent out a 911 text. First, it’s bleach, and now a 911. You’ve been a hot mess lately. Are you dying?”

Dammit, Gemma. That was fast. “No, I’m not dying. Everything is fine. I’m headed to Mom and Dad’s.”

“You don’t sound fine. A 911 isn’t fine. Gemma said Mom’s making French onion soup, so I’ll see you in a bit.” She hangs up, and I stare at my phone, anticipating the next sister check-in.

“Yeah?” I say, pushing the speaker button before the first ring finishes.

“Are you hurt?” Gina asks in a whisper. She must be in the library.

“Keep studying. It’s silly boy problems.”

“You sure?”

“Absolutely.” I try to sound confident and assertive so she won’t drop her plans for my drama.

“I can study at Mom’s,” Gina says, and I already hear her packing a bag. “I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I answer Gloria’s call before Gina hangs up. “Aren’t you and Jacob on your honeymoon?”

“Yeah, but Gemma texted 911. What’s up? Are you lying on your deathbed?”

“I’m fine. The entire family is overreacting.”

“Overreacting to what?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, give me a quick summary of nothing.”

“Fine.” I sigh. “Girl meets boy. Boy is sweet and adorable. Girl shags the sweet and adorable boy. Boy leaves

her for his ex-girlfriend who lives in California.”

“Damn,” Gloria says. “That nothing is a terrible story.”

“Yeah, heartbreak sucks.”

“Logan’s the sweet and adorable boy?”

“Yep. But I’m fine.”

“You want Jacob to handle things?”

I laugh because if anyone is handling things, it will be Gloria. She’s the obvious choice as the Russo assassin.

“I’m fine.”

“You sound delirious.”

“Too much caffeine. Go love on your new husband.”

“Okay, if you say so,” Gloria teases. “Love you.”

“Love you too.”

She hangs up, and I hold my breath, waiting for the phone to ring with another sibling at the other end. Thankfully, my phone remains silent.

“Hey.” Gemma opens the front door, clearly having stalked me from the living room window.

“You called everyone?”

“Not Gabe.”

“Way to keep my crisis on the down low.”

“Hannah’s on her way.”

“Great.”

“Hi, Mom,” I say, rounding the kitchen counter with Gemma. “Need help slicing those?”

“Please. I hate cutting onions. Love eating them though.”

I wash my hands and grab the cutting board and a knife. This is what I need, work to distract me from the melodrama. “Where’s Dad?”

“He left for a game of pickleball.” Mom throws me a dish towel to wipe my wet hands. “Should we discuss the boy now?”

“No, I might as well wait until everyone gets here. No use telling the saga over and over again.”

Mom wraps her arm around me. “Okay, but let me give a piece of unsolicited advice?”

I nod.

“I don’t know what happened, but I saw how Logan looks at you. That boy is crazy about you.”

I hug Mom. “Maybe last night he was into me, but not anymore.”

She bumps me with her hip. “Just don’t jump to conclusions. Okay, honey?”

“I said those exact same words,” Gemma says, popping a sliver of raw onion in her mouth.

“Where is everyone?” Hannah yells from the foyer. “I brought four different kinds of ice cream.”

“Ghita, where are you?” Giovanna yells, walking in behind her.

“In here,” Gemma shouts.

I glance at Mom. “You sure you want to hear the story? It’s a sordid tale.”

Mom tosses me the salt. “I can handle a juicy drama.”

“It’s rated R,” I say, sprinkling salt on the onions.

“I’ve experienced more than you think, sweetie.”

I laugh. “Should we wait for Dad?”

Mom swats me with an oven mitt. “He can’t endure any information over a PG-13 rating when it comes to you kids.”

Gemma grabs a coffee mug and pauses. “Is this a wine situation?”

“Yesssssss,” says Giovanna, opening the cabinet with the wineglasses.

“Grab a couple of bottles of red from the reception leftovers,” Mom says to Hannah as she puts the ice cream in the freezer. “We have a ton in the dining room.”

Gemma busies herself lining up glasses while Giovanna opens the bottles and starts pouring.

“Hey, I’m home.” Gina appears in the kitchen with a bag of books, her computer, and a backpack. “What did I miss?” She snaps a giant chocolate chip cookie in half.

Mom takes the other half and shakes her head to indicate nothing important yet.

“Okay, spill it, Ghita,” Giovanna says.

I glare at Gemma, surprised she didn’t already tell the excruciating story.

She raises her hands innocently. “I just sent out the 911. I left the gory details to you.”

I slice a few of the onions to avoid direct eye contact with my family. “Okay. Last night, Logan and I ... we ...” I wave the knife around as if the movement describes our mind-blowing sex.

“I knew it,” Hannah says.

“What’s the problem?” Giovanna asks, and her eyes harden. “Wait. Was the sex terrible?”

“Maybe,” Gemma says. “Logan ran out on her.”

“He ran out in the middle of sex?” Giovanna’s mouth gapes.

“No. And the sex was incredible,” I say, and check on my mother’s level of comfort. “Sorry, Mom.”

She shakes her head. “No worries, keep going.”

“But he ran out on you?” Giovanna asks again with a wrinkled brow.

“Not during sex. He received a phone call this morning from a girl named Mandy and left.”

“Mandy?” Hannah spins around as if my sisters have been holding out on her.

“Who’s Mandy,” Mom asks, taking her wineglass.

“I’m not totally sure.” I fling my arms to the ceiling. “His girlfriend? His ex? A famous knitter setting up shop in Dallas?”

“He has a girlfriend?” Gina asks.

“She’s a knitter?” Gemma seems a little too excited by the prospect.

“I don’t know anything,” I say.

“Nothing?” Hannah asks.

“Well, one fact is certain. I slept with my best friend’s brother who may or may not have an adorable knitting girlfriend who is moving to Dallas to be with him.” I face-plant and say from the table, “Why did I break my most important rule? I screwed up big time. And Nicole is gonna dump me.”

“Nicole would never blame you,” Gemma says and hands me a full glass of red. “She loves you. What happened at Flavour? Why didn’t you tell her the situation in person?”

“Yeah, your summarization is lacking particulars,” Hannah says.

“Let’s see. I arrived at Flavour where Logan and Mandy were already there, eating.”

“Huh.” Hannah stands to grab a box of oyster crackers out of the cabinet. “Didn’t you say she lived in California? What’s she doing in Dallas?”

I shrug, my wine sloshing over the side. “Exactly.”

“But what did Logan say about her?” Mom asks when the doorbell rings.

“I’ll get it.” Gemma runs to the door.

Loud voices echo from the hall. “Parker’s covering for me.”

Is that Nicole?

“He can cover for you?” Gemma asks, their voices coming closer.

“That man is capable of anything.”

Nicole walks into the kitchen with Gemma. “What the hell is going on with you and my brother?”

Nobody moves, as if waiting on the edge of their seats for Nicole to get to the root of the issue.

“You called Nicole?” I ask.

“Of course, I did,” Gemma says. “You two should talk.”

Mom looks at me. “Maybe we should leave?”

“No. It’s fine. You guys already heard the story. Plus, all of you,” I glance at my sisters, “will listen at the door anyway.”

Mom smiles but doesn’t disagree.

I take Nicole’s hands. “Please don’t be upset with me.” I pause, and she shoots me a worried expression. “When I was a sophomore in high school, I dated a senior named Donny. He was my first crush, maybe even my first real love.”

I glance at Mom, and she nods for me to continue.

“Donny was my best friend Lorna’s brother.” I take a sip of wine. “He dumped me on a Monday at school, and the next day his sister dumped me too.”

“Oh, honey, Lorna wasn’t a true friend,” Mom says.

I give Mom a sad smile. “But she was my best friend. We’d been friends since third grade, and during my tender teenage years, the termination of that friendship was the worst pain conceivable.”

Nicole tilts her head. “I don’t understand. What does this have to do with Logan?”

