

EXCELLING @  
LOVEL#1 -3



**3 FULL-LENGTH  
ROMANCES:**

**FORMULA FOR LOVE**

**FORMULA FOR LUST**

**FORMULA FOR SEDUCTION**

# EXCELLING

AT

*Love*

AMELIA SIMONE

# EXCELLING AT LOVE

*Books 1-3*

Formula for Love

Formula for Lust

Formula for Seduction

Amelia Simone

# FORMULA FOR LOVE

*Excelling @ Love Book 1*

Amelia Simone

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Amelia Simone  
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# CHAPTER 1: ED

I tried to maintain my *Serious Adult*™ face as I walked into the coffee shop, but my lips tilted up of their own volition. I loved it when a plan came together. I inhaled and blew out my breath over the space of three heartbeats, the lingering flavor of peppermint soothing. *Be cool. Be cool.* Who was I kidding? I'd *never* been cool. I needed to project calm if I couldn't manage cool. I was so close. To finding my people: geeks like me. Breaking the cycle of loneliness that had gripped me since I realized how isolated I'd become. Arranging today's meeting was a big step forward in my plans. A meaningful way to break into the local academic community.

The coffee shop near campus was almost empty, and the aroma of brewed coffee stung my nose. No one wanted to study on a sunny Friday afternoon. A handful of history students sipped froufrou drinks and argued loudly about Harriet Tubman in one corner, but they weren't my flavor of nerd. Maybe I shouldn't write off history major grads, but their ability to spout archaic names and events intimidated me, and narratives based on accounts of the powerful always seemed suspect. Incomplete data made me suspicious of the conclusions.

In a booth at the back, I spotted Doctor Sidney Culver. She matched her bio on the department website—early thirties, dark eyes, and dark brown hair. She wore jeans and an animal print shirt. She exuded effortless cool. Like she belonged. Her bio had listed several published papers and a popular IT textbook on database systems. Smart, successful, and self-assured. Expert in the data architecture that bored others to tears, and my idea of a good time. With luck, meeting her would be key to expanding my social circle and making friends beyond work.



I held out my hand as Dr. Culver stood with a smile. She engulfed my palm in her own soft hand. “Mr. Delancey?” she asked.

I nodded and smiled. “Please, call me Ed.”

Her cheeks rounded in a warm smile in return. “You can call me Sid. Thanks for coming today.”

I sat down in the booth across from her, trying not to let my long legs bump hers. She was petite enough that it didn’t take much effort. “It’s my pleasure. Can I get you a coffee?”

She huffed a quick laugh, and I enjoyed the husky sound and twinkle in her brown eyes. “That’s kind, but this is my research grant and you’re a volunteer; I’m buying. Shall we?” We made our way to the front counter, and I watched the way the light played across her dangly earrings before realizing what they were. I squinted to make them out and held back my grin. Tiny Entity-Relationship model diagrams. The entity box text said “students,” with dangling attributes “major” and “GPA.” Geeky in the extreme. She smiled at the barista and placed her order before turning to me with a raised brow.

Caught. I had been caught staring at her instead of the menu. Did I compliment the earrings, or was that too personal? I’d remarked on my barber’s rose tattoo and she’d treated me to a diatribe on her loser ex, whose name she’d covered with the rose. That experience left scars, and I didn’t need a repeat. I cleared my throat and shifted back toward the barista. “Just a drip coffee for me, please.”

*Pull it together, Ed.* I’d long passed university age, but any freshman could run circles around my social skills right now. I did not, in fact, pull it together. Instead, I stood awkwardly, waiting as Sid paid for our coffee. I’d worked hard for this meeting, and the pressure was on to manage small talk without falling to silence.

Not like the time I'd asked a business colleague to lunch and discovered that outside of work, we had nothing in common. We'd exhausted my small store of conversation before our waiter arrived to take our order. Forty minutes of staring at each other over pasta had cured me of walking into these meetings without preparation.

We moved to doctor our drinks, and I counted off a two second pour of half-and-half and added one packet of the yellow sweetener, glad they had the good stuff. Sid doctored her cup with two yellow packets, and I said, "I see you like it sweet and hot."

Definitely not pulling it together. Dammit. I had forgotten how to talk to business acquaintances. Finally, a chance to hang out with a person I desperately wanted to impress, and I was demonstrating skills at the middle school level. "I realize how that sounded when I said it out loud. Can we pretend I said something different? Did you know that Splenda is six hundred times sweeter than table sugar? Temperature also impacts perceived sweetness levels."

Sid's smile had less power, but she was kind as we returned to the booth and slid in. "Don't worry about it. How did you hear about my grant project? I was surprised to see your email."

I'd practiced for this question. Admitting I was lonely and searching for an outlet would sound too needy. I glanced back at the other occupied table as the occupants packed up, shuffling their books and laptops into backpacks. My gaze turned back to Sid's. "I saw it in the university newsletter."

Had I seen it in the university newsletter? Yes. After meticulously searching every university website and publication I could to find volunteer opportunities to fit my plans. Was I subscribed to the university newsletter? Not so much. However, where there was a Google search, there was a way.

Her smile warmed again. “Were you a student here?”

It was a standard get-to-know-you question; she didn’t know she was turning the knife. “No,” I answered honestly. “But I wish I had. You graduated somewhere in the southwest, right?”

She looked surprised but nodded like I knew she would. “Yes, I studied in Arizona.”

“How did you get involved in this migraine research project?”

Bingo. Sid’s eyes warmed, and her speech sped up. “I’m always on the lookout for grants that give me practical experience and help outfits without their own IT department. I have a passion for data. I think it’s going to take analysis of large datasets to solve some of our biggest problems. I teach the fundamentals in my information systems courses, but this is my first major development grant. My assistant suffers from migraines, so working with the Migraine Research Institute piqued my interest. I was thrilled when my proposal was accepted, but one of the grant stipulations is finding an industry partner to review and QA my work.”

She gestured with her cup, sloshing coffee onto her hand. “That’s where you come in.”

Her eyes were lit with enthusiasm, and my chest relaxed as her approval washed over me. Someone who could get excited about data was my kind of person. I was used to eyes glazing over when I spoke about anything Excel-related. Seeing excitement instead was a rush. People paid me so they wouldn’t have to think about that stuff. Their disinterest in deep knowledge of things data-related paid my bills. Finding someone who enjoyed it at least half as much as I did was like finding Bigfoot. But she might not take that as a compliment.

“I’d love to help as a community partner,” I said instead.

Cool. Professional. Not the real me at all. If the goal was to make friends, maybe that wasn't a good thing? Still, some grant director, somewhere, was going to get a helluva fruit basket from me as a thank-you. Aside from the public benefits of Sid's research, it was a golden opportunity to establish common ground.

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "Will you have the time? You're an IT data consultant, right? Do you travel a lot for work?"

"Some," I admitted. "But I work from my home office extensively, and I've already cleared this project with my partner, Daniel. I have some free time Tuesdays at lunch. How does that match your schedule?"

Did I know she wasn't teaching on Tuesdays because she mentioned it when we booked this coffee meeting? Yes. Was I using the grant project as an excuse for a standing lunch meeting? Also, yes. I'm an acquired taste. I hoped regular lunches would give her an opportunity to admire my mind. Maybe it would be enough to charm her into ignoring some of my less stellar qualities. My analysis suggested I needed at least three months to grow on someone if I wanted the friendship to stick. I needed time, like a fine mold. Because I was sexy like that.

Sid's eyes widened briefly. "You want to meet with me weekly?"

Was she excited or horrified? Regardless, I nodded. All part of the plan. One meeting a week for three months would be twelve meetings and approximately the same number of hours. It should be more than enough time to find out if we were compatible as friends. She wouldn't even know she was growing fuzz.

"I'm not sure that's necessary," she hedged.

Survey says: horrified. I stayed perfectly still. I didn't want to oversell it. In my jeans, polo, and glasses, I hoped I looked

calm and competent. The kind of guy who would be helpful. The kind of guy you'd be willing to share a sandwich with. Or twelve sandwiches. I wondered if offering to bring her lunch would help; I probably needed to work on my kitchen game for that to add to my appeal. If I straight-up offered her a dozen peanut butter sandwiches to be my friend, she'd turn me down. PB&J probably only worked on the kindergarten set.

“We can always cancel if there's nothing new to review or work on. Planning just ensures I hold the time on my calendar, so I don't hold you up.”

She contemplated me a moment longer before nodding. “Okay. Tuesdays.” She smiled, her expression open and friendly.

I smiled back, trying not to let it grow manically large. Another baby step toward success. I was patting myself on the back when another body squeezed onto the bench next to Sid and placed a cup of coffee down, sloshing it on the table in her enthusiasm. The newcomer had a messy bun and a ready grin under big, black-framed glasses. Large earrings jingled softly as she stuck out a golden hand toward me across the table, and I noticed her fingers were stained with purple ink. “Hi, I'm Rita, Sid's graduate assistant. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Delancey.”

Damn. I assumed I'd have one fellow nerd to impress. Not two who had already bonded. Leaving me the odd one out. Again. My awkward tendencies increased exponentially with every witness. Especially pretty ones. Rita's darks eyes and friendly smile put me on immediate alert, my throat tightening. She settled back in her seat and made no moves to wipe up the coffee she spilled. Her relaxed confidence only amped up my anxiety.

“Hi, Rita. It's nice to meet you. Are you participating in Sid's project?” *Please say no. Please say no.*

“For sure,” she said with an enthusiastic nod. “Where Sid goes, I go.”

My smile died a little around the edges. My luck had only carried me so far. Or was it my planning that had failed? I’d done insufficient research if one not-so-measly grad student could throw me off my game. The goal had been to make a new friend in my field. Two shouldn’t be intimidating, but something about Rita’s bubbly energy reminded me of past failures. Her warm beauty left me tongue-tied. Those dark eyes sparkled with intelligence and took in my business-like exterior with a gleam that said she saw beneath the veneer to the lonely man beneath.

I gritted my teeth before forcing my mouth into the semblance of a real smile. It wasn’t Rita’s fault I didn’t want more witnesses to my awkward attempts at friendship. “Well then, I look forward to getting to know you both better. How long have you and Sid worked together?”

Rita’s brown eyes twinkled, and her wide mouth stretched into a grin. “Too long. I need to finish my degree soon, but I’ve enjoyed my time here too much. It’s going to be tough to get a real job after working for Sid.”

Sid snorted softly. “You have a real job with me, Rita, but if you’re looking to move out of academia, maybe Ed will know someone who’s hiring.”

Rita met my gaze across the table and tilted her head. “Oooh. Good idea. Would you review my résumé if you have time?”

I’d do anything she asked if she looked at me like that. See? Too beautiful. I couldn’t say that. Damn. I’d lost the thread of our conversation. I sipped my coffee to give myself time to respond and replayed the mental tape. This time, my beleaguered brain caught on to Rita’s words, not just the shapes her lips formed.

“Sure, I’d be glad to.”

“Great.” Sid clasped her hands in front of her chest, bringing my attention back to her. “Rita can bring her résumé to lunch next week. Shall we meet at my office?”

“You have my email, but let me get your number and we can text if something changes.”

We exchanged numbers and slid out of the booth. Sid stuck out her hand for a brisk shake, and Rita gave me an equally businesslike clasp accompanied by a grin. “Thanks for agreeing to look over my résumé.”

I flexed my hand to dissipate the tingles from the brief contact. Touching another person shouldn’t affect me this much. Yet another sign my plan to socialize more was sorely needed. I nodded absently and watched as Sid followed Rita out the door. The two women shared an animated conversation as they strode toward campus. Where Sid’s walk was a smooth glide, Rita almost bounced, like gravity couldn’t hold her or her hair down. Hopefully, they weren’t brainstorming excuses to get out of future lunch meetings. I’d done okay for a first impression, but by the time I replayed it for the tenth time, I’d find every flaw.

I slid back into our booth and wiped up Rita’s coffee spill, then flipped open my notebook and noted the date.

*First Meeting:*

*Smiles: 5*

*Laughs: 1*

*Personal Revelations: 0*

*Awkward Moments: 4*

*Notes: Friendly and businesslike.*

*Recommendations: Ask more questions about their backgrounds and research. ~~Pretend Rita is Bigfoot, unobtainable.~~ Pretend Rita is like Angi. Like a sister.*

I bobbed my head as I considered my notes. Not bad. I'd avoided the major first meeting traps. Sid's project would be the perfect opportunity to get to know her and Rita better and help out. I just couldn't let Rita get under my skin.

Living alone, working mostly alone, had started to take a toll. I didn't need a legion of friends. I had Daniel and Angi. My mother when she was around. But out of the 7.5 billion people on the planet, surely a few more could put up with me long-term in our own loose definition of family. Just because most people seemed to make friends from the womb didn't mean adults couldn't do it too. Hopefully, one would be Dr. Sidney Culver. Sid. I liked the way it sounded; friendly and unassuming, like someone who wouldn't mind if I had a one-year plan, a five-year plan, and a spreadsheet for every occasion. With luck, Rita would be equally compatible, though I had my doubts.

The beautiful grad student was more likely to keep me tongue-tied and forcing out the odd grunt than showcasing my finer points. Volunteering with Sid was an opportunity to find friends who shared my interests. If I could keep her and Rita in smiles, nods, and laughs exceeding any awkward interludes, I had a chance. Tracking the data would help me keep from careening off course.

I flipped back to my project plan steps and crossed out first meeting. Check. I grimaced at the next step, friendly banter. Not my strong suit. I hoped they were forgiving types. Silence was more my speed, but quiet didn't build connection. If it did, I wouldn't need to force myself to change to make new friends.



## CHAPTER 2: RITA

“So, what did you think of our new research fellow?” I asked, glancing at Sid as we walked back toward the college and our offices.

She shrugged one elegant shoulder. “He seems eager. We can use the help. I’m not sure how I feel about committing my foreseeable Tuesdays to him.” She cast me a sly glance. “That might become one of your jobs as assistant: run interference for me.”

“He was nice enough. Maybe a little put off we were a package deal, but I appreciate that he’s willing to look over my résumé.”

I also appreciated that Ed Delancey was the world’s hottest nerd. He had the businesslike, repressed vibe down pat. Smart was sexy. The sparkle in his blue eyes and the dark hair that fell over his forehead hinted at a quirky side beneath the boring polo and jeans. He’d been tall, standing next to me to shake hands, and his firm grip and lean strength had me wondering how someone with such a sedentary job stayed so fit.

My friend and boss couldn’t help but jump on the reminder of my résumé. “Yes. You’ve worked too hard on your degree not to use it.”

It was an old argument. I’d invested the last seven years of my life in higher education. Literally. I was broke. My stipend to work with Sid helped, but the looming undergrad loans made it hard to sleep some nights.

She scowled as she pulled open the door to the business school building. “You have a brilliant mind.”

“Don’t worry, Sid. I’ll find something in information systems. I want a career, but I’m done with academia. I can’t

afford the tenure-track life. If true knowledge comes only through suffering, then I'm smart enough. Paying back my loans will keep me suffering for years."

"I still say you should let me put in a good word for you with a few of my contacts. It's not cronyism if you're amazing."

"You've met my mother. I've had enough of others smoothing my path for me."

She laughed. "Yes. Your mother is a force to be reckoned with, but my offer stands. I figure I'm doing *them* a favor, not you. Because again: you're awesome."

Asking for help chafed, but maybe it was a habit I needed to get over. Especially if Sid was volunteering. Just because my mother took it to the next level, trying to arrange my life, didn't mean that Sid making a few introductions undercut my professional reputation. Your boss singing your praises wasn't the same as your mother stage managing for you.

We worked through a few additional details for our grant at the office before Sid shut down her laptop and unplugged it.

"Do you have any big plans for the weekend?" she asked.

"Nope. Just working on my thesis. It's my hot date. Really my only date."

She snorted. "What about going out with a real, live person? I'm pretty sure there's an app for that now."

"There's an app for everything, but the dating pool in this town is small. Mostly filled with eels. Stinky eels in too much cologne." I shivered. "I'm better off cuddling up with my thesis. Men trigger migraines." I narrowed my eyes. "What about you? Any hot plans with Paul? Maybe an ironing party?"

“We broke up and he moved out.”

“What? When?” I regretted my teasing. Maybe she wished she were doing laundry with Paul this weekend.

“Eh. A few weeks ago.”

“What happened?”

Sid stared out the window, watching the wind blow through the trees in the courtyard between buildings. “He was ultimately too much of a drama queen for me to handle.”

“Paul? Irons-his-socks Paul? How dramatic could the man be?”

It was Sid’s turn to shiver. “Very.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not,” she replied, her chin set.

There was a story there, but it’d probably take a triple shot of tequila to pry it from her pursed lips. He’d been a bit of a twit the few times we met, but she’d seemed happy. Was it all a lie? I expected them to exchange rings before eviction notices. Whatever he’d done, Sid didn’t appear to mourn the death of their relationship.

“So, are *you* exploring singles’ apps?”

Maybe teasing her so soon after a breakup was a bad move, but I couldn’t resist.

“Not yet. I’m taking some time to think about what I want first. Paul and I were together a long time, but it wasn’t right. I don’t want to waste my time again.”

No, she wanted *me* to waste *my* time. Maybe it was her way of convincing me to stay in town. She looked at me with a smile. “Go on, get out of here. Let’s get the weekend rolling. Enough about ex-boyfriends. Go have your thesis fun, and I’ll see you on Monday.”

I wished her a good weekend and walked the few blocks to the apartment I shared with another student downtown. It was a cute little place, if you liked third-floor student hovels. We had the basics, and Cheri was easygoing. She didn't gripe about me writing on my laptop at all hours, and usually didn't bring her dates home. Since the walls in our place were paper-thin, it was a quality I treasured. My own romantic life was total fiction. Between my commitments to Sid and my thesis, I didn't have time for a real, human partner. They were so needy. Wanting attention. And time. I didn't have either to give. I was better alone. No commitments. No apologies if I had a migraine. Disappointment free was the way to be.

That night, I made one last run through my résumé before attaching it to an email and sending it to Ed. I smiled, thinking about how crestfallen he'd appeared when I scooted in next to Sid. Like I'd killed his goldfish. Had he expected to have her all to himself? I shook my head. I was seeing things that weren't there. Just because I knew Sid was single again, didn't mean every man around her had hopes.

Ed was handsome, but not my usual type. Not that I'd had a type in a long time. But still. Conservatively dressed, with every hair in place, and a smoothly shaven jaw didn't usually ring my bells. He was wound a little tight. Then again, he'd be entertaining to muss up. The hint of rogue in his eyes intrigued me. It'd be interesting to see if I could blow that spark into a flame. For science. He seemed like the kind of guy it'd be fun to tease. The buttoned-up ones were always so adorable when flustered.

I stuck my tongue between my teeth, thinking about how I could word my email for maximum flusterage.

To: [Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com](mailto:Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com)

From: [Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org](mailto:Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org)

*Subject: Resume Review*

*Dear Ed,*

*Attached is my resume. I'd appreciate any feedback you could offer. I know it's asking a lot, so let me know if there's something I can do in return for **you**.*

*Sincerely,*

*Rita*

*(Sid's grad assistant)*

There. It was fun and a little flirty. Worst case, I'd vet him for creepiness. Best case, he'd flirt back. Just because I didn't have time for a relationship didn't mean I couldn't have a little fun.

# CHAPTER 3: ED

Banter. Step two of twelve. Rita sent the first volley with her email, creating pressure to respond in kind. I slapped my palm to my forehead and dragged it down my face, doing my best not to knock my glasses off in the process. I sucked at banter. But laughing at yourself and each other was part of friendship. Showing humor. Demonstrating intelligence. All things I needed to do if I was going to be successful with my plans.

I stared again at the email signature from Rita. *Sid's grad assistant*. Like I could forget her. Rita's personality fairly burst from the booth, even in our short meeting. Outgoing and intimidating as hell. Her presence had overwhelmed the more mellow Sid. Rita's curls were as exuberant as her energy. She reeked of chaos, and I craved control.

I shook my head and reread her email. I hadn't even opened the résumé file yet. I was afraid to. My brain kept looping through her last statement, and those last three letters in bold. "*I know it's asking a lot, so let me know if there's something I can do in return for **you**.*"

She'd offered me the key to friendship success on a silver platter. Extrovert adoption; the fast-track to friendship. But did I dare take it? Would she trade a résumé review for friendship and the inside scoop on how to befriend Sid? Maybe I could finesse the situation. Who was I kidding? Finesse and I were not on first-name terms. What I lacked in finesse, I made up for with careful planning. I just had to figure out how to incorporate Rita into my plans.

I scrubbed my hands through my hair, setting it on end before reaching for a comb to smooth it back down. Making friends with Rita could be what I needed. Or, she could doom

me before I ever started if she found me wanting. I placed my hands on the keyboard.

*To: [Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org](mailto:Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org)*

*From: [Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com](mailto:Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com)*

*Subject: Re: Resume Review*

*Rita,*

*I'm happy to give you feedback.*

Giving her feedback wasn't the problem. The question was, how to ask for what I wanted in return without sounding like a loser? Dumping it in an email lacked discretion. I bit my lip.

*Can we meet for lunch Sunday, and I can share my thoughts? I have a favor to ask in return, if you're game.*

*Sincerely,*

*Ed*

*(Industry Advisor)*

The cursor blinked at me in accusation. Could I do it? Could she be my friend? If I chickened out, I'd come up with a different favor to ask. I still had volunteering at the food bank as a second opportunity for socializing if things with her and Sid didn't pan out. I scrubbed my hand through my hair.

I hit send, then moved on to her résumé file. If I was going to offer feedback, I should probably have comments prepared. Her résumé was impressive. Rita had graduated with honors from her high school in Arizona. She had a gap after high school, but she'd done her undergrad in Connecticut. I

rubbed my chest, which had clenched tighter as I reviewed each accolade. Call it what it was. I was jealous of her degree. Soon to be degrees. My high school diploma moldered in the bottom of my desk drawer. In a college town, you couldn't trip without falling across three people with advanced degrees. I wished I were one of them, but it hadn't been in the plan.

