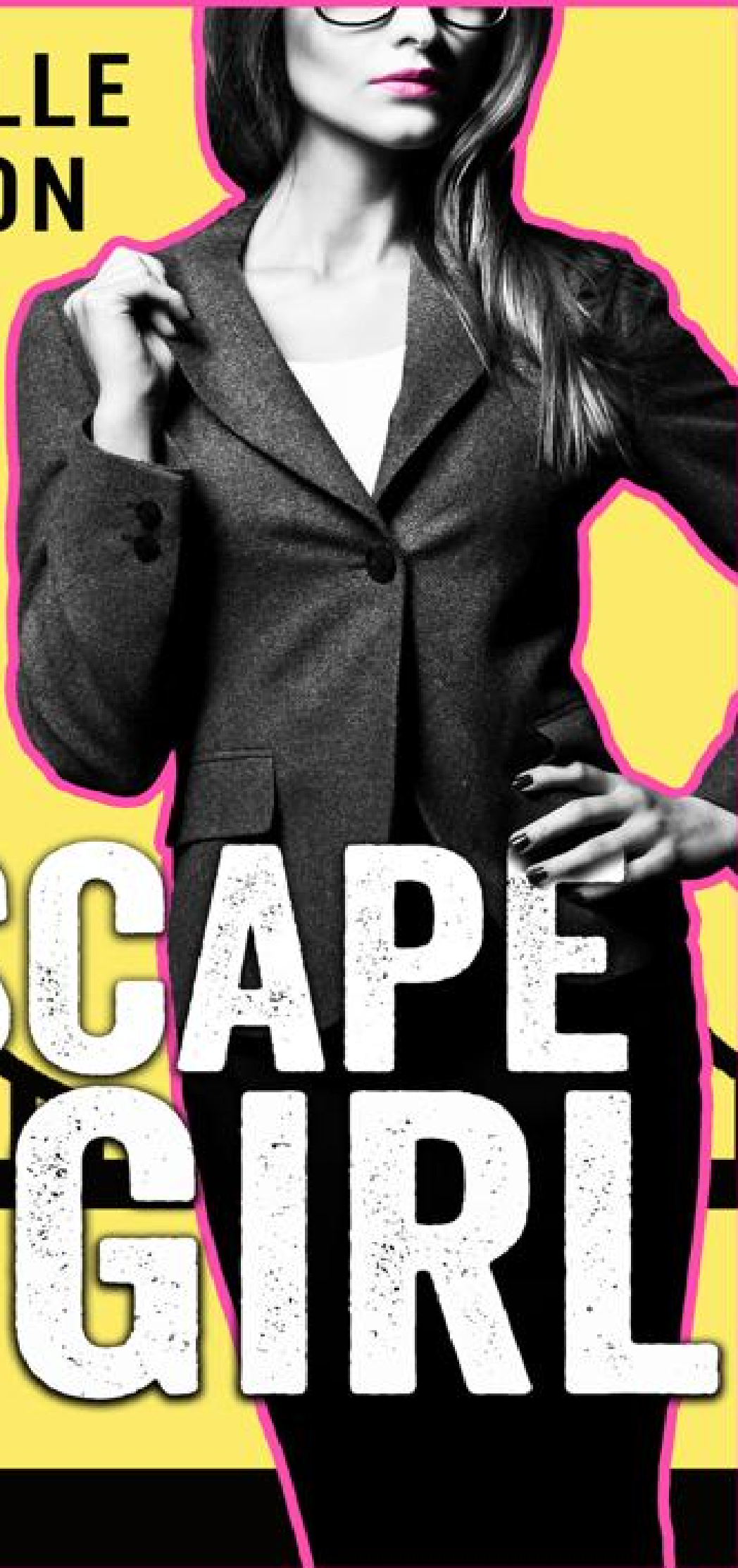


**MICHELLE
DAYTON**



ESCAPE GIRL

Escape Girl

A Tech-nically Love Novel

Michelle Dayton



Escape Girl

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Chapter One

“SO YOU SEE, Ms. Austin, what I’d like is for you to explain to my daughter that pursuing a legal career is in her best interest. Law school is unquestionably the right next step for her.” Wholly satisfied with his own analysis, the man on the other side of my desk leaned back comfortably in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest.

His twenty-three-year-old daughter, on the other hand, perched miserably on the edge of her seat, looking defeated and angry at the same time. She hadn’t spoken a word since they’d arrived, and she only made eye contact with me in short, painful bursts. This noon visit to my firm had obviously been an ambush. Poor girl had probably thought her dad was taking her to lunch.

Inwardly I sighed. *No good deed goes unpunished.* Not that this “mentoring chat,” as it had been sold to me, could be categorized as a good deed. When the named partner of your law firm—a law firm you’ve only worked at for six months—asks you to have a “mentoring chat” with the daughter of his oldest friend, you really can’t say no. “She’ll respond to you,” the partner had said, just before dropping the father-daughter pair in my office with less than ten minutes’ notice. “I’m sure you have a lot in common.”

I eyed the young woman, Gwen Meadows, as she sat across from me in trendy high-waisted jeans and a cropped red top. Her eyeliner was dramatically winged and a perfect complement to her asymmetrical haircut with bright blue streaks. Not only was I almost a decade older, but in my conservative gray suit, I was dressed more like her father.

We were both stifling yawns, but I would have bet hers were because she was out on the town clubbing with friends late last night, whereas I was in this very office until 1:00 a.m., eyeballs-deep in research. No, I doubted we had a lot in common.

Well, except pushy fathers.

I took a deep inhalation through my nose and furrowed my eyebrows thoughtfully. So Dad wants his daughter to go to law school. Daughter has no interest in law school. Dad drags daughter to best friend's law office and best friend digs up the only young female lawyer in the vicinity to try to talk her into it.

This was a strategy that would never work in a million years. Even if his daughter had interest in the law—which this one clearly did not—a little power play like this from Dad would be the exact wrong move.

Like visualizing chess pieces maneuvering on a board, I imagined and dismissed strategies as quickly as I could. There was only one worthwhile move here: the mind I needed to change was Dad's. Not an easy task. But if, under all that pushiness, her father loved and respected her, not impossible.

I nodded seriously in response to his last statement. "Law school is certainly one path to a successful career." I flicked my eyes to my computer screen, where I'd done some frantic Googling in the ten minutes I'd had to research Gwen Meadows. "Though it looks like Gwen has been remarkably successful at forging a different path.

"I see that you've been working at Fulcrum Digital Marketing," I said cheerfully. "Crain's New York Business has nothing but praise for Fulcrum. And you, personally, are building quite a reputation there."

For the first time, her gaze caught mine and held. Her spine straightened.

"Do you like what you've been doing at Fulcrum?" I asked.

"I love it," she said immediately.

Her father frowned at both of us. "She spends every waking hour at this... 'start-up.'" He said "start-up" like it tasted bad in his mouth. "She doesn't have any time left to study for the LSAT."

I opened my mouth, but he cut me off, pointed at my framed diplomas on the wall. "Ms. Austin, what did you study

in college?”

Another sigh. He was going to take me off track, but a good lawyer always knows how to account for verbal detours. “Engineering.”

He nodded approvingly and then shook his head at Gwen. “See? A real course of study.” Her shoulders slumped back down. He leaned forward, as if his gravity would physically pull me into his argument. “I wanted Gwen to study something solid, like engineering or computer science. But her mother indulged her and look at where we are.” Gwen’s lips thinned and she glanced at the door.

I tried to win her back with a light, tinkling laugh. “Where we are? With a daughter who’s not only gainfully employed, but absolutely exceling in her chosen profession? At such a young age too!”

They both blinked at me, wearing identical expressions of distrust. It was kinda funny.

The dad opened and shut his mouth a few times, before deciding on “It’s kind of you to say so, but Gwen knows very well how I feel about her dabbles in marketing.” His mouth turned down at the corners. “I would have loved for her to join my business, but she’s never been interested in it. At least law school would lead her to a real career. To something important—not like whatever she’s doing in her current job.”

Apart from the fact that Gwen looked ready to commit patricide, I wanted to bounce up and down with glee. His carelessly cruel words had given me the ammunition I was looking for.

“Importance,” I emphasized. “Right.” I glanced one more time at the quick data I’d compiled and then stared at him across the desk. “I’d have to say that most companies consider sales to be pretty important. Wouldn’t you agree?”

He smirked at me indulgently. “As a business owner, yes, I would agree.”

“Well,” I continued, “as a result of Fulcrum’s last marketing campaign for Scandal Shoes, which Gwen led, the

store enjoyed a forty percent sales increase in their last quarter.”

Dad rolled his eyes. “Yes, yes, the smutty shoe store. I’m so proud.” Gwen’s hands turned to fists.

“You should be,” I said. “But if you have something against shoes, consider her other most recent project. Did you know that her digital campaign for Trident Bank caused a twenty-five percent increase of Trident ATM usage on the Upper East and West Sides? Or, how about her campaign for Pepper, the online grocery delivery service? I don’t have the exact statistics, but the *New York Post* article I read about the ad campaign credited it with Pepper’s advance to the number-one vendor in that space.”

He froze, pummeled into silence by my calm, factual defense. Gwen was making eye contact with me again, a proud open-mouthed smile on her face. Before now, I hadn’t even known she had teeth.

Dad started to say something, but I was on a roll. “What’s the name of your business, Mr. Meadows?”

“Manor Supply,” he sputtered. I cocked my head at him, my face purposefully blank. “We sell medical supplies,” he explained.

I snapped my fingers. “Like Vocida Industries?”

His eyes narrowed. “Vocida is one of our main competitors.”

I nodded. “I’ve heard of Vocida. Not Manor though.” Shrugging innocently, I let my voice go dry and just a tiny bit scathing. “Vocida must have a better marketing team.”

When his mouth dropped open, Gwen let out a huge, honking laugh. “You just got lawyered, Dad. Maybe you were right. Maybe this meeting *was* a good idea.”

In spite of her mocking words, there was a note of care in her voice that I was happy to hear. Even happier when she stood and softly squeezed his shoulder. My chest twanged like a guitar string.

Father-daughter dynamics could be tricky, and I knew this particular one well. Sometimes career-focused fathers only knew one way to open a connection with their grown daughters—by talking about work. I rarely spoke to my own dad about anything else. It wasn't a terrible way to connect, but often these powerful older men needed to be reminded that *listening* is pretty key to relationships.

Mr. Meadows looked at Gwen's hand on his shoulder and then up at her face, surprised, like they hadn't touched in a very long time. "I didn't know about the bank and the grocer," he mumbled. "You never said anything."

Well, of course not. Resentful daughters didn't always feel the need to justify their life decisions.

Luckily, Gwen seemed intent on taking the high road now that he'd softened a bit. She tugged on his arm. "Can we please actually just go to lunch? I'll tell you more about it."

I walked them to the lobby, smiled until they got in the elevator and disappeared. *Whew*. Thank goodness they had only taken twenty minutes of my day. At last glance, my whole afternoon was blocked full with meetings, and I needed at least an hour to prepare for them.

I had to make time for a very personal conference call today as well.

The thought made my stomach roil, so I was glad when my assistant, Rosie, appeared and handed me a cup of my favorite black tea as we strolled back to my office. "Thank you!" I said. "I need the caffeine more than I need oxygen right now."

"How late were you here last night?"

"I left a little after 1:00 a.m."

"Early for you!" She mock-glared at me. "You're a robot, right? Only a robot could function as many hours of the day as you do."

"Not a robot." I yawned, although I'd been called it many times in the course of my career.

Rosie grinned slyly at me, and I knew that look. She was a woman with a juicy secret. “What?” I demanded. The assistants were always the first to know everything.

“Breaking news! It has to do with that idea you proposed to the team last Thursday,” she hinted.

I felt a zing of excitement on the back of my neck. Last Thursday I’d presented a possible strategy for case settlement, but it was risky and I hadn’t expected the partners would actually go for it.

“Depositions are being canceled left and right,” she said. “Urgent email in your inbox. Your case is going to settle, baby.”

“Wow,” I breathed, hovering at the threshold to my office. “That’s unexpected.”

“Right?! Yay you!” she exclaimed, offering a fist bump that I fumbled returning. “Bets are already being taken on which high-profile case they’ll give you next. Girl, you’re gonna be running this place in a few years.”

“That’s the plan,” I said breezily. Rosie greatly appreciated my blatant ambition, which is one reason I greatly appreciated *her*.

“So, some immediate schedule changes,” she started, holding up her tablet so I could see the calendar app. I nodded along, face serene and composed, but not really listening.

I was thrilled. Of course I was. This would be a huge boon for me so early into my tenure at this firm. Since I’d started, I’d proven I would work like a demon. But I hadn’t solely devised a case-winning strategy until now.

Huh. If the case was going to settle, all sorts of time in the very near future would free up. My afternoon, my evening, tomorrow, the day after that.

“You OK?” Rosie asked.

“Of course!” I chirped.

She waggled her eyebrows. “I bet the firm will throw a happy hour together to celebrate. They usually do on

occasions like this. Probably Friday.”

I made a practiced cooing noise, a delighted yet noncommittal sound that said, “How lovely, but I’m not sure I’ll make it.” Did I have plans Friday night? Nope. Would I go to a happy hour? Only if there was no way I could avoid it.

Colleagues were often surprised at how quickly I could go from badass in the boardroom to awkward wallflower at the bar. Innate social shyness plus an intense reluctance to discuss anything personal kept me eons away from being the life of the party.

Rosie glanced at the tablet again. “The only thing left on your calendar today is whatever personal meeting you have blocked at 5:30.” She looked up, eyes twinkling. “Please tell me it’s time that you’re spending with a sexy adult man, Robot Emily.”

“Ha.” I laughed weakly and shut the door to my office without answering.



YEAH, IT WAS time spent with an adult man. But no, Rosie, poor Cal was not sexy in the slightest. On the Zoom screen in front of me, my divorce attorney’s face looked particularly shiny.

I’d met Cal Bergman several times back in San Francisco, and he was always covered in a light sheen, even in the Bay Area’s cool climate. I used to surmise that he was intimidated by all the power players at the various social events where I’d seen him, but then I randomly ran into him at a dry cleaner’s one morning. He was perspiring then too, and I felt sorry for him. My looks weren’t anything special, but at least I didn’t walk around the world constantly drenched in my own sweat.

I resisted the urge to blot his screen-forehead with a paper towel and forced my attention back to his last words. “Apologies, Cal. Can you repeat that please?”

He nodded furiously at me as though I’d said something very smart instead of spacing out for the last several minutes during his warm-up small talk. “As an attorney yourself, you

know that California is a no-fault state. Between that and your iron-clad prenup, this should be a very simple situation.”

A Very Simple Situation. Sure, Cal. Divorces were always notoriously *simple*.

But I knew what he meant. Bobby and I had only been married for nine months. There were no children. He had his own money and no access to mine. I wouldn't think of taking his. So yeah. In that context, it was a Very Simple Situation.

If you didn't take into account the embarrassment factor of being married for less than a year.

If you didn't factor in...I don't know, freakin' feelings.

My face felt pretty hot, so maybe I was broadcasting the sarcasm. A line formed between Cal's brows and he spoke quickly. “Not that I'm trying to minimize anything, of course. I fully understand—”

“It's fine,” I said, cutting him off before smiling sweetly. This mess wasn't Cal's fault, and I'd hired him specifically because I knew he was deathly afraid of my father and would take care of this discreetly.

Outside of my office window, the mid-September sun was beginning to set. In the skyscrapers around me, office lights began to pop on to fight off the encroaching dusk. I hadn't quite gotten used to my Manhattan view yet. I'd been working on a case in London from March until August. My New York case was supposed to last well into the new year, but now the settlement would open my schedule for something new. The country's highest-ranked intellectual property firm never had a shortage of work.

“Shall I put together the paperwork?” Cal asked quietly. He spoke in such a gentle tone, probably perfected over a dozen years of handling Silicon Valley first wives. “We can file whenever you're ready.”

I glanced down at my left hand, even though I'd stopped wearing my ring a month ago. “Yes, let's get started.”

Cal bobbed his chin briskly, switching from sympathy to no-nonsense, and poised a pen over a legal pad. “Good. It

takes a minimum of six months for divorces to become final in California, so the sooner we get started, the sooner this unpleasantness will be behind you.”

Unpleasantness. What a bland word. If the end of my relationship with Bobby was unpleasant, that would imply that the beginning was *pleasant*. Which was insipidly inaccurate. I could use a thousand different words to describe the beginning of me and Bobby March and not one of them would be *pleasant*.

Of course, at the core of the word *pleasant* was “to please”...and that had different connotations, different memories.

“I’ve just realized something quite silly.” Cal adjusted his glasses with a nervous laugh. “I don’t know what your legal name is, and I need it for the paperwork.”

I swallowed a sigh and gave him a practiced smile. I dealt with the name question constantly. I’d planned on taking Bobby’s last name to end the confusion once and for all, but things were over between us so quickly. I never became Emily March.

“I generally use the name Emily Austin.” That name was on the door to my office, it was how my coworkers and clients knew me, and I was comfortable with it. “But Austin is actually my middle name.” It had been my mother’s maiden name, and my parents had decided that I’d go by Emily Austin when I left home to go to college thirteen years ago. It was an attempt at protection, at anonymity. There were always paparazzi willing to stalk billionaires’ kids to try to get incriminating photos.

“My legal name is Emily Saturn.” The *S* got caught coming out, and I slithered the “Saturn” like a snake. The name never rolled off my tongue easily. I hadn’t answered to it since I was a child, and I didn’t like using it now. It was a weird, distinctive name to begin with. My father had imbued it with such power and status that it didn’t sit well on my very innocuous shoulders. The name felt wrong. Unearned.

“Got it.” Cal jotted away. “Is your permanent address still the San Francisco place, or have you officially moved to New York?”

I hadn’t officially done anything. I’d left our condo in the middle of the night on March 31, and I hadn’t been back since. But I hadn’t moved. Exactly. “I’m just traveling for work right now,” I said smoothly. “Use the San Francisco address.”

On autopilot, I answered more simple questions, watching the day fade away outside. It would be a beautiful, crisp September evening. The kind of night that made you want to walk the long way home. I would, I decided. For once, I didn’t have a case keeping me here late, and my rented studio was blank and depressing. I’d walk the streets for hours and distract myself in the Upper West Side.

Cal’s voice turned gentle again. “I assume you’re filing on the grounds of irreconcilable differences?” Since California was a no-fault state, those were the default grounds. It was a formal way of saying that you and your spouse had serious differences that had broken your marriage beyond your ability to repair it. No one was at fault, but you still wanted a divorce.

“Yes.” It came out as a whisper, so I cleared my throat and tried again. “Yes,” I said firmly. *No one is at fault.* That didn’t feel true.

If we had gotten married in an at-fault state, there would have been different grounds to choose from:

Adultery? Nope. Or at least, it hadn’t been an issue as of the night I left him. Since then, I suppose I couldn’t blame him if he’d...well.

Of course, at this point, he could claim desertion, if he were the one filing in an at-fault state.

Maybe we could both blame mental incapacity at the time of marriage. We’d been so crazy for one another, so obsessed with each other’s every thought, so insane with lust. What was that if not a form of mental incapacity?

Anyway. We got married in California. So irreconcilable differences it was.

No one is at fault. No, that didn't feel true—but it didn't matter. None of it mattered now, except getting the damn thing over.

Cal turned a page of his pad over. “The Summons Form is relatively simple. This one tells Mr. March that you've started a court case and the repercussions if he doesn't respond within thirty days.” He cleared his throat and looked off into the distance. “Ah, is Mr. March still residing at the San Francisco address?”

I ground my jaw. “I don't believe so.” I looked at the footage from our security cameras every few days. Bobby hadn't been there in almost two months.

“I see. Has he taken up residence somewhere else in the city?”

“I don't know.” A long hiss escaped my tight lips. “I don't know where he is. We haven't spoken in some time.”

Not one conversation. Not since that horrible phone call at the beginning of August when he'd called me at my London hotel, drunk off his ass.

No more texts or voice mails either. From March until that call in August, Bobby had texted or called every single day. Sometimes multiple times a day, even though I rarely responded. Usually he was sober and his messages were reasonable, asking what was going on. But sometimes he was miserable and pleading. Rarely, he was angry. The angry ones were the messages I listened to the most.

“No need to worry,” Cal assured me. “If you prefer to have no contact with him, we can handle everything.”

“I think that would be best,” I said demurely. My current dream was to get this divorce settled without seeing Bobby's face or hearing his voice.

“We'll find him,” Cal said confidently.

After a slight hesitation, he dropped his pen and entwined his fingers over his keyboard. *Oh no. Here it comes: the unasked-for sympathy.*

He cocked his head to one side and pursed his lips in a sad frown. “Might I say, Emily, how sorry I am that your marriage didn’t work out as you hoped. You’ve always been such a nice, sweet, good-natured young woman.”

I lifted my upper lip in an attempt to smile, but in my Zoom window, I was snarling. Why were so many people such lousy judges of human nature?

Being quiet is not the same thing as being nice.

Being shy is not the same thing as being sweet.

The ability to plaster on a smile in social or professional situations is a survival skill for women; it doesn’t make us all good-natured.

Ironically, the first person in my life who immediately saw through my quiet, shy-smiling bullshit to the real person underneath was my soon-to-be ex-husband.

Chapter Two

AFTER HANGING UP with Cal, I stood at my desk and stretched my arms over my head. I still wanted the long walk home, but I wished I had comfier clothes in which to enjoy it. My tailored smoke-colored suit was one of my favorites, but it wasn't ideal exercise attire.

On my desk, the phone buzzed. "Emily, there's a woman here to see you. She doesn't have an appointment!" I almost laughed at Rosie's incredulous tone. In the six months I'd worked at this prestigious firm, I'd never met with a client spontaneously. Usually appointments were lined up well in advance.

I had nothing against walk-ins. Unusually, I was even free to take on a new case if it had merit, I was interested, and the partners agreed. I loved the idea of diving straight into something new, but I was strangely fried at the moment. Though the call with Cal hadn't been intellectually demanding, it was emotionally exhausting to pull the trigger I'd been contemplating for months.

"I'm just about to leave for the day," I said to Rosie. "But I'll meet her quickly before I go. Send her in, and then you go home too, OK?"

"Got it. Thanks."

I cleared my throat and pinched my cheeks, tucked my hair behind my ears. An inquisitive smile turned up my lips, and I opened my office door, ready to shake hands.

"Miss Austin?" Her voice was low and tremulous.

I blinked in surprise at the woman in the doorway. She was about my own age, early thirties. Tall, at least five foot ten, with long, blonde hair. She wore a pair of oversize glasses with thick frames, possibly with the intent of obscuring her pretty face. It didn't work. Even with no makeup, wearing baggy jeans and a long beige cardigan sweater, she was clearly a beauty.

“Call me Emily,” I said, waving her in. “I’m afraid I don’t have time for a full consult right now, but give me a summary of your case and I’ll see if we should continue our discussion in a longer appointment this week.”

“Um.” Her eyes went wide behind those frames and she blinked several times, clearly not sure where to start. Frankly, she looked like she was on the verge of tears.

I didn’t alter my inquisitive smile, but a tiny current sparked to life along my spine. Something was very different here.

There were many ways to practice IP law, and I dealt mainly with corporate situations. Most of my recent cases involved intellectual property disputes between large multimillion—or multibillion—dollar corporations. My days were spent in conference rooms full of attorneys and product experts, reviewing intensely technical documentation, collaborating on complex strategies for litigation. The work varied from tedious to fairly interesting, but not once had it ever brought an upset young woman to my office.

“Let’s start with your name,” I said softly, hoping to put her at ease.

“Bella Bradley,” she whispered. OK, so she looked like a catalog model and sounded like an expensive line of yoga apparel. Out of habit, I grabbed a legal pad and jotted down her name while perching on the edge of my desk.

Normally, I’d ask her to sit down, but jaw-cracking yawns were fighting to break free of my lips and I wanted to get out of here before it was full-on dark outside. “What brings you to me, Bella? Tell me about your case.”

She bit her full bottom lip and turned her head to the window. “I guess I don’t even know if I have a case. I went to two IP attorneys before I got referred to you, and they didn’t think...I mean, they didn’t want to, ah, work with me.”

Interesting. But it didn’t necessarily mean that she didn’t have a valid suit. There were a lot of reasons attorneys turned

down clients: overall workload, areas of specialization—particularly in intellectual property—or conflicts of interest.

She looked from the window down to the floor, briefly meeting my gaze in the middle. “When it was suggested to me that I reach out to you about my situation, I was so relieved that you’re a woman.”

I tried never to show surprise to a client, so I didn’t move a muscle, but my eyebrows wanted to draw together. Why would that matter? I mean, she was right, intellectual property firms were notorious for their lack of gender diversity. Mostly because of an overall shortage of women in the science and engineering fields, but also because of other deeply rooted equity problems. But I’d never had a case where my gender mattered in either a positive or negative way.

“Let’s try this,” I said. “Tell me your problem in six sentences or less.”

I loved this technique. Many of our clients brought us engineers or coders who could get very hung up on details or intricacies. Some of our meetings went on for hours before we had an idea of the big picture. Normally that was fine—and hell, I did charge by the hour—but tonight I wanted that big walk followed by a bigger glass of wine.

“OK.” Bella closed her eyes tightly, wrinkling her lids.

One. “On my own, I worked for over a year to design and develop a new software product.”

Two. “I went to a tech conference and met a famous CEO of a software company.” Her upper lip twitched and she turned away from me even though her eyes were still closed.

Three. “I told him about my product at the bar, and we drank, and one thing led to another and—” her voice dropped to a whisper “—he came home with me and we slept together.”

I wanted to tell her to get rid of the shame in her tone. Why would she be embarrassed about consensual sex? But I didn’t want to interrupt her flow, so I let her keep going.

Four. “In the morning he was gone, and I noticed that stuff on my desk, especially my laptop, was not exactly how I keep it.”

Five. “A few weeks later I got a cease-and-desist letter from a law firm saying that I couldn’t do anything with my own product because of copyright infringement.”

Her eyes popped open and she shouted her sixth sentence, outrage apparently triumphing over her embarrassment. “That asshole stole my code, my work, and now he’s going to pass it off as his and sue me if I try to use it!”

My mouth wanted to drop open so badly I bit the inside of my lip to keep it from happening. So yeah, my instincts had been right on. This was very, very far from any kind of typical IP case.

Bella wasn’t quite done. “The other attorneys practically laughed me out of their offices. Because of the sex? Because he’s rich and famous and I’m nobody?”

Her voice cracked on the last word, and my heart broke a little for her. I could easily see the derision on other attorneys’ faces. Without even knowing more than six sentences, I could tell her that there were major problems here.

But I also believed she was telling the truth. When you spend most of your life in the corner, most of your life being quiet and shy, you develop a good ear for what’s bullshit and what’s not.

And if this story were true...

I crossed behind my desk, punched a few keys, and looked at my calendar. “How’s 11:00 a.m. tomorrow?”



THE WALK HOME was not as relaxing as I’d hoped.

It started off lovely. The meeting with Bella had given my brain a little zap, and I spent the first several blocks mentally preparing for how I’d lead her through our meeting tomorrow. If I wanted to take the case after speaking to her, I’d need to

devise a strategy for convincing my firm's stodgy management to get on board as well. When the sun went fully down, the temperature fell into the low sixties, which was perfect for the brisk pace of my walk. After an hour or so, I began to fantasize about the frozen Home Run Inn pizza in my freezer, so I turned toward my rental.

That's when I passed a newsstand and my eyes caught today's date: September 13. I had no idea why it hadn't resonated with me earlier in the day, but when I saw it printed on a newspaper, I stopped short and bent over as though an invisible fist had just punched me in the gut.

Exactly one year ago today, I met Bobby March for the first time.

I stayed bent over, staring at the pavement, unable to catch my breath. My wheezing was loud in my ears, and my hands cramped into strange twists. Static filled my ears and my pulse sped into uneven, heavy thuds.

How could time be so mysterious? How could so much have happened in one year?

A year ago yesterday, I was just fine. I was visiting my father in San Francisco and juggling job offers. Maybe I wasn't ecstatically happy every damn minute, but I was *fine*. Maybe it sometimes felt like I was waiting for my real life to start. Maybe I often woke up in the middle of the night with a painfully heavy weight on my chest.

But really, seriously, truly...I was *fine*.

Then, on September 13, I went to the Irvings' dinner party, and I hadn't been fine since.

"Are you all right?" A woman in her sixties bent next to me, forehead wrinkled in concern. "Do you need help, sweetheart?"

Embarrassment pumped adrenaline through my veins. I forced myself upright and gulped in the evening air, gasped a few times before the wheezing subsided. "I'm OK. Sorry to worry you." I flexed my fingers out of their frozen claw shape.

She cocked her head. “No need to apologize. You’re very pale. Should I call you an Uber?”

I forced a smile even though her maternal concern was causing my left eyelid to twitch. My mother would have been close to her age if she’d survived the aggressive breast cancer. But she hadn’t—and that was a whole other year of my life where time was mysterious.

“I’m fine, I promise.” I pointed north. “My apartment is only two blocks away.”

“OK.” She paused. “You know, having a panic attack is nothing to be ashamed of.”

A panic attack? No. I did not just have a panic attack on the street because I read the date off a newspaper. That would be ridiculous. “Thanks for your help,” I said cheerily, and power-walked away from her.

My apartment was dark and silent. I uncorked a bottle of wine that was much too nice for a nothing Tuesday night and preheated the oven to 400 degrees before roasting myself in a hot shower and pulling on my softest sweatpants. I doused my cheese pizza with red pepper flakes and inhaled two slices while standing at the kitchen island.

“You like your pizza naked?” Bobby had asked incredulously when I told him on our second date that I preferred plain cheese with no toppings.

“Well, yes.” I’d laughed, shaking the can of pepper flakes. “But I like a lot of this on it.”

“So you like naked and spicy,” he shot back, eyes searing and sparking at me across the table. “Good to know.”

Now, the pizza turned to cardboard in my mouth, and I put the rest in a Tupperware container. Maybe I’d be hungry at 3:00 a.m. during my nightly insomnia. Bobby had liked his pizza with sausage, pepperoni, mushrooms, green peppers, and black olives. His slices were so loaded you couldn’t even taste the cheese or sauce or crust.

It was terrible how you couldn’t stop knowing things about people when the relationship was over. I didn’t want to think

about Bobby's preferences every single time I wanted pizza myself. That relaxing shower I just took? It made me think about how Bobby sang in the shower. Every. Time. He'd sing Cardi B or Ed Sheeran or whoever was last on his car radio or in the grocery store. I once caught him fully belting Celine Dion's song from *Titanic*. He didn't even have the grace to look embarrassed. He just grinned at me, dumped shampoo on his head, and started the next verse.

I poured a large glass of wine and took it to the window. Thank goodness Bella Bradley had appeared out of nowhere with a juicy case for me to dive into tomorrow. Because I didn't want even one more night like this, a night where I was home alone by 8:30 with no one waiting for me in a city I didn't know.

I could always get a head start on tomorrow. The thought perked me up, and I settled at the desk near the window. I could Google Bella and see if she had any public skeletons in her closet. Nodding to myself, I brought up my email account, thinking I would begin by emailing her some basic resources about copyright law. I could also—

One new item in my inbox.

A message from Bobby March.

Subject Line: Can You Escape? Invitation inside...

What the hell? That didn't even sound like a real message. At worst, it sounded like a cheap ad or a scam. At best, a kids' birthday party invitation to one of those stupid locked room places. Maybe Bobby's email account had been hacked. I should definitely just delete it without opening.

But I did not.

Good evening, Emily,

On this evening of September 13, Bobby March has invited you to a personally designed virtual escape room: the Irving Townhouse. Wander around, enjoy the sights, absorb the clues—but don't stay too long! To win, to "escape," you'll need to type in the answer-phrase correctly within one hour. The timer starts the moment you enter the room. Up for the challenge?

There was no signature. Just a navy button with red font that read: *Welcome to the Irvings*'.

It looked exactly like the doormat that greeted visitors to the stately home of Dimitri and Selma Irving. I remembered staring at it, a year ago almost to this very moment, while I waited for them to open the door and welcome my father and me to their dinner party.

I hadn't wanted to go. Who threw a dinner party on a Monday night anyway? And the Irvings were not close friends. Dimitri, a big hedge fund guy, always made a fuss about me when my father was in the room. When he wasn't, Dimitri looked right through me. I liked Selma more. She was a touch ridiculous as a human being, but at least she was kind along with silly. She spoke more slowly than any other person I'd ever met. It wasn't because she couldn't speak faster. It was an affectation she chose, to space out her words so that every sentence took hours to complete.

I actually really enjoyed watching her speak to other people. The longer her conversation partner refrained from cutting her off or checking their phone, the more I respected them. In most of those half-speed conversations, Selma spoke about three things and three things only: elaborate dinner parties, eternal renovation and decoration based on constant HGTV viewing, and her two beagles: Chip and Joanna.

"Are you sure we can't cut and run?" I'd said to my father out of the side of my mouth while we stood on their porch. I could hear Selma's heels clattering, bearing down upon the front door. "We could go to a diner. I'll ignore your cholesterol and let you have an enormous cheeseburger."

His lips twitched. "Couldn't you have brought up that bribe a little sooner?" He put an arm over my shoulder and squeezed me to him. "We've already rung the doorbell."

Next time, I'd bring up greasy red meat as soon as we got into the car. I fixed a polite smile on my face just as Selma threw open the door and exclaimed, "Sven! Emily! Come in, come in! I can't wait for you to see the place. I've redecorated!"

With an inward groan, I followed them inside. My father liked to pretend that he hated these things as much as I did, but it was just an act. My mother had managed their social calendar for the entirety of their marriage. For the first couple of years after she was gone, he'd existed as a workaholic by day, hermit by night. Despite his grumbles, evenings like this made him a happier person. These parties almost always invited couples though, so during this long, between-jobs visit of mine, he'd enjoyed coercing me into being his plus-one.

Now, in my sad little New York studio, my mind stuttered to a halt. *No*. I was not going to think back to that evening. What was Bobby doing? Why was he trying to make me remember the night we met?

We were over.

I stood up, grabbed my glass of wine, then swung back to the kitchen for the entire bottle—I was allowed to drink a damn bottle of wine on the day I finally decided to file for divorce!—and crawled into bed.



THE THING ABOUT insomnia is that it doesn't care how much wine you drink.

I woke up at 3:12 a.m. with a pounding head and dry mouth. Cursing my own idiocy, I stomped to the kitchen sink and drank straight from the tap for a full minute before filling a glass and throwing back a few Advil. Then, a few slices of reheated pizza.

Three a.m. had been my mortal enemy for the last five years. It was a rare night when I didn't open my eyes to see the number 3 on the clock. Sometimes I could roll over and eventually fall back asleep. But on others, like this one, I was awake for ages.

The worst thing about my recent 3:00 a.m. episodes was that, in the months I was with Bobby, I didn't mind them at all. When we were married, I'd wake him up too. Sometimes to

talk, sometimes...not. Every single time I shook him awake, he'd look at me with sleepy delight.

I suddenly found myself at the computer, staring at the *Welcome to the Irvings'* button. Tomorrow (real tomorrow), I would blame the mixture of the wine and the meeting with the divorce attorney, all capped off by 3:00 a.m. loneliness. I'd be able to justify this and forgive myself.

I clicked the button.

On the screen appeared a very detailed rendering of the outside of the Victorian-style townhouse. It zoomed in on the navy doormat and then the door swung open, revealing the foyer with super-shiny, overly polished dark floors, and too-small rugs.

I'd forgotten that! The floors were so slippery that night that all the women were skidding off balance in their heels. I shook my head, incredulous. Bobby had an incredible eye for detail, and his memory was a bank vault.

On screen, we moved from the foyer down the short hallway and into a formal living area, where we'd had cocktails before being seated for dinner. At the Irving dinner parties, Selma always started her guests with a "signature cocktail," something my father complained about because he only ever wanted Scotch.

Of course, Bobby had re-created this too. A tray of burnt-orange negronis was sitting on the elegant bar in the corner of the room. The view on the screen rotated, so that an enormous painting of a nude woman's backside took focus in front of the screen. My throat began to burn from the effort of suppressing everything.

Fine. You win, Bobby. I'll remember.

Chapter Three

One Year Ago

THE PAINTING WAS so ludicrous that I chewed the inside of my top lip—hard enough that the next sip of gin was going to sting. But if I didn't control my mouth, it was going to shape itself into a judgy, bitchy smirk at our poor hostess's expense.

The painting was of a woman's back, butt, and legs as she lounged on a blue velvet settee. It didn't reveal any part of the subject's face. But it was clearly supposed to be Selma. Selma was a big fan of strapless gowns and asymmetrical shirts. The triangle of small moles on her left shoulder blade was as familiar to me as the shade of dark pink lipstick always highlighting her formidable lips. The woman in the painting sported an identical isosceles mole triangle, as well as a spill of hair in a variety of blonde shades ranging from honey to platinum. I'd once heard Selma boast that it took three colorists four hours every six weeks to keep her signature blend of hair colors perfect.

I cocked my head as my eyes traveled to the problematic part of the woman in the painting. She may have had Selma's geometric moles and she may have had Selma's intricate hair. The ass, however...

"Do you think this painting is a prophecy?" A question spoken so low that only I could hear.

I snapped my gaze away from the painting's exquisite ass and looked up in surprise at the man suddenly next to me. "Huh?" I didn't recognize him, but that wasn't surprising as I'd only been back in the Bay Area for a couple of weeks.

I would have remembered him if I'd seen him before. He was one of those unmistakable people. (Us generic-looking people often resent his kind.) He was probably mid-thirties, over six feet tall with thick, golden hair, grown at a shaggy length that would look stupid on most men, but it decidedly did not look stupid on him. He was tan like he'd just come

back from a beach vacation, and he had deep smile lines around his eyes and mouth. They were crinkled now around his bright blue eyes.

My own were crinkled too, not with mirth but with confusion. “A prophecy?”

“A prophecy is a prediction, a forecast,” he began, eyes twinkling. Was he teasing or mansplaining?

“Yes, I know what a prophecy is,” I said. Snapped, really. I’d been around at enough of these nights to be familiar with the typical male attendees. The men near my age usually fell into particular categories: boastful start-up tech founders, schmoozy sales and marketing execs, and lots of “I know everything” lawyers. Most of them treated these nights like networking events or auditions for a TED Talk instead of parties.

I’d been so dreading my possible seating partners for dinner that I’d snuck into the dining room to see the place cards when we first arrived. Thank God I was seated next to my father.

“Excellent.” He waved his negroni toward the painted naked lady. “So I was just wondering if this painting is a heads-up from our hostess about certain impending changes.”

Oh. The mischief in his voice made my lips twitch. He’d been teasing, then. This wasn’t some stuffy banker or insufferable crypto bro. Inexplicably, this was someone *fun*.

I raised an eyebrow at him and spoke softly. “Meaning, Selma wants everyone to know that she’ll soon be getting butt implants?”

He grinned down at me, almost with relief, as though he’d been hoping to find someone snarky. “Perhaps the buttock augmentation is already complete.” He pointed directly below the painting. I hadn’t noticed the blue velvet settee against the wall, an identical twin to the one in the portrait. “Perhaps she’ll settle herself right there later and let us compare art to reality.”

It was just too perfect of an image: ludicrous, of course, but if Selma had one too many negronis, you could *almost* see it happening. Oh God, please let that happen. I'd suffer through twelve boring dinner parties if Selma would cross that bizarre, hilarious line.

A significant snort-laugh erupted from my nose before I could stop it. "Sorry," I gasped.

His answering laugh was deep and delighted. "Don't be. I *love* it when people snort when they laugh. It's literally one of my favorite things in life." Well, I loved when people got tears in their eyes at the smallest of chuckles, and right now, there was a sheen of moisture covering his.

"I don't know you, and I usually know everyone at these things," he said, like an invitation.

Sigh. Now I would introduce myself, and he would get *that look* in his eye when he realized who my father was.

I opened my mouth, but to my surprise, he cut me off. "So I asked four different people here who you were and what you're like."

My mouth closed abruptly. Why would he do that? Also, I could guess what the four people had said, and they were all sure to be wrong. I swallowed a sigh. "Oh?" This encounter had started so fun. Now I wondered how soon I could excuse myself.

He took a slow sip. "You're Sven Saturn's daughter." Yep. For the entirety of my life, that would be the first—and sometimes the only—thing most people cared about. "You're intensely smart and have some sort of big, important job." OK, he totally embellished that point. I'm sure whoever he talked to actually just used the word *workaholic*. To be fair, that was also correct. Work was my place, my cathedral, my sports arena. Work was home.

He cocked his head. "And you're very quiet and sweet."

Of course that's what they said. Quiet was correct; sweet was not. But when you're a little shy with a heart-shaped face and round eyes, people always make the leap to sweet. In

actuality, Resting Bitch Face would have suited my internal personality much better. I'm sure people were trying to be kind, but why is sweet a good thing to call someone? In our hyperaggressive, competitive world, who the hell wanted to be sweet?

To the man beside me, I ducked my chin. "Well, that was nice of them." Where was the tray of negronis? Maybe I'd survive this night with a nice little buzz. Or maybe I could put on headphones and go into another room on the pretense of taking a call. I had Netflix on my phone.

His blue eyes were so bright. "It's bullshit though, right?"

His gaze and forthright tone gave me a buzz that had nothing to do with gin. He tapped his temple. "There's a lot going on in there, but I'm guessing that very little of it is sweet."

Correct. Either he was extremely astute or... "Is this your schtick?" I retorted. "Find the quiet girl in the room and make her feel like she's some sort of secret badass that only you can see?"

He laughed. Hard. A surprised, loud, genuinely elated laugh. *I did that*, I thought proudly.

"Who *are* you?" he asked, and suddenly his blue eyes were...intense.

The direct stare right at me, the timbre of his voice, the way he drew a microinch closer. My skin went warm from head to toe and my pulse went *thud, Thud, THUD*.

I swallowed, and his gaze went to my throat and back to my eyes. He leaned even closer, then apparently realized that was not dinner-party-appropriate, so he backed up so quickly he banged into someone behind him. A slight flush crawled up his jaw as he recovered, but his embarrassment didn't make him look away or change the intensity of his expression.

Did I do that to him? I wasn't the kind of woman that made men clumsy, but I could *sense* it. He felt the thud, Thud, THUDDING too.

"I'm Emily," I managed, remembering to offer a hand.

His warm hand took hold of mine, not like a greeting shake, but as if he intended to keep it. My fingers intertwined with his, immediately cataloging the exact temperature of his warmth, the texture of his skin, the strength of his grip.

“There you are! I haven’t seen you in ages, Bobby!” A tall woman with ebony hair appeared between us and the painting. She pressed into him for an enthusiastic hug so I automatically yanked my hand from his. He let mine go, but he squeezed it—hard—first.

What did that mean? Or was the hand squeeze just something he did to everyone? What did I care anyway? We’d exchanged a few sentences, not our life stories. I had no right to feel this level of annoyance at the brunette’s appearance. I knew her, actually. Nora something from Dimitri’s company. Still with one arm around Bobby, she offered a polite party smile. “You’re Sven’s daughter, right? Nice to see you again.”

Of course she hadn’t remembered my actual name. “You too.” I was about to pull away, maybe find an out-of-the-way bathroom and do today’s Wordle on my phone, but Selma waltzed into the room. Her eyes lit on our trio and she sashayed over.

“Now, Emily,” she said, after a few minutes of chatting with Nora about the recent weather. “How is your insomnia these days?” Oh good God. I’d made the mistake of mentioning it to her once, and now she was determined to cure it.

“Pretty much the same,” I said.

“Did you ever try the Xanax I recommended?” she asked loudly, apparently not caring that I might not want a party full of people knowing that she’d recommended antianxiety medication to me.

Nora cut in. “How much exercise do you get?” She gave me an up-and-down. “Try adding at least forty-five minutes of intense cardio to your day before medication. That will usually solve everything.”

Thanks, Doctor. Super helpful. I pursed my lips and nodded thoughtfully.

“Or,” Bobby said, and I cut glaring eyes to his face. So help me God, if he suggested yoga or guided meditations, I was going to scream. “Consider not changing a thing.”

Was this a trick?

He lifted a shoulder in an elegant shrug. “Back before the industrial revolution, before electricity, when night was dark early and really long, it was actually normal for people to wake for an hour or two in the middle of the night. They called that space in the night ‘The Watch,’ and it was a treasured part of ordinary life. Daytime was so busy with back-breaking manual labor that this special time between the first and second sleeps gave families an hour to think or visit with neighbors or smoke or have intimate conversations with one another.”

Despite my initial skepticism, I softened. He’d taken something that plagued me nightly and reframed it. Although his gaze roved over Nora and Selma as well, he was talking to me. “Maybe there’s nothing wrong with waking like you do. Maybe you’re living a rich tradition that predates modern times.”

Oh man. I kinda liked that. Which was obvious when my mouth turned up at the corners in a soft, gooey smile.

“Fascinating,” Nora said, her voice sharp.