“Everything,” I say. “I’m so sorry, Nicole. I didn’t want to jeopardize your friendship, but I liked him so much. Or at least I thought I liked him. I wasn’t aware Logan had a girlfriend. I swear. I would never sleep with a guy in a committed relationship. Never. I’m extremely embarrassed. If I had stuck to my rules, everything would be fine.”

She gasps. “You slept with Logan?”

I nod.

“It’s about damn time,” she says, raising her arms above her head and dancing a little.

Giovanna laughs and spits out her wine.

“But Mandy?” Gemma asks, scooting away from the wine splatter.

Hannah cleans Giovanna’s mess. “Yeah, who is she?”

“What about Mandy?” Nicole grabs an empty glass and fills it. “Logan broke up with her months before he moved to Dallas.”

“But she has an interview at Booker T,” I say. “She’s planning to move here.”

Nicole shrugs. “I have no idea what the hell that interview is about.”

“And don’t forget the job with Questa. Does Logan plan to move back to California?”

“Definitely not.”

“They seem determined to make their relationship work.” I finish my wine in one giant gulp.

“Listen, her announcements were confusing as shit. Logan was in shock, wasn’t it obvious? He had no clue she was coming to Dallas.” Nicole takes a sip of her wine and a second one. “Didn’t Logan tell you about Mandy?”

“No, I mean, he said he ended a relationship before moving here. I’m guessing he meant Mandy?”

“I can’t say why they broke up. Disclosing their story wouldn’t be nice,” Nicole says.

“Sure you can,” Giovanna says with a wicked smile.

“Girls, respect Nicole’s relationship with her brother. She doesn’t want to break his confidence or spread gossip.” Mom pats her on the shoulder.

“But I love gossip,” Giovanna says.

“Did she murder someone?” Gemma asks.

Hannah gives Gemma a funny look. “What’s with all the murder lately?”

“No, Mandy didn’t murder anyone. But it feels wrong to air her dirty laundry. You should talk to Logan.”

“She’s right,” Gemma stands beside Nicole. “You need to talk to Logan.”

Chapter 27-Ghita

Parked in front of my house sits Logan's Corolla. Damn all puzzles with missing pieces. Mandy and Logan are back from Flavour. Worst possible news.

I feel ten million times better after talking to Nicole, but I'm unprepared for a confrontation with Logan. I should grab my laptop bag and return to Mom and Dad's immediately. Do not pass GO. Do not collect 200 bucks.

My house is quiet and dark when I unlock the front door. Maybe they went to bed already? I tiptoe down the hall to my room and discover Logan's bedroom door wide open. It's empty. Did they take a walk around the neighborhood? I better be quick.

I race to my room and rummage around for my computer satchel and file folder for tomorrow's podcast. When I hear the front lock click into place, I freeze in panic.

Crap. They're home, and I'm still here searching. So much for being fast and furious.

I locate my bag hanging on the closet door and drape it over my shoulder. Maybe I can sneak out the window?

I stare at the tiny glass frame and a laugh bubbles up. This scene is straight out of a ridiculous rom-com. Instead of opening out like a door when I turn the handle, the window vents upward from the bottom. I crank the glass as high as possible, but there is no way I can fit out of the small slit. I'm hardly Flat Stanley.

I don't want to confront them. This situation is dire. I scan the bedroom for another escape plan. I might have to hide under my bed or in my cramped closet until they go to sleep.

The refrigerator door opens and closes, and I relax. They've moved into the kitchen. Slipping off my shoes to eliminate any obnoxious clumping noises, damn those hardwood floors, I creep out of my room and toward the front door.

“I love Ghita’s style,” Mandy says, and I pause. Eavesdropping is wrong, but it’s only for a second. Who doesn’t want to hear compliments about themselves?

“We could renovate an older historical house too,” Mandy says. “You dig this neighborhood. Maybe we need a big project to bring us back together.”

And I’m paralyzed. Renovate a place in this neighborhood? Together?

“No, Mandy.” Logan sounds distraught. “Just no.”

I’ve never heard him use that gruff pitch and tone before.

“We broke up. We aren’t a couple. And we aren’t getting together ever again,” he says. His voice seems far away as if he’s covered his face.

“Logan, look at me. I’ll nail this interview, and we can start over here, in Dallas. We’ll make our relationship work again.”

Wilma creaks, and I hold my breath. Have they moved to the living room?

“No, Mandy. You know why we broke up. We cannot start over.”

I’m desperate to learn why their relationship fell apart but discovering their intimate details in this way, hiding in my foyer, is inappropriate and beyond rude.

“But you ...” The rest of her words are muffled.

That’s it. They need to know I’m here, and that their conversation is audible. I lift my foot, but when Logan sighs, I freeze again, my toes dangling above the floor.

“You aren’t listening to me, Mandy. You have a serious problem. You need help.”

She needs help? Is this why Nicole wouldn’t tell me the story behind their breakup? I lower my foot.

“You’re blowing it out of proportion,” Mandy says. “You act like I’m taking drugs or selling stolen goods on the

black market. It isn't a big deal."

Why don't I have Houdini's escape tricks memorized just for this purpose? Their conversation is way too personal. Nicole is right. I should talk to Logan, alone.

I side-step to the front door and turn the lock but the deadbolt is stuck. Why didn't I call a locksmith last month?

Dropping my bag, I lean into the frame and try a second time, but the lock won't budge.

Logan makes another loud huffing sound. "Mandy—"

"Don't you love me?" she asks.

I grow motionless. I hate myself for spying, but I need the answer. Does he love her?

"I'll always love you," Logan says, and my heart clenches, "but I no longer want a future with you. We discussed this months ago in California."

Okay. It's official. He doesn't want to be with Mandy. I relax my shoulders.

"I love you too," Mandy says. "And I bought you a gift."

I understand now why Logan acted catatonic in the restaurant. Mandy doesn't listen and won't take no for an answer. I sympathize with his frustration, but I'm ill-equipped for any fatal attraction shit.

I try the lock again, but it's permanently stuck.

"Why would you buy me a gift?" Logan asks in an exasperated tone.

Yeah, Mandy? Why would you buy your ex-boyfriend a gift? Hell, why would you fly across the country uninvited in the first place?

"It's a housewarming present. We can work out our problems. I promise. I just need you to try."

"The problem is you, Mandy, and the only gift I'll accept is you getting help. You should go home to California."

“We’ve been through this before. I don’t need help. Why can’t you let it go?”

“We’ve repeated this conversation a million times. That’s my point. I’m done rehashing the same argument. I’m done, Mandy.”

“But I’m not,” she says, and I hear a suitcase zipper move.

Oh, no. What is she removing from her bag? A gun? A knife? A dead bunny? Should I run in there and save him? Should I save myself? I twist the lock with more intensity, and the mechanism inside loosens. I twist harder.

“Your gift is in my bag.”

“You didn’t?” Logan says and his voice sounds angry and clipped. “I don’t want it.”

I hold my breath. What the hell did you bring, Mandy?

“Here, I’ll unwrap it for you.”

I hear the crinkle of paper. Is the gift a weapon? A sex toy? Lingerie?

I push on the door frame, willing the deadbolt to align so it will turn.

“What the hell, Mandy?”

Wilma creaks. Did Logan move again? I have to vacate the premises pronto.

“You don’t like it?” she asks. “It’s the newest version. We can plug it in right here.”

Oh. My. God. It *is* a sex toy.

“Mandy.” Logan says her name like he’s pleading with her.

“It’s super lightweight,” she says.

They can’t find out I’ve been listening to them this whole time, especially now with her sex toy on display. I should kick my foot against the door to make the lock align,

but it will make too much noise. Why did I come here? I'm such an idiot.

"You shouldn't have bought this." Logan sounds exhausted.

I'm exhausted.

"There's no disk drive, so the games are saved to the cloud."

Games? Are sex games saved to the cloud?