A childhood spent moving from place to place meant my school experience was patchwork at best. Always the new kid, always playing catch-up with yet another district's curriculum. A fresh group of school cliques.

The one constant in my life had been school and local libraries; they had books. And kind librarians who didn't mind that you rushed through lunch to hang out in the aisles. Free periods among the smell of old paper were my happiest memories of school. Books and the internet didn't judge my ratty jeans and holey tennis shoes. Fictional friends didn't care if you were bad at baseball or quiet instead of cracking jokes. But all the library time in the world couldn't bridge the gap between minimum wage and college tuition.

\*\*\*

Saturday morning, I went for a run before working through my list of household chores to prepare for the week. Like clockwork, Saturdays were consumed with groceries, laundry, and cleaning. Daniel had pressed me to hire some of my chores out; I had the money now. But I'd told him I liked things just so, which was true. Someone I hired might not fold my underwear correctly. Or load the dishwasher right. Then I'd have to do it all over again, and where's the efficiency in that?

If I was honest, it was also because my chores gave my weekends structure. I couldn't work all the time. At first, I tried. Daniel put his foot down early on. He had a much



healthier relationship with our business than I did. For him, he enjoyed our work and appreciated that it put food on the table. For me, it brought order to chaos. Making sense out of data was my superpower. Nerdiest. Power. Ever. I couldn't control much about my early life, but spreadsheets and data I could manipulate the hell out of. Total power. As addictive as my work was, I needed more from life.

My phone buzzed with an incoming email. Rita had emailed me back.

To: [Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com](mailto:Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com)

From: [Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org](mailto:Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org)

Subject: Sunday

Dear Ed,

*I'm always up for fun and games. Sunday at the Windmill? Noon?*

*Sincerely,*

*Rita*

*(Dungeon Master)*

I assumed Rita was referring to the game, not a kink club. If Rita was truly willing to help, my life and my plan just got much easier. I replied to confirm our appointment. Between meeting her and my food bank shift, my weekend was really filling up. Maybe seeing Rita alone and getting to know her better would be less formidable. *Right*. Beautiful women were less overwhelming when they focused wholly on you. Sure. The challenge would be relaxing enough to unmute myself and actually speak to her.

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Saturday's volunteer orientation rolled around before I was truly ready. It had been so easy to click the volunteer button and sign up for a shift at our community food bank. Why did my feet feel so heavy when it came time to get in the car? It was all part of the plan. Being helpful. Contributing to my community. And hopefully finding like-minded people to spend quality time with.

It started to drizzle as I pulled up in front of the boxy warehouse. I parked in between a silver minivan and a high-end SUV before popping a fresh mint and dashing through the rain to the volunteer entrance next to the loading dock. The older woman sitting at a desk near the door looked up from her computer and smiled.

"Are you my new volunteer? Ed?" I nodded, and she continued, extending her hand. "I'm Barb. Welcome. Let me grab your safety orientation paperwork, and we'll get started."

She pinched a sheaf of papers from a standing folder on her messy desk and shuffled around her workstation. Dressed in an eye-searing shade of pink, with rounded cheeks and a ready smile under a cap of white hair, Barb was my picture of the perfect grandma. Soft and friendly, with a no-nonsense air, I relaxed as she chattered away. She gave me a quick tour of the warehouse. Her desk was in the back where they received and stored the pallets stacked with canned goods purchased with donations. The racks were orderly and the floors clean-swept. Next, she walked me into the storefront, organized much like a grocery store, complete with carts. At the front entrance, a youngish man lounged behind a desk, throwing and catching a ball against the wall.

"Think fast, Barb."

The man launched the small ball at Barb, who snatched it out of the air one-handed.

“This rascal is Jake. Jake, meet Ed. He’s fresh meat, so don’t scare him away.”

“Moi? Scare him away? How would I do that? You wound me, Barb.”

Jake’s grin belied his protests. Barb’s cheeks darkened and a dimple flashed.

“I know you, Jacob Nelson. You’re trouble. Now, behave. And at least pretend to complete the community service you’re here for.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jake sketched a short salute, and Barb rolled her eyes before turning back to me.

Their easy humor filled me with envy. I could only hope that after a few volunteer shifts, I’d fit in. Barb went over basic lifting safety and showed me how to use a pallet jack tucked in a corner before issuing her final instructions.

“Jake has the list of stock to pull from the warehouse. He can direct you where to shelve everything.”

Barb shuffled toward the roll-up door leading to the warehouse, leaving me alone with Jake.

“What are you in for?”

Jake had moved to stand beside me and he looked me up and down in my jeans and plain T-shirt. I glanced at my clothes before taking in his. We weren’t dressed that differently, he was in jeans too, but his T-shirt said WISH YOU WERE BEER so maybe I hadn’t needed to worry about a dress code. Short, curly blond hair and a scruffy beard made him appear older than he probably was. I’d pegged him at around thirty from a distance but up close, he looked younger. His irreverence was charming, but he seemed the kind of laid-back guy who might not really ‘get’ my pickier tendencies.

“What are you in for?” he repeated.

Caught staring. I cleared my throat. “In for?”

“Yeah, what did you do?”

“Volunteered?”

Jake’s lips tilted down briefly. “Oh. You’re one of those.”

“One of what?”

“Barb’s Angels.”

I tilted my head. “What does that make you?”

“One of the repentant.”

There had to be a story here.

“What did you do?”

Jake grinned. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Gentlemen. Reminder that we open in thirty minutes. Let’s get those shelves stocked. Hustle, now. I’m expecting a shipment at the back and can’t help today.”

Barb leaned in the doorway and gestured toward the shelves behind us.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She smiled at me before returning to her desk in the warehouse. Jake and I spent the next few minutes in companionable silence, bringing in pallets of green beans and corn and pulling the shrink wrap away to stock the appropriate shelves. Jake side-eyed my adjustment of each can of corn so the labels faced out but didn’t comment. I smiled when I caught him doing the same on another shelf of beans. Maybe we were more compatible than I’d first assumed. We finished stocking as Barb returned to unlock the front door, and the first patrons of the afternoon filtered in to shop.

After several busy hours of stocking shelves and helping customers, Barb returned to lock the door as Jake stretched from his spot behind the desk.

“Want to join me for happy hour at the Porter’s Pints?”

I glanced at Barb, but she didn’t seem to think the invitation was for her despite their banter earlier. Wait. I glanced back at Jake, who waited for my reply, tossing and catching the same ball from earlier.

Was making friends that easy? One shift and I’d gotten an invitation? And while I had questions about Jake, turning down the first new overture of friendship I’d had in ages didn’t appeal. We’d both worked hard today. For all of his cheek with Barb and the hints of a troubled past, he’d been conscientious about his duties and kind to the customers. Relaxing over a friendly drink, learning more about him, sounded perfect.

“Sure.”

He grabbed his wallet and keys from the desk after stowing his ball in the drawer, then followed me toward the back entrance.

“Night, Barb,” Jake said.

“Night, honey. Tell your mama I said hi. I’ll see you tomorrow,” she said without looking up from her computer.

“Good night.”

Barb glanced up from her paperwork and met my gaze with a friendly smile. “Thanks for coming today, Ed. Will we see you again?”

“Sure, do I just sign up for shifts online?”

She nodded, and her white curls bobbed like a halo above her head. “Yes, then you can pick the times you want. We’re glad to have you.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you next time.”

I followed Jake out to the cars, and he unlocked the minivan next to mine. He caught my glance.

“It’s better for hauling kegs in. I’ll see you at the bar.”

I sketched a quick salute before sliding into my car. I followed until we reached the small downtown but lost him trying to find parking as there were no spots left in the lot behind the Porter’s. Saturday night. Of course. I sighed as I paused in the entryway after parking. It was already packed. A mix of twenty-somethings dressed to impress and older couples stood nearly shoulder-to-shoulder holding pints. A band tuned up in one corner, and I scanned the room for Jake, finally spotting his blond hair. Behind the bar. It explained a lot about his beer T-shirt and ease with people. I slid through the crowd and found an empty seat at the counter. Jake spotted me and tilted his head.

“What can I get you?”

“You work here?”

He nodded. “The food bank is my community service. Bartending pays the bills. Can I get you a beer? My treat. You schlepped a lot of cans today. Made my day easier.”

I gave him my order, and he set an amber IPA in front of me a few moments later. The curiosity over his supposed misdeeds was killing me.

“Thanks, Jake.”

I toasted him before taking a sip. Two other bartenders slung drinks at the other end of the counter, and Jake served an older couple before I worked up the courage to ask again.

“So, why the community service?”

Was my new volunteer buddy a thief or felon? I’d never considered that my attempts to make new friends would lead me to the town’s darker side. Then again, Jake seemed more like a jokester than a villain. A little scruffy, but no twirly moustache or dark hat.

“Streaking. Which I probably would have known was a misdemeanor if I hadn’t overslept my Poli-Sci 101 class one

too many times.”

“Like running naked?”

My horror must have been written all over my face. I couldn't imagine doing it at any distance. The flopping. The discomfort. Athletic supporters were invented for a reason, and I could never understand the appeal of jogging without.

“Relax, Straight Edge. It was for a good cause.”

I shivered at the use of my full middle name, my eyes narrowing. He hadn't carded me. Was the teasing about my middle name accidental? Just a riff on Ed? And more importantly, what kind of cause would make someone run with their tackle hanging out?

“How good a cause?”

Nothing would be worth letting my jubbies rock unsupported while I ran. I'd heard of nude-painted cyclists at a festival up north, but no force in the world would convince me to run naked.

Jake's mischievous grin should have tipped me off. “It was a call for student debt transparency and forgiveness. At a football game. During halftime.”

That'd do it. He was lucky community service was all he got. The school's football fans took the game seriously.

One of the other bartenders, this one shorter and bulkier wearing a ball cap over dark hair and a full beard, moved in next to Jake. The flannel-clad frowner looked at Jake knowingly. “You're lucky your mom intervened. If it'd been a townie like me instead of President Nelson's golden boy, they would have thrown away the key.”

Jake hip-checked the other man affectionately, using his momentum to place a quick kiss at the corner of the man's downturned mouth. “Come on, Chris. A few more shots and you know I would have convinced you to join me.”

Jake's grin turned wolfish and Chris rubbed a hand over his beard. Judging by his twinkling eyes, he hid a smile behind his big hand.

Chris tilted his head toward Jake. "Watch out for this one. Otherwise, you'll become part of the menagerie."

Jake winked at him. "You love it and you know it."

The obvious affection between them made me grin.

The other man shook his head. "I love *you*. The rest I put up with."

Chris moved off to help customers at the other end of the bar, and Jake and I chatted companionably between his orders. He confirmed my guess that he and the grouchy bar owner were a couple. "Most nights, Chris stays in the kitchen and lets me manage the front of the house since his folks retired. Really, it's better for everyone. Porter's may have served beer to Benton for decades, but the gregarious gene skipped a generation in Chris. What about you—you single?"

I nodded and Jake held up a finger as he left to go serve another drink. The obvious affection between Chris and Jake only emphasized my solo status. Alone. At a bar on Saturday night. Was there a sadder thing? Granted, I was there by invitation and not totally on my own. Still, I watched as Jake poured a shot and handed it to a flirtatious brunette in a sun dress. He charmed her without trying. I smiled as she turned my way and I said, "Hello," doing my best to look friendly and harmless.

She stared through me and turned back to her friends. *Okay, then.* Nothing so cold as a college co-ed who was not interested. The other patrons at Porter's Pints were all in groups or twosomes. I couldn't spot any other lone wolves. There was a reason I didn't go out much. Daniel and Angi weren't the partying type and coming by myself was just sad. At least with Jake, I had someone to talk to.



An order of chicken wings and another beer later, I thanked Jake and wished him good night.

I whistled an off-key tune on my way to my car, shaking my head when I recognized the melody, “All by Myself.” With luck, that wouldn’t be me for much longer. Hanging out with Jake, even though he was technically working, had been a nice respite from spending my weekend alone.

When I got home, I jotted down my notes from my day.

*First Volunteer Session:*

*Smiles: 5*

*Laughs: 0*

*Personal Revelations: 2 – Jake is a stalker. His boyfriend Chris is not a people-person.*

*Awkward Moments: 4*

*Notes: Jake is that natural kind of friendly I wish I could pull off.*

*Recommendations: Maybe invite Jake to go running sometime? WITH clothes.*

I hadn’t spent much time with Barb, but meeting Jake and Chris gave me hope. Finding ways to be helpful had ironically helped me more than I expected. First, Rita and Sid, and now Jake and Chris.

Anticipation and nerves at the thought of spending more time with Rita buzzed through me. I’d had a small taste of success today. Maybe that confidence would carry me through our conversation tomorrow. She was beautiful and much more distracting than Jake, which would make everything harder. Grinning, I imagined Jake faking wounded

pride if I dared suggest he was anything but distractingly beautiful all on his own. If I could channel his easy confidence, I'd have no problems with Rita whatsoever.

# CHAPTER 4: RITA

I woke to stabbing pain behind my forehead. It was still pitch black and only four o'clock. I sighed. There'd be no returning to sleep. My stomach roiled with nausea, and I pressed against my head, willing the pain to stop. There went another day. I scowled up at my ceiling before pushing the covers back and climbing out of bed.

I crept down the hall in the darkness, hoping not to stumble and wake Cheri. Though she was used to my early-morning escapades. I fumbled through the medicine cabinet and popped the top on my medication. Would one do it today? I shook a white pill out onto my palm and filled a glass with water.

The pounding in my head grew stronger, piercing my skull. I closed my eyes as if it would block out the pain, but it pulsed with every heartbeat. I swallowed quickly and sent up a prayer I'd keep my medicine down. If my stomach couldn't manage it, my day would be even more miserable.

I shuffled back to bed and gingerly laid back, applying pressure to my temples. Migraines sucked. My original plan to work on my thesis before meeting Ed for lunch was blown. Screens were out. There was no way I'd be able to focus on a computer. Between the meds and the headache, letters and numbers swam onscreen. At this rate, I was going to be the world's oldest grad assistant without a completed thesis. Sometimes I'd have days or weeks without a migraine and revel in my productivity. Other times I'd be taken down day after day with debilitating pain.

If my triptans worked in time, I'd still be able to meet with Ed. Playing silly games with him via email would pale in comparison to teasing him in person. And I was beyond curious about the favor he wanted to ask. With luck, it'd be

something I'd enjoy, like helping him shop for shirts that showed off his forearms and highlighted his blue eyes. Fantasies of dressing him like my private nerdgasm dulled the ache in my temples momentarily.

If I couldn't fight back the pain in time, it'd be another missed opportunity. We could reschedule, but I hated putting my life on hold to appease my brain's unpredictable episodes. Someday there would be real relief for migraine sufferers. My work with Sid might be a big part of that. A girl could hope.

I pushed harder against the pressure points in my temple and willed myself back to sleep. *Sleep. Ignore the pain. Please, let the combination of rest and meds kill this migraine.* I could set an alarm, but there was no way I'd sleep past noon. I'd have plenty of time to cancel on Ed if I didn't feel better.

\*\*\*Ed\*\*\*

I arrived fifteen minutes early for my lunch with Rita. I'd wanted to allow extra time for traffic, but I'd overestimated. This is what I got for doubting Google maps. The hostess smiled and seated me at a table for two, and I gave the menu a quick glance. I'd already decided what I wanted to order; no analysis paralysis. It was a wonderful thing when restaurants published their menus online.

I took a sip of my water and fingered the paper copy of Rita's résumé. I'd marked up a few suggested changes to share with her, but I didn't have much. She was impressive all on her own.

I glanced around at the other tables. The Windmill was a small eatery downtown, known for its cozy atmosphere and varied menu. It catered to families, couples, and friends out for a day downtown, and the clientele reflected that. A table next to me held a group of twenty-something women who appeared to be celebrating a birthday. Colorful gift bags

with tufts of tissue paper were nestled at each woman's feet. Seated at another table nearby was a small family; the toddler gleefully dropped each piece of toast their parents were trying to serve to the floor below.

It was a place for kinship; families and friends surrounded each table. Only I was alone. I glanced down at my phone. For the next few minutes, at least. A teenage boy appeared at my elbow as I looked up.

"Sir, can I get you started with anything?" he asked.

"No, thanks. I'm waiting for someone. I'll order when she gets here."

The dark-haired boy nodded. "Sure. I'll check back with you in a few minutes. No rush."

He moved off to another table, and I glanced toward the front door. No sign of Rita yet.

I'd gone back and forth on the advisability of asking Rita for help on my friendship quest, walking through every possible scenario. Some of them multiple times. She could laugh and turn me down. Worst still, she could share my pathetic attempts with Sid. Telling myself she wouldn't didn't make it true. Asking her for help wasn't technically in the plan; but it wasn't against it either. Twelve steps to find a friend sounded easy in theory, but I needed every advantage I could get.

I frowned, glancing at the time on my phone. Rita was late. Eight minutes and counting. Was this typical for her, or was something wrong? She'd been late to my first meeting with Sid too. I waited a few more minutes before texting her, with no response.

I waited another few minutes before succumbing to the waiter's attempts to get me to order. No doubt he wanted the table to turn over for new customers. The Windmill was busy on a Sunday morning, and my single meal generated less revenue than a full table.

I stared between my chicken salad sandwich and my phone, trying not to eavesdrop on the happy chatter around me. Still no response from Rita. Worry and disappointment washed through me. Fear that she was hurt or something bad had happened. Then again, maybe she decided against getting my help with her résumé? Had she researched me further and realized that academically speaking, I didn't match her credentials? Maybe she didn't want help from a fraud? It wasn't unusual to face that kind of snobbery in a college town, but she hadn't struck me as the type. Then again, I wouldn't need help making friends if I'd been skilled at reading people.

Just because I was eager to see her again didn't mean she felt the same. Having her attention squarely on me made me feel good, even if the combination of her expressive face and intelligence made it difficult to focus on my own goals.

My phone remained silent as I paid my bill and drove home. Texting Sid to check on Rita seemed alarmist, but I was tempted.

My phone rang later that afternoon and relief rushed through me at the caller ID. "Rita? Is everything okay?"

"I'm so sorry, Ed. I know I missed our lunch today. I had a migraine and overslept."

My shoulders relaxed for what felt like the first time since I'd left the Windmill. She was safe. And she hadn't stood me up on purpose.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Feeling like a jerk for being glad her absence wasn't about me when she wasn't feeling well. "Are you feeling any better? Did you want to reschedule?"

"Sure, how about now?"

I gulped. Now did not fit with my plans. "I ... " Didn't have a good excuse. "Sure."

Chaos. It had only been two days and already she'd threatened my well-laid plans. I knew that and yet I still wanted to invite her into mine. My days of broken plans and arriving late had ended when I gained control over my own life.

"To make it up to you, I can come to you and bring coffee."

I glanced around my office, trying to come up with a reason to refuse. She probably wouldn't do a two-second pour. What if she couldn't find the yellow sweetener? Too many variables. I couldn't be too particular about things like my coffee order with strangers. It was best not to risk it.

"Ah, that's okay. I don't need coffee. It'll keep me up."

"Isn't that the point?"

I met her comment with silence. I was absolutely failing at banter.

"Thanks, but no coffee. I'll text you my address."

I tried to see my house through Rita's eyes, nervous about how she'd perceive my space. It'd been a few months since I had Daniel and Angi over last. And longer since I'd had anyone new. The small house was fine for me, but it was sparse by most standards. To my eyes it looked clean and organized, but at least one former girlfriend had called me soulless after seeing it. She kept trying to leave things around the house. I kept returning them. I shouldn't have been surprised when she stormed out. Apparently, it's "bad form" to hand someone back a welcome sign they've just placed on the mantel. Without asking. And she called *me* rude.

# CHAPTER 5: ED

Twenty minutes later, Rita knocked on my door. I opened it to see her smiling with a coffee in each hand. She stepped inside and glanced around. “I like your place. It’s very clean.”

“Thanks.”

Was “clean” extrovert code for “soulless” or did she really like it?

“Here.” She thrust a cup of coffee at me. “I know you said you didn’t want any, but I’ll drink it if you don’t. Peace offering.”

I accepted the cup, ignoring the tingle as our fingers brushed.

“Thanks.”

Someday I’d manage to move past one-word answers. Maybe not today. Then again, maybe caffeine would help.

I took a cautious sip. Not bad.

“What is this?”

See? Caffeine was magic. Three whole words. She smiled and short-circuited any remaining phrases I had stored up.

An errant glossy curl dipped over her forehead to the edge of her glasses as she tilted her head and gave me a mischievous eyebrow raise. “Secret family recipe.”

Dungeon master email reference and eyebrow gymnastics aside, accusing her of sorcery probably wouldn’t go over well. Sticking to coffee seemed safer. I took another sip to give me time to think of a response.

“Really? You come from a long line of coffee roasters?”



She chuckled, and the warm glow from making her laugh trickled through me.

“No. I come from a long line of coffee addicts.”

“Do they own a coffee shop?”

She wrinkled her nose. “No, they’re academics. My mom is a professor. My dad too, for that matter. And my stepdad.”

“What do they teach?”

“Criminal justice for my mom. My dad is in archeology. My stepdad is accounting.”

“Nice.” I’d felt inadequate before. She was furlongs? Miles? More like gigaparsecs out of my league. Her pedigree had a pedigree. Rita came from a long line of academics. I came from a long line of screw ups. My mom was a job hopper, and my dad was a mystery.

I cleared my throat. “So, migraines, huh?”

I kept the wince off my face. My conversational transitions needed work. Maybe silence would have been better after all.

She nodded. “Sorry again. My meds make me sleepy. I should have set an alarm.”

“You’re feeling better now?”

“Yeah, thanks.” She hoisted her cup in the air in a toast. “Better living through pharmaceuticals.”

“I’m glad you got some relief.”

She raised her coffee, and my mind blanked watching her full lips purse to take a sip. I cleared my throat. She came for more than coffee. “Ready to look at your résumé?” She nodded and I gestured toward the next room. “Come into the kitchen.”

I took another sip from my own cup. Damn. It wasn't a two-second pour, but it was good. Was the secret cinnamon?