“Oh! I didn’t realize it was so late!” Selma gave us all kisses on the cheek and crossed the room to position herself directly in front of the painting. Bobby edged a glance at me, raised one eyebrow, and then narrowed his eyes at Selma’s rear end. My nostrils flared with humor.

She hit her cocktail glass with a spoon, grabbing the room’s attention.

“Everyone, we’re ready for dinner!” she called. “Let’s move on through to the dining room.”

The din of the small crowd rose with halfhearted cheers and stifled sighs because we all knew what was coming next.

The Irvings always used top-notch catering, so the actual food would be amazing. But we'd earn it with twenty minutes of "oohs" and "ahhs" as Selma paraded us through her redecorated spaces. I saw a lot of disappointed glances at the now-empty tray of negronis.

"Don't worry, everyone!" Bobby's stage whisper carried above the party chatter. "I'm on a mission for libations." With admirable grace, he disappeared from the room and from view altogether, somehow managing to escape Selma's notice as she talked about her agonizing decision over hallway wallpaper.

When he caught up to the dozen of us five minutes later as we were admiring a new chandelier in their den (a chandelier in a den? Really?), he was carrying a tray of champagne flutes and two bottles of Veuve Clicquot. "You scoundrel!" Selma exclaimed slowly, but she happily accepted the first glass he poured before calling our attention to the new crown molding.

When the dining room finally came into sight, I saw my father's white head barrel in front of the crowd and smiled to myself. He was probably starving and hoping there'd be some sort of bread bowl on the table.

"What do you do for a living? Quickly." Bobby's whisper in my ear was so light and fast I almost thought I imagined it. When I looked up with wide eyes, he was nodding along to Nora as she related a story about a recent trip to Rome.

But then he locked his gaze to mine and widened his eyes as if to say "Tell. Me."

Baffled, I mouthed "lawyer" at him. He gave me a tiny nod and then grabbed Nora's elbow to escort her across the threshold of the dining room. What on earth?

As expected, Dad was already seated and wolfing down sourdough. I started toward him, but he caught my eye and shook his head apologetically, pointing to the place cards. What? I'd checked them earlier, and I'd definitely been seated at his right side at the end of the table. Dimitri and Selma didn't sit at the heads of the table. They preferred to sit dead in the middle, in the center of attention. They tended to place the

less popular guests at the edges. Which, frankly, suited me just fine.

“Let me get your chair, Emily.” Suddenly at my side again, Bobby gestured to a place setting at the opposite end of the table from my father. Sure enough, my name was on the place card there—right next to one that said “Bobby March.”

Had...had he moved the place cards? Why?

Selma entered last and dropped into her center seat with a large smile. Which abruptly disappeared when she saw the people on her right and left. If her facial muscles could have moved, her expression would have been thunderous. She half stood. “The caterers messed up the place settings. We need to rearrange.” She spoke unusually rapidly before dabbing at her lips with a napkin, confirming my long-held suspicion that her time-consuming drawl was a choice.

Her husband glared at her. “For God’s sake, Selma, everyone’s fine. Let’s just eat.” It was the first time I’d ever liked Dimitri.

She tried for a fun pout instead of Dinner-Party-Zilla. “Well, at least Bobby has to change seats.” She beckoned my handsome seatmate to her. “You were supposed to sit next to me so that we could discuss the Cannes Film Festival.”

Foolishly, my stomach dropped. But Bobby didn’t move an inch. “We’ll catch up over dessert, Sel.” He glanced at me and gave her a meaningful eyebrow raise. “I’m grateful to have Emily’s time tonight. I need to get her opinion on a time-sensitive legal situation.”

Selma sat back down with a thump and sent a withering stare to the innocent catering staff. “What have you done?” I said under my breath to Bobby, who simply blinked his heavy lids. “Don’t give me the Bambi eyes. I was in the room an hour ago, and the table was arranged differently.”

He held up his hands. “Fine. I moved them. I’ll still do my part. I just couldn’t sit next to her during dinner tonight.”

His part? What did that mean? And, “Why not?”

He closed his eyes briefly. “Two reasons. I know this is cruel, but I’ve sat next to Selma at five dinner parties this year, including one last week. She talks *so* slowly. It wears me out. I know that’s an awful thing to say.”

Maybe, but I appreciated his honesty. “You know, she’s able to speak as quickly as she wants. Watch her speak to the caterers.” At that moment, the catering manager was bent over Selma to discuss the presentation of the first course, and we watched the normal, almost frantic, pace of their interchange. When the catering manager stood, she swiped a hand across her face.

“I did know. Most people don’t realize that though.” Bobby leaned closer, curiosity brightening his face. “What’s your guess on why she talks so slowly most of the time then?”

“I have two guesses,” I admitted. “One nice and one mean.”

“Tell me both,” he demanded.

“The nice one—she’s lonely when other people aren’t around.” I frowned sympathetically. “So when she has an audience, it’s a technique to make people pay extra attention. Like how some people purposely talk softly so others lean in to hear.”

Bobby’s eyes crinkled. “I already know you hate this word, but that’s very sweet. Now tell me the mean one.”

“It’s a bit more mundane, I’m afraid.” I took the last swig of my champagne. “But the slow talking is actually Selma being considerate.”

Bobby looked fascinated as he took a roll from the breadbasket. “What do you mean?”

I grimaced and lowered my voice even more. “Selma’s clearly had quite a bit of work done on the bottom half of her face: lifts and fillers and collagen.” Overkill, in my opinion, but if that’s what made Selma feel beautiful, more power to her. Except: “Because of all that work, she can’t exactly control the shape or movement of her lips.” I wrinkled my nose. “If she talks too fast, she spits like a camel.”

Bobby burst into wild laughter, and every woman at the table looked over. I wanted to hide. Bobby didn't seem to notice the curious gazes. He just kept beaming at me.

Time for a topic change. "What was the second reason that you couldn't sit next to her?"

Bobby shifted in his seat and looked at his plate. "Because I had to sit next to you."

Warmth flooded over me. I never had any idea what to wear to dinner parties, so I usually just opted for one of my work suits with a prettier top under the jacket and more jewelry. Sitting next to Bobby made me too warm for the jacket, so I started to shrug it off.

Wait. He hadn't meant that comment in the way my body was taking it. Maybe the suit jacket should stay on for the legal consult. I cleared my throat. "Right. What was the legal situation you wanted to discuss?"

He shook his head at me in mock disappointment. "I made that up. I don't need legal advice. I just...had to sit next to you."

"Oh." How in the world did one respond to that?

Luckily, the first course was served then. Crisp endive salads with apple slices, blue cheese crumbles, and a zingy vinaigrette. As the table dug in, I began to realize what Bobby meant when he'd said "I'll still do my part."

He was both the spark and the glue of the room.

If conversation lulled for more than a few seconds, Bobby would say something like: "I saw an article in the *Chronicle* last week about the quality of pinot noir that's being grown this year. Nora, Yohan, you both have interest in pinot vineyards. What was your take on that?"

Or: "Dimitri, when we last spoke, you were obsessed with that cigar bar in the Mission. Has it held up?"

Or: "Margot, what's the must-see show on Broadway this year? This group needs your expertise!"

It was incredible to watch. The conversation was lively, varied, and interesting. He included everyone. He even got my father telling a story I'd never heard before, about a trip to Monterey when he was a boy.

But the best part by far was that every time conversation took off among the table, he turned back to me. Our personal conversation wasn't terribly deep; there were too many people right there. We talked about where he lived in the city (North Beach), what we'd done earlier in the day (job interview for me, errands for him) and favorite foods (everything for both of us). His condo was currently under renovation, and he made me triple-snort-laugh as he discussed the many snafus that occurred while being a guest at his buddies' homes.

Despite the innocuous conversation topics, there was a particular quality of the way we stared at one another. Some sort of current running between us that we both felt. Something that said *later*.

When the staff began to remove dinner plates, I didn't know whether to feel excited or disappointed. Selma was describing the elaborate dessert buffet the caterers had set up in the living room, so I knew I'd lose him when we stood up. But his body language! By this point, he was half turned away from the rest of the table, focusing only on me. It didn't seem like dinner was going to be the end.

Bobby glanced over his shoulder and winced. "Your father's giving me quite a look."

I cocked my head down the table. My father wasn't glaring, but there was an evaluative quality in the way he assessed Bobby. How long had he been watching us?

I smiled gently and lifted my glass to him. My father's gaze softened, and he returned the half toast. "He's probably just wondering what we're talking about. He's not used to me being so chatty at these things. I usually sit next to him and stifle yawns and sneak glances at my watch."

Bobby didn't look convinced. "Nah. He's a dad, and he's noticed the way I'm looking at you."

Well, *thud*, *Thud*, *THUD* indeed. “How, exactly, are you looking at me?”

His eyes crinkled, his mouth curved, and he lowered his head toward mine. For a thrilling second, it didn’t seem like looking—or answering my question—was what was going to happen next.

But then, of course, Selma and the whole rest of the table stood, and the moment was broken. In the living room, the party of twelve formed and re-formed conversation groups as we all helped ourselves to miniature portions of key lime pie, crème brûlée, and tiramisu. Predictably, my father got an urgent phone call and began to pace the hallway, barking orders to one of the hard-working teams at his venture capital firm.

As always, I blended into the background to watch and listen.

Bobby March. *March*. I’d heard of his family, I realized, now that his physical presence wasn’t distracting every one of my thoughts and nerve endings. His parents had been legendary in Silicon Valley history. One of them was instrumental in the early days of Apple and one of them at Microsoft. His older brother Jamie was kind of famous right now for being a whistleblower on the dangers of social media and other online threats.

Had I ever heard anything specifically about Bobby? I didn’t think so. Based on his appearance and everyone’s reaction tonight, he was obviously quite popular and social, but I hadn’t heard anything about him professionally. He hadn’t said anything about work over dinner either. Given his parents’ history, he probably had quite a trust fund. Maybe he didn’t work.

Of course, as I watched him captivate the room, it occurred to me that tonight was probably a great deal of work for him indeed. Or at least it would have been exhausting to me; maybe this brilliant tap dance came naturally to him.

Was he even aware of it? How everyone in the room orbited him like he was a magnet full of sunshine? Selma

beamed after everything he said, flushed with the success of her party. Nora enjoyed bobbing one-liners at him. She'd stand off to the side until she thought of something clever and then she'd fling it at him like a witty Ping-Pong ball. Bobby would take a moment to show how much he enjoyed her intellect and then wing something even wittier right back at her. The volley made her feel smart and seen. To the men, he effortlessly steered them between Monday Night Football and the recent activity of the stock market, making sure everyone got to say something of value.

My father popped his head into the room and waved me over. He put a hand over his phone's mouthpiece. "Call the car, will you, Em? I've got to hop on a video conference."

I nodded and texted my father's driver to come round front. "Two minutes," I told him.

"Say our goodbyes?" he asked. I rolled my eyes and nodded.

Selma hugged me. Dimitri waved at my father's back. To the rest of the group, I gave a general farewell. Bobby met my eyes for a brief moment, but he was trapped against a bookcase by three of the other guests who were arguing animatedly about the latest real estate bubble.

I followed my father down the hall to the front door. I could taste the disappointment in my mouth, a tangible flavor like the bitter Campari in the negronis. How silly of me to think that this evening was different than any other.

"Unacceptable!" my father bellowed into his phone and stepped out on the front porch. It was a very cool night, not that he noticed. He just paced back and forth, barking orders. The car wasn't there yet, so I stepped back inside the front door to wait in the warmth.

Inside the living room, a woman's laughter. "Bobby! You're terrible." I wondered how long he'd keep everyone in his easy thrall and if they ever got tired of taking turns. The group was mostly behaved adults, but even in my brief surveillance I could see that they'd prefer not to share him. They were like children around a trampoline. They bounced

off of him feeling exhilarated and special. No wonder they couldn't stay away.

Did the joy go on forever, or did people eventually get hurt?

A laugh burst from my lips.

“What’s so funny?” Of course he appeared right then as I chortled to myself. He looked unsure for the first time that night. “Are you laughing at me?”

“Not *at* you,” I said. “But I’ve just found a way to perfectly describe you, and it amused me.”

He furrowed his brow and his lips twitched as if he was prepared for a joke. But was there also a flash of vulnerability?

“You’re an ‘attractive nuisance,’” I informed him.

His mouth dropped open. “I’ve been called a lot of things, but that’s new.”

“In legal terms, an ‘attractive nuisance’ is something like a swimming pool for which a landowner may be liable for injuries to children...because it’s something so appealing, they can’t stay away.” I shrugged, giggling helplessly. “It’s not a perfect analogy, but I was watching everyone clamor around you—they can’t stay away—and the phrase just popped into my mind.”

Bobby didn’t seem to know what to make of that. He cocked his head to one side and examined my face.

Outside on the porch, my father rapped on the door without even looking in. “Em! Car’s here!”

I opened my mouth to say goodbye, but Bobby spoke before I could. “Are you free Wednesday? Will you spend the day with me?”



Now

MY CHEST WAS aching, seriously aching, like a fifty-pound weight was sitting on it.

On the screen, the escape room had shown different parts of the Irvings' home. We'd moved from the painting to the dining room, with a deep focus on place cards, and now the view was hovering at the front door where Bobby had asked me out.

A text box appeared: *What is the phrase to escape this room?*

I put my fingers to the keyboard and typed in "Attractive Nuisance."

The screen filled with celebration images, but instead of the traditional balloons, negronis rained from the top of the screen to the bottom.

Congratulations, Em! You win!

I pushed myself away from the desk and stumbled back into the bedroom, my head pounding and my heart sick. What, exactly, had I won?

Chapter Four

“WE’RE GOING TO take this nice and slow,” I said to Bella across the table in my office. A coffee carafe, a teapot, a pitcher of water, and an assortment of pastries and fruit sat between us. In front of me, my laptop was open and a stack of legal pads with at least eight pens sat off to the side. I liked to be prepared.

I’d had four cups of tea already, but I poured myself a fresh cup. I hadn’t fallen back asleep until after 5:30, and I’d only gotten a fitful hour after that. But the 3:00 a.m. insanity had passed, thank goodness. When I’d woken up, I deleted the invitation to the Irving Escape Room. I had no idea what Bobby thought that little act of memory would accomplish, but my morning brain knew that erasing the room—from my inbox, from my memory—was the right thing to do.

Bella looked as lovely as she did the day before. She was wearing a light blue sweater with brown leather patches on the elbows. When she arrived this morning, she mentioned that she was staying at a Marriott down the street, which surprised me. I’d made the assumption yesterday that she lived in the city. I didn’t know that she’d come to New York specifically to see me. Where did she live? Where did all the shenanigans she described yesterday go down? I guessed I’d find out today.

Bella took a sip of water and paged through a folder of notes she’d brought with her. Nice. I liked a client who knew how to document and organize.

“Tell me the long version of the story you told yesterday.” I picked up a pen. “Try to be as specific as possible on names, dates, and times. I’ll interrupt with questions when I need to. Start with your professional background.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “I have a degree in computer science. When I was younger, I always intended to design and build software. I was the kid who loved Legos, you know? I took coding classes at the YMCA when I was in fourth grade.” She met my eyes briefly and sighed. “But when

I graduated college, I got recruited by a management consulting company. I'm from a small, poor town in Wisconsin and I couldn't believe the salary they offered. So I took that job and worked as a consultant for almost seven years."

I jotted rapid notes, already pleased. She had a solid education and work history—immediate credibility for this kind of case.

"I enjoyed consulting for a while: the travel, the clients, getting exposed to new industries and technologies and business problems. Then, about a year and a half ago, I got an idea, a good one, for a software product. I was a little burnt out at work, and I had some money saved up. I decided to resign from my job and try to build the product myself." She smiled sadly to herself. "I was really excited to dive into a coding cave and just...create."

"What does your product do, Bella?"

She picked a stapled packet of papers from her folder and handed it to me. "I brought you a design document."

Impressed, I read the first couple of paragraphs. "It has to do with fighting against ransomware?"

Very cool. I'd heard a ton lately about ransomware, a type of malicious software designed to block access to a computer system until a sum of money has been paid. While no industry was safe from ransomware attacks, law firms had recently become increasingly attractive as targets because of the confidential and sensitive nature of the data handled in lawsuits. Law firms also tend to be more vulnerable than other types of businesses because they often didn't have strong digital security. I'd seen more than one email from our small IT organization urging the firm's partners to invest in encryption products.

"Yes." She leaned forward. "Have you heard of GuardTower? It's been available for three or four years. It's one of the best programs out there for multilayered ransomware protection."

I wrote down the name and underlined it. “It sounds vaguely familiar.” I did a quick Google search and saw that, indeed, GuardTower was very well reviewed and thousands of businesses used it for protection.

“It’s open-source software.” She paused. “Do you know what that means?”

I bit back a smile. People always forgot that IP attorneys often had technical backgrounds. “I do.” Open-source software is code that is designed to be publicly accessible—anyone can see, modify, and distribute the code. Most open-source software, like GuardTower, was also available free of charge.

“My product is an add-on to GuardTower,” she explained. “GuardTower works great, but its main criticism is that it’s not very user-friendly. You have to be an IT security specialist to really make use of all its functionality. My product was supposed to bridge the gap between GuardTower and users who aren’t super technical.”

“How so?”

She flushed a little. “I hadn’t named it yet, but I was going to call it TowerWizard or something like that. Basically, it’s an administrative console, a control panel, that makes using the product much simpler for most people. IT security professionals are really hard to keep on staff, because their skill set is so valuable. They often jump around to the highest-paid positions, and when they leave, companies have a big gap—no one who has expertise on GuardTower. My product was supposed to fix that. It’s a simpler front end. Non-security professionals can understand the user interface and take advantage of the functionality.”

“OK.” I reviewed what I’d written so far and nodded to myself, comfortable I understood the basic gist. “What did you intend to do with TowerWizard?”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I was about ninety-five percent finished with development, and I’d done a fair bit of unit testing. I was going to hire some testers to work with me for a few months to catch and fix bugs. All in all, I figured it’d be ready to release in five or six months.”

Her lips turned down at the corners. “I wanted it to be as close to perfect as possible before I made it official. I planned to release it free and open source, with some media exposure when it was available.”

I raised my eyebrows. “You weren’t going to sell it?” Even though products like GuardTower were free, many companies existed solely to sell products or services related to open-source products.

If Bella’s product worked as she described, she probably could have made a ton of money.

She lifted her chin. “No way. I’m a huge believer in the open-source software movement. I love the idea of a community of collaborators working together to make things better, particularly when it comes to something as awful as ransomware.” She sighed. “I was going to copyright my original code because, yeah, I wanted my name on it. I wanted to be known in the tech community. But I wasn’t going to sell the licensing to use it or modify it. I wanted *everyone* to be able to use it.”

She met my gaze. “I’m not overly altruistic. If my product became widely adopted among businesses that use GuardTower, it would have been a huge success for me. I would have made money in some way, either with a big new job at a top-tier company or with seed money from investors to start my own software business.”

My cup of tea was gone. I reluctantly switched to water before my eyeballs started to vibrate inside my head. I turned to a fresh page. “So you were ninety-five percent done with coding; you hadn’t brought in testers yet. This is when you went to the fateful conference?”

“Yeah.” Her hands went to fists on the table. “I’m still mad at myself for going. Furious with myself for what took place later. If I hadn’t, none of this would have happened.”

“You don’t know that,” I said matter-of-factly. “The same bad thing could have happened another way. This situation is not your fault.”

She blinked at me. “Thank you.” She sounded so surprised at the basic kindness that I almost got angry. Whoever else she’d met with had clearly done some traumatizing victim-blaming.

“The conference,” I said gently. “Tell me everything that happened there.”



LATE AFTERNOON, AFTER a slightly hoarse Bella left my office, I took an hour’s break to walk the city streets before returning to review my notes with fresh eyes. Bella hadn’t held anything back. I could *see* the events she described, almost like a scene from a movie.

A little more than two months ago, on July 13, Bella Bradley attended an IT conference in Chicago that focused on cybersecurity. I’d done another quick Google search to ask: “There are more than fifty conferences a year that focus on some sort of IT security. Why did you choose this one?”

“Two reasons,” she answered. “First, it was in Chicago, where I live. So I didn’t need to travel. It was an affordable option for me. But more importantly, I wanted to go because Cole Taggert was giving one of the keynote speeches, and I hoped to meet him.”

Cole Taggert. The name sounded familiar. Another quick Google revealed that he was CEO of a successful software company named SideDoor. I scanned through his bio. “Oh! I remember this guy.” I read a few more lines, my eyes widened, and then I fell silent for a few moments before looking up at Bella.

“Cole Taggert is the creator of GuardTower?” I asked quietly.

She met my gaze evenly. “Yes. SideDoor is his business, and it’s a well-known dev shop, even if it hasn’t exactly lit the world on fire lately. But Cole Taggert is even more famous for GuardTower. Out of nowhere, a couple of years back, he released it free and open source, with this really inspiring press

release about how everyone deserved the chance to defend themselves from ransomware attacks—not just big companies who could afford the protection. He could have made millions upon millions of dollars selling it, but he released it for free.”

I nodded slowly. “The press called him the Robin Hood of code or something like that.” The vat of caffeinated tea in my stomach was starting to turn on me. Bella had warned me yesterday that a “famous CEO” was involved, but I’d just assumed she meant he was niche-IT famous, not “profiled in every major newspaper” famous.

After attending two full days of sessions without being able to connect with Taggert, Bella finally saw her chance right as the conference ended. The last event was a cocktail and networking event held in the bar of the conference hotel. Taggert was holding court in a corner booth, trading jokes with friends from SideDoor and intermittently greeting other conference attendees.

“Why did you want to talk to him?” I asked Bella.

She cocked her head to one side. “Two reasons again. I wanted to fangirl a little over him and tell him how awesome GuardTower was. And I wanted to tell him about my product! I was so proud of it, and I thought he’d be interested since it integrated so seamlessly with his work.” She shrugged. “Maybe I was lonely after all of those months working on my own. Maybe I was hungry for some sort of acknowledgment that it wasn’t wasted time. That I’d actually created something great.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “So you met him at the bar?”

Bella had made her way to his table and bravely introduced herself. “I stumbled through it,” she remembered. “I was awkward and starstruck.” But Taggert had been immediately kind. He asked her to sit down at the table with his group.

Oooh. I perked up. “Did you mention your product in front of that whole group?” Potential witnesses of that conversation could be critical.

Bella shook her head. “Not in a useful way. I was still so nervous. I mentioned that I was building a GuardTower-related product, and one of the guys at the table said something obnoxious like: ‘You and a zillion other baby coders.’ It made me angry, but he was drunk, and I knew I could wait him out.”

After an hour, Taggert’s friends were leaving, and he waved to the waitress to bring the check, wondering aloud about the next Metra train leaving for Winnetka. Bella knew she couldn’t delay any further if she wanted to really talk about her work. “I pulled up a demo on my laptop,” she said, face flushing red. “I showed him the UI and how it would work and talked about my successful tests to date.”

Taggert stopped looking at the train schedule and asked the waitress for another round for the two of them instead of the check. He was dismissive to anyone else who stopped by the table, focusing solely on her. “He asked a lot of questions,” Bella said. “I was thrilled. He was clearly impressed. My head went straight to the clouds, thinking maybe he’d even endorse it publicly in some way.”

“How long were you at the bar?”

“Probably two and half hours,” she said. “I think it was about 8:00 when we finished up.”

“You had your laptop open?” I asked. “Would the waitress or anyone else in the near vicinity remember what you guys were looking at or discussing?”

“No. We were in a booth the whole time, the screen facing only us. The bar was really crowded, so the waitstaff was slammed.” She looked down and bit her lip. “Anyway, about thirty minutes before we left, Taggert shut my laptop and the conversation shifted.”

I nodded briskly and flipped another page. “You two began to talk less about your product and more about your personal lives?”

“Yes.” Bella’s face was a steady deep pink now, but she kept going. “Sort of. I mean, he asked a lot of questions about me, my life. I realize now that when I tried to reciprocate and

ask about him, he was kind of evasive. He would always turn the focus back on me.” She paused. “I know it sounds shady as hell when I say it like that, but in the moment his interest was flattering.”

I made a note to myself to return to this piece of the evening with Bella later, to dive deep into the kinds of questions that he was asking. If he’d already been planning a theft, he may have been trying to ascertain what sort of adversary she’d be: How much had she shared with others about her product? Had she shown it to anyone else? What kind of financial situation was she in? Did she have family money or power via other high-level connections in the industry?

As they left the conference hotel, Taggert suggested they get dinner. He took her to a small French bistro in Bucktown. It was dark and romantic and the wine flowed freely. “I definitely had too much to drink,” Bella said bluntly. “But he kept ordering things for us to try, and I felt like I was in some sort of dream. I didn’t want to say no to anything. He was handsome and charming and funny. I wanted to match him.”

Ooof. That was a tough phrase to hear. I’d always wanted to match Bobby too. Talk about futility.

“Did you speak about your product at all during dinner?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“No.”

“After dinner?”

Taggert asked Bella if he could make sure she got home safely. When the Uber arrived at her walk-up, Taggert asked if he could walk her to her door. “Then you invited him in?” I prompted.

She gave me a wry glance. “Not verbally, but we were kissing. A lot. So it was assumed when I unlocked the door and led him in.”

I cleared my throat. “Consensual sex followed?” She nodded, blinking hard.

Bella slept unusually hard, probably because of all the wine. When she opened her eyes around 6:00 a.m., the bedroom was quiet.

“How did you feel?” I asked.

She scrunched up her face. “Kind of embarrassed? I mean, I’d enjoyed the evening. He’s older than me, and it was exciting to be wined and dined by someone so sophisticated. The sex was fine. Not bad, but sort of...perfunctory? When I woke up, I wasn’t feeling ashamed or anything. But I was a little weirded out by how fast it had gone. Like, one minute we were discussing the intricacies of my code and the next, he was telling me how beautiful my eyes were and how he wanted to take me to his favorite restaurant.”

He was also gone when she woke up, which didn’t feel great. “There was no note or text or anything. Almost no evidence he’d been in my apartment at all.”

“Almost?”

Her eyes went dark, lips thin. “Later that morning, I sat down at my desk to work. I’m really anal about my workspace. I could tell that things weren’t in their proper place. Like, cords were askew and the back-up drive was a few inches to the left of its normal place. When I went to get my laptop, it was not in my bag the way I normally place it. It was turned in the reverse direction.”

“What did you think about all of that?”

She flushed again. “Ridiculously, I was almost excited. I thought Taggart might have been up in the middle of the night and he was so interested that he wanted another look at the stuff I’d shown him.”

I made another note. We’d have to dive into this later too: Did she say or type in her password in front of Taggart? How could he have accessed her files?

“When did you hear from him again?”

A harsh laugh escaped her lips. Light reflected off of her glasses. “I never heard from him directly again. No texts, calls, or emails. No contact on any of my social media—and believe

me, I checked! I felt ridiculous for weeks. I'd acted like a groupie instead of a professional woman."

I restrained myself from offering more pointless reassurances. She'd had sex with a guy and bad shit happened. Nothing I could say would make that better.

She sighed and went on. "In the meantime, I decided I was ready to hire those testers. I put up an ad on a few local tech job boards. The next day I received a cease-and-desist letter in my email from an expensive firm. Another copy followed by certified mail two days later."

The next day? I jotted three exclamation points in my notes. That was unusual—way too fast. Like someone had been watching and waiting. "Can I see the letter?"

She handed it over, and I scanned the letterhead on the first page. I'd heard of the firm, Bird & Dreyer, but didn't recognize the name of the attorney who'd signed the letter, a James A. Hill.

The letter was six pages long and used unnecessary legalese, but the gist was easy: Cole Taggert's attorney was ordering Bella to cease and desist because they were claiming copyright infringement on the code of the TowerWizard. They claimed that TowerWizard was the intellectual property of Cole Taggert and included a copyright registration number.

Well, that wasn't good. I looked up at her. "He has a copyright on TowerWizard?"

Miserably, she nodded. "He must have registered the copyright after he stole it from my laptop."

I shook my head. "The timeline doesn't work. Bella, it takes six to seven months for the US Copyright Office to grant copyright registration. He couldn't have this if he took the code from you only a few weeks before you got the letter."

She shoved her chair back from the table and stood, frustration personified. "It's *my* code! I swear to God!"

"I believe you," I said firmly. And I did. But this just didn't make sense at all.

Ignoring the headache caused by too much caffeine and not enough sleep, I documented the key facts of Bella's story into an executive summary on my laptop. I left my office for half an hour to grab a tea—herbal, this time—and to trade jokes with Rosie.

Then, with that minor distance from the data, I sat down and tried to view the case through a partner's bottom-line-driven eyes. Those eyes confirmed what my anxious stomach already knew.

There was no way they'd agree to take this case.

Chapter Five

FROWNING, I CLOSED the door to Gabe's office and marched stiffly down the hallway to my own. *That didn't go well.*

Wednesday had passed in a flurry of settlement discussions to close out my prior case. Today, Thursday, I spent time thinking about Bella and doing some research I wanted to have on hand before our next meeting, which was scheduled for 10:00 a.m. tomorrow. I owed it to her to make my decision by then. She needed to know if I was going to take her case.

I wasn't even sure yet what that meant. If Bella ignored the cease and desist and continued her plan to release TowerWizard, Taggert's next step would be litigation. He could file an injunction, and I could represent her in court. But from what I knew so far, it'd be a waste of a trip to the courtroom.

"This case is a loser," Gabe had just said matter-of-factly. Besides Rosie, he was my favorite person at the firm. We had lunch a couple of times a week and often used one another as sounding boards. I'd hoped he might see merit in Bella's case or find an angle I hadn't considered. He'd been at the firm for years and was well known for his instincts on how to maneuver the organization. Which is why I felt crushed at his pithy judgment: "The partners won't agree that you should take it."

He held up counting fingers. "One, Taggert has the code registered for copyright and she doesn't. Two, there's that scandalous he-said, she-said nature to it, and a sexual component. He's famous; she's beautiful. If it goes to court, it'll get press. Lots of it. Which the firm won't want, because we will lose. Three, Taggert is clearly ready to throw money at this since he's already engaged Bird & Dreyer. Does your client even have the resources to fight back?"

Doubtful. Bella had mentioned that she could stay free at her hotel for a week because she had so many points left over from all of her consulting travel. But I also knew that she

hadn't worked for eighteen months as she was developing her product. She wasn't even grabbing takeout for dinner in the evenings; she was stopping at bodegas to grab fruit, yogurt, and noodles. When she left on Tuesday evening, she'd hovered in the door and shifted her weight. "Um, how do I pay you?"

I shook my head. "Let's figure that out later." My \$450 per hour billing rate might give her sticker shock.

I grabbed my purse from my office and locked the door, headed out into another lovely September evening, another long walk back to my apartment. Gabe wasn't wrong. On paper, this was not a winnable case. Two parties had access to the exact same code, and one of them had a copyright. Taggart could claim exactly what Bella was claiming—that she got the code from his computer during their one-night liaison.

But I believed Bella completely, and it wasn't just her story that convinced me. Examining the cease-and-desist letter in detail had raised some red flags for me. OK, not red flags. Maybe pale pink ones. Enough that I wanted to dig in further.

But if my firm didn't support this case... Ugh, I could feel frown lines so deep they were probably permeating my skull.

Technically, I could take the case pro bono. Work it on my own personal time.

Except I didn't take personal time. Ever. Except for the four-month blip when I was between jobs and Bobby and I first met, my assigned cases consumed my every waking hour, most of my waking thoughts, and I liked it that way.

It was why my reputation in the IP legal community was so stellar, and it was why the partners here had recruited me. If I kept it up, I'd be a partner myself in a year.

"You must really love the work," Bobby had marveled when I'd first talked him through my normal daily routine. "To commit to it like that, when the financial compensation is not your main motivator."

Such a polite way of saying that Sven Saturn's daughter was never going to hurt for cash.

But did I *love* the actual work?

I didn't hate it.

I tried to explain to Bobby, because he really seemed to want to understand. "What I love is that I built this career all on my own merit. It's mine." Most of the clients and attorneys I interacted with had no idea who my father was, and that was incredibly refreshing and important to me.

But beyond my daddy issues, there was more to my workaholic nature. I'd never really been able to explain the "more" to Bobby, but the "more" was the true reason I'd been so devoted to the crazy hours of my job, the constant cases and competition.

My work had provided the intense structure and distraction I'd needed to...to...freakin' hold myself together.

My phone rang before my thoughts could wander down that particular path, thank God. *Speak of the devil*. My father, of course. Pretty much the only person who called regularly.

"Hey, Dad."

"Em! I'd almost forgotten the sound of your voice." His gruff voice chided me, but I could hear the relief and swallowed a prick of guilt. He had called several times in the last couple of weeks. I hadn't felt like talking so I'd answered with texts.

"I just got home from work," I said, forcing cheer into my voice. "How are you?"

"Oh, still at the office." I could hear the contemplative frown in his voice. "This team is going to be the death of me." I rolled my eyes. My father had the most brilliant men and women from all over the world working at his venture capital firm. He just liked to worry. For very little reason. No matter what his analysts recommended, he was always the final decision-maker. Which was a good thing for his supremely successful firm; he was justifiably famous for his street smarts and consistent good judgment.

Well, with two enormous exceptions to that good judgment. But the world didn't know about one of those

exceptions at all and had only sympathy for him about the other.

“Got your text about your case settling,” he said. He took a careful breath, and I closed my eyes. Here it came again: the unwanted sympathy. “Can I talk you into a visit home? Take care of you a little?” He tried a laugh. “I haven’t seen you in months. I’m starting to feel a little aban—Oh—uh. Ah.”

I could sense his horror at the poor choice of phrase, and my stomach plummeted. My father and I could not joke about abandonment.

“Soon maybe,” I chirped, pretending my mind hadn’t gone to the same place his did. “I’m considering a pro bono case though, so we’ll see.”

We talked about the weather, about one of Dad’s noisy neighbors, about office politics. I could tell that he wanted to ask about Bobby, and I almost told him about filing for divorce. But I couldn’t. It was only starting to be real for me, and if I told my father, it would be real for everyone. Also, I figured that Bobby should really be the next person to know and Cal hadn’t found him yet.

I promised my dad I’d call him again in a few days, and examined my fridge doubtfully. I really needed to learn to grocery shop like a grown-up. But I had a few slices of cheese, some not-yet-old bread, and a stick of butter. Triumph! I made a perfect grilled cheese on the stove and wolfed it down, still standing.

Outside the window, the sky was dark now, and I glanced into the lighted windows of neighbors around me. September 15.

I’d been ignoring the date all day. So what if a year ago had been Bobby’s and my first date? I’d survived my freak-out from the other night. Was I going to be fixated on particular dates for the rest of my life, or was it something that would fade as more time went on? As Bobby and I drifted firmly into the past, would I stop remembering every key moment that happened on every key date last year?

Of course I would. No, that wasn't sad.

I sat down at my computer for no reason. Opened my email for no reason.

Liar.

I looked because I *knew* there was going to be something there. That Irving Escape Room had the feeling of a beginning of something, not an isolated incident.

Here it was. Another email from Bobby March.

Subject Line: Can You Escape? Invitation inside...

Good evening, Emily,

On this evening of September 15, Bobby March has invited you to a personally designed virtual escape room: The Libraries of San Francisco. Wander around, enjoy the sights, absorb the clues—but don't stay too long! To win, to "escape," you'll need to type in the answer-phrase correctly within one hour. The timer starts the moment you enter the room. Up for the challenge?

There was no signature. Just a button that looked like a phone with a text message displayed: *I hope you like long first dates.*

The lump formed in my throat so quickly I couldn't vanquish it with fury. *I hope you like long first dates.* When he'd asked me out at the Irvings', I thought he'd been exaggerating when he said "Spend the day with me." But he wasn't. Our first date was a daylong affair.

I blew out a long breath and contemplated the email. Did I want to click the stupid button and get drawn into another emotional maelstrom? God no. But maybe that wouldn't happen this time. I'd been drunk and sad when I dove into the Irving Escape Room. Tonight I was sober and frustrated, which was definitely better.

You want to play, Bobby? Fine, I'll play. I'll solve your stupid riddle and then I'll walk away.

I had to keep living in this damn universe with him in it. So I might as well prove to him—and myself—that I could.

I clicked on the phone button, and the screen went to black. After a moment, the sound of a car's rumbling engine

burst through the speakers and a detailed image of a dark green Jeep appeared, driving toward me.

An unwelcome memory: last year's Emily literally waiting by the window, too nervous to even have a cup of tea. Bobby had sent the *I hope you like long first dates* text message to me the night before, followed with *I'll pick you up at 9:00 a.m.*

The message had been thrilling, mostly because it confirmed that this was a date-date. I'd spent a ridiculous amount of time debating my outfit. What did one wear on an all-day date? I hoped we weren't going on a hike or something. I had nothing against hiking, but I was a little out of shape, and my gasping and wheezing probably wouldn't make a great first impression. I'd finally settled on slim dark jeans, a soft gray cashmere sweater, comfortable ankle boots, and a pair of silver hoop earrings. Not the most original or sexy outfit, but I'd be comfortable and it was appropriate for almost anywhere in the city.

On the laptop screen, a map of San Francisco appeared behind the image of the green Jeep. I didn't need to watch the map. If I let myself, I could remember every moment of that day. I remembered that day more clearly than I remembered entire years of my life. If I let myself...



One Year Ago

I DIDN'T EVEN wait for Bobby to ring the door. As soon as I saw him climb out of the Jeep, I ran downstairs and opened the front door without a moment's hesitation. Apparently, I was not going to play hard to get.

"Hi!" He beamed at me as I appeared in the street. It was annoying how good he looked first thing in the morning. We'd only seen each other in Selma's carefully lit rooms, but now, in broad daylight, he looked even better, like he'd just mountain-climbed out of a Patagonia catalog.

"You look wonderful." He almost looked surprised at the words as they burst through his lips.

“Thanks.” I hoped I wasn’t blushing. I knew exactly what I looked like, and it did not match the reverent tone in his voice. I gestured to his Jeep. “Where are we going?”

He opened the passenger door for me. “I’m taking you on a tour of my favorite places. But they’re all the same kind of place.”

When he got in the driver’s seat and started the car, I started guessing. “Favorite...diners? Dog parks? Tattoo parlors?”

He grinned. “Glad you’re thinking ahead to our next three dates already.” He started the car. “But today, we’re starting with my favorite libraries.”

We drove to Potrero Hill, a hilly area of the city with bay and skyline views. I hadn’t been over here in ages, and I’d certainly never gone for the library. “The Potrero Hill Branch was the twenty-second branch in the San Francisco Public Library system,” Bobby lectured like a tour guide as we parked.

“Why are we starting here?” I asked, already completely giddy with the day stretched out in front of us.

He pointed to a small coffee shop across the street. “Because we’re going to go get beverages and sneak them inside up to the second floor. There are gorgeous views of the city up there.” He smiled at me, and this time I saw a twinge of nerves. “I thought starting the day with caffeine and scenery might be just the thing.”

Warmth spread in my chest. He’d really *planned* this. He was as excited to be with me as I was with him. How... intoxicating. “Perfect.”

It really, really was. We sipped hot drinks overlooking our gorgeous city, and Bobby told me more about the library. This particular branch had children’s Spanish, Chinese, and Italian collections. Even cooler, it had a seed library. Visitors could take seeds to plant and later bring back the best seeds from what they had grown.

The librarians all knew Bobby. They waved, said hello, gave pointed glances at the rule-breaking coffee cups in our hands but didn't say anything. "How often do you come here?" I asked.

"Once a week, usually." He reached down a hand to pull me up. "Ready for the next?"

It was a quick drive to SOMA, or South of Market, which is a part of town that encompasses Mission Bay and South Beach. It's filled with warehouses and dotted with upscale dining options and nightclubs. "Now this library is only open on Wednesdays, so we're lucky today."

The Prelinger Library wasn't part of the San Francisco Public Library system. It was an independent research center, primarily a collection of nineteenth- and twentieth-century ephemera, periodicals, maps, and books. Much of the collection was image-rich and in the public domain. We spent some time poking at the enormous collection of maps, the part of this library Bobby particularly admired. "What's your favorite place in the world?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," I said—and immediately felt stupid.

But Bobby just looked charmed. "I like that answer. It implies that there's so much yet to be seen or discovered before making a decision."

"Do you have a favorite place in the world?" He seemed like one of those people who was absolutely at home wherever they were.

"Not exactly," he said thoughtfully. "More like, I have favorite moments in time that are associated with different places."

"Give me some examples," I demanded.

He nodded, brow furrowed. "The town of Sonoma is one of my favorite places because I have so many memories of summer fireworks there with my family when I was a kid. An amazing restaurant in the town of Kinsale, Ireland, where I fell into lifelong love with seafood. A certain dive bar in New York because my college friends and I went there almost every

day for four years to play darts. That kind of thing. I love places because they're all wrapped up in memories."

I appreciated his self-awareness and knew exactly what he meant. "I used to love the dressing room at Nordstrom," I said quietly, shocking myself. "Because that's where my mom would take me for special growing-up bonding stuff. Like when I first got a bra. Or when I needed a prom dress. My first suit for law school interviews."

I shut up quickly, hearing my voice grow hoarse. I couldn't even go near Nordstrom now.

Bobby looked like he wanted to ask more questions, but when he saw my tight lips, he paused. "One more stop before lunch?"

"Ah! I've actually been here before!" I called out as our next destination came into view. The Bernal Heights Branch of the San Francisco Public Library had a distinctive colorful mural on its outside that always made me smile. I'd donated money to its impressive array of community programs.

"It's a favorite within my favorites," Bobby said. Once again, the librarians inside all waved and said hello to him by name as we browsed the bulletin board advertising monthly Lego nights, origami club meetings, poetry workshops, and Teen Fridays.

"Do you come to this one every week too?" I asked.

He glanced over and nodded, looking mildly embarrassed. "I go to all of them once a week."

My mouth dropped open. "You do?"

Bobby shrugged and started to stroll slowly toward the interior of the library. I followed as he said, "I'm not 'gainfully employed,' darling. I have a lot of free time."

I didn't like his insouciant, self-mocking tone of voice. I hated how he called me "darling." It reminded me of how he managed the other guests at the dinner party.

"Don't—" But I didn't know how to finish my admonishment. Don't be flippant? Don't treat me like

everyone else?

Somehow, though, he knew exactly what I meant. He stopped walking, shook his head, and faced me. “I’m sorry.”

“Tell me more,” I asked. “Do you go to a different library every day of the week?”

“Yeah.” He fidgeted with a rack displaying the librarians’ recommended picks for September. “I read for several hours every morning. Newspapers, fiction, memoirs, history. Anything, really.” He gestured to the groups of people clustered at tables and browsing the stacks. “But I get itchy if I’m home alone, reading in silence. I like to be in a bustling environment. It makes me feel like I’m a part of something, even if I’m really not.” He paused and smiled sheepishly down at his feet. “God, that sounds dumb to say aloud.”

I shook my head. “First of all, it doesn’t sound dumb at all. Second, you *are* a part of something. You’re part of a community. Of readers, of knowledge-seekers.”

He squinted at me from under sandy lashes. “You don’t think that sounds just a little pathetic for a grown man?”

I cocked my head and shook it again. How weird. Bobby March did not seem like the kind of man who could be insecure about anything. At the dinner party, he’d been all swagger and confidence.

“Not a bit,” I said honestly. How could he think it was pathetic to use time every day to read and learn? “This explains how you know so much about everything. At the Irvings’, I couldn’t understand how you could speak knowledgeably about every topic under the sun.”

He laughed, but again, there was a mocking quality to it that I immediately hated. “Well, conversation is a kind of currency, isn’t it? Other guests bring a lot more to the table than I do: status, accolades, accomplishments.” Another biting laugh, as he led me into the stacks, wandering slowly. “I just bring the chitchat.”

“You shouldn’t downplay your gifts,” I said softly. “It would be *impossible* for me—for most people!—to captivate a

room like you do.” I bit my lip and shook my head. “You know, in one night you actually changed a long-held belief of mine.”

He blinked. “Which is...?”

“You called conversation a type of currency, which I agree with because it means it has value. I used to think that good, easy, interesting conversation was like a natural wonder of the world. Something unpredictably amazing that happened without a sense of manmade machinery behind it. Like the Northern Lights, an occurrence that’s beautiful and simply born of circumstance or chemistry.”

Bobby was staring at me, looking riveted. My face was so hot it felt like I’d been sitting under a heat lamp. As someone who often felt like an outsider, always on the edges of the real conversation, possibly I’d given this topic a bit too much consideration.

“But after watching you,” I continued, “I wondered if that kind of good conversation is actually more like a piece of art or a skyscraper. Something that has been worked at with skill and talent, something that’s been invested in.”

Bobby blinked again, several times in a row. He reached out to trace the spine of a shelved novel before responding. “I do work at it,” he said quietly, the corners of his mouth quirking up. “The appearance of effortless takes a great deal of effort.”

He turned so our eyes met briefly. “I’ve never thought of it like you described though—as something creative, something valuable. Thank you.” A small sigh. “I do enjoy it, but I’ve also always personally considered it to be the price of admission. I’m invited everywhere because I put on a bit of a show.”