"Ghita can play too," she says excitedly. "We can all play together online."

"Ahhhhh," I scream inside my head and try the lock a final time. It doesn't move. This is my punishment for spying. Public humiliation. I deserve whatever happens next.

"You bought an Xbox?" Logan asks.

What the what? Hold on a damn minute. An Xbox? Is that a euphemism for something dirty?

"I have to clear my head," Logan says. "I'm going for a walk."

Shit. Shit. Shit. I grip the bolt with both hands and twist. Come on lock.

"I'll walk with you," Mandy says.

Shit. Fire and Brimstone. How can this situation get any worse?

"Please don't. I need alone time."

"Why are you upset? It's only a game."

"It's not just a game, Mandy. Not for you. You have a gaming addiction. Your dependency broke our relationship. Hell, it broke you."

"I don't have a gaming addiction." Mandy's voice undulates like she's pacing the room.

I should show myself before it's too late. I gather up the nerve and stand tall, tossing my bag onto my shoulder. Dammit, is it already too late?

“How many hours a day are you gaming now?” Logan asks, and Wilma creaks as if he’s sitting again.

Crap. How long is this conversation going to last? I’m never escaping. I slink to the floor and begin scooting down the hall toward my bedroom. I should be out of sight if they move toward the front door.

“Just—a—a—few hours,” she says in a quiver, and even I’m not convinced she’s telling the truth.

“Are you playing on your computer during the school day when you should be teaching?”

What? Does she play online games during work? While she teaches?

“Logan, my job performance isn’t a problem.”

“Mandy, you are way past addicted,” he says. “It’s messing with your brain. You aren’t the same person, which breaks my heart. That is why we broke up. You broke my heart.”

Logan sounds destroyed, and I’m the psycho creeping around their relationship shards. This is dreadful. I’m dreadful.

“You don’t understand,” Mandy says in a pitiful tone that makes me feel sorry for her.

“Yeah, I don’t understand. Why would you spend your life in front of a screen instead of with real people? Instead of with your friends? Your parents? Instead of me?”

I scurry into my room and hide behind the door. My stomach aches. Mandy is addicted to gaming. The way Logan talks, her addiction is more harmful than crack.

Crying comes from the front room, and I want to cry too. This discussion is heartbreaking. I must quit listening to their private business. I shouldn’t have spied in the first place.

I slowly shut the door to my bedroom, hoping the hinges won’t click when it latches. The closed-door muffles the rest of their argument. Thank goodness. Coming home was a huge mistake but listening was even worse.

I crawl into bed and drag the fluffy comforter over my head. What the hell do I do now?

As if reading my mind with her twin powers, my phone vibrates in my hand.

Gemma: Stop at the store for eggs on your way back. Mom said she needs them for breakfast.

Me: Okay

I stare at the phone. Should I ask Gemma to rescue me? But I'll have to tell her where I am and what's happening. I'm too ashamed of myself to admit the truth even to my twin sister.

Minutes later, there's a pounding of feet on the hall floor. I fist bump the air. They are moving into Logan's room. My escape is finally possible.

I lift the comforter at the same time the door swings open.

Mandy stands in the doorway, a horrified expression on her face.

Shit. She got the wrong room. I'm mute.

Mandy stares at me with wide unblinking eyes. "Ghita? You're home?"

Unfortunately, my mattress doesn't open into a sinkhole and suck me into oblivion. I don't know what to say. I have the sudden urge to vomit. Mandy must suspect I heard everything.

"When d—d—did you get home?" she asks, and I see her replaying the whole intimate conversation with Logan in her head.

"I was—" What do I say? I'm in the middle of my queen bed wrapped in a duvet. "I was sleeping."

"Sleeping?"

She's not buying my bullshit.

“I should go.” I throw off the duvet. “My mom needs eggs.”

She wrinkles her brow at me. “Eggs?”

Come on, Mandy, play along. If we both pretend this debacle never happened, it never happened. Right?

“Yep. Eggs.”

She squeezes her eyes shut, and I do the same, neither of us speaking for a few minutes. Maybe this situation is a terrible, terrible figment of our imagination.

“Thanks for letting me stay here,” she says, and I’m dragged back to reality.

Her voice is despondent, and I’m close to confessing my mortifying behavior but the confession might be worse because I’d be admitting that I’m privy to their secrets. Right now, there is room for plausible deniability.

I nod and gather my bag and purse.

She leans against the doorframe and rubs her forehead. “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“You are? What about the interview?”

“I’m going home. Logan doesn’t want me here.” She pauses.

Is she waiting for me to say something? I have nothing to add to this conversation. This entire exchange is beyond brutal. Why doesn’t she want the unbearable awkwardness to end as badly as I do?

Mandy continues staring into space. I’m ready to run past her when the front door opens and heavy footsteps thump down the hall.

“Mandy?” Logan says, sticking his head in the door. “What are you doing?” His gaze flips from her to me and his eyes go wide. “Ghita? Have you been here the whole time?” he asks, putting two and two together.

“I have to buy eggs,” I say, squeezing past them and hurrying toward the front of the house.

“Eggs?”

I sprint to the door. “Yep.”

The lock turns with ease this time. Of course, it does.

“Ghita, wait,” Logan says behind me.

I raise my hand over my shoulder, my eyes directed forward. “See you later.”

I take the steps two at a time to my car, fearful Logan might follow me. It isn't until I park at Mom's that I remember the eggs.

Chapter 28-Logan

After dropping Mandy off at DFW Airport early this morning, I haven't been able to clear my head and focus on a single work-related task. I was relieved to leave her with a boarding pass back to California, but the conversation beforehand was uncomfortable and heart-wrenching. Even after last night's talk, she believed we could resume our relationship if she reduced her gaming hours. She thought there was hope for us. I love Mandy, but I'm no longer in love with her, and explaining the harsh truth is painful for both of us.

The woman I am in love with didn't come home last night or this morning. Ghita must have shut off her phone because she didn't answer any of my texts, and when I called, all seven times, it went straight to voicemail.

I couldn't sleep. Talk about bad timing. I tossed and turned on the sofa for hours, guessing what Ghita might think after witnessing the Mandy drama. I'm humiliated that she overheard our discussion. She wouldn't even meet my eyes when she ran out of the house.

After our steamy night together, our future felt certain, and we were forging a new path. Now, my gut tells me our future might be a dead end with no hope for resuscitation.

I crawl onto the red brick wall outside my office building and push my earbud in tighter, attempting to drown out the traffic speeding on Central Expressway. I'm ditching work to listen to Ghita's podcast.

"What kind of advice does your grandmother give you?" Ghita asks Julie, the cheeky twenty-year-old she's interviewing. They both giggle into the mic like they share a secret.

I recall Ghita telling me how she found Julie and her grandmother. It was a few weeks ago, and they were laughing over spilled coffee at Ghita's favorite shop. She told me she couldn't walk by them without saying hello. Within minutes,

the two women invited Ghita to join them. She fell in love with their relationship story, so she invited them to her show.

“Grammy gives the best dating advice,” Julie says. “I’ve dumped more women than I’m willing to admit after taking them for dinner at her house. Grammy doesn’t hold back on the interrogation. If they can’t handle her questioning, it’s my cue to get a move on.”

“And you, Grammy?” Ghita chuckles. “Does Julie give you sound dating advice?”

“Julie keeps me tech-savvy, but I prefer to meet my men face-to-face, not on those apps you young people use.”

“Grammy hooked up with Stanley at the senior center,” Julie says, giggling. “He plays guitar in a band.”

“You better watch out for those musicians,” Ghita teases. “They are a handful. I should know, my sister married one.”

“Don’t worry about Grammy,” Julie says. “All five of her husbands were musicians. She’s equipped to handle a man with a guitar.”