Rita took a seat across from me at the dark wood table in the kitchen. Her brown curls crowned her head and cascaded down to her shoulders today. They framed her smooth, tawny skin and delicate nose, chin, and mouth. Brown eyes were framed by stylish glasses. She'd dressed for comfort in jeans and a university mascot Thresher's sweatshirt with what looked like a dribble of coffee running down the front, and I felt out of place in my slacks and button-down. Too formal and starched in comparison to her laid-back weekend wear.

I cleared my throat before passing her a copy of her marked up résumé. Her brows reached her hairline as she took in the red marks on the page. She'd asked for feedback. Did she not really want suggested edits? Was this a trap? Asking for advice when all she wanted was a pat on the back?

"I, uh, added some thoughts here on the page."

Her brows lowered. "I see that."

Everything about her body language and tone put me on red alert.

"Is that not what you wanted?"

She shook her head before focusing on me. "No. I can understand the suggestions; it just struck me that this is really *real*. I'm going to be leaving Sid soon. Leaving town."

She'd given me an opening, and I'd be a fool not to take it. "You and Sid are close?"

She nodded. "We've worked together for a few years now. She's an incredible mentor. I value the work we do."

"Why not stay?"

Her gaze met mine. "I can't afford to be a student forever. I need to bring in a paycheck to chip away at my

loans.”

That I could understand. I’d needed income from a young age to make my plan for more stability a reality. My mom had worked hard to support us, and I couldn’t be a burden to her any longer. She loved the thrill of a new adventure, in a new place, with a new job. To her there was always something better around the next corner, and she wanted to experience it firsthand. When I got old enough, I wanted to establish a career and set down roots. I’d calculated the loans it would take to finance my education, but I could never make it pencil out financially.

“What is it you want to do after you finish your degree?”

“Mostly, not be evil.”

I tried to decide if she was serious from her expression. Was that a risk? I hadn’t heard leaving academia turned you evil. Did she think *I* was evil? She seemed to realize I was unsure how to respond.

“Not that you’re evil.”

Glad she cleared that up.

“But you might be,” she added with a grin and a glint in her eyes. “I don’t know much about you.”

Great.

“I’m trying to figure out where I fit in the scope of things. Working with Sid has given me extra appreciation for data and how powerful aggregating it is. And for privacy. I’m much more aware of how I’m giving my private data away with every click, like, or search. The profile companies can build from our preferences is staggering. I don’t want to work for a business where my efforts to organize and collate are going to be used to manipulate.” She shuddered and took a sip of her coffee. “I’ve been thinking about my options. I don’t like most of them. At least our migraine database is for the

greater good. It might lead to a cure, not just corporate profit and school loan repayment.”

I nodded. “You want to believe in the mission of the organization you join.”

“Exactly. That’s why I’m excited about our grant. It’s both great experience and has given me some new contacts.”

“Have you thought about using a rubric to guide your job search?”

She squinted. “Not really my style.”

My stomach churned at her admission. I couldn’t imagine making such a serious commitment without a decision matrix. Maybe I could help with more than a few résumé comments. “It’s easy, and it might help.”

A smile softened her expression. Maybe she was only humoring me, but her gentle, “Sure,” still filled me with unbridled ISTJ joy.

I flexed my fingers and shook them out before grabbing a fresh piece of paper and pen from my desk in the other room. “Okay, so tell me what’s important to you.”

“Well, mission,” she said. “Oh, and the opportunity to grow. I want my work to be interesting. And meaningful. Of course, the people I work with are important. Pay and benefits. I have to repay those student loans somehow ... and location.”

“What about the location?”

“Weather, cost of living, that kind of thing.”

“What about family?”

“I love my mom, but living in her backyard would only lead to drama. She’s a strong woman. Very opinionated.”

“And so are you.”

“Do you really know me well enough to tell?” she asked archly.

I squirmed. Not really. But I suspected. “You’re confident enough to move cross-country on your own. That takes strength,” I pointed out.

She shrugged off the compliment. “It’s easy when you don’t have ties.” She glanced around the warm kitchen. “No house. No real career. Just me.”

Just me. The hint of loneliness surprised me. Maybe we were more alike than I’d thought. A small spark of kinship flared, heating within me.

We talked through the rubric and changes I’d suggested to her résumé while I pondered her options. She had her whole career in front of her. Unlimited possibility for her future. I’d been seeking stability when I entered the workforce. I didn’t have the luxury of considering the mission statement of the company that hired me. I’d been focused on making rent.

Rita glanced up from the marked-up pages with a small smile. “Thanks, Ed. I appreciate this. I want to return the favor. You mentioned you needed help with something. What can I do for you?”

My mouth opened, but no words came out. I looked again from her halo of dark curls, to her smiling eyes and mouth. She *was* volunteering. Did I dare ask? I cleared my throat, stalling. My gaze shifted to my fridge before shifting back to her. I wasn’t ready yet.

“Ah, would you like a snack first?” I asked.

Her smile widened. “Are you trying to butter me up? I haven’t eaten today. What have you got?”

I tilted my head. What did I have? Crap. I really hadn’t thought this through. How unlike me. This is what

happened when you didn't have a solid plan. "Um, cheese. I think I have some crackers and cheese."

"Thank you, but I'm lactose intolerant. No cheese for me. Half-and-half in my coffee is about all I can handle."

"MEAT," I said too loudly. "I think I have some meat too," I added. I glanced at her, then away. I'd made that as awkward as possible. Me without a plan was me without a brain.

Her smile faltered, then it rekindled with something suspiciously like mischief. "I've always wanted to try a man's mystery meat. Sure."

I gulped. Did this qualify as banter? Or just really uncomfortable conversation? It wasn't a good sign if I couldn't tell. At least she looked amused. Progress, right?

I pulled salami and a hunk of cheese from the fridge, sliced both, and added crackers before setting the entire selection down on the table before Rita.

"See, my meat isn't mysterious. Just garden-variety Genoa salami. Nothing too weird here."

"So glad your meat isn't weird," she acknowledged with a small smile.

My meat may not be weird, but she clearly thought I was. While I was making it awkward, why not go all-in? I picked up a piece of cheese and a cracker, chewing slowly before swallowing and clearing my throat.

"So. About that favor. I'm hoping you can help me with a, uh, delicate situation."

Her wary brown gaze met mine. "Oh?"

"I need some help."

"Help from me? On what?" she asked.

"Making friends."

That got her attention. Her gaze lasered back to mine, and she scanned my expression carefully. “You think I have it figured out?”

I cleared my throat again. She was going to think I had a nervous tic. And she’d be right. “Yeah. You’re cute. Bubbly. Outgoing.”

That sounded wrong. Like she was a puppy for me to adopt, instead of the reverse. “Clearly, you’re more extroverted than me. I’ve got a plan and everything, I just need an extrovert in my covert. A wing woman. I need you to show me the way. Help me break in.”

She took a deep breath, and I held my own, waiting. Would she laugh at me, turn me down, or agree to help? She traced the table with her thumb for a moment before meeting my gaze. “So, just so I’m clear here. You want me. To help you. Make friends.”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Why?” she asked.

“You’ve lived here a few years. This is a college town.”

“So?”

“There are three distinct groups. Students, university faculty, and townies.” I ticked them off on my fingers. Then I put out my thumb. “Then there’s me. The sore thumb. Not born here, so no chance of being a townie. Those cliques are hard-set by the time people are my age. Everyone knows everyone and has all the friends they need. I’m not associated with the faculty, which is its own insular community, and I’m too old to fit in with the undergrad student crowd. My partner, Daniel, and his wife are really the only people I know here.”

Her eyes softened as she took in my serious expression. “Being new can be hard.”

“That excuse worked fine the first five years I lived in Benton, but it’s been almost ten. I don’t want to look around in another ten and realize I’m all alone. I work at home on my own. Live by myself. Volunteering with you and Sid is my chance to get out of the house and break into the university crowd.”

Too much. I’d revealed too much. It was meant to be an appeal for help, not a pity party.

“How do you think I can help? I’m a lowly grad student. It’s not like they’ve given me the keys to the college.”

I shifted in my seat, glancing around the kitchen. I’d left the cracker box out on the counter. Maybe I should get up and put it away. But Rita was waiting. I focused back on her. “No, but you’re a natural. I’m not. I always say or do the wrong thing.”

She examined me, from my dark brown tousled hair, to my blue eyes behind my glasses, over my shoulders and shirt, to my chest. “Have you considered a vow of silence?”

Ouch. Direct hit. Still, in the name of science, I had to let her know what she was dealing with. “Ah, I’ve actually tried that. We’ll call mute my default mode.”

Her gaze flew back to mine. “You know I was joking, right?”

I shook my head. “No. I’ve tried embracing the quiet. Not a total vow of silence but listening and offering the occasional encouraging noise. I went to one community fundraiser for the Presidential Scholarship and listened to the dean of engineering drone on and on all night. I learned more than I ever wanted about the community design projects the college had been involved in, but outside of my check, I didn’t make any connections.”

Rita nodded. “Okay, then. You’re sure you want my help? *Me?*”



She gestured to her own chest, and I nodded. She might not be an expert, but she was as close as I'd get to a specialist on the college crowd.

"Yes. I figure you have the inside scoop on academic social events."

She shook her head. "True, I'm usually included in the major events, but I'm not an important player."

"I'm just looking for a few introductions."

"O-kay," she said slowly.

"Does that mean you'll do it? You'll help me?"

She nodded, and I smiled. "Great. Now, where do I start?"

"You said you had a plan?"

Right. My plan. How fast would she roadrunner out if I shared it with her? I'd already hit some of the highlights. Maybe I could expand on those.

"Well, I'm trying to volunteer with you and Sid. Spend time with people who share my interests. Maybe I could try another university event. I also thought I'd try a few more volunteer activities to meet people."

"Really, what kind?"

Making connections at the college was a logical choice. I lived here. My other hobbies were harder to explain. More personal.

"I've signed up for a monthly shift at the food bank, and for some administrative tasks with the BFRO."

"BFRO? I'm not familiar with that organization. What do they do?"

Maybe if I said it softly enough, she'd think I was into podiatry.

"BigfootResearchOrganization," I mumbled.

Rita bit her lip, and I suspected she was holding back a smile. Any illusions she had about me being a full-fledged adult had probably bit the dust at talk of Bigfoot. Explaining would only make it worse. The silence stretched until she cleared her throat. “I’ll keep my eyes open for a good event at the college. I’d be happy to be your wing woman.”

I sank back against my kitchen chair. Achievement unlocked. “Thanks.”

“How’s your text game? Communication is a big part of building friendship.”

Since I didn’t call it a game, I was going to go with nonexistent.

“Rusty,” I admitted instead. My mom thought texting was gauche and favored the phone, and Daniel preferred to email. “Do you have any pointers?”

“Well, your friends like to know you’re thinking of them. It’s important to keep in touch. Try texting something funny. Nothing creepy,” she warned. “You’re trying to build inside jokes, not scar them for life.”

“What constitutes creepy?”

“Your junk. No one wants to see that.”

I laughed. She was kidding. Had to be. Rita’s expression turned sour. So, serious then. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask who was sending her dick pics, but I resisted. Not someone she wanted to hear from, clearly. I smoothed my expression to one equally serious.

“So, no nudes. O-kay.”

She could tell I wasn’t getting it. At least not really. “Step one: establish contact. Something light and fun. Maybe something that made you think of them. Step two: make it more personal. Build on shared experiences.”

Now she was speaking my language. “I think I’ve got this.”

“Good.” She glanced at her phone. “I’ve got to run, but thanks again for the résumé feedback. Is it okay if I send you the final version for a last look?”

She pushed back her chair, and I followed her to the front door. Asking Rita for help had been surprisingly straightforward. Her easy acceptance helped boost my confidence that my plan had merit.

“Sure. I’m happy to review it again. And I appreciate your help.”

I stuck out my hand to shake hers, and her eyes twinkled as she leaned toward me slowly. Mesmerized, I didn’t step aside. “Now that you’ve told me about Bigfoot and asked me to be your wing woman, I think we’re beyond shaking hands,” she whispered. The brush of her lips against my cheek was phantom-fast. She stepped back with a smile. “See you at lunch.”

# CHAPTER 6: ED

I shut the door softly after Rita, trying to use it to ward off the warm tingling and more than platonic feelings aroused by her soft lips against my cheek. Friendly. She was being friendly. It was kind of her to agree to help me. Her guidance might make all the difference in launching me with the academic crowd. I went back to my office and pulled out my notebook. I reread my notes from my first meeting with Sid and Rita and tapped my pen against my teeth before adding today's observations.

*Rita—Résumé Meeting:*

*Smiles: 5*

*Laughs: 0*

*Personal Revelations: She doesn't want to be evil, I want to make friends.*

*Awkward Moments: Asking for help, mystery meat.*

*Notes: Rita is kind and patient. Apparently, we no longer shake hands.*

*Recommendations: Start texting to stay in communication.*

I'd taken a chance, asking Rita to help me. Thinking about her advice, I pulled up Sid's contact in my phone and opened a new message. We had nothing in our text stream together. The blank line blinked, taunting me. I had no idea what to say.

Rita said to establish contact with something friendly. I bit my lip before composing my message.

*Ed: Still on for Tuesday?*

A few minutes later she responded.

*Sid: Yes. See you then.*

*Ed: Great. Looking forward to it. I saw another study abstract that made me think of you.*

*Sid: Excellent. I look forward to your thoughts.*

I could totally do this. Texting wasn't even hard with Rita's help.

*Ed: Thanks again for today. You're right. This isn't hard.*

*Rita: That's what she said!*

*Ed: \*groan\* We're all brave in our own way. For example, I am not afraid of buying fresh produce that will definitely mold in my fridge before I use them. True story.*

*Rita: Relax. We're all immature. It's not a competition.*

I snickered. Maybe I shouldn't have worried about Rita judging me. We may be different, but that didn't mean we couldn't get along. Be friends. I ignored the voice whispering *more than friends*.

\*\*\*

On Monday, Daniel and I met for coffee to discuss our upcoming workload. We got together weekly in person but managed the rest of our business via phone and email. Our partnership had evolved over time as I'd gained his trust and developed my own client relationships. We were essentially independent IT contractors. Some clients engaged me for projects to scrub their data and load it into new software. Others leaned on me to help with their search engine optimization, embedding the appropriate keywords in their web copy. Daniel had started Kwon and Associates and brought me on. I became "and Associates" when his workload and travel schedule grew overwhelming. He'd overlooked my lack of formal education credentials and given me a chance.

Daniel's short black hair had threads of gray, but his skin remained relatively unlined. When I started with him at eighteen, he'd been a late twenty-something hotshot, ready to set the world on fire but overwhelmed by the business he was generating. I don't know what made him take a chance on me. We'd met when the accounting firm I'd finagled a clerical role with needed additional help building their analytical systems. He'd taken one look at the Excel workbook I'd created and asked me how I liked it there.

"Hey. How'd it go in Seattle?" I asked as we settled into our usual booth with our coffee.

He shrugged. "Fine. We've been retained on the project I bid. I'm helping them migrate to a new payroll processor."

"Will you need my help?" I asked.

Daniel shook his head. "No, I've got it covered. I know you've got a full plate, but I'm thinking it may be time to bring on another associate if we keep growing."

I examined him carefully. He looked his usual self. Clean, neat, and orderly. No overt signs of stress marred his

features. “Are you feeling okay?”

He smiled ruefully. “Yes.”

“Are you sure? Is this the same Daniel who told me over ten years ago that ‘associates’ was a misnomer meant to impress the clients and you didn’t want to grow anymore after you hired me?”

He shrugged. “I think it’s time. I brought you on, and it turned out alright.”

I smiled. My friend and partner was stingy with his compliments. But I knew he appreciated me. “What’s prompting this?” I asked.

His brown gaze met mine. “Angi’s pregnant.”

My grin overwhelmed my face. “Congratulations!”

Daniel’s broad smile made his eyes crinkle. “We didn’t think it would happen. But I want to be there for her through the pregnancy and home more after.”

“I’m happy for you both. Let me know if I can take on more.”

My offer was selfish as much as altruistic. If I took on additional work, maybe Daniel and Angi would still have time for me. A baby changed things.

He shook his head. “I can’t ask that of you; you already work too much. If you’re okay with it, I think we should post for another associate or intern.”

Things were already changing. But maybe his willingness to add help was a good sign.

I nodded. “Sure. That makes sense. Are you excited?”

His smile was blinding. “Yeah. We’ve been talking names. Angi and I are having a lot of fun arguing over the possibilities.”

“Any front-runners? Please. No rock star names. I beg of you.”

He snorted. “Not yet, Rivers Edge. I think you’re too sensitive about your name.”

I mock scowled at him. “Try being ten and deciding to go by Ed because you got teased for that less than your actual name. It was either ‘Old man Ed’ or a thousand jokes about running water. Ed was slightly more tolerable. Don’t do that to your kid. No naming babies after old movies or aging rock stars, please. My mom is still cagey about which one landed me with my name. There’s no gossip or drama with a name like Thomas. I say stay in your lane. Your kid will thank you.”

“Noted. It may take us the full nine months to decide. Angi and I have very different tastes.”

He wasn’t lying. Daniel and I understood each other with relative ease. He spoke fluent geek and didn’t seem to mind if I made things awkward, ignoring basic social cues in our early days working together. His wife was practically another species. She was warm and wonderful, but also overwhelming. Intelligent and socially adept, she made me aware of my own deficiencies.

Talk turned to our ongoing projects. “How’s the university gig going? You’re sure you’ve got time for it?”

I nodded. I’d make time. I wasn’t getting any younger. Or less lonely. Daniel’s news only underlined why I needed to expand my social circle. “Yeah. I think it’ll be a weekly commitment for the next three months or so.”

His brow furrowed. “I’m still surprised you volunteered to take this on.”

I shrugged. “It’s in my plans to try to broaden my academic exposure and clientele.”

Daniel snorted softly. “You and your plans.” He looked at me closely. “For the record, Angi wasn’t in the



plans. Us getting pregnant in our forties wasn't in the plans." I tilted my head, waiting for the kicker. "But I wouldn't change it for anything. Don't let your commitment to the plan push you off the path to making new friends. Don't sacrifice what you truly want for how you think things should happen."

I didn't see how his advice applied given my track record when I attempted spontaneity, but it was meant to be helpful, so I smiled. "Sure, Daniel."

I hadn't admitted my secondary purpose in volunteering to Daniel. He knew I'd tortured Angi with detailed questions about how she'd met the women in her circle the last time they had me over, but he didn't know how I'd applied my newfound knowledge.

He and Angi were fine together. A unit. Soulmates. But that would never work for me. Relying on one other person for my happiness was a trap. Delanceys weren't built that way. My mother's vagabond ways had shown me time and again. She was happy alone. The key difference between us? She had friends all over. I had Daniel. And Daniel had Angi and their soon-to-be baby.

Daniel brought me back to the present when he pushed out of the booth. "I'll see you next Monday. Give me a call if you need anything."

I slid out and stood next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Hey. Congratulations again to you and Angi. Give her a hug for me."

Daniel gave me a two-finger salute. "Will do. See you later."

I walked the few blocks home. Parking in our college town was miserable. In the summers it was a ghost town as students returned home, but fall through spring, it was a mess of tightly packed cars and students jaywalking on their way to campus.

I passed one rental with a twenty-something stripped down to his boxers, drinking a forty in a brown paper bag. At ten in the morning on a Monday. Not the version of university life they showed in the college brochures, but accurate just the same. I passed a few more student houses with broken-down couches in the front yard before the blocks turned into townie residences. The demarcation was clear: you were either a townie or part of the university life. Townies disdained the lack of permanence of the university crowd. The constant turnover in housing as students and faculty flowed in and out of the area wreaked havoc on property values and maintenance.

I much preferred my quiet townie block, even if my neighbors kept to themselves. Small but orderly residences lined the street. No loud music or parties at all hours. Just the sound of birds chirping and the occasional lawnmower. At least here, I didn't stick out like a sore thumb. I walked up the steps to my place and unlocked and pushed open the door. My home hailed from a time when everything was tiny: the kitchen, the rooms, the bathroom. I'd made some modifications, mostly adding a dishwasher, and turning one of the bedrooms into my home office. For someone who grew up with very little, coming home to a place all my own still felt like paradise, even if it wasn't fancy.

I had a mountain of work to finish before meeting with Sid and Rita on Tuesday, but that didn't stop me from reading my notes from our first meeting, thinking about what I could bring to their project. Thinking of ways to advance my friendship goals. I needed to use every hour with Sid and Rita wisely. I only had twelve to work with.

# CHAPTER 7: RITA

I smiled when I saw Ed's text.

*Ed: Would it be weird if I brought lunch today?*

*Rita: You don't have to feed me. Sid would be jealous.*

*Ed: I thought I'd bring lunch for Sid and you.*

*Ed: I know it would be weird if I only brought lunch for one of you.*

He was cute. I debated asking for a shirtless photo instead. Too bad I'd already warned him away from NSFW texts. Wildly inappropriate but still too tempting. What? A girl had needs. I still wasn't convinced he was interested in fulfilling mine, but it didn't stop me from hoping. Our coffee chat to talk about my résumé had gone well. His favor hadn't been exactly what I'd been hoping, but it still created opportunity for us to learn more about each other. Kissing his cheek had been a lesson in self-torture, but I'd been tickled by his flustered silence. Maybe I was reading into things, but something about his follow up texts gave me hope. Would he really ask me for advice on making friends to flirt with me?

*Rita: It would be weird. But it's a kind thought.*

*Ed: Oh, OK.*

I bit my lip. I could test my theory. Would he respond with a shirtless photo if I asked, or would it make him uncomfortable? He was supposed to be here soon. Sid was teaching a class, and I had our office to myself.

*Rita: Luckily, I like it a little weird.*

*Ed: ??*

Drat. Maybe I had misread the situation. Was he not flirting after all?

*Rita: Never mind.*

He didn't respond, and I returned to grading papers, trying to ignore my silent phone. I had stuff to do. Important stuff. Stuff that paid the bills.

