

Big sisters know best.

DOUBLE *happiness*



a novella

JEN TRINH

Double Happiness

Jen Trinh

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This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

DOUBLE HAPPINESS

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To my grandmothers.

Chapter 1

The first time we met Steven Yi, he was naked, laughing, and eating a peach. He was also two years old, so it's not like he or Nancy remembers, but I was a grizzled five year old, so I do. Vaguely. I think. Maybe I've heard the story too many times, or maybe the toddler I remember was a different naked Asian kid (not an uncommon sight back then), but that nude little boy held out his peach to my sister, and she took a bite and gave it back to him with a rosy, puff-cheeked smile. The kind of look of pure joy you'd do anything to see again.

After that, there are snippets. There's the tight bellyache of laughter, the heat underfoot from sun-warmed grass, the sweet slush of watermelon breaking apart in our mouths. I don't even know what we were laughing so hard about, because at that age, kids laugh at the weirdest things. Like Peek-A-Boo? How is object permanence funny? And Grandma said I used to cackle at open-mouthed chewing noises, but they're officially the most annoying sounds in the world, aside from squealing brakes and my ex-wife's laugh, which are honestly kind of the same?

Sad how something can go from "charmingly unique" to "singularly irritating" in just a few short years.

Anyway, from that day on, me, Nancy, and Steven fit together like Amish joinery, part of an heirloom-quality friendship meant to last the ages. In particular, Nancy and Steven were inseparable, which is why, when they turned three, then 12, then 28, and they were still best friends, I and everyone else had thought that they'd be married by now.

And yet, I'm on the couch at Nancy's engagement party, working on my third martini, staring at the wrong man. It's been a year since they first got together, and I still haven't cracked the code on my sister's fiance, Bradley Chanthavong. There's a thick band of tension in my gut, and it's not from the alcohol bloat in my high-waisted jeans—or not *only* that—but from a certainty that something is *wrong*. It's like that time an intern forced a quarter-inch nut onto an M6 bolt. Any self-

respecting industrial designer knows that metric and imperial simply don't mix. They might kind of fit together, but they don't *belong* together. Not unless you want to strip their threads and ruin them both.

There's nothing wrong with Bradley. He's friendly, polite, a Warriors fan, a good cook, and he runs a big, clean gym where I get a family discount, or *would* get one if I ever went. But whenever he opens his mouth and that loud, fist-bumpy voice comes out, or whenever his thick, tatted arms go around Nancy's delicate shoulders, covering her in his pungent man musk, my brain lets out a rude noise. Quiet, willowy, bookish Nancy, the Gu family's latest doctor, and *that* guy? Not while Steven's still on the market.

Speak of the devil.

"You and your pickles and olives," he says in that dear, familiar voice. His pronunciation is crisp, like he's spent the last two years training to be an NPR news correspondent instead of volunteering abroad. "You're going to get ulcers one day and I'm not going to be able to help you."

The man who sits down next to me is neither naked nor eating a peach. He's tall and lanky with soft features and a warm smile, like a young Mister Rogers, but with more jasmine rice and MSG in his diet.

Looking at the two of them, it's so obvious. Nancy and Steven were cut out of a C-Drama about two heart doctors who were born on the same day in the same hospital, which is literally what they are. They belong together. How much clearer does the Universe need to be?

Sighing, I pop another olive, and my stomach picks up a broom and knocks on the ceiling, telling me to cut it out. Quiet, you. "So if I were dying before your eyes, you still wouldn't administer aid because you're '*not my doctor?*'"

It's an old fight, and a silly one. Steven refuses to give his full professional opinion or write prescriptions for family members or close friends because he, quote, "can't stay objective." In reality, he probably just doesn't want to look at

my cousin Vicky's many moles, which all happen to cluster in her pants. Cousin Vicky's never been subtle.

"It's different if it's an emergency."

"Okay, so if I'm literally about to bleed out, you'll do something about it, but you'll happily let me die a slow death?"

He blinks at some faraway vision, like an old knight dreaming of his glory days, and sips his beer. "Aren't we all dying a slow death?"

My eyes go full CSI mode and triple-enhance on his furrowed brow, the fine wrinkles forming over them. They didn't used to be there, and he didn't used to say things like that. Among the three of us, it's always been my job to be annoyingly philosophical. "Are you *moping*?"

A thick, flat laugh escapes his lips, like a steak thudding onto a counter. "No, I'm not moping. Really."

Said the man, moping. "Well, I am."

Usually, he towers over me like a penguin over an egg, but he has this way of leaning forward and tilting his head at you that makes him seem smaller and more innocent than he is. "And why are *you* moping?"

Innocent my butt. "You, obviously."

He tilts his head further. "What do you mean?"

"You, and *her*," I mumble, gesturing with my chin. "It sucks that it didn't work out."

"Oh." He shrugs easily, as if he isn't about to lose his soul mate. "It doesn't matter. As long as she's happy."

No, it absolutely *does* matter. Nancy doesn't know how he feels, which means that she has no idea that their lives are about to become an Alanis Morissette lyric. She oughta know.

Bradley's Goofy-ish *huh-huh-huh* bursts through the windows from outside, and we look up in time to catch Nancy's smile through the windows, small but bright. Again, the match strikes, but doesn't light. What does she see in him?

I turn and catch Steven looking at me. He takes a too-quick sip of beer and starts choke-coughing.

I pat his back. “What do you think she’d do if you told her how you feel?”

He presses a hand to his chest and waits for his cough to subside before answering. “Nothing, because I won’t tell her.”

“But if you did?”

He shifts uncomfortably. “Why would I? Look at her. She’s glowing. That’s all that matters.”

I *pfift* at him as if spitting out an olive pit. Maybe I should hit him with one, just to knock some sense into him. “She used to look at you the same way Grandma looked at LV bags. She wanted you *bad*.”

“Yeah, well, that was then.” He stares down into his beer. “This is now.”

I swallow the final olive and wash it down with the last of the briney liquor. *Now* sucks. Now, Grandma is gone, Nancy is marrying a guy whom I don’t *get*, and with no reason to stay, Steven is on the verge of moving away. He hasn’t told me yet, but I “accidentally” read an email over his shoulder. He got into a residency program in Boston, and he’s not the kind of guy who applies to something unless he really wants it. And the fact that he hasn’t mentioned it yet is even more proof that he’s seriously considering leaving us again.

“You want me to tell her?”

“No,” says Steven too quickly. “How would that help?”

“Um, because then she’d *know*?” I stand.

“No!” He catches my wrist, trying to hold me back, but I used to win jiu jitsu and aikido competitions and he’s got delicate doctor hands. With a simple twist, I slip from his grasp. He tries again.

“I’m not telling her *now*, silly. I’m getting another drink. You want anything?”

After a beat, he drops his hands. “No, I’m good. But seriously, don’t tell her. I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

It’s not causing trouble if he’s legitimately better for her. He’d be doing us all a favor and saving her from heartbreak, and from losing half her assets in a divorce like I did.

There’s that saying I learned back in high school carpentry class that’s true in every situation: measure twice, cut once. A carpenter should double check their measurements before making any cuts. Well, before Nancy gets married, she needs to do a final measurement and see which guy is the better fit for her. Because right now, to my eyes, Bradley falls short.

“Come with me.”

Wary as an alley cat, he follows me down the hall to the kitchen, where I load my glass with four more olives. Or attempt to, but Steven takes the jar and puts it back into the stainless steel fridge, handing me a glass of water instead. So much for not intervening in my health.

“You’re not going to say anything, right?”

I take a sip of water, and it tastes good. Too good. After all those olives, I’m a sample of the Dead Sea. “I know you don’t watch C-Dramas, but if you did, you’d know that half of them would be resolved within the first few episodes if people just admitted their feelings.”

“Sure, I guess. But don’t the characters have to grow into people who are readier for or more deserving of love?”

The gasp I let out. I’m surprised the rest of the party guests don’t come running.

I grab his arms and stare him down. Or up. “Did you watch *Paris is Four Lovers*?”

He fights a smile. “Well, yeah, you told me to. But the point is—”

“Holy moly, you watched it!” I lean in closer and, lowering my voice, ask, “What did you think?”

He blinks down at me, eerily still. Is there something in my teeth? Olive bits? “Honestly? I thought it was outlandish and

saccharine. I mean, double amnesia? Two sets of twins? What? Amnesia doesn't work like that."

"But you watched the whole thing didn't you?"

My smile spreads as he washes pink, a bead of watercolor bleeding into cream paper. It's cute. If only Nancy could see. "Yes."

Of course he did. It's an awesome show. And it's totally relevant to this, our situa...huh. Now, wait a second.

I cackle and give Steven a rattle. "That's exactly it! Don't you get what we have to do?"

His eyes bug out a little. "No?"

"It's exactly the same as in *P4L!* We have to throw you two together constantly until she realizes that she's still in love with you." Because even if amnesia doesn't work that way, Nancy's brain apparently does.

Ever since Bradley came into the picture, she hasn't been hanging out as much with Steven. No wonder the spark has faded. We've got to find a way to fan it back.

Still wide-eyed, he stares down into my face. But then his eyebrows slam down. "That's the worst idea I've ever heard."

"Why? Because it might actually work?"

"Because it's wrong."

"How is it wrong? We won't sabotage their relationship or anything. It's just...what if, after spending more time together, she decides on her own that she's still in love with you?"

He jerks out of my grip and puts the kitchen island between us, running his hands through his hair. "That's just sad. And impossible."

"Improbable, maybe, but not impossible."

"Either way, it's wrong to try to change her mind when she already seems so happy."

"Not if you could make her happier. Think about it! She's only been with him for a year. She doesn't know him the way

she knows you. Like, he's a nice guy and everything but...I mean, do *you* understand why she likes him?"

"I don't have to. Whatever their relationship is like is between them."

I lower my voice to a whisper. "Don't tell me you don't have doubts about him. You know her as well as I do. Is this the kind of guy she usually dates? No. There's something weird happening."

Her exes were all Steven-esque, Steven-wannabes, as cheap and disappointing as the "Goochy" bag Grandma once got from a street vendor in the Mission. Facsimiles of the man standing before me, and nowhere close to as good as the real thing.

Slowly, he shakes his head. "It doesn't matter if we understand it or not. She's an adult, she knows what she's doing."

"I disagree, and age has nothing to do with it. Adults get love-scammed all the time. And I'm older than either of you, but that didn't stop me from making the biggest mistake of my life."

He stares-but-doesn't-really at a photo on the fridge. "Do you really think that marrying Taylor was the biggest mistake of your life?"

Hmm, let's see. Taylor and I went from friends to besties to lovers to wives in a span of five years, and from wives to rivals in the second Cold War in three. And with two years of recovery, that adds up to...ten years? Almost a third of my life that I'd love to excise and toss into a biohazardous waste bin. Yeah, I'd say that's a huge mistake.

"We're not talking about me, we're talking about Nancy. She needs an objective observer. She's hopped up on early relationship hormones, but long-term, the two of them don't make sense together. And I don't want to be the person who stood by and did nothing when I saw a train wreck coming."

"It's not going to be a train wreck. And even if it is, it's up to Nancy to make the call. It's her life. She wouldn't marry

someone if she couldn't see herself spending forever with them."

But that's the problem. We're not seeing the same thing. She's moving forward and I'm watching from the side, and only I can see the giant hole that's about to swallow her up.

Well, too bad. You can't start a fire next to a smoke detector and expect it to stay silent.

"Promise me you won't tell her."

It's ridiculous. Telling her how he feels is the fastest way to resolve all of this. But he's got his pride, and now that I think about it, Nancy's about as stubborn as a rusty nail. Even if she knows that Steven is finally interested, she won't budge, not unless she comes to her own conclusions about the right thing to do.

"Please, Win." He grabs my elbows and pulls me close, holding my gaze. Close enough to feel the warmth of citrus hops from his lips. I don't want to imagine what he can smell on mine. "I don't even feel that way anymore. I just want her to be happy."

Liar. "You're going to give up and let her go? Even though you love her?"

For the briefest flicker, he lets me see it, his own private chasm. We all have one, but the depth and bleakness of Steven's—*our* Steven's—is the saddest thing I've ever seen, and that includes *A Star is Born*. "The woman I want doesn't want me back. There's no point in telling her."

Oh. My eyes prick with tears. "Steven..."

He lets me go and wanders off.

I stay strong for about two seconds, then I'm back in the fridge, pulling out the jar of olives, and some pickled okra for good measure, too. As I close the door, a mosaic of old photos comes into view. There's one of the three of us in the middle school auditorium, which was the last time that I was taller than both of them, before they shot up like bamboo on either side of me. Next to that, a photo from the year they tied for

first place at the science fair. Their junior prom. Med school.
So on.

They're a match. They make sense.

And I'm going to make sure that Nancy remembers.

Chapter 2

The next morning, my stomach gurgles are Mavericks-level in intensity, but I roll out of bed and force myself to meet Nancy for our Saturday morning walk through Golden Gate Park. It's that or mope in bed and then hate myself later for wasting this chance, and Grandma taught me not to waste anything if I can help it. Not condiments, not coupons, not chances.

"Sorry I'm late," I tell her, huffing as I approach. "Any chance we could get coffee first and then walk?"

She crosses her arms and swings her long straight ponytail over a shoulder, studying me with a clinical eye. "Yeah, you look like you need 500 cc's of coffee, stat. Let's go."

We reverse our usual walking direction and head towards a funky multi-colored sign for Bean Flicks Cafe, our go-to after walk spot.

"I was worried you wouldn't make it out this morning," she says, frowning. "How much did you have to drink?"

"Like four...ish drinks?"

"All dirty martinis?"

"Yes, but they were filthy. More antipasti than cocktail."

I prepare to receive a lecture on my health like Steven gave me, but all she lets out is a Gollum-esque sigh. "I haven't had one of those in forever."

"Why not?"

"Bradley convinced me to try cutting alcohol for a bit, and it's been going really well. But sometimes I could really, really use a dirty martini."

"I'll have one waiting for you when you're ready to return to the dark side." E.g., after you've dumped him.

"Thanks, Win."

See? Bradley's changing her for the worse. Like, yeah, alcohol isn't exactly a superfood, but it wasn't like Nancy was putting them away before...unlike me. He's got her focused on things that didn't used to be important to her, like her fitness. And I don't mean her health—as someone who's gluten intolerant, she spends plenty of time thinking about what she puts into her body and taking care of herself. But she used to sprinkle gym time into her schedule like a garnish, whereas now, it's the main course, which means that we haven't belted out our feelings at karaoke or traveled anywhere together in ages. I don't even remember the last time we hung out with Steven, just the three of us. Doesn't she miss him?

“Nance...what happened between you and Steven?”

She raises an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“You know how you used to think the sun and stars fell out of his butt?”

“Um, gross? I've never thought that. That makes it sound like the Big Bang was a case of giardiasis.”

“Okay, whatever, but you kind of did, right? Remember that box you had under the tree with that plastic ring pop he gave you for Halloween? Or like his old pens that had run out of ink?”

“Yeah, okay, I remember,” she says, looking around as if Steven—or Bradley—could appear at any moment. “Why are you asking me that all of a sudden?”

“Oh, I don't know, maybe because you were in love with him for most of your life but you're marrying someone else?”

Not just someone else, but *anyone* else. When a clumsy teen ripped her prom dress, who gave her his jacket to cover it up? Steven! And when her car got totaled in med school and she was struggling with her impossible schedule, who offered to drive her around and buy her groceries for the semester? Duh! Steven! Even now, when he sees how happy she is, he'd rather back off and care for her from afar. How could she possibly find someone who loves her as much as Steven does?

She stops walking, and I have to back up a step to stay abreast of her. She tosses her head, scattering her bangs to the side, and gives me that beautiful stubborn mule look of hers. “Bradley isn’t ‘someone else.’ He’s my future husband. My person. Steven is just an old friend.”

Just? *Just?* “So you don’t have feelings for him anymore?”

She cocks her head at me, and I know from her quick squint-blinks that she’s in chess mode, playing out various scenarios for my line of questioning. When she’s done computing, she smiles. “You know, I was wondering why you two were so cozy last night.”

“Huh?”

“You’re interested in him, aren’t you?” The edge of her smile flicks further upward, like the sharp cut of a scalpel. “I’m happy for you, Win. You’re finally getting out there again!”

“What? Are you...what? No.” How could she even think that? This heart-shaped garden bed has been salted and doused in gasoline. Nothing’s growing here any time soon. And feelings, for *Steven*? What? We’re not kids anymore, and I would never go after a person my sister was into. That just goes to show how far out of sync we’ve fallen.

She crosses her arms. “Then why are you asking what I think about him?”

“It’s just...Bradley’s nice, but like I said, you’ve always loved Steven. And I know you love Bradley, but like...pretend you’d never met him. Don’t you think you’d be with Steven now?”

Instead of answering, she starts walking again, quick, purposeful steps. “It’s not useful to think in hypotheticals. And I don’t feel that way about Steven anymore. He’s just Steven.”

“You’re not even a little attracted to him?”

She stops again and turns a suspicious look my way. “Why are you grilling me on all this?”

“No reason. Just, you know, curious about what happened. You used to adore him.”

“I still adore him, but as a friend. Whereas I love Bradley. Like, *really* love him.”

Repeating it doesn't make it more true, hon.

But what is true is that she doesn't look at Steven the same way. Before, whenever he'd walk into a room, she'd get the warmest, coziest, Hygge-est smile on her face. Now, it's just Safeway Signature Selects. It's like she's bonked her head and forgotten all the wonderful times we've had with him. Somehow, she's lost perspective.

If only I could get her to see him in a different light. Not just the way she used to see him, but the way he is now, and the way he could be for her in the future. Not just as a friend, but a partner.

And what better way to do that than to get them naked?

Well, mostly naked. In January. Somehow.

Good thing I've got connections.

“elloo, Gastrotoob, 'ow may I 'elp you?” says the person who picks up when I dial the number for Gastrotub, the hottest hot tub club and restaurant in town. Or like, probably the world, but I wouldn't be surprised if the Japanese or maybe the Icelanders did it better. Some of our clients at the design agency are from there, and they've hired us to prototype the most ingenious little home appliances, including some hot tub accessories. Think *reclaimed water*, not *sex jets*. Sadly, our company doesn't do sex jets.

But that's neither here nor there. “Drop the fake accent, Jaeun, it's me, Winnie.”

“Elloo? 'Elloo?”

“Jaeun!”

“Fine,” he says in his normal voice, which is about as thick and Midwestern as a steakburger. “But it was pretty good, right?”

“Jar Jar Binks could do a better French accent than you.”

A pause. “Okay, well whatever you’re calling me for, *forget it—*”

“Wait, wait!” I take a quick breath. “I’m sorry. Your accent was...nice.”

“Uh huh.”

“It was. Really. I almost thought you were Omar Sy or something.”

“Hmph. That’s better. And I know it’s not one hundred percent accurate, but I’ll have you know that I get significantly more in tips when I use the accent than when I don’t.”