“I guess they better watch out for you,” Ghita laughs, a light lilting sound I love, far from the distressed one I expected. I’ve imagined countless worst-case scenarios, but Ghita’s on-air voice isn’t even strained. Maybe last night’s run-in wasn’t as devastating as it appeared. Maybe she didn’t catch our argument in great detail? Or maybe she’s already over me?

I jump off the wall and pace the courtyard. We have giant rain barrels with trees painted on them, and I immediately imagine making one for Ghita’s garden.

“Grammy,” Ghita says, “ever date someone with the ugliest chair ever made?”

I freeze in place. The sun beats down on me, but I have goosebumps all over my arms. She’s talking about my chair, Wilma.

“Is the chair comfortable?” Grammy asks.

Ghita pauses for a few seconds, long for an on-air conversation, and I wonder if she'll tell the truth. I found her napping in Wilma a week ago.

"As a matter of fact," she says, "it's the most comfortable chair I've ever sat in, and I own an Eames chair."

I punch my fist in the air. Ghita loves Wilma. I knew it.

"Furniture shouldn't matter," Julie says, "if you like the person who owns the chair."

"What if you like someone you shouldn't?" Ghita asks. This time her voice sounds small and thin.

My heart freezes in my chest.

"What do you mean you shouldn't?" Grammy asks. "Is he a scoundrel? Many young women favor the bad boys."

"Definitely not a scoundrel," Ghita says.

I laugh out loud. A FedEx guy walking by gives me a dirty look. I respond with an overzealous salute and jump onto the wall again.

"But he breaks the rules," Ghita says. "My rules."

I clench my fists in frustration. She's still ruminating over her rules, rules that have made her afraid to trust relationships.

"My best friend swears by *The Hot New Rules* book. Did you read it?" Julie asks.

"Not yet."

"Well, don't. The book is total bullshit. Rules are meant to be broken when it comes to love."

"I agree," says Grammy. "If I hadn't broken a few rules, husbands number two and three wouldn't have accompanied me down the aisle. And I never would have learned how to fly a plane."

"You hear that, Ghita?" I say to the bushes.

"Throw those rules out the window, girl," Julie says.

“You two remind me of my best friend.” Ghita sighs. “But I made this particular rule to protect myself from further heartbreak.”

“Did it work?” Julie asks.

“Did what work?”

“Did your rule work or not?” Julie asks. The sass in her tone makes me suspect Julie has survived more heartbreaks than one should at her age. “By protecting your heart with rules and regulations, you’re letting love slip through your fingers.”

Ghita makes a terse cackle into the mic. It’s her nervous laugh, her this-isn’t-funny giggle. “Aren’t I supposed to be interviewing you two?” Ghita clears her throat.

“Humor us,” Grammy says. “You need to go on record too.”

I’m right there with Grammy. Ghita can’t keep denying the chemistry between us or our growing intimacy.

“The rule would have worked if I hadn’t broken it.” Ghita sounds both defensive and sad. Did my conversation with Mandy change her feelings for me?

I leap off the wall again. It’s impossible to sit still during this stressful interview.

“No rule can keep you from a broken heart, honey,” Grammy says. “Life is about savoring the pleasure, not running away from pain.”

“Does this person give you pleasure?” Julie asks, chuckling. “Cause you gotta have the pleasure, you hear what I’m saying?”

I move to the front entryway of my office building and pace faster. I should go upstairs and make a couple of work calls, but I can’t while she’s on the air. This interview feels too important to turn off.

“Oh, he gives me pleasure all right,” Ghita giggles, and not the nervous kind. My face flushes with heat. There is no

one else around, but I feel the eyes of the universe watching me.

“Pleasure is the most important part,” Grammy says. “Even for women my age. You should always keep the people around who spark joy.”

“Grammy takes life advice from Marie Kondo,” Julie says. “Well, before Marie Kondo had children and realized tidiness is an illusion.”

“She’s still a very wise woman,” Grammy says, and I sense she quotes Marie Kondo a ton. “Marie says that when we really delve into the reasons we can’t let something go, there are only two: an attachment to the past or a fear for the future.”

Hmm. This Marie Kondo might be a genius.

“Are you too attached to the past or afraid of the future, honey?” Grammy asks.

I’m waiting on pins and needles for the answer. Will Ghita hold on to the past or be afraid of the future?

“And we’ll end on that complicated note,” she says.

What? Wait. Answer the question, Ghita.

“Thank you two for sharing,” Ghita says.

“Thank you for having us.”

“If I may, Ghita,” Grammy says. “Life is over in a blink of an eye, so don’t let the past keep you from the future.”

You tell her, Grammy.

“Thank you for your advice.”

Ghita sounds somber, and I wish I was there in the studio with her.

“And thank you, listeners, for joining us today. And remember all relationships matter. Find some time to get connected.”

Chapter 29-Ghita

“Ah.” I gulp in a huge breath of air. “You scared me, Logan.” He’s sprawled out in his monster chair with a spiral notebook in one hand and a pen in the other. “Why are you sitting in the dark?”

He brightens when he hears me and sits straighter. I notice Herbert curled in a fat furry ball, sleeping on his lap.

“I wanted to catch you when you got home,” he says. “*If* you came home.”

I planned to crash at Mom and Dad’s again tonight, but Gemma convinced me that hiding wasn’t healthy, and hiding from him forever was an impossibility. I waited as late as possible before returning, though.

“Sorry I’ve been avoiding you.” I drop my purse on the coffee table.

“You shouldn’t have to avoid me in your own house,” he says.

We fall silent, staring at one another. I’m afraid to make a move.

“Should I sleep at Nicole’s place?” he asks.

“No.” My response is too quick, and my face flushes with heat. “Please don’t go. I mean,” I shift from foot to foot, “you don’t have to go.” If Logan left, I would miss a piece of myself.

After eating lunch at Flavour with Nicole today, I confessed my clandestine behavior and inadvertent snooping on Mandy and Logan. Still mortified by my unacceptable eavesdropping, the confession was a weight off my chest. To my surprise, Nicole laughed hysterically, picturing me at the moment when Mandy opened my bedroom door, and then Logan arrived to find me there too. She couldn’t wait to tell Parker about my inappropriate behavior. Apparently, my extreme embarrassment makes for a good chuckle. I’m unsure if Logan feels the same way.

“We need to talk,” Logan says.

Herbert stirs and lifts his head as if to confirm Logan’s statement.

I gulp. This is what I’ve been avoiding. The talking.

“Sure.” I snatch my purse. “Let me put this away and take off my shoes.”

I hurry to my bedroom, kick off my black boots, and dump my bag on the bed. I glance at the window and wonder if I could manage an escape this time. But I can’t escape this discussion forever.

The walk back into the living room takes a full year off my life. Nausea churns in my stomach like a tumultuous storm. Logan hasn’t moved, so I sit in the chair beside Wilma. The Eames chair is unbelievably comfortable, well-crafted, and beautiful, but witnessing Logan and Herbert snuggled together in the warm puffy arms of Wilma makes me wish for my own monstrous chair hug.

“I made you a cup of Tulsi tea.” He points to the tire table we made. My favorite blue pottery mug sits next to a thermos.

“Thank you.” I reach for the drink and pour the steaming liquid into my mug.

“Careful, it’s hot.”

I take a tentative sip and nestle in, wishing I had Herbert on my lap.

Logan’s face falls. “You didn’t text me back or answer any of my calls.”

I take a small sip of my tea, avoiding the underlying question.

“Why didn’t you call me?” he asks.

“I turned off my phone.”

“You didn’t want to talk to me?”

Herbert licks a paw in what feels like judgment and resettles in the chair.

“Umm.” It’s true I didn’t want to talk to him, but only because I was embarrassed and mortified and humiliated and ashamed. Plus, I thought he would hate me for eavesdropping.

“Ghita. I’ve been worried the entire day.”

“You have?”

“Yeah, near panic.”

“I was scared to call you,” I say. The admission rips my damaged heart open. Can he see my vulnerability?