This was not exactly first-date conversation. He wasn’t using that distracting and enviable charm; he was being open and direct. I *loved* it.

So, I said exactly what I was thinking. “Do you have some sort of inferiority complex because you don’t have a

traditional career or something?”

Bobby stopped in his tracks, gaped at me, and then threw back his head and roared incredulous laughter. When he got himself under control, there were laughter tears in his eyes. “No one’s ever put it that way before. But yes. Yes, I believe I do.”

“Good to know.” I gave him exasperated eyebrows over a sympathetic smile. “You should really work on that nonsense.”

Too many people, men especially, wrapped their self-worth up so tightly with their jobs. My mother used to lecture my father about separating himself from his career all the time. I’m not sure it ever really took. Well, not until she died, and then he realized he didn’t care about anything anymore.

I shook away the memories, pointed to the entrance, and we walked slowly out of the library into the cool sunshine. Bobby slid his sunglasses on. “Tacos? I know a great little place.”

We sat outside, the small picnic table in front of us overwhelmed with containers of seafood tacos, chips and guacamole, four different kinds of salsa, two bottles of Mexican beer, and a burrito as big as Bobby’s forearm, smothered in Chihuahua cheese and green sauce. “We have to try everything,” he insisted, much to my delight.

“How have I never met you before?” he wondered as I took a big bite of taco and salsa slid down my chin. “I’ve met your dad several times.”

“I haven’t lived here in a long time,” I explained, wiping my face with a napkin. “I went to college and law school in Boston. Then I took a job in Seattle for several years. I’ve only been back visiting my father for the last couple of weeks.”

On the table in front of me, my phone buzzed with a call. I glanced at the screen and cleared my throat. It was the last firm I’d interviewed with. “Sorry,” I said to Bobby and picked up. “Emily Austin,” I said briskly.

The conversation was brief and expected, as my interview with them had gone very well. The firm would be delighted

for me to join them and would send over an offer letter shortly. “Thank you very much. I look forward to reviewing it.”

As I hung up, Bobby picked up his beer bottle and clinked it against mine. “Are congratulations in order?”

I clinked back and took a sip. “Yes, thanks.” I paused. “I’m considering four different offers right now,” I admitted.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed, making me laugh. “Do you know which one you’re going to take?”

Three days ago, I would have said a confident yes: I’d be taking the partner-track position with Coonley in New York. By all rankings, it was the number-one IP firm in the country, so it was the best next step for me.

But today, sitting in the sun and eating tacos with Bobby in San Francisco...faraway New York sounded very unappealing.

“There’s no rush to make a decision,” I said lightly.

“Not to inundate you with questions,” he said. “But why is your last name Austin?”

Relieved at the subject change, I explained my parents’ concern and the hope for anonymity and distance when I left for college.

Bobby nodded thoughtfully. “Looking back on it now, are you glad you used a different name?”

I dug into the enormous burrito with a fork. “Most of the time, yes, I’m grateful for the different name.”

“When aren’t you?”

The burrito’s green sauce was tangy, spicy, and so delicious I made an appreciative *hmmm* as I swallowed.

Bobby’s eyelids closed a centimeter when he heard my throaty noise. He looked at my lips and shifted in his seat. A zigzag of excitement shot up my spine. That *thud*, *Thud*, *THUD* hadn’t gone anywhere. In fact, it had grown stronger today as we’d talked about real things.

Might as well keep it going.

“Dating,” I said matter-of-factly. “The name thing has been difficult while dating.”

Bobby leaned forward, blue eyes sparkling. “Tell me.”

Oh, the stories. “Well, when I first start dating somebody, it’s easy. I’m Emily. Especially when you’re younger, most people don’t introduce themselves with first and last names. Eventually, maybe through social media stuff, the guy would learn my last name was Austin. So, Emily Austin it is. Then a few weeks or months go by, and we’d get a little more serious, and I’d finally confide who my father was, my actual last name.”

“And?” Bobby demanded. “Then what?”

“It’s been horrible,” I said frankly. “Everyone knows Sven Saturn, famous billionaire. Immediately, the guys looked at me differently. I became a stranger in their eyes. I almost felt sorry for a few of them, actually. It’s like I could see what they were thinking: ‘Should I be excited because I’m dating a super-rich girl? What if we got married? Holy shit!’ Or: ‘Dude, it’s gross to even be thinking about her money...but I can’t stop.’”

Bobby mock-shuddered. “Have you done the opposite? Been upfront with someone right away?”

A few times. I nodded. “That scenario is a little better. I’m a pretty good judge of character, so it’s easy to dismiss the guys who are interested in the proximity-to-money angle. But I also don’t want to date someone who worships my father or who is intimidated by my father or who cares in *any* way about my father, and I haven’t found that yet.” I laughed a little. “To be fair, it’s probably my fault. My sample size has been small. I don’t often date.”

This was going to make me sound like a snotty bitch, but I said it anyway: “I don’t like all that many people all that much.”

Bobby’s lips twitched, hopefully with humor and not shock. He took a long swallow of beer and picked up a taco with both hands. “Do you like me?” he asked. His tone was casual, but he had stiff shoulders.

“Yes.” I said it immediately and with no hesitation. I could have been coy with an “I don’t know yet” or “We’ll see” kind of answer, but it would have been an obvious flirtation, and I was not a good flirt.

His shoulders relaxed. “Good.”

After lunch, we hit two more libraries—the SFPL Main Branch, which I’d visited before, and the Mechanics’ Institute, which I hadn’t. “There’s a thriving chess community here,” Bobby said. “Don’t tell anyone, but I play in the Tuesday Night Marathon tournament sometimes.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to tell anyone?” I asked. “That’s so cool!”

“I agree!” he said quickly. “I guess I just don’t want it to become party fodder. I like having it as something only for me.”

Aw. I loved that. “What else do you do that’s only for you?”

He hesitated but must have been convinced by my wide, interested eyes. “Volunteering. I coach basketball at the Boys & Girls Club. On Fridays, I work at a food bank near the big homeless encampment in the Tenderloin.”

I wanted to pinch him. Or pinch myself. He couldn’t be real. He looked like a surfer, read like an academic, played in a weekly chess tournament, and spent a hefty amount of time doing good deeds. Best of all, he was looking at me *that* way again. My body temperature had been rising steadily all day, and it had nothing to do with the coffee or salsa.

The sun was low in the sky by the time he drove me back to my father’s house in Pacific Heights. He pulled his Jeep to the side of the road and turned off the ignition. I reached for the door handle. “Hold up!” Bobby said. “I’m a gentleman. I’ll walk you to the door.”

Grinning like an idiot, I dropped my hands in my lap and watched him jump out of the car and scramble to the passenger side. Anticipation rose like a cloud in my throat. We’d spent the entire day inches from each other without touching. I’d

been able to feel his body heat near my skin for hours, but I still didn't know how his hands felt. Or how he smelled. Or much at all about his lips. I mean, I'd memorized their exact shape and the many expressions they made when he laughed or spoke. But I was *very* interested in how they might move against mine.

I glanced around my father's street and up the sidewalk to the door. If I accepted the job offer I had in San Francisco and moved back here permanently, I'd choose a place in a lively neighborhood instead of this rarified, ultrawealthy corridor. I preferred sidewalk seating at nearby cafés, people walking dogs, apartments with tiny, oft-used patios. But here, on my father's street, it was quiet. The only sounds were that of landscaping and an occasional walkie-talkie blast from a neighbor congresswoman's Secret Service patrol.

My father's next-door neighbor was watering her plants on a spacious second-floor outdoor patio. She had a perfect view of my father's front door, which absolutely sucked.

I wanted a kiss.

Not a peck on the cheek or forehead. Not a lingering handshake. I wanted a kiss to match the singeing heat I felt every time I looked in Bobby's general direction. A kiss that would steal the breath from his lungs. A kiss where I could show him just how wound up he made me today.

Bobby opened my car door, and I resigned myself to a short walk up the sidewalk and a quick goodbye. But to my surprise, he didn't open the car door wide and offer a hand to help me out. Rather, he opened it and then stepped inward, bracing himself with both arms and blocking anyone on the street from seeing into the car. "If I walk you to the door," he said in a low voice, "there's going to be an audience."

My skin started to burn under my cashmere sweater. I wished I was wearing...less. My lips curved up at him as my gaze greedily roamed over his shoulders, neck, and lips. "An audience for what?"

"Our goodbye," he whispered. He leaned closer, and I licked my lips, breathing the thickening air between us. He

hesitated a couple of inches from my mouth. “Do you feel this too? When we’re together? The voltage?” He laughed, a little desperate. “I’m so attracted to you that there’s a humming in the air when you’re near me.”

I tipped my chin up, bringing my mouth closer to his. “Of course I feel it,” I said, practically panting. “It’s like a drumbeat in my veins.” I smiled, close to a purr. “Don’t tell me you haven’t read anything on the science of attraction,” I teased. “I’m sure you could lecture me on what’s happening between us on a physiological level.”

His eyes crinkled as he brought the hand that had been braced against the car door to my nape. My eyes fluttered shut as I felt his fingers in my hair. “Yes,” he whispered. “I could talk to you for hours about theories of sexual attraction, about the way our bodies right now are sensing each other’s pheromones. But...” He wound his fingers through my hair, twisted his hand into a tugging fist. “I’d rather just do th—”

I didn’t even wait for him to finish. I jerked upward, closing the distance between us.

Most first kisses start gentle, with closed mouths and slow friction as people adjust to one another’s shapes, movements, breath.

This was not like most first kisses.

The millisecond our lips finally met, Bobby groaned in his throat. He released his remaining hold on the car and leaned fully in, pinning me to the passenger seat with his body.

I wanted to gasp *yes*, but I was too busy opening my mouth and pulling at his hips with both hands.

He tasted so *good*. Our mouths were frenzied: pressing, licking, sucking, and biting at one another. This wasn’t a first kiss at all. It was a revelation of human chemistry. With one thrust of his tongue, I wanted to rip off my sweater and his T-shirt. Press against each other until our sweat mingled and we were one scent.

Bobby angled his head to take the kiss even deeper, and I was lost. Maybe we were in the front seat of his car in broad

daylight in full view of the neighborhood, but all I knew from all five senses was Bobby. If I opened my eyes, I could see his blue ones staring at me like I was a fallen goddess or a risen devil. Every nerve ending in my body was screaming for more friction, and if I could have physically managed it, my legs would have been wrapped around his waist already.

Embarrassing whimpers of arousal and joy escaped my throat every time I managed to gasp air, and I didn't even care. I wanted to inhale the scent and taste of him until the end of time, although I couldn't have described them with all the words in the English language.

Except one: *mine*.

From the very beginning, Bobby felt like mine.

One street away, a fire truck roared by. Its screaming siren startled us apart a few inches. Enough so that I could see that nosy neighbor overwatering her plants as she snuck surreptitious glances through Bobby's windshield.

I automatically stiffened, and Bobby released his hold on me immediately. "Are you OK?"

"I'm great." I pressed a quick, soft kiss to his cheek, and the concern in his eyes vanished. I pointed up to the balcony. "Just wondering what Florence thinks of the show." Florence wouldn't be scandalized. She'd lived in San Francisco her whole life. She was kind of a hoot. Her cat was named Chairman Meow and she referred to him only as The Chairman, which was outstanding.

Bobby straightened and angled himself back out of the car with some difficulty. He presented his hand to me like a footman. I took it and levered myself onto the sidewalk, although I really wanted to use it to pull him back on top of me.

We took two tiny steps. Bobby looked down at me, blue eyes wide and more serious than I would have expected. "That was...ah..."

A game changer? A *life* changer? "Yeah."

Florence was still staring at us, so I gave her a jaunty wave. She was quite flushed and sweaty, and I wondered if she was overexerted from gardening or if watching us had brought on the heat. Bobby followed my lead and waved up at her as well.

When she gave Bobby a thoroughly unhurried full-body scan and then gave me a thumbs-up, I burst into loud laughter. I'd laughed a lot today. The sound had been rusty, weird, and almost unrecognizable to me.

"Perhaps Florence would be interested in an article I recently read about the weird science of how sweat attracts," Bobby said.

I clutched his elbow and slowed my stride even more, delaying the end of the date. "I'm interested."

He grinned. "A few years ago, in Russia, they held a sort of speed-dating event in Gorky Park. But instead of chatting with all the contenders, everyone wiped their armpit perspiration on a cotton pad. Then, all the contenders smelled the pads and voted for the ones they liked. If you matched with someone, you got introduced."

"Did you make that up?" I asked suspiciously. It sounded too gross to be true.

"Nope!" He waved his phone at me. "I'll send you the link to the article. It's fascinating."

The tiny walk couldn't last forever, and when we reached the front door, I bit my lip. My entire body was thrumming and ordering me to invite him in, but I would never feel comfortable kissing him the way I wanted to in my father's house. I cringed at just the thought of my dad walking in on us.

It probably wouldn't hurt for my brain to do some catching up to my body anyway. What the hell had just happened? I'd never felt like this in my life.

"Thank you for today," Bobby said, pulling me to him for a hug. I turned my face to his neck to inhale, and he literally quivered in my arms. My brain might be asking *what the hell*,

but at least this wasn't one-sided. Bobby seemed just as affected as I was.

I unlocked my door, and he walked backward along the path toward his car. "I'm sad it's the end," I admitted.

Bobby raised one eyebrow. "Are you kidding? This is the beginning."



Now

OH MY. I refocused on the last image of the escape room. It was a view of Bobby's green Jeep from my father's sidewalk. My traitorous body was throbbing, just as it had the entire night after our first kiss.

Was Bobby trying to remind me of our crazy attraction? Why? That had never been the problem. In fact, when I realized I needed to leave him, our attraction was one of the main reasons I'd gone so physically far away. Or was he trying to remind me of all those first conversations? Right away we'd been real with one another. Right away we wanted to know one another, to connect.

It doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. Whatever Bobby was trying to do, it was too late. Nothing had changed. Time, in fact, does not heal all wounds.

A text box appeared on the screen: *What is the phrase to escape this room?*

Too many possible options for this one. Something about kissing? Or my neighbor? Or first dates? I squinted at the screen and typed in *pheromones*.

Immediately, the screen filled with celebration images, raining tacos and books.

Congratulations, Em! You win!

I snorted. Really, Bobby? You picked the exact same word from that day? We'd often been in sync, but I didn't believe this for one second.

New text appeared.

In case you're wondering, I would also have accepted the following answers:

First kiss

Florence

Inferiority complex

Science of attraction

Any phrase with the word "armpit"

I burst out laughing. The sound was raucous, loud, and completely unprecedented in my studio apartment.

Damn you, Bobby.

Chapter Six

CAL, MY DIVORCE attorney, called the next morning. I let him go to voice mail. After accepting Bobby's invitations to the two virtual escape rooms, I felt too sheepish to talk to him. What if Cal asked if I'd had any contact with Bobby? It was true that I hadn't seen or spoken to him, but there had been contact.

In my office, I played his message on speaker. "Good morning, Emily. It's Cal. Your divorce paperwork is ready to be served to Mr. March, and we've located him. I want to respect your wishes for distance and not disclose anything you don't want to hear. However, as he's moved out of the Bay Area, we should discuss how we'll serve the papers to him. Normally, I'd recommend a trusted process server who would be discreet. But as Mr. March is now in a different city, we'll either need to hire someone local there or fly my recommended process server into that town. The second option would be an additional expense for you to approve.

"Call me before the end of today if you want me to fly in my usual server. If I don't hear from you, I'll just go ahead and work with a local resource. The good news is, I'm confident we can serve Mr. March within the next couple of days. We've identified both his new residence and place of employment, so serving him the paperwork will not be difficult. I'll speak to you soon."

Wait. Wait. What?

I played the voice mail again, in case I'd hallucinated the first time.

Bobby had moved to a different city? I'd obviously known that he wasn't in our condo anymore, but I'd assumed he was still somewhere in town. Except for college, he'd never lived anywhere else. I stood up behind my desk, sat down again. I'd last spoken to him—the really bad conversation—at the beginning of August, and he was still in San Francisco then.

In the last six weeks he'd picked up and left town?

Gotten a job?

I snatched my cell phone and scrolled through my list of contacts until I found him. I almost pressed the call button, but luckily my brain started working again just in time, and I dropped the phone on the desk. *It's none of your business anymore.* Bobby was free to move about the country, the entire world even, without letting me know. He could spend his time however he wanted without telling me, even though I was dying to know what kind of work he was doing. How did all of this fit in with the virtual escape rooms he was sending me?

A yawning pit opened up in my chest and my left eyelid twitched violently. Without admitting it to myself, I'd thought maybe the virtual escape rooms were a way for Bobby to pull me back. But in the context of his new life changes, it made much more sense that they were a way for him to say goodbye.

Bobby had always been a lot better and more creative at working his way through tough emotions than I was.

Still though, after thirty-three years in the same city and living off a trust fund for his adult life, that was a lot of change for him in six weeks. I did a slow spin in my office chair. Of course, a year ago, my entire life changed in six weeks too.

After that first library date, Bobby and I saw each other constantly. San Francisco was our playground, and oh, did we play. We walked the hilly streets for miles, talking, until my throat was sore and my calves ached. We did picnics in Golden Gate Park and visited every museum we could find. I cheered Bobby on at his chess tournaments, and he helped me make a pro and con grid to compare my different job offers. We ate dim sum in Chinatown four Sundays in a row, saw old movies at The Castro Theatre, and hiked in John Muir Woods.

We kissed. And kissed. And kissed. I was staying at my father's house, and the renovations at Bobby's condo stretched through the fall, so he remained a houseguest in friends' homes. Given these logistical challenges, we couldn't go further than kissing. I wanted him so badly every cell in my body ached, but I also knew my careful self enough to know

that sleeping with Bobby would be a big deal. Something I might not bounce back from. What if I fell into that abyss and Bobby wasn't in as deep, emotionally, as me?

So no sex, but we made out like teenagers every freakin' day.

One afternoon we snuck a bottle of wine into a movie theater showing a revival of *Casablanca*. We sat in the back row of a 3:00 p.m. showing on a Tuesday, and we had the theater to ourselves. We kissed until I was shaking from head to toe and begging in his ear for more. Bobby bit my neck and slipped his hand inside my jeans and I—

"Your 10:00 a.m. is here," Rosie called, knocking on my door.

"C'mon in," I called, fanning myself and hoping I wasn't visibly sweaty. Stupid, stupid escape rooms. My libido had vanished the moment I'd fled San Francisco, and I did not welcome its return.

Bella walked in and sat down at the conference table. She wore another oversize cardigan sweater, this one ivory, with cropped jeans and worn boots. "Good morning." She sounded nervous, probably wondering if this whole week had been a waste of her time.

My 3:00 a.m. insomnia time had been particularly stressful the night before. My brain exhausted itself fighting first-date memories and crafting carefully worded memos to the partners, explaining this very not-Emily Austin decision.

I joined her at the table. "I'm going to take your case," I said, putting her out of her misery. "Pro bono. If you want to take on Taggert, I'll be your partner." Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes went shiny.

But now, for the bad news. "You need to realize that we don't have a good shot, Bella," I added quickly. "It's likely you'll end up in the exact place you are now. Possibly worse if this goes to court and they fight dirty. You could be the victim of negative, embarrassing press. Everyone talks about the world getting more progressive, and in some ways it has. But

people still love celebrities, and they still love sex scandals. The fact that you did nothing wrong by sleeping with Taggert is not going to matter to trolls on social media.”

Her happy expression faded into worry. She bit her lip and looked out the window.

Might as well give her all I had. She’d need it to make an informed decision. “I have a theory,” I announced, yanking her attention back. I pulled out the cease-and-desist letter and the design document of TowerWizard.

“The fact that Taggert has a copyright registration is our biggest problem.” She nodded, lips turning down at the corners. “Particularly because he had filed it months before he met you.” I’d checked, and it was a valid registration made eight months ago for the source code of an administrative console to work with GuardTower. All bad news.

But, the cease-and-desist letter had not included a copy of the actual copyright application, including any snippets of the actual source code. Any decent lawyer would argue that disclosing actual code may expose trade secrets, but in this particular scenario and timing, it also would have ended any claim that Bella had that the code was originally hers.

“I think Taggert’s company was probably working on a similar product to the one you created,” I explained. “They were creating their own version of TowerWizard, and they copyrighted their source code. He probably intended to sell it.

“But then...” I looked straight at her. “One night at a tech conference, he meets a young woman who opens her laptop and shows him a much better version of the same type of product.” I grinned at her. “Your TowerWizard probably kicked his product’s ass.”

This was all speculation, of course, but it made so much sense. “Now, if you were intending to sell yours too, maybe he wouldn’t have worried. Because his company has a lot more marketing dollars and all that.”

Bella nodded slowly. “But I was going to release it free...”

“Exactly.” I shrugged. “If your competitor product was superior *and free*, his product would be dead in the water. Who knows how much time and money he’s spent developing his? How much in projected sales he was expecting to make? That’s all heavy incentive for theft.”

I lowered my voice in sympathy. “Especially if the person you’re stealing from has fewer resources. Especially if you can threaten her with shame. Especially if you don’t expect her to be able to fight back.”

She stood up and walked to the window and turned her back to me. “I’m positive he thinks I won’t fight,” she whispered. “That night, on our impromptu ‘date,’ I told him how my savings were almost drained. I confided in him about my grandmother being ill, and how I always told her that everything in my life was perfect because she worries so much about me and I could never cause her additional stress.”

That made a lot of sense. If Taggert thought of her as broke and unwilling to hurt a beloved family member, he probably did figure that she’d just slink away.

“He was right too.” She let out a harsh sigh. “I would never have risked any sort of press that would slut-shame me or call me a thief. I could never expose my grandma to that kind of trauma.”

Confused, I looked down at the six-page cease-and-desist letter spread across the table. So, she didn’t want to continue?

Bella made a strangled sort of snuffle, and I jumped halfway out of my seat when I realized she was swallowing back sobs. “But my grandmother died two weeks ago,” she managed. “So yeah. I’m going to fight.”

I walked across the office slowly, to give her a moment, and returned with a box of tissues. In the face of her sorrow, I felt ashamed I’d even considered not taking the case. “Good,” I said softly.

She blew her nose. “What’s next?”

“You can go home to Chicago, and we’ll continue to work together via video conference,” I said. “I’ll provide you with

some options and the consequences of each. For example, you could ignore the cease and desist and continue with hiring your testers and working on your product release. The consequence may be that Taggart files an injunction against you and we prepare to go to court. Or, we could go on the offensive. We could reply to the cease and desist, asking them for more comprehensive proof that they own this intellectual property and see how they respond.”

She nodded, slowly. “OK. I sure wish there was something even more proactive that we could do.” She grabbed another tissue. “Like punch him in the face.”

I laughed. Driven by anger, I bet Bella could pack quite a punch. “Definitely stay away from him,” I warned. “His lawyer will be looking for ways to twist any interaction between the two of you, so it’s far safer for there to be none.”

She sighed. “Fine, I’ll behave.” Her eyes brightened. “Hey! Since I’ll fly home tomorrow, can I take you out to lunch today? I’d love a way to say thank you!”

I pulled up the calendar on my phone, ready to make an excuse—except I didn’t want to.

How weird. I’d planned to immediately inform the partners that I was going to take a pro bono case on the side, emphasizing that I would still have most of my considerable time to spend on billable hours for any case they wanted to assign me. Starting this very afternoon! I’d be willing to jump in wherever would be most helpful.

But now, I didn’t want to do any of that. Now, I wanted to go out to lunch with Bella. I stood staring at my phone in silence, way too long. What was with me today?

Maybe it wasn’t so unusual to just need a moment to breathe. Jesus, I’d worked eighty-hour weeks straight since the beginning of April. No mystery there; that was my modus operandi in life. I suffocated myself in work to avoid everything else. But between Bella’s case and the forced memories of last year, something inside was stirring.

“Great!” I smiled at her and shoved my phone in my pocket. “Let’s go.”



LUNCH WAS SURPRISINGLY fun. We went to a simple Italian place around the corner and took our time, ordering plates of antipasto to share before splitting two huge bowls of cacio e pepe and rigatoni with fennel sausage.

The conversation flowed easily, now that we weren’t restricted to her legal case. We spoke about movies, books, our best work stories, and what it was like to grow up in Bella’s small hometown. She was kind, funny, and extremely easy to talk to. It made me realize how long it’d had been since I’d simply relaxed with a female friend, and I felt a fresh twinge of old guilt at how I’d let my college friendships languish.

After a dessert of tiramisu, Bella put a hand to her belly. “I suppose you have to get back to work now, right?”

My suit pants felt like they were bursting at the seams. Sitting in my office for the rest of the day suddenly felt like the worst idea ever. A few free hours wasn’t that big of a deal. I could always work late into the night, right? “Actually, I’m going to treat myself to a rare afternoon off,” I announced.

Bella smiled. “Want to walk off some of these carbs?”

A very long walk turned into happy hour drinks at an Irish pub halfway between Bella’s hotel and my apartment. We’d been there about two minutes when a guy at the bar offered to buy her a drink. She graciously declined, and he wandered off to find his buddies.

“Don’t say no on my account,” I insisted. “He was pretty cute. If you want to talk to him, it’s totally fine.”

Bella snorted. “Have you forgotten the result of my last romantic entanglement?” She shuddered and slurped her beer. “I may never sleep with a man again.”

She twirled on her barstool. “Do you have a boyfriend? Or a partner?” she asked curiously.

Well, I needed to learn how to push this phrase out of my mouth sometime. “I’m getting divorced,” I practiced.

Bella’s face fell. “Oh my God, I’m so sorry!”

“It sucks,” I admitted.

Her lips twitched as I watched her consider all sorts of follow-up questions. We barely knew each other. But we had been talking for hours, so she caved to the nosiness. “What happened?”

Halcyon scenes from last fall raced through my mind, memories I’d always treasure, even if they were painful to remember in light of what came later. “My ex and I fell head over heels in love and got married very quickly,” I said. “It was like a vacation romance that we took too far.” I shrugged. “Those things never work out when you return to real life, right?”

Bella blinked a few times. “I guess I don’t know. I’ve never been head over heels in love.”

My Guinness was both frothy and bitter. Kind of like the tone of my voice. “Can’t say I totally recommend it. It’s overwhelming. Consuming.”

Bella bit her lip, as if she was physically preventing another question from bursting out of her mouth. Was it because she noticed that I was speaking of love in the present tense?

Luckily, she veered onto an adjacent topic: “Are your parents still married?”

Oh boy, that was *not* better. I gulped down a third of my beer. “They would be, if my mom were still alive.” Bella blanched. I could see she was about to self-flagellate again so I kept talking. “They were one of those couples who were so in love, even after thirty years of being married. They were legendary for it.”

Bella’s face softened into a smile, and she nodded. I knew she thought I meant that my parents’ relationship was famous in our family or neighborhood or something, but I meant famous-famous. My parents’ love story had been written about

in *People* magazine. They were like Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft. The press used to eat it up because my father was so steely and terrifying in all other aspects of life. But even after decades together, if he got one glimpse of my mom's red curls, he lost sight of everything else in the room.

My parents used to golf together every single weekend. Unusual for men of my father's generation, he much preferred to golf with my mother instead of other men. When she died, my father wouldn't golf with anyone else. He'd go out on the course by himself, but no one else was ever invited.

A *Time* magazine article once called my father the most powerful man in the country. The writer then suggested that since it was well known my father would do anything for his wife, my mother was the most powerful *person* in the country.

My mom had the article framed and hung it in the entryway of our house.

"Were you close to your mom?" Bella asked. "What was she like?"

Emotions prickled in my throat, like shards of glass. I didn't talk about my mom. Ever. I didn't have anyone to share memories with. Except my dad, and I wouldn't risk that.

Maybe it was the fact that Bella's grandmother had just died, so I knew she was hurting too. More likely it was that Bobby's stupid escape rooms had me all messed up inside. Whatever the reason, I actually answered.

"We were very close." I cleared my sore throat. "She was warm. Witty. With a biting sense of humor." When we had to go to intolerably boring events for my father, she made them fun by whispering just awful things in my ear. When she felt like my father had drunk too much Scotch, she called him "Johnnie Walker" until he properly apologized. After one riotous Christmas party, Dad was Johnnie Walker in the house for a full week.

"She had a terrible sense of direction." When mobile phones with map apps became ubiquitous, she said it was the

greatest thing that ever happened in her life. My father took offense to this.

“She loved to sing more than anything in the world.” I twirled my Guinness and glanced at Bella. “When one of us had hard a week, we would go to one of those Korean karaoke places where you get your own private room. The two of us would just sing in there for hours.”

I finished the beer then, because my throat hurt too much, and it felt like my intestines were shaking. I couldn’t remember the last time I sang. I’d never even sung in front of Bobby, I suddenly realized.

“What was your mom’s favorite song to sing?” Bella asked.

Such a great question. “‘Piece of My Heart’ by Janis Joplin.” I closed my eyes, picturing her bent over the mic, wailing, her hand in a fist. “She nailed it too.”

Bella put her hand over mine. “How long has she been gone?”

Forever and no time at all. “Almost six years.” She squeezed my hand, and suddenly, I needed to be talking about something—anything—else.

“Hey!” I chirped, determined to pull myself together. “You know, I’ve been meaning to ask—how did you come to me in the first place?” There had to be some female IP attorneys in Chicago, right? Or some specific reason to seek me out in New York. I struggled to think back to what she’d said at our first meeting. “Some kind of referral, you said.”

Bella didn’t fight the change in subject. She just leaned back and nodded. “It’s a little random, actually. I’d gotten the cease-and-desist letter, visited those two awful firms in Chicago, and was feeling lousy and had no idea what to do next. I was at my favorite neighborhood coffee shop just sitting and feeling sorry for myself. I got to chatting with a woman at the table next to me. Before I knew it, I was spilling my guts. Totally oversharing, which is not like me at all, but she was such a good listener and asked such good questions.

Anyway, this stranger at the coffee shop—she was the one who recommended you. Said you were a brilliant attorney and a good person.” Bella toasted me with her glass. “She was right!”

Huh. Maybe the woman had been involved in a former case of mine as a client or was some sort of colleague. I didn’t know many attorneys in Chicago, but the IP world could be small. “What was her name?”

Bella scrunched up her face. “Jo something? Like Jo in *Little Women*. Ah!” She snapped her fingers together. “Jo Harper, that was it.”

The empty pint glass in my fingers slipped slightly out of my grasp and hit the table with a loud thud.

What the fuck?

Chapter Seven

A LOT IS known about my father, the famous Sven Saturn.

Everyone knows that he's the chairman at one of Silicon Valley's most successful venture capital firms. Everyone knows about his analytic mind and prescience, how he got in on the ground floor of Netscape, Amazon, and Google. Everyone knows that he's amassed a nine-billion-dollar fortune. His reputation for being cutthroat and severe. That he worshipped his wife and was completely devastated in the wake of her death. That after she died, Sven Saturn took a prolonged leave of absence. He was not seen in the Bay Area for half a year.

But only three people in the entire world know where he was and what he was doing in those six months. My father, obviously. Me. And Jo fucking Harper.

My father is undeniably brilliant and has incredible judgment. The world sees evidence of that in his strategic business acumen, in his wealth. I saw evidence of it in how he loved and valued my mom above everything, including his business and wealth. But in his overwhelming grief following my mother's death, that legendary judgment took a six-month vacation.

The day after my mom's funeral, my dad disappeared.

I remember walking through their home, looking for him, wanting to apologize for the night before. I hated being in the house. All the rooms still smelled like my mom's favorite moisturizer: lilac and vanilla.

Maybe he was still in bed in one of the guest rooms? No, they were all empty. The bed in the one nearest the master bedroom looked a little ruffled, as though someone had tossed around on it without getting under the covers. But no sign of my father.

The door to the master bedroom was ajar, and the room was a mess, the only exception being the still-made bed.

“Dad?” I’d called, knocking on the open door, unnerved to see the dresser drawers opened and puddles of clothes on the floor in the lighted walk-in closet.

The household staff kept everything perfectly organized, so it was easy to see that a few pieces of luggage were missing. In the bathroom, cabinets were completely empty as though someone had swiped their arm across all of the shelves and dumped everything into a bag.

My stomach tightened to a knot. My dad was in no condition to travel. Hell, he’d barely been able to form complete sentences for the past week. At the funeral mass, he’d leaned on me so heavily, I’d had to brace myself on the church pew to hold his weight. After the mass was over, he’d abandoned the rest of the funeral proceedings in favor of an entire bottle of Scotch.

I yanked out my phone, but calling him only went to voice mail. “Dad, it’s Em. Where are you? I’m *so* sorry about last night. Tell me where you are and I’ll come get you. OK? I love you.”

He didn’t call back.

After he’d been gone a week, I was frantic. I’d just lost my mother and now my father too? Should I be calling the authorities or something? Surely, he would have called me back if he were OK. Surely, he wouldn’t be ignoring my pleas if he were alive and well. “Dad, it’s Em. AGAIN. It’s November 1. Listen, I’m terrified that I haven’t heard from you in so many days. I’m going to call the police and report you missing.”

Five minutes after I left that message, my phone rang. It was him! I answered with a high-pitched yelp. “Dad?”

“Don’t call the police, Em.” I blinked at his harsh tone. It was unmistakably my father’s voice, but also, not his voice. It was so dull, so devoid of anything lifelike that I shivered. “I’m fine, but I’m taking some time away.”

“Where?” I hated the sound of my voice. I sounded like I was a scared ten-year-old kid, not a twenty-five-year-old soon

to graduate from law school. “Can I come see you?”

A long pause, then a wheezing sigh. “I just want to be on my own. I can’t—I can’t.” He hung up.

That was the last I heard from him until the end of May. I couldn’t count the number of times I called in those six months or the number of tearful, pleading messages I left. All ignored.

I returned to Boston, to law school, because I didn’t know what else to do. I attended classes, I interviewed for jobs, I did everything I was supposed to, even though I felt like a completely different person than the woman who started the year. That woman had a complete, loving family and passion for her future career. This woman was alone and couldn’t feel anything.

Sometime in March or April, my worry and fear grew colder. Angrier. When I graduated law school with no family in attendance, I decided to take a job offer with a firm in Seattle instead of one in San Francisco.

When my father finally deigned to call me at the end of May, I didn’t pick up.

His voice mail messages over the next couple of months never reached the level of desperation or tears, but he did apologize, over and over again.

“I’m so sorry, Em. I was in a terrible place. I never should have left.”

“I’m so sorry, Em. I miss you so much.”

“I’m so sorry, Em. I’m home, and I want you to come home.”

“I’m so sorry, Em. I’m seeing a therapist now, and it’s helping.”

Well, good for him. A little shocking, actually, that Mr. Powerful had actually admitted he needed professional help. But I’d had to deal with the first wave of shock and depression all on my freakin’ own, and I wasn’t terribly interested in

helping him through his journey. Maybe that made me a bad daughter, but he certainly hadn't been a very good father.

"I'm so sorry, Em. I want to tell you everything that happened while I was gone. I'm not proud of myself, but I want to be open with you. My relationship with you means everything to me."

That one almost got me. What the hell had he been doing for all those months? I couldn't imagine my father untethered, away from his business and my mother. Away from work and Mom, he didn't seem like he could be a three-dimensional person.

"Em, it's Dad again. I just love you, honey. I love you."

So fine, that one made me flinch. But both of my parents were stubborn grudge-holders, and boy, had I inherited every last ounce of that particular trait.

Maybe he did love me, but maybe that wasn't enough.

Then, in July, I received a letter.

Emily,

We don't know each other, but I've been wanting to reach out to you for months.

From December until May, I spent time with your father. During that time, I know he was an abysmal father to you—in the very worst period of your life. You needed him, and he wasn't there for you. You were dealing with unspeakable loss and the one person you should have been able to count on, the one person who should have been holding you, the one person who could have understood what you were going through...he wasn't there. I can only imagine the depth of your anger and your sense of betrayal. I can only imagine the amount of strength it must have taken you to power through those months all on your own.

There is no excusing your father's behavior, Emily, but for both of your sakes, you need to forgive him.

Cutting him out of your life to punish him would be the cruelest thing that you could do to yourself. No one else will ever love you like he does and no one else will ever have the same connection to your mother. The two of you are still a family. There is still a staggering amount of love that is worth preserving.

Again, there is no excusing your father's behavior, but I can try to explain it a little. He lost himself, Emily. He was drowning in unmanageable grief. Heartache that was as large and consuming as his love for your mom. When the strongest people come undone, it's those people who need the most support to find their way again.

And now, I'm going to bring out the big guns and I apologize. But what I'm about to say is the truth:

Forgive your father, Emily. Because your mom would want you to.

Sincerely,

A friend

“Em? You...you picked up!”

“Hi, Dad.”



I LEFT BELLA at the bar, abruptly and with only “Too much food. Gotta go!” as my explanation. She probably thought it was all the memories of my mom that made me flee. On another night, she might have been right.

But my brain was actually spin-spin-spinning on the fact that Jo Harper sent Bella to me, and that just didn't make any sort of sense.

Jo Harper was a con artist.

True to his word about wanting to be honest with me, my father had long ago confessed that during his “vanishing,” he'd wandered into the Drake Hotel in Chicago, sat down next

to a much younger woman at the bar—and proposed to her three months later. The King of the Universe, in his grief-stricken state, almost married a gold digger just a few years older than me.

But he did not return to San Francisco with a new wife on his arm. She disappeared instead, breaking it off with him in a goodbye letter that told him that he needed to grieve his wife and make amends to his daughter. After he confessed all of this to me, I put two and two together and realized that she had written that letter to me as well. For a long time, I was actually almost grateful to the woman.

Until August anyway.

Ignoring a sudden downpour of rain hitting my windows, I didn't even turn the lights on in my studio before sitting at my desk and booting up my laptop. I was going to find that woman and make her explain. How had she managed to infiltrate my life for the third time? And why? What did she have to gain by linking me up with Bella's case?

Out of a years-long habit, I glanced at my email inbox first. Goddamn it.

Subject Line: *Can You Escape? Invitation inside...*

Good evening, Emily,

On this evening, Bobby March has invited you to a personally designed virtual escape room: Indian Springs. Wander around, enjoy the sights, absorb the clues—but don't stay too long! To win, to "escape," you'll need to type in the answer-phrase correctly within one hour. The timer starts the moment you enter the room. Up for the challenge?

At the bottom was a button that looked like a phone with a text message displayed: *How would you feel about a road trip?*

All thoughts of researching Jo Harper fled from my mind. Oh my goodness, Indian Springs. *How would you feel about a road trip?* Bobby was changing the game. He wasn't matching his escape rooms to last year's dates anymore. We hadn't gone to up to Indian Springs, a resort in the Napa wine country town of Calistoga, until mid-October.

Why was he escalating the timeline? And if he cared about me at all, why was he going to force me to relive *that* night?

Was this all part of some closure exercise he was doing in an effort to embrace his entirely new life?

You could just ignore it, the sane part of my brain reminded me.

But the sane part of my brain had never been able to defeat Bobby's effect on me. Maybe it was weak, but I wanted to see how he remembered that night. How he would capture it. Because, yeah, if someone put a gun to my head and forced me to tell them the best twenty-four hours of my life, the time we spent at Indian Springs would probably be it.

I clicked on the button to enter the escape room. Immediately, the screen pixelated into an image of the Golden Gate Bridge, as though I were in the front seat of a car driving over it. My pulse sped up, and suddenly I felt just like last-October Emily, barely able to keep from bouncing up and down in Bobby's Jeep...

Chapter Eight

Last October

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’ve never been to Indian Springs,” Bobby exclaimed. His left hand gripped the steering wheel, and his right hand squeezed my thigh.

We’d been dating for almost six weeks, but I still wasn’t used to his casual touches. Or the way he grinned at me behind his sunglasses, the wind from the open windows whipping his light hair back.

“I’ve heard of the resort, of course,” I said. “Calistoga is one of my favorite places in wine country.” At the north end of Napa Valley, the town of about six thousand residents was known for its hot springs, mud baths, and proximity to dozens of wineries. Some friends and I had done a girls’ weekend there right after college graduation.

“It’s got an Olympic-sized mineral water pool fed by on-site geysers. The water is always between 92 and 102 degrees, even in January,” he marveled. “I’m glad it’s going to be so cool tonight. The hot water is amazing when the air is cold. Oh! How do you feel about steaks for dinner? There’s this place in walking dist—”

My face kept smiling and my head kept nodding, but I’d lost the thread minutes ago. Yes, yes, I was excited about the mineral pool. About the food. About the grounds of the resort. Wine, yay.

But but but...this was going to be our very first overnight together, and ohmygod how could he talk or think about anything else?!

Bobby’s hand slid an inch higher on my thigh, and my muscles automatically clenched.

Six weeks of lunches, dinners, movies, museums, theater, concerts, walks, hikes, morning coffees, afternoon ice cream cones, local IPAs, and California wine.

Six weeks of kissing like each other's mouths had the oxygen we needed to survive. Six weeks of my fingernails scraping his neck and back. Six weeks of shamelessly pulling his body against mine when we clung to one another before saying goodnight. Six weeks of feeling his smile against my earlobe and his teeth on my neck.

Finally, a night together. My thoughts bounced between what we would do and what it would mean. Would it mean too much? Too little?

Bobby's entrance into my life had all the subtlety of a tsunami. One moment I was a workaholic between jobs, a daughter, an occasionally bitchy malcontent with inexplicably severe insomnia. The next, I was a woman consumed, a smitten daydreamer, my thoughts and days completely absorbed by one person.

When my father managed to snag me for brunch last weekend, he'd asked, "You ever going to decide on one of those job offers?"

"I've narrowed it to two," I answered breezily, as though winnowing from four to two was solid progress. In reality, the firm in New York had been my first choice and the firm in San Francisco had been my second choice, right from the start. And truthfully, the partners at both places were getting just a little impatient for my decision. But I couldn't even imagine moving to New York right now. Even if I decided to stay here, I knew that as soon as I started I'd be back to sixty billable hours a week. I'd see Bobby a tiny fraction of the time I did now. What if he wasn't interested in a relationship with a woman who spent ninety-nine percent of her waking hours working?

"Dad," I'd said softly, speaking to us both. "Before I left the firm in Seattle, I took a total of ten days off in five years. This time is good for me."

A text from Bobby buzzed on my phone then. My face flared hot, and my body went gooey from head to toe as I read:
How would you feel about a road trip?

My father ducked behind his newspaper, mumbling, “You do look happy.”

In the car, we drove up Highway 29 through Yountville, Oakville, Rutherford, and St. Helena. Bobby pointed out his favorite wineries for Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay. Tomorrow, I’d ask him to drive back south on the Silverado Trail so I could show him my favorites. Not that I could actually wrap my mind around the concept of tomorrow yet. Tomorrow would mean that tonight had happened.

As we coasted into Calistoga, he said, “I was thinking we could check into the hotel and then go out exploring on foot. There are several tasting rooms and restaurants right here in town that we can walk to.” He paused. “Does that sound OK?”

You know what sounded OK? The twinge of nervousness in his voice. This trip *meant* something to him. “Perfect,” I agreed.

As promised, the Indian Springs resort was gorgeous. I’d stalked the property online last night, so I knew it was a collection of Mission Revival–style buildings, historic cottages, and bungalows spread out across seventeen acres. As we drove onto the property, I saw the building framing the mineral pool, the spa famous for mud baths. Bobby parked in front of the check-in location. “Be right back.”

When he got back in the car, I expected him to drive to the parking area for The Lodge, the largest building of rooms, but he surprised me with a different turn. “I got us a bungalow,” he said in response to my questioning look. “I figured, we’re out of the city for the night...why not have a little extra space?” He cleared his throat and stared straight ahead. “A little extra privacy.”

Oh my. I swallowed and willed my pulse to stop slamming so hard against my veins. Our bungalow was set way back from most of the other buildings. The pathway to the door was flanked with sweet-smelling vegetation, mint maybe. Two white wicker rocking chairs sat on each side of the front door.

I let out a gasp of appreciation as I entered a cozy, impeccably decorated living room. Bobby threw open a set of

French doors, revealing a private patio with a firepit and views of the Napa Valley Hills. “It’s gorgeous!” Suddenly his plans of hiking around town didn’t sound quite as lovely. I wanted to pop open a bottle of bubbles and just nestle next to him on one of the cushy chairs.

Then he had to go and say, “There are two bedrooms.”

I turned and gaped at him. Was this trip not what I thought? His eyes were still hidden by his sunglasses. I marched up to him and gently pulled the glasses off his face. If I had to initiate this humiliating conversation, he was going to participate with eye contact. “Do you want us to sleep in different rooms?”

He gripped my elbows and growled at me. “No, Em. I do not want to sleep separately. But I wasn’t sure where your head’s at, and this is super important to me.” His voice lowered to a whisper. “I didn’t want to mess anything up by making assumptions.”

I had to laugh at him then. “Bobby, for the past month, I’ve been dry humping you every time you drop me at my front door.”