Right. He once went to buy a \$6 plant off of someone from Facebook Marketplace, only to return with three of the same exact plant for \$20, so I’m not sure I trust his math on this one.

“So Jaeun,” I say in my sweetest tones. “This Friday. You got any tables for two?”

“You mean *tubbles*?”

“Uh, yeah, *tubbles*.” Stupid hot tub restaurant.

“No, we’re completely booked.”

“Huh. Okay, you sure about that? Doesn’t sound like you checked the system—”

“I *am* the system, and I’m telling you, we’re booked.”

I clamp the phone between my face and my shoulder and scroll through my shared calendar with Nancy and Steven.

“What about Sat—”

“No.”

“Sun—”

“No.”

“Then when—”

“Reservation slots drop thirty days in advance at 10 AM. You can make a booking tomorrow morning for thirty days from now.”

Nothing ever comes easy with Jaeun. He loves a good begging, which is also how he pronounces the word *bagging*. “You know as well as I do that those reservations get snapped up by bots. And then people try to resell them for even more than they’re worth.”

He lets out a mouth-shrug, a soft *muh*. “I can’t help you.”

“Please? If anything opens up this Friday night, please hold it for me? If so, I’ll...build you that plant shelf that you wanted.”

He gasps. “With the arch for the air plants?”

“Yes, with the arch. Even though that kind of thing isn’t easy to make.”

“And you’ll paint it Paeon Black for me?”

“No.” I repress a shiver at the thought of painting perfectly good wood. “But I’ll sand it down and make sure it’s ready for painting.”

“Hmmm... Okay, fine, you’re on. I’ll get you the next available tubble on Friday night. But no guarantees! We rarely get cancellations.”

“Yes! Thank you, thank you, thank you, Jaeun—”

“If you’re so grateful, then paint the damn shelf!”

“I’m grateful, but not that grateful! Wood is beautiful as it is!”

And later that day, as I’m wrapping up at work, I get an email with a reservation for two on Friday at six, with a paint color code, three fist emojis, and three kissy-face emojis included in the reservation notes. The game is on.

Winnie: Dinner on Friday at six? I got us a resy at this new place called Gastrotub. It’s under “Gu-Yi”

Steven: Nice. I bet they spelled it “Gooley”

Nancy: Gastrotub? Is it that weird restaurant that opened in an old bath house?

Winnie: If by “old” you mean “historical,” then yes.

Steven: What exactly is a gastrotub?

Steven: Sounds like a medical waste container.

Winnie: It's not a med waste container, it's the hottest restaurant in town. Bring swimwear and an appetite. The premise is kinda lame but the food's supposed to be exquisite, even the GF stuff. And you'll leave with soft skin.

Nancy: Ooh. Well, my hands have been kind of chapped from all the hand sanitizer.

Nancy: Can Bradley come?

Winnie: Sorry, this was the only reservation available. And anyway, won't it be nice to hang out together like we used to, just the three of us?

Just kidding. I won't be seeing either of them.

Oh, the things we do for love.

Before I can pat myself on the back, my phone buzzes with a private message from Steven.

Steven: I know what you're doing.

An ice cube slides down my back.

Winnie: What am I doing

Steven: You're trying to get Nancy to see me in my swim trunks

Steven: But you forget that the only pair of swim trunks I own are banana-yellow and make me look jaundiced. So joke's on you.

Ha! Only half-right. And maybe he would've looked jaundiced back when he was pale, but he's got a golden tan from his summer in South America. So maybe he'd look more like an Oscar statue.

Winnie: What happened to the funky Hawaiian ones I got you???

Steven: You mean the ones from Christmas ten years ago?

Steven: They probably belong to some stoner in San Jose now.

Winnie: How dare you donate my gift!

Steven: I'm kidding, I have them. I would never donate any gifts from Winnie the Gu

Steven: Even if they're too tight in the crotchal region

I blink. For one brief, yet too-long moment, the memory of the last time he wore those trunks flashes in my head. Was it too tight for him *there*—

Nope nope nope. I don't care about my future brother-in-law's crotchal region. It might as well be a giant black box, for all I care. Well, not giant, but probably large-ish—

ANYHOO.

Winnie: Is “crotchal region” a technical term?

Steven: Obviously. I am a doctor, you know.

Winnie: *three duck emojis*

Winnie: You probably don't want to look at Vicky's moles because then she'd expose you as a quack

Steven: You're right, that is the only reason I refuse every time she tries to make me look down her pants.

We keep riffing like we always do—always have—and by the time I drift off to sleep, I'm still smiling.

Steven is...wonderful.

The only person who deserves him is my little sis.

Chapter 3

“I think it was the pickles.”

“No, not the pickles!”

“I know, right?”

Nancy moans, and it’s the sound of a door squeaking shut on yet another beloved foodstuff. She hasn’t sounded this bad since our aunt’s beef stew had her aching for days.

“Were they glutened?”

“They were homemade, and after thinking about it, Corrie mentioned that her husband might’ve used beer in the process.”

“Careless, Corrie!”

“It’s not her fault,” says Nancy, though she lets out a quiet gasp that burns up any forgiveness I may have had.

“So then tonight...”

“I don’t think I should get anywhere close to a hot tub.”

“It’s that bad?”

“You know how much I love pickles.”

Almost as much as I do, so fair point. “There are a few non-hot-tub tables there. Maybe—”

“No, no...don’t worry about it. I probably can’t eat all that rich food tonight anyway, no matter how gluten-free it is.”

Dang. Thwarted by my favorite snack. That’s some Shakespearean stuff.

“Sorry,” she says. “I know how much you were looking forward to this. And how hard it must’ve been to get a reservation. My friends were super jealous.”

“Yeah, well, your health comes first.”

With many assurances that she’ll be fine, she hangs up, and I have to rethink the situation for tonight. Dinner’s in

twenty minutes, I can't give up my reservation without losing my deposit, and the menu looks positively mouthgushing.

There's only one thing to do.

I get to the restaurant first, and Jaeun frowns. "Why are you here?"

It's strangely cold in the restaurant. I shrug my thin jacket closed. "My plan failed, so forget about it."

"What plan?"

That voice. With a wince-y smile, I turn and face my dinner companion for the evening. "Hey! Hi. So, turns out that Nancy can't make it tonight. Which is lucky, because apparently the table—"

"Tubble." Thanks, Jaeun.

"The tubble is only for two."

He tilts his head back, then lets it bounce in a slow nod. Steven's dressed in his usual attire, dark jeans and a dark button-down shirt. This one's got little pink flamingos on it. "Is she okay?"

I rub my belly in the universal "tummy troubles" sign, and he gives me a knowing look. "Ah. But then what was your plan?"

"Plan? Oh, I was... going to turn this into a 'congrats you're engaged' thing. For the three of us."

The inner edges of his eyebrows do a two-step. "That's what this fancy dinner was for? But they just had an engagement party."

"Yeah, but... whatever. It's just us now. Forget it." I turn to Jaeun. "So is our tubble for two ready?"

"Yizzz," he says with an even worse accent than before. "Thiz way."

We follow him into a changing area where we each get our own private stall to rinse and freshen up into "dinner attire." I stuff my clothes into my designated cubby and slip on a plain old black swimsuit, the only one I could find. It's got a weird

cutout on the side that used to look cool, but now makes my belly bulge out asymmetrically. Whatever, I couldn't care less what these people think of me. I'm here to get my money's worth.

Following a trail of purple lights, I get to the tub first, where there's already a tray laid across the middle with cheerfully colored plastic cups and cutlery, hand towels, and a collection of beautifully plated fruits. I hang up my restaurant-branded robe before dipping my feet into the silky hot water and sitting on the edge of the tub, sighing like Goldilocks on the third try. With the coolness of the restaurant, the tub feels just right.

Steven appears a moment later, and we exchange smiles, but he freezes with his hand on the collar of the robe, looking at me.

“What are you waiting for? The water's perfect.”

He nods and slides the robe off his shoulders to reveal sensible black swim trunks. We match. It's nothing I haven't seen before, but I swear he's got more definition now. He's still kind of Grinch-like, especially around the middle, but I've always thought it was cute, in a way.

If only Nancy were here to see him like this, and also notice his...crotch region.

I don't look, I swear.

He slips into the tub like there's someone drilling him on it. Two seconds, a new restaurant record, I'm sure. “Fruit to start?”

I slide fully into the tub. “Guess so.”

We eat. The fruits are simple, but bursting with peak, juicy ripeness, tasting of fresh air and open sun, washing the processed sugars and fats from our palettes before the next course arrives.

“Is that swimsuit the same one you wore during that Tahoe trip a few years ago? The one where you got hit in the head with the fish?”

I chuckle and swipe up my whipped potato with caviar. “Guess you’re right. This is my bad-luck swimsuit, but it was the only one I could find. I swear my hair smelled like fish for a few days after.”

He smiles down at his fork. He’s been taking small bites, eating like a bird, while I’ve been Hungry Hungry Hippo-ing each tiny dish that comes out. “We haven’t done a Tahoe trip in a while.”

“True. It’s been a long time.”

He’s got this dreamy-sad look in his eyes that hits like a staple to the chest. It’d be so easy to have those days again, if only Nancy would come to her senses.

Next comes crudo with tiny flowers, and braised uni on toast.

“Would you be down to go sometime in the next few weekends? I could make it happen.”

His face brightens, and it locks in my resolve. Of course we should go to Tahoe! Aside from the old Sunnyvale apartment building where we all grew up playing, Tahoe was the place with the sunniest memories. The boats, the hikes, the fire-grilled fish. What better place to remind Nancy and Steven of what we had?

“I’d love that. For old time’s sake.”

“You say that like we’ve been apart forever. Or will be.”

He sips from a glass of chilled wine. “You never know.”

As the waiter puts down the next course—duck prepared four ways—I stretch my legs, straightening my knees. Under the tubble—*in* the tubble?—his foot brushes mine, the fleeting flutter of a warm-blooded fish, before he kicks them back and sets off a wave pool on his side of the tub. “Sorry.”

“You’re good.” But I snap my legs back to their bent position, too. It’s just his foot, but there’s a strange pang that goes through me, as if I’ve had a brush with an electric eel. Which makes no sense. It’s Steven’s foot. We used to tussle

and play-kick each other all the time, so I'm no stranger to his tootsies.

I guess this is as good a time as any to get out of the tub. I pull myself out onto the seat at the edge and leave my legs submerged. Steven does the same.

We pull our trays closer and eat the duck—I snarf, he nibbles—in thoughtful silence. There *has* been some kind of weirdness between us, but I don't know why. We text like usual, but in person, it's like there's some forcefield keeping us from horsing around like we used to, or like I horse around with my other friends.

Or maybe it's him. He's barely met my gaze this entire meal. What's on his mind?

As usual, he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Since I have you here, I guess I should tell you. It's not a sure thing, but...I might be moving to Boston."

My mouth drops open a half-second slower than it would have had I not already known. "Seriously? Boston? Why?"

The waiter intervenes, clears our plates, and leaves, and I stare Steven down over two cubes of glistening beef.

Hold on. My eyes slide back to the beef, all seared, pink, and marbled. Dang, that's some nice-looking beef. Entranced, I slip back into the tub and spear it with my fork, my mouth lubing up in preparation for this blessed morsel.

"Mass General. It's one of my top choices for residency."

"But that's so far."

"I know. But it's a good program." He forks and raises his own chunk of meat. "I might not go, though. Being back here...it's been nice. Seeing family again. And friends. I'll miss them all."

The marvel of flesh is mere millimeters from my lips. On them. In them. Juicing all over my tongue.

"Especially you, Winnie."

Oiik. Oiik.

That's the sound of A5 wagyu getting surprise-yeeted down my throat.

“Winnie?”

I try to cough. I try to speak. Nothing comes out.

“Win?”

My chest feels like it wants to burst, but can't. My eyes start to water as the pain in my throat gets worse, like there's a hot coal in my throat and not a chunk of \$85 flesh. I clutch my neck, thumping on my sternum, trying to do something, anything to get it out.

Like a merman, he's under the tray and on my side of the tubble in a wet flash, his arms snaking around me from behind, his chest firm against my back. He thrusts his locked fists up into my sternum, once, twice, three times—

A wet wad of red comes flying out of my mouth, landing on the tray like a chunk of my own insides, and I gasp, pant, clutch at Steven's arms as he turns me around to look at him, eyes wide. “Win? Win, are you okay?”

He's wet and warm and all around me, staring into my eyes with such panicked worry that it ratchets up my own. I almost...if Steven weren't here, I...

But it's over. I cough. I *breathe*. “Oh god, Steven—”

His arms clamp around me so tightly, I'm surprised I don't pop something. “You scared me half to death.”

And rather than face all the worried looks around us, I turn my face into his chest and hold him, sagging, panting. Shaking. My throat still burns. I focus on the arms banded around me. Their warmth. Their solidness.

We breathe. Or, I breathe, fat gulps that I've never been more grateful for in my life, until I'm relatively calm again. But from the sounds of it, he's still having a moment. He holds me like a drowning man holds a pylon, and his heart is a metronome going double-time.

My palms dig into his warm, sturdy back, and I turn my face upward, brushing my lips against his collarbone. His

pulse flutters in his neck. *Oh, Steven.* “Thank you for intervening, even though you’re not my doctor,” I whisper roughly, still coughing a bit. I half think he hasn’t heard me, but his reply is loud and clear.

“I’ve only ever been kidding about that. Of course I’m your doctor, I’ll always be your doctor, whenever you need me.”

I lean even harder against him. I can’t help it—my insides have turned to congee. “Even if I have moles to show you?”

He pulls back to look at me, his hands on either side of my head. “I don’t give you my opinion because you’re stubborn. I know you won’t take it, and I’d rather not get into a fight with you. But if you really want to know, you eat too much salt. You chew your food like a Sarlacc. You get out of breath going up the stairs, so you’re not doing enough cardio. I worry that you’re going to get ulcers, or maybe high blood pressure like your grandma. Strokes are more common in women. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in this country. And if you do have any unusual moles, sores, lumps, or blemishes, I’ll happily take a look, but I’m not a dermatologist. I’ll refer you to one, if you need—”

He tries to speak past my hand, but stops when he realizes that the entire restaurant is looking and listening to my list of health problems. So much for doctor-patient confidentiality.

“Thanks, Steven.” I smile, then laugh, because that’s all I can do in the face of this hot wave of affection for him. I remove my hand from his lips, and he gives me a relieved smile, too.

The staff hover worriedly around us, so we split up and assure them that we’re okay. One of them even cleans up the offending piece of meat and brings me a fresh one. After a few moments, the restaurant is buzzing again, although more quietly than before. I swear, I see more people chewing their cud and Drake-Hotline-Bling-refusing whenever a waiter asks if they want another cocktail. I push my cocktail away, too.

“Please eat my meat.”

He freezes. “Excuse me?”

I slide the plate over. “I want to eat it, but I can’t bring myself to. My throat still kind of hurts, but it’s too good to waste.”

Slowly, he nods and takes the beef. Puts it in his mouth. Chews slowly, methodically, as if teaching me how beef that fine should be handled. Or, you know, solid food in general.

But it wasn’t my poor chewing habits that caused me to choke. Not totally. “What did you mean by that?”

“By what?”

“When you said, ‘Especially you, Winnie.’”

He carefully swallows the morsel before answering. “You’re my best friend, Win. I always used to feel closer to Nancy, but...that’s not true anymore.”

The relief that surges almost matches the relief I felt after spitting up the beef chunk. The world’s turned right side up again. “I see.”

But he isn’t the only one who feels that way. Ever since Bradley came into the picture, Nancy’s been gone more and more. She’s drifting into a place where we can’t quite follow.

And now, Steven’s thinking of leaving too.

No. I refuse to be that person who lives alone and chokes on their beef and whose body won’t be found until two weeks later, half-eaten by rats.

We are a trio, dang it, and I’m going to keep it that way.

Chapter 4

If Gaston from *Beauty and the Beast* were a car, he'd be the kind of car that pulls into Nancy's driveway. That giant, rumbling monster looks like it gets ten miles per gallon of endangered sea turtle. How in the world can Miss Pays-Money-To-Carbon-Offset-Her-Flights Gu date a man who drives *that*, let alone marry him?

"Hey, *Bradley*. What brings you here? Don't you have a workshop to run this weekend?"

He gets out of the truck and blasts me with a smile, and I wish I could swipe down and dim the brightness on it by about 45 percent. It's like he brushes his teeth with a glitter eyeshadow palette called *Disco Blizzard*, which is completely at odds with how he smells: like if jock straps could smoke menthols. Weirdly, Nance says that she can't get enough of his scent. Guess it's a pheromones thing.

"Hey, Win. Hope you don't mind if I crash your trip."

Um, excuse me? "Oh. Nancy told me you were busy this weekend."

Which is why I picked it.

"Yeah, I got someone to cover for me."

"Oh. Huh. Are you sure they can spare you?"

"Yeah, it's not a big deal. Besides, I could use a little mini-vacation. And Nancy said it was a trip you guys used to take together often, so I thought I'd become part of the tradition, if you know what I mean."

Not cool, my dude. Traditions aren't traditions if they aren't the *same*. "I'm not sure if the cabin has enough bed space—"

He holds up a set of dense, bulging bags with one hand, and I can't say that I'm not impressed. "Oh, I brought a sleeping bag, pad, all the stuff I might need."

“Ah. Cool.” Great, because there is no way in heck I’m letting him take the bed with Nancy. That’s my spot.

We walk up the stairs to Nancy’s apartment together. I check my phone for messages—she *just* sent me a message that says “Bradley’s coming after all!” two minutes ago—and he holds the hall door open for me. Nice try. Chivalry won’t work on me, buddy.

“I thought you weren’t a big winter sports person.”

“No, I’ve just never been skiing before. But after talking to Nancy about it, I’m actually super excited to give it a try.”

“I see. So that’s why you want to come?”

“Yeah. That, and...well, I was hoping to spend more time with you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because you’re Nancy’s sister, soon to be *my* sister. I feel like we should get to know each other better.”

Suspicion zips up my neck like a spooked skink. “Did she say something to you?”

He gives me a small “busted” smile. “Not gonna lie...she did mention that you seemed skeptical about me.”

Danged honest sister. “Oh, no, not at all. I’m not *skeptical* about you, I just...you’re right. I don’t know you that well yet.”

He smiles again, and for a split second, I see what Nancy must see. He’s got a winter holiday kind of face, eyes merry and smile bright. Too bright, like LEDs. “I hope we can fix that.”

Nancy, Steven, and I would’ve fit into my BMW i4 with the cooler and all of our weekend gear just fine, but with the four of us, Nancy’s in the back middle squeezed up against Bradley, and long-legged Steven’s in the front, helping me navigate. Bradley offers to drive his truck, but I refuse to be complicit in his massacre of baby turtles.