“I was scared to talk to you too.” He rubs the cat’s ears absentmindedly.

I take another sip of my tea and relax my shoulders. The Tulsi is already working its magic on my stress level.

“Let’s be honest with each other,” he says, and Herbert meows in agreement.

“No fair.” I point to the cat. “I don’t have a furry advocate to help me defend my case.”

He laughs. “I’m pretty sure he’d take a plea deal for a plate of bacon.”

“Yeah,” I laugh too, relieved to have a little of this tension between us dissipate. “Herbert’s such a traitor.”

“Ghita.” Logan’s mouth returns to a serious expression. “I have to tell you something.”

Here it comes. I wind a piece of loose thread from my sweater around my pinkie, turning my finger purple. Is he going to say sleeping with me was a huge mistake? Was it a huge mistake?

“Ghita? Please look at me.”

I break the thread, and the blood comes rushing back to my finger. “Yes. Of course, tell me anything you want.”

“I value our friendship first and foremost.”

Yep. Here comes the painful monologue. This beautiful man is going to break my heart. It's already ripped in two. What's another couple of pieces? I clench my mug, preparing myself for the dreaded words coming next.

"Oops," he says, digging the pen out of a hole he made in his notebook.

That's the opposite of what I expected him to say. I point at the spiral. "What's the deal with the composition book? Did you write your opening argument in there?"

He grins, transforming his face into my favorite expression. "It's to ensure I don't forget a single important word."

I take another sip of my tea and place the mug on the table. "You have a lot to say?"

"Are you kidding? The last twenty-four hours have been total and utter hell."

Utter hell?

"I listened to your podcast today," he says, and I wonder if those words are in his notebook. "The topic was insightful."

I'm glad I put my hot tea down otherwise I would have spilled it all over my lap.

"You did? It was?" My face flushes with heat.

"Yeah. I listen to all your shows." He leans forward a bit. Herbert raises his head and glares at Logan as if to say, *be still dude*.

"Oh? I didn't know."

"Grammy is an interesting character."

"She is." I clench my jaw. Is he going to acknowledge the embarrassing part of the interview about him?

He bites his lower lip in deep thought, and I send him a telepathic message: *please, for the love of all fat cats, don't ask me about the interview*.

He must receive the transmission because he doesn't say another word. We stare at one another, and a thick silence fills the room. My insides are surging, and I have a crick in my neck from the tension circulating between us.

"So, Mandy," he says, giving me conversation whiplash.

"Mandy?" I ask like I've already forgotten her. I want to forget her. I want to forget yesterday. The entire week.

"I'm sorry I took off without an explanation yesterday morning, Ghita."

"You are?"

"When Mandy called, I was stunned into paralysis. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that she was waiting for me at the airport. And at Flavour, you invited her to stay here, at your house. To stay here with the two of us after we had the most amazing night together. I was confused and discombobulated."

"Amazing night?" I glance at my hands and pick at my cuticle. Did he call our night together amazing? I'm worried I heard him wrong.

"Ghita, look at me."

I raise my head, afraid he'll change his mind about the amazing part.

He takes my hand in his, and his thumb sweeps over the top of my hand.

"Our night together was totally amazing," he repeats, refusing to break eye contact with me.

He thinks our time together was amazing, and he doesn't hate me even though I'm an eavesdropping jackass. I nod, encouraging him to continue.

"I should have explained the situation with Mandy before I walked out the door. I was in shock."

"It was shocking." I smile, feeling the tension melting away.

“As you have surmised, I broke up with her because of her gaming addiction.”

I nod because of course I know. I heard everything.

“A year ago, they put her on probation at the private school where she teaches. Mandy’s parents tried to help her, and her friends, but she won’t accept any help. I should have told you.”

“Logan, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I promise. It was a huge mistake. I came home to grab my computer bag, and you two walked in arguing. I couldn’t leave the house without disturbing you. There wasn’t a clean escape, and by the time I learned the personal details ... well, you know the rest.”

“Yeah.” He runs his hands through his hair. “I was deeply embarrassed, Ghita.”

“*You* were embarrassed? I’m the one who should be embarrassed. Your prior relationship is none of my business.”

“But it is your business. I should have been honest with you about my history with Mandy, especially after things got serious with us.”

I tilt my head at him. “Things are serious with us?”

Logan stands making Herbert meow loudly and kneels in front of me. “Things are *very* serious with us.”

“Yeah?” I’m elated. I didn’t screw up the entire relationship.

“Yeah,” Logan says, his hands still holding mine, their warmth covering me like a weighted blanket.

“I love you, Ghita.”

My heart stops in my chest.

“What?” I have to make sure I understand him correctly.

“I love you. I’m in love with you. Our night together wasn’t a one time fling for me, Ghita. I want to be with you.”

“You do?” I ask like an idiot unable to decipher his words.

He motions to the notebook. “I made a list of reasons we should be together.”

“You made a list?”

“In case you need convincing.”

I smirk playfully. “Convincing?”

He opens the spiral and kneels in front of me. “Wanna hear the first reason?”

“Sure?” I say, still reeling from his declaration of love.

“Reason one: Herbert loves me.”

At the sound of his name, Herbert meows again and readjusts his large fuzzy body, occupying the entire space on the cushion.

“He loves your chair,” I say and stretch to pet Herbert’s extended belly.

“That brings me to reason number two: My chair. Wilma loves you.”

I snort. “Wilma loves me?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “Yes, and you love her.” He listened to my podcast, so he knows the truth.

“Fine.” I hold my hands above my head as if caught. “Wilma is an insanely comfortable chair.”

“And?” His grin is infectious.

“And I love her,” I say.

He wraps his arms around my waist. “And reason number three: You love me.”

I smile. “Yes, Logan.” He lifts his brows, urging me to continue. “I love you.”

“Thank goodness.” His lips graze mine, the barest of touches, and a blaze of fire runs through every cell of my body.

I drag my fingers through his thick brown hair and tug a bit. He reacts with a soft moan, letting me know he is completely and utterly in this relationship with me. I've won the lottery and damn any rule that stands in my way. Logan loves me.

"Logan?" I say as he kisses me deeper this time, his hands pressed against my face.

He reluctantly pulls away. "Yes?"

"Let's go to the bedroom."

His face brightens. "Yeah?"

"For sure," I say and run my finger down his chest.

He leans back. "Which one?"

I chuckle. Only Logan would worry about the semantics now. "You pick."

He lifts me off the chair, and I wrap my legs around his waist as he carries me into his room and places me on the bed, his eyes roaming dangerously over my fully dressed body.

"Shirt off," I say in a demanding voice I've never used with him.

"Yes, ma'am." He yanks his shirt over his head.

I crawl over to his bare chest and run my fingers along his spine and into the rear pocket of his jeans. "These too."

He shucks off the rest of his clothes in a flash and cocks an eyebrow at me. "Your turn, Lovie."

"Lovie?" I scratch my head.

"Just trying out a pet name."

"Might have to dig deeper, Big Guy." I raise my eyebrows and laugh, stripping out of my shirt. I've never joked with anyone during sex, but damn if these games aren't my favorite part so far. I trace my fingers around his pecs, sliding them across his taut stomach muscles.

Logan watches my hand and chews his lower lip. "Big Guy?"

“I’ll bring *my* spiral notebook next time.”

“We shouldn’t be too hasty. It might take time to find the perfect name.”

“Can’t wait to read your drafts.”

“I think Roomie will always be my favorite,” he says.

I wiggle my hips in agreement. “That might be the one we stick with.”

I scan his magnificent body and shimmy off my jeans. Logan’s gaze goes wide at my barely there lace G-string. He crawls across my body, his teeth catching the edge of the lace as he runs his tongue over them. He works his way up my body, lifting my bra to suck a nipple, swirling until I’m thoroughly excited.