His lips parted, and he flashed a huge white smile. “I may have noticed that. I sure as hell enjoyed it.”

“Well then.” I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a light kiss to the side of his neck, right under his jaw. “Let me be even more clear. One bedroom—correction: one bed—is all we need tonight.”

All sorts of further corrections immediately ran through my mind: we didn’t even need a bed. The couch, the floor, against the wall. All viable options.

In fact, we didn’t even need *tonight*. For the first time since we’d met, I had Bobby March completely alone. There were no dinner party guests or baristas or neighbors or fathers or ushers or picnickers in sight. We were in our own private space. With a locked door and a mountain of time.

In the silence, Bobby raised one eyebrow. “Are you thinking what I am?”

Oh God. Probably not. He was probably about to ask if I also wanted pizza for lunch. I raised one eyebrow. “What are you thinking?”

He shifted his weight and grinned down at me, a nervous wolf. “That I have lost all inclination to leave this bungalow.”

I let out a high-pitched sigh of glee and relief. “I love it when we’re on the exact same page.”

Bobby slid my purse strap off my shoulder, placed the bag on a table next to his sunglasses, and pulled me to him. I wrapped myself around him, tucked my head under his chin, and breathed him in, savoring this sweet moment, *the before*.

“I haven’t ever been this nervous in my life,” he said. I drew back, looked up at him, and blinked. When I’d imagined our first time together, clothes had been ripped off and everything had been rather fierce and feral. Nerves hadn’t really entered into the equation.

“We make each other moan when we kiss,” I whispered. “I melt inside when you look at me over a dinner table.” I pressed myself against him again. “You shake when I bite your neck. I don’t think we need to worry.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “I know. But sex is different. No matter how much electricity is between us, it can still be awkward. And there’s been a hell of a lot of buildup here.” I moved my face so that my nose brushed lightly against his neck and I could inhale his scent. He shuddered. “I just want this to be perfect, and first times are never perfect.”

Unbidden, a phrase my mom always used to say popped right through my lips. “It doesn’t have to be perfect to be wonderful.” I gripped the back of his neck and pulled his lips to mine. “I already know that it’ll be wonderful because it’s us.”

We were both right, it turned out.

As Bobby predicted, there was a little awkwardness: Frantically kissing, we fumbled with each other’s clothes for long minutes before we gave up and undressed ourselves. The strong sunlight pouring through the bedroom windows was

merciless in its reveal of every imperfection on my body. It was too warm in the small bedroom, and we were both sweating in seconds. But the moments of awkwardness didn't make us shy or self-conscious as I would have feared. Instead, they highlighted our growing intimacy, the new way we were knowing one another.

Oh my God, was it wonderful. The moment I felt the entire length of his naked body against mine. The way he stared at me with single-minded worship when he finally slid inside me. The way we both cried out as our bodies learned to move together to get the rhythm and friction we both needed.

So no, it wasn't a movie love scene. There weren't choreographed moves or romantic music or camera-ready hair and bodies. We were a little clumsy and really sweaty and very loud; I was almost shocked at the ferocity of the sounds we made, the slapping of our bodies, the groans and grunts. I loved the taste of the salt on his skin, how he gasped when I dug my nails into his ass. He panted with wonder as he rode me even harder. "Jesus, Em. You. Feel. So. Fucking. Good."

We came together, fast and so hard I saw starbursts in the corners of my eyes.

Dazed, I let the universe take its sweet time to settle back into some semblance of normalcy before I even lifted my head. When I finally came all the way back to myself, Bobby handed me a glass of cold sparkling wine—and then yanked me to his chest before I could even take a sip.

"Remember on our first date how you asked me about my favorite place in the world?" He kissed me, feather-soft, on my lips. "This is it. The place I first made love to you."

If any other man had used the phrase "made love," I would have cringed. I'd always hated it. But when Bobby said it, I felt honest-to-goodness tears prick at my eyelids. Because the sex—as carnal and lusty and earthy as it was—had felt exactly like love.

I kissed him back, partly to busy my mouth so that any too-sappy sentiment couldn't burst right out. Sure, Bobby seemed as infatuated as I was, but I couldn't tell him that I was

in love with him. Could I? Was it too soon? I'd never been in love before. Was six weeks a long enough time to know? How long were most couples together before they confessed their love? I had no idea.

Bobby took a sip of champagne. "You know," he said in a confessional tone, "I found an old picture of your family on the internet the other day."

I suppressed a satisfied little smirk at the thought of him Googling me. But then he said, "You used to have red hair." I almost jerked in surprise, although it was true. Until I was twenty-six, my hair was a bright auburn.

I attempted a casual laugh and shrug. "Natural red hair often fades to a blonde or brown." I shook my tousled light brown hair self-consciously.

Bobby ran a warm hand over my scalp, fingers parting my tresses. I suddenly realized that I'd missed my last hair appointment, which meant my fiery roots were probably just becoming visible. "Yours didn't though," he said softly, confirming my fear. There was a hint of a question in his voice.

I pulled away from his chest to take a long pull of my own bubbles. Bobby's gaze went straight to my naked breasts. I started to pull up the sheet. "Don't you dare," he warned, yanking the expensive thread count out of my hand. "Do you know how long I've waited to see those?" he teased.

Fine, then. I lifted my chin, arched my back, and gave him a good, long look. I did have pretty nice boobs. "I know exactly how long," I purred. I let my gaze rake over his sculpted torso and then lower. "I've been waiting to see some things too."

His breath quickened in time with my pulse. I set my glass on the nightstand. "About those plans to walk to tasting rooms and go out for a steak dinner..."

"Screw those plans," he said immediately, and we both burst out laughing. "We'll do all that tomorrow," he said, gaze back on my breasts. "But now..."

I took his glass and set it next to my own. “Now.”

We dove at each other.



WHEN I WOKE the next morning, I was shocked to see it was almost 10:00 a.m. I couldn't remember the last time I'd slept so late and so hard. Of course, I'd gotten quite a bit of exercise in the last twenty-four hours, and we hadn't slept more than an hour or two at a time.

I sat up in bed, wincing. My hip flexors downright ached from all of the, ahem, thrusting. I was going to need to take up Pilates or something. Not that Bobby had had any complaints about my flexibility. Indeed, he'd been pretty damn complimentary about the way I'd bent myself over in front of the bathroom mirror, so that we could both watch him—

Where was he, anyway?

His side of the bed was empty and the sheets were cool. “Bobby?” I called. My voice carried out of the bedroom, and the bungalow wasn't large. No answer. Hmmm. Maybe he'd gotten antsy waiting for my sleepy ass to wake up. Maybe he'd gone for a run or for coffees or something.

I dug through my suitcase and pulled on pajama pants and a T-shirt before heading out to the kitchen and living room to see if he'd left a note or text on my phone. Nope. I poured myself a glass of water from the tap and opened the French doors. It was a beautiful morning, sunny and cool, probably about fifty degrees. Goose bumps rose on my bare arms. Where was he?

Fifteen minutes later, Bobby finally walked through the bungalow door. He was not in running clothes or carrying coffees. A worry line creased his forehead—something I'd rarely seen. “Hey,” I said from my perch on the sofa. “Everything OK?”

He nodded quickly, but the worry line held firm. “All good.”

After the kind of night we'd spent together, I expected him to come to the sofa, to kiss me with a loud smack, and make a flirty, sexy, or charming-Bobby comment. But he circled the small room instead, chewing his lip and giving me way too much space.

I swallowed against my suddenly dry throat. Did he regret last night, the day before? I couldn't imagine why, but I'd never seen him this agitated before. "What is wrong?" My voice was small and tight.

His gaze darted over, took in my wide eyes and newly hunched, defensive posture. "Nothing!" he exclaimed, finally swooping over to cuddle me. He squeezed me against him, pressed a kiss to my forehead. Just as I was about to relax, though, he stood again. "Sorry. I was just thinking how we should go to the pool. Right now."

I raised my eyebrows. Really? He was acting all weird and impatient because he wanted to go to the hot springs? "OK," I said slowly, drawing the word out. I supposed that's why we were here. But really? Right now? He wanted to leave our beautiful private cocoon to head to the pool where the majority of the resort's guests were sure to be on this beautiful morning?

"Great!" Bobby practically ran from the room. "I'll get my suit on. Meet you out front when you're ready." The bathroom door slammed behind him.

I stood up, stomach churning. Was he bored of me and desperate for the company of others? Or somehow freaked out that I'd expect our relationship to change in some way now that we'd slept together? I hadn't known what to expect from our morning after, but I certainly hadn't expected this nervousness and distance.

I pulled on my swimsuit and the heavy white robe the resort provided to all guests. My messy hair went in a bun on top of my head. I wanted to put on the armor of makeup, but that didn't make any sense as we were headed into what was essentially an enormous hot tub.

Bobby was waiting for me out front, pacing, on the path. His sunglasses were on, hiding his eyes. They couldn't hide that worry line though, or the way he was practically vibrating with tension. Or the way he didn't speak on the three-minute walk to the pool. In the six weeks I'd known Bobby, this was the only completely silent time between us.

This was ridiculous. Something was clearly wrong, and I was going to find out what it was. I bit my lip and marched in front of Bobby to the entrance of the pool. Hundreds of other guests be damned. I'd find a private corner for us somewhere and demand to know what was going on.

I was so determined and distracted that I was ten feet into the enormous pool space before I realized that it was completely empty.

I stopped in my tracks, and my mouth dropped open. The Olympic-sized pool of geyser-fed water was gorgeous, steam rising from its entire length, like a scene from a modern fairy tale. I swiveled my head from side to side, taking in the surrounding stone architecture, the multiple levels where hundreds of reclining chairs lay side by side, all empty. Had we make a mistake? Was the pool closed?

"Bobby," I started, and turned back to face him.

He was on one knee.

Oh my God. Oh my freakin' God. What was happening?

The sunglasses were on the ground next to him, so I could see his turquoise eyes now: so serious, so scared. In his hands, proffered up to me, was a ring box from one of San Francisco's most famous jewelers.

"We only have the pool to ourselves for an hour," he whispered. "That's the most I could get from the hotel manager, even with a lot of begging and pleading and my trademark charm. It's not enough time for me to tell you how much I love you or all the reasons I want to marry you, but it's enough time to start the conversation at least."

Something was wrong with me. I couldn't stop blinking—oh, that's because tears were brimming in my eyes. My

shuddering breaths were loud and echoing in this cathedral of silence and steam. My brain was broken. Bobby loved me? I had hoped he did, with every fiber of my being, but I'd never even dared to think further than him saying it aloud.

Oh my, he was still talking and I really, really needed to listen to him instead of the incredulity in my own mind. "I started to fall for you the first night we met. I've fallen deeper with every hour that we've spent together. I never want to stop. I never want to stop falling for you or talking to you or making love to you. I love you, Em."

The fat tears finally fell from my eyes and slid down my hot face. "I love you too. I feel like I always have. Like I've been waiting for you my entire life." I didn't like that he was down on the cold pavement by himself. I knelt in front of him, my bare knees grinding against the sidewalk. I grabbed him by the back of the neck and we kissed, feverishly, my tears intermingling with his.

He broke away and leaned his forehead against mine. "Marry me?"

This was insane. In my wildest dreams of Bobby—and there had been plenty of those in the last few weeks—I'd never imagined a proposal. I knew this was too fast. The connection between us was real. So, so real. But were we actually ready for marriage? A tiny, minuscule flare of panic burst through my chest. Did Bobby really know me well enough to love me?

"Believe me, I know this is crazy," Bobby whispered, his forehead still pressed to mine. "But for once in my life, I don't want to wait for things to happen. I can't be passive when it comes to you. I *like* you, I *want* you, I *love* you. I will love you forever. Maybe that's all that matters. We can figure out the rest as we go. Together."

My doubts rose in the air and vanished, just like the steam from the pool. Yeah, this was too fast—and so the hell what? Because I loved him too. I'd probably started the minute he switched the place cards. I couldn't imagine not loving him. I

couldn't imagine anything better than figuring out the rest of life with him by my side.

“Yes.”



Now

I GLARED AT the text box on the Indian Springs escape room, the blinking cursor waiting for an answer to the puzzle. The answer was clearly “marry me” or “yes.”

Instead of answering, I slammed the laptop shut. I'd been wrong to be weak. I was done with the escape rooms. Bobby could send me one every day until he worked through his closure exercise, but I wasn't opening any more of the emails. They were axe blows to my heart, and I needed to stop aiding and abetting while he tried to break down my fragile walls.

I pushed away from my desk. This stupid studio was stifling me. I couldn't breathe. I needed somewhere to go and burn some of this desperate energy. But the rain outside fell in sideways sheets, so I couldn't go for a walk. Pressure was building inside me, so painful. I felt like I was about to erupt. What if I had a full-on panic attack, like I almost did on the street last week?

I did a desperate half twirl in the tiny space of my apartment. If I couldn't move, I was going to scream and scream and scream. Which would freak the hell out of my neighbors; they'd probably call the cops. Regardless, a scream built up in my throat, ready to tear out of my mouth and through the walls and floors.

But then: *What was your mom's favorite song to sing?*

Oh. Oh, that might just work. Hands shaking, I connected my phone to a portable speaker, cranked the volume as loud as it could go, and found “Piece of My Heart.” The neighbors were just going to have to deal with scream-singing instead of scream-screaming.

“Come on! Come on! Come on!” I shrieked along with Janis as loud as I could.

Chapter Nine

UNDER MY PILLOW, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. Automatically, I cleared my throat a few times and reached to the nightstand for my glasses. What time was it? 8:03. I would definitely be late to work, but at least I'd managed to grab a few hours of sleep after my 3:00 a.m. insomnia.

I blinked sleep away until I could read the name on the phone screen. "Morning, Bella."

"Hey, Emily. Sorry to call so early." There was a note of determination in her voice, and I pushed myself into a seated position.

"No worries." I grabbed the pad of paper and pen always next to the bed. "What's up?"

Wind whistled through our connection. I could hear the sound of a rolling bag on pavement, of horns and muted conversations. Bella must have left her hotel, on her way to the airport. "I made a decision. I want to go on the offensive with Taggart. I don't want to just wait for him to come at me again. I want to be more aggressive. That intellectual property is *mine*."

A shiver of adrenaline started at my spine and sizzled me more awake with every inch it spread through my body. Going on the aggressive with only my shaky theory was a risky approach, but I wanted to do it too.

Throwing myself entirely into this absorbing case was exactly what I needed right now. Work had saved me when I couldn't function all those years ago, and it would save me now. I could focus on the various puzzles in Bella's situation instead of these nightly emotional puzzles I was simply not equipped to solve. It would be OK to take some personal time to make some traction on this. Surely, the partners wouldn't begrudge me two or three days off after my strong performance the past few months.

I pushed myself out of bed and went to my laptop. “What flight are you on?”

“Grande skim vanilla latte with an extra shot of espresso,” Bella said, apparently grabbing a Starbucks for the road. “Sorry,” she said to me. “I’m on the 11:00 a.m. United to O’Hare out of LaGuardia. Do you want me to switch to a later one? I could come to your office if you want to discuss more strategy before I leave.”

“Nope.” I went to United’s website and easily found her flight. There were several open seats and I grabbed one. “I’m coming to Chicago with you.”

“Really?” she squeaked. She sounded so happy it made my lips turn up at the corners.

“Oh yeah.” I needed logistics, paperwork, a different city, travel, and to help my new friend. I needed the exact opposite of crying in my sad apartment after wandering through ridiculous virtual rooms.

Besides, the aggressive approach Bella wanted would necessitate a meeting with Taggert and his lawyer sooner rather than later. I could theoretically join via video conferencing software, but there were so many things to be learned by being in a physical room with someone rather than seeing a square video of their face on a screen. Our case didn’t need a single additional disadvantage.

Also, if I was in Chicago, I could figure out whatever was going on with Jo Harper. I hadn’t gotten far in my research last night. I’d been too wrecked by the escape room to dive too deep. But I had found one interesting thing: Jo Harper had formed a new LLC, just two months ago. Poise, LLC was headquartered in Chicago and classified as a fundraising business. So either this was a front for a con or she’d recently gone straight.

Suddenly full of energy, I yanked my carry-on suitcase out from under my bed and pulled three of my favorite suits off hangers in my closet. “I’ll meet you at the gate!”



BELLA FIDGETED IN the roomy seat and looked in wonder at the mimosa in her hand. “I can’t thank you enough for the upgrade. This is incredible!”

The first-class cabin on the plane was small, just three rows. Yeah, it was a splurge, especially for such a short flight. But I was so invigorated by this mini-adventure, I decided to start us off with a bang.

“Do you want to talk about the case? Or something else? Or should I just be quiet and leave you alone?” Bella closed her eyes in delight at the taste of orange juice and sparkling wine, and I laughed.

“The first thing I’ll work on is drafting a response to the cease-and-desist letter. We’ll decide how much information we want to include in it and request a meeting through Taggert’s lawyer.” I cocked my head at her. “You know, going on the offensive doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re going to have some sort of imminent showdown with Taggert. He may prefer that his lawyer handle everything up to the point where he’d need to be in court.”

Bella sighed and winked at me. “I know. Don’t worry. I’ll only punch him in the face inside my head.”

After takeoff, Bella fell asleep against the window. I accepted my third tea from the flight attendant and frowned at my laptop screen, where two drafts of a letter to Taggert’s lawyer sat side by side. What was the right tone here? More of a simpering “there must have been a misunderstanding and we’d like to discuss further” or an in-your-face “we vehemently disagree that you own this intellectual property”?

Since we had no real evidence yet, as a next step, I would greatly prefer a meeting instead of them moving straight to a court injunction. The softer draft would probably accomplish that, but it also started our relationship on a conciliatory tone, which I did not like. I’d prefer starting with a “don’t fuck with me” vibe, but if Taggert was as cocky as he came across from

Bella's story, he very well might file an injunction and straight to court we'd go.

I leaned back and shook my head. Didn't need to fire off the letter when I wasn't sure. I could look at it tomorrow with a more rested brain and decide. A ping from my email inbox made me cringe. Hopefully, it wasn't my firm. They wouldn't love that I'd disappeared with zero notice. Bracing myself, I looked at the new message.

It was another escape room invitation from Bobby.

He was breaking pattern again. He'd just sent the Indian Springs one last night. I opened the email to see the title: *First Family Dinner*. I shut it immediately. Why was he sending me another one so quickly? Because I'd exited the last one without solving it? Because he sensed that I was quitting his game and he'd decided to escalate?

I knew the night he was talking about. In November, shortly after we announced our engagement, we went out to dinner with my father and Bobby's brother, Jamie.

I was *not* going to open the stupid thing and be whisked into a visual flood of troublesome memories again. But it was interesting that this was the next event in our relationship he'd chosen. The first ones had been rather obvious markers in our brief love story: the night we met, our first date, the night we first slept together and his proposal.

But the night we'd gone out to dinner with his brother and my dad was a different kind of night. It started off full of tension, for one thing, and not the fun sexual kind. Because both Jamie and my dad had been shocked by our engagement.

Jamie was more baffled than anything else. Bobby had always dated a lot but never seriously, and he'd never even mentioned the prospect of settling down someday. I'm sure our engagement seemed entirely out of character. I'd been disappointed that Jamie wasn't married or dating anyone at the moment. It would have been nice to have another woman at the table, someone who could become a friend or even sisterly.

My father was less baffled and more disapproving. His exact words when I showed him my engagement ring were: “Have you lost your mind? You’ve known him five minutes.”

His words were like a slap to my happy face, and I retaliated too quickly in a way sure to hurt him. “Remind me how long you knew Mom before you proposed?”

My dad got down on one knee seven days after meeting my mother, although she made him wait three months before saying yes. As I suspected, my saucy comment ended that line of questioning. He never talked about my mom, so any subject even adjacent to her became quickly taboo.

I bottom-lined it for him. “Dad. I’m an adult. I love him. This is what I want. I’ll get a prenu.”

So off to dinner the four of us went. Ostensibly, it was to celebrate and talk about wedding plans, but really it was for Jamie to get to know me and for my father to take Bobby’s measure.

Jamie looked a little like Bobby. He had the same height and strong jawline. The same shape of eyes, although the color was a darker combination of blue and green. His hair was brown instead of gold and had a little white running through it. Although he tried hard to be social and carefree at dinner that night, worry lines were dug into his face, and he often checked his phone.

Jamie was famous in the tech world these days. Last year he’d given a widely viewed TED Talk about the dangers of social media. Because of that talk and because he’d created a nonprofit, SSM (Safe Social Media), Jamie had been christened “The Conscience of Silicon Valley.” Unfortunately, nonprofits struggled even in the best of times, and rumor on the street had it that SSM’s funding was running out. I suspected the lines in Jamie’s face were well earned.

In our hundreds of hours talking over the past two months, I’d tried to dig into the brothers’ relationship. “Are you close?” As an only child, I was always curious about siblings.

Bobby had grimaced. “We used to be. As kids, I mean. But we don’t have much in common anymore. He spends most of his time working and obviously, I do not.” He’d used that flippant tone I hated. The one that (poorly) masked his insecurity.

“Do you wish you were still close?”

Bobby nodded once, and I’d squeezed his hand. Maybe this was something I could do for him. Help him strengthen his bond with his brother.

At that dinner though, Jamie was the least of Bobby’s worries. “On a scale of one to ten, how much does your dad want to kill me?” he’d asked in the back seat of the Uber on the way to the restaurant.

I laughed. “Maybe a six and a half?” Bobby shuddered and I turned serious. “He’s protective, but he’s not an asshole. He just doesn’t know you, and he’s not the most trusting person. But it’ll be OK.”

And dinner was...OK. Not great. Both Jamie and my father made offhand comments about Bobby’s lack of career that I could see ate away at him, although he parried with his charm so easily I’m sure they didn’t notice.

They also both tried to encourage us to enjoy a long engagement. “No need to rush things,” my father boomed condescendingly. “Setting the date for this time next year would be ideal.”

Jamie rushed to agree. “Fall weddings are always my favorite.”

I bristled at both of them. Bobby and I hadn’t discussed a date yet, but how dare my dad or his brother try to set the timeline for any part of our relationship?

Across the table, Bobby took a slow sip of his old-fashioned. There was an edge to his cheerful voice that only I could hear. “What were *you* thinking, Em?”

I grinned at him, fiercely, showing all my teeth. “Sooner.” I boomed my voice in a way that matched my father. “I was thinking sooner.”

Jamie and my father exchanged glances until I turned my teeth at them and they looked down at the table. *That's right—it's none of your business.*

“So was I,” Bobby answered. Across the table, he smiled so broadly at me, his eyes almost disappeared. I could feel warmth and adoration emanating from him like protective wings.

I eyed the champagne glass in front of me and raised an eyebrow. “New Year’s Eve?”

Jamie’s eyes widened, and my father audibly gasped.

Bobby burst from his chair and swung around the table to kiss me on the mouth, delighting everyone in the restaurant except our dinner companions. “Perfect.”

Now, on the plane, I slammed my laptop shut again, so sharply that Bella twitched in her sleep. I hadn’t even opened the stupid escape room, and here I was, remembering anyway. I knew why Bobby had chosen that particular night after all.

It wasn’t because we’d chosen our wedding date either. It was because we’d both been nervous that night. It was the first time we brought the most powerful and important people in our lives into our cocoon. But in the face of their disapproval, we didn’t even blink. We’d become a unit, and that dinner had been a stepping stone. Eventually, Jamie and I became friendly and Bobby even won over my father.



AS THE PLANE touched down in Chicago, I finished an email to Rosie, letting her know what was up. I also spent a few minutes on Bird & Dreyer’s website, searching for the bio of Taggart’s attorney, James A. Hill. *Let’s see how good of a lawyer you are.*

I found him on their alphabetic directory, but he didn’t have a written bio like most of the other professionals. Of course, that didn’t mean much. He could be newer to the firm and the website was just slightly out of date. My own bio hadn’t gone up on my current firm’s website for months. I

made a note in my calendar to dig deeper on his background, to see what other intellectual property cases he'd been involved in.

Bella and I deplaned and strolled briskly to the CTA train stop that would take us into the city. "I'd offer to host you," Bella said, "but my apartment is tiny."

I laughed, touched that she would even think of such a thing. "No worries at all. I haven't been to Chicago in years. I'm excited to stay someplace fancy downtown. Maybe I'll even fit in some touristy stuff."

We boarded the train, and I was tickled to realize there was a genuine spring in my step. It felt great to be here. Like coming out of hiding or something.

My smile wavered. It was jarring to admit, but maybe hiding was exactly what I'd been doing since March. Sure, I'd been amassing a record number of billable hours on cases in London and New York. But maybe burying myself in the legitimacy of work was actually just a way to hide. From Bobby. From my father. From myself.

"You seem really happy to be here. Do you not like New York?" Bella asked, plopping in a seat and scooching over to make room for me.

I sat and scrunched my eyebrows together. "It's fine."

Bella gave me an amused frown. "I've never met anyone who's had a 'meh' opinion about New York. Usually people love it or loathe it. If you don't actively love it, why do you choose to live there?"

Fair question. But considering the actual city of New York hadn't been part of my decision-making. When I'd fled my marriage, I'd simply run straight to the job offer. If it had been in Istanbul or Helsinki, I'd have gone there.

To Bella, I just shrugged and changed the subject. "Tomorrow I'll send a response to Taggert's attorney and try to set up a meeting." I paused. "I'm also going to reach out to Jo Harper."

Bella craned her neck to see out of the window, checking that the train wasn't pulling up to her stop yet. "The woman who recommended I hire you? Why?"

I sighed. Talk about a long, complicated story. "I've never met her, but our lives have intertwined in unusual ways. I find it a highly suspicious coincidence that she just sat down next to you in your favorite coffee shop one day. It's much more likely that she engineered the meeting as a way to connect us."

Understandably, Bella looked bewildered. "I don't get it. How would she know anything about my situation? Why would she care? Why would she do that?"

The downtown Chicago skyline became visible in the distance. "That's what we're going to find out."



BELLA GOT OFF the train at the Logan Square stop north of downtown, and I continued to ride the Blue Line into the Loop. I checked into the Langham, a five-star hotel not far from both Taggert's office and the office of his attorney's law firm. My room's view was absolutely gorgeous, overlooking the Chicago River and cityscape. For long minutes, I watched boats pass by and contemplated taking myself out for an early dinner at one of the many restaurants lining the Riverwalk.

But first, I drafted the email I'd been composing in my head for hours.

Ms. Harper,

This afternoon I flew into Chicago with my client, Bella Bradley. It's my understanding that the reason Bella hired me is because you recommended she do so. I can't believe it's a coincidence that our paths have overlapped for a third time. Shall we meet to discuss? Bella and I are available all day tomorrow.

Emily Austin

I hit the send button a little harder than necessary and went to take the world's longest, hottest shower. I forgot to turn on the bathroom fan, so the mirrors became opaque with steam. Which reminded me how Bobby used to draw hearts on our

bathroom mirrors after his shower and write sappy things for me to find later.

With a huff, I wiped the mirrors clean and frowned at myself. *Ugh*. I looked like shit. My skin was pasty, and it would take an entire tube of concealer to mask the dark circles under my eyes. I needed an appointment with a colorist, stat. My ginger roots were coming in, brightening my scalp in a way that looked bizarre with the rest of my ash-brown hair.

Sighing, I pulled on the hotel robe and left the bathroom. Disappointment in my reflection was nothing new. I hadn't smiled at the woman in the mirror in more than half a decade.

Jo Harper had already responded to my message.

Emily,

I'm so glad you're here. We have a lot to talk about. Let's meet at 6:00 p.m. tomorrow at Fizz.

Jo

She'd included a link to Fizz's website. It was a neighborhood bar on the city's north side. That was weird. If we were meeting to talk about Bella's case, why were we meeting after business hours and in a bar? Hadn't she just started a company? Didn't they have an office? Damn it, why did she have to be so cryptic? Couldn't she have included just the tiniest bit of information in her response?

I couldn't even focus on being upset about her reply because another emotional bomb exploded in my email box: an escape room invitation from Bobby. *Another* one? What the hell? I hadn't answered the riddle to last night's, and I hadn't even opened the one from today except to see the title.

Hmmm, what would this one be? Oh, easy: our wedding day.

I opened the email—only to see the title, not to enter the escape room. I just wanted to know if I was right.

I wasn't. I'd expected it to say "New Year's Eve" or something similar. Instead, it said "Honeymoon in Real Life," and a shocked sound erupted from my throat.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't fucking fair, that Bobby knew me so well. If it had been an escape room designed around our super fancy wedding, I would have emotionally shrugged and moved on.

Our wedding had been beautiful, obviously. Sven Saturn's daughter could only have a beautiful wedding. It was held in the Grand Ballroom at the Palace Hotel. My father had moved mountains to reserve it on such short notice. My dress was couture from a designer most of Hollywood was currently obsessed with, a princessy frothy thing that the women in the boutique practically foamed at the mouth over. We had a ten-piece band and oyster appetizers and a cake almost as tall as I was.

I didn't care about any of it.

When it became clear that I wasn't budging on my wedding date, my father immediately hired the best wedding planner on the West Coast, and she pulled off the miracle-wedding-in-two-months. All I had to do was nod and point and smile. I did smile, in all of the pictures, from ear to ear.

Inside though...

And Bobby knew?

An enormous lump grew in my throat, and my fingers really, really wanted to open this latest escape room.

The day after our wedding, I woke up a little grumpy in the big hotel bed. My feet ached from being in heels for fourteen hours the day before, and I had a headache from all the champagne. The ache I'd carried in my chest the entire day hadn't quite disappeared yet either.

But then I'd heard Bobby singing in the shower. "Good as Hell" by Lizzo, if I wasn't mistaken. I burst into giggles, cleansing laughter that chased away all the aches in body and heart. That was my *husband* in there singing.

I was still grinning like a loon when he emerged from the bathroom. As soon as he saw me up and beaming, he dove into the bed. Tickled me and kissed me from head to toe while I screamed with laughter and joy.

Later, over tea in bed, I asked, “Are you disappointed that we’re not flying somewhere today? Should we have planned a honeymoon after all?”

Bobby shook his head. “Nope. We have the rest of our lives to travel. The last few months have been insane.” True that. Besides planning the wedding of Silicon Valley’s dreams, we’d also navigated the insane San Francisco real estate market to purchase our first home together. He kissed my bare shoulder. “It’s still a honeymoon, even if we don’t go anywhere.”

He was right. The next week, my first week of being his wife, was magical. We rearranged furniture in our new condo to make it a comfortable place for both of us. We cooked for one another. His pesto was delicious; I burned the pork chops. When we went out for coffee, he ordered from the barista, saying, “I’ll have a cappuccino. My brilliant wife will have your strongest tea.” We conspired together about setting Jamie up with various friendly acquaintances. I finally accepted the San Francisco job offer and set a start date. We went to the libraries together, and Bobby taught me how to play chess.

After making love and before falling asleep those nights, I’d marvel to myself, *This is my life, this is my actual life now.*



IN MY CHICAGO hotel room, I shook off the memories and stumbled, completely disoriented, to look out the window at the unfamiliar view again. *Is this my life? Is this my life now?*

Chapter Ten

“**L**OOKS LIKE A cool place,” Bella said cheerfully as we stepped into Fizz.

Still annoyed that we weren't meeting in a businesslike environment, I glanced around the bar, frowning. Didn't look like anything special to me. Just your basic big city corner pub. Pool table in the back corner, cushioned booths along the dark paneled walls. Flat-screen TVs over the bar showing football games.

Although, it did have a nice, relaxed ambiance. I could grudgingly admit that. The dudes on barstools were laughing with one another and taking shit from the bartender, a striking woman with a faux hawk and bright red lipstick. A chalkboard on the wall announced a contest for naming this month's original bourbon cocktail. Even though it was pretty crowded, I didn't feel like covering my ears or taking a preemptive Advil. The volume on the TVs was turned off so no sportscaster blasted us with commentaries and no whistles blared. Instead, patrons chose the bar's soundtrack on TouchTunes.

I squared my shoulders and lifted my chin, a change in posture I'd always affected when bracing myself to enter a social situation. My father did a similar sort of ritual stiffening, and my mother had always laugh-sighed at us both. “You two,” she'd say, hands on her hips. “You walk into a room like it's something to conquer, like you expect people to be against you.”

“And you,” my father had retorted, “walk into a room as though you assume everyone is in love with you.”

She'd beamed at him and batted her eyelashes. “Aren't they?”

Then she'd saunter in and three minutes later, every freakin' person in the room *would* be in love with her.

I smiled at the memory before I could stop myself.

“There she is.” Bella pointed to a booth in the back, where two women sat talking. “Jo Harper is the one with the dark hair.”

Irritating to admit, but I was full of nerves about this meeting. I’d wondered about this person for years. What kind of woman would put on a disguise and trick a grieving billionaire into proposing only to then suffer an attack of morality and disappear—but not before writing intense letters to both him and his daughter, imploring them to get help and love one another?

And all that was before she started a new illegal enterprise!

Jo caught sight of Bella’s outstretched hand and rose from her booth, face placid. I supposed I’d imagined her as some sort of irresistible femme fatale, so her mostly ordinary appearance took me aback. I mean, she was very pretty—just not the movie star in my mind. She was in her mid-thirties with long, dark hair pulled back in a French braid. She had light brown eyes that contrasted with dark brows and lashes, good high cheekbones, and a wide mouth. She wore a simple long-sleeved black T-shirt and leggings with sneakers. I immediately felt overdressed in my suit.

“Nice to see you again, Bella,” she said. Bella returned her smile and offered an awkward little wave.

She turned to me. “I’ve wanted to meet you for a long time, Emily.”

Ugh, what did one even *do* with that? This was all so *weird*.

I did not want to talk about any of her stuff with my father—or what had happened in August—in front of Bella and the other stranger at the table. That stuff was too personal. We were here tonight to discuss the intellectual property case, and that’s where we’d start.

I didn’t return Jo’s smile. I simply nodded and held up my laptop bag, legal pads and pens tucked into the outside pocket. “I would like to understand why you connected Bella to me,

how you're in the middle of this. What does Taggart have to do with you?"

To my surprise, Jo took a step back toward the booth and flicked her eyes to the other woman sitting there. "Your move, Tess."

I shifted my gaze to this Tess for the first time. She swallowed some liquid from the glass in front of her before sliding out of the booth and extending her hand to me. "Tess Greene." She wore tight jeans, knee-high black boots, and a pink T-shirt that read, *If my mouth doesn't say it, my face definitely will*. She was quite tall, probably five foot eleven, with strawberry blonde curls, light amber eyes, and full cheeks.

I wouldn't have called her gorgeous, exactly, but she radiated attitude, a confident energy that made her hard to look away from. She'd said only her name, but I felt short and intimidated. *Jesus, pull it together*. I shook her hand firmly. "Emily Austin." Bella introduced herself next, eyes wide. She must have felt Tess's vibe as well.

She gestured to the booth, so Bella slid in on Jo's side and I perched awkwardly on Tess's. I grabbed a legal pad and pen out of my bag. Before sitting back down, Tess craned her head toward the bar and whistled.

The faux-hawked bartender looked over and frowned in mock-annoyance. "I'm not a dog, Tess. I don't answer to whistles."

Tess grinned at her. "Do you answer to large bar tabs? We'll take four of the monthly special." The bartender rolled her eyes but gave a thumbs-up. Tess plopped back down. "You guys will like it. It's delicious."

My lips tightened in annoyance. I would have much preferred ordering my own damn drink. Jo met my eyes across the table, lips twitching, as if she knew what I was thinking. I looked down at the legal pad in front of me instead of returning her mischievous look.

Tess took a deep breath. “Jo doesn’t have any connection to Cole Taggert. I looped her into this situation.”

Bella frowned with her whole face. “I don’t understand.”

Tess smirked, not unkindly, at her. “After the Chicago IP firms laughed you out of their offices and before you met Jo in the coffee shop that day, what did you do about Taggert?”

Huh? My gaze slid from Tess’s face to Bella’s. She hadn’t mentioned doing anything at all.

Bella shook her head. “Nothing!” She glanced at me, eyes wide. “I promise, Emily, I didn’t confront him! I didn’t call him. I didn’t email him.” She narrowed her eyes at Tess. “I did nothing.”

Another smirk. “Just because you didn’t do anything confrontational doesn’t mean you did nothing.” Tess pulled out her phone and jabbed at it. She showed the screen to the rest of us at the table, but the website displayed meant nothing to me.

Bella, however, blanched. “Oh. I didn’t post anything though!” She locked eyes with me again. “It’s a commonly used site for coders where you can post questions and get help from others. Lots of developers reach out to this community when they need help with a problem.” She shook her head. “I didn’t post anything about Taggert though. I wanted to, but I was afraid if I did, it would somehow violate the cease and desist.”

“Oh, I know you didn’t post anything,” Tess said gleefully. “But you did search the site quite thoroughly, right? Entered in Taggert’s name, along with other key words like *theft*, *steal*, *unethical*, *liar*...that kind of thing?”

Pinkening, Bella nodded slowly. “Well. Yeah. I wanted to see if anyone else had ever posted about Taggert being shady. I was desperate.” Her shoulders slumped. “I didn’t find anyone though.”

Tess’s bright golden eyes flashed. “But someone found you.”

The bartender deposited four tumblers on the table. “The September bourbon special. It’s a little citrusy and a little bitter. Enjoy!”

“Cheers!” Tess insisted, and the four of us automatically clinked our glasses together, although I didn’t have a clue what we were toasting. I raised the glass to my lips and swallowed. Oh man. I revised my earlier annoyance with Tess. She could order for me anytime. Oh wow, that was delicious. Bourbon, lemon, Campari, and other miscellaneous delights. I don’t know what my face did in response, but Tess winked at me. “I know, right?”

Bella didn’t even taste hers. “What did you mean, someone found me?”

Tess sideswiped her question. “Your hunch was that Taggart had stolen before, right? That if he’d taken your code so brazenly, he might have done something similarly shitty in the past?”

A thrum of excitement pulsed at the base of my spine. Sometimes you just know that whatever you’re going to hear next is going to change the case in front of you.

Bella straightened. “Yes,” she whispered.

“You were right,” Tess said breezily. “Taggart is an asshole, a life-ruining thief.”

I cleared my throat, pen poised. “Did he steal something from you?”

Tess’s golden eyes cut across the table to me like a sunshiny laser. “No, not me.”

I stifled my frustration. “Then from who? What was stolen?”

Tess and Jo exchanged glances. Then Tess bounced right out of the booth, marched across the bar, and tapped the shoulder of a guy working on a laptop at a highboy near the pool table. She gave him a nod, and he stood, grabbing a basket of food off the table. Halfway back to our table, they bumped shoulders and grinned at one another. My heart gave a little clang. I loved those kinds of touches. Those simple, tiny

gestures that said, “I’m here. I’m yours.” Bobby used to gently stroke my right shoulder blade whenever we stood in a line.

“This is Max,” Tess announced as they approached our table.

“Hey, guys,” he said easily, pushing his black-framed glasses up his nose. He threw a basket of French fries on the table, grabbed a nearby stool, and perched at the edge of our booth. “Emily, Bella. Great to meet you.”

Tess grabbed a fry and used it to point at Bella. “Max is the one who found you from your Taggert searches.”

He nodded. “I’ve written a program that I run against several developer sites looking for Taggert’s name with a combination of other key words. It checks for postings—and for search history. Since you have to log on to use the site, I was able to find your user account and then you that way too.” He wrinkled his nose, a little shamefaced. “Sorry to internet stalk you,” he said to Bella.

I looked up from my notes. “That’s a lot of trouble to go to,” I said slowly. “What did Taggert steal from you?”

Max’s lips thinned, but he didn’t look angry, exactly. Tess, on the other hand, practically had sparks coming out of her eyes. “Oh sorry,” she bit out. “I didn’t introduce him properly.” She waved at Max with both hands in a wild flourish. “Emily, Bella, please meet Max Hampshire—the *actual* creator of GuardTower.”

I maintained my lawyer-trained non-expression, but Bella’s mouth dropped open so far she looked like a cartoon. “Are you serious?” Her big blue eyes searched Max’s face. “Taggert stole GuardTower from you? You actually wrote it?”

Max flushed. “Yeah. About three years ago. I worked for SideDoor for a long time, had an up-and-down relationship with Taggert. I created GuardTower completely on my own time and equipment. But I blabbed about my new baby in front of the wrong folks, and then one night Taggert showed up at my place with a pizza and beer. We were still colleagues, still friendly—I thought. But while I was out of the room at some

point, he moved the code to SideDoor's servers. By the time I realized what had been done, I couldn't prove it had been mine in the first place. They'd whitewashed the code. If I'd done anything with it, they would have said I stole it. He had all the power; no one would have believed me."

Bella stared at Max in awe, blinking slowly, her lips slightly parted. When Tess raised an eyebrow at her, she shook herself a little. But she couldn't keep from babbling either. "Um, wow. GuardTower is the most incredible product. The thing I wrote is an add-on to it. I loved working on it so much." She stopped herself. "But wait. Wait. Why would Taggert steal it? He didn't make money from it."

I cleared my throat. "I bet he intended to. But then *Max* released it as open source." After hearing Bella's tale of Taggert's behavior, it had never squared for me that such a jerk would willingly give away such a huge a money-making opportunity.

Jo, Tess, and Max all looked at me. "Impressive," Tess drawled.

Max nodded. "Yeah. I was pissed. So I wrote a press release pretending to be Taggert, and I released the code into the world free before Taggert could make a dime."

"Wow," Bella echoed dreamily, stars practically appearing in her eyes as she stared at Max. Tess placed her hands on her hips but seemed more amused than annoyed.

"Professionally, it's not been an easy road since then," Max said carefully. "Obviously, he fired me. I'm blacklisted at the C-level in the tech community. Taggert has ruined a lot of job opportunities for me." He sighed. "I'm fine. I do a lot of short-term contracting now, sometimes even for the FBI Cyber Crimes unit. I'm developing my own new product again, which is exciting." Bella looked like she wanted to interrupt, but she managed to restrain herself.

"But..." Tess prompted, putting a hand on his arm.

Max smiled at her and turned his arm so it was palm up and their fingers intertwined. "But... It would be great to not

always have the threat of Taggert hanging over me. To be able to interview for a job without worrying that the rug will get pulled out from under me once I have an offer.”

I tapped my pencil on the pad a few times. “So you were searching the sites for someone else who had a similar experience with Taggert in the hopes that together you’d be able to discredit him publicly for this pattern of behavior?”

“I suppose.” Max took off his glasses to rub the bridge of his nose. “Over the past year, I did find two other people who did searches similar to Bella’s.” He sighed. “But I didn’t know what to do next. How could I reach out to them in a way that wouldn’t freak them out by referring to searches they thought were anonymous?” Tess handed him her cocktail and he gratefully took a swallow.

I blew out a long breath and thought through the few facts I had. “If it had been an IP case, your situation was a clear loser since you worked at SideDoor and had a rocky professional relationship with Taggert. Also, once you released the product *as* Taggert, you became complicit in his ownership of the code.”

Tess glared at me, but I held up a placating palm. “I totally get why Max did it, I’m just saying that there’s no valid *legal* recourse for him at this time.” I looked at Bella, who was still staring starstruck at Max. “Bella’s case has potential, but it’s got some pretty big problems as well. I doubt that we’re going to win this case in a way that’s going to publicly out Cole Taggert as an unscrupulous ass.”

Jo spoke up for the first time. “We know. But the reason I connected her to you was because you’re an incredibly accomplished attorney, and I knew you would *try* to help the situation. That’s more than Max and Bella had a few weeks ago.”

I bit my own lip to keep from snapping at her. It didn’t really work. “How could you possibly know anything about me?”

Jo didn’t flinch at my snotty outburst; she just smiled. “A solid character witness.”

What could she mean by that? My father? Somehow I doubted he spoke much about me at all in their weird little fake-relationship five years ago.

But I didn't want to ask in front of Bella, Tess, and Max. Which I think she knew. Infuriated, I drained the rest of my cocktail.

"Anyway," Tess said. "We wanted to meet you tonight to introduce ourselves and let you know that we are in this with you. We can help! Max can give you lots of background info on Taggert and SideDoor. Jo and her team have a number of useful skills. I can keep you all plied with bourbon and dirty jokes."

Bella giggled, and my annoyance softened. Even if our case went into the toilet, she wasn't alone anymore. I nodded. "Thanks. It's honestly great to have more people in Bella's corner."

"We're in both your corners," Jo said softly. She slid out of the booth. "I'll get the check."

Max looked at his watch. "Uh-oh," he said to Tess. "God's going to pee any second."

Bella and I exchanged uneasy glances. Tess laughed at us. "God is my neighbor's dog. Max and I help her by walking him."

"I'll run down there and get him," Max said, scooping up a few fries for the road. He squeezed Tess's shoulder. "See you at your place?"

Tess whispered something in his ear. His pupils went dark, and he tripped over his own feet getting up. "Twenty minutes!" she called to his back.

"Are you ready to go?" I asked Bella. She nodded. "I'll get us an Uber."