We've done this trip a dozen times, but just in case, we ask the god of Google Maps the best way to get there and follow her commands in peaceful silence. It's short-lived.

"Win, what kind of music do you like?" asks Bradley from the backseat.

I'm tempted to say "no music," or maybe just "eh," but with Nancy and Steven in the car, I behave. "I like everything."

"Literally everything? Screamo? Country? Finnish war songs?"

Finnish war songs? I'm surprised he even knows those exist. And yeah, I know that's kind of judgmental of me, but I can't help it if he looks and sounds like Asian Channing Tatum, but shorter. That guy is typecast for a reason.

"Off the top of my head, I can only remember *Njet Molotoff*, but yes, I do know some Finnish war songs. And I listened to Thursday and The Used in high school. Brandi Carlile is a current country favorite. Oh," I add, thinking back to the engagement party, where his phone had been connected to the speaker. "The only genre I don't like is EDM."

He huffs out a *puh*, like he's just learned the letter P for the first time and is sounding it out. "If you listen to all this other stuff, then what's wrong with EDM?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong with it, I just don't like it."

He seems to think about it, and I can see in the rearview mirror the moment he makes up his mind. "EDM's a big genre. I bet I could find some artists you like."

Oh good. A man who thinks I don't know my own preferences. "You're not going to change my mind. I'm too old for that."

"You're not that old," says Steven, smiling.

"I didn't think I would change my mind, but I did," adds Nancy. Cool, thanks for reminding me that he's brainwashed you.

“What’s your car bluetooth? Can you add my phone? Or, actually, can I use your phone, Nancy? I’m almost out of data.”

“Sure.”

Wow. Forcing me to listen to EDM *and* mooching off Nancy? “Actually, I’d prefer to listen to NPR, if that’s cool with everyone.”

At least he knows the car-seat hierarchy, because he backs off when Nancy and Steven say sure. “Okay, but I’ll make a playlist for you and send it over sometime. Let me know which songs you like and I’ll find you more.”

None of them. But all I say is, “Thanks,” before letting Peter Sagal soothe my nerves.

I meet Nancy’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Ready to play?”

Bradley frowns. “Play what?”

Nancy gives me a sheepish smile. “Eh...I haven’t listened to *Wait Wait Don’t Tell Me* in a while. And I’m not up-to-date on the news.”

“But don’t you read it every morning?”

Her gaze falls. “I went on a news diet when I realized that it was messing with my mental health.” She brightens and smiles more warmly at Bradley. “It’s been good for me. Thanks for the idea.”

News diet? Mental health? What’s going on? Way to wait wait not tell me, Nancy.

“Well, feel free to put on whatever you want to listen to, then, Nance.”

“Oh, it’s fine. *Wait Wait Don’t Tell Me* is the fun kind of news.”

We listen, but only Steven and I put forth guesses, and it’s not fun at all when we hit the worst traffic in the observable universe thanks to a multi-car pileup with a tomato truck outside of Sacramento. Our daylight hours are spent rolling

forward like wagon wheel pasta through marinara. And every so often, Bradley feels compelled to remind us how excited he is to try skiing for the first time, as if deliberately pointing out that we're still not on the slopes. By the time we get to our Airbnb in South Lake Tahoe, it's dark, cold, and I'm ready for Monday.

But at least we're no longer bumper-to-bumper with other cars. We've got beer and charcuterie in the cooler, and there's light and a heater in the Airbnb. Or there should be, anyway. It's cold when we walk in.

"God, I'm beat," says Bradley, yawning. As if he did anything other than sit.

"Is it okay if I shower first?" Nancy shivers, and we all give assent. Slender thing is always cold.

"So what's the bedroom situation?" Bradley tests the futon couch, sliding it out until it's in flat mattress mode. "Is this up for grabs?"

"That's for Steven. I'm in the bedroom with Nancy. You're on the floor out here."

"Gotcha," he says, yawning, though his expression changes when he sees a small bag lying on the floor. "Oh, Nancy forgot her toiletries. I'll bring them to her."

I should bring it instead, but I'm sprawled out like a new rug that's been ripped free of its plastic wrap. The only thing I can do is glance at Steven. He doesn't seem to react at all to the news that Bradley's going to deliver toiletries to a probably naked Nancy. Poor guy would make Marcus Aurelius proud.

We—mostly Steven—finish setting up a light, simple dinner, and still in our jackets, Steven and I each crack open a beer and begin to munch.

"Is it just me, or is it not getting any warmer in here?"

I peel myself off the chair and force myself to look at the thermostat. It's set to 72 degrees. I find a vent in the living room and hold my hand up to it. Elsa is blowing me a kiss.

"Weird."

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s blowing cold air.” I try the other vents. Same thing.

“Do you know why?”

“Could be anything. The flame detector, gas supply, air filter, pilot light, condensate lines...” I groan, imagining myself on my hands and knees in front of a dirty old furnace. In other circumstances, it’d be a sexy I-Get-To-Fix-This groan, but after that millennium of driving, all I want is meat and cheese in my mouth, even if I have to wrap myself in blankets. And anyway, it’s our Airbnb host’s job to fix it.

But even after I message them, they don’t respond, and after eight hours of driving, I can’t bring myself to do anything but vegetate. Instead, Steven goes to take a look.

“Pilot light’s on, but the furnace isn’t.”

“Probably some component needs to be cleaned or replaced. Not a job for us.”

“But what about tonight?”

It’s cold, cold enough inside that even with a jacket on, I feel like I’m in a deli case. “Maybe you and Bradley can get cozy.”

Steven puts down his empty beer bottle, frowning. “Speaking of, where is he?”

We glance around. It’s been thirty minutes, and neither Bradley nor Nancy have reappeared. With a sinking feeling, I get up and go to the bedroom, where the full bathroom is, and find them curly-fry tangled up in each other, fast asleep.

My head rolls backwards and I let out an anguished—but silent—*buhhhhhh*. Of course this would happen.

I close the door and let them sleep.

“They’re out,” I report back to Steven.

“But the bed...”

“Yeah. About that.”

We both look between the futon and the sleeping bag.

“I’ll take the sleeping bag,” he begins.

“No, I’ll take it. I’m the one who was supposed to be in the bedroom, we promised you the futon—”

“Fine, then let’s just both take the futon.”

There’s a long pause as I take in what he’s said. “No way.” I’ve seen enough Asian dramas—too many of them, really—to know that the only person who should get into that futon with him is Nancy.

Strangely, he makes a face at me like he’s been on hold for over an hour. “It’s cold, and the futon is more comfortable than the floor. Don’t be stubborn. We can open the sleeping bag and use it as a blanket.”

Hmph. Call me stubborn, will you? But the concrete floor does seem a bit...concrete-y. “Fine. But you use the sleeping bag. I’ll be fine in my jacket.”

He looks like he wants to argue, but just lets out a labored sigh. “Suit yourself.”

I do. So does he. We each get ready for bed and huddle up on our respective sides. But after five minutes of lying quietly next to each other, my teeth put on a tiny gamelan concert in my mouth. Meanwhile, in the bedroom, Bradley and Nancy are snoring away like two angle grinders. At least in that they match.

I’m fantasizing about looking up another Airbnb, even a super expensive one, when the tiniest whisper comes. “Win?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you freezing?”

“No, I feel pretty warm.”

“Really?”

“No, it’s effing Hoth in here.”

He lets out a quiet breath that I know means he’s smiling. A few seconds later, he rolls closer, but doesn’t touch me, and with a slippery swish and a *zzzzzip*, he opens the sleeping bag. “Let me be your dead tauntaun?”

I muffle my laughter in the collar of my jacket, and something loosens inside of me, something that not even beer and cheese could release. “You want me to gut you and crawl inside of you?”

“Ha, you? Miss Went-To-The-Library-Instead-Of-Dissecting-A-Frog-in-High-School?”

“You’re right, I need you to gut yourself and shove me inside.”

He inches closer and tosses half of the sleeping bag over me, which still has some of his warmth. The gamelan music begins to fade.

He clears his throat. “Do you want me to...you know... hold you?”

“No, no, I think this will be fine.” But the longer I resist, the more he looks like the sunny corner chair in a coffee shop, sitting unused. “Actually, yes, please. For now. And when I’m warm enough, I’ll let you know.”

“Okay.”

Under the blanket, he lays a tentative hand on my arm and huddles close. His knee nudges mine. Our hips don’t touch, but his breath on my neck—

Be warm. Don’t overthink it.

Soon the futon is toasty and just right for sleep.

Too bad I can’t sleep a wink.

Chapter 5

Last night, after Steven had drifted off, I'd slithered to the very edge of the futon and placed a small pillow between us. Which is why the last thing I expect is waking up stuck to Steven like we're two half-thawed cocktail shrimp, with me as the big shrimp! The pillow is M.I.A., probably swallowed up in our sea of makeshift blankets.

With the speed of a Tai Chi practitioner, I peel myself from Steven's back and do a stealth-roll off the bed. The concrete floor is ice-cold against my palms, and I get up as quickly and quietly as possible in the dim light, tip-toeing towards the toilet—

Slipping and tipping on that wretched little pillow —“Surprise, Mothereffe!”—like I'm in an infomercial for vertigo supplements, and then slamming my knee to the floor with a yelp.

Steven is by my side in an instant, hands still under-the-blankets warm on my shoulders. “You okay?”

I sit up and try to scuttle away, but he frowns and scuttles with me. “Yes, I'm fine!”

Nancy and Bradley pop their heads out of the bedroom, and then I'm surrounded and groped like a bargain bin of avocados. Nancy shoos the boys away and checks my leg for swelling, so Steven gets breakfast going, and Bradley hogs the bathroom until my diagnosis is clear: I haven't done any real harm, but with the dull ache in my knee, it's a no-ski day for me.

“I'll stay here with you,” says Nancy. “Steven and Bradley can go skiing together.”

“What, no! We bought ski passes, so the three of you should go. I'll be fine here with my phone.”

“I'll stay,” says Steven. “I don't even like skiing.”

We both raise our eyebrows at him. “What are you talking about? You love skiing.”

“I used to,” he says. “My joints can’t handle it anymore.”

As if to prove his point, he turns each ankle, one at a time, and there’s a chorus of cracking walnuts. I try cracking my own, but they turn and turn in utter silence, which is weirdly upsetting in a different way.

“Why don’t Winnie and I go on the water today, and you guys go skiing,” says Steven, nibbling on a breakfast banana. “I know how much Bradley was looking forward to it.”

I scowl, at both him and his slow, thoughtful eating. “No, you should go skiing with them. That’s what we came here to do, and we already missed yesterday because of traffic.”

He looks past me at Nancy, and they exchange a nod like I’m a perp about to get taken down instead of their esteemed elder. I let out an indignant huff, but it’s ineffective, and soon Nancy and Bradley are bundled up and on their way to the slopes, while Steven and I are off to rent a boat for a day.

“You sure you can walk?”

“Yes, I’m sure I can—eep!”

One moment, I’m walking. The next, my boot is foot-deep in a snowdrift. The next next, Steven’s plucking me out like a carrot.

“Got you.” His arm curls around my puffy-jacketed waist.

“I’m fi—whoop!” His arm tightens, saving me from sinking deeper into the drift. He plants his feet and crouches to get a better hold of me, and I smell the ocean breeze-y scent of his skin, and that soft citrusy pomade he always uses. It’s nice, and he takes advantage of my momentary daze to half-carry me to the road. But when we make it to the asphalt, I wriggle again and he lets go.

We amble towards the boat rental place, taking in the crisp mountain air and thick quiet, broken only by the occasional passing car or the crunching of our boots on icy snow. The cold stings our cheeks, but it’s sunny and not too breezy, perfectly balanced like sweetness and spice. Perfect, if only he’d stop treating me like a baby bird with a broken wing. I’m a majestic eagle, okay? A totally bad-butt bird of prey.

Which gives me an idea. “Should we try to catch some dinner, too? See who can land the biggest catch?”

His smile is soft and padded with memories, probably of us as kids, continuing the tradition of our dads competing to see who could catch anything besides a chill. Or maybe the image of me getting hit in the fish with a head. Wait. Opposite. “Sure.”

We get a couple of one-day fishing permits, buy our bait, rent our tackle, and lug it all onto the boat, which we drive out onto the lake. Despite the cool, nippy air, the sky could not be clearer, which means emerald-teal water with bright shimmers of fish taunting us below.

With how hype I feel about our little contest, I half expect the water to be frothing with fish at the first drop of bait. But as the hours drag on, our lines get nothing but nibbles. I start the boat up and cruise us around towards shallower waters until my instincts tell me to stop. We slow to a drift and sacrifice more worms to the lake gods. So much for having plenty of fish in the sea-slash-lake.

It is weird how dating is like fishing, though. It’s so circumstantial. You happen to be in the right place at the right time with the right bait and the right tools.

Nancy once joked that because I’m bi, I have a bigger sea than her, but it turns out my pool is as small as any. Because it’s *my* pool. She has no idea how hard she lucked out with Steven, and now she’s throwing him back with a hook in his mouth.

My thoughts must be showing, because Steven bumps me lightly with his elbow and says, “So Nancy said the wedding’s in a little over a month?”

I carefully thread my hook through a squirmy nightcrawler. Sorry, little guy. “Yup. You’ll still be here, right?”

“Yeah, I told her I’d go.” He picks up a worm from our small communal bucket and does the same to his. “Just surprised it’s happening so fast.”

Aha! So he *is* heartbroken. “You could slow it down, or like, even end their engagement if you tell her how you feel.”

It’d be the best outcome for everyone. When I’d asked her about the sudden rush to marry, all she’d had to say was, “Sometimes when you know, you just know, you know?”

And my first thought was, *EXCUSE ME, YOU ARE AN ALIEN, MY SISTER WENT TO STANFORD MEDICAL SCHOOL*. Such a poorly formed sentence would never escape her lips.

My second thought: I thought I knew-knew with Taylor, but I didn’t know anything.

“No,” says Steven, with enough force to spook the hairs on my skin. But he catches himself, takes it down a notch, and says, “She’s never going to find out, not from me or you, alright?”

“Alright, fine.” *The hard way it is*. I shut my mouth and focus on summoning fish with my mind.

After an hour of nothing, I shift on my seat, massaging my lower back. “See? You should have gone skiing.”

“I’m perfectly happy right here.”

“Wouldn’t you rather be cruising down the mountain with Nancy right now?”

“No, not really.”

Liar. Then again, I wouldn’t want to be a third wheel, either. And for him, watching her and Bradley must feel like slowly getting your heart peeled back with a spoon.

Poor guy. He’s peak lovelorn pine-boy right now with that distant gaze and pinkening skin...

Wait. “We forgot sunscreen.”

He sits bolt upright. “Oh shoot, you’re right.” But then he slouches back to a fishing position. “Oh well. Let’s face away from the sun.”

We turn and each cast our lines out from the northeast side of the boat. Not that it’ll make a difference to our fishing, but

it *is* nice to face the breeze and have my hair float away from my eyes rather than into them. Our lures hit the water, and after a minute or two of standing, I sit back down to enjoy the lake.

As soon as my butt hits the seat, there's a tug on my line, but it's barely more than the wash of a wave. But then there's another tug, a much bigger one, and I'm up on my feet and bracing for battle.

"Oh man. It's a monster."

"You got it, Win?"

"Course I do. Just relax and stay where you are. Dinner'll only take a sec." I lock my foot against the railing of the boat and pull. The fish pulls back, almost launching me forward. Not today, Satan-fish!

I pull with all I have, every last ounce. I heave with my legs, my arms, my neck, my back, and those other parts that Khia sings about, too. I fight with every ounce of myself like I wish I could fight against the World. Against Time. Against every last change and inevitable loss.

I'm not losing anything ever again. Not Steven, not this fish.

Except, whatever it is, it's *actually* big. At this time of year in Lake Tahoe, I wouldn't expect the trout to be very large, but with global warming and pollution and all that, who knows? Maybe it's Fishzilla.

My arms strain against nature, pulling with everything I've got from my neck down to my toes.

"Win?"

It starts to shift. "I think it's getting tired!"

I reel and reel and pull and pull, until suddenly, I stumble back, and, fishless, land on Steven's lap. He lets out a quiet *oof*, but I'm too stunned to move. I stare at the end of my rod, where the fishing line dangles like a severed cobweb. Game over.

"Nooo. My fish! It would've been so delicious, I can tell."

“It’s okay,” grunts Steven, sitting up behind me, and suddenly, his hand is on my thigh as he braces himself. “I think I’ve got something, too.”

And indeed, his rod is now bending, almost in half. “That’s a big fish.”

“Yup. Help me?”

His jaw is tight, and his neck strains with the effort. I try to help him pull from the side, but with our height difference, I’m only getting in the way. So I get behind him, put my arms around him and pull, and at least now we’re going in the same direction. We heave and we heave and he falls backwards onto me, and soon a huge, beautiful fish is head-banging to System of a Down on the bottom of the boat.

Just kidding, there’s no fish. It’s an old, rusty tire covered in wire.

He’s sprawled across me and kind of crushing my thigh, but we take one look at each other and burst out laughing, the kind of laughter that makes your face hurt and your head light. We laugh and laugh all over each other, slapping each other’s arms and legs, and he leans back and rolls over and—

His lips. My cheek. And it’s not just a quick sweep either, but a warm, palpable press that shuts me up in a snap.

He’s still smiling...until he sees my face, and then his smile drops faster than the Tower of Terror.

“Sorry, I, um...” He sits up away from me, and releases my sore thigh. “Thanks for helping me with the catch of the day.”

“What was that?”

He looks out over the water, or down at his hands. Anywhere but at me. “Just...thanks.”

A...Thank You kiss? I guess I could see that? Maybe it’s something he picked up during his time in Brazil. Friends and family do the cheek-kissing thing there, right?

I don’t ask, he doesn’t explain, and the moment passes, thank goodness.

But my cheek still tingles. All of me tingles. And when I think of his warm body next to mine, the way he's been on or around almost every inch of me since last night...

I take in a slow, centering breath.

This is Steven. Saw-him-naked-as-a-toddler Steven. Future-bro-in-law Steven.

None of that does anything to relieve the weird tightness in my chest.

Okay, I'm still Team Sally over Harry: women can obviously be friends with men. Anyone can be friends with anyone else. But after all I went through with *HER* (*hiss*), maybe my friends and I should have some no-contact zones? Like, perhaps we should treat lips, hips and other places like radioactive waste sites?

"Steven, I don't think we—"

"Do you think you could eat a tire, if you had to?"

I blink, and blink again. "No, silly. Tires are made of rubber. Humans can't digest rubber."

"That's a shame. I hear they taste wheel-y good."

With the look I give him, I'm surprised he doesn't fold into a ball of shame and roll overboard with the tire. If anything, he starts laughing again like *I've* just delivered a joke with my face. He laughs way harder than he should, and my lips start to crack, too.

"According to whom? Elmer Fudd?"

He smirks. "Remember that old tire shop off El Camino?"