Logan reaches for the box of condoms in his drawer, but I stop his hand. “I’m on birth control. Have you been tested?” It’s an uneasy conversation even with a partner you adore.

“I tested clean after Mandy.”

“And you haven’t been with anyone?” I’m afraid to hear the answer. Do I want to know how many people he’s slept with since Mandy?

“No one. I don’t do one-night stands,” he says, and I’m elated. “You?”

“I haven’t slept with anyone in a long time either. Squeaky clean.”

He holds the package above his head. “So, ditch these?”

“Yeah?” This is a new level of intimacy. “I haven’t done this before.”

His face wrinkles in confusion since we had sex a few days ago.

“Not using a condom,” I say, clarifying.

“Never?” He kisses me and winds me up once more, the weight of his body pressing against mine.

“Never.” I try to catch my breath as he eases into me. The sensation is intense and raw, and I crave more of him deep inside me.

“You feel incredible,” he says, kissing me.

“Yeah,” I say, unable to form other words.

He advances the rhythm and soon we both fall over the edge, coming together. The emotions block other coherent thoughts. I roll to my side and gasp. There isn't enough air in the room.

“That was everything,” he says, rolling closer to kiss me, a happy grin plastered on his face. I match it.

“Yeah,” I say again. “Everything.”

Epilogue-Logan

“Ghita, I’m home.”

There isn’t an answer, and our house is dead silent. Ghita must be recording a podcast in the backyard studio. Disappointment courses through my tired limbs. I wanted to spend the evening hanging out and loving on Ghita. I made dinner reservations, but she sent me a text hours earlier asking me to cancel them. It’s a super busy time for her at work, and we can always celebrate another night.

If she’s working, I will too. I prepare to drag my work stuff to the kitchen table, but I spy a single lit candle on the entry table. Next to it sits a white envelope with my name scrawled in Ghita’s curvy cursive writing. Ripping the envelope open, I find a homemade red card inside.

Dear Roomie (Aka hot husband),

I’ve planned a surprise for our first wedding anniversary. Note, this traditional anniversary gift is paper, so yeah, I’m a clever, clever woman.

Please take off your shoes and leave all work items on the floor.

Don’t forget to blow out the candle and proceed to the kitchen.

Love,

Your favorite Roomie

(Aka adoring wife)

I do as Ghita instructs, kicking off my shoes and shedding my backpack. I’m tempted to rip off my pants and shirt too, but knowing Ghita’s proclivity for big parties, the kitchen might be full of friends and family hiding. My underwear might not be the best attire for public consumption.

I blow out the candle and hope she didn’t plan a surprise party. I want plenty of alone time with Ghita tonight. This year has flown by with her insane podcast schedule, the new sound studio in the backyard, and my promotion to

Environmental Director. We haven't had enough quiet nights alone in a few months.

With the red note in hand, I peer into the kitchen. Thank goodness no one jumps out yelling, "Surprise."

On the bamboo island is another lit candle next to a letter, this time a cut-out hot pink heart with a lipstick kiss print. I chuckle at my adorable and playful wife.

Dear Roomie,

Grab two long-stemmed champagne glasses in the cabinet behind you and a bottle of Veuve from the refrigerator.

Say hi to Herbert and Wilma on your way to our bedroom.

Love,

Your Roomie

I enter the living room with my arms full and crack up at Herbert, who is wearing a silk red bowtie. How did Ghita manage to put a costume on him? He has made himself comfortable on the newly upholstered Wilma. I don't know how she made the old gal look new. The chair is more modern and cozier in purple velvet.

Herbert lifts his head at my approach and rolls to his back for a belly rub. His chubby belly is irresistible.

I place the champagne bottle on our tire table and say my hellos to Mr. Herbert for a quick minute. "Can't stay long, my friend. Ghita's waiting, with exciting plans I hope."

He purrs in understanding, and I lean over to read the third letter balancing on the arm of the chair.

Dear Roomie,

You're almost there. Head to the hallway.

Love,

Your Roomie

In the hallway? Is she there waiting for me? I sincerely hope Ghita is alone at the end of this scavenger hunt.

A pink Post-it note is stuck to the hardwoods.

Dear Logan,

This year has been bliss. Best roomie ever. An even better husband. I love you.

Please proceed to the bedroom.

Yours forever,

G.

Soft light shines from the partially opened bedroom door. I can't believe my luck. I married my best friend and the love of my life.

I push open the door the rest of the way, hoping to find Ghita spread out like the goddess she is. Instead, I find her sound asleep in my old Greenpeace T-shirt. The bedside lamp is brighter than normal and chocolate-covered strawberries sit in a bowl beside her.

"Hey," I say, whispering so I don't scare her.

She instantly stirs. "Logan?" She rubs her eyes and glances at her phone on the table. "You're late." A notification waits. "Oh, you texted me."

"Yeah. I had an overseas call at the last minute."

She kneels on the bed and drapes her arms around my neck. "Hi, husband." Her smile ignites the tingly nerves in my body.

I kiss her on the nose. "Hi, wife. I got your notes."

Her expression turns wickedly sexy. "I didn't mean to fall asleep."

I lift off her shirt and push her hair away from her face. I take in her beautiful body.

"But I'm awake now," she says, drawing me toward her by my belt. God, she's sexy.

"Wait," I say. "I have something for you."

"We said no gifts."

“We did, but you gave me all that paper.”

She laughs. “That doesn’t count.”

“Then this doesn’t either.”

I run out of the room to my backpack by the front door and hurry back to our bedroom. I hand her the scrapbook I made. It’s rough, tied together with pink ribbon and tape.

Her face illuminates with joy. “Logan. You went with paper too.”

“Open it.” I’m nervous. Maybe I should have thought the gesture through longer.

“What’s this?” she asks, opening the book.

“It’s the story of us,” I say.

She turns the pages. “These are the notes I’ve written you over the past two years and pictures of us.” She points to a picture of us dancing at a party. “I haven’t seen this one.”

She glances at me with love in her eyes. I hope she sees the same in mine.

“I love it,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“And I love you.”

“I love you too, Ghita.”

She puts the book down and draws me to her. Our lips meet, and there isn’t enough time, space, or energy to stop us from merging together like magnets. She tears off my clothes, and I fall onto the bed. We are skin against skin as I stroke each dip, every single curve of her body, worshiping it like it’s the first time. Sex always feels spontaneous with Ghita. It’s never the same, sometimes fast, sometimes playful, often slow and deliberate, but when we are together, our bodies crave one another.

We take our time, tasting, and touching until I finally roll her under me.

She kisses me, and I deepen it, giving her tender kisses on all the places that make her pant. She returns the favor, touching me so I melt into her. It's the most exquisite feeling, being with the person you love the most.

When she moans, I know she's close. I find the spot she likes best and send her over the edge.

Authors Note

Readers often ask us how we dream up our stories. We are inspired by everyday life and have a running list of ideas in a secret Word file. For *Dear Roomie*, the idea occurred to both of us at the exact same time...like kismet.

A friend of ours told us about this utopian coffee place, La La Land Kind Cafe, where they mentor foster youth aging out of the system. There, kindness is the priority. We visited and were not disappointed by the sunshiny joy that filled the space. <https://lalalandkindcafe.com/about/>

As we were sipping their signature lavender bloom matcha latte, two college-aged girls sat at the table next to us. Pink sweater said, "I'm dying. I'm in love with Jeremy." Plaid shirt said, "So? What's the problem?" Pink sweater answered with the three words that would launch the plot of this book: "He's my roommate."

Yes, we are "people watchers" and "coffee shop eavesdroppers." Don't judge, we can't help ourselves!

We won't recount the rest of their conversation because that's private. :) But we knew immediately how to complicate this already complicated love story.

What if Jeremy was plaid shirt's big brother? Besties or boyfriends? Can you have both? Well, in a Romcom you can, so that's what we wrote in *Dear Roomie*.