My mind was overwhelmed by Max's big reveal. This had to be the opening to our path to win. I just needed to follow it. Did this new knowledge change the way I framed our response to the cease and desist, our request for a meeting? I bounced in

the booth, anxious to leave. All I wanted was to get in my hotel bed with my laptop.

But wait. Was I really going to leave here tonight without talking to Jo about my father or what had happened in August? I scanned the entire bar, but Jo was nowhere in sight.

She was gone.

Chapter Eleven

Early August—Six Weeks Ago

T*HRUM, THRUM, THRUM.*

Buzz, buzz, buzz.

“UGH.” I let out a frustrated grunt and forced one eye open. Like I did every night since coming to London in May, I rolled the wrong way in the hotel bed. No clock on the nightstand. With another exasperated huff, I rolled the other way—3:00 a.m. Yes, it was my typical insomnia time. But for once, I’d been having a solid night of sleep until something had woken me.

Thrum, thrum, thrum. There it went again. My phone was set to vibrate, and it was giving itself quite a workout under one of the pillows.

I blinked my bleary eyes clear in the darkness. Who the hell was calling now? My case was high profile and intense, but I was already working fourteen-hour days. Usually the hours between 10:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. were uninterrupted. My stomach dropped to the floor. There were only a few reasons to call someone at 3:00 a.m. Suddenly frantic, I grabbed for the phone. What if my father had collapsed or something?

It was Bobby. I hadn’t answered his calls in months, but he’d never called in the middle of the night before. If something was wrong with my father, he’d be the one to know and call, wouldn’t he? *Shit.*

“Hello?”

A pause. Then Bobby’s voice, unforgotten despite months of trying. “Em. Em! Oh m’God, is ashually you, na yer voice mail thing.”

My fears about my father faded. Bobby wasn’t calling me in the middle of the night because of a medical situation. He was slurring his words. I’d never actually seen Bobby after too

many cocktails, but I supposed at this stage in our separation, it wasn't that surprising to get a drunk dial.

"How many drinks have you had?" My voice was calm and even, like I was giving a deposition.

"All of them!" He laughed, and I could picture the expansive arm movement that accompanied his charming hyperbole.

I sighed. Sometimes I wanted to talk to Bobby so much that the craving crawled over my skin like an itch. Even now, hearing the deep pitch of his voice made my breath uneven. But if he was going to ask, again, why I'd left, I had nothing new to say.

"I miss you so much," he said, adding space between each word in a clear effort not to slur. "What did I do to make you leave? What did I do to make you not want me anymore?"

I leaned back against my pillows, flattened by the pain in my chest. "Nothing. You did nothing," I whispered. "I told you before. I made a mistake. I thought I could balance a marriage and my career. But I couldn't. I couldn't make it work."

Bobby groaned. "And I told *you* before that I don't believe one word of that excuse. I know your face and I know your voice. I know when yer peddling bullshit, Em. You don' need to protect m' feelings, but I wan' the truth."

I did the math in my head; it was only 7:00 p.m. in San Francisco. So early for him to be so drunk. No wonder he'd forgotten the time zone change. "It's really late here, you know," I said softly.

"I know!" He sounded proud. "It's three-ish where you are. It's your insomnia time. I called to keep you company."

There were huge watery discs in my eyes now, blinding me to anything that wasn't his voice. "You woke me up, actually, and I need to go back to bed. Long day tomorrow."

There was a pause so long I thought he'd hung up. But then I heard a liquid swallowing kind of sound and wondered if he was chugging water or something stronger. When he spoke again, his voice had grown wilder. "You can't keep

doing this. You left me and your explanation is ridiculous. You've been giving me the silent treatment for months. This isn't fair. It's cruel."

On the bed, my face crumpled and I sagged under the comforter. He wasn't wrong.

"I just don't understand how we got here from where we started." He sounded bewildered, sharing the sentiment of anyone in the world who's ever been dumped. "After the wedding, I knew you weren't exactly happy, but I thought it was just growing pains. That we'd jumped in so fast, you needed time to adjust to sharing your life."

That *should* have been all it was.

"I would have tried anything to make it better, but you stopped talking to me!" Bobby's voice was a half yell now, and I welcomed the change in tone. Anger would make us both feel stronger instead of shattered.

"You stopped talking to me," he said again. This time it was muttered with sad confusion.

Again, he wasn't wrong. Last winter, something in me had shattered. I wasn't unaware; I was just mentally unable to express my feelings. Physically unable to get the mess out of my chest, my brain, my body. So everything just steeped in my veins, like a toxic tea.

A tea that had only grown thicker and more bitter. "I've got to go."

"Damn it, Em." Angry Bobby was back. "You know, maybe I won't be here if you change your mind and want me back! I know I'm no prize, but some women do find me attractive."

I almost laughed. Bobby was the very definition of a prize, and he literally turned heads when we walked into any public place. If a straight woman told me that she didn't find Bobby attractive, I wouldn't have believed her.

He let out a sort of moan that transitioned him from angry back to sad. "I almost did something bad, Em," Bobby

whispered. I caught my breath, climbed halfway out of my covers. This was new.

“I was at a bar in Napa. This ridiculously beautiful girl started talking to me. Flirting with me. I didn’t tell her I was married. When she asked me for my email address, I gave it to her. We wrote each other a few messages.”

My body froze still, my emotional core divided into two parts.

The first part leaned back and nodded approvingly. Wasn’t this exactly what I’d been waiting for? Some sort of sign that it was time to let him wholly go and move on?

The problem was that the emotional core had not divided into two equal parts. The accepting, approving part was *tiny* compared to the large rage ball that threatened to burn my face and larynx.

“What the fuck?” I hissed into the phone, completely against my better judgment. My brain knew that it wasn’t fair to expect anything from Bobby at this point, but the rage ball said *mine* and didn’t care about fair.

Silence in my ear. I wished it were a video call. Was Bobby blinking in bewilderment because this was the first time I’d expressed emotion in months? Or was he angry and about to point out that I had no right to judge him since I was the one who’d walked out? Maybe he was about to tell me that he was actually interested in the “ridiculously beautiful” girl, and since I wasn’t around, he was going for it.

More of that liquid swallowing noise. Definitely not water. Sheesh, he was going to have such a headache tomorrow. A harsh laugh. “For a second, I was thrilled you sounded jealous. Because that would mean you still care.” Another swallow. “But now I just feel awful cause I hurt you. I never want to hurt you. But I must have, since you left.”

The rage ball dissipated as quickly as it formed, leaving me exhausted.

“Anyway, it wassen real,” Bobby slurred. “The girl, I mean. Was some sorta scam, y’know, one of those romance

scams? So don't worry cause it—"

Wait, what? "A romance scam?"

He sighed. "Yeah. She wasn't interested in me, she was only after my money. I know, I know. I'm an idiot."

I had *a lot* of questions. "Bobby—"

A sharp, dramatic gasp of air. "That's the first time I've heard you say my name since you left. Hey, Em, did I ever tell you that I hate my name?"

I wanted more information on this whole scamming business; after all, some of our bank accounts were linked. What if he'd accidentally given away personal or financial information to the scammer?

But his last words broke my train of thought, and my lips parted in surprise. Bobby rarely used the word *hate* at all. "No. You've never said that to me."

"It's horrible," he groaned. "My parents probably thought I'd eventually grow up into a Robert or Rob or Bob, but it never happened. Now my name matches what I am—a man-child, a pathetic joke."

OK, that was ridiculous. The booze had turned on him; he was getting maudlin. "Stop. You are not a pathetic joke. I've always liked your name." Sure, it was boyish, but it suited Bobby. He wasn't childish in any pejorative way. He was high-energy and affectionate, easy to please and quick to laugh.

"Do you ever miss me?" he asked suddenly.

Only when I breathed. Only every inhalation, every exhalation, and the spaces in between.

This conversation needed to be over before I said something like that aloud. "I need to go to back to bed."

"No!" he bellowed. "Goddamn it. Talk to me!"

"Oh yeah, about what?" I snapped. "The fact that you're wasted in the early evening on a Tuesday? That you woke me up in the middle of the night even though I'm working around the clock on this case and need every hour of sleep possible?"

Or maybe you'd like to tell me more about the 'ridiculously beautiful' woman you were interested in?"

My voice was shaking on that last sentence. "This conversation is over."

I hung up and threw my phone across the room.

Chapter Twelve

Now

AFTER THAT PHONE call with Bobby, I had called my father and told him what Bobby said about a romance scammer. Bobby had seemed so vulnerable. What if he'd accidentally exposed something to a person who'd run off with his bank accounts?

Telling my father about it was probably not the right thing to do. It was like hitting an ant with a sledgehammer. He was paranoid on a good day and considered the scammer's attempt on Bobby as a deeply personal attack on our family. Working nonstop in a conference room with a dozen other lawyers for the next week, I wasn't involved in what happened next: my father interrogated Bobby, took his computer, and began working with his own investigator and the FBI to find the scammers.

Days later, I called my father to get an update. Boy, did he have one. At the moment I called, he was face-to-face with Jo Harper. She'd just revealed herself to him not only as his fake fiancée from all those years ago, but also as the leader of a team of romance scammers who targeted rich married men. Apparently, one of her "girls" had targeted Bobby *by accident*. According to Jo, she would never have hurt my father or his family again, blah blah blah. She'd stopped her scam, was dissolving her team, and asking my father to please drop the case with the FBI.

"Not that I will," he huffed importantly in my ear. "I mean, she's a con artist. This could have hurt you! Think of the damage she could have caused to our family."

It's not that I totally disagreed. Frankly, I was still foaming at the mouth over the "ridiculously beautiful" girl who had approached Bobby.

But.

I'd long ago memorized that mysterious letter that arrived when my dad and I were estranged. *Forgive your father, Emily.*

Because your mom would want you to.

Because of that letter, I'd forgiven him. Because of that letter, I hadn't let my pride and hurt feelings keep us estranged. Because of that letter, I still had family. Despite our emotionally stunted relationship, I fiercely loved my father.

Interrupting my father's rant, I said, "I think you should tell the FBI to drop it."

It was hard to shock my father, but I'd done it. "What? Em, it was your husband who got entrapped in this, and—"

"I need to tell you about a letter I received," I blurted. "The July after you disappeared."

That shut him up fast.

I didn't tell him much about the contents of the letter, but I did tell him that I knew it was from Jo Harper and that it was the reason I started picking up the phone again when he called.

Then I got pulled into an urgent meeting, and my father and I never really talked about the situation again. But he did text me. *Thought about what you said. I'm going to let it go.*

If you looked at it from my perspective, I'd done Jo a big, fat favor. I'd managed to call off Vengeful Billionaire Daddy, and she was able to move on from her illegal romance scam to whatever her new company, Poise LLC, was doing now.

Is that why she'd connected Bella to me? As a sort of thank-you? Bella's case had energized me, no doubt, but Jo couldn't have known that it would. I didn't buy that connecting us was as simple as my "brilliant lawyer" skills either. Even if Bella had been rejected by two IP lawyers in Chicago, there were hundreds of others. Many with more experience than me.

From a self-preservation standpoint, wouldn't it be much smarter for Jo to stay far away from me? My father had let her off the hook a few months ago, but he'd come roaring back if he felt like I was getting involved in anything untoward.

So, there had to be more to it. Today, I'd find out what.

In the hotel bathroom, I brushed my hair, frowning, wondering which style would best hide my roots. Maybe I'd book a colorist for some time this week. I scrolled through Yelp reviews of salons on my phone for a few minutes but then decided I should probably get the appointment with Taggert's attorney scheduled before I made any alternate plans.

The problem was, I still wasn't satisfied with either draft of our response to the cease and desist, and I was acutely aware that we had the element of surprise only once. Taggert didn't think Bella would fight back. When she did, when she confronted him with opposing counsel, I wanted it to feel like the punch in the face Bella so badly wanted to give him.

Last night I'd done some research. Everything about Max Hampshire checked out, and I was sure he was telling the truth. A simple Google search on his name revealed posts from dozens of different software developer sites. In many cases, he was responding to someone who'd asked for guidance on a problem. In others, coders were simply praising him as a super-smart, nice dude who went out of his way to help others.

Right before we left Fizz last night, Tess had busted Bella for staring at Max with awestruck eyes. "He's even more incredible than you think," she said proudly. "Yeah, yeah, GuardTower. But also?" She lowered her voice to a dramatic whisper. "He's the Ghost Killer."

Which meant exactly nothing to me, but Bella let out a sort of swoony gasp-shriek. "Really?"

Naturally, I had to look that up later too. Turns out that the Ghost Killer was a hacker who had managed to take down a real internet asshole—a sleazy dude who ran a revenge porn sex tape site. For years, authorities hadn't managed to get the site down, as it was hosted on offshore servers. But the Ghost Killer had taken it down for good, to the extreme relief of the dozens of women victimized on the site.

So in addition to being a software creator, Max had a secret alter ego as a semi-famous hacker. As a woman, I completely supported his ghost-killing work, but as a lawyer,

he made for a problematic witness. If we ended up in court with Taggart, Max couldn't be any part of our actual strategy.

However... I bit my lip. He had offered help. He seemed to be awfully good at different methods of research, and he knew the Chicago tech community. I could hire an investigator to get some of the answers I wanted, but maybe this would be faster. Decision made, I fired off an email.

Hi Max,

Nice to meet you last night, and thanks for offering assistance to Bella and me. You know that search thing you mentioned last night? That you ran for Taggart's name? Could you do the same thing for James A. Hill, Taggart's lawyer? I'm wondering if Taggart's used him for other cease and desists in the past. Maybe people searched his name. Also, if you have any extra time, it'd be good to know more about the other intellectual property cases Hill has worked on.

I hit Send and pulled on another suit. Perhaps I should have packed differently. I wasn't going into a law office today. I didn't need to look so formal. No, I decided, squaring my shoulders. I'd always liked wearing suits. In today's world, where athleisure ruled, I knew that made me odd. But I liked everything about suits: they were warm, flattering, and they signified power.

When I'd started my new job a few weeks after our wedding, Bobby would wolf-whistle at me in the mornings. He'd waggle his eyebrows and leer at me over his coffee cup in our kitchen. "Sorry if this makes me sound like a meathead, but you look so damn hot in your lawyer clothes."

I squinted at my laptop. There hadn't been an escape room invitation in my inbox this morning. After receiving so many in a row, the absence felt ominous. Maybe the "Honeymoon in Real Life" was the last one. If Bobby was focused our relationship's greatest hits, ending on that week actually made sense. It wasn't long after our honeymoon staycation that things began to change between us.

Enough.

Today wasn't the day for solving the mess of Bobby and me. Today was the day for solving the mystery of Jo.

I considered emailing Jo to tell her that I was coming by but rejected the idea immediately. In fact, hell no. Element of surprise again. Her LLC was registered with an address in Fulton Market, and Google Maps revealed it as a loft office building. In the mirror, I admired myself from the neck down. I looked steely. Formidable. I was going to march in there, put her on the spot, and demand some answers.

My upbeat resolve carried me down the Langham's elevators, through my Uber ride to the loft building, and up the two flights of stairs to Poise's office suite. Determination lifted my fist and I banged on the door with gusto.

The door swung open, inward and sudden. But it wasn't Jo who answered. It was a young blonde woman, and she was the most gorgeous person I'd ever seen in real life. Platinum hair, perfect figure, and a face so stunning it was hard to believe.

I'd thought Bella was lovely when I'd first met her, and she was. But comparing Bella to this woman was like comparing a pretty girl in your high school to Aphrodite.

She was, I suddenly thought, *ridiculously beautiful*.

Holy shit. If this goddess was the scammer who sat down next to Bobby in the bar that night, I honestly couldn't blame him for being tempted.

"Can I help you?" the blonde asked.

Bravado mostly evaporated, I swallowed hard. "I'm here to see Jo."

Curiosity lit her eyes like an azure candle. "She's grabbing coffee with her fiancé, but you can come in and wait if you want."

"Fiancé?" I sputtered but recovered quickly. "A real one this time?"

The blonde burst out laughing. "Good one!"

Continuing to cackle, she gestured me into the loft office. The space was...great, actually. Exposed brick walls, framed posters, a cool green velvet sofa in the corner near a kitchenette. Ed Sheeran was playing at low volume, and the

room smelled like cinnamon tea. The vibe was warm and cozy, more like a home than an office.

But it was certainly a place where work was getting done. Six desks were scattered throughout the large room, all of them supporting multiple computer monitors. Two of them were currently occupied by young brunette women wearing headphones and speaking intermittently, as though on video calls.

Both women looked up as the door closed. One of them glanced at me, confused, and raised an eyebrow at the blonde, who shrugged. The other one, who wore two buns on top of her head and looked like she was still in college, reacted very strangely. Her eyes widened and her mouth dropped open. If I wasn't mistaken, she mouthed "oh shit."

Had she recognized me? How? Why would I be "oh shit" scary? Maybe it was the specter of my father.

"I'm Sloan," said the blonde. Of course she would have an ultracool rare name. I'd never met anyone else named Sloan.

"Emily." There was nothing wrong with the name Emily, but it had been super popular for decades and there were just so many of us running around.

Sloan the Scammer. I wondered what name she'd used when she introduced herself to Bobby. "You can wait on the couch if you want." Sloan headed for one of the vacant desks. "I've got to hop on a call in a bit."

One of the brunettes—the one who didn't look scared of me—pulled her headphones off her ears and frantically waved Sloan over to her desk. "Help! I've got a call with Alan Crown coming up. He's only going to give me five minutes, and I've totally lost focus."

Pretending not to eavesdrop, I lowered myself to the sofa and rummaged through my purse, trying to look busy. Were they were talking about Alan Crown, the hedge fund manager from Seattle? I'd met him a few times when I lived there and my father visited. Although he was outwardly genial, always

smiling and shaking hands, I'd never been comfortable in his presence. There was something reptilian about him.

"I'm so glad this isn't an in-person meeting," the brunette said to Sloan, with a little shudder. "He's got snake eyes."

I suppressed a smile and scrolled through my phone without seeing anything. She was spot on; he *did* have snake eyes. My father admired Crown's portfolio, but not the person. "He's more ego than man," he'd grumble.

My own impression was that Crown was not only an egomaniac but that he was also desperate to still be young and therefore relevant. Although he was only ten years younger than my father, certainly pushing sixty, I remembered him saying things like: "Men of my generation have different priorities than yours, Sven." He invested heavily in crypto, wore six-thousand-dollar sneakers, and his fourth wife was younger than me.

Sloan perched on the edge of the brunette's desk. "This is your third call with him, right? He must be willing to give something, Heather, or he wouldn't bother."

Oh right. Poise, LLC was classified as a fundraising business. So this Heather was trying to solicit a donation from Alan Crown? For what cause?

Heather pulled a mirror on her desk closer to her face and applied a little mascara. "I know I can get a little something. But damn, I really thought I had him for a big chunk." She waved the mascara wand. "Last week, I hinted that if he cut a sizable check, we'd do a big press release. Jo even whipped up a draft for me to show him, and he ate it up. It was all about how his deep concern for future generations inspired him to invest in a better online environment for children. He loved the idea of playing up his altruistic side to the media."

Yeah, that tracked. Ego, ego, ego.

"What changed from last week?" Sloan asked.

"This!" Heather pointed at something on her screen. "Cover article from yesterday's *Seattle Times*. Rumor has it that he's going to donate a building to the University of Puget

Sound.” Her shoulders slumped. “Crown is not the kind of guy to give away a single penny more than is good for him for tax purposes. That building is where his charity cash is going this year.”

I nodded to myself. She had his number all right.

Sloan squeezed her shoulder. “That sucks, dude. Just get what you can and move on to the next. Lots of other whales in the sea.”

Heather smiled at her in the makeup mirror. “I know. Thanks.” She sighed and muttered, “Really wanted this one though.”

“What are you raising money for?” I asked, unable to stem my curiosity.

She blinked at me and looked to Sloan, who shrugged. “This is Emily. She’s here to see Jo.”

Heather stretched her arms over her head. “We’re raising funds for a nonprofit organization dedicated to tackling social-media-related dangers. Everything from cyberbullying to hate speech and human trafficking.”

Admirable. Those were serious problems in the modern world. Aha! The *modern* world.

I snapped my fingers. “That’s your angle! Crown does not want to be thought of as old. Frame the college building thing as something an elderly person would do. Laugh at the idea with him as if he’s in on the joke. As though you couldn’t possibly believe that someone as ‘in the zeitgeist’ as he is would even consider that old fogey way of donating money.”

A slow smile formed on her face, and her hazel eyes sparkled. “That could work.” She exchanged excited glances with Sloan and bounced in her chair. “Holy wow, that could actually work.” Her fingers flew over her keys. “I gotta make some quick notes.” She beamed at me. “Thank you!”

Sloan pushed off of Heather’s desk and sauntered toward her own. “You here for a job interview?” she teased.

I smiled at her and shook my head, feeling the tiniest bit exhilarated. I'd never thought of fundraising as interesting work before, but all three of the women in the office were completely focused on the task at hand. No boredom in sight. If they treated each possible donor with the same sort of research and psychological analysis Heather had clearly put into Crown, I could see how they'd be very successful.

Jo Harper certainly wasn't dumb, I'd give her that. She'd quit her romance scamming, but she found a legitimate business that had skill set overlap. They were still soliciting money from rich men, only instead of being for themselves, now it was for this nonprofit client. Idly, I counted desks again, wondering about the size of her team. Three girls were here, and one desk was probably Jo's, which meant that she had two other MIA employees.

Oh, actually, there was a framed photo of the team on the wall nearby. They were standing outside of this building, grinning and squinting in the sun. Heather and Sloan crouched on the ground, while Jo, the brunette with two buns, and another woman with big red curls stood behind them. It didn't look like an employee photo; it looked like a family snapshot.

Hmmm. Jo, Heather, Sloan, redhead, buns. Five women. Six desks. Maybe Jo was actually looking to hire someone new? But no: all three of the vacant desks were covered with papers, notebooks, and framed photos.

I snorted to myself as I heard Sloan sexily greet a potential donor and then launch into a smoldering diatribe about the dangers of the world posed by social media. I assumed Jo appreciated the irony here—her team used to *be* one of those very dangers.

My phone pinged with an email from Max. *I'd love to help. I'll dive in and give you an update tomorrow.*

Fifteen minutes passed, and I fidgeted on the sofa while scrolling through work emails. How long was Jo's coffee break going to last? I couldn't believe she was actually engaged. Had she been wearing a ring at the bar last night? I wondered if she'd been completely truthful with her new

fiancé about the kind of work she'd been doing for the last five years or about her near-scam-marriage with my father.

Sloan giggled throatily into her headset. "You're so funny! Such a charmer, oh my goodness." Smoothly, she transitioned back to: "Let me tell you what's so special about SSM, OK?"

My scrolling thumb paused. A slither of unease circled my stomach and spine. Wait. *Wait.*

Heather pointed at her screen emphatically. "I knew it, Alan! I knew it. Someone with your progressive vision wouldn't throw money at symbols of the past. Someone like you, with his finger on the pulse on today's world, knows that organizations like SSM are shepherds to the future."

SSM. Safe Social Media. That was the nonprofit they were working for? No. No, this didn't make any sense. How in the world could this have happened? How could this team of former romance scammers be working for SSM?

The door to the office suite opened a crack. None of the girls on the phone noticed. I stood quietly, prepared to confront Jo head-on.

Jo stood mostly in the hallway, propping open the door slightly with her arm. I could tell it was her because she wore the same long, dark French braid. I moved closer to get a better view. "I'm going to see you in a few hours, Indy," she murmured, a laugh thrumming through her low speaking voice...which transitioned into a bit of a squeak as she was pulled up into an embrace.

I finally got a clear view through the cracked opening. Jo was being rather thoroughly kissed by a man with dark hair. This must be the fiancé.

Jo finally pushed away. "You are such a distraction!" She caressed his face. "A gorgeous, gorgeous distraction. Now go away! I'll see you at home later."

At least, I think that was what she said to him. But as soon as her fiancé's face was revealed, a roaring began in my ears.

Staring down at Jo—with a fierce, proprietary, and crazy-in-love smile—was my husband's brother, Jamie March.

Chapter Thirteen

I FROZE INTO a statue. One with its mouth hanging wide open.

Behind me, the girl I hadn't met yet abruptly began to wrap up her call. "You know what? It was great speaking with you, but I need to go. I'm so sorry."

Jo finally fully entered the office and closed the door on Jamie. She had a few fingers pressed to her lips, her cheeks were flushed, her eyes unfocused. She looked dreamy and much younger than the woman I'd met the night before. Must have been one hell of a kiss.

I cleared my throat in a snotty, overdramatic fashion. "Wow. Had the timing been different, I guess we'd have been sisters-in-law. That's a definite improvement over you being my stepmother."

Jo blinked at the sound of my raised voice, the sight of suited me, clearly enraged and standing smack in the middle of her office. And with that one blink and a flick of her braid over her shoulder, she transformed straight back into her impenetrable, unflappable, infuriating self.

"Good morning, Emily."

Before I could shout *What the hell?* at her, she strolled to the kitchenette. "How about a cup of coffee?"

I stalked after her with my hands on my hips, an angry panther in heels. My face was so hot with rage, I knew it had to be beet red.

"You're such an incredible person. I'll call you later to finalize the details, Alan, OK?" Heather said quickly and then slammed down her phone.

Sloan followed suit in an instant. "We'll talk again soon. Bye-ee!"

Before I got within ten feet of Jo, her team of three swarmed by me to flank her in the kitchen, all wide, worried

eyes and defensive postures. As if I were going to raise a machete to their beloved leader.

Jo filled a mug from a coffeepot on a burner and offered it to me. “Milk? Sugar?” She sounded so calm that Sloan, Heather, and the third girl relaxed their shoulders.

“I don’t want coffee,” I shouted. “I want answers. I’m tired of being in the dark.”

“Hmmm.” Coolly, she raised an eyebrow at me. “Well, you’re not the only one.”

What in the hell did that mean? “Can we please not speak in riddles? Why did you connect me with Bella? How in the hell are you engaged to Jamie?”

“Oh,” both Heather and Sloan breathed.

“Exactly,” the third one chimed in. “She’s *Emily*.”

“We’re very stupid,” Heather said to Sloan.

Mystified, I scanned their faces looking for clues. Except for Jo, they were staring at me with unabashed curiosity, as though they were children in a fairy tale and I was a family member who’d been on a long, adventurous journey. How did they think they knew me? If Jo had talked to them about me simply as Sven Saturn’s daughter, they’d be more cautious. They wouldn’t be looking at me in such a friendly, interested way.

The third girl, Buns, marched from the kitchen to one of the vacant desks I’d noticed earlier and grabbed a framed photo. Practically shoved it in my face. “You’re Bobby’s Emily.”

The photo registered before her words did. It was a selfie Bobby took during that first week we were married. In it, we’re simply sitting on our sofa in our pajamas, our heads against the back cushion. Right before he clicked the button, Bobby had turned his head to kiss my cheek, and I’d laughed. So the photo was mostly of my surprised face, smiling with my mouth open. Bobby’s face was in profile, his lips to my cheek. Jesus, we looked so happy.

Then her words sunk in. *You're Bobby's Emily*. That's how they knew me. They knew me because Bobby talked about me. Because Bobby...oh my God. My eyes widened on the sixth desk. This was where Bobby worked? He had moved here?

A panicked gasp escaped my mouth, and my gaze flew from the desk to the door. Was he going to walk in any minute too? Oh shit. Oh no. I wasn't ready. I had to get out of here. I stumbled over my feet, looking wildly toward the sofa. Where was my purse?

"He's out of town," Jo said firmly. I forced myself still, humiliated to be so seen through. I couldn't stop my ragged breath though. I was breathing like I'd just sprinted a mile.

"He's on a fundraising trip to Atlanta," she explained. I met her light brown eyes. "I would never spring him on you out of the blue. Or you on him," she added carefully.

My mind was blank from shock, and my body felt numb too. I sank back down on the green sofa, out of words, out of air, out of ideas.

Before I could even think about recovering, Sloan, Heather, and Buns surrounded me in the little sitting area like overexcited golden retriever puppies. Jo stood still in the kitchen area, her brow furrowed.

"You're the one who dumped Bobby? How could you?" Sloan demanded. "He's so sweet! And fun! Everyone loves him!"

The woman who attempted to seduce my husband was really asking me why I'd left him? I crossed my arms over my chest and cocked my head in a *Really? Seriously?* look at her.

She knew exactly what I meant. "Oh, you can't blame me," she announced, rolling her eyes. "You guys were already separated then and he wasn't actually interested in me anyway."

"It's true," Heather piped up. She waved her hands up and down near Sloan's incredible face and physique. "Once he got over the initial Sloaniness Effect, he didn't want anything to

do with her.” She leaned forward. “He’s been working so hard since he started, and he’s so great at this! He’s even tied with me for raising the most capital.”

Sloan’s bottom lip slid out in a pout. “Only for the last month,” she muttered.

The third girl spoke to me for the first time. “I’m Andie, by the way. You know those virtual escape rooms Bobby’s been sending you? I taught him how to create them. He kept the actual rooms private, but I know that he worked for days on each one.”

I held up my hands as if I could shield myself from their tidal wave of irritating praise. He was my husband, for God’s sake, I knew how wonderful he was. “Why are you all giving me his résumé?” I snapped.

The three of them went silent. In unison, they looked back at Jo. Sure, why not? Bring in the big guns.

Jo didn’t even hesitate. “Because Bobby thinks it’s his fault you left him. He thinks that after you two were married, you started to find him ridiculous and contemptible. That it was embarrassing for you to be married to a man with no career.”

Wh-what? My peripheral vision vanished and all of the sounds in the room dissolved into white noise. As if through a long tunnel, all I could see and hear was Jo. “Th-that’s what he thinks? That’s the reason I left?”

Jo nodded, eye contact steady.

A nasty spiked weight began to press on my chest, smashing the air out of me. My stomach roiled in pain. *Oh, Bobby. I am a terrible person.*

“It’s not about that at all,” I whispered to Jo through our tunnel.

She nodded, her brown eyes serious and unexpectedly sympathetic. “OK.”

She didn’t say anything else, and her purposeful silence told me that she was not going to ask the obvious follow-up

question.

Why? Why then, Emily?

The question had followed me since March like a constant hangover. Everyone wanted to know: my father, Bobby himself, anyone who knew that I was separated. *Why did you leave?*

To anyone who was bold enough to ask, I offered the same explanation I'd given Bella. I compared our whirlwind romance to a vacation fling. Something that bloomed unexpectedly, something wild and beautiful but short-lived. Something that wasn't able to thrive when we returned to the real world.

I wasn't lying when I told Bobby that I left because I couldn't handle both my career and my marriage. I truly couldn't. After our wedding, I'd gone back to work. And I'd fallen completely apart. I walked around the world constantly holding back tears. I bit the heads off of everyone around me on an hourly basis. My sleep schedule went from problematic to catastrophic.

I know it didn't make sense, but I couldn't explain it any better—not even to myself.

If I couldn't explain it to myself, how was I supposed to explain to anyone else? Maybe it was because Jo didn't ask that I actually tried to answer in a more visceral way than I'd ever expressed before.

"I left because I was miserable," I whispered.

That was true. But it wasn't an actual reason. It only led to more of that same question.

Why? Why? Why?

Heather let out a distressed murmur, and Sloan threw a box of tissues in my lap. *Oh.* I raised trembling hands to my cheeks; my face was soaking wet. Embarrassment swept over my entire body and settled, like a heated blanket. I'd intended to come in here and pound my fists and feel powerful. Now look at me. Shaking with silent tears in front of a group of

strangers. Worse than plain strangers, actually. They were friends of Bobby.

At least I'd gotten some puzzle pieces. Jo must have forged the connection between us because she was now inextricably linked with Bobby. He worked for her, and she was marrying his brother. Her end game remained mysterious, but the sudden burst of tears had dampened my angry, investigative spirit. Now I just wanted to go back to my hotel room and climb under the covers. Hide from my shame and forget this encounter had ever happened.

"You know what I think?" Jo said suddenly. "We're all going to take the rest of the day off of work and do something fun with Emily instead."

What? Oh God no. I didn't need a pity party thrown for me. Especially not here and now. Not by them.

"Hell yes!" Sloan whooped. Heather clapped her hands together, and Andie jumped to her feet.

"No," I protested. "That's not—I mean—"

"Oh come on!" Sloan said. "When was the last time you were in Chicago?"

"We could do a whole Ferris Bueller day," Andie squeaked. "The Art Institute? Sears Tower? Millennium Park?"

Heather took over. "Michigan Avenue? Wrigley Field? Navy Pier?"

Jo was calmer than her team but just as insistent. "Surely there's something you wanted to do in town this week besides work?"

My hand went to my head. "I did want to get my hair done," I admitted. As soon as the words left my mouth, I felt stupid. What was wrong with me? If I wasn't going to run out of here to be by myself, why wouldn't I just go along with one of their touristy ideas? Why would I make such an inane suggestion?

Strangely, the girls didn't seem to find it boring at all. "Ooh, a makeover!" Sloan and Heather grinned at one another. "Awesome."

Before I could object—I just needed my roots touched up, not a *Pretty Woman* montage—Jo said, "I know a great salon."

Half hour later, all five of us were seated in a boutique salon a few blocks from their office. Andie and Sloan were across the room, feet bare, ready for pedicures. Heather was getting her hair washed in preparation for a trim. Jo sat in the chair next to me. We were both waiting for our assigned stylists to finish with their last customers. Jo was going to get a blow-out. "I'm excited," she confided. "Jamie never sees me with my hair done. It's always bedhead or in a braid."

I looked at her through the mirror. Somehow, it was easier than looking directly at her face. "I can't believe you're engaged to Jamie," I marveled. I hadn't had the time to become close to Bobby's brother, but he always seemed a little starchy. Not the type of guy who would ever fall for a con artist, even a reformed one.

Of course... "I really can't believe you were once engaged to my father."

I'd meant it as a statement of incredulity, not judgment, but a shadow passed over her face. "I know," she said quietly. "I don't expect you to understand, but I was in a difficult place, and I made poor choices. I was a different version of myself back then." She sighed. "A worse version."

A salon is a confessional place. Any hairdresser can tell you that. Maybe it's the soothing sounds of rushing water, the clean scent of shampoo, the comfort of the head massage. Maybe it's the anticipation of knowing you'll leave the building looking better than you did when you walked in.

Whatever the reason, I found myself talking. "I've been a different version of myself too." I swallowed. "Six years ago, maybe. But I think it was a better version."

"How so?" she asked.

Obviously, my mom had still been alive, and we didn't know she was sick yet. That was clearly the biggest chunk; I hadn't been saturated in sadness yet. But it wasn't just that. "I just...liked myself more, maybe?" I was never the life of the party or the smartest person in the room, but I had been more confident in my own skin. I was funny and a hard worker. I had a lot to give. "I didn't know exactly who I was yet, but I was certain I was in progress toward the woman I wanted to become."

Jo nodded and started to unravel her braid. "And now?"

I looked at myself in the mirror. "Now I sometimes feel like a guest in my own life. A rude, irritable, occasionally batshit-crazy guest." Ugh, was there truth serum gas being pumped through the air vents here? I looked down at my hands.

"Was it batshit-crazy to marry Bobby or to leave him?" Her tone was so offhand, it completely contradicted the gunshot nature of her question.

"Both." The answer popped out without any thought. But I stood by it.

My stylist appeared in the mirror behind me before Jo could say anything else. "What are we doing today?"

"Covering up my roots," I said. I pulled up the notes app on my phone and showed her the color formula I'd been using for years.

As with every new stylist I'd had in that time, she looked from the notes to my bright roots and frowned. "Are you sure?" When I nodded, she went back to mix the color, shaking her head.

Jo had been watching our interaction. "Before I approached your father five years ago, I did a lot of research on your family." She waited until I made eye contact and then fired another verbal gunshot. "You look almost exactly like your mother, don't you?"

Damn her.

I'd always been my mother's mini-me, and with every passing year the resemblance grew stronger. I had her small waist, rounded hips, and good boobs. Heart-shaped face with a dimpled chin and high cheekbones. Pointy ears and long feet. Round green eyes and eyebrows that needed constant maintenance.

And, most obviously, the hair. The auburn tresses had been my mother's particular vanity. Her scarlet crown.

"Is that why you dye it?" Jo asked quietly. "Because it makes you sad to see so much of her in the mirror?"

Suddenly furious, I turned to face her in person instead of in reflection. What gave her the right to ask such intrusive questions? What made her think she was entitled to the answers? How dare she make me think about these things, let alone talk about them!

"No," I hissed. "It's not for *me*."

Comprehension dawned on her face, and I was shocked to see moisture brighten her eyes. "Oh," she whispered. "Your father."

I swiped a tissue from a box on the counter in front of me and shredded it, just to give my hands something to do. "Yeah." I glared at her. Words were building in my lungs. Horrible, burning words. Ones I'd never said—and never intended to say, ever ever. "Want to know exactly how my father was propelled out of San Francisco after the funeral, Jo?"

The memory came rolling back, thick and acrid, fresh tar on an old highway. "He made it through the church service, but not to the cemetery. He went back to the house instead, drank an entire bottle of scotch."

I'd suffered the rest of the day in public on my own, hugged by hundreds of acquaintances. Some actually knew and cared about my family. Most didn't. "I didn't own a funeral-appropriate black dress, and after she passed, I didn't have the energy to leave the house and shop for one. My

mother had dozens of black dresses though, and I was the same size, so I wore one of hers.”

When I finally closed the front door on the rest of the world that night, my parents’ house was silent and dark. “I assumed my father was in bed, but he was sitting in the den with no lights on.” I’d wandered into the room in the dress, looking for my book because I knew I wouldn’t sleep.

“He was dozing, passed out from the whiskey. He heard me and startled awake.” I’d never forget his face at that moment as long as I lived. Absolute joy. Wonder. Relief. “Tru!” he’d gasped.

“For an instant he thought I was my mother,” I said flatly to Jo. “When I winced and corrected him—” *Dad, it’s me; it’s Em* “—it was like she died all over again.” His stricken eyes had widened even as the rest of him had crumpled into sobbing despair. I rushed toward him, and he shook his head wildly and launched himself out of the chair, out of the room.

“He was gone the next morning.”

Jo had listened to my wretched memory without flinching. Her face was a study in empathy, and my fury at her disappeared as abruptly as it arrived. The stylist popped back at that moment to escort me to the washing station, and I leapt up, ready for a few minutes of quiet.

As the warm water seeped through my hair and the stylist’s strong fingers dug into my scalp, I felt an odd loosening of tension in my body. I’d never told anyone what had happened with my father that night. I’d always felt so guilty about that moment, and so hurt that my father abandoned me right afterward.

But telling Jo about it actually made me feel a little better. Maybe it was her sympathetic reaction, but more likely it was simply the realization that confronting the memory didn’t kill me. Yeah, it hurt. But I’d survived a lot of hurt. Maybe it was the keeping things in that was more toxic to me now.

The stylist led me back to her chair. For some reason, Sloan, Andie, and Heather were now gathered around it, along

with Jo.

Sloan put her hands on her hips and spoke without preamble. “Jo showed us an old picture of you.”

For the love of God. What was this nonsense? Some sort of idiotic hair intervention? I glared at Jo again, but she just gave me an enigmatic smile.

Sloan spoke with that singular authority granted to obscenely beautiful women. “We all think you should go back to your old hair color.”

Heather nodded emphatically. “Seriously. You look like a young Ann-Margret.”

Andie chimed in. “I have no idea who that is. But it would be so, so pretty.”

The stylist beamed at them. “Yes! I wasn’t going to say anything, but I totally agree. The red would be so much better on her!”

I felt half bullied and half flattered. Yes, it was irritating to run up against so many contrary opinions, but they were also all smiling and excited and invested in the conversation. Clearly, it had been way too long since I’d spent time with female friends. The sweetness and camaraderie were kind of intoxicating.

I blew out a long breath. “I don’t know...”

The girls smelled weakness and jumped all over it.

Sloan: “You can always just dye it back to your boring color if you don’t like it.”

Andie: “Sloan! Rude!”

Heather: “Your current color is not boring, Emily, but the auburn you used to have is stunning.”

Jo, with the coup de grace: “If you want to find that better version of yourself, maybe you need to look like that version first.”

Oh, to feel like the old me. That would be impossible, but...it was suddenly tempting as hell to *look* like the old me. I

threw up my hands. “Fine! OK!”

The four women and the stylist all burst into raucous cheering. In spite of myself, I started to laugh.

Chapter Fourteen

ON THE STAGE at the front of the bar, Andie finished a spirited, slightly off-key rendition of an old Fergie song, and we all stomped our feet, whistled, and raised our drinks.

So, the day might have gotten just a bit out of hand.

We'd been at the salon for so many hours that we'd ordered in pizzas for the entire staff. At one point, Jo had disappeared and reappeared with a bottle of champagne, which Sloan popped open as soon as the stylist finished drying my hair and whirled my chair to face the mirror.

I won't lie. The first sight of myself with the auburn hair felt like a gut punch. With the last six years of age on my face, my mom peered out at me from the mirror, ashen-faced and wide-eyed. I had stopped breathing entirely. My hands had gripped the sides of the chair, turning my knuckles white.

Jo had offered me a glass of bubbly before tossing out another offhand remark. "Do you know what I hadn't noticed before? You have your dad's nose."

It was a weird enough thing to say that it snapped me out of my paralysis and I started breathing again. Huh. She was right, actually. My mom had had a tiny nose that turned slightly up at the end, like a ski jump. My own long, straight nose definitely came from the Saturn side of the family. With that microanalysis, I stopped seeing my mom in the mirror and saw myself again.

I didn't look like Emily at twenty-five, exactly. Too much had happened since then. My face was less plump, and I had dark circles under my eyes from years of poor sleep and a deep line between them from work stress. But I looked a hell of a lot better than the Emily of the last few years.

In the mirror, my lips turned up at the corners and my eyes crinkled.

"She likes it!" Sloan had yelled, and the entire salon applauded.

Well, they wanted to keep the celebration going after that. “We need to take that hair out on the town!” said Heather. Who was I to say no?

A stop at a wine bar on the Riverwalk had turned into a long dinner at a tapas place and somehow we wound up here, at a dive bar on karaoke night.

“Do not let Sloan sing ‘Fever’ again,” Jo said now to Heather, with a long-suffering sigh. “I don’t want every dude in here circling this table like a shark or leering at us from the bar after sending over cheap shots.”

Heather giggled. “What if they send over expensive shots?”

Jo grinned back. “That would be better. But I don’t really want to hear Sloan sing again either.”

We all laughed at that. Sloan looked like a movie star on stage, and she knew how to perform with breathless whispers, pursed lips, and slinky hip movements. But she couldn’t actually sing at *all*.

Andie plopped down next to me and handed out fresh beers to everyone at the table. “Thanks.” I took a sip and set it on the table. Andie was the youngest and quietest of the bunch. Sloan and Heather treated her like a beloved kid sister, and she looked at Jo with hero worship in her eyes. Apparently, she functioned as the team’s technology expert and research guru.

“Can you tell me more about the escape rooms?” I blurted. Apparently alcohol was going to control my mouth for the rest of the night.

Andie looked a little startled but nodded. “We use them a lot as fundraising vehicles. It was Jo’s idea, of course. She theorized that if you put a bunch of rich egomaniacs in a virtual escape room together as a competition to see who can solve the puzzles and get out first, their competitive juices go crazy. They’ll end up bidding wildly on clues so they can win and have bragging rights.” She smirked. “It costs us nothing except Jo’s brainpower and my coding time to create, but we

can pull in thousands in thirty minutes with the right combination of PR and arrogant men.”

Super interesting, of course, but not what I was asking. “I meant Bobby’s rooms,” I said into my beer.

“Oh!” Andie turned pink. “Of course you did. Sorry. Um, about a month ago he asked if I could teach him how I created them. Said he wanted to build a custom series of them for an audience of one. For you.”

Still not what I was asking. “Did he ever say why—”

Before I could finish my awkward question, Tess made a grand entrance into the bar, striding up to our table in tight jeans, a black V-neck T-shirt, and thigh-high boots. If suits were my trademark look, boots were certainly hers. “Ladies!” she crowed. “Getting wild on a weeknight? I approve!”

Jo patted the empty seat next to her. “Glad you could join us.”

Tess smirked. “As if I would miss a karaoke night.” She winked at Sloan. “Except for you. No singing for you.” Sloan gave her the finger.

When Tess’s gaze met mine across the table, her amber eyes widened. “Wow. You look so much better than you did last night.”

I decided to take the compliment instead of the insult. “Thanks.”

“Max is on his way. He wants to talk to you,” she said. “He found something when he was doing the research you requested.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed, putting down my beer bottle for good. I was going to need a clear head for that discussion. Right now I couldn’t even remember what I’d asked him to look up. I drained a glass of water. “Great.”

Tess glanced down at her watch and back at me. “They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Jo’s head snapped up. “They?”

Surprised at the edge in her voice, I watched as she leaned over and whispered something in Tess's ear.

Next to me, Andie and Heather started cheering for a pair of dudes struggling valiantly to sing Jay-Z. Unfortunately, they didn't seem to know the beat, melody, or be able to read lyrics.