"Uhhh, you mean *The Wheel Deal*?"

"Yeah. I got it from there."

"Thief."

"Guilty as charged." With a small smile, he opens up the tackle box and begins fixing his line, as if he hasn't just set my world spinning faster.

I have to be imagining things. Steven and I are on the same page about Nancy. There's nothing happening between us. We are what we've always been.

Then he looks up, and my heart starts beating to techno.

What is wrong with you, Win? Get a grip! He's going to be your brother one day.

But each time I catch him looking my way, my thoughts scatter like grass.

Chapter 6

We're not litterbugs, so we carefully remove the wire and roll the old tire back to our cabin and look into disposal there. It worked out well, because rolling it gave me something to do besides peek at Steven every few minutes to decide if he actually meant anything by that little peck. He's his usual self, quiet and thoughtful and Steven-y, pointing out scenic points of view and making suggestions for what we might have for dinner.

But when we get back, we have bigger fish to fry. Nancy doesn't reply when I call out that we're back, and I find her hiding in the bedroom, face red, while Bradley's nowhere to be seen.

"Hey, what happened?"

She sniffs and shakes her head. "We had a stupid fight, that's all."

"About what?"

Her lip trembles as she begins to speak. "We were skiing just fine, but then he felt the need to give me advice on my form. Like, sure, he's a natural at it, but I've been skiing for years! He thought he was being helpful, but all he was doing was annoying me, and I told him that. He got defensive and said he was just trying to help, but then it spiraled from there into...other things."

"So his first day on the slopes, he's an expert?" It's so easy to imagine: Super Bradley the jock-head giving unsolicited advice, which is something that Steven would never do. Sure, Nancy's not the greatest downhill skier, but after over a decade of skiing with zero injuries, she knows what she's doing.

"Right? And after the beginner slope, he jumped right to the intermediate slopes."

"Ugh, really? What a show-off."

"Not just that," says Nancy, tears crowding in her eyes. "He could've gotten hurt. He's so confident, it makes him

reckless.”

I almost say that maybe he should've gotten hurt, just to teach him a lesson, but the guilt that hits sinks me onto the bed next to her. As undeserving as he is of Nancy, what he doesn't deserve is to get hurt. Especially not when his pain would hurt Nancy, too.

So all I say is, “I'm sorry. That sucks.”

She nods. “It's okay. We'll get over it. But he needs to learn that I don't like being told what to do.”

I scooch closer to her on the bed. It's a lot less lumpy than the bed I share with Steven.

Man, that sentence was weird. I'll have to check with Bradley and Nancy about the sleeping arrangement tonight so that I never have to say that series of words again. “How does he not already know that?”

“I think he does,” she says softly, staring down at the carpet. “But that part of him just comes out sometimes, you know? It's like he can't turn off trainer mode.” She looks up, eyes wide, as if there's a ghost standing between us, and not the hot Patrick Swayze kind. “Is this a bad sign for our marriage?”

Yes, yes it is. But saying that feels like grounding a child after they dropped their ice cream cone. “Maybe, but I'm sure he didn't mean to hurt you.”

“No, he didn't mean to.” Her lip trembles, and her eyes water anew. “Maybe I'm the one who's too sensitive.”

“What? No.” She's not sensitive, never has been. But then, she was never one to get teary-eyed after a fight, either. She used to dump any man who wasn't good enough for her and then go and get a massage and her hair done. So what gives?

“Is something wrong, Nance? You're not usually a crier.”

She sniffles again and wipes away a stray tear. “I know, right? It's just... There's something about me and Bradley that just...” She lets out a trembling sigh. “I want this to work.”

“Why?”

“Because...” She blinks rapidly, searching for words. “You know how I was. Me and my high *standards*. I used to dump boyfriends and move on at the slightest hint of a problem, but it was only because I didn’t want to deal. But with Bradley... he’s the first one who’s really tried to put in the work. He doesn’t give up. Whenever there’s friction, my immediate thought is, I should move on, let go, find someone better. But with him, there’s always a way forward. There’s something really comforting about that.” She picks at a tiny hole in her sweater. “The truth is, it feels really good when we work things out. It feels healthy, and real. I’m tired of searching for the perfect man, because I’m not a perfect woman. It’s just hard sometimes to acknowledge that, yeah, sometimes the problem is me.”

“You’re not the problem, and you’re not too sensitive. He’s being a cocky buttface.” And the perfect man does exist, for *you*. He’s been here all along.

“But he’s not a cocky buttface. He...” She groans and throws herself backwards on the bed, covering her face with her hands like a shame-faced crab. “His advice was actually... good advice.”

My mental image of their fight begins to warp sideways. “Okay, but it was still unsolicited.”

“He was just looking out for me.” She rolls onto her side, away from me. “Ughhhh, I shouldn’t have been so stubborn.”

Now everything is acid-melting warped. Who is this woman, rolling and moaning on the bed? My sister would never admit to being stubborn. And even if he *was* looking out for her, he still shouldn’t have told her what to do or made her feel bad. She can ski however she wants to.

I can’t believe I’m saying this, but, “Do you want me to talk to him?”

Between her fingers, she gives me a hopeful look, but it quickly fades as she lowers her hands. “No. I should talk to him myself. I don’t want to put you in that situation.”

“I don’t mind.” Bradley makes her soft. She needs a blunt instrument to stick up for her. I’ll be her Warren G *and* her Nate Dogg.

“I know, and I love you for it, but this isn’t the kind of thing that I can ask you to do, Win. It’s my job to take care of my relationships, not yours.”

Oof. I’d probably agree, if she weren’t doing such a poop job of it with Steven. “Okay, well...just let me know if there’s anything you need. I’m here for you.”

“Thank you.”

I leave the room, but Steven’s nowhere to be seen. There is, however, a note saying that he’s gone off to get food for dinner, as our tire is not exactly edible. But there’s a voice coming from outside, so I take a look. Why, *huh-huh-huh*, it’s Bradley.

Fine. I won’t talk to him on her behalf, but I’ll walk past him and give him a Regina George smile so that he knows where we stand.

But as I open the door to confront him, his words drift over.

“...I’m busy with gym stuff today, so I can’t come over. Yeah, sorry. I know.”

I pause at the door and listen.

“I know it’s been a while, but I promise, I’ll be over there next weekend. I’ll make it up to you. Yes, I’ll take you to the jewelry store.”

Jewelry? Who’s he making promises to?

“I know, I know, thank you. Love you, too.”

Love you? What the actual what?

He ends the call, looks up, and sees me. I play it cool, open the door, and walk out with the swagger of Conor McGregor, giving him a “sup” nod. “Hey.”

“Hey.” He dares to smile at me. “How was the lake?”

“It was fine.” I whip out my phone. “I was going to make a phone call. Were you also just on the phone? Who were you talking to?”

Yeah, Cousin Vicky’s not the only one who isn’t subtle.

He slips his phone away in his back pocket. “My mom.”

Uh huh. Okay. First of all, why would you lie to your mom about where you are? Why would you take your mom to the jewelry store? And why would you, as a Southeast Asian guy, say *love you* to your mom? Asian parents don’t say that stuff!

If he’s cheating...

My fists curl up into rock-hard knuckle sandwiches. Because that’s what *he’s* having for dinner.

But I need definitive proof, first, without putting him on high alert. I know from experience how simple questions can lead to complicated answers.

He gives me a nod and walks into the cabin. “Enjoy your phone call.”

Right. “I will.”

And now that I’ve committed to it, I have to call someone or else have fiery pants like him. So I phone a friend.

“elloo, Gastrotoob, ‘ow may I—”

“Jaeun, it’s me.”

His voice turns into a low, Midwestern hiss. Which is weird, because hissing is very un-Midwestern, but then so is Jaeun after so many years in the Bay. “Why do you keep calling the restaurant phone number?”

“Because you never pick up your cell.”

“Because I’m working! So unless you’re calling to say you’re going to paint the plant shelf, good day!”

He hangs up. But it’s too brief of a phone call, so I dial the other option.

“Is something wrong?” From his voice, it sounds like Steven started sprinting back to the car as soon as he saw who

was calling.

“No, nothing’s wrong. That’s the first thought in your head when I call?” I don’t know why, but the thought makes me a bit puddly.

He pauses. “Well, I thought...I just saw you, so there’s no reason why you’d call me unless there’s an emergency.”

“There are many reasons I’d call you. Like to find out why you stole my car, and what you decided to get us for dinner. This cabin is a democracy, not a Steven-ocracy.”

He chuckles. “You’ll like it, I promise.”

And he hangs up on me, too! How dare he!

But he’s right though. When he gets back with butternut squash soup and zucchini lasagna—“The owner promised me it’s gluten-free”—we all dig in and thaw and feel a little more human, even though there’s still some ice in the room from the broken heater and Nancy and Bradley’s silence.

But Nancy casts a few too many glances his way, slumping down to eat and then going ramrod straight again. It’s the little dance she does when she’s gearing up to apologize. Sure enough, later that night, they make up *very* loudly—there goes my chance at the bed!—and though Steven and I are in “bed” next to each other, trying to get warm, we don’t dare touch while they’re whispering and giggling and causing a 4.0 earthquake together. I want to cover his ears to censor the noise, but that would be touching him and...well, that just feels weird to do right now with the bumper car party going on in the next room.

Which, again, is highly unusual for Nancy to do so publicly. He’s a bad influence, that Bradley.

But Steven’s the one I’m worried about. So I talk.

“So. Boston.”

Thump. Thump.

“Yep. Boston.”

“I get why you want to go, but aren’t there hospitals closer to here? Good ones?”

“Sure. And I could stay, but... Maybe it’d be good to experience something new for a change.”

There goes that tight achy chest feeling again. “Didn’t you just get back from ‘experiencing something new for a change?’”

His answer is slow in coming. “I thought two years would be enough, but...I haven’t found what I’m looking for yet.”

I curl up into myself. “Well, have fun changing and finding whatever it is.”

I guess it was inevitable. I’m the only weirdo in our group who’d rather go to Bean Flicks Cafe every Sunday than try a new brunch spot. I’m the one who refuses to get on all the new social media apps and doesn’t use words like *cheugy* or *bet*. I don’t even know what those words mean in modern contexts. I don’t need to know.

It’s not that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. This dog doesn’t need new tricks. It’s happy with the tricks it’s got. But it’s when people figure that out about me that things like “divorce lawyer,” “bored of wife,” and “is emotional cheating that bad” start showing up in their search history.

“It’s not that I want change,” he says softly. “But I can’t stay here, with how things are.”

I perk up. “You mean with Nancy?”

He looks at a spot halfway between us and sighs. “Yeah. Sure.”

He almost sounds sarcastic, but Steven’s never sarcastic, not in person. I guess it’s just his annoyance seeping through.

“Well, I’ll be the same old Winnie. Come back and visit anytime. We’ll go to Tahoe together on our own and catch us something even bigger. Maybe a whole car next time.”

He shifts a tiny bit closer, so close that the fabric over his knee brushes my pinky. “Let’s hope no one’s dumping cars into Lake Tahoe. The tire was bad enough.”

The way he says it is so worn and tired—ha—so unlike his usual crisp, happy voice, I swear my ears and throat clam up, just listening. He doesn't deserve this.

Even though they're still kissy-noising over there, I reach out to Steven, just to touch his shoulder, but I accidentally poke his stomach instead, and he lets out a tiny Pillsbury Doughboy laugh. I hadn't realized how much tension was in my neck until that laugh washed it away.

“Are you still that ticklish?”

“No.” He says, with a silvery edge of laughter in his voice. “Are you?”

I poise my finger to strike again, but he knows me too well and turns to grab my hands before I can get him, bending close with a laughing, “No you don't.”

But the jiu jitsu competitor in me bristles at his attempt to hold me still. I twist my hands and unlock his grip, but he doesn't know the rules or etiquette, doesn't know how to move in the ways that I do, and he tries to tickle me while I try to dominate him. We poke, we grip, we writhe, until I'm sitting on his chest with his arms pinned down, breathing hard and lording over him.

“I win.”

“Yes, you *are* Win,” he pants, chest rising and falling beneath me. His eyes sparkle in the quiet moonlight, their edges curved with joy and something soft, yet sharp, which pokes me right in the chest.

And over the chorus of our breaths, we realize that the rest of the house is silent, and I'm straddling the guy I want my sister to marry. Touching him in too many places, including some radioactive waste sites!

“Oh, um. Good...goodnight.” I slide off, roll away, and hide my face until the sun comes up.

Chapter 7

As soon as Bradley steps out of his house the next weekend, I'm on his tail, prepared with a Zipcar and a cheap bucket hat as cover. He takes off in his ugly compensative car and I follow him down 280, all the way to Stanford Shopping Mall, where I almost lose him in the hunt for a parking spot. But I don't lose him, because I'm not a loser. I'm a Winnie.

Steven's the only one who would laugh at that joke.

Steven, laughing, under me, bucking—

I slap my mind away from that memory and focus. Bradley's several meters ahead of me, and walking fast past a gorgeous array of flowers, a water fountain at their center, hip, pricey stores all around. It's chilly today, which gives me the excuse of zipping my jacket all the way up and shrugging as shadily as I want. I tail him past row after row of designer shops—ooh, Arcteryx is having a sale!—until we stop at the Tiffany & Co.

Wow. So he'll get cubic zirconia for Nancy's engagement ring but Tiffany's for his girlfriend?

And no wonder. Standing by the entrance is a gorgeous Asian woman with a salon-fresh balayage blowout that's giving early-aughts Victoria's Secret Angel vibes. She's short and thin, but with a sizable bust and hips that fill her tiny jeans like air in a bounce castle. I only catch a glimpse of her full face before he casually puts an arm around her and leads her into the store, and I'm not following them in there without an appointment.

Oh shoot, I didn't get a photo!

But I've seen them together. I'm all the proof I need.

He is so busted.

It makes sense. My instincts were right. But now I have to be the one to tell Nancy, and watch her crumble and sink into heartbreak.

At least she won't have anyone pressuring her to sign papers. She won't have to hire a lawyer or sweep through her apartment and decide, item by item, what she's willing to fight for or give up, and have a dozen negotiations over both nothing and everything. Because of the timing, she'll be able to focus on healing, and moving on.

Luckily, I know the perfect spoonful of sugar for her medicine. I turn the corner and head over to our favorite gluten-free cupcake shop, Sprunkles, the only location in the entire Bay Area.

But as I walk up, my heart leaps into double dutch. There's a familiar silhouette walking into the store, and before I realize it, I'm sprinting, caught up, stepping into the store behind him with a, "Hey! What are you doing here?"

Steven turns around with a surprised smile. "Hey, you. I imagine I'm here doing the same thing you are. Getting cupcakes."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Oh yeah? What's the occasion?"

"I just met up with a friend of mine nearby and remembered that you and Nancy love these cupcakes. I thought I'd stop by and get some. Why, what's your occasion?"

I open my mouth, but quickly shut it. He shouldn't know before Nancy does. "No occasion."

"Then what brought you all the way down here?"

"Okay, fine. Nancy and I have been a bit...at odds recently. I wanted to make it up to her."

Steven gives me a questioning look, but doesn't ask about it, and for that, I'm grateful. "Then we'd better get a lot of them."

We order half the store and carry out two giant pink boxes full of frosted gluten-free happiness. As we approach the spot where I parked, Steven scans the rows of the parking lot, looking for my car. "Are you sure you parked over here?"

“Yes.” I give him my box and open the Zipcar, hoping his lack of questioning continues. It doesn’t.

“What’s with the car?”

I take my box of cupcakes back from him. “Oh, uh...I’m considering getting a new car, so I wanted to test-drive this one.”

“You’re considering getting a 2017 Hyundai?”

“Y-es? Not the 2017, the newer one, but maybe I’ll buy one used.”

“I thought you loved your car.”

“I do. But I don’t really need such a nice car right now.” Except, yeah, I do. My Beamer’s a tight-handling beaut, a fine-tuned machine, and I love being inside of her.

He gives me a strange look, but lets it go with a small smile. “Alright, well I hope Nancy feels better. Let me know if you two want to do dinner sometime this week.”

“Will do—”

“Heyyy, fancy meeting you two here!”

We whip around together, and of course Bradley’s standing there with yet another pink box. The woman he was with, however, is gone.

Like that Spiderman meme, we all eye each other’s Sprunkles boxes, and we all bark a laugh. It’s probably the first and last time we’ll have this kind of mind-meld moment.

“While I have you here,” says Bradley to Steven, smile bright enough to broil, “any chance you’d be willing to be a groomsman?”

Steven points at himself. “Me?”

Bradley nods. “Yeah. You’re an important friend to Nancy, and I know she’d love to have you in our wedding photos. Plus, I’m short a groomsman right now, so you’d be helping even out the numbers. What do you think?”

“I...” Steven meets my gaze. “I don’t know.”

“Think about it. Take your time. But I hope you’ll say yes.” He fist-chucks Steven on the shoulder and hurries on. “Sorry, I’ve got some errands to run. See you guys later?”

And with a nod and a smile, he’s gone. Cheater. Lying, two-timing, son of a—

Steven steps in front of me, watching me with narrowed eyes. “You’re acting weird.”

“Am I?”

He bows forward a little, lowering his head until we’re eye to eye. “Are you plotting something? Something related to him and Nancy?”

“What, me? Plotting? Nahhh.”

He straightens, lips thinning. “I’m watching you, Gu.”

I place the cupcakes in my rented car and wave him off. “Love you, too, Yi.”

“What?”

Half in the driver’s seat already, I turn around and stick my tongue out at him. His jaw has fallen open, and there’s something in the way he looks at me that snags in my chest, like a fishing line on an old, used-up tire. “Just kidding, byeeeeee.”

And I get into the car and zoom off before things can get any weirder.

We used to say stuff like that to each other all the time, and we’d laugh it off. They were just jokes. But now it’s like he’s got a screwdriver up his butt that starts twisting whenever I mention love or his relationship with Nancy. Like I know he’s sad that Nancy loves someone else, but why do I have to be the one doing all the planning to bring them together? Why did Steven just give up?

It doesn’t matter. With what I know about Bradley, Nancy will be sprinting into Steven’s arms soon. Maybe tonight, even.

When I get to her apartment, Nancy's in the shower, so I wait in the living room and prepare my speech. She joins me a few minutes later, and her eyes go round at the bright pink box.

"Sprunkles! This is so perfect. I was just telling Bradley last night that I was craving them."

"Oh. I see. Well, good thing you'll be getting multiple boxes today."

"What?"

"Nothing. Never mind." I bounce towards her on the couch and tie my short hair back. This is going to get messy. "So hey, I actually have something to tell you."

She pops the box open and stares down at the contents with shining eyes. "What is it?"

I'd rehearsed a speech on the way over, but I keep it to the point. Better to get it done while she's feeling good about the cupcakes. "I think Bradley is cheating on you."

She looks up, smile flickering. "What are you talking about?"