Sid rushed back into the office just before our planned lunch with Ed. Elegant as always, she was dressed for success in slacks and a silk blouse. The shade of red offset her warm skin tone. Vibrant and confident. I wanted to be her when I grew up.

A smile touched the matching red of her lips. "Hey. How's the grading going?"

I nodded to the finished stack of quizzes next to me. "Good. I'm about done with your intro section."

"Did you bring anything for our lunch with Ed?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yep. My standard."

"Bagged salad?" she asked with a nose wrinkle.

"Bagged salad."

Sid shook her head. "I don't know how you do it, but more power to you."

"What culinary delight did you bring?" I asked.

"Just leftovers."

It was my turn to express skepticism. “You never have ‘just leftovers.’ I’m always jealous.”

She shrugged, and there was a soft knock on the office door before Ed stuck his head around it.

“Who’s jealous?” he asked.

I held back my groan, thinking of our earlier text exchange and my awkward backtrack. “No one,” I claimed. “Come on in.”

“Thanks.”

Ed stepped fully into the office, and I gulped. I wanted to rescind my earlier statement. I was jealous. Jealous of the fit of that shirt. Sid would be suspicious if I started fanning myself for no reason, but I cast her a sideways glance to see if she noticed Ed’s build. She seemed unfazed by the way his open collar showcased the tanned column of his throat. His sleeves were unbuttoned and rolled up his forearms again. I set my chin on my hand and smiled at him.

“Hey.”

He smiled in return and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Hey.” Then he glanced at Sid. “Where shall I sit?”

She gestured to our guest chair, then took a seat behind her own desk, creating a triangle. Him in the ancient wooden guest chair, me at my government-issue metal desk, set at a right angle to Sid’s and directly across from Ed.

“We’re glad you could join us today, Ed,” Sid said.

“I’m glad to be here.”

“I’m going to grab my lunch, then we can get started. You brought something? If not, I should have enough to share,” Sid said.

I glanced at Sid. Was she only being nice to the new guy or did she think he was cute too? She was single again. I

couldn't read anything from her expression.

Ed's eyes lit, and he smiled. "That's a kind offer, and not weird at all, but I brought lunch." He held up his brown paper sack and looked at me. "I know Rita's lactose intolerant, but no one's allergic to nuts here, right?"

The twelve-year-old stuck inside me wanted to giggle, but he was asking in earnest. The adult side of me who wanted to fluster him at every opportunity mourned the lost opportunity. I shook my head and Sid responded, "No nut allergies here."

Ed nodded. "Good. I brought peanut butter and jelly. Sorry. I eat out a lot."

My brain was stuck in a giggle loop at his unintended second meaning. I kept a straight face with effort. Ed would think I was laughing at him. And I was. But not for the reasons he'd assume. I didn't need to add to his uncertainty. My inappropriate thoughts were not his problem.

Sid plucked her container from our mini fridge, and I grabbed my salad and soda. She stepped out of the room to visit the staff microwave, and I turned to Ed.

"How's it going with your project? Are you ready to meet the Bigfoot fanatics?" I asked.

He froze like I'd caught him manually tabulating data instead of using the sum formula. I didn't understand what I'd done wrong. Unless the making friends thing had been an excuse to hang out and not a real project. "Sorry, you don't have to tell me if you don't want to."

He relaxed slightly before peering at me. "I think it's going okay. I scheduled another few shifts at the food bank. The BFRO meeting isn't for another couple weeks. Time will tell."

His reluctance to speak about himself seemed genuine, and bewildering. Ed acted almost like he was ashamed to talk

about his friendship project, but I admired that he was going after what he wanted.

Sid returned, and we munched on our respective lunches while discussing the project plan for our grant and the areas Sid would need help from me and Ed. I would carry the bulk of the design workload, laying out the tables, fields, and relationships for our model. Ed and Sid would pull together data sample sets to test the model for completeness. Ed's previous experience developing a chronic pain reporting tool would hopefully help him catch things Sid or I might miss.

I knew Ed was a bit of a nerd, but didn't realize how much help he actually needed interacting with others until I watched him bungle his first true criticism of Sid's project specs.

“Having so few test sets violates due diligence.”

I winced at his wording. Sid's head snapped back like she'd been slapped. You didn't come into Dr. Sidney Culver's office and imply she did anything less than her best. Not if you wanted to live.

“Excuse me?”

Ed ignored Sid's affronted tone and the flashing red warning signs as the heat rose to her cheeks and bullied on.

“You need more data. A lot more data—at least double what you've proposed. This model is going to be very complex by the time it's done. Don't underestimate the different data permutations you'll need to fully test all of the scenarios.”

I held back my head shake. He'd doubled-down on his fighting words, accusing us of a lack of diligence and underestimating the complexity of our own project. Ed would never make it in academic politics. It was a wonder he'd survived the private sector. I glanced between Sid's mute anger and Ed's frowning censure. He needed to dial it down a notch. Maybe he didn't know that he was hitting her hot

buttons. Approaching Sid with direct criticism was not the way to win her friendship. Then again, maybe there were no friends in his business as an outside consultant. As a temporary coworker, making friends at work probably hadn't been a priority. After all, that's why he'd come to me for help. Saving him from himself seemed the kindest thing to do.

“What I think Ed means is that to be safe and ensure the model is robust enough to be successful in the field, we need to double our test sets. Really grind it out. After all, we wouldn't want to disappoint the MRI or create more headaches for ourselves down the line with the second implementation grant in the works. Investing more in testing now makes sense.”

Sid's shoulders relaxed at my words, and I sensed that she was at least listening to the argument for more datasets now. Her curt nod after a few seconds helped us move beyond the awkward moment and on to less contentious aspects of our plan. I let out a small sigh at successfully heading off the personality clash between Ed and Sid.

Sid excused herself for a department meeting as lunch wrapped up, and Ed smoothed out his paper bag before slipping it in our recycling container.

“How'd you think today went?” Ed asked. “Am I in danger of getting kicked off the project for arguing with Sid?”

“You picked up on that, huh?”

His sheepish grin was its own answer. “I get carried away sometimes.”

I bit my lip. Give it to him gently or take us to new and more uncomfortable places?

“You need to work on your foreplay. A good argument, like a strong friendship or amazing sex, comes in stages. You went straight for the hair pulling and then tried to spank her.”



I watched Ed's face flush. *Rita Ryan, travel agent to the awkward destinations of your dreams. Or nightmares.* Something about Ed's starchy attitude continually tempted me to mess with him. He deserved a little torture for his earlier remarks to Sid. "You know, work on easing into telling someone they're wrong. Even batters need a few practice swings before they smack it out of the park. And no one runs directly to home without crossing the other bases first."

"I, uh, didn't play a lot of sports growing up."

He coughed. "I moved around too much. But I get what you're saying." He stared at me steadily, his eyes gleaming behind his glasses. "I can't insert directly from a legacy system into new tables. There's always some data massaging to get it ready—stripping away extra characters or flexing formats. I can't just thrust my data around, forcing compatibility, it takes finesse. A close eye to smooth the fit and a deft hand to merge seamlessly."

Whoa. *Massage. Strip. Flex. Thrust.* Maybe Ed had a few ideas about foreplay after all. I cleared my throat. "Right. Well, use some of that finesse next time you talk to Sid and you'll be fine."

He relaxed visibly at my reassurances.

"Thanks, Rita. I'll see you next time."

I grinned. "Next time."

Baseball might not be his thing, but at least he was trying to be a team player. I disposed of my trash and reached for my dishes to follow him toward the staff kitchen.

"I may as well have mentioned Bigfoot," he muttered as he moved toward the door.

"What?"

He looked startled. Had he not meant that for me? *Wonderful.* There was teasing him, and there was making a

pest of myself. I didn't want to send him rushing for the emergency exits every time I opened my mouth.

"Sorry. Talking to myself."

"About Bigfoot?"

His face flushed pink under his tan and he pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose. "Uh. Yeah." He shook his head and I couldn't hear what he muttered under his breath. "I uh, like to hike at known Bigfoot sighting spots. That's why I wanted to volunteer with BFRO."

He surprised a laugh out of me. "Really? You?"

Ed seemed so straitlaced. I never imagined him foraging for Bigfoot.

"Yeah. I like hiking." He tilted his head up to make eye contact. "Beauty is all around us, but Bigfoot? Not so much. It keeps things exciting."

I smiled. Wait. Was he implying I was beautiful?

"Have you ever spotted Bigfoot?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No. But I have fun looking."

I hadn't been hiking in forever. There were nice trails in the hills near campus, but between work, school, and my thesis, exercise came in a distant fourth. Let's be honest; it was more like eighth. Maybe fifteenth.

"Sounds fun."

He perked up and watched me for a moment as if gauging my sincerity before clearing his throat. "Would you like to come? I'm doing data collection. You might find it interesting."

"Uh, sure." I hadn't expected the invitation. Then again, it'd be a good break from work and school. "When were you thinking?"

"How about Saturday?"

I didn't have anything better to do. Other than work, school, and writing. I sighed. I needed a life. Sid would tell me to go, and I was curious about Ed's hobby; he didn't seem the outdoorsy type.

"Sure."

"Great, I'll text you later in the week and make plans to pick you up. You'll see, it's fun."

Sure. Fun. I debated telling him exercise fell low on my usual priority list. I mustered a smile instead. "Sounds like a plan."

His smile grew in return, and he wished me goodbye.

I stared around the empty office. What had I agreed to? I was going "hiking" in the woods with a man I barely knew. Searching for Bigfoot. My mother's natural skepticism kicked in, and I could hear her voice in my head. *"Margarita Ryan, what are you doing? He could murder you. I did not spend twenty years teaching criminal psychology to have my daughter join the list of victims. Play it smart."*

I should cancel. I barely knew Ed. He seemed okay, but didn't they always say that about serial killers? Not that he was a serial killer. That was the problem with having a mother who studied them in-depth. Most people could go their whole lives, only vaguely knowing serial killers existed. I'd been raised on their stories. I tried to reassure myself he was a nice, moderately normal man. Not a serial killer. He'd displayed none of the markers. Weren't sociopaths supposed to be smooth? Then again, Ed's awkwardness was part of his charm.

Sid stuck her head around the office door while I was absorbed in grading more papers. "Hey. I'm on my way to my next meeting. Need anything from me?"

Probably not the time to ask if she thought Ed was a serial killer. I smiled instead. "Nope."

“Did things end okay with Ed today? Sorry I had to rush off.”

She’d given me the perfect opening. “Yeah. Actually, he asked me to go hiking with him Saturday.” I didn’t need to bring Bigfoot into it. “What’s your read? Do you think it’d be safe for me to go?”

Sid’s eyes narrowed. She knew all about my mother. “He strikes me as an okay guy. A little offbeat, but not in the ‘I’d like to eat your eyeballs’ way. Be sure to tell him I know where you are and text me when you leave and get home.” She smiled. “Safety in sharing.”

I nodded. She wasn’t wrong. “Thanks. I’ll finish my grading, then head out.”

# CHAPTER 8: RITA

The rest of the week passed quietly. I fulfilled my teaching assistant duties for Sid and made slow progress on my thesis. One thing I did have to break up the monotony was rewatching episodes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer with Cheri. Each week we'd watch teenage Buffy slay, study, and try to live a normal life. It was both empowering and depressing. Once upon a time I'd had time for friends, dating, and work. I may have been directionless when I worked at Kangaroo Party Zone before starting my degree, but I'd had fun. Other than messing with Ed, I'd forgotten what fun felt like. Now, I only had time to sleep and study. I needed to make time for my job search. I couldn't afford this glamorous student life for much longer.

On Friday night after our latest episode of Buffy, I buckled down and revised my résumé with Ed's feedback. He'd encouraged me to send it to him again after I finished. I also emailed it to my friend Maddy from undergrad; she'd promised to look it over for me too.

To: [Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com](mailto:Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com)

From: [Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org](mailto:Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org)

Subject: *Resume Review Part Deux*

*Ed,*

*Attached is my updated resume. Thanks again for the feedback. I'm looking forward to searching for Bigfoot Saturday. Just promise you'll protect me if we find it.*

*Rita*

*(Your Bigfoot Buddy)*

The next morning, Ed had emailed me back, and I laughed reading his message.

To: [Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org](mailto:Rita.Ryan@OSCollege.org)

From: [Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com](mailto:Ed.Delancey@DEConsulting.com)

Subject: Re: Resume Review Part Deux

Rita,

*I'd hire you. Also, no promises here: If we find Bigfoot and he's not pleased about it, I think I can run faster than you. Just kidding. I'm reasonably sure Bigfoot doesn't exist, but just in case, I'll bring bear spray. We'll hope my aim is true.*

Ed

*(Target practice pending)*

I opened my blinds. We were lucky enough to get mostly blue sky for our hike. I ate a quick bowl of cereal and swallowed down a cup of coffee before Ed was supposed to pick me up. Cheri was lounging on the couch in workout gear when I made it to the living room. I'd dressed similarly in yoga pants and a T-shirt. Spring in Oregon was still crisp, and if Ed was taking us up into the Coast Range at all, it could be cold.

"Hey, what are you up to today?" Cheri asked.

"Hunting for Bigfoot. You?"

"Nothing that exciting. Mostly hanging out here. Tell me, what will you do if you find him?" she asked.

I wiggled my brows at her. “An in-depth interview on his mating preferences.”

She shook her head and snorted. “I do not want to know.”

I held a hand to my chest. “What? You’re going to be a midwife. I thought that’d be your jam.”

She crossed her eyes. “Keep it vanilla, Ryan. My delicate sensibilities can only handle so much.”

It was my turn to snort. Cheri’s delicate sensibilities were more myth than Bigfoot.

There was a knock at the door, and I bathed in the perfection that was Ed in lightweight tan cargo pants and a close-fitting green wicking workout tee. The short sleeves left his biceps visible in all their tensile glory. Using big words made me feel less pervy about noticing. His tousled dark hair and casual clothing were the most relaxed I’d seen him. His blue eyes took their own inventory of my outfit from behind his glasses. Was it my imagination that he lingered at my neckline? Maybe I wasn’t the only one rocking a deviant vocabulary as I took in the scenery.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Almost. I’m just finishing packing my bag.”

He stepped inside and greeted Cheri while I filled my water bottle. Then I followed him out to his vehicle with my backpack. He drove a Subaru SUV; plenty of room in the back for bodies. I peered intently through the back windows for any suspicious lumps, but only spotted one small one—not large enough to be a body. Or a shovel.

“Are we taking equipment on this hike?” I asked after we were in the car.

Better to be safe than sorry. My mom would be proud.

He nodded and turned on the car. “Yeah. It’s there in the back. I’ve got a GPS specifically for hiking in case we lose cell reception. It also tracks my routes for uploading later and allows me to mark any sightings or physical evidence locations.”

“Do you really think we’ll find Bigfoot?” I asked. I had no idea how serious he was. Specialty GPS sounded pretty damn serious. How eccentric was Ed?

He glanced at me with a boyish grin as he stopped at a light. His blue eyes gleamed behind his glasses. “Probably not,” he acknowledged. “But if we can read about witches and werewolves, then I should be able to daydream about creatures in the woods too.” He shrugged. “Everyone needs a hobby. I also like geocaching. Ever heard of it?”

I shook my head.

“It’s coordinate-based treasure hunting.”

My brows raised. “Treasure?”

He chuckled. “I use that term very loosely. It’s usually a token you exchange in the cache bin. A toy or something cheap. But it’s fun, and people from all over the world participate.”

“What’s your token?” I asked.

“I leave pins.”

“Pins?”

He chuckled again. “Bigfoot Research pins. They have our organization’s logo on them. I figure this way I’m spreading the word.”

I shook my head. “You are one of a kind, Ed.”

He sobered. I had intended it as a compliment, but from his expression he didn’t take it that way. “I meant in a good way,” I tried to reassure him.

His smiled weakly. “Sure.”



\*\*\* Ed \*\*\*

We pulled up to the trailhead at Marys Peak in the Siuslaw National Forest. Close enough to town to be accessible, but far enough away to offer majestic views of the forest and hills. Marys Peak perched on the horizon to the west of the Willamette Valley, a silent sentinel over the college campus. To the east, rolling green hills and fields spread in every direction outside of town.

We'd been silent for most of the drive. I couldn't help wondering if I'd made a mistake letting Rita in on my hobby. Maybe it was time to give up Bigfoot. What if she told Sid or others at the college what a freak she thought I was? In my experience, when people told me I was one of a kind it wasn't a compliment. They meant I was weird. And I kinda was. But I hoped Rita and Sid would see me differently.

Rita and I got out of the car at the day use area, and I moved to the trunk to pull out the hiking backpack and power up my GPS while she did something on her phone. I had packed all the essentials for the day: water and snacks, first aid supplies, and bear spray.

I locked the car and gestured toward the path. "Shall we?"

Rita smiled and started along the trail. Spring could be hit or miss; raining and misty or sunny and clear. We'd drawn the lucky stick for sunny and clear. It was beautiful. The hillside by the day use area wasn't remarkable, mostly low grass and rocks, but we'd have views to the east and west when we hit the summit. On clear days, the Pacific Ocean was visible in the distance. I inhaled. The air on this part of the trail smelled mostly of damp and moss, but the hint of evergreens carried on the wind.

I focused on the trail in front of me and let silence wash over us. Unfortunately, the quiet gave me time to notice things. Like Rita's shapely backside. She wore soft black pants that hugged her curves. A hoodie covered her top, and I wondered if we went faster, she'd warm up and tie it around her waist instead, removing the temptation to stare at her ass. Her riot of curls bounced behind her in a ponytail, adding another layer of distraction. The wild curls corkscrewed out in all directions.

Rita may be beautiful, but she wasn't part of the plan. You weren't supposed to lust after your friends. That had to be a clause somewhere in the friendship handbook. Right after not noticing if they had a nice ass. I cleared my throat. If I didn't start talking, it'd leave way too much time for thinking.

"So, uh. How did you think our lunch meeting went this week?"

I was curious for her take after she had a chance to talk with Sid.

"Sid seems pleased with our progress," Rita said.

Progress was good. "I was impressed with her project plan. It was very thorough."

"Thanks. I actually made that."

I couldn't see her face. Was she serious? I looked again at her backside, but it could neither confirm nor deny her statement.

"Really?"

She glanced behind her with a scowl. "Why do you sound surprised?"

"No reason."

No reason except I'd been thinking how alike Sid and I were. She was a planner like me. Except she wasn't. Or at least she hadn't developed that plan.

Rita turned back to me with a playful frown. “Do you doubt my project management skills?”

“No, of course not.” Maybe I doubted her. A little. She was always behind schedule. That didn’t correlate with stellar planning.

“You don’t sound convinced.”

I finally blurted what was on my mind. “You’re always late. Good planners aren’t late.”

I sounded like a prick. A judgmental ass. Not exactly the friendly banter I’d been going for. She’d be within her rights to tell me to go deep throat a cactus. Her snort in front of me was audible, and I checked my position on the trail. We were far away from any treacherous edges, thankfully. Our friendly hike was becoming progressively less amiable.

“Wow, Ed. Tell me what you really think. Have you ever considered being late as an efficiency strategy and that being late *is* part of the plan?”

I gasped theatrically, trying to move us back into teasing territory. “How could being late be part of the plan? It’s inefficient if you’ve run over with other tasks.”

“Maybe I had a few minutes in between and fit something more in.”

“So now you’re doing things out of order too? *The horror.*”

She shook her head and paused in front of me, turning to face me with a playful smile. “Maybe. If they fit. Also, being late cuts out some of the bullshit.”

I shook my head like a disapproving auntie. She was supposed to be the extroverted one. I was trying to learn the bullshit. Hadn’t she been the one going on about verbal foreplay?

“How much of the first few minutes is useless pleasantries? If I’m not needed, I cut it out by arriving late. Easy.” She spread her arms wide. “And, you’re welcome.”

Poking at her was too much fun to resist. If being easy to talk to were a superpower, she had it. “No. That’s not how it’s done,” I insisted. “You have a time, and you stick to it. Early is better than late. It’s inefficient to keep people waiting.”

“Flexibility lets me fit more in. You should try it sometime.”

Her word choice shouldn’t have been suggestive. But hearing her impassioned speech had me thinking about other uses for that passion. *Flexibility. Fitting more in.* Would she laugh if I made an immature joke, or drop me as a failed experiment in friendship? I couldn’t risk the swing and miss. Going back to her earlier baseball analogy, waiting for the right throw was a must. Striking out with Rita would mean a lonely walk of shame to the dugout. I’d been sitting on the bench, watching everyone else play long enough.

She turned forward and kept moving, and I followed, letting the subject drop.

We hiked on, stopping briefly for water and snacks, until we reached the summit. I stood at her side, watching Rita’s face as she took in the views around her. It was clear enough to see the blue of the Pacific Ocean out over the hills and trees to the west. The white tips of the waves cresting were more a trick of the mind than truly visible, but the blue water was beautiful. And so was she. A few curls had escaped her ponytail to frame her face. Rita’s lips and cheeks were tinted pink, and I couldn’t help but focus on her mouth. Her cupid’s bow had the most perfect arch. I leaned in closer before she turned to fully face me, and I realized how close I’d moved.

I shuffled back and cleared my throat. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it.”

Rita smiled, and I tried to focus on her warm brown eyes behind her glasses instead of her lips. “It’s gorgeous. I can’t believe we can see the ocean from here. I really need to get to the beach.”

“You haven’t been in a while?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t been at all.”

I reared back. “How is that possible? We’re only ninety minutes away.”

Rita shrugged. “I grew up in Arizona, did my undergrad in Connecticut, and now I’m here. I’ve been too busy to make it.”

“We need to go. Maybe not today, but you can’t live in Oregon and never visit the beach.”

“I could be convinced.”

“You mentioned an academic family. Are they still in Arizona?”

Rita nodded. “My mom is a professor in Phoenix. She and my dad have been divorced since I was ten. They met when he was a visiting professor in Mexico.”

“Brothers or sisters?”

“None.”

“Me, neither.”

“What about you?” she asked.

“Me, what?”

“Are you local? Are your parents here?”