Across the table, Tess's mouth fell open. "Well, I didn't know that! Fuck, Jo, you should have told me!"

Jo spoke urgently again, but as much as I strained to hear, her low voice carried only intermittently over the other girls' voices. "Trying to respect...privacy! He...even supposed... Chicago!"

On stage, the Jay-Z wannabes stopped singing altogether and just stared helplessly at the screen. "They're way worse than you, Sloanie," Andie said, and Heather snorted.

At the other end of the table, Tess and Jo started frantically jabbing at their phones. "There's just no signal in here," Tess groaned.

Oblivious to whatever was going on at the other end of the table, Sloan mock-glared at Andie and then batted her eyelashes at me. "You're up next, by the way."

"What? No," I said firmly, my attention reeling away from Tess and Jo to settle firmly on Sloan's mischievous face. "I already said I don't want to sing."

She made a brushing motion with her hands, flinging away my protest. "Yeah, yeah. That's what you *said*. But you've been mooning at the stage like a big-eyed puppy ever since we got here. You've been lip-synching along with every single song."

OK, guilty. But in my defense, all of the talk about my mom with Jo had made me remember our karaoke afternoons—in a happy way, for once.

I glanced up at the stage, at the microphone. In my veins, the champagne, wine, sangria, and beer joined forces and began an attack on my better judgment. But what was the worst that could happen? I'd already embarrassed myself to

the moon and back in front of everyone today. Singing a tipsy song wasn't going to change anything.

Sloan leaned closer; she knew she had me. "What do you want to sing? I'll tell the DJ."

My pulse tripped over itself, and I had one last sip of beer. "Janis Joplin," I whispered. Sloan bounced up and sauntered to the stage.

"Hey, guys," Jo called, hurriedly. "I got the check. Let's head out."

Andie and Heather looked down at their full drinks and frowned.

"C'mon, let's roll." Tess pushed her chair away from the table and stood up. "This place is beat. I know a great little pub around the corner. Next round's on me."

Well, OK then. I didn't exactly see why we'd leave when we'd only been here thirty minutes, and everyone was having a good time. Didn't Tess just say she was happy to be at karaoke night? But I would follow the momentum of the group.

The DJ ended the Jay-Z song with an exasperated harumph into the microphone. "Let's move on. Welcome to the stage... Emily!"

Andie and Heather burst into applause, and before I could blink, Sloan was at my elbow pulling me across the bar. I glanced over my shoulder to see something kinda funny: Tess and Jo, the most confident women I'd ever met, with stricken gazes and mouths in perfect O's.

Jo closed her eyes and shook her head. "Shit," she mouthed.

Jeez, what was her problem? How long did it take to sing a song—four minutes? It would take that long to get everyone ready to go anyway.

My mouth went dry as I climbed the three stairs to the tiny stage. God, maybe this was a terrible idea. I'd only ever sung karaoke in a private room. Suddenly, I was stifling in my suit.

I whipped off my jacket before I sweat through it, and threw it down to Sloan.

With trembling hands, I reached for the mic and nodded to the DJ. He covered his own mic and said, “Are you sure you want to sing this? It’s harder than you think.”

Well duh. No one could actually sing Janis like Janis. You just had to “use her as your inspiration and sing it your own way,” my mom used to say.

“I’m sure,” I said.

He flicked his eyes to the ceiling, clearly over his job. “Fine.” He sighed.

He punched something on his keyboard, and I waited for the familiar aggressive guitar chords that started “Piece of My Heart.”

But instead, a softer guitar strumming came through the speakers. Oh no. I looked down at Sloan, who gave me a thumbs-up from the dance floor. I should have been more specific when I told her I wanted to sing Janis. She’d told the DJ to play “Me and Bobby McGee.”

Of course she did. Of course she’d think I’d want to sing a wistful love song about a Bobby.

Panic closed my throat, especially when I looked across the bar and saw so many expectant faces. At our table, Heather and Andie were standing, already clapping for me. Jo and Tess were also standing, but they were staring at the door to the street for some reason. I didn’t care; the fewer eyes on me the better.

The hell with it. I could do this. I knew this song too. I licked my lips and started to sing about a flat tire in Baton Rouge.

Across the bar, people straightened and turned their heads to the stage. On the dance floor, Sloan’s smile became impressed and she gave me a fist pump. The DJ forgot himself and spoke into his live mic. “Oh dang. This one can actually sing.”

As the song deepened, so did my commitment to the performance. I took the mic off the stand, fisted it, closed my eyes, and sang my freakin' heart into the song's most iconic line about freedom.

My voice went from sweet and melodic to hoarse and passionate and back again. I sang about a man named Bobby who made me feel good, and feelin' good being enough, for a time. I sang about a man named Bobby who was looking for something I couldn't give. I sang about letting a man named Bobby go. And how that left me with nothing. About how I'd swap a whole lonely future for just one day in the past, a day when I'd hold him to me.

As the song came to a close and I sang the final notes, the small crowd became wilder. There were probably only forty people in the place, spread out among tables and barstools, but most of them were smiling at me and applauding, and it was *loud*.

I was sweating, embarrassed, and a little drunk. My newly red hair was wild on my head, and I was visibly trembling from all the adrenaline.

I felt...amazing.

With shaking hands, I tried to fumble the mic back into the stand, but couldn't quite manage it. "Naw, girl," the DJ called. "How 'bout an encore?"

Ooh, super tempting. But I couldn't hold up the whole group if Jo and Tess wanted to get out of here so bad. Were they still itching to go?

I squinted past the bright lights of the stage, narrowing in on our table. Heather and Andie were sitting now, and to my surprise, they weren't clapping or cheering. Andie had a hand over her mouth, and Heather's face was in profile. She was looking back to the bar. At the other end of the table, Tess stood next to Max, her mouth buried in her hands cupped over his ear. Why did everyone seem so stressed?

Confused, I followed Heather's gaze to the bar, where I recognized the back of Jo's head. She stood facing a tall man,

both hands up in a “wait one moment” pleading gesture.

The man didn’t appear to see or hear her at all. His blazing eyes stared right over her head. Right into mine.

Bobby.

Was here.

Here.

For the first time in six months, I was face-to-face with my husband.

I inhaled so sharply into the microphone that the gasping sound echoed around the entire bar. The mic slipped right out of my sweaty hands and hit the ground. *Boom!*

Sloan jumped on the stage next to me. “Are you OK?”

As if I could even form words. Or do anything at all to break the eye contact with Bobby.

His hair was shorter. Much shorter. He wasn’t as tan, which made sense if he was living in Chicago now instead of California. His face was thinner, and he had unfamiliar dark circles under his eyes. They kind of matched mine.

Now that I’d cataloged all the things I *didn’t* like, my brain started adding up everything else. Holy shit, was he handsome. I’d looked at pictures of him since I’d left, of course, but photographs of Bobby didn’t capture him at all. He was one of those people that you had to see in movement, in person. His animation and warmth were everything. People always flocked to him because his energy brought a tangible pulse to the room.

His eyes were so blue. So blue. They were like a tractor beam; if I suddenly found my body in the air floating toward him, I wouldn’t have been surprised in the least.

“Oh,” Sloan muttered as she saw Bobby across the room and took in our staring contest. “Yowza. I guess he really likes your hair.”

I finally blinked and shook my head. “He’s always looked at me like that,” I whispered, looking past her to the bathroom

hallway. Was there a door to the street back there? I had to get out of this bar and far away from him before we did something very, very stupid.

I may not have seen him for six months, but I still knew my husband's looks. Under the shock in his gaze was something else very...basic. Biological. Primal.

He may have wanted to know what the hell I was doing smack in the middle of his new life, and he probably wanted answers to a lot of questions. But I could read his dark pupils, the slight flaring of his nostrils, the angled set to his jaw.

At this exact moment? He wanted something else more.

And as my body was all too ready to submit to his gravitational pull, I needed to *run*.

"I have to go," I said to Sloan, grabbing my suit jacket from her hands and fleeing down the stage steps. I ignored the DJ's protests about my abandoned encore, ignored Sloan calling after me that I didn't even have my purse, and stumbled in my heels down the dark back hallway.

Past the restrooms at the dead end of the long hall was a door with a beat-up exit sign over it. Fifteen feet away, I cringed and peered at the handle. Was the door alarmed? If so, was I willing to set it off to get away from Bobby?

Heavy footfalls in the hall behind me, moving fast. *Much* faster than my high-heeled skidding. Yep! Yep, I was willing to set off an alarm.

But just as I placed my fingertips on the door, a much stronger hand reached from behind me and grabbed the door to keep it closed.

I'd thought I'd been spiked with adrenaline on stage. But now, trapped in the dark between the door and Bobby's body, so much flooded through my veins, I transformed into a coiled, vibrating wire.

"Now here I thought you didn't want to escape anymore," he growled in my ear. "Since you've ignored my last few invitations."

Every nerve ending in my neck came alive at the warmth of his breath. I'd heard Bobby's voice lowered with passion before, but I'd never heard it this thick with arousal—or threaded with anger. My body reacted with zero involvement from my brain. My back arched, throwing my head against his shoulder and pressing my suited bottom against his...whoa.

“Yeah.” With the hand not holding the door, he gripped my hip and pulled me even tighter against his hardness. “Jo said I should leave and call you tomorrow so that we could be adults and talk.”

He turned his head to flick his tongue along my neck. I bit my lip, hard, and rocked against him shamelessly.

“The problem with that,” he went on, “is that the moment I saw you I didn't feel like an ‘adult’ anymore. I barely feel human.”

I knew exactly what he meant. I'd given up on rational thought the moment I left the stage. I didn't want to be a responsible adult woman. I wanted to be an animal.

Bobby dropped his hold on the door and whirled me around to face him. We stared at one another in the dim glowing exit sign light. We were both breathing hard, and his lips were inches from mine. “I don't want to talk right now either,” he rasped.

He glowered down at me, his hands on my shoulders. My heart pounded so hard I could feel my pulse in my ears. My body screamed at me to take a step forward, to rub every inch of me from head to toe against him. I wanted his skin. I wanted to taste his sweat.

“Do you want to talk?” he asked.

I shook my head, eyes wide. Two, three, four times.

“I'll leave if you want me to.” It sounded like it hurt him to say the words, they came out so hoarse. It looked like it hurt too, because his face contorted, as if in pain.

He was telling the truth. That was the thing about Bobby. He might be in the grip of the fiercest lust and stewed in months of anger. But he would never purposefully do anything

I didn't want him to do. Just one out of thousands of reasons I'd fallen in love with him.

I didn't say a word. Maybe some tiny sane part of me thought he should leave. But if he actually tried, I knew with one hundred percent certainty that I would reach out and stop him.

The silence stretched on, long enough. "I want to kiss you so much, I'm fucking dizzy," he whispered. One hand slid from my shoulder to grip my hair behind my head. "But what I want doesn't matter." He believed that, but I wish he didn't. What he wanted did matter. Always.

I licked my lips and rose an inch on my toes. Bobby's eyelids lowered a fraction. "You look like you want my mouth on you. But I won't make assumptions. If you want me to kiss you, you're going to have to say so."

No. I didn't want words, any words. There was a chance that words would make me think, and thinking was not something I wanted to do. For the rest of the night. I glared up at him. "I just told you I don't want to talk." If he needed me to be the instigator on this terrible decision, however, that I could do. I took that fateful step forward, throwing my arms around his neck and yanking him down to me.

I pressed my lips to his, and I was lost.

Kissing Bobby was so...lush. His lips and tongue moved with mine so effortlessly. His mouth took and gave in a rhythm that was sometimes lazy and sometimes brutal. I reveled in every damn detail of this reunion. I felt the scruff on his face scratch mine. With his fist in my hair, he tugged, just enough to feel good and claimed.

My hand went to the back of his head to return the tug and floundered when the hair wasn't long enough. I settled for stroking the soft skin on the back of his neck, and Bobby shuddered. I opened my mouth wider as he pushed me back against the wall of the hallway.

The kiss grew wilder, like a fire out of control. His lips were voracious, matching my appetite perfectly. Pinned

against the wall with his body, I slid my hands under his jacket. My hands traced the contours of his chest and back, exploring the once-known terrain, feeling for changes. He felt leaner and harder than I remembered.

He slid a big, muscled thigh between my legs, giving me friction exactly where my body most wanted it. “Oh God,” escaped from my lips before I remembered that I hadn’t wanted to speak. The moment Bobby heard my wanton exclamation, he pulled his mouth away.

I blinked up at him in blurry protest. “You’re coming home with me,” he said, as if the matter had already been decided. Maybe I would have said something different if he hadn’t followed it up with an abrupt, guttural, “Please.”

Who knew that rough politeness was such a ridiculous turn-on?

I nodded, once, and he grabbed my hand and pulled me through the exit door.

Chapter Fifteen

BOBBY DROVE US to his home in a car I didn't recognize. We didn't speak at all on the drive, which was odd and charged. I couldn't even pretend to be distracted with work emails because I'd left my phone in my purse in the bar. I sure hoped that Heather or Andie would grab my bag off the table before they left.

The streets went by in a blur. I didn't know Chicago well enough to orient myself. We were headed north, I thought, but that was about all I could tell from looking out the window. After ten minutes, Bobby pulled over in front of a townhouse on a residential street.

I glanced around the neighborhood as I climbed out of the car. Why had Bobby chosen this place? Was he renting or had he bought the property? I bit my tongue to keep from asking. I shouldn't be here at all, so I had no right to dive in deeper.

"I'm on a year lease," he said, reading my mind. "I liked it because it's about halfway between work and the Lakeview apartment where Jamie is living with Jo. There are a couple of microbreweries in the neighborhood. A library I can walk to. Lots of good takeout options too."

Inside the townhouse, I followed him into a kitchen with white cabinets and stainless appliances. Without asking, he poured me a glass of water. I downed it all quickly, and he silently refilled the glass. "Are you hungry?"

I shook my head, suddenly kind of impatient. This wasn't a date, damn it. I didn't come here for a home-cooked meal. He quirked an eyebrow at me. "One-track mind, Em? Straight to bed then?"

His voice was warm, teasing, and oh so familiar. It lured some words right out. "Your hair is so short," I blurted.

He snorted. "You're focused on *my* follicular change?" He reached out and wound a lock of my hair around his fingers. "I

always wondered...” He swallowed, audibly. “You’re gorgeous.”

I wasn’t. But God help me, he’d always made me feel so beautiful.

His lips were pursed like he was going to ask a question, and I took a step back. No talking, no thinking. I already knew that future-Emily was going to curse present-Emily to hell and back, so I didn’t need to give her additional ammunition.

Over Bobby’s shoulder, a flash of color caught my eye. His kitchen was mostly brand-new. Everything was white and silver, and there was no clutter. But on the range sat a bright yellow and slightly battered teapot.

My teapot. I’d had it forever. My sinuses began to burn. No. No talking, no thinking.

Bobby understood what had caught my attention. “Oh. Yeah. I brought it from ho—” He stopped, shook his head. No, it wasn’t home anymore. “I brought it from San Francisco.”

“Why?” While I made at least two cups of mint or chamomile every night, Bobby never drank tea.

His eyes went from vulnerable to shuttered and back again. “In case you were ever here.”

I dragged my eyes and heart away from the sunny little pot. It was too much, all of it. I’d been wrong to let my hormones overtake my common sense, and I needed to leave. But how? Find Bobby’s phone and get an Uber?

“You don’t need to run away.” Ugh, why could he still read me so well? “I’m not going to make you do anything you don’t want to, including talk to me.” He let out a harsh, sad laugh. “The definition of insanity is trying the same thing over and over and expecting different results. I’m not insane anymore.”

What did that mean? My gaze skittered to the teapot again.

Bobby stepped in front of it, blocking my view. “So maybe I’ve imagined you here.” His voice lowered a half octave,

taking us back to what we'd started in the bar hallway. "Want to know what I've imagined?"

He reached forward and carefully peeled off my suit jacket. Pressed his lips first to one bare shoulder and then the other. I shivered and bit my lip. He slowly unbuttoned my sleeveless blouse, and I let him slide it off as well. Pulling his shirt over his head, I traced my hands over his bare chest and biceps. He was definitely leaner, and his muscles were more defined than they'd been six months earlier. Exactly how many hours was he spending at the gym? I almost wanted to tease him about it. But then he gathered me to him and took my mouth in another one of those lingering, lush kisses that made thoughts fuzzy and stole my breath completely.

Just as I melted against his chest, he broke away. Maybe to lead me to the bedroom? But suddenly his forearm was under my ass, and before I could blink I was perched on the kitchen island. My suit pants were unfastened and in a puddle on the floor.

"Lie back," he commanded. Panting, I did as he asked and lay flat on my back, my knees at the edge of the counter. My heart was beating in rapid bursts. I loved when he took control and told me what to do.

With warm hands, he slid my panties off and pushed my thighs apart. Then his mouth was on me, and *oh*, he remembered my body. How to move his lips, tongue, and face. Where I wanted pressure and where I wanted breath. Where to linger and when to move away.

He licked the insides of both thighs. "God, I've missed your taste."

Then he was *right there* again and I was *so close, so close, so close*.

But I didn't want to come without him, not this time, not after so long. I wanted to look in my husband's eyes and watch him go up in flames with me. I sat up like a rocket and scooted my ass to the very edge of the counter. "I want you inside. Please." I undid his belt and yanked it out of his pants like I was cracking a whip. "Get these off."

He matched the urgency of my tone with his next hard kiss. His pants were gone like smoke, and I reached down to grip him. There was no hesitancy in my hands or how they touched him. I remembered him too, how he liked to be held and stroked. Bobby braced himself against the island, arms on either side of me, groaning with his face buried in my neck, and I reveled in his pleasure.

But I wanted more; I wanted our bodies connected. After being so empty for so long, I wanted to be filled. I wanted him to be inside me *this instant*. Tugging him closer, I tried to make it happen. But if I scooted anymore, I'd fall off the counter.

Bobby sensed my dilemma and raised his face to me, grinning. "I think the counter is too high. We don't have the right angle."

A wave of giggles swam up my chest and burst through my mouth. "Sexy kitchen time is always more complicated than one anticipates." He chuckled along with me, and I remembered another wonderful thing about being intimate with him. We could have incredible intensity that transitioned easily to laughter and then back again.

Case in point—he straightened and pulled my ass forward with warm hands. "I've got you," he whispered. And then, good God, he somehow lifted me and lowered me and slid himself inside me.

"Oh!" My moan was loud in the silent kitchen. Bobby swung us around until my back was against the refrigerator and the leverage let him slide in even deeper. "Oh God yes." Way to put those new muscles to excellent use, I thought, and locked my legs around his waist. "More." He thrust again and again, hitting every good spot I knew about and several I didn't.

"I'm never going to walk through this kitchen again without thinking of this," he gasped, the fridge shaking behind us. Inside, I heard bottles and jars clanking and falling.

"Good." I liked that idea. I wanted him to think of this every single time he got a beer or a glass of orange juice.

Every single time he walked into this brand-new room in his brand-new life.

“Come for me, Em.” He swiveled his hips and bit my neck and oh. Oh. OH. I obeyed and came apart around him.



“HOW ARE YOU here?” Bobby asked sleepily from his side of the bed. He’d carried me in here from the kitchen, tucked me in next to him, and I’d been too blissfully strung out to protest.

I struggled to find a linear way to explain, but it was difficult because I could barely follow the threads myself. “Um, Max has a sort of old work enemy, and he set up some online searches to see if this jerk had ever taken advantage of someone else. He found Bella, another victim, and told Tess, who told Jo about it. Jo met Bella and encouraged her to hire me. So I came to Chicago to work on her case.”

Bobby blinked a few times at the information overload. “Oh.” He shook his head, looking a bit sheepish. “I was being sappy,” he said. “I meant it more like, ‘How are you here in this universe? How am I this lucky?’”

His words both melted and terrified me. His phone was on the nightstand table. I could so easily grab it and hit that damn Uber button. He followed my gaze and frowned. “Stop thinking about running away. It’s almost midnight. You’re sleeping here.”

He rubbed his eyes and shook his head. “God, what if I hadn’t decided to come back from Atlanta a day early? What if Max hadn’t called to see if I wanted to get a beer? I could not believe it when I saw you up there singing. Throaty, incredible voice and that amazing hair. You sang so confidently too. You *owned* that stage.”

I blinked a few times at his unrecognizable verbal description. “I guess I looked like a different person.”

“No.” He shook his head thoughtfully. “Not a different person. You looked like yourself, just actualized or something.”

Before I could dive into that he pushed himself up and back against his pillows. “Since I have you here, however reluctantly, will you answer a question for me? I promise it’s one I haven’t asked before.”

I squelched some of the panic rising in my throat. He’d asked me dozens of times why I left, so at least we weren’t going to go down that sad road. “OK.”

“Why didn’t you care about our wedding?”

That was unexpected. “Wh-what?”

He gave me a knowing glance. “You didn’t care. About any of it. You let the wedding planner and your father make all of the decisions.” He looked down at his hands and twisted his wedding ring. I was sure he’d already noticed that I wasn’t wearing mine. “You didn’t even care about your dress or the readings at the ceremony. Why?”

I deflected, of course. “Did you not like it?”

A muscle flicked in his jaw. He was annoyed that I didn’t answer. “It was a fun party, I guess. But it wasn’t what I would have chosen.”

I sat up straight in the bed, making sure I was completely covered by the comforter. “Well, that’s news to me. You never said a word. You smiled and agreed to everything the planner suggested.”

“Because what I most wanted,” he exclaimed, “was to have the wedding *you* wanted. It took me too long to understand that you were just going through the motions. That it wasn’t what you wanted at all.”

I really hoped he understood an important distinction: I had wanted the marriage, if not that particular wedding.

The muscle in his jaw relaxed and his voice grew even gentler. “So why didn’t we do the wedding the way you would have wanted?”

I’d been wrong to think this would be an easier conversation topic. “Because the wedding I wanted was

impossible.” My voice trembled. “The only wedding I would ever want is one where my mom was there.”

Wow. I’d actually said it. Aloud. The truth.

Bobby was right. I hadn’t wanted to focus on my wedding day at all. I was grateful when it became an overly large, impersonal, glitzy corporate spectacle. I wouldn’t have been able to handle an intimate wedding that focused on emotion, family, and love.

Fuck that. If my mom couldn’t be there, I didn’t want it.

Next to me, he stilled completely. I’d barely said anything about my mom to him before. He waited a full minute before speaking in the most careful tone I’d ever heard him use. “I’ve always wanted to know more about your mom.” He smiled sweetly, and his hands spread up in the air as if flourishing an old-fashioned movie marquee. “The legendary Trudy Saturn.”

I winced. “Tru, not Trudy. She hated the name Trudy. Loathed it from the depths of her being.” A sharp pang reverberated through my chest. I grabbed a glass of water from the nightstand and chugged it down, just to have something to do.

“Anyway,” I said in my firmest voice. That subject was closed. Time to move on. Besides, I was curious. “What would you have wanted, for a wedding, if it had been entirely up to you?”

Bobby put his hands behind his head and mused at the ceiling. “Something really small. Just family and the closest of friends. Maybe one of them officiating. Personal vows. Lots of laughing.”

So yeah. The polar opposite of our wedding day. And a weird slap in the face to realize that he’d never said anything during the planning process and I’d never even asked him what he wanted. For two people who never stopped talking last fall, we sure hadn’t communicated on a pretty important topic.

“Well, maybe your next one,” I said.

It was meant as a joke, but Bobby flinched. “Shitty thing to say, Em.”

He was right. What was wrong with me? Why was I here in his bed, being hurtful? How much more toxic of a human being could I get? “I’m sorry,” I whispered, glancing over.

He met my eyes for a long minute, then nodded. Grabbing his phone off the nightstand, he brought up the alarm clock. “I don’t have any early calls tomorrow, so I probably won’t go in the office until after eight. Do you need me to set one for you?”

I shook my head, marveling at the role reversal. In our brief marriage, it was always me setting alarms and planning my workday while Bobby just rolled out of bed whenever I did.

“You have a nice life here,” I said slowly. “A new job that you like. A better relationship with Jamie. Friends.” Even a pretty home, I thought, looking around the cozy bedroom. That was a lot of accomplishment for six months. What had I done in the same time period? Worked myself into oblivion. Spent all my nights alone in impersonal spaces.

I let out huffy laugh that sounded jealous. Bobby’s life got unmistakably better once I left. *See? It was the right decision to leave.*

He turned off the bedside lamp before rolling to his side and propping his head on his hand. He hadn’t closed the shades, so the streetlights prevented the room from total darkness. “I know what you’re thinking, and you’re wrong. I’ll admit that I like it here, that I like the work and the people. I love that Jamie and I are close again.”

He reached under the comforter and touched me for the first time in the bed, stroking my bare back. I shivered under his touch and at the familiarity. Whenever Bobby had turned off the light before we went to sleep, he always, always pulled me to him. Often we didn’t end up going to sleep after all. “But I will never agree that it was a good thing you left.”

He tugged at me until I was flush against him under the covers, skin to skin. “Never,” he whispered.

In the dark, he lowered his lips to mine. I opened my mouth to him, raised my thigh over his hip. I didn’t know what I was doing coming here tonight. But I did know that I wanted him. Had always wanted him. Probably would always want him. It was weird, but even when things were clearly disintegrating between us, even when I was falling apart and acting mean and aloof, even when I knew I needed to leave... we’d made love every night. Sex was always our safe space. I could still connect with him and express myself physically, even when I couldn’t verbally.

So maybe this was a goodbye or some sort of sexual closure? I didn’t know. And as Bobby deepened our kiss, rolled me on my back, and pinched my nipple, I didn’t care.



SERIOUSLY, 3:00 A.M.?

I frowned at Bobby’s ceiling. I’d only slept for two hours. Why couldn’t I even get a good night’s sleep after two of the world’s best orgasms? My brain was so messed up.

Bobby’s sleepy singing voice interrupted my grumpy rumination. “Hello, 3:00 a.m., my old friend.”

“How did you know I was awake?” I exclaimed. “I didn’t make a sound.”

I could hear the smile in his voice. “Your breathing is different. Asleep-Em breathes calm and easy. Awake-Em breathes frustrated and bitchy.”

How he always made me laugh during my insomnia, I had no idea. “Only I could breathe bitchy.”

Bobby snorted. “Sweetheart, you can do everything bitchy.”

A smile blooming, I took the pillow from under my head and whomped him in the face with it.

“Bad idea,” he whooped, sitting up and reaching for his own. “Bad idea, Em.”

He took a swing at my head with it and missed, just grazing my shoulder. I got on my knees and nailed him square in the nose with mine again. “You’re still so terrible at pillow fights,” I informed him, crawling on top of him, pinning him down to take another whack.

“Maybe.” He smirked up at me. “But you’ve forgotten where I excel.” He threw his pillow off the bed and attacked my vulnerable abdomen with wriggling fingers. “Tickling.”

Oh no, oh no. I *had* forgotten! I was *so* ticklish. Shrieking, I tried to climb off him and escape his pinching, devilish hands, but he held me in place with one while relentlessly tickling me with the other. My scream-giggles probably woke up all of his neighbors.

He stopped suddenly, sat up, and wrapped his arms around me. Tight. My shrieks faded, and I stilled in his arms. Was it OK for him to hold me like this? Just hold me?

“It’s so good to hear you laugh,” he whispered.

Oh, Bobby. I put my arms around his back and squeezed as tight as I could.

Chapter Sixteen

I WOKE TO a room full of sunshine and the sound of a shower running. I sat up slowly, relishing in the fact that I literally could not spend the first five minutes of the day with my face in my phone, reading work emails that would have come in from the partners overnight or doomscrolling through the latest world news.

It was after 8:00 a.m. I'm sure we'd slept later than Bobby intended if he needed to get to work. Not that Jo seemed like the kind of boss who really watched the exact instant her team punched in and out. In the attached bathroom, the water turned off, and my stomach flipped over. The night had been so wonderful. I hadn't thought through it to this moment. How did I say goodbye to him? I didn't want to. At all. But sex with Bobby—or hell, loving Bobby—neither had ever been the problem.

“Your clothes are on the chair,” he called.

Of course. He was just so damn thoughtful. Grateful I wouldn't need to scramble naked down the stairs in search of my pants, I popped out of bed and retrieved my suit. There were a few papers on the desk in the corner that I nosily peeped at. Smiled to myself when I saw that Bobby was filling out a volunteer application to coach kids' basketball at the local Y.

He emerged from the bathroom in dark jeans and a bright blue button-down that matched his eyes. “Morning.”

“Hey.” Awkwardly holding my folded clothes in front of me like a shield, I shifted my weight from foot to foot.

“Have a shower before you go,” he offered. “I've got coffee brewing.”

His tone was casual and disarming. A shower did sound irresistible. Given our, ahem, activities of the night before, I was very disheveled. I didn't want to start the actual day with wild hair and smelling like Bobby from head to toe. “OK.”

He disappeared down the hall, whistling and with a spring in his step. Bobby was one of those rare people who woke up cheerful.

The water pressure was amazing, and I admired the unusual green tilework along the shower. He used the same bodywash he'd always used. It smelled like eucalyptus, and I lathered it all over me. The rugs on the bathroom floor were so thick and soft, I almost wanted to curl up on one and read a book. His towels were luxurious and hanging on heated towel racks.

Bobby had created such a comfortable home here. It was one of his innate gifts; he made every space better. I wondered if he was considering staying in Chicago for more than a year. Making this place a long-term home.

I paused in the act of dressing as a yearning pang vibrated in my chest. I'd lived in Seattle for five years and it never felt like home. New York certainly didn't. San Francisco...well. I wasn't sure I could ever happily settle there with so many memories on every street. I borrowed one of Bobby's combs and pulled it through my hair a little harder than necessary. Maybe I would never feel at home anywhere again.

In the bathroom cabinet, I found a hair dryer still in its original box. Bobby always let his hair air-dry, so he must have bought it for guests. I frowned at it. Shouldn't a hair dryer for guests be in one of the guest bathrooms and not the master?

Some guests will sleep in the master bedroom. Thank you very much, nasty voice in my head. I certainly couldn't blame Bobby if he did have female overnight company at times. As I untangled the cords and plugged it in, I realized it was the same brand I'd used at home. *Maybe, like the teapot, the hair dryer is for me.* The thought took my breath away. I shoved it way down deep.

Downstairs, the doorbell rang and I smiled. Breakfast was Bobby's favorite meal. All kinds: he loved donuts, bagels, egg sandwiches, breakfast burritos. What had he decided to order this morning?

My hair looked very pretty once I'd dried it. I indulged in a rare moment of vanity in front the mirror, looking at myself in my suit and new/old hair. My reflection lifted my spirits.

I didn't need to be scared of talking with Bobby over coffee. I didn't need to make any large life decisions this morning. I could just chat with him, say goodbye, and go back to my hotel. I'd take a few days to absorb our evening together. I had time to think about what it meant, what it changed.

I went downstairs, surprised at how quiet it was. Bobby didn't exist in quiet. He played music constantly, and if there wasn't a speaker nearby, he sang. I once found him belting out Sia's "Chandelier" while he was scrambling eggs and laughed for thirty minutes.

It was so unnaturally quiet that I almost gasped when I caught sight of him sitting at a table in a small dining alcove. His back was to me and he was hunched over, as if in pain. "Bobby, are you OK?"

"Do you know why I sent you those escape rooms?"

I froze in my tracks. His voice was empty and hollow. What the hell had happened since he left me in the bedroom? I swallowed. "No."

He made another sound I didn't recognize. It was either an awful laugh or an awful sob. "I had a whole plan, Em. First, I'd send you rooms that showed all the moments we were happiest. To remind you what falling in love had been like. To remind you how giddy we were to find each other."

I twitched, but didn't move forward or say anything. His rooms had worked exactly as planned; that was for sure.

"Right up until last night, I was working on the next set of rooms." He raised a hand as if it were unbearably heavy and made a circular motion. "If the first set of rooms was to make you remember, the next set was intended to intrigue you. I was going to walk you through my home here. A brand-new place, a nice place, an unfamiliar place—but with things you'd recognize, like the teapot. I wanted to make you wonder about

my life, to entice you back into it. Then I was going to do one of the office and my workspace, to show you how I've changed. To show you that I'm working hard to be the man who deserves you."

Oh no. My heart seized in my chest and my throat closed. Jo had been right. He thought I'd left because of something lacking in him. He couldn't be more wrong, and I needed to find the words to convince him.

He half turned, exposing a sheaf of papers on the table in front of him. "But I guess I'm too late."

What the—? I took a step forward, squinting at the papers. My gaze caught on the letterhead, and all the breath in my lungs wheezed out.

I'm confident we can serve Mr. March within the next couple of days. We've identified both his new residence and place of employment, so serving him the paperwork will not be difficult.

I'd completely forgotten about Cal Bergman's last voice message. I hadn't responded to it either. So he'd proceeded as planned and served Bobby with the divorce paperwork at his home.

While I was freakin' upstairs.

Bobby used the table to lever himself into a standing position, like he was a frail old man who didn't have the strength to get to his feet on his own. When he fully faced me, my jaw dropped. He looked utterly destroyed.

Different, even, from the night I left. He'd been upset then too, but also bewildered and disbelieving and confused. Now, there were none of those tempering other emotions. Now, he looked plain miserable and defeated. Black-eyed and hollow-cheeked. Like a good percentage of his life force had been sucked right out of his skin.

"So you and me last night," he whispered. "It was just a goodbye."

No. Yes? God, I had no clue—and that didn't seem better.

I had no idea where to start with all the things I should say. “Bobby.” I licked my lips and tried to slow my frantic breathing and pulse. “I didn’t leave because of anything you did or didn’t do. You are the most incredible person I’ve ever met. Please don’t think that you were not deserving or anything absurd like that.”

A spark of anger fired through Bobby’s face, briefly lifting his features. I was happy to see it and wanted to curse when it died out as quickly as it flamed up. “Really, Em? The old ‘it’s not you, it’s me’?”

I put my hands on my hips. *C’mon, Bobby, fight with me at least.* I wished for him to swell with righteous anger. Because it would make him feel better, and it was appropriate. “It’s not that simple,” I tried.

He looked away, down at the paperwork. “If it wasn’t anything I did or about who I am, then what is it? Do not give me that shit about balancing work and marriage either. I would never have been anything but supportive of your career, and you know that. *Why did you leave?*” The dreaded question again, asked for the last time.

Talk, Emily! My heart screamed at me to lessen Bobby’s pain by explaining, but my stupid fucking brain still didn’t provide any answers.

The month after our wedding, I began to spin out of control.

Some days I couldn’t get out of bed because my lack of energy made it hard for me to move my limbs.

Some days I was so irritable that I bit my new assistant’s head off for the slightest of errors, something I’d never done in my entire career. I complained loudly at Starbucks, at the dry cleaner, at the gym. Every tiny inconvenience suddenly drove me bananas.

Bobby had noticed the crying spells. It was hard to hide noisy, racking sobs and swollen eyes. When he begged to know why I was upset, I just shrugged and showered and said I didn’t want to talk about it.

He knew about my insomnia, of course, but not that it grew so bad I was only sleeping an hour or two at a time.

He didn't know that I grew weirdly anxious about his safety whenever he wasn't in my sight. I was suddenly terrified that he'd get hit by a car or caught up in an armed robbery or get hijacked. Any bad thing I read about on the internet, I was absolutely sure was going to happen to Bobby.

And God, the anger. The constant simmering anger. I tried to hide it, but I snapped at him all the time. I yelled at my father too, more than once. Neither of them deserved this wrath, I knew. I had no idea where it was coming from, but it was unstoppable. I'd been even-tempered all my life. I had no idea how to live while floundering in a sea of rage.

I felt like I was going insane.

I didn't know what was happening to me.

But I knew one thing. The anger, the fatigue, the immobilizing guilt, the tears, the anxiety and paranoia—all of the noxiousness—it stemmed from marrying Bobby.

So even now, as he stared at me with his heart in his eyes and everything between us on the line, I fell silent.

I hadn't stopped loving him for a millisecond. He hadn't done anything wrong—not *anything*.

But those two truths didn't change the fact that being with him had snapped something in me. How the hell could something like that be explained?

When it became clear that I was going to say nothing, Bobby staggered out of the dining room and returned a moment later with a pen in his hand. He lowered himself slowly into one of the chairs and methodically signed his name at every point in the paperwork where one of Cal's team had placed helpful stickers.

Then he shoved them all back into the discreet manila envelope and handed it to me without meeting my eyes. "I'll get you an Uber." He spoke mechanically, as if a robot was talking in Bobby's voice. "Goodbye, Emily."

Chapter Seventeen

“I DON’T HAVE a key to my hotel room. Room 680,” I told the Langham front desk clerk. My voice sounded completely normal. Anyone watching me would think that the morning’s drama hadn’t affected me at all. With my neatly blown-out hair and suit in place, I looked ready to take on the world.

It’s a disorienting way to exist. To walk through life with my outside not matching my inside. Was I good at it? Or did no one ever look at me closely enough to tell?

The front desk clerk took my name and began to punch at her keyboard. “Of course, ma’am. I’ll just need a photo ID to print a new key for you.”

I wanted to put my head on the desk and weep. Or scream. I suddenly wished I was crazy-eyed and disheveled. Then she would see how close to losing it I was. “I don’t have my ID. I left my purse somewhere—”

“Emily?”

I whirled at the sound of my name. Jo stood in the lobby a few feet away holding my purse. “We grabbed it off the table for you last night. I came by to leave it for you.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I grabbed it from her outstretched hands.

“Your feet are bleeding,” she said softly.

I looked down in surprise. Oh no. In my pumps, blood was actually pooling between my toes, and maroon crusts had formed on my heels.

“You walked here from Bobby’s place? In those shoes?” she guessed. “That’s almost two miles.”

Well, yeah. I supposed so. The minute Bobby said goodbye to me, I’d fled out his front door. I couldn’t be in the same air with him and wait for an Uber. Not after what I’d done to him. I’d run down his street, turned left, and found the nearest mailbox. I’d scribbled my name next to his signature on all of Cal’s paperwork and stuffed it into the blue USPS receptacle.

After that...huh. I barely remembered the walk. I'd gotten lost several times, that I knew. It was cold and windy, but also sunny.

That was maybe the one clear thought I'd had while walking: How could a day this awful be sunny?

My room key was right where I'd left it, in the outside pocket of my purse. I pulled it out and marched to the elevator, ignoring whatever Jo was saying now. From her tone, I was guessing it was some sort of apology or invitation to talk, but I didn't give a shit. The world was closing in around me now, breaking through whatever tunnel of numbness had surrounded me through most of the walk back here.

All I wanted was bed.



I SLEPT MOST of the day. Every time I surfaced the tiniest bit, I'd see Bobby's face and pull the covers over my head again. Sleep claimed me, but it wasn't an escape from the sadness. It followed me right into unconsciousness, swamped my dreams. When I finally woke, late in the afternoon, I didn't feel refreshed in the slightest.

Reluctantly, I checked my phone. As expected, I had a slew of missed calls. I took my phone straight under the covers with me and listened to my various messages: Cal Bergman informing me that the papers had been served; several calls from my assistant, Rosie, the last one warning me that the partners had asked her about my schedule for the next week; Bella just checking in on the case; one from Jo: "Please call me."

The last voice mail was from Max. "Hey, Emily. Um, sorry we didn't get to connect last night. I did the research you requested and emailed you about my findings. Would love to talk it through with you. Give me a call." He rattled off a phone number with a 773 area code.

At last, a real reason to get out of bed. After splashing some water on my face, I grabbed my laptop and settled

myself at the desk. There were forty-three emails from work. From the subject lines on the first dozen, it appeared that the partners at my firm had assigned me to help out on Gabe's current case. I didn't even open the emails.

I opened Max's.

Emily,

I did the research we discussed. I will try to sum it up here, but you know what? We're onto something.

OK, James A. Hill. Taggart's attorney. I was unable to find his name associated with any intellectual property case. I'll attach a list of the sources I checked—maybe I'm not checking the right places? But if I am, that's weird, right? I also can't find a social media presence for him, which is unusual.

When I searched the tech boards for searches done on any variation of James A. Hill with cease and desist or a bunch of other similar phrases, I found four results in the past year. There may have been more, but the sites probably routinely purge this kind of nonessential data.,

Please call me about next steps with this.

Max

I leaned back in my desk chair and pushed my reading glasses to the top of my head. I was so grateful to have something important, something non-Bobby, to think about, that my sleep headache faded by several degrees.

Max was right; we were onto something.

Four other folks searching on James A. Hill cease-and-desist letters. If he was an actively practicing intellectual property lawyer, maybe these folks were searching because he was representing a variety of clients across a number of cases. But that was still highly unlikely. Like my firm, the IP division at Bird & Dreyer focused mainly on corporate IP work. Corporate intellectual property lawyers typically worked on massive, long cases at a time, not four small, individual cases in a year. I supposed there could be scenarios that made sense with these few facts, but nothing explained why Max couldn't find Hill's name on any IP lawsuits.

Biting my lip, I called Gabe.

He answered on the first ring. "Oh thank God, Emily. So glad they put you on my case. Are you back in the office?"

Swing by and I'll catch you up.”

I grimaced. “No. I’m sorry, Gabe, but I’m in Chicago.”

He huffed at me. “Fine, fine. I’ll send you a Zoom link.”

Closing my eyes, I spoke through my teeth. “I’m pretty wrapped up in my pro bono case, Gabe. And—” Ugh, ugh, ugh. But Gabe was the closest thing I had to a friend at work. The best thing I could do was to be honest with him. “I—I’m pretty wrapped up in a personal situation as well. I’m so sorry, but I just don’t have the capacity, intellectually or emotionally, to join your case right now.”

There was a pause on the line. My stomach sank, but I also lifted my chin. This may have been the first time I’d ever drawn any sort of boundary at work.

When Gabe responded, his voice was gentle. “I get it, kid. I’m not gonna give you shit.” His tone turned cautious. “The powers-that-be are not going to be thrilled though,” he warned.

I sighed. “Yeah, I know.” I’d have to deal with that reckoning at some point soon. Very soon once they got wind that I was refusing to work on Gabe’s case. “Hey, do you know anyone trustworthy at Bird & Dreyer? In the Chicago office?”

I heard quick typing and his customary “I’m thinking” light hum. “Lydia Beckett. She’s a senior associate there. We worked together briefly a few years back, and I always liked her. Want me to do an email introduction?”

That would be perfect. “Please. Thank you so much, Gabe.”

“You’re welcome.” Another pause on the line. “Take care of yourself, OK?”

As common a sentiment as it was, Gabe had never said anything like it to me before. It almost sounded like a final goodbye, and I winced. He was assuming the partners were going to be mighty pissed.

The introductory email appeared in my inbox three minutes later, and I jumped right on top of it, asking Lydia

Beckett if she'd be open to a quick phone call or a cup of coffee in the morning. I was vague about my reason for wanting to meet. She probably would think I was discreetly looking to change firms.

Now, was I ready to talk to Max? I was pretty sure I knew what he wanted to discuss and not over email. In order to identify the people who had searched for James A. Hill, he would need to cross-reference their user names on the sites with the personal information stored in their user accounts.

Definite illegal hacking.

Not an appropriate way to start a legal case.

Sure, he'd already done it with Bella, but she had eventually come to me, and I hadn't known any of other stuff when I took on her case. Now I did know, though, and if I told him to find out more about the people who had searched Hill's name, I would be a party to cybercrime.

Was that a line I was willing to cross?

I called the number Max had left on my voice mail. "Hey, it's Emily. So, I'm not sure about proceeding to the next steps for identifying the people who posted about Hill."

"I totally understand," he said immediately. "Isn't there some sort of legal thing about 'fruit of the poisoned tree' or something?"

"Exactly," I said, relieved. "I have no idea where we're going with all of this yet, and I want to be careful and entirely aboveboard." *At least for now.* "Um, the thing you're doing, where you can see what other people search for...is that something everybody can do?"

He answered so readily, I could picture him nodding. "I know what you're asking. The search data is not encrypted or protected. I didn't need to do anything, ah, shady, to access it. But, it's not easily available. You really have to know what you're doing to find other people's old searches."

Good. But if we were going to stay aboveboard, legally, how could we find other possible victims of Taggart? "What if we did an actual post? Something like 'If James A. Hill ever

sent you a cease-and-desist letter, contact me' with a generic email address or something like that? What would be the chance that we could fly under the radar and maybe have someone contact us? I still want the element of surprise, so I wouldn't want Taggart and Hill to know that we were trying to find other victims."

Max sighed. "It's a long shot. These sites get hundreds of posts per day, so the actual post will get buried quickly. But if someone is doing a search on it, they'll see it. Our best bet would be that a past victim is routinely active on one of the boards and sees it and responds. But if you really want to stay hidden, I would also recommend that we don't put Hill's name in the post. If we used his name and he has a Google alert, it would pop up."

I frowned. "So just a vague post to contact us if anyone has received *any* cease and desists then? What if that generates a ton of nonrelated responses?"

"I can monitor it," he said confidently. "Weed out anything valuable that comes in."