I gesture for her to sit down. She does, and I scoot closer. "When we were in Tahoe, I heard Bradley on the phone with someone. He lied to them about where he was, said he was busy with gym stuff, and even said that he *loved them*. But he promised them that he would visit the next weekend and take them jewelry shopping. When I went to Sprunkles today, I happened to see him go to Tiffany's at the Stanford Shopping Center, and there was a woman there. He put his arm around her and they went in to shop together. They looked...cozy." I give her a sympathetic look. "I'm sorry."

She looks confused and ready to laugh, like I've just told her that I'm into giant tentacle porn. Which, I *have* watched a few dozen in my time, but it's not really my thing. "Bradley's not a cheater."

"I know it's hard to believe, but I know what I heard. What I saw."

She casually pulls out a red velvet cupcake from the box, but her nostrils flare as she begins to speak, and she drops the cupcake back in. “Did you ask him about it, or did you jump to your own conclusions?”

Prickles sweep across the back of my neck. There’s a shark in the water. “Of course I didn’t ask him. He’s your boyfriend. I thought you should be the first to know.”

“Yeah, he’s my fiance, but he’s also going to be your brother-in-law. You didn’t feel comfortable talking to him about it in the moment? Why didn’t you ask him who she was?”

It’s the moment that tips you off that you might be in a dream, like when your teeth fall out but there’s no pain. “I thought you’d want to be the one to ask him about it. I didn’t realize you’d want me to sort out your relationship mess for you.”

The burners in her eyes ignite, and I hear the drum beat of impending battle. “It’s not that I want you to sort things out for me. But if he’s on the phone with someone, why not ask him who he’s talking to? Or if he’s out with someone and you saw them together, why didn’t you just go talk to them? Why make any assumptions at all?”

“I did ask him, but he could’ve been lying.” But she’s right. I could’ve confronted him in person. Instead, I snuck around and assumed the absolute worst. But my instincts have to be right. Guys like him cheat all the time. Why would he lie about where he was on the phone call, and why take a beautiful woman into an expensive jewelry store?

Mothers worry too much. Mothers wear jewelry.

I swat the thoughts away. I know what I saw.

“How did he respond?”

“He said he was talking to his mother.”

Nancy’s eyes bug out, and she flips her palms up like she’s shown me the answer. “Then he was talking to his mother.”

“But why did he lie to her about where he was last weekend?”

“I don’t know. Why didn’t you ask him? And anyway, do you tell Mom and Dad the truth about everything all the time? No. I’m sure you’ve told them some white lies here and there.” She crosses her arms and looks at me like I’m clogged and the plunger’s broken. “What do you have against him?”

“I mean, if he’s cheating on you, then I have a lot against him.”

“He’s not.” She shakes her head and sighs. “I swear you’ve had it out for him ever since we got engaged. Why don’t you like him?”

“It’s not that I don’t like him. I told you, I just...don’t completely understand why you two are together. I think there are better people for you out there.”

“Better people? Like who, Steven?”

“Well...yes.”

She throws her hands up, jumps to her feet, and begins pacing behind the couch. “I can’t believe you, Win. Whatever ideas you have, let them go. Because even if you don’t love him, I do, and that’s all that matters.”

Not true. Love is a weed. It can grow anywhere, including in all the wrong places.

“Love isn’t everything, Nance. There’s a lot that goes into making a relationship work. I would know.” There’s a seismic shift inside my chest, but I use the force of it. I show her. “Right now, you’re on the edge of a cliff, looking down at a beautiful sea of blue. But after you jump, you’ll realize that there are rocks at the bottom. And sharks. Electric-eel-shark chimeras with lobster claws. It’s all bad.” Maybe that’s a silly image, but it didn’t feel silly at the time. It really did hit me like jagged earth at 9.8 meters per second per second, and shock me and take bites out of my flesh. Just the thought or mention of her is salt on my wounds.

“My relationship is not like yours. There were a ton of red flags between you and Taylor.”

They weren't red flags, they were burgundy handkerchiefs, thank you very much. "Well there are no red flags between you and Steven. And you've known each other for years and haven't gotten sick of each other yet. I'm positive that you and Steven would be per—"

"Oh god, please stop it. You're acting like Mom right now."

The chasm in my chest rips wide open. It took our mother two kids to realize that she wasn't mother material, especially to me. For Mom, everything was always her way. Coming out to her as bi, hearing her denial about who I was, was what pulled the pin on our relationship. It's taken years of time apart—and Grandma's death—to finally get us to speak again.

Realizing what she's said, and to me of all people, Nancy softens her tone. "I'm all grown up, Win, and I don't need you to look after me. I need you to *support* me." She stops pacing, starts rearranging a stack of books instead. "Forget it. Could you just go? I need to clean the apartment."

It looks like a CB2 catalog photo already, but when Nancy's stressed, she starts shifting piles of stuff like our old pet crayfish, Mr. Cray Cray, would shift piles of rocks.

"Fine. I'll go."

"And take the cupcakes. Bradley just texted to tell me that he got me some, so you can have them."

And all of a sudden, my turtle neck is two sizes too small. Or maybe I'm shrinking, too. "Alright."

As I bundle up and walk out into the light drizzle, one thought echoes in my head, weighing on my jaw and locking my teeth together.

She doubts herself, and she doubts *me*. There's only one person she doesn't doubt.

Bradley Chanthavong has poisoned her mind.

Yes, I'll admit, there's a chance he's not cheating. There's a chance, even, that Nancy'll be happy with him. But if I were

a betting woman, I'd put my money on a horse who's shown he can go the distance, not a stinky showhorse.

There's only one weapon left in my arsenal before their wedding, and it's cutting it close, but I'm going to speak now, *and then* forever hold my peace. Promise.

It's time to put my power as Maid of Honor to use.

Chapter 8

A month goes by in a whirl of work and planning. Nancy doesn't talk to me much, even going so far as to cancel on me twice during our weekly walks because she was "busy." The one time we do get together before the wedding, she goes on about the weather, our parents' travel plans for the wedding, and day-of logistics. Bradley gets mentioned once.

"Hey, I don't know if you were going to give us any gifts, but please, nothing fancy. We don't need more stuff. You've already given me all the household gadgets I could possibly need."

"Fine. I'll give you guys a red envelope like every other person in our family." I've got a pile of leftover ones from my own wedding, the special wedding red envelopes that have the double happiness symbol on them. I guess it's meant to be a symbol of marriage—two happy individuals joined together to form one single, jumbo happy entity—but my experience of marriage was more like double trouble and half money.

"Thanks, but... If you want to do something more meaningful, I do have a suggestion."

"What is it?"

"I'm not much of a cook, you know that. But, maybe you could give Bradley Grandma's pickled mustard greens recipe?"

The mere mention of Grandma's cooking unlocks my salivary glands, and Grandma's pickled mustard greens? Delicious on their own, but in soup with chicken, pork, or fish, they will murder your ability to appreciate any other clear broth soup again. Together, they form the stocks from which memories are made. But that's exactly why it's Grandma's secret recipe, and now, mine. We both understood that it should be protected.

"I don't know. That feels disrespectful. It was Grandma's recipe, and she gave it to me for a reason."

"Because you were her favorite?"

“No. I mean, yes.” Grandma didn’t even try to make it a secret that I was her favorite child. She left me all of her vintage qipao and cookware and jade bracelets, too. All Nancy got was a pair of earrings, a backscratcher, and her Goochy house slippers. “But it was also Grandma’s special thing.” Our parents didn’t really know how to cook, so that piquant mix of flavors is associated with her and only her. To give Grandma’s recipe to someone else and risk that it might be diluted, misrepresented, or warped in some way—in other words, disrespected—no. Absolutely not on my watch.

Nancy lets out a close-mouthed sigh. “Okay, well, I just thought it’d be a fun way to say that he’s officially part of the family now. But if you feel that strongly, then don’t worry about it.”

“Thanks.” We move on, but that icky, tar-like feeling lingers between us and we cut things short that day.

“I know I should let it go,” I tell Grandma’s photo the night before the big day. It’s the only photo of her as a young woman, black and white, hair permed, sitting in a cute dress. “It’s up to Nancy how she wants to live her life. But when I think about the woman I’ve known for my entire life, and the life she’s signing up for, it’s like watching someone use Play-Doh and glitter paint to build a house. It looks fun, sure, but it won’t stand up to reality. People will get hurt. *Nancy* will get hurt.”

Young Grandma sits on my nightstand, legs crossed, hands on lap, patiently waiting for me to continue.

“I know it’s her choice. She’s not a kid anymore. But I also promised you that I would take care of her, so I’m going to give it one more try. If she successfully goes through with the wedding, then I’ll let go forever.”

She smiles reassuringly. Everyone’s always said that I look like Grandma, but that’s like saying buttercups resemble sunflowers. Maybe it’s the old camera technology, but her skin looks smooth as glass, and not a single hair is out of place. So very different from how she looked the last time I saw her. One minute, she was strong as a bull, quick on her feet,

cracking snappy jokes and making vats of congee. The next, she was gone, first cognitively, then physically, but never in spirit.

“I know how much you were hoping Nancy and Steven would get together. So if you have any objections to Nancy’s wedding, please interfere. Maybe send a big storm? Or like, a tiny, localized earthquake, enough to knock some chairs over? Just don’t send the Big One, please. We’re not ready for that.”

Grandma wouldn’t do that to us. She’s feisty, not cruel.

“Thanks, Grandma. Miss you. Goodnight.”

It’s just a photo, but as she showed us in her last days, memories—even the ones that have been recounted a dozen times over—are fragile. This small anchor to her is the most durable thing I’ve got. Which is why I’m bringing her to Nancy’s wedding, for good luck.

The next morning, I prepare for the last stand with my curling wand, Fenty lipstick, and the lavender, armored monstrosity that is my Maid of Honor gown. The built-in bustier feels like it could take a bullet. A small, pea-like bullet, but a bullet nonetheless. It elevates my tiny boobs from Kansas to Nebraska, which isn’t great but it’s something. And my hair loses its curl almost immediately, except at the very ends. Guess that’ll have to do.

I get to my aunt’s house in Outer Sunset by seven to set up my custom-made gate-crashing games, and to help my aunt set up the shrine where the couple will pay their respects, putting Grandma’s photo up on one side. My parents aren’t there yet—I assume they’ll show up just before the ceremony, when they’ll *need* to be there or else be embarrassed.

The house is ornately decorated, with banners and decals of gold and red flowers, hearts, and good luck symbols, with “double happiness” characters splashed across every door and window. It’s a Chinese wedding alright, although different from what I’d imagined. I’d elected for way less of that at my own wedding, because, well, Taylor didn’t like how it looked. She was more into succulents, which we’d bought hundreds of and placed everywhere. Dozens of people got stabbed or

pricked that day, which was very on-brand for Taylor, but the pictures were impressive, I'll give her that.

Just another reminder that things can be so beautiful one moment and so ugly the next.

Inside and upstairs, Nancy's so excited and nervous that she completely forgets to be mad at me. "How do I look?"

I helped her pick out the gown, but it still makes my heart clench to see her in it. It's a gossamer white dress with a simple heart-shaped neckline, off-the-shoulder sleeves, and a romantic, full skirt. With her long curls, simple makeup, and bright expression...

"You look lovely."

She smiles warmly and takes my hand. "Thank you for being here. I know you don't like him—"

"I never said that."

She purses her lips but doesn't argue. "I'm glad you're here."

"Of course I'm here." I sit down on the bed next to her. "And no matter what happens today, I'll always be here for you."

The same way she was there for me during my own divorce. The beers, the ice cream, the C-drama marathons. The Rage Room rental, all of it. I'll be ready.

One of the photographers pokes his head into the doorway. "Hey there, it sounds like they're done with the getting-ready photos for the groomsmen, so they're on their way over. They should be here in a few minutes."

"Great, thanks for letting me know." I turn to Nancy. "Guess it's showtime."

"Guess so." Her smile is marred by the tiniest furrow of her brow. "You didn't make the challenges too difficult, did you?"

"Don't worry, it'll all work out."

Instead of smoothing, the line between her brows grows deeper.

I close the door to the bedroom and lock her in. The key's already in its hiding place, the games are set. All that's left is for the groomsmen to arrive.

A few minutes later, a shiny, black Rivian rolls up, and the driver door swings open slowly. Bradley steps out and whips off his sunglasses like he's just stepped out of a limo. Which, given how expensive those things are, isn't far off.

"Hey. Did something happen to your truck?"

He gives the hood of the car an affectionate pat. "Traded it in for my new car. I wanted to surprise Nancy. I know you hated my old pickup," he shouts, as if she can hear. "Sorry it's not a sedan, but I need a big car for work! I got this just for you, baby, so we can start our marriage off right!"

"Aww," says the crowd.

Not aww. She's not a baby, and he's starting off their marriage in debt. And he's doing it for her instead of actually caring about the environment. But I can hear Nancy say that the net effect is the same...

From out of the car come the four groomsmen of the apocalypse, and among them is Steven, the only tall, skinny one, looking dapper in a light gray suit and lavender tie that matches my dress. He walks up to me with a misshapen bag. "Hey, is there somewhere we can put this?"

"What is it?"

"It's a mix of Bradley's and the groomsmen's stuff, like his phone, some gifts, things like that." He leans forward and whispers, "They all have massive thighs, so their pants pockets are out of commission."

I glance over at Bradley and the Groomsmen—terrible band name—and Steven sticks out like a greyhound among pitbulls.

"Gifts? For whom?"

Steven shrugs. "Bradley said he'll give them out later."

As my fingers close around the bag, an idea pops into my head. “I’ll put it in the spare bedroom. Be right back.”

I take the bag and scurry up to the spare bedroom, making sure that no one follows me in before checking inside the bag. There. A jewelry box. A phone that isn’t Bradley’s. A phone that *is* Bradley’s.

Using the edge of the bag, I pick up the phone and turn it right side up. I don’t know the exact code that he enters, just the approximate motion. Is it 2553? 5886? Neither works.

“What are you doing?”

I almost drop the phone but manage to hacky-sack it in my hands like it’s a tiny pizza dough and barely catch it before turning around to face Steven, phone behind my back. “I could ask you the same thing.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Bradley said he wanted his phone after all, so I came to get it.”

“He did? What does he need it for when he’s about to...”

Footsteps, creaking down the hall. I grab Steven’s hand and leap behind the door just in time.

“No one’s here,” comes Bradley’s whisper.

“Okay, well this surprise had better be worth sneaking out and risking Winnie’s ire.”

Risking my ire? I’m tempted to peek and get preemptively mad, but Steven’s pushing me into the wall, and if we move even an inch, they’ll probably see us.

From out of sight, there’s a swish of fabric, and Nancy giggle-gasps. “I can’t believe you.”

“I know. But I had to see you one more time before we do this.”

“Oh... *Bradley.*”

And then the smoochy sounds begin, right there in the room with us.

She's right—there goes my ire, spiking. This isn't like Nancy at *all*.

Above me, Steven's eyes go wide, and my heart trembles for him. How can he stand listening to this?

Before I can second-guess myself, my hands are on his ears, cupping them, protecting them from these awful sounds. He leans down towards me, eyes wide.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby.”

I stare up at Steven, willing him to stay strong. *Focus on me, I mouth. Focus on me.*

His eyebrows twitch together, then rise like they've been released in the wind. Something shifts. His thigh. It's...oh. *Oh*. It's jammed between my legs, rubbing me in a spot where I haven't been touched in too long. I bite back a gasp as something else touches me, too. Something hard, pressing right into my bullet-proof dress.

It's only a physical response. It's not me. It's the same as tapping his knee and getting kicked, but with a dick.

A hard, insistent dick, pressing into me while my sister makes out with her fiance just feet away. How much worse can this get?

It's fine. I stare ahead. Ignore it. I'll ignore it like I've ignored everything el—

He slides closer into me and my belly tightens, burns, combusts, forcing out a soft gasp. My toes curl. My legs go weak. My hands slip from his ears to his lapels, and I grab them and look up again. Steven gazes down at me, lips parted. Questioning.

I give him a rough shake.

And suddenly, I'm buzzed. The phone—not mine—vibrates in my dress pocket, against my hip, and I pat around in my dress skirt to make it stop. But when the buzzing stops, so do the smoochy sounds. “Did you hear that?”

The bed groans like it's been released from torture. They're going to discover us. They're going to find me with Steven behind a door and I'm going to have to explain—

I'm pulled up, and with our eyes wide open, Steven's lips lock onto mine just as the door swings back.

Warmth floods through my neck and chest, all the way to the tips of my ears. For one strange, floaty instant, my world shrinks down to lips on mine, a body on mine, and a wash of fire all over my skin. Fire both cool and burning, melting me against the wall.

But it's *his* lips, *his* body. Wrong one, wrong one!

I push him away. He stumbles back. We're exposed.

“What are you two doing back here?”

Nancy looks as shocked as I feel. Bradley, meanwhile, is delighted.

“Wow. Hooking up before our wedding?” he asks.

“No!”

“Yes.” Steven steps behind me, as if to hide...oh. *That*.

Bradley chuckles. “I thought something was up with you guys. I won't tell if you won't.” He gives Nancy a chaste kiss on the cheek, grins at Steven, and jogs back towards the action by the entrance of the house.

Nancy's surprise softens into something terribly close to disappointment, and I can hardly keep eye contact with her, but I do. She has to know, I didn't do this. I would never do this to her.

“We'll talk later,” she says firmly, and walks back up the stairs.

I flip to Steven, careful to keep my distance. “What was *that*?”

His mouth opens and closes, but it takes him a few tries to whisper, “Didn't you tell me to kiss you?”

“No, I said *focus* on me, not *kiss me!* Why would I tell you to kiss me?” It takes every last ounce of willpower not to pull out my hair. “Crap. Now she thinks we’re together!”

He stares at me a moment, then pulls me deeper into the room. “Why did you grab my face like that? And those sounds. Weren’t you trying to...”

To what? “I was covering your ears! I was worried that you’d get sad, hearing them make out like that.”

His face goes pale. “That’s why? Then... Wait, what exactly are you doing in here?”

“Nothing.” I successfully refrain from biting my lip, but it might’ve quivered. Just a bit.

“What do you have planned?”

“Nothing, I swear.” Dammit, lip.

He circles and steps in front of me, close enough to kiss again, but I take a step back and hit a dresser. It’s not enough to get away from the ocean clean scent of him, which a moment ago was all I could breathe.

“Win, swear to me that you won’t do anything to mess up their wedding.”

“Of course I won’t. You really think I would do that?”

It’s not messing up their wedding. It’s...umm...

Fudge. I’m not directly sabotaging their wedding, but I’m not exactly wishing them well, either.

But she’s about to make a terrible mistake. I want to remind her one last time that it’s not too late to change her mind.

“Whatever you’re doing in here, please stop.”

My hands tighten around Bradley’s phone. It’d be so easy for me to unlock it, for me to snoop around and determine once and for all what’s going on with him. And for Nancy’s sake, I should.

But with Steven looking at me like that...