“I’m local-ish. My mom is in California now.”

“How is one local-ish?”

“My mom and I moved around a lot when I was young. We landed around here for a while, but also bounced up and down the I-5 corridor. I don’t remember all of the places we lived.”

“Was that hard?”

She’d jumped to the heart of it. I hated the constant moving growing up. Plan was a four-letter word to my mom. She’d done what she wanted and dragged me along behind her. One week she was a promoter for a band, and the next a secretary in a law office. I was mad when she quit her job as a paralegal. She’d stuck with it six months, and I’d made friends at school. She came home one Friday when I was twelve to let me know she’d quit and we were moving to a town I’d never heard of.

“Your silence says a lot.”

I cleared my throat. “I’m not a fan of talking about my childhood.”

Her smile was wry. “I can understand. Mine had its moments. Divorce isn’t fun.”

She shifted her weight and stared out toward the ocean for a moment before glancing back to me. “It’s too beautiful here to focus on the ugly. Where is this treasure? I want to get my Goonie on.”

I grinned. Classic eighties movies for the win. I glanced down at my GPS. I’d entered the coordinates for the geocache, and it wasn’t far along the trail up ahead. “If you’re done looking at the ocean you’ve never visited, then we can get going and find our cache. But don’t hold your breath for any rich stuff or old pirate ships. We’re more likely to find someone’s grow op.”

“You mean I worried about bears and Bigfoot, when I should have been worried about booby traps and guns?”

I chuckled. "I'm just saying, don't get your hopes up. Geocaching is more about the seeking than the finding."

We followed a side trail along the ridge until we entered the forest. Tall Sitka spruce and Douglas fir trees closed in, and we slowed to pick our way along the path. The smell of evergreen needles hung pungent in the air, mixed with the loamy odor of moss and mud. Spots were damp beneath the trees. The open path had dried out, but here it was still muddy.

I was intent on the GPS, tracking the coordinates. I pointed to our left. "It should be about fifty feet that way."

Rita stumbled, and I grabbed her arm to hold her up. She looked up and smiled. "Thanks. Who needs booby traps when I have my own feet?"

I cleared my throat to hide the rush from having her body aligned with mine. Almost touching. "No problem."

We picked our way carefully through the underbrush. "It should be right around here."

We scanned the forest floor and peeked under bushes. Rita was the first to spot the cache. "There!"

She pointed to the crook of a tree. Nestled between a low-hanging branch and the trunk was a coffee can painted forest green.

"Good eye."

After countless caches, I didn't expect much, but my pulse still raced at our find. We picked our way closer to the tree, and she reached to pull it down. "What do we do now?"

"Open it."

She pried the top off and peered inside with the enthusiasm of a little kid opening a present. I hoped she wouldn't be disappointed by our token. She reached a hand

inside and proffered her palm. “They’re plastic frogs. How cute.”

“That’s yours to keep. A memento of our visit.” I dug through my backpack and pulled out a trading pin. “Here. Put one of these inside in its place.”

She dropped the pin inside, and the soft *tink* reverberated against the coffee can edges before she replaced the top and put it back in the tree branch.

Rita turned back to me. An errant curl rested on her temple, and I couldn’t resist. I reached out to push it back off her face. I worried I’d overstepped, but she grinned up at me. “I think I could get into this treasure hunting thing.”

I smiled back and pushed my glasses up my nose. Judging from her grin, inviting her to join me had been the right choice. “It’s fun, even if it won’t make you rich. Now, let’s see if we can find Bigfoot.”

She laughed, and I enjoyed the sound as it echoed across the forest around us. Any worries she wouldn’t be into our adventures were burned away by her obvious enthusiasm. It was novel not to be hiking alone. I usually enjoyed the solitude, but I soaked up the warmth of her presence.

I consulted my GPS and punched in the coordinates from the most recent sighting in the area. “Let’s go back to the path; the sighting is a quarter mile farther down.”

We hiked companionably, content with silence. Rita was nice to be with. Not judgmental. Just a welcome presence leading the way, enjoying the day. Birds twittered overhead, and the occasional golden-mantled ground squirrel dashed across our path. I glanced down at my GPS. “We’re at the point where we need to head off-trail.” I pointed to our right, and Rita stepped off the path.

“If you were a serial killer, this is the point where you’d do nefarious things,” she said. “You’re not a serial killer, right? Asking for a friend. Who is me.”



She surprised a laugh out of me. “Nope. Not a serial killer.”

“That’s probably what a serial killer would say.”

I chuckled softly. “Your body is safe with me. I can’t make any claims for your safety with Bigfoot. However, research suggests they’re shy, not dangerous.”

“Hm. I’ll take my chances there.”

We settled into silence and picked our way through the underbrush until we reached the coordinates. “Okay. We’re here.”

We paused and glanced around. It looked like the rest of the Siuslaw Forest. Lots of trees. A plethora of native shrubs and the occasional bird tweeting in the trees. No mysterious footprints. No hairy faces peeking out from behind branches. I slowly circled the area, examining for any evidence to the contrary. Nothing. Rita followed me.

“Nada.”

Rita didn’t look disappointed, which I took as a good sign. If she’d really been expecting a sighting, I’d be worried. I smiled. “Not today. I’ve got my data. Shall we head back?”

She nodded, and we started back up toward the trail. I may have been distracted by the view. Rita’s curves were more enticing than the forest floor, which proved a problem as we started our final climb. I missed a root sticking out, caught my foot, and tumbled back. “Shit!”

Rita heard my fall and my curse. “Are you okay?”

I sprawled a few feet back, trying to catch my breath. I’d partially caught myself on my forearms. Pain radiated up from where my elbows dug into the muddy earth. Looking down my body, nothing was at an awkward angle, except maybe my left foot. I started to move my legs under me to push to my feet and hissed.

Rita came down and crouched at my side. “You’re not okay. Where does it hurt?”

My pride. As an experienced hiker I knew better than to take my focus off my feet in uneven terrain. I grimaced. “I think I just landed awkwardly. Give me a minute.”

Rita ignored me and started running her hands down my body. “I hope nothing’s broken. Let me know if it hurts.”

Oh, it hurt. I gritted my teeth. Having her hands on me sent blood rushing directly to my groin. Every muscle tightened in pleasure-pain as her soft hands traced along my calves to my thighs. I cleared my throat. “Ah. Please stop. I’ll be okay. I only need a moment to rest.”

Rest. Control my burgeoning erection. Tom-ay-to, to-mah-to.

She drew her hands away, and I tried to think about VLOOKUP formulas. But Rita could probably write those formulas in her sleep. Still too sexy. I thought about ruining our budding friendship, and my ardor cooled. I shouldn’t be having blood-rushing thoughts about Rita. Friends didn’t get hard-ons for friends.

I wiggled my left foot. I could move it, but it ached. I cleared my throat again. “I’m going to try to get up.”

Rita grabbed my elbow to assist, and I avoided thoughts of how close she was and how good she smelled and focused on getting to my feet. I pushed up and put weight on my right foot first before placing the toes of my left to the ground. My right side was solid, but pain arced and exploded along my nerve endings as I put full pressure on my left.

“I’m fine.”

Rita side-eyed me but didn’t comment on the obvious lie. She stayed at my elbow as I started my way up the embankment. Each step on my left foot was quick; I babied it as best I could. We made it back to the official path and I

breathed a sigh of relief. The terrain was much easier from here back to the car.

“Are you going to make it?”

I nodded and focused on putting one foot in front of the other. Holding my breath through the pain. I didn't have a choice. Rita couldn't carry me. She watched me for a moment before stepping off the path again. She returned a minute later with a big stick. “Here. Use it for extra support.”

I grunted my thanks and kept going. The walking stick helped, but it was still a long walk back to the car. We were silent for a few minutes, and that let me focus on the pain radiating from my ankle. “You know, if you were the serial killer, then I've presented you the perfect opportunity. Is the park service going to find my desiccated remains over the next ridge?”

“If you keep fighting me on project planning methodology, maybe.”

“So that's how it is, huh? Can't stand a little disagreement?”

She had to know I was needling her as a distraction, but she played along.

Rita snorted. “Only if you keep whining about going out of order. It's not a good look.”

We bickered amicably. I could tell there was no heat behind her words as she called me out for being rigid, a stick-in-the-mud, and whatever other names she could come up with. The few in Spanish I'd have to google later. I wasn't familiar with pendejo but from context, figured it wasn't good. Her creativity was stellar, and it was another thing to admire, much to my chagrin.

We crept along, our progress painfully slow. Pain radiated with every step. My shirt clung to my chest and back with a sheen of sweat, sticky and uncomfortable. I breathed a

sigh when we finally reached sight of my car. If I could have moved it closer with the power of my mind, I'd have been in it already. Rita blew out a breath behind me. I wasn't the only one worried about making it back.

I threw my backpack in my trunk, and when I turned back, Rita was holding out her hand. "Gimme."

"Give you what?"

"Keys. Do you have an ice pack in your first aid kit? You need to get your ankle elevated and iced on our way back to town."

I handed them over and dug through my backpack for my emergency kit. Her tone brooked no argument, and I was out of energy to try. I maneuvered into the front passenger seat and pushed it all the way back. Unlacing my boot might make the ice pack more effective, but I'd never get it on again. Instead, I elevated my foot to the dashboard and broke the packet inside the ice pack to cause the chemical reaction. I swished it around until it grew cool, then placed it against my throbbing ankle, tucking it into my boot the best I could. I hissed as the cold met my tender flesh, and Rita cast me a quick glance from where she was adjusting mirrors in the driver's seat.

"You going to make it?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Nope," she answered cheerfully. Her clenched hands on the steering wheel and furrowed brow belied her upbeat tone.

"Hey," I said, reaching out a hand to her wrist where it rested against the steering wheel. "I'll be fine. I just need to rest it."

Rita gave me a tight smile in response and was quiet as she maneuvered the car back to the highway. My clumsy ass aside, I couldn't remember a more perfect day. Rita was

cheeky and fun to be with. Not what I pictured when I first made my plans, but she'd already proven to be a good friend. My eyes drifted closed, and I tried to picture sharing a beer with Rita and Bigfoot, but abundant curls and kissable lips kept intruding.

# CHAPTER 9: RITA

“Hey, Ed. Time to wake up.”

We’d arrived at the urgent care clinic, and I ignored the guilt over disturbing his peace. The boxy building sat on a corner near campus, and they appeared to be doing a brisk business for a sunny Saturday afternoon. Ed groaned as he opened his eyes and focused on me. Then he smiled. His blue eyes were glazed with pain behind his glasses, but his full lips still turned up as if glad to see me.

“Time to see the doctor, big guy.”

He nodded and winced as he dislodged his left foot from where it had been propped on the dashboard. He unbent with a groan. Even with the seat all the way back, it had taken some contortions to elevate his foot. I moved around the car and did my best to support him getting out, but I wasn’t doing much. We hobbled together to the double doors for the clinic, and I held them open for him to enter.

“Hey, Dawn.”

I greeted the dark-haired receptionist, and Ed glanced at me in surprise. “Are you a frequent flier here, or do you know everyone?” he asked.

I smiled. “A little bit of both. A lot of students have jobs around town, and they usually recognize me from class or office hours.”

Dawn got Ed checked in with his insurance information, and we took seats in the lobby.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“For what?”

“Taking all of your time today. You’ve been a good friend, bringing me here.”

Friend. Sure, I was his friend. But was that all? I'd caught him leaning in on the path and was sure he was going to kiss me. What had started as a simple day out threatened to become something more. But here he was, pulling back. Just because he awakened my lady bits from a long winter's nap didn't mean anything more was in the cards for us. Ed was looking for friends. That I could be. Anything more could only lead to heartache when I moved. Keeping things friendly would save us both pain.

I mustered a smile. "Well, I guess I could have left you for Bigfoot."

His own smile was weak. "True. They might have found my desiccated remains if that were the case. I appreciate the ride. Do you need to get home? I can give you my car if you don't want to stay and call a service when I'm ready to leave."

I bit my lip. A mountain of work waited for me at home. Ed was a competent adult. He could take care of himself. But from his tousled dark hair to the glasses framing his blue eyes and his dirty hiking clothes, he looked worn out. I didn't want to leave him on his own. Not if I could help.

"It's sweet of you to offer, but I want to make sure you get home okay."

"Thanks," he rumbled softly.

I ignored the tingles his deep bass sent down my spine. I was doing the friendly thing. Nothing more.

I sent a quick text to Sid to let her know I made it back to town and laughed at the GIF she sent back of a woman wiping her brow. I doubt she'd truly been worried, but I appreciated her as my safety net.

Despite it being a Saturday, the clinic moved through patients quickly, and it wasn't much longer before we were called back. Every step seemed to pain Ed, and I hoped I'd made the right call, bringing him here instead of the ER. If

they thought his ankle was broken, we'd have to start the whole process over somewhere else. I did my best to offer support; he'd left his walking stick back at the trailhead, and he leaned on me more and more as we made it into the procedure room.

The nurse smiled at Ed before asking him what happened. Ed told his story to the other man, and I held back a smirk when he conveniently left out any mention of Bigfoot. The nurse asked a few more questions and took notes for the file before letting us know the physician assistant would be with us shortly. Ed still hadn't taken his hiking boot off, and I was afraid of how much it had swollen. Cracked Pillsbury dough containers looked less stressed by overflow than his boot.

A few minutes later, a middle-aged woman entered. "Mr. Delancey? I'm Heather Rider, one of the PAs here. Let's look at your ankle."

She ran her hands down his leg, examining carefully.

"Do you want me to take off the boot?"

She glanced at his face. "You've been able to walk on it?"

He nodded.

"Let's take it off and check your range of motion. If you can walk on it, it's probably a minor strain or sprain."

He wedged the boot off, and I winced at the puffy, swollen skin as the PA manipulated his foot and confirmed her diagnosis.

"You can take over the counter painkillers and keep icing it. Stay off it for the rest of the weekend. I'll see you for a follow-up next week so we can determine if you need a brace." She glanced between Ed and me with a smile. "Your girlfriend can fetch and carry, but just this once." She winked at him. "Don't take advantage."



He gulped and nodded but didn't dispute her advice. I considered denying my girlfriend status, but friends could help friends. It didn't sound like Ed had anyone else. With luck, I'd be up for the challenge; pressure was starting to build behind my temples. Maybe due to the stress of worrying about Ed or possibly, simply the fluorescent lights in the clinic. Hopefully, my headache would hold off until I got him settled.

Ed thanked Heather and we shuffled back to the car. He didn't even try to offer to drive. "I'll take you home?"

He nodded. "Sorry again about today. If you want to take my car and go home yourself, I can come pick it up Monday when I'm back on my feet."

I grunted, unsure about leaving him on his own. My head had begun throbbing. I just wanted to get him home. We pulled up to his neat little house, and I helped him maneuver to the door and up the couple of steps. Ed unlocked and pushed the door open, and I followed him inside, getting him settled on the couch before grabbing our backpacks from the back of the car.

I pawed through mine, going through every pocket, hoping for a tiny miracle. Crap. I'd forgotten to pack my meds. The throbbing in my temple was becoming more insistent, and my stomach had joined the choir, throwing in an extra helping of nausea for good measure. Even if I had my pills, I wasn't sure I could keep one down long enough to help.

Ed seemed to realize something was wrong. "Rita, you okay? Did you lose something on the trail?"

I almost shook my head before thinking better of it. "No. Headache's coming and I forgot my pills."

"Oh." He held out his keys. "Here, take my keys and get home. I hope you feel better."

I groaned. It was too late. I'd hit my limits. I was past the point where I should be driving. Thanks to the nausea, I

was past riding too. Any more incidents, and I'd be banned from ride-share apps for good.

"I'm not gonna make it," I admitted softly.

I closed my eyes and willed the pounding to stop. Didn't work. Never worked. Dammit.

"What do you mean, you're not gonna make it? Do I need to dial 911? You're not stroking out on me or anything, are you?"

Ed's tone indicated alarm, and I did my best to reassure him. "Ed. I'm not dying. I've got a migraine. I'd puke all over your car if I tried to drive now, and believe me, no one wants that."

"Oh. Well, you can stay here. What do you need?" he asked.

I swallowed back the nausea and tried to focus on his words. "What?"

"What do you need?"

I swallowed again. "A dark room. Maybe an ice pack if you have one to spare. Probably a trash can," I admitted.

He chuckled low, the sound like a soothing stroke across my tense neck. "It's not funny, but what a pair we are. I'm not sure my first aid supplies are adequate for us hanging out. I'm going to have to restock my ice pack supply after today. Go lay down in my room. The shades should be down. I'll bring you an ice pack."

"I can get the ice pack. You're not supposed to be up on that foot."

He snorted. "I'm not going to argue with you in your diminished state. Go lay down. I can take care of myself. I'll get both of us an ice pack."

"I'd argue with you for being high-handed, but I hurt too much."

“You took care of me all day, let me return the favor.”

My head was resonating like the skin of a drum. It seemed to expand with every pulse, then contract in pain. I followed the gloomy hallway until I reached a room with a bed. I didn't bother to turn on the light but stumbled toward the fluffy haven in the center of the room. I laid down gingerly and closed my eyes as I sank into the soft comforter. Each beat of my pulse hurt. Forgetting to restock my meds was a rookie mistake. I made a habit of tucking a few in my purse, my backpack, and my travel cosmetic bag. I didn't want to be without. I must have used my last one and forgotten to refill the stash in my backpack.

My stomach swirled with nausea threatening to crawl up my throat. The last thing I'd eaten were fruit snacks on the trail. If I got sick and couldn't make it to the bathroom in time, Ed wouldn't kill me, but my embarrassment might.

A shadow eclipsed the faint light seeping from the hall, and Ed limped to the bed. “I brought you an ice pack,” he murmured.

Bless him. The icy burn and pressure at my temples made me sigh. The cool compress couldn't heal me, but it eased my misery.

“Thanks,” I said.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“Eventually.”

“Do you need anything else?”

His gentle tone was soothing. I'd never have suspected this kind of sweetness from the frowning man I first met over coffee.

“Honestly? A trash can. Just in case.”

“You got it. Is there anything else I can do to help?” he asked.

I couldn't see his face in the gloom, but he sounded earnest. He was hurting too. He needed to get off his feet. "You don't need to do anything more."

"But I want to. I feel bad. If I hadn't been such a klutz, you would have been home with your meds for this and not in so much pain. Are you sure there's nothing else I can do?"

There was one thing. Laying down next to me probably wasn't the answer he was looking for. I closed my eyes and sighed. "Why don't you lay down too? You're not supposed to be moving around. And if you really want to help, pressure point massage on my scalp gives me a little relief."

He shuffled a trash can to my side of the bed, then the mattress dipped as he sat on the edge. He swung his legs up until he was laying down beside me, his foot elevated. Ed's bed wasn't huge, a queen at most, though it was hard to tell in the dark. His long body lay only a few inches from mine.

"Tell me how. I want to help." Ed's voice was soft and throaty, a half whisper that sent a different kind of tingle along my nerve endings.

"If you can press against my temples and rotate, that would be great."

He brushed his fingers near my hairline. Ed adjusted his body, turning on his side until he lay next to me at an angle. I could feel his breath against my forehead as he pressed his fingers into my scalp. I breathed a sigh of relief. It was a small thing, but it helped.

"Thank you," I breathed.

"Anytime," he responded softly.

He shouldn't throw around promises like that. I lay quietly, soaking up the salve of the pressure along with his presence. His touch didn't erase my migraine, but I could push the pain far enough away to pick up other sensations. The rough pads of his fingers against my skin. The heat and weight

of his body next to mine. The subtle aroma of male sweat and mud mixed with his soap. His scent was blessedly simple; free from complicated colognes or deodorants that could trigger a stronger headache.

I was in Ed's bedroom. *With* Ed. Granted, it was the least-sexy bedroom situation I'd had in a while, but every molecule of my body was aware of his. Agitated and ready to run amok. If only that were enough to end the pain. He kept applying pressure, and I tried to breathe. Eventually, I relaxed enough to sleep.

# CHAPTER 10: ED

It was wrong that I was so aware of Rita. She wasn't for me. We were too different. I wanted stable, drama-free friendship. Desire didn't make the list. She may be in my bed, but it wasn't voluntary. For either of us. Not part of my plan, and I doubt she'd even put me in the same universe as her plan. She was getting ready to move on and start the next chapter of her life. With a new job and a new town. But that didn't stop my body from reacting to hers.

I did my best to maintain pressure on her temples; her body was slowly melting next to mine. As her shoulders relaxed into the bed, the lines in her forehead eased. I hoped I was helping. Her breathing evened, and I slowly released my fingers from her temples. She had petal-soft skin. That I should not be aching to stroke.

I adjusted until I was lying on my back, staring up at the dark ceiling above my bed. I could feel her body heat next to mine. We weren't touching. I didn't need to touch her anymore, now that she was asleep. But part of me still wanted to. I could move back to the couch, but my ankle throbbed just thinking about it. If I stumbled in the dark and woke Rita, I'd never forgive myself.

I was ready for a life that didn't revolve around work. I needed more. Someone to care about. Someone who could love me as-is, and be part of my life. Lovers may leave, but friends were forever. It wasn't romantic love, but I'd proven capable of strong friendships. Daniel and Angi were my best evidence. But their lives were changing, and I couldn't be the needy hanger-on. Pathetic Uncle Ed. I needed to be Cool Uncle Ed. Okay, cool may be a step too far. Interesting Uncle Ed. With my own hobbies and friends to share with my honorary niece or nephew.

Hobbies and friends. Friends who wouldn't see my drive to plan my day, my week, and my life as a flaw. Sid wouldn't care that I was passionate about my work—she was passionate about her work. Being neat and tidy didn't need to be a turn-off. Wanting to feel settled—in one house, in one town, it was a good thing. Not boring. Not unimaginative. Home.

Today with Rita had been fun, but I wasn't searching for fun. I was serious. Serious about finding a group of my own. Rita seemed ready to leave. Find her future and career outside of Benton.