Hope you like their happily-ever-after as much as we did.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank all of our family and friends who have supported our writing career by continuing to buy and read our books. You know who you are, and we love you.

We would like to thank Susan Wesley for our beautiful author photo and our TikTok video that went viral ... just joking.

We would like to thank Beth Gonzales for using her creative super powers to make our book covers stand out from all the rest. We are FOREVER in your debt.

We want to thank the BrainTrust and our ARC readers for creating a buzz around our newest releases. We can always rely on you.

Michelle would like to thank Albanese Gummy Bears for keeping her awake during the only writing time she has to herself, after 10:00 p.m. in the dormer window behind a curtain.

Angelle would like to thank her bedroom closet. Without this space in between shirts and pants, she would never be able to escape long enough to write a couple of chapters.

About The Author

Michelle Angelle

Michelle Angelle is the pen name of two best friends who write modern love stories with a hint of spice. This coffee-fueled duo resides in Texas dreaming of writing desks on a screened-in porch.

Books In This Series

Dear Pink

Dear Pink

Will an unexpected bucket list change Hannah and Gabe's lives forever?

Hannah's sleazy ex-boyfriend left her a hot mess. For years, she's worked in the basement dungeon and has come to accept a life full of disappointments. That is until she receives a bucket list from her best friend.

Gabe's Instagram-famous fiancé dumped him for a social media mogul. Shocked and heartbroken, Gabe decides he's better off without a girlfriend until he runs into an adorable woman on a pink bike.

Will Hannah and Gabe be able to put aside their fears and let love into their lives again? A bucket list might just be the trick that gets them both back on track.

Until Next Year

Two best friends. Ten New Years. One last chance to get it right.

Gloria has trained her whole life to dance at the American Ballet Company in New York. Now that she has the coveted prima ballerina spot, Jacob will not be the one to stand in the way of her dreams.

Jacob has finally landed a record deal and is on his way to fame and fortune. Gloria would never let her feelings for him jeopardize his career.

Gloria and Jacob are perfect for each other, but their relationship seems opposed by fate. Will these star-crossed

lovers listen to their hearts and take control of their destiny, or will they let another year keep them apart?

If you loved the Russo family in Dear Pink, then you'll love seeing Gabe's sister Gloria in this holiday romance.

Books By This Author

[Wrong Guy, Right Room](#)

Neil and Katie's meet-cute is straight out of a romance novel, except for the hot sex. Will a lockdown with her college exchange her life forever? The night before Katie's rehearsal dinner, her twin brother fills her head with images of deformed penises and erectile dysfunction, sending her to seduce Neil before it's too late. However, when Katie sneaks into his hotel room ready to uncover their chemistry, she discovers something unexpected. Wrong Guy, Right Room is a romantic comedy where the wrong guy might just be the right man.

[Hammer My Heart](#)

All's fair in love and war until your heart is on the line.

Max blames himself for losing his family home, but when he's cast on the popular reality show, Go Hard or Go Home, he can't believe his luck. If only his competition wasn't a gorgeous woman in work boots and tight overalls.

Sam's often underestimated because of her looks, but she's determined to sweep the competition. Not even a cute guy in Clark Kent glasses will distract her. Will her mad woodworking skills and charisma be enough to win over the social media crowd?

Sam and Max should hate each other, but they can't deny the chemistry simmering between them. When the competition heats up, they must decide if they'll follow their hearts or fight for the renovated farmhouse. There can only be one winner in this game, but is the prize worth the cost of victory?

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If you loved the Russo family in *Dear Pink*, then you'll love seeing Gabe's sister Gloria in this holiday romance. Fans of *One Day in December*, *In a Holiday*, and *This Time Next*

Year will enjoy this “missed chances” love story.

Read an excerpt from:
Hammer My Heart

The Audition

Sam

“So, what’s your story, sister?” asks a petite blonde with her Lycra-wrapped boobs invading my personal space. I glance at my own abundant cleavage, but my size D breasts have nothing on the triple F she’s sporting. She pops her peppermint gum, and the sharp mint smell clears my sinuses.

I must take too long to answer because she sighs dramatically.

“Did you hear me?” She presses in further, and her breasts dig into the side of my arm. “What’s your story, girly? If you’re at this audition, then you gotta have something special going for you.” She pulls her gum out of her mouth in one long string and wraps it around her sculpted, pointed nail, examining me behind her eyelash extensions.

“I have nothing,” I whisper in an attempt to shut her down or at least lower her talking volume. My overly excited nerves can’t handle her loudmouthed inquisition in this stressful situation. I’m trying to stay calm, but the pressure building in this cramped, hot room feels dangerously close to nuclear combustion. One match and we’ll all burst into flames.

“Nothing? Ha. Yeah, right.” Her voice rises several octaves louder. A couple of heads turn in our direction. “Look around.” She points her French tip like a dagger, threatening everyone in the room. “These are the final callbacks. If you made it this far, you’re either hot or freaky.”

“So, which one are you? Freaky?” I mumble.

Her nostrils flare. “What did you say?”

Oh, geez. Did I say that last part out loud? I really need a better filter.

“Uh, I mean, I’m both. Freaky and hot,” I say and wiggle away from her intrusive breasts. It’s a challenging maneuver, and my butt slips off the plastic chair. I land on the hard, gray linoleum with a thud. French Tips scowls at me, but her Botox-infused face doesn’t crack.

She is not helping me relax in this pressure cooker.

I scan the small office space from the dusty floor but find no vacant seats. Every single chair is pushed against the dingy perimeter walls and filled. We sit here like middle school dance leftovers, desperate to be picked for the next slow song.

“Jeff,” calls a striking redheaded woman holding a clipboard. A dapper older gentleman in a brown tweed suit and leather driving cap follows her through the open door. He looks neither hot nor freaky.

I hurry to the vacant seat and collapse against the stiff, unwelcoming chair. Taking the rubber band off my wrist, I gather my long hair into a high ponytail, removing the wet strands from my hot neck. They must have dialed the furnace to extra high. Are they trying to break our spirits so we’ll act foolish on camera?

“I dig your overalls,” says a gruff voice.

“Thanks, they ...” I choke on my words when a whiff of the skinny, pale guy next to me blows my way. He smells terrible. Rotten eggs mixed with vinegar wave off his body. It’s hard to focus on his face and ignore the stench. He’s also shirtless and shoeless. Did he have to make an emergency evacuation and then remember he had a callback? Or is this the freaky type French Tips mentioned?

Shoeless shifts in his seat, and I whip my head to the left to avoid another whiff, just in time to be whacked in the eye by a long black dreadlock belonging to none other than Bob Marley

reincarnated. Even with my eyes tearing, I can tell this guy is gorgeous. Definitely in the hot category.

“Sorry ‘bout that,” he says with an actual Jamaican accent. I swoon.

Maybe French Tips is on to something. This callback includes an eclectic bunch of people. I grab my cherry Chapstick and smother my parched lips. The fruity scent gives me a little relief from my smelly neighbor.

When Bob Marley checks his teeth in a compact mirror, a wave of paranoia runs through me. I seldom worry about my appearance, but my stomach gurgles with nerves. Should I check my teeth too?

My dad always said I inherited my beauty from my mother. Mocha-skinned and voluptuous, she was a glamorous woman. She claimed flamenco dancing gave her luscious curves. My dad and I worshiped her. My dad told me never to hide behind make-up, but sitting in this dreary waiting room with the fluorescent lights flickering on my bare thirty-year-old skin, I feel dangerously overexposed.

“Ommmmm.”

The sound reverberates from across the room. I lift my head to find a bald man in his early twenties, dressed head to toe in white linen, sitting cross-legged in his chair. The yoga pose is impressive. My back aches where the hard plastic has dug a permanent ridge into my spine, and I wonder if he might recommend a good stretch position. I open my mouth to ask, but Zen Master cuts me off.