“Fine.” I put his phone back in the bag on the dresser where I found it, but Steven takes it out and slips it into his pocket instead. Does he really not trust me?

Then again...

It's too late. The games are set.

“Steven! Winnie? We're ready to start!”

He gives me a hard look, and shame wells up into my chest. “I can't believe you, Win.”

And he leaves me behind with a whale of anxiety about what's about to happen next. A whale that's swimming beneath the surface, ready to breach.

Chapter 9

“Find your mother, ask her for three pieces of marriage advice, and vow to follow them.”

Bradley looks up from the first challenge prompt with a huge grin on his face and sweeps his gaze over the crowd of family members standing in the front yard. I’ve already checked each face, and the woman he’d met up with that day isn’t among them.

Which means that the woman he brought to Tiffany’s wasn’t his mom.

Which means that he’s a liar and a cheat.

“Mom? Where are you? Has anyone seen her?”

The groomsmen spread out and begin calling out for Mrs. Chanthavong. I’d assumed that his other girlfriend wouldn’t be here today, but his real mom should be here, at least, right?

“Here! I’m here.”

We all turn back towards the house, where a woman with a huge bouffant, three-inch stilettos, and a blue minidress is closing the door and taking the steps down one at a time like a baby deer.

“Sorry, I was using the bathroom,” she says with a sheepish smile and slight R-rolling accent.

“That’s his *mom*?” I mutter under my breath, but not quietly enough.

Standing next to me is the best man, Kyle, who leans in and whispers back, “Yeah. Total mirlf, right?”

“Merlf?”

“Mom I’d *respectfully* like to fuck,” he whispers, as if that makes it any better. “But obviously I won’t because she’s my mom’s best friend. Wait. I mean best friend’s mom. Actually, she’s both, I guess.”

And as Mrs. Chanthavong looks from her son to me, the images overlap and click into place. It's really her. The woman. And when I'm up close and not meters away, I can see the resemblance in the folds of their eyes and the curves of their noses.

Was that the stroke of midnight? Because all around me, my plan is turning to rats and rotten pumpkins. It's like I'm Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense*, finally coming to terms with everything that I've seen, arriving at the only conclusion that makes sense.

If I were to post my story on r/aita, the answer would be unanimous: I am one-thousand percent the a-hole.

Fudge.

As per the prompt, his hot mom gives three pieces of advice—listen to each other, say I love you often, and make time to be romantic—and cupping his hands around his mouth, he smiles up towards where Nancy's waiting and yells out, “You hear that, Nancy? I promise to listen to you, say I love you, and be romantic, for the rest of our lives.”

From out of her secret watching place above comes, “I hear you, and I promise, too! Love you.”

Bradley's eyes go shiny. “Love you, babe!”

And with “Awww”s all around, suddenly a dim hope dawns that Bradley will be able to overcome these challenges after all. If he overcomes them, then I'm not an a-hole! And who knows, even if Steven takes the limelight today, it's not like Bradley loses. He still gets to marry my sister! Because who am I kidding, she was never going to change her mind, no matter how much I polished Steven and flashed him around in front of her.

Darn. It's like the time I brought a GearGal technical vest to an office white elephant gift exchange. I'd smiled to myself for the whole month, knowing that it was going to be the most stolen gift that year. Instead, when my coworker Rachel opened it, everyone laughed. How? With twenty-six different compartments and ample storage loops, it was objectively the

best gift of the bunch—better than that stupid egg maker!—but nobody wanted it except me.

But in this case, it's not like I *want* Steven, I just...I...

“What's next?”

I come to and look back at Bradley. The groom. The man my sister's going to marry, and with whom I'm going to have to get along if I want to keep her in my life.

Again, that feeling of *WTF am I doing* eats at me like I'm at a Thai fish spa, but with piranhas. I could abort mission with all of these challenges, but my engineering integrity is on the line. I'd already made a big show of setting up the various stations, and each challenge is connected to the next.

Too dang smart for your own good, Winnie.

I lead the group over to the table I've set up and whip off the silk sheet, revealing the buzz wire game I've created. “Here's challenge number two. Any one of your groomsmen can complete this. All you have to do is get this loop all the way around this heart-shaped spiral to the endpoint. Once you do, you'll be able to hit this switch and it'll reveal the final challenge.”

“That's it?” says Bradley, with the swagger of someone who's never seen a buzz wire game before. “Piece of cake.”

And with all that cockiness, my kid's scoop of sympathy splats onto the floor. He'll face the challenge like he was meant to, and triumph or not.

“The catch is, if you touch the loop to the spiral, you'll get shocked by a taser. But don't worry,” I say to their stunned faces, “the voltage is super low, so it won't hurt. Much.”

But I hope it'll hurt him at least a little, especially his ego.

Now the groomsmen look at each other warily. I almost add, *I can lower the voltage further if you want me to*, but the videographer chooses that moment to zoom in on me, and I keep my mouth shut. I'm not admitting that I might've overdone it. The wire is a simple shape. They'll be fine.

“I’m the groom,” says Bradley, “so I gotta try first, right?” He tentatively picks up the loop wand, which is insulated from the heart spiral at the start, but after lifting the wand three inches, he drops it and jumps back with a, “Motherf—effer! Damn, that hurt!”

“It’s not that bad,” I reassure the other groomsmen, who look at each other uneasily. “I tested it myself.” Though I have heard that women have a higher tolerance for pain. Pansies.

I look at Steven. Steven looks back at me. I’m positive that, if anyone can do it, it’s him. He used to love these types of games, and he’s training to be a surgeon. He’s got steady hands. But before he can volunteer, Kyle steps up.

“My turn...ow!”

He drops it after about an inch.

Another groomsman tries, and he makes it almost halfway before yelping and shaking out his hands. “It hurts!”

More and more people are looking my way, and their disapproval rasps against my skin. I stare at Steven who stares at me, beaming my thoughts into his mind. *Save the day.*

“I’ll try,” says Steven, stepping forward, but Bradley stops him.

“Wait. She’s my bride. Let me do it.”

With a small frown, Steven steps aside as Bradley comes forward and eyes the machine, swallowing. “So all I have to do is get the loop all the way out right? Doesn’t matter if I get shocked?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

He takes several quick breaths, like he’s about to do a record-setting deadlift or something, and then holds his breath and whips the loop around the spiral. He groans through gritted teeth at least three times, but doesn’t let go of the loop, and when the loop finally escapes the spiral, he jumps back and says, “I did it! I win! I did it!” while dancing like he just got a touchdown. The groomsmen all fist pump and cheer with

him, patting him on the back. And I have to admit, I breathe a small sigh of relief, too.

“Nice job,” says Steven with a genuine smile. “Thanks for saving me.”

“Of course. You’re Nancy’s good friend, I couldn’t let you get hurt because of me, not when I’m the one who asked you to do this.” He shakes Steven’s hand and pulls him into a bro-hug. “I’m grateful you were willing to take a taser for me, though.”

Steven’s smile goes full grin. “Happy to take on anything these guys are.”

“Attaboy.”

The cameras eat up their smiles. Good. Good for them that everyone’s all buddy-buddy with Bradley except for me. But we’re not done yet.

Bradley turns to the table, where the switch should now work for the next challenge. He presses the button, and from the end of a pole attached to the awning above, a small box falls open, and out drops a small red envelope, one of the special double happiness ones, suspended by a string.

The boys look to me for an explanation.

“Figure out a way to get it down from there using just yourselves. No tools or ladders or anything. No climbing the house.”

They all look up. The envelope is precisely 3.52 meters up, which is exactly the right height so that they won’t be able to lift any of the groomsmen besides Steven, who is slimmer, taller, and has a larger wingspan than the rest of them. They’re all too short and heavy. The only configuration that makes sense is Steven standing or sitting on top of one of their shoulders, with the other guys spotting.

And no, I’m not trying to hurt him. I put some foam puzzle mats underneath the envelope. They’ll be fine.

But the boys don’t come to the same conclusion as me, except for maybe Steven, who gives me a suspicious look.

They start by trying to jump up to the envelope, as if they can somehow super-dunk, but none of these guys are Spud Webb or Allen Iverson.

“I could throw you,” says Kyle to Bradley. “Like I used to throw cheerleaders.”

“Didn’t you mess up your shoulder doing that?”

“Yeah, but I’d do anything for love, man.”

Bradley pats his shoulder. “Nah. We’re doing this the hard way. Who wants to be on bottom?”

They take off their shoes and start trying to form a pyramid, but when Kyle suggests that Steven gets on top, Bradley shakes his head. “I’m the groom. I have to do it.”

“But you’re heavy as f—you’re heavy,” says Kyle, barely catching himself. “Steven’s light and tall.”

Bradley raises an eyebrow. “I’m the groom, right? Think about the pictures. I have to be the one who looks good today.”

Exactly. Which is why Steven looks right at me and purses his lips. He knows what I was trying to do.

And then he does the worst possible thing. “Let’s do the pyramid. Bradley, you can sit on me.”

No way! Bradley’s twice as thick as you! You’ll snap like a graham cracker! But I don’t say anything. It’s not my place to interfere, and the videographer’s got the camera rolling.

The boys line up, two on the bottom, Steven and Kyle in the middle, and when Bradley climbs the pyramid, the guys all start hollering.

“Brad, yo, hurry up, you’re crushing us!”

“Agggghhhhhh! Bro! Go, go, go!”

Steven silently grits his teeth, and I know he’s holding his core as tight as can be, but he’s trembling with effort, and I can barely watch the disaster through my fingers. He’s going to get hurt. He’s going to throw out his back and get a hernia and get crushed to death by a pile of muscles—

“Got it!” Bradley swipes the envelope and does a surprisingly graceful dismount off of the pyramid, which promptly collapses in a pile of groans. The guys all rub their knees and backs like they just finished work for the day in a gulag. Bradley helps them each up, one by one, thanking them for their service.

“Alright, home stretch, fellas.” Bradley rips open the envelope and reads the prompt inside. The very last one.

He looks up at me from the sheet of paper with a worried little frown. “Huh.”

Annnnd yep. Thought so. This time, he’s not going to get it without Steven’s help.

Depending on how you look at it, either I win, or I lose.

Either way, it’s not looking good for me.

Chapter 10

“What’s it say?” asks an auntie whose title and exact relationship to me I always forget.

Eyebrows up, Bradley takes a breath and reads,

“When she was young, she hid her heart,

Her keepsakes and most cherished art,

In a place no one could see.

Inside of here, you’ll find the key!”

For once, he gives me a tight-lipped smile. “Didn’t realize you were a poet, Sis.”

Sis. He’s already calling me Sis.

His face scrunches like he’s sucking a Warhead as he continues to stare at the poem, turning it left and right as if the answer might tip out the side.

Kyle holds his hand to his forehead and squints around, searching for land. “It’s gotta be out here, right? Where would you hide stuff if you were a kid?”

Steven slow-shakes his head at me. He knows *exactly* where the hiding spot is, but instead, he looks under his shoe. In the grass. Behind the neighbor’s dog.

The other groomsmen begin searching under rocks, behind bushes, under the stairs. Bradley doesn’t move. He keeps staring at the poem like Keanu trying to bend a spoon with his mind.

And suddenly, the spoon twitches. “Oh my god, I’ve got it.”

He whips around, starts walking in the correct direction. Warmer, warmer, hot...

There. He’s standing right in front of it, a tree with a heart around the initials “NG + SY.” It’s small, but it’s hard to miss, given how the rest of the tree is perfectly smooth. But if he sees it, he ignores it, and sticks his hand into the hole in the

tree, scooping out the sticks and leaves I shoved in as a cover, and pulls out a heart-shaped key, holding it over his head like he's He-Man Having the Power.

“How'd you know?” asks Kyle. I'm wondering the same thing.

Bradley looks to me, his expression softening. “Grandma.”

What? I turn around with a jolt, heart pounding, half expecting her to be there. But no, there's only her photo. “What do you mean?”

“When Nancy moved into her apartment, I helped her pack and unpack her stuff, and I found a funny birthday card from her grandmother that mentioned this spot.”

All of a sudden, it's a bit hard to breathe. Of course Grandma would save the day, and from the past, no less. She always was uncannily prepared for everything, but that might've been because of her hoarder tendencies.

He holds up the key and gives me a questioning smile. “May I?”

I nod, and he walks past—

No. He walks *into* me and gives me a warm, welcoming hug, as if I'm the one who's joining the family, not him. It's the kind of hug that I should've given him from day one—a full-bodied hug that makes you feel safe, and cherished. The hug a brother would give a sister.

“Thank you for doing this, Winnie. I've always wanted an older sister.”

Twin tears break through and roll down my cheeks.

He backs up, smiles at me, and goes to greet his bride, dashing up the stairs like a prince on the way to meet Sleeping Beauty. A prince who's slain the evil dragon.

And of course, when I turn around, one of the video cameras is aimed right at my face. Yes, take it in. Capture my guilty expression for posterity's sake. I'll probably be banned from meeting my nieces and nephews, so let them at least

know that their Auntie is sorry for trying to prevent their existence.

During the tea ceremony, Ms. Chanthavong gifts Nancy with a classic Tiffany's open heart pendant necklace in rose gold, which matches her rose-gold diamond engagement ring and wedding band.

I'd like to throw myself into a black hole and get ripped to shreds, please.

Instead, there's lunch. Refreshments. Photos.

It's during the cocktail hour that Bradley comes up to me with a customized Leatherbox Multitool, which GearGal magazine listed as the best multitool of the season. How the heck did he know I'd been eyeing it? I try to refuse the gift, but he won't hear of it.

"It's the least I can do when you've been so helpful." He turns to the listening crowd and adds, "She came by the gym and fixed a whole bunch of things for free, out of the goodness of her heart."

"It was just a couple of loose screws and a dusty filter," I mumble, folding up into myself like an umbrella. And it was a long time ago, back when I thought he was just Nancy's personal trainer.

"You saved me a service call from a technician. Who knows how much it would've cost." He puts an arm around me and gives me that knock-out smile. "Thanks, Sis."

I'm surprised a hole hasn't opened up under my feet and sucked me to hell.

I cringe-smile my way through the rest of the wedding, even managing to get through my speech without throwing up at the tempered smile on Nancy's face, but by the end of it, I have a headache from holding back the tears, and the only solution is to say cheers, chug my champagne, and run away.

I spend the rest of the wedding like a cat in a dog park, dodging between friends and relatives and leaving the room as soon as someone looks at me a little too long. But I can't hide forever. Momma Chanthavong finds me in the kitchen corner

nook and tries to ask me about my job. Kyle and Cousin Vicky get together and force me out of the bathroom. Finally, Steven corners me outside on the deck at 9 PM, and at the first sight of him, I turn away. I can't hide, but I don't have to look.

“I can't believe you almost ruined your sister's wedding.”

I cross my arms, practically straight-jacketing myself. He'll have to talk to my back if that's all he has to say.

“But I'm also, honestly, impressed.”

Okay, that was unexpected. I throw him a look over my shoulder. “Why are you impressed?”

“Because you *didn't* ruin it. You got it so that I would likely look good, but he still stood a chance.”

I cross my arms tighter and flip my limp and curl-less hair. “Duh. I told you I wouldn't ruin her wedding.”

“You wanted to, though. You wanted him to look bad. And that's the worst part of it all.”

I tremble in the wind, like a golden-red leaf on the verge of falling. “I know it was stupid. But Bradley was better than me.”

It's quiet, and then it's warm, as Steven puts his suit jacket around my shoulders. I shrug it off. Rather, I want to shrug it off, but my body won't listen, and in fact, grips the collar so that the wind won't whip it off for me.

“Does she know what you were up to?”

“Probably. She at least knows that I forced her husband to tase himself and his friends. And I'll bet she's ready to ban me from seeing her kids in the future. No Cool Aunt Winnie for them. I'll have to live my childfree Cool Aunt dreams through someone else.”

“Are you sure? In the end, you made him look pretty good. I'm sure she'll forgive you if you make it up to her.”

“I'm not really sure how to do that.”

“But you'll try, won't you?”

I shrug his jacket closer around me. “Of course I will.”

We gaze out over the hills together, watching the pale fog roll in off the water. It’s a sight we’ve seen thousands of times, sometimes together, sometimes alone.

From now on, it’s just you and me, and Karl.

“I don’t want you to leave,” I say out loud, panicking as a sinkhole opens up under me. “I was hoping that Nancy could get you to stay.”

There, I said it. But while I wait for his reply, the fog seems to slow, floating like an octopus after a fat rip.

Finally, “*You* could get me to stay, Win.”

My heart begins to pound, but I don’t dare to look at him. Still, I feel him come closer, the scent of him filling my nostrils as he turns me to face him and tilts up my chin.

I look. For the first time all night, since that moment this morning, I let my gaze roam across his features. His medium-length hair, which somehow always looks like it’s on the verge of needing a trim. Those laughing eyes and long, straight lashes. He’s too cute by half.

“Why do you want me to stay?”

I try an answer, swallow the words. Try again. “You’re my best friend.”

His gaze grows deeper, more intense. With reverent fingers, he tucks a few stray strands behind my ear. “Is that the only reason?”

I shake under his touch, and it takes every ounce of will I have not to pull away, or do something worse.

“Tell me how you feel,” he whispers, leaning close. But my lips won’t move. I’m frozen, staring up at him, caught.

Because sitting in the sewer of my brain are light-washed memories of me and Taylor eating rice pudding, me and Taylor at the succulent altar, me and Taylor on the green velvet couch, in the Turkish restaurant, in the Sleep Number bed, selecting our own personal firmnesses in quiet, quiet, deathly

quiet, our passion fading to black until the moment it flared for one last terrible blast.

My one consolation, after all was said and done: Taylor *hated* pickles.

Steven doesn't hate pickles, so if all goes to heck, then I won't have even that.

But I can't find the words to explain in time. He swoops in, and the warmth of his mouth washes over mine. The night sky turns overhead, making me dizzy. Steven—*my* Steven—is kissing me.

It takes a full revolution of the earth before my lips move with his, dancing, weaving. They drift together with calm, sure strokes, both of us already knowing the choreography by heart.

I melt into his chest, and he holds me up, solid, steady, but warm and soft as a beam of sunshine, his every touch beginning the process of overwriting our history to *this*.

This.

This is what it's like, with Steven.

I really wish...I didn't know.

Sometimes, I swear that the main purpose of life is to lose things, over and over and over. Every other day, someone's gotten married or had a kid or moved or passed away. We lose things, we lose each other, we lose ourselves. When I look in the mirror, a paling, pruning version of myself stares back. Time is a leech.

And now it's going to take This, too.

I let myself linger in the kiss like it's the yoga breath at the beginning of a long class. And when he pulls back as if to speak, I push him away and run.

It's my sister's wedding, it's not even over, but I run as far as I can into the farthest, darkest place I can find to ruin my makeup.