I focused again on the ceiling, mentally reviewing the steps in my plan. Next with Sid would be personal revelations. Nothing could go wrong with that. *Right*. It's not like I'd revealed the painful parts of my childhood and been ghosted before by so-called friends. I sighed. I'd been trying with the wrong people before. I hadn't gone about things the right way. This time I had a plan, and it would be different.

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I woke up to a darkened room and groaned as my ankle barked at me for moving. The previous day came rushing back, including taking Rita hiking and my fall from grace in the woods. I winced. She'd been a good friend to help me out.

A good friend who was currently wrapped around me like I was burrito filling. She curled up against my side, one arm thrown across my chest and a leg across my thighs. Her nose nuzzled my chest over my shirt, and her breath puffed softly against the fabric.

The weight of her breasts against my chest and thought of what other warm parts of her body were currently snuggled with mine sent all my blood rushing south. My breath sped up. *Calm down*. Pitching a tent in my pants wasn't

the good morning wakeup I had in mind for Rita. It would be *very* friendly. Just not the kind of friendship I was going for.

I stopped myself from clearing my throat at the last moment. I didn't want to wake her. Not before my own personal Bigfoot was feeling less alert. Cluttered bathrooms. Not having a restaurant reservation. Moldy bread. Moving to a new city. They were the least sexy things I could think of. I glanced down at my lap. And they'd done the trick.

I inched out from under Rita, doing my best not to wake her or put unnecessary pressure on my foot. Pain flashed up my body as I put weight on my leg. Not good. But nature called. I shuffled to the edge of the bed and glanced back at Rita. In the gloomy light I could barely make out her curls, fanned out around her head. Her dark lashes against her smooth skin. I hoped her relaxed expression meant her headache was gone.

I took care of business in the bathroom down the hall, including swallowing a few painkillers, and started a pot of coffee in the kitchen. I had just taken my first sip of the inky brew when I heard the knock at my door.

“What the hell?”

I wasn't expecting anyone. I stumbled quickly to the front door, hoping to get there before whoever it was rang the doorbell and woke Rita.

“Daniel? What are you doing here?”

It wasn't Monday. Daniel was well-groomed and ready to face the day in jeans and a T-shirt. I peeked around him, but didn't see Angi, just his SUV in my driveway.

“You texted that you probably couldn't walk to coffee on Monday, so I wanted to check on you. Are you okay?”

I nodded and leaned against the doorjamb. “Yeah. It was stupid. Rita and I were hiking at Marys Peak, and I slipped. Tweaked my ankle.”



“But it’s not broken?”

I shook my head. “Nah. I should be fine in a few days. I won’t be running any marathons this week. Or hiking.”

“Are you going to be okay to fly to Chicago next week?”

“I’ll be fine. I know you want to stay close to Angi. I’ve got you covered.”

“Glad to hear it. Can I get a cup of coffee before I hit the road? Angi and I are going shopping, and I need all the caffeine to survive. I’ve been trying not to drink it in front of her because she says the smell makes her nauseated.”

“Sure, come on in. We can drink it in the kitchen.”

A quick cup of coffee and he’d be on his way. Rita would never know he was here. I led the way and poured him a cup before sitting down next to him at my kitchen table.

He took a sip and sighed before raising a brow. “Who’s this Rita you went hiking with?”

“She’s Dr. Culver’s graduate assistant.”

He grinned at me. “And you’re dating?”

I shook my head and his face fell. “No. We’re trading favors. We’re friends.”

Daniel’s dark head tilted and raised his dark brows. “What kind of favors? And what kind of friends? I don’t think that word means what you think it does.”

“She’s helping me with a project,” I answered vaguely.

Daniel didn’t know about my plans. It was Angi I went to for advice on relationships. Or dating. Or Daniel. She was a Rosetta Stone for all occasions. Scarily competent.

“How’s it going with Dr. Culver?”

I smiled. “Good. We’re just getting started, but our first lunch together was a success.”

“I’m glad.” Daniel pushed back from his seat and stood. “I’ll be right back. I need to borrow your bathroom.”

I glanced at the kitchen clock while I sipped my coffee. It was nearly nine, would Rita wake soon? I wasn’t sure if her headache would be gone. If so, she’d probably be hungry. Neither of us had eaten much yesterday.

I was thinking about the ingredients I had in the fridge when Daniel returned with a bemused expression.

“I’m sorry, Ed. I didn’t realize you had company. You could have told me to get lost.”

“What? Oh, you mean Rita. I thought she was still asleep.”

Daniel’s brows were already raised, and if possible, they went higher. “She slept here?”

He knew I only had one bedroom. She sure as hell hadn’t been on the couch when he came in. I shuffled. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Was she drunk?”

I reared back. “No, why would you think so?”

He peered at me more closely. “Is she pregnant?”

I reared back again. “Not that I know of.”

I didn’t know much about Rita’s personal life. It was possible she was pregnant. I thought back over our time together, searching for clues.

“Well. Your ‘friend,’” he said, using his fingers to make air quotes, “looks like she has morning sickness. She was coming out of the bathroom as I came down the hall. Trust me, I know the signs.”

I had no idea how to respond. Rita might be pregnant. I imagined her round, roses in her cheeks, softly caressing her abdomen. She'd be beautiful. Daniel distracted me from daydreams of Rita with child.

He reached out a hand to clap me on the shoulder. "Congratulations, man. I'm happy for you."

I opened and closed my mouth, then shook my head. "Daniel. What makes you think she's pregnant? And what makes you think it's mine if she is? Those are major conclusions on very little data."

He tilted his head. "Interesting."

"What? What's interesting?" I squawked before clearing my throat.

Daniel let a smile tilt his lips. "Oh, I'm still collecting data, don't worry. I wanted to see what you'd say. It's interesting you didn't deny it. Your face is even more telling, friend. Good luck there."

I goldfished again. I had no idea what he was getting at. What was wrong with my face? It was my normal, everyday face. Sure, he'd surprised me. Having a baby was not in my plans. Friends, sure. Honorary uncle to his kid, absolutely. Kids of my own? Unlikely. My childhood hadn't been the best model for fatherhood.

"Daniel, I don't understand you. Rita had a migraine last night. I doubt she's pregnant, but if she is, it's not my baby."

Daniel's expression twisted into one of mischief. "Sure. But you want it to be."

"I do not want to get Rita pregnant!"

"Well, I'm glad we cleared that up," a feminine voice said behind me.

Shit. I missed a key data point in Daniel's earlier statements. Rita was awake. And up, moving around. I shouldn't have been surprised she appeared at the worst possible moment. If we were dating, now is the point where she'd dump me. Which we weren't. So maybe there was no problem. I cleared my throat.

"Sorry to wake you, Rita." I looked at her to see how much more apologizing I needed to do. Daniel was right about one thing; in the soft morning light filtering in through the kitchen window, she appeared wan. Worn out. Nothing like the bubbly woman I'd gone hiking with the day before. It was hard to read her expression. Was she simply tired from her migraine, or disappointed in my outburst?

"Yeah. It's not every day I hear about my possible impregnation before breakfast. At least feed me first."

My gaze shifted to her face. Was she messing with me, or mad? I opened my mouth to respond, but Daniel beat me to it.

"Sorry about that. You must be Rita? I'm his partner, Daniel. Ed was just telling me about you."

Somehow, he pulled off his introduction without sounding like he wanted to climb into a hole.

"I heard."

Daniel winced at her wry tone, fidgeting. "Ah, right. Rita, it was nice to meet you. I'll show myself out. Ed, I'll catch you later."

The traitor left in record time, probably anxious to leave the scene of his social crime. I cleared my throat when we were alone and poured her a cup of coffee. "What would you like in your coffee? On Sundays I scramble eggs for breakfast, if that sounds okay."

The kitchen was quiet. "Rita, what would you like in your coffee?"

“Half-and-half and sweetener if you have it, please.”

I placed the mug next to her at the table, along with the half-and-half and sweetener. I counted. She was a three-second pour. I glanced up from her hands on the mug to see her staring at me over the rim of her cup.

She didn't smile, and I wondered if she was still feeling sick or just annoyed by my earlier comment. What was the proper etiquette for apologizing for not wanting to get someone pregnant? Was that even a thing? Daniel had escaped before I could ask his advice. Then again, maybe there was no saving me.

I cleared my throat. “Sorry about earlier.”

She shrugged and took another sip of her coffee.

“How are you feeling?”

She grimaced before responding. “Pretty sure I should be asking you that. How's the ankle today?”

I shrugged. “I think it's a little better. Resting it last night helped.”

Rita traced a pattern with her fingernail on my table before focusing on me. “About last night ...”

I cleared my throat. “Nothing happened.”

“I know. I wanted to say thank you.”

“For what?”

She smiled. “Not bundling me into a car and sending me home while I felt awful. I'm sorry for inflicting my sick self on you.”

I flinched. “You didn't inflict yourself on me. You were helping me at great inconvenience to you. If I hadn't stumbled on the trail, you would have been home and had your prescription. I feel awful that *you* felt so awful. It was avoidable if I could put one foot in front of the other reliably.”

“Thanks.”

“No thanks necessary. I’m just sorry you were miserable.”

“No, thanks for helping me last night. The massage made a difference.”

“How often do you get headaches?” I asked.

Her smile was sad. “All. The. Damn. Time.” She watched me. “Not that I’m complaining, but I’m totally complaining. I get a few a month and some hit without warning. I’ve missed trips, lost jobs, and struggled with classes after missing tests thanks to my migraines. Sometimes the medication works, other times I don’t take it fast enough, or it’s not enough to manage the pain.”

“Doctors can’t do anything for you?”

“This *is* the doctors doing something for me. It isn’t something they can fix. It’s my life.”

“I’m sorry.”

She smiled at me. “Me, too.”

Rita turned green when I mentioned eggs again, and I downgraded my offer to toast.

“That’s more my speed today. Even the smell of eggs sounds like a bad idea right now, let alone trying to force any down.”

And ... I was eating toast too now. That’s okay, I didn’t need eggs. Just because I ate them every Sunday didn’t mean I had to today. Not if they were going to make Rita more miserable.

I popped slices of bread in the toaster and set the butter on the table before sitting beside her, my ankle throbbing with my pulse. Quiet cushioned us as I watched her nibble on toast and sip at her coffee while I did the same. “What do you want to do today?”

She looked up in surprise. “Oh. I’m headed home after this. Unless you need me here?”

I shook my head. Why did I want to nod instead? My ankle ached, but not enough to keep her with me. “No. I know you probably have things to do, and I want to make sure you have all your stuff if you need it. I’ll take it easy. My ankle isn’t hurting like yesterday.”

“I’m glad.” Rita’s smile reached her eyes, and I enjoyed the sparkle in their brown depths. Food seemed to be bringing back her color and energy.

“How do you feel about a ride home?”

Rita took a deep breath before smiling. “Like I won’t make a mess in your car. Thanks.”

# CHAPTER 11: RITA

Cheri flew out of her room and toward the front door after I let it close behind me. “Where have you been? Yesterday we were joking about serial killers and last night you didn’t come home or answer my texts.” She held out her hand, fingers pinched together. “I was this close to calling your mom. You know she would have raised holy hell.”

“Sorry, Cheri. Migraine. I texted Sid before my phone died, but I should have realized you’d worry. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Oh.” She looked me over. “Where were you? You’re usually home in bed when those hit.”

“I crashed at Ed’s house.”

“Ed, huh? Is there something going on there?”

“Nothing like what you mean. I just spent the night with a man who unequivocally doesn’t want to get me pregnant, so there’s that.”

Cheri’s brows raised. “There’s that. How did you learn this tidbit?”

“He shouted it.”

“How emphatic of him. I have so many questions. Did you want him to get you pregnant?”

I shrugged. “Well. No. Not anytime soon. But it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility.”

“And why was he shouting at you? That sounds like a dick move the morning after a migraine.”

“He wasn’t shouting at me,” I admitted. “His business partner showed up unexpectedly.”



Cheri scowled. “Still rude.” She looked at me, eyes dancing. “I’d want you to have my baby, Rita.”

I snorted. “Gee, thanks, Cheri. I think you’re safe.”

She nodded solemnly. “Never let it be said I didn’t offer.”

I shook my head, and a smile broke through. She was a goof, but she was my goof. “Thanks, Cheri. I’m going to shower and change. See you later.”

My room was as I’d left it; laptop on my dresser and my pajamas from Friday night piled alongside. Three empty coffee cups took up the rest of the space. I thought longingly of putting on my pajamas and crawling back into bed, but the laptop sent a wave of guilt washing over me. Yesterday I’d hiked instead of working on my thesis. I couldn’t miss out on today too.

I grabbed fresh clothes and shuffled to the bathroom Cheri and I shared. It still carried the scent of her bodywash, and I winced. It was usually a pleasant scent, but not when my head had the strength of tissue paper. I turned on the fan and tried to breathe through my mouth to compensate. I couldn’t afford to trigger another migraine.

My stomach grumbled as I stepped out of the shower to dry off. Ed had been sweet to make me toast this morning, but now that I felt stronger, my appetite was coming back.

I was waiting for my tea to brew and another slice of toast to pop when my phone rang. Mom. I sighed. If I ignored it, there’d be hell to pay. Cheri hadn’t been joking about how my mom would react if I was unreachable. She was fierce, and I loved her for it.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hi, mija.”

If I bet on how long it would take her to ask about my thesis and plans, I’d have lost, because she didn’t wait at all.

“How’s your thesis coming? Have you thought more about where you want to apply for your doctorate?”

I held back my groan. I loved my mother. She was amazing. Smart. Driven. She had her PhD. Her husband had his doctorate and taught too. She and my father had met as doctorate students back in the day. There was a theme here. I was surrounded by the hyper-educated. She was convinced I needed those letters after my name too.

“It’s going okay,” I hedged.

“Mija, have you asked Dr. Culver for a letter of recommendation for your program application?”

Sid would absolutely write me a letter. If I wanted one. I bit my lip. Was now the time to let my mom know my decision? What were the odds she’d hop on a plane and come try to talk sense into me? I was too old for that. Still. I couldn’t keep stringing her along.

I sighed. “Mom. I’ve decided to leave academia after I finish my master’s.”

“Leave academia? Why would you leave academia? It would be such a good future for you.”

“I know, Mom, but it’s not the future I want.”

“Not the future you want?” I could hear the hurt in her voice. “Why?”

I’d been raised the daughter of academics, steeped in the culture and expectations. Sometimes also the snobbery. This conversation had been brewing for a while, but I’d been reluctant to have it. I rarely spoke with my father; he hadn’t been a fixture in our lives since my parents’ divorce when I was little. I’d accepted a distant relationship. Academia was his life.

“I don’t love it like you do. I’m ready to try something different.”

“Was your degree for nothing then?”

“Mom, no. I’ll still try to use my degree, but I’m going to move into private industry or a nonprofit role.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

That never happened. It was likely to be a short-lived circumstance. My mother remarried when I was in middle school. My stepfather, Gene, was a nice man. He remained content to let my mother take the lead with me but supported her quietly in the background. The key word being quietly. He was used to my mom drowning him out.

“It’ll be okay, Mom. You’ll see.”

I hoped it would be okay. I still needed to find a job.

My mom figured out her angle in record time. “Well, why not get a job here, in Arizona? You could move home with us while you get on your feet.”

And there it was. I loved my parents, but I didn’t want to live at home again.

“I like it here, Mom. I’m going to try on my own first, but I appreciate the offer.”

“What is there to like in Oregon? Doesn’t it rain all the time? Come home and enjoy the sun with me.”

“Mom, I like it here. Believe it or not, the cloudy skies help my migraines. But I love you. We’ll talk more soon, okay?”

I ended the call with a sigh. I tried to determine if I should warn Cheri before she landed on our doorstep. Overall, she’d taken my news well. Maybe too well. I expected that me moving to Arizona would feature in every upcoming phone call until she either wore me down or I lost my cool.

Finding a job would be the only way to shut her down. Arizona was out of the question. Going back east was a strong possibility, but part of me wanted to stay in Benton. No more

moving. But jobs outside of academia in a college town were hard to come by. I'd promised my friend Maddy from my gap year I'd tell her when I was ready to start searching for jobs. She'd been sending me postings near her and bugging me to send her my résumé. As reluctant as I was to move again, Connecticut was familiar. Before I could renege, I dialed her number.

"Hey, Rita. How are you?" Maddy's breathless voice answered my call on the fourth ring.

"I'm good. How are you? You sound out of breath. What are you up to?"

I could hear the grin in her voice. "Just a little bouncy time."

I groaned. I'd caught her and her boyfriend, Connor, having "bouncy time" once before at work. Shocking, considering she knew what other kinds of body fluids the jumping toys had seen. "Why did you pick up the phone? I'll let you go."

"No, no." She chuckled. "Connor understands. You never call. What's up?"

I barely heard "Connor does not understand" grumbled in the background.

I laughed, uncomfortable and unsure how to escape gracefully. "You said to let you know when I was ready to start applying for real. This is me telling you."

Maddy laughed. "That's great news. I'd love to have you back here. I'm going to keep my ears open and send you a few job links."

"Thanks, Mads. I'll let you get back to bouncing. Enjoy."

A quick gasp on the other end of the line was her only response. I didn't think it was meant for me.

I smiled as I set down the phone. Of all the people I met during my time in New Haven, Maddy was one of the kindest. We'd started as coworkers at Kangaroo Party Zone. In my rebellious phase, I'd wanted nothing to do with college, and throwing a dart at the map and moving to Connecticut to work as a bounce house attendant seemed as far as I could get from my parents and academic life. Meeting Maddy had changed that. Maddy had just enrolled in college and spoke with such passion about her classes and all she was learning. Her enthusiasm had me wondering what I was missing. Her experiences were a long way from sitting in the back of my mom's classroom with a cheese sandwich in the evenings while she lectured on the psychosis of serial killers.

She'd been my champion as I dropped to part-time at the bounce house and picked up a course load, but our friendship faded to the background when I moved to Oregon. She'd stayed in New Haven with her boyfriend. I smiled. At least she hadn't forgotten me. She was one of the few friends who'd stuck it out through broken plans. She'd never given up on me, no matter how many times I canceled for migraines. Most did.

Making new friends was difficult enough as an adult without bailing on short notice. But I couldn't plan my migraines. It was easier not to try. I'd become a pro at learning names and making friendly conversation that never went deeper. You couldn't be disappointed if you didn't let them close. No plans meant nothing to cancel. The irony of Ed asking me for friendship advice didn't escape me. I was an expert at making friends, but not keeping them. Knowing people wasn't the same as *knowing* people.

I pushed away thoughts of failed friendships and worked on my thesis for a few hours, glad my headache seemed to be gone. My growling stomach finally forced me to stop work, and I checked my phone while I made myself a grilled cheese.

*Ed: How are you feeling? Back to normal?*

*Rita: Yeah, thanks. Goonies never say die.*

*Ed: Yet I still found a booby trap. Thanks again for your help yesterday.*

*Rita: No problem. How are you feeling?*

*Ed: Still sore, but I'm hobbling better. If anyone asks, Bigfoot did it. Not my lack of coordination.*

*Rita: Ha! Noted. Your secret is safe with me.*

I smiled as I put my phone away and returned to my laptop with my sandwich. The green bug-eyed plastic frog from our hike stared back at me from its perch on my desk. Ed might deny it, but we made a good team. He was funny. And sweet. Wrong-headed opinions on planning to the contrary, he was able roll with it when things didn't go his way. It may not be riches, but I'd found something to treasure in the forest.

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Monday, Sid and I had time between classes to work on our grant project, and she didn't miss the opportunity to grill me about my weekend.

"So. How'd it go with Ed?"

I shrugged. "Fine."

Her brows raised. "Fine, huh. Is he another silent conquest?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bull. You charm them and leave. Poor souls."

I brushed off her statement. She didn't know what she was talking about. I hadn't dated in months. Never seriously. My so-called charm was all in her head. I'd been careful not to get too involved. Not to make commitments I couldn't keep.

"Ed is not interested in me. He made that clear. He slipped on our hike, so we ended up in urgent care. Other than that, it was fine."

"There's that word again. Was he okay? And do you think you'll see him again?"

I snorted. "It wasn't a date." His protestations with Daniel made that clear. "And of course, I'll see him again. We have lunch with him tomorrow." I shrugged. "I haven't checked in with him today, but it's a minor sprain, no serious injuries."

Sid took a sip of her coffee and peered at me over the top of the cup. "Mmmm. Okay, then. Any other news from your weekend?"

Something about her tone tipped me off. No. No. No. *No.* I sighed. "My mom called you?"

She nodded. "As you can imagine, she wants me to convince you to get your doctorate. I'm glad you finally told her, but it would have been nice to get a heads-up."

I groaned. "I'm sorry. I didn't think she'd contact you."

A flush crept up under my skin. I was twenty-seven years old. Too old to have my mother calling my boss. For any reason. I loved her, but this was why I didn't want to move back to Arizona.

Sid shook her head. "It was fine. I enjoyed catching up with her. It's been a long time since I took one of her psychology classes. I owed her a thank-you for introducing us when you were looking at graduate programs. I let her know I supported you, whatever you wanted to do. That I was sure

you'd have a brilliant career in industry, if that's what you want."

I sighed. "Thanks. And sorry again. I'll talk to her."

She chuckled. "She's a force to be reckoned with. I have a feeling this decision will feature in future conversations with her. Stay strong."

Talk moved on to the migraine trigger and symptom database we were building for our grant, and I settled in to work on our data model, refining the field definitions, and adjusting the tables and relationships in our modeling software as we talked. The grant funds supported the initial design and build before the finished product was turned over to the Migraine Research Institute for use.

I had finished the patient profile tables and fields, but the symptom capture tables were proving trickier. Time, severity, frequency—trying to model a structure flexible enough to capture every aspect of migraines seemed impossible. Someday, our work might help migraine sufferers identify their triggers and get better treatment. Capturing symptom data and organizing it in a way to facilitate understanding the underlying trends was a start. If there was anything that drew me to academic life and might keep me, it was the value and impact of using what we learned to ease suffering. To push boundaries. It was a long slog to answers, but if something I worked on led to something amazing like migraine relief, then I was in.