Cases were won on long shots all the time. "OK, let's start there."

My other line beeped, so I said a quick goodbye to Max and answered. "Emily Austin."

"This is Lydia Beckett," a woman said. "I had a few minutes before my next meeting, and any friend of Gabe's is a friend of mine." She laughed and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "Bird & Dreyer is definitely recruiting experienced IP attorneys, by the way."

I looked out of the window at the Chicago skyline. "Good to know. Thanks for calling me so promptly. But I actually just wanted your input on an attorney who already works at your firm."

"Who?"

"James A. Hill."

When Lydia Beckett spoke again, her voice was way too careful. "What kind of input are you looking for?"

“Anything,” I said honestly. “I can’t find record of him working on any other IP cases, and there are other oddities.”

I heard a tap-tap-tapping sound, as though she was hitting a pen on her desk. “He hasn’t been here long,” she said. “About a year, I think. I honestly don’t know what he’s been working on. He hasn’t been assigned to any case that I know of.” She stopped the tapping. “He was hired not because of his experience but because of his corporate connections.”

She sounded a little weary, and I certainly sympathized with this specific kind of tired. “It can be kind of a boys’ club around here. *Who* you know often trumps *what* you know. Supposedly, Hill came through the door with preexisting big-money connections, and our managing director would hire Satan himself if he could foster relationships with lucrative potential clients.”

Like famous CEOs of software companies.

“Your personal impression of Hill?” I held my breath.

She hesitated and I heard the tap-tap-tap again. “I dislike him. In my few interactions with him, he’s been overly aggressive and entitled. Lazy. He strolls into the office at 10:00 a.m., takes a long lunch at noon on the dot, and leaves early, while the rest of us rise at dawn, eat at our desks, and go home yawning. I’d complain about his lack of billable hours, but frankly, I prefer for him to be out of the office.”

He and Taggert were a perfect pair, then. Unscrupulous corporate thief and a jerk lawyer BFF.

“Do you know where he was before Bird & Dreyer? Anything about his background?”

“No,” she said. “Sorry. Frankly, I try not to engage with him at all.”

Well, shoot. I appreciated her character assessment, but knowing that he was an asshole didn’t really help our case. I’d been hoping for any sort of case history, any professional glimpse of how his mind worked. This was not a traditional case, and I needed ammunition. How was I supposed to

strategize when I knew nothing about my opponent? Maybe I was going to have to hire an investigator after all.

My phone buzzed with a text.

Hey, lady! It's Sloan! I want the hot goss! What happened with Bobby last night?????? U OK??? Did you guys even make it home or did he ravish you in his car? Lol. Lips emoji. Smiley face hearts eyes emoji.

I stared at the message, a little nonplussed. I couldn't open the lid on last night if I wanted my brain to keep functioning, but it was kinda nice of her to text just to chat. Were we friends now?

"I'm afraid I need to get to my next meeting," Lydia said. "Sorry I couldn't be more helpful."

Another text from Sloan. *Seriously, I want the deets! Eggplant emoji.*

Oh. Oh my. Oh my my. Wait a minute. I had an idea.

"One more question, Lydia. By any chance, do you have a picture of him?"

While she poked around the company's internal electronic directory, I responded to Sloan's text. *I need a favor...*

Chapter Eighteen

THE NEXT DAY, Sloan and I met for lunch at the Corner Bakery in the lobby of the skyscraper where Bird & Dreyer's offices were located.

When I had explained what I wanted, Sloan hadn't even blinked. She'd just exclaimed, "Fun!" Now, sipping her coconut mocha with extra whipped cream, she looked up from the photo of Hill I'd printed and widened her baby blues. "Here's the thing: I'm a good actress, but I'm not very good at improvisation. Jo used to mostly script my encounters with the marks. So, what do want me to say to the jerk? What are we trying to get out of him?"

I wished I knew. "Anything. Especially about his professional background. See if you can find a reason to ask where he worked before this. Ask him what kind of cases he's working on. Even where he went to law school or college. Social media handles."

She nodded sagely. "Basic stats. Got it." She got out a mirror and began to apply lipstick. A twentysomething dude walking by literally stopped in his tracks to gape at her. "Any idea what kind of character I should be? What he'll best respond to?"

I scrunched up my nose. "I don't think you need to be a character at all." I waved my hands in the air over her blinding perfection. "This should be enough. What straight man wouldn't respond to this?"

She grinned at me as though she'd been waiting for the opportunity. "Bobby didn't."

"Yes, he did," I said through ground teeth. "He called me drunk in August and told me about the 'ridiculously beautiful' girl he'd been talking to."

She arched an eyebrow at me. "I thought we were past this. I caught him at a lonely, vulnerable moment and complimented him until he smiled. Then I practically begged

for his email address. And you know what? A few emails later, he apologized for writing to me and went on and on about how much he loves you.” She sighed, a little dreamy. “It was desperately romantic.”

I looked down at the table, and the dreamy on her face faded. She gave me a speculative look. “He didn’t come into work yesterday. Or today. Is he OK?”

Nope. Not going there. If I pictured Bobby’s face from yesterday morning, a flash flood of panic threatened to snatch all the air from my lungs.

“Ooh.” Sloan’s gaze sharpened on something behind me, and I turned around to follow her gaze. “I think that might be him. With the bright red tie? It’s almost noon, so the timing fits.” She glanced down at the photo and back up at a man who was coming out of the elevator banks and laughing down at his cell phone.

He was a tall, good-looking man with longish sandy hair that was, gulp, styled almost like Bobby’s used to be. But once he was close enough to get a good look at his face, the similarity to my husband ended. As cheesy as it sounded, Bobby exuded playfulness and joy. Or at least he did until I’d crushed him into the ground.

But Hill just smirked. At his phone, at a colleague who waved hello, at the world in general.

“OK,” I said under my breath to Sloan. “You’re on.” I grabbed my stuff and moved across the room, leaving her at that particular table against the wall.

She winked at me and stood. Took off her jacket and slung it over her shoulder, revealing a short-sleeved bright teal dress. She strolled slowly to the entrance of the restaurant, her platinum hair and formfitting turquoise dress drawing every single eye in the room.

I shook my head to ward off her dazzle. *I* wasn’t immune, so Hill had no chance.

“Excuse me,” she murmured, reaching out to tap his shoulder as he passed by. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but any

chance you'd be willing to have a cup of coffee? To sit down in here with me for a couple of minutes? I have the most ridiculous favor to ask you."

His mouth dropped open. He looked gratifyingly stupid. "Wh-at?" He cleared his throat. "I mean, how can I help?"

She beamed at him, and his bottom lip slacked another inch. "Do you have an iPhone charger? My phone is almost dead, and I'm waiting on a super-important call from my agent." She pointed to her table, which was against the wall, directly over the only power outlet in the restaurant. "We could sit together and let my phone charge for a few minutes. Pretty please?"

"Of course!" he blurted, practically before she finished speaking. "No problem."

She bounced in her heels and did an obscene little shimmy that highlighted her cleavage, and somehow managed to be adorable instead of ridiculous. "Yay!"

Hill followed Sloan to her table with his eyes on her butt. For the next ten minutes, Sloan gazed at him like he was Bruce Wayne, peppering him with questions about himself and gushing over the answers. I couldn't hear much, but he did seem to talk a lot, so hopefully there was something useful.

Finally, Sloan did a quick tug of her left earlobe. Either he was getting too creepy or she didn't think she could get anything else. I called her cell phone. She stood up like a rocket and detached her phone from his charger. "My agent!" she squealed and blew Hill a kiss. "You're a lifesaver!" With admirable skill, she fled gracefully from the restaurant before he could protest.

I caught up with her halfway down the block. She was leaning against the side of a building and grimacing as though she'd just pounded a quart of pickle juice. "Yuck," she said plaintively. "He was really, really yuck."

"Sorry." I felt genuine guilt. "I owe you big-time."

"Eh." She shrugged and smiled at me. "What are friends for? Besides, I don't think I accomplished our mission."

I grabbed a legal pad out of my bag and leaned next to her, pen poised and ready to go. “Tell me everything you remember.”

Sloan closed her eyes and concentrated. “First I asked him what he did for a living. He said he worked for the best law firm in the country.”

I snorted. OK, ego. Bird & Dreyer was solid, but by most rankings they weren’t even in the top ten of the entire country.

“I asked him what kind of legal cases he worked on.” She opened her eyes long enough to roll them heavenward. “He said—and I repeat—‘the big-money cases, babe.’”

Blech.

“When I asked him where he worked before the best firm, he squinted his eyes in a mean way,” she said thoughtfully. “Said he’d worked at another big-time firm, but it was full of old tight-asses.”

Unhelpful. All top-tier firms were chock-full of old tight-asses.

“College or law school?”

Another roll of those huge sapphire eyes. “He said, ‘Ivy League all the way.’ I think that was a lie though. He repeated my question back to me first, and his voice went to a slightly higher pitch when he answered.”

I glanced at her, impressed. “You’re good at this.”

Sloan gave me a huge, unabashed grin. “I know.”

She sighed and pushed herself off the wall. “Wish I could have gotten you more, but he kept inching closer to me. When he pressed his thigh against mine, I wanted out of there.”

“Gross. I’m so sorry. You did great. We got useful clues,” I fibbed while offering a reassuring smile.

She squeezed me in a half hug with one arm. “He gave me a creepy-crawly feeling, so I sure hope you nail him. Don’t ever want to run into Hilt the Douchebag again, that’s for

sure.” She skipped down the street a few steps. “Text me later!”

I snapped my chin toward her. “Sloan, wait. Did you just call him Hilt? With a *T*? His name is James A. Hill.”

She shrugged and raised her eyebrows. “He introduced himself to me as ‘Hilt.’ Must be a nickname or something. Bye-ee! I gotta get back to work.”

I barely heard her farewell. That telltale shiver of adrenaline was at the base of my spine again, and I sprinted toward my hotel.



THREE HOURS LATER, I let out a triumphant screech. “I got you. I got you!” I shouted in my empty room.

I snorted with laughter and shook my head ruefully. As someone who had so many issues with her name, this scenario should have occurred to me sooner. James A. Hill was a ghost in the legal community and on social media because he hadn’t even existed two years ago.

Name changes were part of the public record, but that didn’t mean they were easy to find. You needed to search through the clerk of court records of the county in which the name change took place. I tried a few of the online search systems for Cook County and at least twenty of the Chicago suburbs, but my eyes started to cross before I had any luck.

But I wasn’t ready to give up. Maybe the key was actually Cole Taggert. I couldn’t find the right James A. Hill on social media, but I could find Cole Taggert. Unfortunately, all of his social media accounts were set to private. Only his friends could look at his pictures and posts.

In the end, it was incredibly simple. Rubbing my eyes, I typed “Cole Taggert and Hilt” into Google. The very first hit was from an article in an issue of the alumni magazine from University of Illinois. The article was boasting of its most influential alums, and Cole Taggert was the star of the piece. There were several photos of him: his SideDoor headshot, a

picture of him standing in front of glass desk, arms crossed over his chest like an actor playing a mob boss. Finally, a candid from a college reunion celebration just a few years back. He stood laughing, his face ruddy and eyes bleary, next to a familiar tall, sandy-haired dude holding a beer. The photo was captioned: “Cole Taggert and Hiltan James, Esq, fellow Fighting Illini alum.”

Hiltan James. *Ha.*

James A. Hill was invisible on the internet, but Hiltan James was not.

Within minutes, I found his prior place of employment. According to a dated LinkedIn profile, he'd been at Scully Thomas for several years, which was another big firm here in the city, albeit not one well known for IP law. A simple Google search on Hiltan James revealed locked social media accounts, random mentions of his times in old 5k races, but no scandalous news articles.

So, why the name change? Why would you go by another name for no reason?

He's been overly aggressive and entitled. Lazy. I think he was lying.

Hmmm. Biting my lip, I navigated to the Illinois Attorney Registration and Disciplinary Commission website and searched for Hiltan James's profile. Everything looked normal until I pulled up the Public Record of Discipline and Pending Proceedings.

My, my, my. Hiltan James, you got yourself in some deep shit, didn't you?

I was about to dig deeper, but black dots suddenly appeared in front of my vision, and I realized that I hadn't eaten all day. In fact, I hadn't eaten anything yesterday either. I'd left my appetite in the dining room of Bobby's townhouse.

Maybe I could use some help.

Hey, Max,

Taggert's lawyer, James A. Hill, changed his name in the past two years from Hiltan James. It looks like he might be an old college buddy. I'm

reading between the lines a bit, but he may have been fired from Scully Thomas because of some ethical violation. He was suspended for a significant amount of time, which is a penalty just shy of being disbarred. Can you research a little more on this? I'm wondering if he's actually even an IP lawyer at all. What did he get suspended for? Please keep all searches legally aboveboard.

*Thanks so much,
Emily*

I hit Send and glanced through the room service menu, but nothing sounded appetizing. Not even a plain cheese pizza. Was Bobby eating today? Hating myself, I looked through my list of unopened emails just to be one hundred percent sure there wasn't a new escape room invitation.

Of course there wasn't.

Sloan said he hadn't gone to work yesterday and hadn't been in this morning. I practically had to sit on my hands not to text her and ask if he'd appeared in the afternoon. Bobby was none of my business anymore. I had no right to any information about him. I didn't deserve the smallest of facts.

Frankly, I didn't even feel like I deserved to eat lunch. Or dinner. Or whatever meal this was.

In whatever day this was. In whatever city this was.

My euphoria at finding Hill was draining as fast as water down a toilet bowl. What did it really matter anyway? I'd already known Taggert was scum. Was finding out that his lawyer also sucked really any sort of help?

The facts of the case remained the same; nothing had changed. Taggert had the money, resources, and relationships to drag this on for years. Bella didn't have money or years. If I didn't get my butt back to New York soon, the partners would find another workhorse to fill my position.

Nothing I'd found today mattered.

No—even simpler: nothing mattered. Not anymore.

The wave of panic I'd held at bay, the panic I'd been able to suppress today with work...it was coming for me now. It

swamped over me, just like the night a few weeks back when I realized it had been exactly a year since I'd met Bobby.

I welcomed it.

I heard the wheezing coming from my mouth like it was a sound from someone else. My extremities felt cold, numb with pins and needles. My hands cramped into strange little paws. My forehead and cheeks grew damp with sweat, and my vision went black at the edges.

Good. I didn't really want to see any more of the world today anyway.

Chapter Nineteen

B_{ANG!} **B**_{ANG!} **B**_{ANG!}

What the hell? I wheezed in as much air as I could and pushed myself out of the desk chair. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Was that someone knocking on the door? It sounded more like they were trying to break it down.

“Open up, Emily!” a woman called. I gulped in a little more air, trying to place the voice. Not that I needed to since she immediately followed up with, “It’s Tess and Jo, and we’re coming in!”

Oh for fuck’s sake. What was *with* the women in this city? Couldn’t they just let me fall apart in peace? Supreme irritation distracted my brain long enough for my lungs to grab more oxygen.

I swung open the door. “You’re not coming in unless I say you’re coming in.” I’d wanted to meet Tess’s attitude with a bunch of my own, but my trembling, breathless, sweaty gasp-announcement didn’t quite cut it.

Tess raised a saucy eyebrow. “OK,” she drawled, tapping her booted foot and holding up a brown paper shopping bag. “But if you don’t let us in, you don’t get what’s in the bag. You’re really going to say no to tacos, chips, and guacamole? Is that even legal?”

My lungs were barely working, and my brain didn’t want any, but my stomach roared at the scent of chipotle and lime. Enough to make me waver at the door instead of shutting it in their faces.

Jo stood silently, her brown-eyed gaze seeing way too much: my chest heaving to catch more air, my flushed and dampened face, my manic blinks over dead eyes.

I’d been expecting Tess to charge right in, but it was Jo who actually pushed right past me, ignoring my strangled peep of protest. “Sit on the bed,” she said firmly.

I did what she asked, but only because my knees were buckling anyway. When my butt hit the mattress, I almost fell sideways off the bed, but Tess crossed the room in one long stride and steadied me. “Shit, what’s wrong?” she hissed.

“Emily, close your eyes. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth,” Jo said. Her voice sounded far away. “Focus on making your exhalation longer than your inhalation.

“She’s having a panic attack,” she said, presumably to Tess.

They murmured back and forth to each other a few times, but I couldn’t make out the words over the static in my ears. But eventually the focused, measured breathing did help; my muscles in my neck and shoulders relaxed.

“I’m OK,” I breathed, standing gingerly and crossing the room to put some space between me and these uninvited guests. In the bathroom, I splashed cold water a few times before opening the door. “I’m OK now.”

They exchanged inscrutable glances.

“Great!” Tess said brightly. “Then we can have dinner after all.” Before I could protest, she unpacked the food on the small table in the corner of the room. I lowered myself back into my desk chair, unsure if I should be grateful for the food delivery or irritated at the intrusion. Tess handed me a plate loaded with everything, and my hand dipped a chip into the guacamole and shoved it into my mouth before my tired and cranky brain could second-guess it.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, in spite of myself. The limey, cilantro-garnished guacamole was so fresh it made my taste buds ache. “That’s really good.”

I ate quietly while Jo and Tess made plates for themselves and chatted about their workdays. Tess complained about her boss for a few minutes, and Jo talked about reaching a halfway point to some sort of fundraising goal.

“How about you, Emily?” Tess asked. “How’s the case going? Max texted me that you might have had some sort of breakthrough today?”

I shook my head. “Not really.” I explained about the Hiltan James reveal. “I was excited at first, but if we proceed, we’re still facing a long, uphill legal battle. Bella doesn’t have the resources for that kind of fight, and my firm won’t let me be MIA much longer.”

“Do you love your job at this firm?” Tess asked curiously.

“I don’t hate it.” Both Tess and Jo frowned at my response, and I scoffed at them. “Oh, c’mon. Who actually loves their job?”

“I do,” they said in unison.

Show-offs. I stood to look out the window. “Let’s pretend,” Jo said slowly, “that you could start your career over tomorrow. Any career. Any job. What would you choose?”

I hated how she was always asking me uncomfortable questions. “Are you trying to psychoanalyze me?”

“Don’t take it personally.” Tess popped a chip in her mouth and attacked it with a loud crunch. “She does it to everyone.”

Jo had the good grace to turn a bit pink. “Guilty. Sorry.”

“It’s an interesting question though,” Tess mused. “Would you do something totally different? Astronaut? Travel blogger? Detective? Chef?”

Even the thought of cooking for a living was enough to make me shudder and smile. “I actually think I’d still be a lawyer,” I said, after thinking a moment. “There’s a lot about the legal profession that suits me.”

“Including the actual suits,” Tess punned. Jo rolled her eyes.

“Maybe a different kind though.” I thought of how quickly I’d jumped at helping Bella. How it was so refreshing to work on a more personal level after years and years of being buried in corporate paperwork. How nice it was to call all the shots myself, without having to worry about the opinions of firm leadership.

“I loved my engineering courses in college, so IP law was just a natural transition.” But I’d been so fired up lately, so infuriated by Taggert’s behavior. How fulfilling it was going to be to face off against him! “Maybe I should have been a DA instead.”

Jo cocked her head. “What appeals to you about being a prosecutor?”

Tess produced yet another shopping bag from somewhere and pulled out a six-pack of Corona. She deftly popped a slice of lime in one and handed it over. What the hell? I took a swig.

“Taking down bad guys, I guess.” It sounded pretty dumb to say aloud. “Obviously, I grew up in an ivory tower, but my family was always very invested in the health of our society. My dad comes across as this scary guy, but he’s actually quite a philanthropist, and my mom spent most of her time doing charity work. I make a lot of charitable donations, but I always feel sheepish that I don’t contribute in a more active, hands-on way. Maybe being a prosecutor would have been a good way for me to contribute.”

I shrugged. “I’m smart, I work obsessively, and I’m a little mean. Talk about a good fit.”

Tess and Jo both grinned around their beer bottles. “Here’s to being a little mean,” Tess hooted. She paused, bottle halfway to her mouth. “Is it too late to change? I don’t know anything about lawyer stuff, but since you don’t love your job, could you switch to being a prosecutor?”

I turned away from the window and flopped on the bed. “Eh. It wouldn’t be impossible, but it would be very difficult. And while there are parts of it that appeal to me, I’m not sure it’s really my dream job either.”

“You should think more about this. Come up with a new dream,” Tess said.

Maybe. But, “A new dream sounds very tiring,” I admitted.

Tess put slices of limes in two Coronas and handed one to Jo, almost like a relay baton being passed.

Jo kicked off her shoes and pulled her legs on the bed to sit and face me. She took a deep breath. “We came to see if you were OK tonight. Because I saw Bobby today, and he is very much not OK.”

The Corona transformed into corrosive acid in my esophagus. “Oh—is? He—ah? What did—um? How—?” *Jesus, shut up, Emily.* What the hell did I even want to ask? *Is he destroyed? Is he angry? Is he taking care of himself? Does he still love me?* I bit the inside of my bottom lip so hard it bled into my mouth.

Jo watched my verbal struggles. “Then Tess and I get here tonight, and you’re also very much not OK.”

I sighed angrily and threw up my hands. “Fine. No, I’m not. I’m not OK. I haven’t been OK in years.”

Jo’s eyes lit slightly, as though I’d given her an opening. “Let’s talk about that.”

Fuck no. I stared her down, but she didn’t blink. Tess pulled a chair to the edge of the bed, giving Jo both emotional and physical backup.

Ugh. I let my head thump back against the wall. They obviously weren’t going anywhere. I’d answer her stupid questions and then they’d leave and I could do...I could do...I could do...do what, exactly?

“When the girls were pestering you in the office about why you left Bobby, you said that you left because you were miserable. You were telling the truth,” Jo said. “I know you were—but can you try explaining it to me a little more?”

I blew out a shaking breath. “Yeah. But I’ll sound crazy.”

“Dude, all the best people are crazy,” Tess said, and I almost smiled at the wry support.

Jo just sat there and waited, so I tried hard to verbalize what happened to me last winter. “After we got married, Bobby and I moved in together in San Francisco. The fall had been such a miracle, such a whirlwind. We fell in love, we got engaged. I felt alive, different than I had in years. Almost like I was waking up from a bad dream or something.”

I licked my lips and swallowed more beer. “But not long after the wedding, I just started to lose it. I was angry all the time. At everyone. I was insanely irritable.” I snorted. “I’ve never been exactly sunny or perky, but I suddenly was in constant full-bitch mode for no reason.”

Shame flooded my face. “Then came the paranoia, which I had no idea what to do with. I didn’t want Bobby out of my sight, but if he was in sight, I was so mean.

“There were days I just cried,” I admitted, whispering. “I didn’t know why I would have these waves of depression or any of the other shit. But I knew it had something to do with Bobby. I’d never experienced any of these things before we got married. Now, suddenly, I was really mentally ill. It was absolutely terrifying.”

I raised my stricken face to Jo. “I know it was nothing he did. Of course I know that. But I also know that it started with him. It makes no sense. But I was losing my mind. I was treating him terribly too. I had to leave.”

They sat quietly for a moment, Jo nodding. Any moment now, they’d probably exchange uneasy glances, find a reason to leave. “A bit more crazy than you bargained for, huh?” I tried to joke.

Tess snorted. “Don’t come at me with that weak shit, lady. You’re amateur-crazy, at best.” I blinked in surprise.

Jo cleared her throat and spoke more quickly than before. “Emily, tell me about your life after your dad disappeared to Chicago.”

I shook my head, a little whiplashed by the sudden and complete change of topics. “Uh, I went back to my last semester of law school and graduated. Got a super-intense job in Seattle.” What did that have to do with anything?

“After your father came back into your life, how often did the two of you discuss your mother?”

Why was she speaking so fast? I felt like I needed to answer quickly too, to match the rhythm. “Not once.”

Another rapid-fire question. “Between graduating law school and when you moved back to San Francisco from Seattle, how often did you take vacations or have time off?”

“Almost never,” I shot back immediately. This super-quick Q&A was sort of fun. I was just answering without even thinking.

Jo’s lips were practically a blur. “Who was your absolute favorite person in the world growing up?”

Duh. “My mom.”

“Who is your favorite person in the world now?”

“Bobby.” His name shot of my mouth like a bullet because it was such an easy answer, but hearing it hang in the air made it feel like that same bullet took a U-turn into my heart.

“When did you leave Bobby?” This question was still asked quickly, but not as rapid-fire as the previous ones.

“March 31. Late at night.” I could still picture the inside of our walk-in closet, where I was blindly throwing clothes into a rolling bag, swallowing back shrieks of fury. Bobby had been downstairs making me a cup of tea, baffled as to why I was so angry after our dinner out with my father.

“What did you do that evening?”

“We went to a restaurant with my dad.” Some of the anger was back with me now, much to my astonishment.

“Did something happen during the meal?” Her voice was so calm, so even, so rational. I kinda wanted to punch her.

“Nope. Bobby and Dad got along great. They both laughed a lot.” After his initial resistance to our engagement, it hadn’t taken my father long to warm up to Bobby. He appreciated how well informed Bobby always was on the news and how well read he was in general. It helped that Bobby quickly learned what made my father laugh, and that he was such a good listener. “For the first time, my dad even invited Bobby to go golfing with him.”

Jo’s voice grew stronger, more assured. “How did that make you feel?”

What a stereotypical, bullshit therapist question. *How did that make you feel?* I echoed the question in my head, high-pitched and bratty.

It should have made me feel happy, right? That my father and my husband were getting along so well. That my dad was so comfortable in Bobby's presence that he'd invited him along to his most favorite past-time. The one that he'd only ever played with...

"It made me furious," I said now, seething through my teeth.

"Because?"

"Because it's like we were replacing her," I shouted, only half understanding what I was even saying. "There were three of us again, and there was love and laughing and joy, but she wasn't there! She wasn't there and I couldn't stand it, I couldn't stand it—"

My voice broke into uncontrollable sobs, and I crossed my arms over my face.

I cried loud and long, until I was empty.

So hard I wasn't sure where I was.

So loud that the front desk was probably getting calls from anyone sharing walls with me.

When the storm finally passed, I dropped my arms and opened my eyes, wrung out. It wouldn't have surprised me if the room had emptied. But Jo and Tess were still there, watching me. With sympathy and empathy, not pity.

"Emily," Jo started. "Do you know what delayed grief, or repressed grief, is?" She fidgeted with her braid. "I'm not a licensed therapist, but in my layman's opinion, you are suffering from delayed grief."

She sighed. "When I leave, I'm going to give you a list of some very good therapists you should call ASAP. But here's what I think is going on. When your mom died, you had so much to handle and no one to help you, especially since your father pulled his disappearing act. He dealt with his own grief

so poorly that I don't blame you for never wanting to raise the subject with him again. And then you threw yourself into a career that demanded all of your time and energy."

She allowed a small, chagrined smile. "It's a coping mechanism I'm very familiar with."

Now, she raised her eyebrows as if underscoring a very important point. "But then you met Bobby and fell in love, possibly the most powerful emotional experience there is—the only one that comes close to matching the strength of grief. So, it kind of opened you up, emotionally—it made you vulnerable to *all* emotions."

She leaned forward to take my hand and squeezed it. "You fell in love with someone very much like your mother in personality, which compounded things."

Another squeeze. "All of the symptoms you described experiencing last winter—the depression, the paranoia, the irritability—they can all be attributed to processing delayed grief. You're right in that Bobby was the reason. But he was the catalyst, not the cause. Grief can't be ignored, and it can't be permanently skipped."

Tess stood, went to the closet, and retrieved a blanket. She carefully placed it over my shoulders, and I looked up at her in confusion. "You're shaking," she informed me.

Oh. OK. I clutched the ends of the blanket together, forming a soft cape. "I'm so...tired." I sighed. I wanted to think about everything Jo said—how her words made me go hot and cold before turning me completely numb. But all the crying had wrung me dry, and my eyelids were so, so heavy.

Jo stood and gave me a sadder smile. "Exhaustion is another symptom of grief." She grabbed a folded sheet of paper out of her purse and placed it on my desk. "Here's the list of therapists. We'll leave you to rest, but I'll call you tomorrow."

Tess gathered up the rest of the food and put the three remaining Coronas in the fridge. "I'll call you too."

I closed my eyes. “Thank you,” I whispered—or at least I meant to.

Chapter Twenty

“TELL ME WHY you’re here today.”

I fidgeted in the chair, with my purse on my lap and my right leg twitching up and down, nonstop. Across the table, Dr. Rivera waited for my response with a pleasant, relaxed expression on her face. She’d been at the top of Jo’s list of therapists, with several stars next to her name.

I’d woken up in my hotel bed this morning, completely at odds. I knew what I should be doing: calling Bella to have a come-to-Jesus talk about the state of our case, booking a flight back to New York, catching up with work emails, and reaching out to the partners to apologize for my recent absence.

But I didn’t do any of those things. Because Jo’s words last night had birthed a tiny kernel in my chest. It took a full pot of tea and a twenty-minute shower for me to be able to name that kernel: it was hope.

So I’d picked up my phone and the list of therapists instead.

Dr. Rivera was clearly a woman comfortable with silence. Her shoulders were relaxed, her lips turned up just a bit at the corners. Her whole office emanated comfort, actually. It wasn’t sterile or medicinal in any way. The chairs were softly cushioned, her desk was a gorgeous antique, and she wore a thick, cream-colored cardigan that looked so cozy I immediately wanted one for myself.

“I left my husband seven months ago,” I whispered. “I left him, even though I love him more than anything, because I was suffering unmanageable symptoms of depression and anger and anxiety.” I swallowed over that horrible ever-present lump in my throat. “A friend of mine believes that my symptoms weren’t caused by my marriage but because I never properly grieved my mother, who passed away six years ago.”

But that was absurd, right? When Jo said it aloud last night, it made a bizarre sort of sense, but in the fresh light of a

new day, could that really be true?

Dr. Rivera just nodded. “Did you seek any counseling when your mom passed?” I shook my head. “Or talk about her with family or friends?”

“No. Very rarely.”

She cocked her head to one side. “Why is that?”

My lips wanted to seal themselves from the inside. But that’s what I’d been doing for years. And it wasn’t working. “Because talking about her makes me feel like I’ll dissolve. That I’ll completely lose it. Come apart at the seams.” Tears clogged my voice. “I will *break*.”

She nodded again, and a thinking line appeared between her eyebrows. “I might posit that the grief at her passing has already broken you.”

Well, gee thanks.

A glimmer of humor brightened her eyes, so some of my sarcasm must have shown on my face. “But you being here today, reaching out for help, is a great step toward healing.”

I nodded, doubtful. Talking was going to cure me of all this toxicity? Unlikely.

Dr. Rivera was clearly accustomed to skepticism. “Emily, do you know what happens to a broken bone that doesn’t get set?”

“It doesn’t heal right,” I mumbled, almost rolling my eyes.

She didn’t care about my grouchy tone; she just smiled and nodded. “Correct. All sorts of things can go wrong. A serious infection can develop. It can deteriorate into a permanent deformity. It doesn’t even have to be that serious, but a bone that remains broken can also just mean that swelling, tenderness, and pain will get worse over time.”

She shrugged. “Why should the mind be that different from the body? What is grief if not trauma to the mind? If it doesn’t get treated, it makes perfect sense to me that deterioration and more pain could follow.”

I moved my shoulders up and down abruptly in an insolent shrug. “That sounds like the way you’d explain grief to a child.” I was a grown woman. I didn’t need analogies that belonged in a kids’ TV show.

Dr. Rivera accepted this with a gentle nod. “Maybe. But what is a person who is suffering the loss of their mother, if not a child?”

Ooof. I chewed on my bottom lip. Score one for the doc.

“There are obviously no guarantees with therapy,” she said. “But I feel confident that we can get you to a healthier emotional space. If you’d like to give this a try and do the work, I’m here.”

It was the phrase “do the work” that decided me. I was a workaholic, after all.

Hell, look at the mess I’d made of my life. I spent all of my time working at a job I tolerated, just to hide from my feelings. I’d thrown away a marriage to the most wonderful man on earth. I loved my father, but our relationship was only a fraction of what it should be. I’d let all my old friendships lapse and shied away from new ones. I was so unmoored that no place in the world felt like home. What could happen—I’d fall apart even more?

I had nothing left to lose.

“Can we get started today?” I asked.



I DIDN’T SPEAK to anyone for a while after starting therapy. My sessions with Dr. Rivera settled somewhere between brutal and cathartic, and after them I felt too wrung out to have normal conversations.

I didn’t disappear, exactly. I shot an email to Jo and Tess, thanking them for dinner and telling them that I was meeting with one of the therapists Jo recommended. I told both Bella and Max that I needed a little time off but that I would recommit to the case when I felt better. I texted my father to

let him know I was alive and in Chicago. I informed the HR department at my firm that I was taking a leave of absence.

One of Dr. Rivera's suggestions was that I join a support group for people who had lost loved ones to cancer. At first, the idea of sitting with others suffering through raw pain sounded like a terrible idea. But it actually became the most valuable experience imaginable, to witness so many good people who had been hit by the same emotional semi-truck. To hear their struggles and stories. To see them going through the same cycles as me. To understand, finally, that feeling better was possible.



WHEN I FELT capable of human interaction again, Jo was the first person I called. “Dr. Rivera has been great, and she’s really helping me. Thank you.”

Jo’s voice was warm and encouraging. “I’m so happy to hear that. I’ve thought about you constantly.”

We chatted for a few minutes about Jamie and their wedding plans. They were planning a destination wedding in New Orleans. “Nothing fancy. Just small and fun.” She laughed.

Small and fun. Much like the wedding Bobby had wanted. I gave in and asked the question I cared most about. “Um, how is Bobby doing?”

A pause. “He’s struggling,” she said finally. “I mean, he’s hanging in there—working a lot, hitting the gym, going out for beers with Jamie. But he’s sad, Emily. He’s just sad.” Her voice got cautious. “A divorce is another kind of death to mourn, you know.”

“Did you say anything to him about me, about my, ah, grief stuff?” I held my breath, not sure how I wanted her to answer.

“Of course not!” she exclaimed. “That’s extremely private and not my story to tell.” She took a deep breath. “But I really think you should tell him. I think it would help him a lot. He

would stop blaming himself, for one thing. Jamie and I have tried to tell him, over and over, that it wasn't his fault, but he doesn't believe us."

I nodded hard, even though she couldn't see me. "I will."

But would words be enough? They were still so hard to push through my lips, and I'd failed miserably every time he'd asked me what was wrong. I was still so new to being able to speak about the turmoil inside my brain, and Bobby always inspired such a hurricane of emotions. I didn't trust my voice. I still sat silently through the majority of my therapy sessions and support groups, my words breaking through my barriers in unpredictable torrents. What if I froze in front of him again?

If only I could get beyond words. If only I could show him.

Show him. Wait a minute. Wait just a goddamn minute.

"Jo, can I have Andie's number? I need her help with something."



OPENING MYSELF TO the help and the pain...wow. It was frustrating because I'd feel so good one day and then like I'd been swallowed by a black hole the next. "Grief isn't linear," everyone said. It sure fucking wasn't.

Weird too, I felt myself moving, changing, becoming... who? I could never revert to the Emily I'd been before my mom passed. I sure as hell didn't want to be the repressed Emily only half living a life that I'd been before I'd met Bobby and after I'd left him. Thank God it turned out that the ill woman I'd been for those months in my marriage wasn't me either.

I tried to express this to Dr. Rivera: the disorientation, the fear and wonder of knowing I was transitioning to someone new. "But who?"

It was the biggest smile I'd ever seen on her kind face. "Who are you becoming? Isn't that the beauty of this

reclamation of your life, Emily? Whoever you want.”



GATHERED AROUND A table in a bustling diner, Tess, Max, and Bella looked at me expectantly over their coffee mugs. I swallowed hard and busied my hands by gathering my legal pads and aligning them. “Apologies for the delay, guys. But I’m ready to work now.”

Bella opened her mouth like she wanted to say something, but then she just gave me a weak smile and gazed down into her latte.

“Max, were you able to find anything about Hill’s suspension?” I asked.

“A little.” He adjusted his glasses. “Keeping my research aboveboard made it a little tricky to get juicy details, but by cobbling together various documents and social media posts from other lawyers at Scully Thomas, I would guess that Hill had been involved in financial fraud of some of their clients. Also, you were right. He did not practice intellectual property law at all. His specialty was trusts and estates.”

“Did we ever get a response to our post about cease and desists?”

Max wrinkled his nose. “Nothing useful.”

I drummed my fingers on the table and began to use them to count off points. “OK. Here’s what we know. One, Taggart and Hill are old friends. Two, Hill steals money from his old firm and gets a stain on his résumé that would make him unhireable at most respected firms. Three, Taggart files a copyright months ago for his GuardTower product. Four, Taggart steals Bella’s code.”

I paused for a gulp of coffee. “Now, here’s what we can surmise. Hill was able to get the job at Bird & Dreyer by dangling Taggart in front of them as a potential big-money client. In return, he uses the legitimacy and reputation of the firm to beat down people like Bella who Taggart is stealing intellectual property from.”

“So what do we do?” Tess asked, looking impatient.

“We start a legal battle.” I said. “We argue that the intellectual property is Bella’s. The good news is that we have solid evidence there. At some point, it will be revealed that whatever they filed a copyright on is not her code.”

“At some point,” Bella echoed faintly.

“Yeah.” I sighed. “There’s the rub. Once we start the suit, Taggert will likely switch to an actual IP lawyer. Knowing his personality, he’ll also talk to the press and relate a bunch of salacious details.”

Bella winced.

“There’s more bad news,” Max said, an apology in his tone. “The thing with the copyright has been bugging me. It’s just so ballsy.” I narrowed my eyes at him, and he held up hands. “I did not hack into anything, but I did research all of the guys who graduated from U of I in the same class as Taggert and Hiltan James.” He sighed. “One of them currently works in the IT department of the United States copyright office.”

“What?” Bella exclaimed. “So if they’re all working together, that means that the third douchebag could have exchanged their original copyright application with documentation that reflects my code?”

Max nodded. “It would be super risky though. The security on those databases is no joke. They probably wouldn’t do it until they felt they had to.” He met my eyes. “If they felt threatened.”

This was maddening. Fucking maddening. I felt my spine stiffen. Those idiot bullies had no idea what was coming their

“I’ve changed my mind,” Bella blurted. “This is the end of the road for me.” Max’s mouth dropped open, and Tess glared at her. She shrunk a little against Tess’s amber blaze but kept talking. “I’m broke, and if my name is in the papers as some sort of modern-day Mata Hari, it’s going to be hard for me to get another job.”

She didn't need to pay for anything! I opened my mouth, but she cut me off. "I know you'd do this pro bono, Emily, but I still need to support myself. For the rest of my life, that will be more difficult if a future employer Googles me and this story is what they find. I'm not sure I have the stomach to survive a long legal battle either." She swallowed hard, and I realized she was close to tears. "I haven't even been home yet to deal with my grandmother's estate."

I'd forgotten all about the recent death in her family. Her small display of pain hit me in the solar plexus and closed my throat.

"Excuse me. I need a moment." Bella stood from the table and walked to the restroom.

"So this is it?" Tess demanded. She kicked something under the table and our mugs all rattled. "Taggert seduces, steals, lies...and gets away with it? Again?"

Max put his arm around her. "I don't like it either, Boots, but the man sure knows how to work the system."

"Well, the system blows," Tess said flatly. "Screw the system." She looked at me. "As someone who likes the idea of taking down bad guys, doesn't this make you crazy?"

So many thoughts were flooding through my brain that the moment, I didn't answer right away.

Screw the system.

Who are you becoming?

Whoever you want.

"Whoa," Tess said. Both she and Max were outright staring at me. "Emily, what is that shit-eating grin all about?"

Oh, you know. Just a series of really obvious realizations that should have occurred to me about a zillion years go.

Um, I didn't need to work at a soul-sucking firm to make a living or to make an impact or prove my merit.

Taggert thought he was untouchable because he had money and fame?

Well, hot damn, I was the sole heir to a billionaire. If he wanted to bend the rules to get his way, then so would I. We'd just see who did it better.

I cackled aloud, already composing my resignation letter.

Taggert had made his bet and rolled the dice, counting on the fact that he would win by being the most powerful person in the fight. But I was the daughter of Tru and Sven Saturn, for Christ's sake. I looked down at my hands, almost surprised there wasn't lightning crackling at my fingertips. I'd completely forgotten what it was like to feel powerful.

"OK over there?" Tess asked warily. "I was just kidding when I asked if this made you crazy."

"You know what, Tess?" I beamed. "For the first time in ages, I actually feel sane."

I grabbed a pen and pointed it at Max. "Here's what I want you to do."

Chapter Twenty-One

FOR THE NEXT week, while Max dived into the less-legal side of the interwebs and did whatever magic hackers do, I put my considerable energy and focus into a different aspect of technology.

“I want to create an escape room–type experience for Bobby,” I explained to Andie, sitting at her workspace in Jo’s loft office. It was early in the morning. Andie had agreed to meet me here long before anyone else would show up for the workday. I looked down at my notes and back up at her sweet-yet-skeptical face. “I want to re-create three different spaces, and I want my voice recorded and to play when he is in them.”

“So,” Andie said, brow wrinkling. “Different from how Bobby’s rooms worked for you?”

“Yeah.” Bobby knew me so well. He knew I wouldn’t be able to resist the puzzle aspect. If a challenge was issued to me, I would take it. But he also knew that I hadn’t been in an emotional space where I could have listened to his voice. If he’d spoken in those escape rooms, I would have shut them down immediately.

But Bobby was still trying to make sense of our disaster. He still had questions. So my escape room to him was going to be less of a puzzle and more of an explanation.

Andie brought up some impressive 3D design software on her monitor. “You can send me photos of the spaces, and I can build the rooms. Then, I’ll hand it over to you to add the recordings. I’ll include instructions.”

“Perfect.”

Her fingers flew over the keyboard. “What do you want to name it?”

I closed my eyes, pushed past the embarrassment. “Three Times I Could Have Saved Us.”

“Oh!” Andie peeped and sniffled. I caught her blowing her nose in a tissue, and she gave me a teary, forgiving smile. “I’m so glad you’re going to try this. Bobby is still the sweetest dude I’ve ever met, but he’s changed. He’s lost his spark. He’s so kind, but he laughs so much less. He’s not *silly* anymore.”

If my heart hadn’t already been broken, that might have done it. If I could have, I would have offered the entire world an apology for changing one ounce of Bobby. In lieu of a global apology, I offered one to Andie. “I’m sorry. I was broken and I didn’t know how to heal. In my flailing, I broke him too.”

Andie met my eyes, and I suddenly saw a maturity on her face that was concealed most of the time by her exuberance and youth. “I hate to paraphrase Hemingway, because that dude is problematic, but I do believe that we’re stronger in the places that we’ve been broken.”

She shook off the somber and bounced in her chair. “I’ll get started!”

I sent her the photos that evening, and she worked quickly. By the following night, she’d sent me a file with rough mock-ups of the rooms. “You can work on your recordings now,” she said. “I’ll put it all together once you’re happy with the audio.”

The first room was the exclusive bridal salon where I’d bought my wedding dress.

Bobby would remember this day well, I was sure of it. My wedding planner had reserved a two-hour appointment for me in which I’d be the only customer in the store. Because my wedding was coming up so quickly, there were only a dozen gowns to choose from that could be altered to fit me in the weeks remaining. Those twelve gowns had been lined up in the enormous dressing room. My wedding planner and the three women working at the bridal boutique waited for me to emerge in each dress, to step on a platform in front of an enormous mirror and be judged.

I had dreaded this appointment from the moment it was scheduled. At the time, I couldn’t name the reason for the dread. I’d only known that even thinking about trying on a

wedding dress filled my chest with pressure and made me feel sick to my stomach.

Somehow, Bobby knew. Because he'd shown up at the salon unexpectedly, much to the annoyance of my wedding planner who was convinced that if he saw "the dress" ahead of time, that would ruin the "authenticity" of the "big reveal" for the wedding photos.

Bobby ignored her irritation and brought me a glass of champagne to the dressing room. He stayed with me until I'd drank the entire thing, and then kissed me until I barely remembered how to pull a zipper.

As I examined Andie's work from the various photos I sent, I was pleased to see she'd captured all the items I'd requested: the dressing room, bursting at the seams with fat white dresses, the bucket of champagne, the outer room with the platform and the mirror.

Most importantly, two particular dresses.

The first ten dresses I'd tried on were fine. Mostly strapless, some A-line, all expensive. I'd dutifully paraded each one out to the various opinions of the wedding planner and staff.

When I'd walked out in the eleventh dress, though, the staff and wedding planner went giddy. It was an extreme princess look, dramatic in its femininity. Fit wise, it was flattering. It accentuated my natural hourglass shape, and the shade of ivory was good against my skin. "There she is! That's my star bride!" my wedding planner announced.

"Hmm," I said doubtfully. It did look good on me, but come *on*. It wasn't my style at all. It didn't fit my personality in the slightest.

In the mirror, I'd looked at Bobby's reflection. He was *laughing* at me. "You're a beautiful cupcake," he gasped. I giggled so hard that I snorted—which made him double over.