Chapter 11

From what I hear, Bradley and Nancy went on to have a lovely sparkling honeymoon send-off, but not before the bride spent thirty minutes asking everyone, “Where’s my sister? Has anyone seen Winnie?”

And I think that *that*—on top of kissing her childhood-crush-slash-soulmate and almost ruining her wedding—is why I haven’t heard from her since. Nor Steven. Nancy, I could kind of explain away with the fact that she’s currently in Europe, but Steven’s not far at all. Not unless he’s gotten sick of my shenanigans and up and moved to Boston already.

After a long, sleepless week, I start to believe that that’s what actually happened. That he’s rapidly forgetting about me in a sea of baked beans and Sam Adams. Until one day, I’m walking to my car after work and a dark figure emerges from the bushes. I drop into a defensive stance before I realize it’s the guy I’ve been dreaming of every single—*oh* so single—night.

They’re the kinds of dreams I occasionally used to have, but kept locked away in the back of my mind, too taboo and sordid for contemplation. Dreams that follow seamlessly from the kiss we shared, of his thighs between mine, his lips painting my skin with feather-light brushes, fingers digging into my back and scalp and...and places that don’t exist on Barbies.

Dreams that are wrong for any older-sister-figure to have.

Dreams that make my face burn, now that he’s right in front of me. “Hi.”

He comes into the light of the streetlamp, and it looks like he’s gotten as much sleep as I have this past week. “Did you eat yet? Can we talk?”

I don’t know if I can face him. After everything I tried to do, I can’t even face myself in the mornings. “Sorry, I’ve got plans.” I have a date with some wood and a half-made plant

shelf, with maybe a C-drama on in the background, as long as it's not a super sad one.

I try to walk past him, but he stops me with a hand on the arm. His touch burns through my coat, and I have to step back. "Then drive me to wherever you're going and we can talk on the way."

"But..." I peek behind him. "What about your car?"

"I'll come back and pick it up later."

"But that makes no sense."

"Please, Win." He comes closer, and I'm torn between taking a step back and going forward. I stay where I am. "We need to talk."

Do we? Because *Winnie's Harebrained Love Plot* was the worst movie of the year, and it doesn't even merit a review. We can all agree, it was Certified Rotten.

But he's got this look in his eyes, like a dog that can sense its return to the pound. I want to beat up the person who put that look on his face, or worse, deprive them of pickles and olives for an entire year.

I take a deep, trembling breath. "Fine. Dinner at...um... Taco Hell? It's right around the corner."

He nods, and I take fast, jerky steps towards the tiny taco shop where I have lunch almost every day. It's tangy, cheap, and fast, totally worth it, even when the cute-but-too-young cashier flirts with me a bit too often.

Abe, said cashier, looks up and starts to smile, but it dies halfway on and slides off his face. "Winnie, my favorite customer! Who's this?"

"Oh. This? This is my...my Steven. Well, not *mine*. Just Steven."

Abe eyes us and rubs his hairless chin, but soon slips on his usual charm and takes my order, then Steven's. We pay, we sit, and I shovel chips and salsa into my mouth so that nothing else ridiculous can come out. I wait for Steven to start the

conversation, but he picks at his chips and eats them one bite at a time.

Abe comes by a few minutes later.

“One usual for you,” he says, handing me my tacos with an unpracticed smolder, and “for *you*,” he says to Steven, dropping his smile *and* the tacos on the counter like there’s a severed body part inside. Steven frowns, but thanks him anyway.

I bite into my red, hot-sauce soaked diablo taco and my lips immediately begin to sizzle. Which only makes me think even more about my lips, and Steven, and how this conversation could possibly go anywhere good.

“I...”

We both clear our throats.

“You first,” I say.

He nods. “I’m sorry for...for forcing my mouth on your mouth. I shouldn’t have done that.”

Forcing his mouth on my mouth? I imagine shoving two flanges together that don’t fit and I barely suppress a shudder. “I wasn’t expecting it, but it wasn’t, like, bad or anything. Just weird.”

Incredible. Amazing. Absolutely unrepeatabe.

“Weird?”

“Yeah. Because of the whole ‘we’re childhood friends’ thing.”

He rolls his lips in and nods. “I misread the situation. I’m sorry. Now that I know how you feel, it won’t happen again.”

I wait for the relief to come, but instead I feel like a beach ball that’s landed on a cactus. This is the part where I step up and admit my own feelings, but I can’t. The two of us work as friends. There’s data to back that up. As anything else...I don’t know, and neither does he.

“But for a moment there, during that kiss...I thought you might’ve kissed me back?”

“Oh.” I grab my glass of water and gulp it down. “Reflex. Wasn’t thinking.”

You know, reflex, when it happens without you even trying. Like with knees, or dicks, or falling in love—

Stop it. He’s leaving for Boston on a quest for Something New, while I’m a West Coast gal through and through. We’d never make it, and I’d end up spending forever trying to forget him.

He stops eating, sucks in air and chugs his water before grabbing mine and chugging it, too. “How can you eat this? It’s so spicy. I swear, you’re a closet masochist.”

Maybe he’s right. Maybe I do like hurting myself. Why else would I do it all the time?

Actually, why *is* he gasping and sucking his tongue? “Why did you get the spicy one? You don’t like spicy food.”

He gives me a wry smile. “I ordered the same thing you did. I guess I wanted to change things up and try it the Winnie way, in case it turns out to be better.”

“I see.” He’s talking about tacos. Just the tacos, nothing else. And yet, I can’t help asking, “Do you wish you’d gotten it your usual way after all?”

He thinks about it, shakes his head. “No, I’m glad I tried it, because now I’ve experienced the heat-death of the universe in my mouth.” He takes another bite. “I think my throat might be numb now, or maybe my insides are all burned out, so maybe I’m getting used to it?”

Silly, silly man. I get up and buy a flan and set it on the table in front of him. “Here, it’ll cut the spiciness.”

He pants like a dog in a sauna. “But I still have another taco.”

“I’ll finish it.”

He nods gratefully and digs into the flan while I pick up the last taco. See? Just more proof that we don’t mix.

But when I bite the taco, my mouth goes supernova and I have to spit it out. “What the what is *this*? It’s so spicy!”

I glance at Abe, who’s whistling and wiping down the counter, carefully not looking our way.

“Oh. Well, I’m glad to know you’re not eating that level of spice all the time, because you’d definitely get an ulcer then.”

“Alright, thanks, Doctor Not-My-Doctor.”

“Any time, Miss Patient Not-My-Patient.”

We both smile, but only for old time’s sake. I doubt there will be many more occasions for what I assume is a joke he’s been long tired of.

He offers me a bite of flan, and with my mouth on fire and the water gone, I accept, curling my tongue around his spoon to wipe up every last morsel. It’s so wonderfully sweet and cool, a delicious balm. “Thank you.”

“Thank *you*.”

We finish the food—only the edible bits—in silence, and soon it’s time to clear the table and leave. We stand by the door, an awkward distance apart, and it feels like we’ve just broken up or something when we’ve never even come together.

I fold my arms over my chest, holding myself close. “When do you leave, exactly?”

“It depends. On this.” He clears his throat, perhaps more times than usual thanks to all the spice. “I want you to know that I won’t force my mouth on your mouth again, but...you’re welcome to put yours on mine, if you ever want to. I have, um, a strong fondness for you. Romantic-type fondness. Both physical and emotional...ly.” He clears his throat again, twice. “I like you a lot, but I don’t expect you to feel the same or anything. That’s all. Just wanted to make it clear before I leave.”

Tears swim in my eyes like tiny moon jellies, clouding up my vision. “That’s, um, good to know. But for the record, I

think it's best if we keep things the way they were. Before all of *this* happened."

He nods with the calm of a journalist who got the answer he'd expected. "Okay. I see. In that case...I'll let you know before I leave. Maybe we can grab a meal or something."

But he doesn't mean it. I feel the distance growing between us, like his boat has already left the shore.

Still. "I'd like that."

He gives me the saddest smile, with those same last-look pound-puppy eyes. "Would it have made a difference if I'd brought you a bouquet of pickled vegetables? Because I thought about it, but honestly, the logistics of carrying it around without it getting gross seemed too complicated, and also, you should really cut back."

I laugh, which only leaves me feeling more hollow. "No, that wouldn't have worked."

"That's what I thought." He nods and smiles one last time. "Goodnight, Win."

He turns away and walks right out of my life, and I let it happen. I stay rooted to the spot and let this one chance with him slip away, an absolute and utter waste.

I know what Grandma would have to say about *that*.

And it hits me, hard, what *I* will have to say about it later, if I let him go. How I'll feel. Like a plant who asked the sun to go away, because it was too scared of getting burned.

He's only four steps along by the time I run and tackle him. Not enough to send him sprawling, but enough to make him lose his balance, and I have to hold him hard to keep him from falling forward. "Don't go. Please."

He turns, and I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him. He kisses me back like a first responder, saving me from myself, smothering my burning need with his mouth. It's air, it's water, it's magic and everything right with the world. With his body curling over mine, his lips warm and soft, the wind picks up and whips my beanie off onto the moon—

Not really, but it *feels* that way, with him. He kisses me slowly, fiercely, his hands clawing down my spine as he holds me like he's been away for ages instead of three seconds, but he's back, finally back.

“You've been spending all your time trying to prove to Nancy that I'm right for her. Let me prove to you that I'm right for you.”

My feet drop back down to the ground. “You don't have to prove anything, Steven. I've known.”

“Known what?”

I tuck my face into his jacket and mumble. “That you're good. And that I like you.”

His hands smooth down my back, warm, gentle, bespoke weights tailored perfectly to my flesh. “If you like me, then why've you been trying to set me up with Nancy?”

“Because. I know what's at the end of the rainbow for me.”

“What are you talking about?”

I pull away and look at him. He has to understand, and I need to remind myself. “Taylor was my best friend, once.”

A shadow comes over his features. He knows where this is going. “Sure, but Taylor—”

“Let me finish.” I take a deep breath, try again. “Before we got together, Taylor and I were best friends. Like, stay-up-until-3-AM-laughing-at-animal-videos best friends. Or like driving-five-hundred-miles-through-snow-and-rain-because-she-was-stranded best friends. But you know what happened. The proximity or the constancy or plain-old *time* changed something between us. Like, we said ‘I Do’ because we knew that what we were signing up for was a good thing, but that *knowing* was the problem. Something faded. The tension between us, or the mystique. At least, that's what it felt like.” *And what our marriage counselor said.* “And then, before we could really fix it, she left me for her other best friend Carolina, and now they're pregnant. Which is funny, because before that, neither of them wanted kids.”

Sometimes I wonder if it got so dull and quiet between us that it drove Taylor to want to fill the silence. She'd rather have squalling and gurgles and screams than the *shwip-shwip* of page turning or the dull tapping on thumbs on phone screens. I blamed my old job, at which I performed long hours of detailed work, studying requirements, squinting at AutoCAD files, and building prototypes, which meant that I usually came home late, ready to collapse. But even with how hard it was, it was also rewarding. I loved my job, and it led to me getting my current job, which I love even more.

Not as much as I loved her, though, once.

And if I'm honest? I *am* boring.

"Anyway, I think I'm not good at the relationship thing. When you like someone you can't have, it's always exciting. The chase is what's exciting. But once you have them, *you* have to be the one who keeps things exciting, and I'm...not a pepper, or an herb. I'm a potato. I take on the flavors of whatever's around me."

He grabs me by the shoulders as if to shake me, but doesn't. "What? How can you say that? You're the most flavorful person I know. There's never a dull moment with you. And even if you are a potato, I think potatoes taste delicious on their own. Boiled, baked, fried. They're great."

"But you can't just eat boiled potatoes every day. You'd get sick of it."

"Not true. The great thing about potatoes is that they go with everything. They're versatile. And regardless of what pantry item you are, I would still rather sit on a boat on a lake for hours, roasting in the sun and catching nothing but litter, than do anything with anyone else."

I turn away to hide how wet my lashes are. "You're just saying that. I know you'd get tired of me. I like doing the same things and going to the same places. Anyone would get sick of me." Just the thought of that thick, buzzing silence sitting between us, expanding like a swarm of gnats, makes my stomach turn.

“Taylor made you think that the divorce was your fault, but it wasn’t. You’re not boring just because she got bored. You two weren’t compatible...or maybe she doesn’t love as deeply as you do. I mean, if you loved me half as much as you loved pickles, I think we’d be solid.”

I let out a quiet laugh, and it’s the release my stomach needs. “You’re better than pickles, Steven. Except for maybe those Happily Ever After brand spicy dill big boys.”

“I have a confession.” With glittering eyes, he leans in closer and whispers, “I prefer sweet pickles.”

“Of course you would. You’ve always loved sweet stuff.”

He gives me this long, tender look that makes me blush, and lets me off by closing his eyes and leaning in.

And as we kiss, it really is quite sweet.

But on the edge of that sweetness is the sour tang of fear.

This could all go so, so wrong.

Chapter 12

We take things slow.

Just kidding, we go 60 miles per hour in a 40 zone. We've made out a lot—maybe too much—and gotten pretty handsy so far, which may not be very fast in some people's books, but I mean, to go from thirty years of polite distance to hot and heavy petting in two nights? I'm basically Danica Patrick.

We could've had sex already, but whenever my hands stray too close to the end zone, he intercepts me and asks me to wait.

"You have no idea how much I want you," he says in this breathy way that twists me up like a hot cheddar pretzel. "But I want it to be special."

The birds in my heart flutter happily, but the bees in my pants buzz with impatience. It's been years since I've been with anyone of any pronoun. "It will be special, because it's with you."

His smile is so familiar, yet newly glazed with a touch of honey. "I have a plan. Just wait."

How can I resist that face? I wait.

Until tonight. I can tell it's the big night because of how he's dressed. He's gotten a haircut, his clothes are new, and there's the subtlest extra bit of scent on him, like he added a dab of cologne somewhere. The biggest hint of all is how he keeps asking me how I'm feeling or whether or not I'm enjoying myself, and fidgeting with his hands. Not gonna lie, though, it isn't easy enjoying myself when everything that is possible to go wrong absolutely does.

We start the evening at a romantic rooftop restaurant called *The 69th Floor*, which we giggle about incessantly. Or, would have, if it hadn't been closed for a private event. Like, how hard is it to update your online reservation system, folks, or to let people know more than thirty minutes ahead of time?

Sadly, that meant hunting for a new dinner spot on a Friday night in Nob Hill, and pretty much everywhere was packed except for a sushi place that was still pretty packed, but didn't have a long wait. Of course, that meant that the seafood was chewy and fishy and the tempura veggies were over-fried, and our stomachs—promised one thing but given another—rebelled.

Our stomachs only grew more mutinous at the after-dinner movie, *Big Hearts*, about a mysterious illness that makes your heart bigger and bigger until it explodes inside of you. The bag of butter with popcorn sprinkles doesn't help, but we had to eat *something* to get the fishiness out.

“Sorry, I thought this was supposed to be a cute movie,” says Steven, shaken. He looks like he's just performed surgery on a stick of butter for 48 hours straight.

“Did you mean to take me to *The Guts*?”

“Maybe? What's that?”

“I think it's the rom-com about two people daring each other to do things, as in, *do you have the guts to do blah blah blah* until they fall in love.”

He shakes his head. “I knew it was some anatomical name, but you get why I made the mistake, right?”

“Yeah, because you're a quack who doesn't know guts from hearts.” I stick my tongue out at him, he sticks his back, and we both laugh a little. At least there's that.

But as we walk back to his downtown apartment, the wind is penetrating, and I begin to curl up into myself. Not just to protect myself from the cold, but to brace myself for the tell-tale stirrings of cramps in my lower belly. It's like my womb has suddenly caught that *Big Hearts* disease and is expanding, pumping blood and spurting it everywhere.

I walk as fast as my cramps will let me go, and he keeps up. If he notices, he doesn't say anything.

We make it back to his apartment building, where my car is parked around the corner, and I'm waiting to see what disaster will cap off the night. Did someone break into my car

to steal my mint gum? Will we kiss goodnight and crack our front teeth? Will a rabid raccoon bite his leg and put an end to him and this romance?

I'd like to blame the PMS, but this entire night has felt like a first pancake, all burnt on the outside and raw on the inside. It takes a few tries to get it right, but with how long we've known each other, shouldn't we be good at this?

"Thanks for tonight." I try to smile, but my womb clenches and I'm afraid it comes out like a grimace.

"Want to come inside for a bit?"

Aunt Flo kneads my insides, and despite the cold, I begin to sweat. "Thanks, but it's probably not a good idea. Not because I don't want to. I do, but, um..."

Now that I've blurted that out, anything I say will sound like I'm making an excuse. Great. "Really, I enjoyed hanging out with you, I just—"

"I have pads and tampons, if you need any. Wouldn't you rather get one from here than wait until you get home?"

I blink up at him, unable to find my tongue for several seconds. "Why do you have pads and tampons?"

"In case guests ever need them."

"Wow. More people should do that."

"They should."

"But how did you know?"

"Whenever you're early in your period, you clutch your lower abdomen, just like that."

I look down at my hands, which are clasped over the most painful area, right under my navel. "You've always known?"

"Sure. I am a doctor, you know. Not a quack." He puts an arm around me and escorts me into the building. "And even if I weren't a doctor, what kind of boyfriend would I be, if I couldn't tell that you were in pain?"

Boyfriend. That's...presumptuous. We haven't had that conversation yet. But the word brings a warmth to my cheeks that has nothing to do with hot flashes. And if I'm honest, it feels a bit like blowing the dust off an old book cover and seeing the words that were there all along. It's his title, alright.

His apartment is the same as always, but I look at it more carefully now. Lee Child and John Grisham novels lay in wait beneath couch cushions, sitting on chairs, propped up on windowsills. Otherwise, the place is immaculate, if a bit bare, painted in a warm off-white with hints of brown and rust, with black industrial accents like steel rods lining the shelves and legs under the coffee table and counter stools, a mix of modern and industrial chic. And everywhere, wood, beautiful wood, maples, oaks, and ashes. Besides the color palette, it's not far from what I'd pick for myself.

He shows me where he stashes his period products, and when I come out of the bathroom, he's waiting with my favorite brand of honey-ginger tea, plus a slice of plain sourdough toast with apple butter. It's so comforting and gentle on my tummy, and I'm worlds away from where we were just hours before. The only thing my heart might explode with is gratitude.

From the way he's looking at me, I think he can tell.

"Want to stay for a bit? Watch a better movie, maybe?"

I'm honestly kind of movied-out, but I'm not Stevened-out, and whether or not there's a movie on doesn't matter to me. "Sure."

We cuddle on the couch and watch an old favorite together, *Spirited Away*. And as I listen to the music with Steven's heartbeat in the background, a memory lands like a leaf on a still pond: I'd gotten the DVD for him back in middle school as a birthday present, but he'd joked that it was really a present for myself because I'd loved the movie so much.

How long ago did his feelings start? How long ago did mine?

It doesn't matter, does it? The important question is, how long will they last?