My battle with migraines had started in my teens. Some were tied to my menstrual cycle; it was like my brain rejected the natural ebb and flow of hormones needed to menstruate and punished me for it. Others cropped up out of nowhere. I couldn't find a pattern. Nothing I did, nothing I gave up, seemed to make a difference.

I'd been on a merry-go-round of medications and doctors, trying to manage my headaches. I'd find medications



worked for a while, but none of them fixed me. There were no easy answers. There were days I'd be willing to hang by my toenails and slurp swamp water through a straw if it gave me relief, but nothing worked.

I hated how much I missed because of my headaches. My high school volleyball coach had not considered a migraine a valid reason to miss practice. I spent a lot of time on the bench. Friends thought I was blowing them off and eventually quit asking me to hang out. School assignments were late, and my grades suffered. I gained a reputation as the unreliable one, which was frustrating, because outside of my illness, I was rock solid.

Maybe that's part of why I found Ed so appealing. His understanding in the face of my illness, his kindness when I needed someone to lean on. His willingness to reschedule when I had missed our lunch. For all his talk about planning and scheduling, he'd been flexible and understanding at almost every turn. Those traits were hard to find in a friend and even harder to find in a romantic partner. My interest was totally understandable. Doomed to failure given my pending move, but almost inevitable. Sweet, nerdy, handsome men like Ed had to be rarer than Bigfoot sightings or pirate treasure.

# CHAPTER 12: ED

By Tuesday, I could bear weight on my foot with a minimum of cussing. It was still tender, but if I had to, I could fake normalcy. A little thing like a sore ankle keep couldn't keep me from lunch with Sid and Rita. I'd reread my project plan, and my progress wasn't stellar. Understatement. I needed to adjust my expectations. I still had ten lunches left. Ten chances to make a connection. That also meant ten opportunities to screw up.

I'd messed up Sunday with Rita. My comment to Daniel had been thoughtless. As the recipient of a plethora of rejections, I didn't need to be handing them out like candy too. I liked Rita. She was funny and kind, but her eagerness to move away pushed all my buttons. I'd lived life with a charming flutterer as a kid. I needed steady people in my life, who wouldn't swoop from flower to flower.

I walked slowly from my house to the college building, trying not to abuse my ankle more than necessary. A light drizzle fell, and I huddled further into my jacket and hood. Parking on campus was impossible without a permit, and the visitor parking was as far away as my house. Miserable weather or not, walking was my best option.

I shook off once I pushed through the doors to the business college and dried my glasses on my shirt. Judging from the growing wet spots on the tile, I wasn't the only one doing a wet dog in the entryway. Student traffic was light; I was a few minutes before classes would dismiss. I made my way up the stairs and down the hall to Sid's office. Their glass-frosted door was shut, so I knocked gently.

"Come in."

Sid stood from her desk chair with a smile when I entered. Her long dark hair was held back in a coil at the base

of her neck, and the overall impression was crisp and professional.

“Hey, Ed. Welcome. I’m going to go heat up my lunch, then we can get started. I’ll be right back.”

I nodded and turned to Rita. She remained seated at her desk, intent on her computer screen. Her red sweater was a bright point in the room, and her eyes were clear and her coloring normal.

“Feeling okay today?” I asked.

She glanced up and pushed a stray curl away from her glasses with the myopic expression of someone who’d been concentrating hard. It took her a beat to respond. “Yes, thanks. Headache’s all gone.”

I let my chagrin show. “I’m sorry again about Saturday taking so long.”

She smiled, relaxing back into her chair. “You have nothing to be sorry for. How are you feeling?”

My ankle throbbed. Sid wasn’t here to learn about my clumsy tendencies, and Rita already had a front-row seat so I decided to go with the truth. I grimaced. “I thought I was fine, but I walked here. I’m already regretting my choice.”

“Do you want an ice pack? We’ve got a first aid kit in the faculty break room.”

“No. I’ll be okay.”

Sid bustled back in, and the aroma of garlic and ginger wafted from her bowl. “Wow. Smells great. Is there enough for two?”

My attempt at banter fell flat. She looked concerned. “Did you not bring a lunch?” She glanced down at her container. “I should have plenty if you want to share.”

“I brought my sandwich. I was only teasing.” Badly. Asshole, table for one. Way to make it awkward. I didn’t need

to deprive her of lunch. “I’m good, but thanks for offering.”

Determined to put myself back in her good graces, we talked through the progress they’d made on the data model, and I asked questions about the data structures they’d designed. We brainstormed possible combinations of symptoms and tried to fit them into the table structure. The database needed to be flexible to capture a variety of symptoms and possible migraine triggers and robust enough to support a self-reporting app.

Sid had submitted a secondary grant proposal to build the app next. Patients being treated by members from the institute could track their symptoms and use the app as a diary to correlate possible triggers for their migraines, share information with their medical provider, and transmit data anonymously to the institute. The design had to encompass medications, menstrual cycles, habits, symptoms, and attributes of the migraines themselves. We had to factor in symptom severity, frequency, and duration.

And those were only the patient-facing aspects. It was a complex patchwork, but their model was thoughtful, thorough, and well done. “Sid, you do good work.” I smiled. “You don’t seem to need me at all.”

She laughed. “It’s Rita’s work. I’ve been focused on the app development proposal.”

And, I was the asshole again. I smiled at Rita. “Nice work.”

“Thanks.” She pushed a curl behind her shoulder, and I couldn’t look away. It exposed the delicate shell of her ear. Which I had a sudden urge to nibble. I cleared my throat. No nibbling on friends. Very sure that was somewhere in the friendship handbook. I focused back on Sid and her ears. They were nice. It was probably a good thing I didn’t want to nibble on them. Again, weird. I shouldn’t want to nibble on anyone. Nibbling wasn’t part of the plan.

Rita excused herself, and I shook myself, remembering the question I needed to ask. “Next week, I’ve got plans at lunch. Would you want to meet up with me in the evening instead, or should we skip?”

Sid glanced up from her spot at the desk. “Sure, that’s fine. What did you have in mind?”

I named a pub downtown, and she agreed to meet me after work. “Rita probably can’t make it; she has an evening class, but I’ll be there.”

Heaviness gripped my heart at her words. I should be excited to hang out with Sid, get to know her more. It was the point of volunteering. Making friends. I resisted asking to reschedule to a time Rita could join us. Because she was another potential friend, and because I’d miss her contributions to the conversation and her quick wit, not because I was interested in anything more than building a friendship. Right. *Liar*.

Rita returned from the restroom, and Sid excused herself to go teach her next class.

Rita looked me up and down, and her eyes darkened. I couldn’t fully hide favoring my left side. Sid hadn’t noticed, but Rita’s frown told me I wasn’t fooling her. “How’s the foot? Are you going to be able to make it all the way home?”

I grimaced but nodded. “I think so. I’ll be sure to take it easy tomorrow.”

“Do you want a ride?” she asked. “I’m heading home now anyway, and my car isn’t far. I can drop you off.”

Friends could help friends home. “Sure, thanks.”

Rita gathered her things, and I followed her downstairs and out to the staff parking lot. I did not enjoy the seductive sway of her butt in her jeans. Nope. Not me. We made our way to an older Prius, and I slid inside, brushing off

her apology for the clutter on the floor. My foot throbbed. Getting off my feet was worth letting someone else drive.

“Thanks for the ride.”

The rain had stopped, and the air in her car smelled fresh, with the hint of coffee and Rita. She glanced at me as she started the car. “No problem. I meant to ask, how are things going with your project? Have you been making progress?”

My project. New friendships. I had plans, but not much progress yet. “Ah, not really,” I admitted. “It’s going okay. I met someone at the food bank, and my first BFRO meeting is tomorrow tonight. We’ll see.”

She gave me a small smile. “Good things take time.”

I cleared my throat. “Thanks again for the ride.”

“No problem, what are friends for?”

Something in my chest eased, hearing her acknowledge us as friends. Maybe the rest of my plans were proceeding as fast as a stoned snail, but Rita and I had forged a friendship. I’d let her see more of me than anyone in years, and she hadn’t turned away. I hobbled out of the car and made it up the steps to my house. When I got to my desk, I pulled out my tracking notebook. I couldn’t lose sight of the data. Staying on plan was critical.

*Sid—Third Meeting:*

*Smiles: 1*

*Laughs: 1*

*Personal Revelations: 0*

*Awkward Moments: 1*

*Notes: Invited for an off-site meeting.*

*Recommendations: Need to make more of an effort to talk about things other than work.*

I bit my lip. More than friendship with Rita wasn't part of the original plan, but she was fast becoming all I could think about. That needed to stop.

*Rita—Third Meeting:*

*Smiles: 1*

*Laughs: 0*

*Personal Revelations: 0*

*Awkward Moments: 1*

*Notes: Insulted her.*

*Recommendations: Quit thinking about how nibble-able her ears are.*

There. By my measures, I was making good progress in my friendship quest. Surely, Sid and I could find something other than work in common. Use that to build into a real friendship.

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My nerves about attending my first BFRO meeting in person wouldn't leave me alone. By the time Wednesday night rolled around, I was all jitters and no cool. Volunteering from the safety of my computer had been no big deal but taking the step to meet other chapter members in person filled me with apprehension. That's what growth felt like, right? Stone cold dread, sitting in the pit of my stomach? Totally normal. Ish.

I sucked on the last of my peppermint, trying to use the soothing mint to calm my nerves as I pulled open the door to Elmer's. Some people popped antacids; I rocked a minty-fresh mouth. The diner chain was the last place I'd suspect of hosting a bunch of bigfoot enthusiasts, but I guess talking about the 'squatch made people hungry. The teenage hostess only side-eyed me a little as she showed me to their meeting room.

I glanced down at my jeans and button-down blue shirt. Was it too normie for the BFRO crowd? I almost told her I needed to use the restroom as an excuse to escape. I could email Dr. Bronson that I got sick and couldn't make it. He'd never know. *Coward*. I sighed and straightened. Failing was part of the adventure. Right? *Wrong*. My whole plan was about avoiding failure. Or at least minimizing the chances of it.

The low hum of chatter quieted as I entered the meeting room behind the hostess. Noob alert. All eyes turned to me, and I quickly scanned the room. I recognized Dr. Bronson from the chapter website. As president, he cut a more distinguished figure than you'd expect from a group hunting mythical creatures. Silver hair, glasses, and a brown sweater. Average. Boring. Like the retired life sciences professor he was. He stepped forward and held out his hand as he spotted me.

"You must be Ed. Welcome. Let me introduce you to the gang."

He gestured to an older woman who peered back at me from behind her bifocals. "Our treasurer, Thelma."

I tipped my chin in greeting, and she frowned back at me. So friendly. I swallowed and gave her a weak smile in return. Dr. Bronson gestured to a middle-aged man on her other side. "And our secretary, Jim Beam. No connection to the whiskey, sadly."



Thelma's grumbled, "That's not what his recycling bin tells us," under her breath had me holding back a smile. Salty. I guess if you can't say something nice, being funny was a reasonable alternative.

Dr. Bronson ignored Thelma's comment and continued to introduce me around the room, until we reached a familiar face.

"And this is—"

"Ed, it's good to see you here. I had no idea you were considering membership. I was hoping you'd come by the bar this week," Jake said. "Here, there's an open spot next to me." He patted the wooden chair to his right.

I was surprised to see Jake at what I considered a pretty obscure group, but maybe I shouldn't have been. After all, today's T-shirt did say UNDEFEATED HIDE AND SEEK CHAMPION with a picture of Bigfoot plastered across the front.

Dr. Bronson beamed beatifically. "Excellent, glad to see you're already making connections, Ed. Take a seat, and we'll get this meeting started."

After the table had placed their orders, Dr. Bronson called the meeting to order. Jim read back the minutes from the last meeting and distributed copies, while Thelma passed around the budget report. Yep. The Bigfoot Research Organization had a budget report. Who knew? Scratch that, I should have. Dr. Bronson and I had emailed to set up my admin privileges for the chapter website and database when I first started volunteering as the administrator. None of the club infrastructure came without a cost.

"I have some bad news," Dr. Bronson said solemnly. "Our IT hosting provider is raising rates again. We need to come up with a way to raise the funds to keep the site alive. Ideally, a fundraiser or something we can repeat to protect against future increases." He glanced around the room. "Any ideas?"

His pronouncement was met with silence. Jim shifted in his seat and stared morosely into his iced tea. Thelma frowned. So, business as usual there. The handful of others seated around the table, including Jake, pushed food around on their mostly empty plates.

My mind raced. Even one measly suggestion might spark an idea in someone else. A video gaming tournament might be hard to organize, but in a college town, we'd have a plethora of players. Then again, every frat had something similar as part of their philanthropy. My only other hobby was running, and it was more of a solo sport. I looked around the room. Thelma didn't exactly scream runner. Then again ... "What about a fun run to raise the funds?"

"A *fun* run?"

Thelma's emphasis on the word "fun" affirmed her disdain for the idea. But I'd tried. Dr. Bronson rubbed his chin, and a long-haired man, who likely listened to Dave Mathews and the Steve Miller Band on repeat, picked up the gauntlet. "Yeah, man. We could turn it into a scavenger hunt. Do it at the nature reserve and hide 'squatch signs at different points."

"Chris would let me advertise at the bar," Jake added.

Thelma harumphed. "You think we'd raise enough? The Bigfoot freaks? We'd be lucky to break even."

I popped a peppermint, letting the cool swish around my mouth. She had a point. As fun as it sounded—to me, it might be a tough sell in town. If the entry fee were low enough, we'd attract some students, but it wasn't the kind of event that drew townies. We needed a different hook. A good cause outside our own.

I glanced at Jake. He was mastermind material. It still surprised me he was here. I shook my head. Sure, the food bank and the bar made sense, but Bigfoot? The food bank. I snapped my fingers.

“What about collaborating with the food bank, turning it into a donation drive? It might have broader appeal.”

Jake’s grin of approval and Dr. Bronson’s nod filled me with pride. I’d stepped outside my comfort zone to come and made a small difference. From there, planning took off, and Jake promised to talk with Barb about the idea the next day.

As the meeting broke up, I said good night to Dr. Bronson, who thanked me for coming.

“Not bad, Scully,” Thelma husked adding her own head nod.

“Scully?”

Jake clapped me on the back and laughed. “Yeah, it’s what she calls the non-believers.”

Thelma grunted and didn’t deign to respond. I wished her good night and followed Jake out to the lot.

“I was surprised to see you here tonight,” I admitted.

He shrugged. “It started as a way to mess with my mom. Because I’m mature like that.”

My bark of laughter caught me by surprise, and Jake grinned.

“You try being the president’s son. And gay. In a small town. I’ve got to find my joy where I can.”

“In Bigfoot?” I teased.

He wiggled his brows. “*Big. Foot.* Not gonna lie, no one was more disappointed than nineteen-year-old me when I discovered the chapter meetings weren’t a euphemism for the city’s queer crowd. But Dr. Bronson and the gang accepted me, and I needed it at the time.” His smile turned nostalgic. “Chris still wasn’t giving me the time of day.”

I limped out to my car after wishing him good night. Overall, I’d categorize the meeting a success. Thelma may

have been unimpressed, but the others had been welcoming. And seeing Jake again had been a bonus.

*BFRO Meeting:*

*Smiles: 2*

*Laughs: 1*

*Personal Revelations: Jake's motivations for joining BFRO.*

*Awkward Moments: Sharing my ideas...but it worked out.*

*Notes: Jake is everywhere. This IS a small town. Also, maybe a sign.*

*Recommendations: Follow up with the group on the fun run.*

The rest of the week passed with a quick trip to Chicago and a haze of normal work calls and time on my computer. A flurry of emails between the BFRO crew and we had the beginnings of a plan for our fundraiser. I couldn't hold back the smile when I saw Rita had texted.

*Rita: You healing from your encounter with Bigfoot?*

*Ed: That's my story and I'm sticking to it.*

*Rita: How'd the big meeting go?*

I smiled. She remembered.

*Ed: Good. We're putting together a fun run. I even saw a new friend.*

*Rita: Oh?? Was this new friend hairy? Maybe tall? Imaginary?*

I chuckled. Almost accurate. Though Jake might disagree.

*Ed: Don't worry, Bigfoot doesn't believe in you either. Jake would probably object to the imaginary part.*

*Rita: Jake, huh? Well, tell "Jake" I said hi. I'm glad you had fun. I know it's hard to put yourself out there.*

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Angi threw open the door Saturday night after I knocked. "Ed, it's good to see you. How was Chicago?"

"Fine. Quick trip," I mumbled as she muffled my words with a hard hug. Her short arms squeezed me with surprising strength. She may be petite, but she packed a punch. Her dark head barely came to my shoulder. As she stepped back, I glanced down her body.

"I'm not showing yet, doofus."

I raised my hands. "Sorry. You look great."

Her smile lit her entire face. "Thanks." She clapped her hands. "We're excited."

I followed her into the kitchen where Daniel was pulling something fragrant with ginger from their steamer. He placed the small dumplings on a plate and set it on the island next to an array of sauces.

"Hey. Help yourself. The rest of dinner is going to be a while."

“Have you settled on a name yet, or is it too soon?” I asked.

Angi smiled again. “It’s a little soon, but I’m not letting that stop me.” She smiled fondly at Daniel. “We’re fighting over names on a daily basis.”

“Is that good for the baby?”

Angi snorted. “I’m fine. A little arguing never hurt anyone. Are you ready to be Uncle Ed?”

There was only one way to answer that question. “Yes?”

She proved I was right with a laugh. “Good answer.”

“Don’t you have sisters?” I asked.

Angi bobbed her head. “Too many, but you’ll be the only honorary uncle. You’re the closest thing Daniel has to a brother.”

I was touched. And scared. In my head, any child of Daniel and Angi’s would arrive on earth a fully-formed miniature adult. Mentally, I’d skipped over the infant stage. Weren’t babies supposed to be fragile? I tilted my head. Then again, they couldn’t talk at first. A baby probably wouldn’t judge me too harshly for my conversational skills. Babies were often little assholes themselves. But maybe I didn’t need to tell Angi that.

Angi poured me a glass of wine and herself a glass of water, and we sat around the island, watching Daniel as diced vegetables. “So, how’s it going with your research project at the school?”

“Fine. I’m meeting with them weekly like we discussed.”

Daniel’s face lit with mischief. “And how’s the beautiful Rita? Has she forgiven you for protesting you didn’t want her to have your babies?”

Angi turned to me, aghast. She slapped me on the arm. “Tell me you didn’t.”

I shrugged and took a sip of my wine. I knew better than to lie to Angi.

“It’s probably not as bad as it sounds.”

Daniel laughed and looked at his wife. “It might be worse. I was teasing him about having a woman over, and she walked in at the wrong moment.”

Angi shook her head. “Did you at least apologize?”

“Of course!” I was exasperated she assumed I’d be careless.

“Well, that’s growth then. In the past you would have thought that was perfectly okay.” She leaned in closer. “Tell me more about this woman. How did you meet her?”

“Volunteering.”

“Wait. You had a woman overnight, and you met her volunteering?” Angi wiggled her brows. “That must be some project.”

“It wasn’t like that.” I glanced between Daniel and Angi, who seemed unconvinced. “We went hiking, and I fell and sprained my ankle. She helped me home and a migraine hit. She slept over because she couldn’t drive. Nothing happened. She’s a friend.”

Daniel wouldn’t let it go. “A friend you shared a bed with.”

I shifted in my seat. It didn’t mean anything.

“It’s not like that. Rita and I are friends. I hope Sid and I can be friends too. It’s all part of expanding my circle.”

Daniel shook his head. “I’m afraid to ask about the rest.”

Angi raised her brows. “The rest?”

Daniel shot a glance my way before responding to his wife. “With Ed, there’s always more.” He looked at me. “Am I right?”

He was right. But given how they’d responded already, did I want to admit it? I cleared my throat and Angi’s piercing gaze swung my way.

“What?”

“You cleared your throat.”

“So?”

“It’s your tell. You’re nervous or unsure about something. There really is more. Spill.”

I shifted on my stool and took another sip of wine. Liquid courage or simple stall, both worked for me. “I have a plan.”

“Ha! I knew it.” Daniel shot his wife a triumphant look.

“A plan?” Angi asked.

Daniel nodded. “Ed says ‘plan’ like alcoholics claim they’re only going to have one drink.”

“Exactly how detailed is this plan?” Angi asked.

I traced a pattern on the island counter, avoiding her gaze. “It, uh, has about twelve steps.”

“Twelve steps? To make friends? I’m pretty sure plots to take over small countries have fewer steps.”

I sighed and let the last part of my dignity die, revealing the final details. “And data collection. Metrics, if you will.”

“Oh, I will. Metrics? Like you’ve been scoring them?”

Angi didn’t sound amused, and I didn’t want her to get the wrong idea. “No, I’m not scoring *them*. I’m scoring me,” I admitted.



“Do I want to know how you’re doing?” Daniel asked.

I waffled my hand in the air. “Eh. It’s still early. I’ve been tracking a few key indicators, and I’m not doing terrible.”

Angi smacked her hand against her forehead, then dragged it down her face. “Not being terrible is a matter of perspective. I can’t believe you’re tracking yourself.”

My gut churned. As my closest friends, I hoped they’d be supportive. I’d come to rely on their counsel. Maybe it had been a mistake not to run this by them to begin with.

“I don’t want to fail,” I said quietly.

Angi’s expression softened. “It’s not failure if you don’t gel with someone. You’re too hard on yourself. You’re an amazing guy, Ed. I’m confident you’ll find others out there who agree.”

I didn’t deserve Angi. I cast a glance at my partner. Or Daniel. He’d resumed his chopping. If the sound of the knife hitting the cutting board was more staccato than before, I wasn’t going to say anything.

“After every meeting, I track a few things: smiles, laughs, were there any personal revelations, stuff like that.”

Angi nodded. “What else?”

“I track, uh, awkward moments. Because it’s me.” I smiled weakly.

“Those seem reasonable. What are you doing with your data?” she asked.

“Not a lot. I’m using it to reflect, capture notes, and make recommendations to myself on how to improve next time.”