Tears of mirth were streaming down my face when I went back to the dressing room, sure the day was a bust. The only

dress remaining in the room was much simpler. I couldn't even tell what it was supposed to look like until I put it on my body.

When I finally got it zipped and turned to face myself in the mirror, I inhaled sharply. It was an elegant Grecian-style gown. A simple column with no embellishments. Just beautiful, high-quality fabric and a sheen that glowed. I remember wishing hard for my own red hair.

I pushed back my shoulders and lifted my chin, a small, awed smile brightening my face.

That one, Emmy.

My mother's voice, clear as day in my head.

I stopped breathing. The color fled from my face.

That one, Emmy.

"Emily, are you finished?" the wedding planner called. "Was that the last dress? I think we should take it."

I ignored her, still staring at my trembling reflection.

Behind me, the curtains to the dressing room parted, and Bobby appeared in the mirror.

His face went starstruck. "Oh. Oh my God, Em."

Something inside me began to shake. I felt like I was going to come apart, bits and pieces toppling off my outer edges, like a skyscraper in an earthquake.

I pushed Bobby out of the room. "Give me a minute, will you?" I said coldly. I pulled the dress off my body as quickly as could.

When I rejoined the others, I had the cupcake dress in my arms and a huge fake smile on my face. "You guys were right!" I cheered. "This one is it!"

Bobby looked bewildered. I ignored him and concentrated on the sales staff, who began to parade out veils and white shoes. Eventually, he left and we never talked about the dress again until recently in his townhome.

Now, on the screen in the escape room mock-up, the cupcake dress I'd worn on our wedding day was displayed next to the Grecian gown. I cleared my throat and spoke into the microphone connected to my laptop.

I didn't want to go wedding dress shopping, Bobby. Not without my mother. It just hurt so much. She should have been there with me.

She loved dresses—did I ever tell you that? No, of course I didn't. Unless she was on the golf course, she never wore pants or shorts. Dresses were her thing. Kind of like how suits are my thing.

When I put on the dress that I actually loved, I heard her voice, telling me that it was the right one. I don't know if it was just my own mind echoing what I knew to be true, or if she was really watching me that day and decided she had to weigh in. Which I can absolutely see her doing, by the way, like some sort of sassy angel, breaking the rules.

But it shattered me. I'd become very good at not thinking about her and not talking about her. It was a self-protection thing. I didn't want to feel her loss. And I didn't, for a very long time. But when I fell in love with you, I started to feel everything again.

I didn't want to shatter so I fought against it. I wore the ridiculous dress and pretended I liked it. I didn't talk to you about it, and I should have. This was a moment I could have saved us. If I had opened up to you then about my unresolved grief, maybe I wouldn't have been overwhelmed by it later.

I'm sorry—

My voice broke, so I had to stop the recording there. I wasn't going to have audio clips of me sobbing, for Christ's sake. The escape room was about explanation, not sniveling for sympathy.



THE SECOND ROOM Andie had set up for me resembled a Thai restaurant that opened on the same street as our condo in San

Francisco. The restaurant had its grand opening on the same date as my first day at my new job after we were married, so we'd decided to meet for dinner there.

As I'd instructed, Andie had crafted the room so that after you entered the restaurant, the perspective shifted and settled on a table by the window. Bobby had been waiting for me there, reading a book, not caring that I was forty minutes later than I said I would be.

"Well?" he'd demanded after planting a smacking kiss on my lips and pouring me a glass of Riesling. "How was the first day?"

I remember settling into the chair across from him, the joy at coming home to him fighting hard but losing to the deflated feeling that had weighed me down all day. "It was OK."

"Only OK?" He raised his eyebrows, inviting more details.

Yeah, only OK. The same kind of people, the same expectation of insane billable hours, and the same type of cases I'd been working on at my firm in Seattle. I hadn't really expected it to be that much different, so I didn't understand why it was affecting me so negatively. Maybe I didn't want to admit that spending the fall with Bobby had altered me so much that I couldn't pick right up where I'd left off. That maybe I needed to make a big change.

I grew irrationally irritated at Bobby's concerned expression. "It's work, Bobby. It's not all fun and games, OK?"

I didn't say: "You don't get it because you don't have a real job," but it was implicit and he knew it. He just nodded and opened his menu to hide his shamed face, and I wanted to punch myself in the gut.

I spoke into the microphone.

I lashed out at you here, for no good reason. You simply expressed concern that I didn't have a good first day at my new job, and I bit your head off. I was snide and cruel and exploited your own worst insecurity. This was the start of a pattern: I wasn't happy working like a maniac anymore—it

was easy to see—and every time you tried to talk to me about it, I hurt you.

All I'd had in my life, after my mom died and before I met you, was work. In a way, it saved me because focusing all of my energy and time there gave me a survival mechanism, but it also gave me a way to escape the grief instead of processing it like I should have.

My whole identity was tied up in my job. So when I realized I was unhappy with it, it became clear that I was also unhappy with myself as a whole. When you pointed out the obvious, you were forcing me to confront things I didn't want to deal with.

I'm ready to deal with it now.

I quit my job last week. I cheered when I hit Send on my resignation letter.

I don't know exactly what I'm going to do now. I'm thinking about starting my own firm and taking impossible cases. Cases for the underdogs that no lawyer in her right mind would take on. No lawyer except one with bottomless resources and zero fucks to give.

I know it sounds crazy. God, I'd love to talk to you about it.

I'm also dying to talk to you about your job. Jo and her team do nothing except sing your praises, but all I really want to know is what you think about it. How you feel about it.

I'm sorry, Bobby. This was another place I could have saved us, but I made everything worse. I was angry and irritated with myself, not you. Never you.



I'D SAVED THE WORST ONE FOR LAST.

The escape room was simple, because in our San Francisco condo, the layout of our master bedroom's walk-in closet was simple.

We'd had the entire discussion while we stood in the closet. Surrounded by racks of suits and shelves of sweaters, I'd ruined everything.

I could only hope that Bobby's memory was poorer than mine, because I'd remember every word of the conversation until the end of my life.

"I don't want that," I'd hissed, pointing at the cup of tea he offered me.

Bobby had frozen, his eyes on the suitcase on the floor in front of me. "What are you doing?"

He'd been honestly mystified. We'd just had a lovely dinner with my father. I hadn't spoken much at the restaurant, but they both wrote it off to the fact that I was tired from working twelve-hour days. On the way home, Bobby tried to initiate six different conversations, but I'd given one-word answers, seething in indescribable anger.

The suitcase was nearly filled with suits and heels, so I got on my knees and zipped it so hard I almost tore the thick fabric. "I'm leaving."

The cup of tea must have been burning his fingers because he wasn't holding it by the handle and I knew how thin the porcelain was and how it felt when it held boiling water. But he didn't set it down. "What do you mean? Do you have a last-minute business trip?"

I shook my head furiously. "No. I mean, I'm leaving you. I'm leaving us."

His beautiful blue eyes grew larger and darker, until his whole face was taken over by twin pools of fear. "What?"

"I can't live like this anymore," I babbled, shoving myself unsteadily to my feet.

"Can't live like what?" he asked, voice rising. "Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Everything!" I screamed it so loud that he dropped the stupid cup and the tea seeped into the floor, spreading in the carpet under the soles of my heels and his sneakers.

“I’m miserable, Bobby.” I said it quieter, but he flinched as though I branded his skin with the words. “I’m miserable and I’m leaving.”

And that was it. I’d shoved past him, pulling the suitcase behind me, and left our home for good.

It took me three tries before I could record without snot clogging my voice. Even when I finally managed to speak clearly, it was in a whisper.

You’ve asked me many times why I left, and I could never answer you with the truth. I’m going to try to do it now.

As clearly as I could, I described all the symptoms of repressed grief I’d been experiencing while we lived together, how it turned my head and heart upside down, and what Dr. Rivera and I were covering in therapy.

Bobby, I left because I was, indeed, miserable. But it was unforgivable for me to throw that phrase at you like it was your fault. It was not, and I can’t apologize enough for making you feel like you were the reason for my behavior and my actions.

Even though our marriage was brief, I can say with complete honesty that you were the greatest of husbands and remain the most wonderful person I’ve ever met.

I had to pause the recording there to gather myself. I wasn’t happy with my words, exactly, but I’d spoken honestly and explained the best I could. Maybe I’d get more clarity as I moved through therapy. Maybe someday I’d be able to verbally connect the dots in a more sensible way or a more poetic way.

But I couldn’t wait for some future eloquence. Now that I knew what was going on with me, I needed to try to relieve some of the harm I’d caused. I couldn’t try to ease my own pain anymore and not try to ease his. Bobby deserved the truth *now*.

What he chose to do next was up to him.

Andie had asked what the answer to the escape room puzzle would be, and I told her that I didn’t have one. “Um.”

She raised her eyebrows apologetically. “Then how’s he going to ‘leave’ the rooms? How’s he going to ‘escape’?”

That was the problem, wasn’t it? I very much wanted him to escape those particular memories...but I didn’t want him to escape me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

THE STARBUCKS IN Bella's neighborhood was crowded midmorning, but I spotted her the moment she walked in and waved her over. "Thanks so much for coming. Here you go." Smiling, I handed her a latte and gestured to a chair across from me.

"Thanks." Bella shrugged off her puffy coat, sat down, and took a sip of the foamy drink. She squinted at me over the lid. "I was surprised to get your call. Surprised you're still in Chicago. Kinda thought you'd head back to New York after I chickened out of our case. Are you working remotely or something?"

"Nope." I guzzled my coffee, enjoying the hit of caffeine. After hearing back from Max earlier in the week on the results of his, ahem, research, I'd been working nonstop, interviewing witnesses. "I quit."

The partners hadn't been all that surprised, after my recent disappearing act. I'd also canceled my lease on the New York studio and arranged to have my clothes and a few personal items shipped here. I couldn't live in the hotel forever, but I needed to see how the lawsuit progressed before I decided my next steps. I was a woman in limbo.

Her eyes widened. "Really? Why?"

I thought of Tess's offhand comment. "I needed a new dream."

"Huh?"

"Never mind." I pulled a legal pad out of my laptop bag. I hated to blindside her, but: "Max and I found four other victims of Taggert. They've agreed to work with us."

Her mouth formed a perfect O, and her coffee cup hit the table with a thud. "Four? What did he steal from them?"

Good. Curiosity and outrage were her first reactions, not: *Why are you still looking into this?* I badly wanted her to

rejoin us, and I thought I had the facts to persuade her.

“Two of them are a team. Two students, really young guys: Manuel and Jorge. Like you, they developed an add-on to GuardTower,” I told her. “It’s much smaller in scope than your project, but Max thought it was good work. He said it’s some kind of communications workflow tool.”

Bella looked off into the distance, her gaze analytical behind her glasses. “Ooh, that *is* a good idea. I wonder how they solved the issue of—” She shook her head out of Codeland. “Sorry. How did Taggert get their code?”

“Very similar to your story, actually. They met Taggert at a convention and showed him a demo. Unlike you, they were not planning to release it open source. They were hoping SideDoor might buy it from them.”

She leaned toward me. “But he just took it somehow?”

“Yep. He wined and dined them, whirled them out on the town. They were dazzled college kids and completely out of their element. They think he stole the code from Jorge’s laptop while they were at a club and distracted.” I crinkled my nose. “A few days after the convention, they sent Taggert a few screenshots of their product as a reminder and asked if he was interested in purchasing it.”

“Let me guess,” she said. “They received an accusation of theft and a cease and desist from Hill in response.”

“Bingo!” I chugged more coffee. “No copyright language in their letter though.”

“Why didn’t they fight back?” Bella asked. “There was no embarrassing sex stuff and there are two of them!”

“They’re both DACA students,” I said, my soft voice contradicting the anger in my belly. “They were absolutely terrified of legal trouble.”

Bella’s jaw went hard, her soft expression transitioning to steel. “That absolute fuckhead. I was probably the *least* vulnerable person he preyed on.”

“Yep,” I confirmed, raising my eyebrows. “Want to hear about the others?”



WITH BELLA BACK on board, I spent the afternoon on my hotel bed, laptop on my crossed legs with files and notepads spread in squares all around me as if I was a sentient piece in an enormous chessboard. My gut told me we had enough for a huge, valid lawsuit—but it wasn’t a sure winner.

In his own asshole way, Taggert had been careful. He’d only taken advantage of people who didn’t have the resources to fight back. People who “the system” or the media wouldn’t treat kindly. People who simply couldn’t afford the battle.

I could stand for them, at no cost, and fight this out. But I couldn’t control the fact that a significant amount of their time, their life, might be lost on a long case. I could shade, but not control, the media coverage.

So, a settlement was the optimum solution here. My clients deserved the right to use the intellectual property they created, and they deserved financial compensation for what they’d been through as a result of Taggert’s threats. While I’d love to see Taggert punished in a loss-of-freedom kind of way, that was an unrealistic goal given his money, fame, and power. But, I hoped, with a wicked smile, bleeding him dry was *not* an unrealistic goal.

I was expecting a call from Max so when my phone rang, I answered it without looking at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Emily, it’s Cal. So nice to hear your voice.” I closed my laptop screen slowly. He’d let me know via email that he’d received the signed paperwork, but I hadn’t actually spoken to my divorce attorney in quite some time.

“I have good news,” he said jovially. There was only one possible outcome that Cal could consider good news, and my stomach ached before he said the words. “I pulled a few strings.” He lowered his voice conspiratorially. “It’s not like

your family is just *any* family.” He laughed. “Your divorce is final as of yesterday!”

He waited for a response. I suppose he was expecting an exclamation of thanks or relief. Maybe even joy or applause. But all I could do was wheeze out a startled “Oh.”

He went on and on about the paperwork being filed, about the likelihood that the press would find out, about the final notification that would be sent to both Bobby and me later today. I just closed my eyes and rested my heavy head on my pillow. *If only.*

If only I’d known what was wrong with me sooner. For someone with a broken brain and a wounded heart, I’d done a hell of a good job of finding and marrying the right man. If only I could go back in time and change how I’d acted, what I’d done.

I’d said something similar to Dr. Rivera earlier in the week because I’d heard nothing in response from Bobby after he’d received my escape room invitation. Andie had assured me that the room had at least been accessed, but she had no other diagnostics.

Always pragmatic, Dr. Rivera just offered a wry smile and practical shrug. “There are no time machines. We don’t get do-overs. The past is already written. We want to come to terms with it, to understand it. You can try to make amends, but you can’t go back. You can only go forward.”



“MEET ME AND Tess out for a drink tonight,” Jo said.

I shifted the phone to my other ear and forced my eyes off the timeline I was working on. I was only days away from being ready to confront Taggert and Hill. Bella and my four other clients were counting on me.

“I don’t know,” I grumbled. “I’m pretty busy right now.” Also, I wasn’t quite sure I wanted to hear about Jo’s wedding plans or see the way Tess’s eyes flashed whenever she told a Max story.

We recent divorcées didn't have a lot of patience with people in love.

"You'll always be busy, Emily," Jo chided. "That's who you are. You should make time for friends too though."

Why did she always have to be right? It was so annoying. "OK. When and where?"

There was a triumphant tone in her voice. "Eight. Tess found some trendy new place. One of those lounges that's so 'cool' they barely put the name on the door, you know? I'll text you the address."

So, at 8:00 p.m., I stood shivering on the doorstep of some old loft building not far from Jo's office. Except for the streetlights, the surrounding area was dark and quiet. Shouldn't I be able to hear music or something? What kind of weird bar was this?

I stared at the panel with buzzer buttons to the building's entry. There was only one with a label next to it, and it looked brand-new: "The ER."

"Blech," I moaned aloud. What kind of bar named itself after an emergency room? Hopefully, one with very potent cocktails. I pressed the button and a burst of noise erupted from the speaker. "Fourth floor!" a static-covered voice blurted, and the door in front of me immediately clicked open.

My heels clicked on worn linoleum as I made my way to the elevator. The last time I'd seen Tess and Jo, I'd had a panic attack and fell asleep in front of them, so I'd made an effort to put myself together tonight. I wore a casual black suit cut just this side of sexy, with my hair blown out and honest-to-goodness makeup on my face.

When the elevator doors opened to the fourth floor, I stepped out tentatively. I still couldn't hear any music or conversation, but there was one door at the end of the hallway with light showing through the edges. That must be it. I squared my shoulders, pasted a pleasant smile on my face, grabbed the handle, and strode briskly through the door.

It was an empty, black room. The only light was one in the entryway directly above where I stood. I couldn't see more than five feet in front of me. While it was completely quiet, the hairs on the back of my neck rose. I didn't feel alone.

"Crap," I whispered. I must have walked into the wrong unit after all. When I found the right goddamn bar, I was going to give Tess a piece of my mind about her stupid choice of watering holes. I spun on my heel and pushed the door to the hall.

It didn't open.

I yanked and pulled. Pulled and yanked. The door didn't budge. What in the actual fuck?

A light flared behind me; I could see it in my peripheral vision. I whirled to face it. At the opposite end of the space, a simple wooden bar with two stools was now illuminated.

My heart pounded so hard I could feel each individual beat in my teeth.

Because out of the darkness, a golden-haired man appeared and seated himself on one of the stools.

"I think it's time for a real escape room, don't you?" Bobby asked.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HE'D GROWN HIS hair back out. That was the first thought that registered in my shocked mind as I slowly crossed the room on shaking legs. He looked like my Bobby again.

“Don't be nervous,” he said softly. He gave me a crooked grin. “We're just two single adults, having a conversation in a bar.”

I suppressed a wince at the reference to our finalized divorce. Climbing onto the stool next to him, I tried to calm my face. I didn't want to be all wide, wild eyes and sealed mouth. I wanted to be clever, confident, and open: a better version of the woman he'd known last fall.

“I'm not nervous,” I lied. I was petrified. Except for saying yes to his unexpected marriage proposal, I'd failed in every high-stakes personal conversation we'd ever had. But hadn't I been hoping for exactly this when I'd sent him my escape room invitation?

“So how does this escape room work?” I asked, glancing around the austere space. “I don't see any puzzles or clues.”

Another crooked smile. “No. For the first time in the history of us, I think all the cards are on the table. There's no more puzzle.” He hesitated, his blue eyes somber. “But we're still locked together, I think. And we need to decide what's next.”

His gaze raked over me, from heels to hair. “You've never looked more beautiful,” he said, still quiet. “Your new life must be agreeing with you.”

So many thoughts wanted to jumble out at once that none did, and the silence stretched too long. Anxiety almost choked me—I could not screw this up.

Open your mouth, Emily. “A l-lot of it does,” I finally stuttered. “It feels good to be working on a case I actually care about. To make my own schedule.”

Keep going. Share, already. I took a deep breath. “To be getting help.” I was suddenly desperate for him to understand how hard I was working to process my grief, how much I wanted to be emotionally healthy again. I opened my mouth to describe my bi-weekly therapy appointments, the support group meetings I was religiously attending.

But he spoke before I could. “I’m so sorry, Emily. I am so ridiculously sorry.”

Wait, what? What in the world could he possibly be apologizing for?

“I knew something was wrong. Deeply wrong,” he whispered. “But I was an idiot and self-absorbed. I made it all about me.” He shook his head, anger tightening his jaw. “Here you were, in such enormous pain, and I didn’t find a way to get through to you.”

“Bobby. No,” I said firmly, my voice finally, *finally*, working the way it was supposed to. “There was nothing you could have done. I didn’t talk to you because I couldn’t even talk to myself. I had no idea what was going on inside. Nothing you could have done would have made a difference.”

I put my hands on my hips, super-frustrated. “Didn’t you understand that the point of the rooms I sent you was for *me* to apologize to you?!”

“My heart stopped when the invitation appeared in my inbox,” he said, and I ached to pull him into my arms. “I mean it. I think I was medically dead for a minute there. I had actually started to accept that I’d never hear from you again.”

Should I have let him go? “Part of me still wonders if that would have been the right thing to do,” I admitted. “To let you have a clean break. To just disappear and let you move on in peace.”

His blue eyes narrowed abruptly into a furious glare. “That’s bullshit, Em.” He reached out and touched me for the first time, roughly grabbing my hands and pulling them into his lap. “I will never move on. It didn’t even matter that you didn’t want me, that you divorced me. I was still yours. I’m

yours now. I'll be yours until I don't exist anymore. I fucking love you."

He was saying everything I dreamed of, and I was trembling all over, but I couldn't absorb the words. Not yet.

"But I'm...I don't know. A mess?" I clutched his warm hands. It felt so good to touch him again, to feel the familiar fingers, curved around mine. "I'm not exactly the woman you fell in love with. I'm not the basket case you were married to either, but I don't quite know who I'll be yet."

He shifted to grip both of my hands with one of his and ran the other one softly through my hair. "I don't know exactly who I'm becoming either, you know. I've made a lot of changes and grown up a bunch since we were together."

Tears sprung in his eyes even as he gave me a wide grin. "You can love someone who's in progress. People are never their perfect selves at all times. We're all changing—every day, every year. Em, I don't want to wait to love you until you're some pinnacle version of yourself. Loving someone is being a partner on the journey. I want to love you along the way."

I should have known Bobby would say the exact perfect thing. A warm, fizzy mixture of acceptance and joy exploded in my chest and spread to every inch of my body.

That one, Emmy.

Her voice was as clear in my head as it had ever been in life. The shock of it took my breath away. And yeah, there was a spike of grief in the joy. I let myself feel it, all the way through, from my core to my toes.

"I wish she could have known you," I whispered.

Bobby briefly pressed his forehead to mine. "Me too. Maybe, when you're ready, you can tell me about her."

I could learn to do that. I could.

Right now though, I could almost hear her impatience.
Later, Emmy.

She was right as always. Now was the time for me to get Bobby and me out of an escape room and back into a life— together. I tried to launch myself at him. I wanted his arms around me. I wanted him to kiss me until I couldn't breathe.

He stopped me though, bracing me back with his hands on my shoulders. For the first time since I sat down, he looked unsure. "I haven't always been honest with you about what I want or need. Our wedding was a prime example. I want that to change. Right now...I need the words too, Em."

Oh man. My heart was so full I hadn't even realized I hadn't said anything back. Shame on me. After almost a year of my silence, of course he needed the words.

"I've loved you from practically the minute we met." I wasn't even whispering. The words were loud and so easy. "I loved you when you proposed, and I loved you when we said I do. I loved you when I screamed at you, and I loved you when I left. Loving you was never, ever the problem. I loved you when you called me, drunk, and I loved you when you signed the papers."

This time, he let me pull us together. "Today, I love you more than I ever have."

I angled up for a kiss, but he backed away again, the brute. "And you want to be with me? You want to try us again?" he asked, tender and just a tiny bit scared. "My old heart can't take a one-night experiment or a flare of nostalgia, sweetheart."

I hated that he needed to ask, but I sure as hell understood why he did. When I spoke again, it was in my lawyer voice, clear and definitive, no room for misinterpretation. "Listen close, Bobby, because I have the answer to this escape room: I want you, and I want us. Please, let's try again."

I caught just a glimpse of his fierce, joyful smile before he crushed his lips to mine.



HELLO, 3:00 A.M.

With a resigned sigh, I flipped on my back and scooched up until I was sitting, propped by pillows against the headboard. Even though my body felt delicious and relaxed, my brain was primed for action. Not too surprising, as in the morning I would go with Bella to face off against Taggert and Hill. This would be it: the culmination of everything I'd been working on since the day Bella first walked into my New York office. Nothing typical about this face-to-face interaction either. It was going to be more of a performance than a meeting. I needed to take our few facts, mix them together with my legal expertise, and serve it all to them with no small amount of drama.

A small smirk twisted my lips. This tap dance would include the talents of both Sven and Tru Saturn. I honestly couldn't wait to bring both the ice and the heat.

"You should make that exact face at those idiots tomorrow," Bobby said sleepily. "It's terrifying."

"Noted," I said with a snort-laugh. "I'm sorry if I woke you."

He reached over and tugged me down until we were spooning. Behind me, his body was very warm and very naked. "I'm never sorry to wake to you," he whispered in my ear, and I squirmed, half ticklish and half aroused. "Although you are a very fidgety spoon."

I giggled and flexed my toes, relishing this perfect feeling. The one that told me I was exactly where I belonged. "Bobby," I said, slightly more serious. "Should we stay here? In Chicago? Is this where you want to live?"

He raised himself on one elbow, gathering me closer with an arm around my hips. "I wouldn't mind trying it out. I think Jo would be fine with me working remotely from anywhere, but I do like it here. I like working in person with the team, and I love seeing Jamie as much as I do. He goes back and forth between here and San Francisco though, so if you wanted us to move back there, I'd still see him. What do you want to do?"

I honestly didn't know. "A new city feels like a good place for a fresh start," I admitted. Illinois had bar reciprocity with New York, so I was allowed to practice here. "If tomorrow goes well, I could picture setting up an office here," I said slowly. Something like Jo's loft space, with an air of efficiency and warmth. Somewhere my clients would feel comfortable. Maybe I'd even try to poach Rosie from my old firm. I could offer her a hefty pay raise.

"Tomorrow *will* go well. I know it," Bobby said. "But even if it doesn't, that's OK. Take it from an extreme late starter." He laughed. "There are more second chances in life than you expect."

"I'm lying in bed with my ex-husband, planning a future together," I said dryly, elbowing him in the ribs. "I'm learning all about second chances."

Bobby cupped a hand over his ear and wiggled his eyebrows in fake confusion. "I'm sorry, did you say you want seconds?" With remarkable finesse, he rolled me on my stomach and began to kiss his way down my neck and back.

God, I loved 3:00 a.m.

Chapter Twenty-Four

IN THE LOBBY of the skyscraper where Bird & Dreyer's offices were located, I slid my expensive suit jacket from my shoulders and folded it over my arm. Without it, my outfit looked unimpressive. Tailored navy pants, simple white blouse, Mary Jane flats. My hair was in a fluffy ponytail at the nape of my neck, and I'd spent time on my makeup this morning, so my eyes looked extra round and my skin was fresh and pink.

Bella arrived five minutes before our scheduled appointment time, pushing slowly through the revolving doors. When she saw me, she stopped short. "Emily, you look so... young."

I gave her a wolfish smile. "Inexperienced. Fresh out of law school is the look we're going for here." Today, I wanted to be underestimated. Taggert and Hill didn't know I was coming at all. Bella had called Hill to ask for the appointment. She'd feigned confusion on the entire situation, saying that Taggert must have made a mistake. That she didn't understand the cease and desist. I was sure the men couldn't wait to explain it to her.

"Gotcha." She nodded. She was a bundle of nerves, twitching in her sweater and jeans, pale behind her glasses.

I looked up at her pretty face and guided her toward the elevator. "It'll all be over soon. One way or the other."

She nodded quickly. "Good. I'm gonna go back home for the month of December, I think. There are things from my grandmother's estate I need to settle." Her mouth turned down at the corners. "A lot of things I need to settle, actually."

With any luck today, I'd make sure that trip home was less painful for her, at least financially.

We checked in with the receptionist in Bird & Dreyer's lobby, and she showed us to an enormous conference room that overlooked the turn of Wacker Drive and the Chicago

River. Bella ignored the tray of bagels in favor of the view. I poured us both a glass of water and myself a cup of coffee. I didn't need the caffeine since I was wired high on adrenaline, but it gave me something to do with my hands while we waited.

They let us sit in the conference room fifteen minutes past our scheduled appointment time, but it was such a transparent power move that it didn't bother me. When they finally deigned to appear, I stood up from my seat and made a show out of smoothing my pants and widening my eyes.

Taggert was dressed casually in a lavender golf shirt and dark jeans. Hill wore a gray suit and another red tie. They were both relaxed-looking and unusually tan for November, as though they'd just come back from a vacation in Cabo.

"H-hi," Bella stammered. Both men gave her a thorough up-and-down before dismissing her by flicking their eyes away.

"Nice to see you again, Bella," Taggert said smoothly. "Although, I'm not sure what there is to talk about." His gaze landed on me, and his voice tipped just a bit chilly. "Who did you bring with you? I hadn't realized you'd engaged counsel."

Bella shifted her weight from foot to foot. "This is my friend Emily. She's a lawyer, so I asked her to come." Perfect. Taggert's lips quirked as he dismissed me as well.

Hill pulled a business card out of his pocket and tossed it across the table at me. "James Hill. Bird & Dreyer, obviously."

"Oh!" I peeped. "Sorry. I just left my firm, and I don't have new business cards yet."

Taggert and Hill exchanged amused glances and sat themselves at the table, taking up space that would have comfortably held six men. Bella and I followed their lead and sat gingerly, directly across from them.

Hill kicked us off. "Why are we here today?" He peered at Bella. "You mentioned that you were confused by the content of the cease and desist?"

I cleared my throat, even though I didn't need to. My voice was fake-shaky when I spoke. "My client is confused because she designed and coded the product described in your letter. That intellectual property is hers to do with as she sees fit."

The men exchanged another brief, charged look. They were excited, I realized. They'd been looking forward to this. None of Taggert's other victims had pushed back in the slightest—which had been easy, but no fun. They *wanted* to flaunt their power.

"Incorrect," Hill boomed importantly. "That code is the property of SideDoor and created by Mr. Taggert himself."

"S-so how did Ms. Bradley come into the possession of all of the source code and design documentation then?" I asked, working in a nervous stammer.

Hill made a disappointed clucking sound in the back of his throat. Taggert's nostrils flared as he was barely able to suppress a smile. "She stole it from my client's laptop while he was asleep." He shook his head regretfully. "It appears to my client and myself that Ms. Bradley had sex with Mr. Taggert solely for this motive."

His lizard eyes went from me to Bella. "It would appear that way to anyone, really."

There it was: the threat of exposure. Bella couldn't suppress a shudder. Taggert leaned forward, as if he wanted to get closer to her fear.

"Well," I said cheerfully, dropping the nervous-Nellie act. "We'll see about that in court, I suppose."

Both men's gazes shot straight to me. "What?" Taggert asked.

I frowned at them, my eyebrows drawing together. "Sorry. Should have said sooner. We're petitioning the court for monetary relief and an injunction against SideDoor."

I drew a sheaf of paperwork out of my laptop bag and tossed it at Hill. "An injunction?" Taggert asked me. "What does that mean?"

“Your attorney can explain it to you,” I said breezily.

Taggert whipped his gaze to Hill. “What is this?”

Hill shook his head quickly. “If granted, it would mean that SideDoor wouldn’t be allowed to use the product and possibly monetary damages would be granted to Ms. Bradley. But it’s nothing, Cole. A court would never grant a petition like this.” He added emphasis to his voice. “We have the copyright on the code, remember?”

Taggert’s shoulders relaxed. No doubt he was thinking of fraternity brother number three, ready to replace files at command. “Of course,” he said. The smugness returned to plump up his face as he gave Bella a condescending frown. “I copyrighted this product months before I even met you.”

Hill piled on, aiming smugness toward me. “This was clearly explained in the cease and desist, Ms....ah.” He’d forgotten that he never got my full name. “Whatever. The copyright makes this case a non-starter.”

“We’ll see!” I chirped again, super cheerful. “I called my contact at the US Copyright Office last week and reported suspicion of copyright fraud, so they should have frozen the related application files immediately. The judge can take a look and weigh in.”

Taggert and Hill went still at the exact same time. It was comical to watch their whole bodies turn to stone. Next to me, Bella sat up straighter.

“So that’s the first thing,” I said, grabbing my Tom Ford suit jacket and sliding it on. I unclasped my ponytail and my waves of red hair curled professionally on my shoulders. My reading glasses went on my nose as I pulled a stack of files out of my bag.

“I’ll also be filing suit against SideDoor and Mr. Taggert on behalf of Manuel Valdez and Jorge Ayala, as well as Lucia Nowak and Trey Johnson.” I looked up at Hill and Taggert over the bridge of my glasses. “As you served each of them cease and desists, I assume you’re familiar with the products in question?”

Across the table, the men's bodies remained still, but Taggert's eyes jumped around wildly, from Bella to me to Hill.

More paperwork emerged from my bag. "The court may decide to consolidate the cases since the plaintiffs will be accusing Mr. Taggert of the same infringement. The details of each IP case are slightly different, of course, but the overall theme is identical."

I thumped the ream of paper on the table loudly. Then I spoke even louder. "Theft. Of vulnerable people. That's how I see it."

I winked at Hill and mimicked his earlier threat. "It would appear that way to anyone, really."

Taggert flushed, mottled and red. *That's right, baby*, I wanted to coo at him. *You try to come at us via the media, and I will have you fucking crucified in the press.* He turned to his buddy and said something under his breath. I couldn't hear the exact words in his growl, but the urgency was clear.

"What firm did you say you were from?" Hill asked, clearly stalling.

I pushed my reading glasses on my head. "I was at Stanley & Fern for five years," I said truthfully, enjoying the name-drop of the country's number-two IP firm. "I've just left Coonley Taft in New York." The number-one firm.

Hill's upper lip was shiny. If I breathed deeply, I could smell his body odor. "I need a minute with my client," he said, pushing his chair away from the table. "Cole, come back to my office."

"Smart," I agreed. "Mr. Taggert, you're going to need a new lawyer." I flicked a disdainful look at Hill. "I'm sure Hiltan James has been a worthy ally until this point."

Both men started at the sound of Mr. Sweaty's former name. I just offered a bland smile. "But you're going to need an actual IP attorney to guide you to either court or settlement."

Taggert's eyes blazed, and he shoved a finger at my face. "Settlement," he sneered. "That's why they're here. They just

want money.”

“Incorrect,” I said, completely unfazed. “Ms. Bradley will require both the return of her intellectual property *and* money.” I’d spoken with the rest of my clients, and they’d all accept a monetary amount in return for SideDoor continuing to own and use the products they’d designed. But Bella’s project was her baby. It was huge and complex and impressive; she deserved for the world to know it was hers.

“Cole, my office.” Hill stood and waited.

“Piss off, Hilt.” Taggert leaned back in his chair to show that he wasn’t going anywhere. He stared me down across the table, and I let him, meeting his gaze and raising my eyebrows.

“What firm are you with now?” he demanded.

“I’m starting my own,” I announced, smiling at Bella. “This will be my first solo case.”

Taggert let out an incredulous laugh, with no small amount of relief in it. “Ha.”

Hill fidgeted with the back of his chair, like he didn’t know whether to rejoin the table or drag his friend physically from the room. He had a better radar than his friend, which made sense. He’d done bad stuff and he’d been caught. He knew it was possible. Taggert, on the other hand, had been stealing for years, and aside from Max trumping him with the release of GuardTower to the public, he’d never faced any repercussions.

Taggert snorted. “Hilt, sit down. She’s bluffing.” He shook his head, pretending disappointment. “You had me for a minute, Emily Whatever. But I’m not fucking settling, so you girls can just run along home.”

He folded his arms over his chest, and Hill picked up the thread. “Lawsuits move very slowly. Even the simplest and most straightforward of cases can take over a year to get through court. They move much more slowly for someone like Mr. Taggert, who can afford to file motion after motion after motion to delay.”

The sneer on Taggert's face was stomach-curdling. He glared at Bella. "I know all about you, remember." He jabbed at the paperwork all over the table. "I know about everyone here. You can't afford to go to litigation."

Well, ring-a-ding-ding. I couldn't ask for an easier opening than that. "You don't know me, Mr. Taggert. I can certainly afford to go through litigation."

He snorted. "Just because you have a good résumé? Please. It's sweet that you're so eager, Emily. I'm sure helping these poor suckers seems like a heroic way to start your own little firm. But when you see the court costs pile up and you need to dedicate all your time *for years* to fend off the team of lawyers I will hire, I imagine you'll change your mind. Of course, by that time, you'll be hundreds of thousands of dollars in debt." He lifted a lavender shoulder. "Maybe more."

I giggled. Honestly giggled. Damn, this was fun.

His eyes narrowed to slits. "Again, very sweet. Very sweet to think you could bluff your way through this."

It was hard to contain my laughter, but I managed to stifle it in. "Oh, Mr. Taggert. As my ex-husband could tell you, the one thing I've never been is sweet."

I did that smirk now, the one Bobby called terrifying. "I realize you didn't think it was important to get my name, but I'll go ahead and introduce myself now."

I stood and offered a hand. "I'm Emily Austin."

They gave me blank stares of scorn.

"Saturn," I finished. "Emily Austin Saturn."

They just sat, ignoring my outstretched hand, and it was beautiful to watch comprehension dawn across their stupid faces. I'd use my entire name from now on, I decided on the spot. I never wanted to before, because the name recognition had seemed unearned. But it wouldn't be unearned if I worked toward earning it every day.

It was a silly sort of power, but awful men are often impressed by the silliest of things.

“I see you recognize my last name,” I said calmly, reclaiming my seat. For once, I was thrilled about the cutthroat reputation my father had spent a lifetime building. For the right opponents, I would proudly contribute to that lineage. “You’ve probably also realized that I could litigate this for the rest of my life and it would barely scratch the interest on my inheritance.

“So obviously, I’m not bluffing.”

Of course I was. None of my clients wanted to be dragged through the time, embarrassment, and emotions of a long trial. But Taggert and Hill would focus only on the money. That’s who they were.

“Jesus. Fuck.” Taggert put his face in his hands.

“Cole, let’s take a break,” Hill tried again, and I had to give him credit. He at least had enough sense to know when a temporary withdrawal was called for.

Taggert did not. “What’s it going to cost me for this to go away?”

Good thing I’d done extensive research on the current value of SideDoor and Taggert’s net worth.

This is going to hurt. I smiled at him. Sweetly.



BELLA AND I left the building an hour later and walked in silence for several city blocks before she burst into tears and pulled me into a huge bear hug. “Oh my God. Oh my God,” she whispered.

I squeezed her back, as hard as I could. She was mostly excited that TowerWizard was back in her possession and its future in her control. But the millions of dollars in damages coming straight into her bank account was nothing to sneeze at either.

In my opinion, Taggert had gotten off pretty easy. But I would watch him, and if he stepped out of line again, I’d circle back.

For now, though, I had a lot of other important things to do. I was going to take Bella out for a celebratory lunch where we'd call Max and Tess to describe every last expression on Taggert's miserable face. Next, we'd call the four other clients to let them know about the settlement dollars coming their way. Then, I was going to an appointment with Dr. Rivera before meeting a Realtor to look at some loft office space.

And tonight?

I was picking Bobby up from work and we were going home.

Epilogue

Nine Months Later

EVERYTHING—AND I MEAN everything—was bright pink.

Thousands of women and men wearing everything from pink sneakers to fedoras gathered near Soldier Field waiting for this year's Chicago leg of the Susan G. Komen 3-Day Walk for Breast Cancer to begin.

“Nervous?” Jo asked me, stretching her hamstrings. Jamie put his hands on her shoulders to steady her while she stretched, his wedding band glinting in the sun. In matching yoga pants, Sloan and Heather bickered while braiding pink extensions into each other's hair.

“Nope!” Sixty miles in three days was a lot, but we'd been training for months. I felt ready. “As long as I don't get blisters, I'll be fine.”

Bobby bounded up wearing a pink feather boa and puffy tutu. “If you get blisters, I'll fix them.” He patted the pink fanny pack around his waist. “I have everything in here. Everything! Call my cell at any point. I'll be at every major mile marker, cheering you on.”

“You guys are going to have the best cheering squad of everyone here,” Tess called, fiddling with a playlist that she planned to blast along the route from the windows of Bobby's car. She was wearing knee-high pink boots and shorts that said “For Tits & Giggles” on the butt. Max was gathering water bottles and making sure everyone had the right size of our team's T-shirt.

The shirt was pink, naturally, with “Team Tru” displayed in silver sparkly letters.

“Don't forget that we need to be at the event breakfast early tomorrow,” Andie called, jabbing into her phone. “We need to accept the first-year fundraising award.” Of course Jo had seen to it that we'd raised the most money of any new team doing the walk.

I pulled Bobby aside. “Are you sure you don’t want to walk with me anymore?” I whined. Bobby had been my training partner, and we’d covered the entire city of Chicago, laughing and kissing, during our walks over the summer. The best summer of my life.

But early this morning, much to my annoyed shock, he’d dropped a bomb on me. “I think I’ll switch to the cheering section instead of being a walker.”

Now, he put his arm around me and cuddled me to his side. “I’m sure.”

“But why? Are you OK?” It was so uncharacteristic of Bobby to cancel on anything, let alone something so important to me, that I was positive he was quietly hiding some sort of injury.

“I’m fine, Em.” He looked up at something over my head and smiled. “I just think, for this one event, that you should walk next to someone else.”

What in the world was he talking about? I whirled around and my jaw dropped to the ground.

My father, the famous Sven Saturn, stood there in a full-body pink Adidas warm-up suit, adorned with the Team Tru logo. “Surprise,” he said.

“Dad!” I exclaimed. “Oh my God.”

He and I had been working on stuff. That’s how I’d categorize the last several months of our relationship. I’d finally told him about everything that had gone on after the wedding. But our conversations hadn’t exactly been easy. I’d inherited my stunted grief processing honestly, and though we tried, we still stumbled over emotional topics.

I’d mentioned the walk to him months ago: how I wanted to do it in my mom’s honor, how my friends and I were going to form a team and do it together. He’d listened. Then he’d sort of harumphed and changed the subject. I hadn’t brought it up again.

Now he was going to walk it with me? Could he really handle sixty miles? Had he prepared? Did he bring his

medication?

“No need for that concerned frown, Emily. I’ve been training every week since you told me about the walk,” he said stiffly. I doubted he was super comfortable in all that jazzy pink.

“Oh.” I blinked at him. “I had no idea.”

Bobby danced between us and threw a pink lei over my father’s head and a string of silver beads over mine. “Of course you didn’t,” he said. “Sven wanted to surprise you.”

Prodded by Bobby, my father nodded. “I thought maybe we could talk about your mother,” he said quietly. “There are stories—” his voice broke and his eyes went wet, even as a sly grin formed “—*a lot* of stories that I haven’t told in years.”

I could hear her in my head, cackling with glee. “I want to hear every single one,” I whispered. “I love you, Dad.” I threw my arms around him and held on tight until we both grew too embarrassed and broke apart.

Jo and Jamie waved some paperwork in the air and called, “Sven, come get your walk credentials.” My father raised a hand in greeting and ambled over.

Over the loudspeakers one of the officials announced a five-minute countdown until the beginning of the walk. Bobby put his hands on my hips and used his thumbs to dig into my lower back. I leaned into his embrace.

“In case you need something extra to think about over the next three days,” he said, “how about getting engaged soon after you cross the finish line?”

My shoulders shook with laughter. I’d found the engagement ring weeks ago, hidden in the refrigerator. I’d been wondering what the hell he was waiting for.

I turned to beam up at him. His eyes were bright but strangely serious, and my heart flipped over. *Aw*. Even though we rarely spent a night apart, even though we were closer than we’d ever been, part of him had been nervous to ask again.

“Engaged, schmengaged. What would you think about getting married soon after I cross the finish line?”

As a rule, Bobby was hard to surprise. Which made it an ultra-satisfying joy to see all expression vanish from his face. “What?”

“Something for *you* to think about,” I said, patting him on the cheek. “Our friends and family are here. We were planning to have a party anyway. I’m sure one of them would like to officiate. I bought the wedding dress I really wanted from that boutique in San Francisco and had it delivered three months ago.” I whirled around, waving at the festivities. “This is a celebration of my mom’s life, so it’s kind of like she’d be there.”

I stood on my tiptoes and smacked him on the lips. “I’m ready when you are, love.”

The End

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Acknowledgments

Escape Girl was the most difficult book I've written so far. I knew I wanted to write a "second chance" romance about Bobby and Emily, two characters who were mentioned earlier in the series. I had character sketches and an outline, like always. But when I sat down to draft, nothing came out the way I'd planned. Emily was just so...sad. I didn't know I was writing a book about a woman dealing with grief. Not for months. I think this happened a lot for authors in the time of COVID, even romance authors.

The foundation of this story is the love between Emily and her mother. So, I would be remiss if I didn't mention here that I have been blessed with the most wonderful mom in the world. Besides purely "mom," my mother fills so many roles in my life: mentor, role model, friend. Mom, I hear your voice in my head like Emily hears her mom's, and I hope I always will. I love you.

The epilogue of the book has all of my favorite characters participating in the Susan G. Komen 3-Day Walk for Breast Cancer. I'd like to say a big thank-you to my friend Elke, an incredible breast cancer survivor, for including me in her walk this past November. It was such a meaningful experience, and I can't wait to repeat it this September. Go Team Pink & Prosecco!

As always, thank you to Tule Publishing. I love working with you all! Special thanks to my editor, Julie Sturgeon, who has an uncanny knack for explaining exactly how a story *isn't* working—and how to fix it! Miracle worker! Finally, thanks to my agent, Janna Bonikowski, for being a partner on the publishing journey.

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About the Author



There are only three things Michelle Dayton loves more than sexy and suspenseful novels: her family, the city of Chicago, and Mr. Darcy. Michelle dreams of a year of world travel – as long as the trip would include weeks and weeks of beach time. As a bourbon lover and unabashed wine snob, Michelle thinks heaven is discussing a good book over an adult beverage.

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