Aching in both my guts and my heart, I do the only thing I can: burrow into his arms and drift.

A few minutes—or is it hours?—later, there's a soft, "Win?"

"Yeah?"

"Our next date will be better."

I pull my head out of my Steven cave and look at him. "It's okay. You can't really promise me that."

"Oh, but I can. I've learned my lesson. I'll have backups, and then backups for my backups."

I hide a smile. "I'm sure you're a great doctor, but you'd make a good designer, too."

"Why's that?"

"Because. You're empathetic, which is such an important part of being a designer: knowing and understanding your user." I press a kiss to his cheek. "Plus, you're smart, reliable, and conscientious. I know that if you were working on anything in my workshop, you'd be thorough. So if you ever get sick of being a doctor, let me know."

He takes my hand and slides his fingers back and forth between mine. "Funny that you say that, because *you* could've been a doctor. Your parents wanted you to be one, right?"

"Yeah, well, you know me, I'm like rebar. Completely implacable."

"I know. Which is why I've always admired you."

"I'm not sure if it's admirable to be so stubborn that you made your mom cry all the time." Though it's true that she cried at the drop of a hat, or anything that didn't go her way. Always the victim, that one.

"Not stubborn. You just have strong preferences and desires. You don't let other people tell you what to do." His fingers slide to a stop and close over mine. "I like my job, but

I only started on this path because it's what my parents wanted, and it's what Nancy was doing, too. It seemed as good as any other option, so why not make my parents happy and hang out with my best friend for longer? But you know what the process is like—college, then med school, then residency, and it's long and rigorous and also super expensive. By the end of med school, I was burnt out. Seeing you switch jobs and companies, the way you didn't compromise on what made you happy, I really admired that. You forged your own path. So you're the reason I took a break from the medical track and found a volunteer opportunity abroad."

Huh. I never knew. "But you were still using your medical skills. It's still applicable."

"Sure, but I would never have tried a non-traditional path if it weren't for your example. You taught me that if you want something to happen, you have to be the one to make it happen. You have to be willing to take risks."

We stare at each other as his last words hang in the air. I break our contest first, and snuggle back into him.

"I haven't been very good at taking risks lately."

He smooths his hand along my hair, my back. "It's okay to not take risks, too. Especially when you've been burned before."

Burned is an understatement. Incinerated, more like, with seventh-degree burns.

"But if you're talking about us," he adds softly, "then we're on the same page. We both know what we have to lose, and we're both seeing what we have to gain. Right now, despite the biggest flop of a date in the twenty-first century, I'm overwhelmed with how happy I am, being next to you like this."

My fingers close around the fabric of his shirt, clutching him closer. "I think I'd feel the same, if it weren't for the ratchet tightening my lower guts."

"The ibuprofen's not helping?"

"Not really."

He gets up, taking all the warmth with him. “I’ll get you a hot water bottle.”

He finds a fuzzy throw and tosses it over me before going off to heat up some water. And despite my discomfort, I’m bubbling with a dozen different flavors of happiness to be so spoiled and pampered.

Guess those years of babysitting him are finally paying off.

And there goes my stomach, but it’s not my period, just plain disgust at myself.

He comes back and hands me a red rubber hot water bottle, just like Grandma used to have. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He lies down next to me and opens his arms to be my tauntaun again, but I don’t climb in. “What’s wrong?”

“You don’t think it’s weird that I’ve been like an older sister figure to you? Or that I’m older?”

“Three years? No, you’re effectively the same age as me. And no, I don’t feel weird about it. Do you?”

“I mean, a bit.” And though I’ve never really cared what my family thinks, I do care about what Nancy thinks. “Are you sure you don’t, because if you do, I—”

“May I?” He closes his arm and slides his warm weight over me, and my words slam to a halt in my throat.

It takes me a few seconds to become coherent again. “May you what?”

“Kiss you.”

Unable to speak, I give him the tiniest nod.

He kisses me, and it’s the kind of kiss that starts at the mouth and unfurls down to the toes in gentle waves. I lose myself in him, turning, tossing, pulsing beneath his weight. My hands climb up over his sweater, clutching his surprisingly firm back, lacking the words for all of these bones and muscles, making a note to ask him sometime so that I can map him in my mind. My legs fall open on their own, letting him

slide between my thighs, pressing himself against me, the hard length of him making me gasp against his lips. He moves again, and again, coaxing me to move with him, kissing me with gentle nips and licks, driving me towards a sparkling finale.

I guess after so long, even jeans-on humping will do the trick. But I suspect that it's the man who's in the jeans that's making me so wet and ready for him.

Of course, Aunt Flo chooses that moment to punch me right in the cervix, and I have to stop him. "Sorry. Still cramping."

"Oh." He picks up the displaced hot water bottle and gently puts it back on my lower belly. "Sorry."

"No, no, I...I wanted to. That was nice."

He tilts his head at me with a new expression, something softer than smug. And hotter. "Then you enjoyed it?"

"I did."

"You want me?"

Did my lady-parts just quiver? "Yes."

"Then that's what matters." He curls up behind me and presses play again. "Let me know if you ever need a reminder."

I smile and curl up around the hot water bottle. "Maybe in a few days."

"I'll be waiting."

After that, I'm too distracted to watch the movie. Instead, I focus on Steven, and this feeling between us, and the sweet bubbling in my head, imagining what could come next...

Except when I'm thinking about Nancy, and the impossible things I'll have to do in order to win her back.

Chapter 13

It doesn't happen on the next or the next-next date, though by the eighth date, I start to wonder why that is. We've already met each other's parents decades ago, so shouldn't we be able to skip ahead? But it's like now that he's built it up into something that needs to be special, we can't go through with it.

Also, we've been hanging out every day, so it's a bit misleading for me to say eighth date when I mean the eighth day in a row that we've met up, and the red tide only stopped blooming a couple of days ago. But I'm approaching that point in my cycle where if he doesn't get inside me soon, I might have to ask him why directly, as embarrassing as it might be. It's been too long, and I'm an eager beaver. Or I *have* an eager beaver? Whatever.

There are days when he touches me like I'm a porcelain vase, and days when he sticks his tongue in my mouth like I'm a bowl of cake and he's been living off of kale for twenty years. But because of our schedules, we don't spend long together, maybe just a meal or dessert and a quick cuddle.

Tonight's going to be different. I'll make sure of it. Because if you want something to happen, you've got to make it happen yourself.

I take the time to iron my pants and wash my hair, and add the slightest swoop of eyeliner to the edges of my eyes. Subtle things, but it's the difference between a plain bowl of pasta and one topped with black pepper and fresh parm.

But just as I'm about to text him that I'm on my way, my phone buzzes.

Nancy: Long story but we had to cut our honeymoon short

Nancy: Any chance you can pick us up from the airport? The rideshare apps are slammed and we keep getting canceled on

Nancy: Maybe because I've thrown up in too many cars

I stare at her message for the longest five seconds of my life, sigh, and text her back.

Winnie: omw

And to Steven, I shoot off a quick explanation and apology before heading off to fetch my sister.

When I arrive at the rat-king that is the airport, we hug like in the before times, with the only difference being how much I sag into her and the tears pricking my eyes. “What brought you back? Gluten?”

She groans. “No, oysters! Just plain-old bad oysters. I promise we won’t mess up your car with our excretions, though. We stole barf bags from the plane.”

Yep, she’s Grandma’s kid, too. “It’s okay. Even if you do, I’ll forgive you. If it’ll make you feel better, let it all out.”

“Thanks.” Bradley rolls down the back window. “Might just sit like a dog, if you don’t mind.”

“Go for it, just don’t get decapitated.”

“Don’t worry, he’s hard-headed,” says Nancy with a sweet smile, and another little piece of their puzzle falls into place. I haven’t arrived at the answer to their complicated math problem yet, but I know that I’m on the right track.

Which is why I slip the sheet of paper out of my pocket and hand it to him. “For you, Bradley.”

“Oh, what is it?” He opens it up and takes a look, and from the rearview mirror, I see his eyes widen. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yep. Grandma’s recipe for spicy pickled mustard greens. Don’t share it with anyone! It’s our little secret. And if you want a hands-on demonstration, come by any time.”

He folds it up again, smiling broadly. It’s a bit dimmer than usual, I assume because he’s trying not to vomit. “Thank you.”

“Why’d you change your mind?” asks Nancy.

“Because he’s family. And even though Grandma’s not around, I’m confident that she would’ve wanted him to have

it, too.”

He thanks me again, and though Nancy doesn't say anything, I know from the way she looks at me from the passenger seat that we're officially good again. Not as good as we were before, but still good. We're going to need a long cry and karaoke sesh to clear up everything else.

Or maybe not. “So. You and Steven, huh?”

I can't see past the teasing look on her face. Is she hurt? Annoyed? Jealous? All of the above?

But after so long of guessing incorrectly, assuming that I know her, I let her speak for herself.

I swallow all the excuses and possible explanations and settle for, “Yup.”

She lets out a sweet little squeal. “I'm so glad. You're my two favorite people, and you deserve each other.”

“Hey,” says Bradley with mock annoyance.

“You're my most favoritest person ever, and no one deserves you but me. Duh.”

“Okay then, that's better.”

“You don't think it's weird, given...” Shoot. Maybe Bradley doesn't know.

“You mean, because I used to have a crush on Steven? Not at all. I was young, and for the longest time, he was the one guy-friend I had, so it felt extra special. But it's nothing like what I have with Bradley.”

I let out a breath. “I'm glad it's not weird.”

“No,” she says laughing, “it's not weird. It makes perfect sense.”

I'm not so sure about that, but I'll take it. I trust her to know herself better than I do.

The two of them are on the verge of collapsing after their fight with their bowels on their long flight back, so I drop them off and head to Steven's. I'm late, but my hair's still neat

and my pants aren't too wrinkled. The eyeliner's long gone, washed away by my oily skin, but I don't think Steven will mind.

He opens the door before I even knock.

"Sorry, I—I saw your car, so I knew you were here."

"You saw me from the third floor window?"

"Yes." He ushers me inside and guides me up the stairs and into his apartment, where there are fewer books scattered about, and a lot more candles lit. Some of them are sputtering, though, so I guess they've been lit for a while.

"Having a romantic evening on your own?"

His arms. They close around me like a Venus fly trap, but one that's warm and soft and isn't dissolving my flesh. "I missed you. I know I saw you yesterday, but I was looking forward to seeing you again."

"I missed you, too." I melt against him, into him, resting my head against his chest. "But I had to make amends with Nancy, and you know her. Acts of service as a love language and all."

"Right. Did it work?"

"I think so. And I told her that we're...together...and she didn't seem to mind."

"Of course she didn't mind. She's married to someone else," he says, scoffing.

I pull back a little, and scented smoke drifts between us. "I don't know, not that long ago, *you* were interested in her. I was afraid that she still had feelings for you, too."

He opens his mouth as if to say something...

Instead, he leads me over to the couch. "Sit."

I sit, and he sits next to me.

"That night I told you that I had feelings for Nancy..."

"Yeah?"

He looks away and smiles to himself, almost shyly. “I actually meant that I had feelings for *you*. But I chickened out at the last second and said I had feelings for Nancy because I was sure you would shoot me down, and I didn’t want to make things awkward between us or ruin our friendship. And with how much you’ve been trying to set me and Nancy up, I figured I didn’t have a chance, so I didn’t want to backtrack and tell you the truth. Better that you think I have a thing for Nancy but can’t be with her than to think I’m in love with you when you’re not interested.”

My world flips over easy, and I’m all warm and runny inside. “You had feelings for *me*? Even then?”

“Always. It was always you.”

“Me, the older sister.”

“Yeah, you, the older sister. You...” His ears go pink. “I mean, you matured faster. And like I told you before, I’ve always admired you. Nancy and I have been great friends, but we’re too similar. It’s like dating myself. But you...we riff.”

When I come to out of my momentary coma, my mouth is hanging open like when I got all four of my wisdom teeth pulled. Thank goodness, I’m not drooling. “Why did it take you so long to tell me?”

“I never thought I had a chance, especially when we were young and you were exploring your sexuality. I know you dated some guys, but you seemed more interested in girls at the time. But after your breakup with your ex, you made some joke about trying men for a change, and I thought, maybe I have a chance, and I found a reason to move back here. But before I could tell you, I found out how Nancy felt about me, and I didn’t want to hurt her or alienate you. So I didn’t say anything. But now that Nancy’s with someone else, I thought it’d be the right time to say something, but then you didn’t seem interested in me except as a prospect for Nancy.”

Oh gosh. Could my actions have been any more cringe? But he’s probably right—if he’d told me he was interested in me that day, I probably would’ve laughed him off and thrown olive pits at him.

But now? After these past few months?

I take his hand, folding both of mine over his like a Steven-stuffed calzone. “I’m sorry I was such a silly butt, but it also feels like the past few months of me being a butt were kind of necessary for us to get together? Maybe?”

He squeezes my hand and puts his on top of mine. We’re a two-person huddle. “I wish I’d had the guts to tell you a long time ago. But I’m glad, too, that you were, um, a butt. You’re really cute when you’re being a butt, all determined and whatnot.”

“So you’re a butt kind of guy, not a boobs guy?”

He smiles and pulls me onto his lap. “I’m a *you* kind of guy.”

“That’s lame. And cheesy.” And kinda sweet, I guess.

“It’s true, though. But if you want me to pick an anatomical body part, I guess, given that I’m a cardiologist, I’m a heart kind of guy.”

Aww. “That’s even lamer.”

He smiles. “Thanks.”

“Could I ask you a question, though, Mr. Cardiologist? What about Boston? Mass General?”

“It was a top option, but not the only option. I’m considering Cedars-Sinai in L.A. as well, which is a great program. So if you don’t mind doing some flying or driving, I’d love to keep seeing you.”

“Hmm. Well, my i4 only has a range of 300 miles, and I think the distance from SF to LA is about 350.”

He grimaces. “I’ll meet you halfway?”

“I’m kidding. You know how much I love driving my car.”

“Weren’t you thinking about getting a new car? A 2017 Hyundai?”

“Never!”

His hand moves from my back, down my waist, the curve of my hip, finally coming to rest on my bum. I can hardly keep my breathing even. “Honestly, though, I *have* always kind of had a thing for your ass.”

“Good! I’ve worked hard for this thing and I’m proud of it.” Ninety percent eating, ten percent walking fast.

“Hmm,” he says, still thoughtfully squeezing closer and closer to the place between my legs where I yearn for him most. Each press of his fingers sends electric shocks up and down my spine. “You’re right. Excellent tone and structure. Top point one percent of bottoms I’ve ever examined.”

“Is there a medical term for what I’ve got?”

“Um, yes, there is. A prime gluteus maximus is referred to as...*gluteylicious?*”

I cackle. “That sounds like something that’s full of gluten.”

“Then I guess Nancy had better watch out for your ass.”

He pulls me down to the couch, bringing me with him so that I’m now straddling his lap. His hands grab my hips, pulling me down even harder on his lap, and I let out a sharp, low gasp.

His eyes grow soft, while something else grows hard between us. I shift my hips back and forward, teasing us both, until his eyebrows furrow and he lets out a quiet breath.

“Lean forward,” he says quietly. “Let me touch you.”

I place my hands on his shoulders, trail them up his neck to cup his face. I lean forward until our lips are mere millimeters apart, our eyes locked. “Like this?”

He nods, and his expression changes from dark to sweet, for only a moment. “I know it’s early to say this, but it’s also really, really late. I love you, Win.”

I try to bite back my own smile, but it expands like warm dough. “I love you, too.”

And then he kisses me, takes my mouth and does things to it that I’ll long for everyday forever. He holds me, grips me,

caresses me, threading his fingers through my hair, moving me and my breath as I move him and his. And when he opens his eyes, I see everything I've ever wanted.

I was never much of a candle person before, but I could get used to all of the lights twinkling in his eyes.

Somehow, no matter how long we spend together, I don't think I will.

••••

Want more Winnie and Steven? [Sign up for my newsletter](#) and you'll receive access to a [sexy little extra](#). It's both sweet *and* spicy, just like them.

Acknowledgments and Notes

As always, I have many people to thank for their help with this novella.

My beta readers, [Katherine Grant](#), Mariana Barthelemy de Brito, and Fannie Watkinson, for their keen eyes and kind words.

My husband, Jia Liu, Rayla Murphy, and various friends for feedback on the cover illustration.

My readers and supporters, who keep me coming back to write, even when things get hard.

And YOU, for taking a chance on this book!

Now, some notes.

Usually, med school graduates don't take much time off before residency, so Steven's volunteering abroad might be unrealistic. Let's assume that he's an extraordinary doctor, though, and not a quack.

Gluten intolerance manifests differently for different people. A friend of mine said that her experience with Celiac disease was more like Winnie's description of menstrual cramps than Nancy's experience.

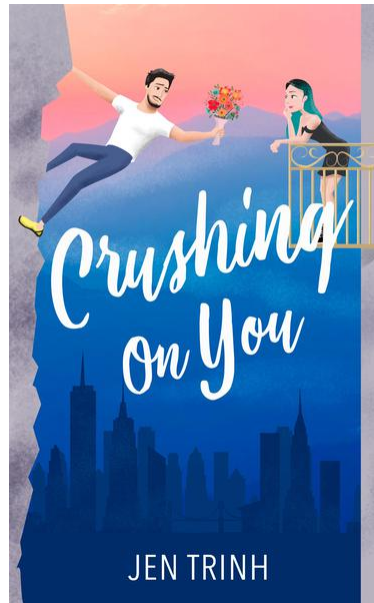
To my knowledge, hot tub restaurants do not exist ([yet](#)). However, the menu was loosely based off of a meal I had at Saison in San Francisco.

People do [catch tires while fishing](#), and lake cleanups have shown that there are indeed tires at the [bottom of Lake Tahoe](#).

Lastly, readers of mine may remember that Burlfriends #3, [Take Me](#), also features gate-crashing games, which are often a part of Chinese tea ceremonies. The games that are played are completely up to the bridal party. Sometimes, they can get pretty risqué!

Thank you so much for reading! If you liked the book, won't you spread the word and leave a review? That's the most surefire way to get me to write more books :)

Did you love *Double Happiness*? Then you should read [*Crushing on You*](#) by Jen Trinh!



Finalist for Best First Book and Best Mid-length Contemporary Romance in the 2020 NJRW Golden Leaf Awards.

Anna Tang doesn't date Asian guys. Her own Chinese family is bad enough, and she's not looking to double the trouble. Besides, she's busy chasing her dream of becoming a music journalist, and she's going to march towards it single-mindedly—and *single*, if need be.

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About the Author

Jen writes funny, heartfelt, contemporary romances with diverse Asian American characters. Her debut novel, *Crushing on You*, was a finalist in two categories of the 2020 NJRW Golden Leaf contest.

She lives in a pile of blankets near a pretty nice Wawa, with her husband and multiple tropical plants.

Sign up for her newsletter to receive discounts, freebies, and updates!

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