“Shhh. You, don’t talk.” He puts two fingers to his mouth as if we’re in a library. “Not a word. You’re killing my inner chi.”

Hardly a master of Zen, then. I close my lips, mimicking a zipper, and Zen Master grunts. For someone asking for quiet, he sure makes a racket.

Averting my eyes from his theatrics, I catch a tall guy close to my age staring at me behind dark-rimmed glasses. Has he been watching me the whole time? Our gaze meets, and he smirks.

Really? A smirk? What's with the attitude?

I smirk back.

He removes his glasses with a practiced Clark Kent maneuver, and the greenest eyes I've ever seen shine back at me. He blinks and the action happens in slow-motion. His irises twinkle like emeralds between luscious, long lashes. Geez, the magnetic pull is forceful.

He watches me watching him. Great, I've become a gawker. The only way to break eye contact is to close my eyes, but when I reopen them, Clark Kent's shoulders are tracking up and down. Is he crying?

I lean forward and hear him snicker. What the hell?

"Are you laughing at me?" I ask in a loud whisper.

He points around the room. "Come on. It's kinda funny, don't cha' think?"

"What exactly is funny about this situation?" I'm no longer whispering, and the whole room stares at our exchange.

"Us. All of us, in here, together. We're funny. Twenty-five strangers competing for two coveted slots on a reality TV show." He barks out a laugh. "It's hysterical."

Standing, I place my hands on my hips in what I hope is an intimidating stance. "It's not funny."

"Come on? You must find humor in the situation."

"No. I really don't," I say defensively. Maybe this reality show is a joke to Clark Kent, but this is my opportunity to venture out on my own. I can't work at my uncles' shop forever, living in a small one-bedroom with no space to build. My uncles have been more than supportive, but my dad would want me to make my own way. I want to make my own way.

"You realize cameras will follow you everywhere on set," he says. "There will be no escape, no private moments." He points to a camera mounted in the ceiling's corner. "They're already watching us."

“And?” A drop of sweat rolls down my neck. Did they turn up the heat again? And why didn’t I consider the constant surveillance before this second?

“Let’s get real. They already have the show cast.” Clark Kent slides his glasses on, and his superpowers diminish. Damn those fantastic green eyes. “Producers probably want the footage of us losing our shit under all this pressure. Desperation makes for great TV.”

“Who are you calling desperate?” Shoeless asks in a desperate way.

“Are you two together?” Zen Master says, swishing his hand between the two of us.

“No,” we say in unison, glare at each other, and then divert our eyes at warp speed.

“We don’t know each other,” I say in a low whisper as if the cameras haven’t already caught the embarrassing commotion. Clark Kent’s ten thousand percent correct. Desperation makes great TV.

“What a shame,” Zen Master says. “Sexual sparks are flying all over this room.”

Clark Kent lifts an eyebrow and licks his lips. Damn if it doesn’t make me copy the gesture. Luckily, my libido is saved by the redhead standing at the door again.

She points her clipboard at Clark Kent, and when he stands, I see he’s well over six feet tall. Giving me a curt nod, he turns to leave. That’s when his fine ass comes into view.

Dammit to all horses in heaven. His Levi’s hang on his perfectly angled hips in just the right way, and his shoulders are even broader than his chest. I wipe away the embarrassing drool with my sleeve. Zen Master catches me and winks.

Shaking my head, I attempt to refocus on the purpose of today. I’m proud of my sexy curves, but I’m prouder of my building skills. If they want a freak, I’m freaky skilled at construction. What’s Clark Kent got to offer? Sarcasm and magnetic bright green eyes?

Sitting down, I say a silent “ommmmm” to center myself. Might as well try any soothing tool available.

I close my eyes and visualize winning the spot on this season’s *Go Hard or Go Home*. I must win the farmhouse estate.

“Samantha Lopez?” A brunette with pointy shoes and a pencil skirt so tight her knees knock together when she walks waves her clipboard in the open doorway.

I jump out of my chair. “That’s me.”

“Right this way.”

I follow her clicking heels down the hall and straighten my lucky red overalls. I want them to understand I’m more than a hottie, but maybe I misjudged the situation and should have worn a traditional business suit?

She opens the door, and it’s too late to worry about my outfit. I’m overwhelmed with fresh fear. This isn’t an interview room. It’s an interrogation cell. Cameras and microphones point in all directions. Clark Kent was spot on. They are recording this last audition day for the unadulterated reality drama.

A large modern glass conference table sits at the far end of the room with two very intimidating white men and one skeletal white woman. They sit in tall leather chairs lined behind the barrier like an alabaster wall. I check for another leather chair, but the brunette points to a plastic one in the middle of the room. Great. Another plastic chair. So much for inclusion.

I sit and take a moment, meeting their piercing stares.

“Hi. I’m Sam.” My voice is clear and confident. “Thank you for having me back today.”

The older of the two men, white-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a pastel yellow suit, taps the paper in front of him with his manicured finger. “You go by Sam, not Samantha?”

The woman next to him in a pink gingham dress clicks her pen on and off.

Click. Click.

“Yes,” I say.

Click. Click.

“I prefer Sam.” My jaw clenches tight, trying to ignore the abhorrent noise.

Click. Click.

“What do you have to offer *Go Hard or Go Home*?”

Click. Click.

I can't help myself. I give the pen-clicking woman a death stare, willing her to stop the damn noise. She actually stops. That commanding move reminds me I am a strong, powerful woman, and they should pick me to compete on this show. I take a huge breath and dive in.

“I'm passionate about construction and design, and I would be honored to compete on *Go Hard or Go Home*.”

“Thank you for your enthusiasm, Sam,” says the other white man in dark tinted glasses. “We have a few additional questions for you.”

“Great.” I try to make my smile seem effortless.

“Are you comfortable being filmed every waking hour?” the older man asks, tugging on his yellow suit sleeve.

Every waking hour? Geez. Clark Kent was right. Will sleep be my sole escape from a camera's view? Unless they film us sleeping. Maybe I should ask?

“Totally comfortable,” I lie. He's probably exaggerating anyway. I mean, the bed and the bathroom gotta be off-limits, right?

Dammit. Should I ask?

“Can you live with no connection to the outside world?” asks the woman.

Why are they being so dramatic? It's not like this show takes place on Mars.

“I’m aware of the show’s rules and look forward to sweeping the competition.” I roll my shoulders back, shaking off the growing concern over hidden spy cameras watching me snore and pee.

They titter awkwardly.

“It’s rare to meet a woman with the woodworking skills you claim to have,” Sunglasses says, and the other two nod.

Sexist much? My wide smile stays plastered to my face. Hopefully, they can’t read the annoyance in my eyes.

“Luckily, my dad believed a woman can do whatever a man can do. Woodworking is in my blood. It’s my weapon of choice.”

No tittering this time. The woman grins, and I return a determined smile. Maybe she’s on my side after all.

“Last question,” Sunglasses says. “What is your greatest fear of being cast on this reality show?”

That you discover my dyslexia and use it against me. Nope. Can’t utter those words. Telling them the truth would end in disaster.

I’ve spent my whole life overcoming this learning difference, and it’s made me the strong person I am today, but I don’t want the show to exploit it by turning dyslexia into a weakness for TV ratings. I don’t want to be cast as the victim, or worse, the underdog people feel obligated to cheer on.

“If you must know, I have a stiletto phobia.”

The entire table breaks out in laughter.

“Me too,” the woman says with a wink.

“Got it,” Sunglasses says. “No three-inch heels.”

“Although,” I stand and spin, “maybe with a pair of overalls.”

More laughter.

“You certainly have a unique style.”

I knew my lucky pair would work their magic.

Sunglasses stands and the other two follow suit. “Thanks for coming in, Sam. We’ll contact you soon.”

“So, I’ll start next week, then?” I shoot them a full-wattage smile. Maybe my confidence will be the deciding factor.

They laugh again, and it’s 100% genuine.