Angi’s head bobbed. “Okay, I can understand that. Sounds like a journal of sorts.”

Daniel chuckled while he was mixing ingredients. “Dear Diary, today I smiled at a girl and she smiled back. XOXO, Ed.”

I laughed uncomfortably. He wasn’t far off.

“Where are you at on this plan?” Angi asked.

I bit my lip. I’d revealed everything else, why not go the distance? I reached into my back pocket and pulled out my journal, opening it up to my project planning page before sliding it over to Angi.

“Oh. Wow. You are serious,” she said. She glanced up from my notebook. “I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

I squirmed as she flipped through the list. Her eyes were wide as she handed it back to me. “Twelve steps. You weren’t kidding.”

I nodded. Being thorough wasn’t a crime. Daniel had his back to us at the stove, but I saw him shake his head. Angi took another sip of water before her gaze met mine. “Good luck,” she said.

I wasn’t great at subtext, but even I picked that one up. *Good luck* because I was going to need it. Wasn’t she the one telling me I was amazing? If I was amazing, I should be able to do this my way.

We sat down to eat together, and conversation turned to Angi’s plans for maternity leave. Daniel reminded me of his intention to hire an associate. “I’m going to put a posting up soon,” he warned.

I nodded. With the changes in Daniel’s life, it made sense for him to minimize travel. My two-day trip to Chicago on his behalf hadn’t been terrible, but I didn’t want to travel full-time. Hiring another associate to lighten the load was logical.

“Hey. What about Rita. Would she be a fit? Do you want to share the posting with her?” Daniel asked.

I inhaled a piece of chicken and started choking. Since I couldn't get any words out, I started nodding. Rita would be great to work with. She was easygoing and could probably put up with Daniel's quirks and mine. Then I started shaking my head no. She'd be a distraction for sure. I needed to be focused at work.

"Which is it, Ed? Do you want to consider her or not?" Daniel asked.

I cleared my throat, then cast a quick glance at Angi and Daniel to see if they'd noticed. "She definitely has the skills we're searching for, based on the work we've done together," I acknowledged.

"Great. We'll have her in for an interview."

"But," I continued, "I'm not sure she's the best choice."

"Why not? Didn't you say she has the talent?" he asked.

I didn't dare admit I found her ears nibble-able. I hoped Angi missed that note in my journal. I hedged instead. "She's a friend of Sid's. I think it'd be awkward. I don't want to steal her from Sid's office."

Daniel scoffed. "Isn't she graduating soon? Sid can't keep her forever; she must know that." He examined me closely. "It's not because you're interested in her, is it? You were awfully vehement about not wanting her to have your babies the other day."

I wanted to clear my throat, but I held it back just in time.

"No."

If my voice sounded strangled, he didn't comment.

"Good. Then there's no problem. I'll look forward to reviewing her résumé if she's interested."

I let it go. There was no arguing with Daniel when he set his mind like this. Just because he reviewed her résumé or interviewed Rita didn't mean he'd hire her. I was safe.

# CHAPTER 13: ED

I smiled when I read Rita's text Monday afternoon.

*Rita: What's for lunch tomorrow? More PB&J? When are you going to bring a grown-up lunch?*

I smiled at her ribbing. Had Sid not mentioned that we'd rescheduled?

*Ed: What—like salad? Salad makes you an adult? Maybe next week, I too, can buy bagged salad at the grocery store. I won't see you this Tuesday.*

*Rita: You bailing on us? Have something more important to do?*

*Ed: Just a work meeting conflict. Sid and I are meeting at McFadden's Tuesday night instead.*

*Rita: Oh.*

Was that disappointment? Were my charms already turning her aspergillus yellow with a fine layer of friendly feelings?

Pushing aside my concerns about Rita feeling left out, I found street parking not far from the pub and tugged at my shirt to straighten it. It was dim when I pushed inside the bar; the dark wood in the décor seemed to absorb light, and the air smelled strongly of beer and fried food. I searched the other patrons but didn't see Sid. The college-age hostess asked if I wanted a table, and she showed me to one near the front

window. It was mostly obscured by neon beer signs, but I could still see the street.

I fiddled with my menu while I waited for Sid. Maybe I should have canceled this meeting, claiming work as an excuse. I still had nine lunches left in our grant project. Nine hours to ease into hanging out. She'd been amenable to meeting outside of our regular office lunch, but offsite business meetings didn't make us friends. Wishing Rita were here to smooth my way didn't help my nerves. For all of my concerns about Rita's participation in our grant meetings making me feel like the friendship equivalent of a worm-eating third wheel, I hadn't needed to worry.

Sid was dressed like she'd come from the classroom, wearing a green blazer over a silky shirt as she pushed open McFadden's door.

"Hey, Ed."

"Hi. How was your day?" I asked. Small talk to warm her up: check.

"Fine. Just doing some review for tests I plan to give next week. How about you, how have you been? Back to normal after your adventure with Rita?"

"Ninety-eight percent, closing in on one hundred."

The server came by our table and we ordered. I searched for something to talk about as we ate our burgers and drank our beer. The update on our project had gone quickly without Rita there for a real progress report. Yet another meeting that could have been an email. Sid probably thought I was wasting her time, only making me miss Rita more. Hiding my grimace, I searched for something to keep conversation flowing.

"How did you get into this migraine grant program?"

Sid shrugged. "Bringing in grants is part of my job. In other fields, research papers are more common, but in IT we

seek grants to fund public or private projects. Rita brought this one to my attention. It was both lucrative and meaningful because of Rita's struggles with migraines."

We talked more about the role of grants in higher ed and other small projects she'd completed. Sid and I talked smoothly, with no awkward pauses, but I didn't realize until we'd finished dinner that nothing touched on the personal.

My goal for the evening had been to put myself out there more and share on a personal level, and I was dangerously close to fizzling out with work talk.

In a last-ditch effort, I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. Not from my list of get-to-know-you questions. Not something I'd carefully researched or planned, just a blurt. "How did you and Rita meet?"

"Rita? I was one of her mother's students in Arizona during my undergrad, and when Rita chose information technology as her master's focus, her mother reached out to connect us."

There. That was a personal revelation. Of sorts. "Lucky for Rita."

She smiled. "No, lucky for *me*. Rita's been an asset as an assistant. I'm going to be sad when she moves on."

Sid glanced at her watch. "Speaking of which, I've got to go. I promised Rita I'd go over her draft tonight and have feedback ready for her tomorrow." She glanced up. "I'm glad we could still touch base. I forgot to ask last week, but there's a symposium Friday night at the college. You should come."

"Me? What kind of symposium?"

"It's a fundraiser for our scholarship fund. We have a few alumni lined up to speak. Nothing too fancy, mostly dinner and conversation at the alumni center. Tickets are a little spendy, but it's all for a good cause." Her eyes danced.

“Maybe bring Rita. She could use a night out and could introduce you around.”

Sid blew away every excuse before I could come up with them. Attending to support my new friends, especially if I could convince Rita to be my wing woman wouldn't be a hardship.

“Sure.”

“Great. I'll hold tickets for both of you. Call the dean's office tomorrow and you can arrange to pick them up.”

She smiled and slid out of the booth and headed for the door. A few moments later, I followed and made the short walk to my car. When I got home, I pulled out my project notes and added the night's totals.

*Sid—Offsite:*

*Smiles: 2*

*Laughs: 0*

*Personal Revelations: 1*

*Awkward Moments: 1*

*Notes: Way to be consistent delivering those awkward moments.*

*Recommendations: Work in more personal talk and less work.*

Sid and I had a lot in common. If finding geeks like me to befriend was the goal, she met every criterion, but all my attempts to move past surface conversation fell flat. I'd been accused of extreme reserve by Daniel, but Sid had me beat. She'd only perked up when I talked about Rita and how they met. Genuine affection shone from her eyes when she



shared those memories, and I couldn't blame her. Rita had that effect on people.

I glanced at my phone as I settled on the couch. It was still early. Maybe Rita was done with class.

*Ed: Do you want to come over?*

*Rita: What for?*

Drat. I should have anticipated her question. How to ask for what I wanted?

*Ed: I'd like your advice. Maybe I can ply you with wine and television and pick your brain?*

*Rita: You had me at wine. But I blame you with your seductive ways if I don't finish my thesis on time.*

What? I checked my text again. That was seductive? Had I been doing it wrong all this time?

*Ed: I don't want that on my conscience. I didn't mean to be seductive.*

*Rita: I know. Anything that's not my thesis sounds amazing. I can't help it if I'm a procrastinator. Be there in fifteen.*

I breathed a sigh of relief. While the procrastination was anathema to me, at least I wasn't guilty of distracting her. It sounded like she wanted to be distracted.

I confirmed that I hadn't made false promises with a quick glance in my fridge; luckily, I still had wine. I pulled down

two glasses and walked into the living room with them when Rita knocked. I set the glasses down on my coffee table and answered the door.

She was all soft curls and smiles as she stepped over the threshold. “You’re my savior. Thanks for the invite. Now, where’s the wine?”

“Well. Hello to you. And the wine is on the table over there.” I gestured to the living room and took her jacket and purse, stashing them in my hall closet. Rita threw herself down on my couch and grasped for the glass with both hands like she was holding a sacred object. She took a quick sip, then smacked her lips.

I laughed at her theatrics. “Don’t you have wine at home?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No. I made a stupid vow not to buy another bottle until my thesis draft was finished.”

“So, I really am impeding your progress right now? Should I be a good friend and go dump it down the sink?”

She pulled the glass to her chest and gave me a look of mock outrage. “Not if you value the limbs you have left. I took out your leg last time. Touch my wine and I’ll do much, much worse.”

I put my hands up. “Whoa there, Killer.” I smiled. “Want me to dump my glass into yours and back away slowly?”

She shook her head. “No. You promised me a distraction. My brain needs a break. I’m willing to share wine if you have something good to watch.” She stared at me. “Plus, you said something about advice?”

I sat down beside her on the couch, unsure where to start. “So, I think I’ve mentioned that I’ve been trying to get out more, meet new people?”

“Sure. How’s it going, by the way?”

I tilted my hand in the air. “So-so. I haven’t been able to work in another volunteer shift at the food bank yet, but I have one scheduled for Saturday. The BFRO crew is planning a fun run I’ll help with, and Sid invited me to the symposium at the college on Friday.”

“It sounds like you don’t need me at all.”

I ran a hand through my hair and pushed up my glasses. If only that were true. “That’s where you’re wrong. Will you go with me?”

“Are you asking me as your socializing sidekick, or your date?”

Which one would she say yes to?

“Maybe you could introduce me around. Sid suggested you might take pity on me.”

Going with a vague plea at least kept my hopes alive. Not that Sid had said Rita pitied my social skills in so many words, but the implication was there.

She chuckled. “I have a feeling this has nothing to do with her pitying you and everything to do with her scoring two more filled seats to beat out Professor Cummings in fundraising. Rumor has it that the dean is rewarding the person who sells the most tickets with some kind of prize, and Sid hates to lose. But sure, I’ll be your buddy.”

My pride demanded a subject change. She’d been eager enough to accept as a friend, and that was a good thing. I opened the movie choices on my TV and glanced at Rita sprawled next to me on the couch. She looked like she was done communing with her wine for the moment. “What sounds good? I have *The Goonies*, or we can find something more current.”

She grinned at me. “I haven’t seen it in forever. Our forest adventure has me jonesing for a little Chunk.”

“Goonies, it is.”

I popped a bowl of popcorn and joined her on the couch. Mikey couldn't compete with Rita for my attention. Our hands brushed in the popcorn bowl and she smacked mine with a smile. "Bowl hog."

"I know how to share," I protested.

"Sure, sure. Next thing I know, you'll have it in your lap instead of on the table."

"What's wrong with that? It'd be closer for both of us. I'm just thinking of you."

She smirked. "Sure, Delancey. Or is it an excuse for me to reach into your lap?"

I held up my hands. "To show you my intentions are pure, we'll put the bowl in your lap."

Rita chuckled. "Nice try. It stays on the table where we can both reach it." I sank back into the sofa and interspersed watching the movie with examining her. She appeared so relaxed. The last time I'd seen her at my place, her face had a pinched quality because she was recovering from her migraine. Tonight, her skin glowed with health. Her dark curls corkscrewed around her head where they were pushed up by the back of the couch. As I watched, she reached up to massage her temples.

"Are you okay? Are you getting another migraine?"

She shot me a quick glance. "No. Just tired."

She yawned, and I paused the movie. "Do you want to finish another time? I don't want to keep you up past your bedtime."

I was sincere, but I could tell from the way her eyes danced she thought I was joking. "That's okay, Dad. I know tomorrow's a school day, but I'll be fine."

I winced. Ouch. "I'm nowhere near old enough to be your dad."

She flipped her hand in the air. “I know. Bad joke.” Her gaze traced from my shoulders to my feet, leaving a trail of fire in their path. “I don’t see you as a father figure.”

I shifted on the couch, aware of how close we were. Near enough to see each long eyelash and the warm gleam in her eyes. She was a friend. Not someone I should be noticing was beautiful. Not someone who should be making my groin tighten painfully.

“It’s okay. Do you want to finish the movie?”

She shook her head. “No. You’re right. I’m going to head out. We can finish another time.”

I smiled. “I’ll supply the wine.”

She grinned back. “Now you have my attention. See you Friday?”

I helped her get her things from the closet. I held her jacket so she could slip into it, then watched as she lifted her curls from beneath the collar. Her scent washed over me, and I shifted my weight. Moving two inches to the right did nothing to help me escape the warm, womanly scent of her skin.

“Good night,” she said.

I cleared my throat and shifted my gaze away from her mouth. “Good night.”

After she left, I shut and locked the door, then turned off the TV. I’d had a full day, first at work, then with Sid, and finally relaxing with Rita.

I groaned. I was supposed to ask Rita to interview with Daniel. There was no good excuse for forgetting, except inviting her to Friday’s symposium had supplanted any thoughts of the interview. I scrubbed a hand through my hair. I’d have to remember Friday. That way I could gauge her interest in person. Something about a call or text felt too impersonal. I may not be able to look Daniel in the eye if I had

to admit I hadn't asked her yet. He'd accuse me of stalling. And he'd be right.

Working together might kill my growing friendship with Rita. Nights like tonight, laughing about popcorn bowls and watching movies, just enjoying each other's company might not sound fun if she had to put up with me at work too. As she'd so delicately put it, sometimes I went straight for the hair-pulling. I chuckled, remembering her analogy. I'd miss the teasing, the playing, if our relationship changed. Pushing away thoughts of her soft lips and the warmth of her thigh pressed against mine on the couch, I rubbed at the muscles constricting in my chest.

*Sure.* It wasn't just friendship I risked working with Rita.

# CHAPTER 14: ED

I never felt more like a fraud then when I entered the alumni center to check in at the front desk with the smiling attendant.

“Name?”

“Ed Delancey.”

“Here you are, at Professor Culver’s table. Are you an alumnus? Can I get you a ribbon?”

I shook my head and attached my naked name badge to my jacket. “No, thanks.”

She directed me to the bar and silent auction in the vestibule, and I scanned the area for Rita or Sid. Neither woman was visible. I craned my neck to peek into the banquet room where the symposium would be held, and my shoulders relaxed when I spotted the curly bun that signaled Rita hadn’t left me to my own devices. I slipped through the door and approached her as she distributed table numbers on top of each round.

“Hey.”

Her bright smile as she turned to me helped me breathe more easily.

“Hi, yourself. You look very dapper tonight.”

Her gaze ran up and down my dark suit, and I colored at her praise. My day-to-day business attire was more casual, but I’d stepped up my game for the night’s event. Rita had done the same. I was used to seeing her in jeans and casual clothing. Tonight, she’d dressed in her own tailored suit with a silky turquoise top. It shouldn’t have been sexy, but her confidence shone in the power suit.

“You look beautiful,” I choked out in a low rumble.

“Thanks, I have to finish assigning tables, and then we can get a drink and check out the auction.”

“I’ll go stand in line while you finish. What would you like?”

Rita chuckled. “You wouldn’t think I’d be picky as a student, but the college liquor buyer and I have very different tastes. The chardonnay is about the only thing I enjoy.”

“A glass of the chardonnay, it is.”

I scanned the other attendees as I waited for my turn at the bar. Gray-haired alumni circulated, drinks in hand. An equal number of faculty socialized, pressing the flesh. The air was full of a cacophony of competing perfumes and colognes. Hopefully, Rita would make it through the evening without triggering an attack. My nose itched from scent overload, and I didn’t struggle the same way.

After paying for our drinks, I found a corner to stake out, watching the other attendees circulate. That should be me. Introducing myself. Chatting. I suppressed the shudder. Why had I agreed to come again? Sid had asked. And Rita had agreed to be my partner.

Sid broke away from a gray-haired group and spotted me lurking on the sidelines. She made a beeline for me.

“Hi, Ed. Glad you could make it tonight.”

“Glad to be here,” I forced the lie from between stiff lips.

She gave me a conspiratorial smile. “Never fear, Rita will be here to save you shortly.” She sipped her own glass of wine. “Congratulations, by the way.”

“On what?”

“Slipping beneath her armor.”

“What armor?”



“Exactly.” Her lips twitched. “You have a superpower when it comes to disarming her. She’s a master at maintaining that invisible barrier between her and the rest of the world. Just watch tonight.”

Sid excused herself, and I maintained my spot on the wall contemplating her words. Maybe I wasn’t the only one with childhood scars? Rita’s confidence had me fooled. Had she been shielding herself with charm like I did with research and planning?

Others meandered along the banquet tables set up for the auction.

“Is that for me?”

I turned to Rita with a smile. “Yes. Are you done with setup?”

She accepted her glass and nodded. “Shall we take a turn through the auction items?”

I gestured her ahead of me and watched the sway of her hips as she strode confidently toward the table. No hesitation. No sitting along the sidelines. Rita cut through the crowd like a knife through softened butter. I picked up my pace to catch up. Getting caught staring wouldn’t help my reputation any. I glanced around as I reached the first table, spotting at least one other man watching her. Then again, I wasn’t the only one mesmerized by Rita.

We browsed the auction items and sipped at our drinks. The donations ranged from gift baskets of university swag to fishing trips and golf outings, all in support of the college’s scholarship program.

“See anything you like?” I asked.

Did her eyes linger on me before she reluctantly shook her head?

“As much as I’d like a ... weekend at a beach house,” she read the bid sheet in front of us, “most of these bids are

already too much for my poor college student budget.”

Right. Student budget. I rubbed my chest. I remembered the lean years when I was starting out.

We approached another couple reading about the donated package in front of us, and I watched as Rita smoothly introduced me and exchanged pleasantries. It happened again with the next group and the next. Either she knew everyone here, or she had surreptitious nametag scanning voodoo down to a science. I floated along in her wake, making appropriate noises and listening to her chatter like an expert hostess.

As we finished our tour of the tables, Rita excused herself to the restroom, and I sped back to the beach house auction sheet to jot down my bid. Ushers opened the doors to the banquet hall and started circulating, inviting everyone inside, but I lurked by the doors until Rita caught back up with me.

“Ready?”

We slid through the crowd to Sid’s table and took our seats. In addition to Sid, a couple in their seventies, and a serious middle-aged man filled out our table. Rita introduced me to everyone. The older couple were donors who owned a winery in Dundee. Robert and Mary Brown had the aura of a long-married husband and wife, slowly resembling each other more and more. Friendly, craggy faces and rounded bodies. Darius Butler’s dark brown skin contrasted with his smile when Rita introduced us. The local CEO had engaged her and Sid for a small consulting project, and the other man chatted with them about possible improvements as servers sped around the room, delivering baskets of rolls and pitchers of ice water.

Rita sat relaxed beside me, engaged in the conversation swirling around us, but Sid kept casting glances to the next table and smirking. A man in a navy suit frowned back, seemingly oblivious to his tablemates. His gaze kept

shifting between the open seats at this table and Sid. The department head strode to the podium to introduce the evening's speaker, when a minor ripple ran through the crowd, and an older woman and familiar man slid into the open seats at the next table. Jake caught my eye and smiled in greeting, and I tipped my chin in acknowledgement. Sid's lips firmed into a frown at the new arrivals, and the man in the navy suit smiled wide. Whether their battle was truly about ticket sales or pride, the other man won.

As the department head droned on about the scholarship fund and welcomed everyone, servers slid salads in front of us. I alternated between minding my table manners and watching Rita chat with the Browns. She sparkled, beautiful under the banquet room chandeliers. Her smile was warm and natural, inviting everyone at the table to contribute. But she kept the topics impersonal. The weather. Sports. Innovations and changes in the college. Nothing personal, nothing revealing. Her sleight of hand in changing topics and avoiding personal questions was so strong no one noticed. Darius Butler seemed intrigued, and I couldn't blame him. Rita made what would have been a stilted business dinner among virtual strangers effortless. My tablemates would walk away from the evening feeling like they'd made a friend. But they wouldn't know Rita at all.

As coffee was served after dinner, Sid moved to the lectern to introduce the speaker. Blythe Nicholson had been invited to speak on blockchain and personal data security, and she was skilled at holding an audience's attention. If I hadn't been aware of Rita's warmth next to me to the exclusion of all else, I probably would have learned a lot. As it was, my attention focused on resisting the urge to reach a hand out to cover hers on the table. Friend. Wing woman. Seeing her interact with so many new people tonight had revealed the truth in Sid's earlier statement. Rita had let down her guard with me. Now, what to do with my knowledge? Nothing.

Except double down as a friend. I still owed her an interview invitation.

The speaker received a vigorous round of applause when she wrapped up, and I joined in, though I hadn't heard a word.

The man in the navy suit moved to the lectern next and introduced himself as Professor Cummings. The name nipped at my memory, but I couldn't place it. Sid's constipated expression as he started announcing the winning bids from the auction signaled a story there. I shifted a glance at Rita, but her expression remained neutral. Either she was better at hiding her feelings than Sid, or Sid's friction with Professor Cummings hadn't touched Rita.

I tensed as the auction items ticked down. He had to be getting close. Had my last-minute bid on the beach house been successful? Rita should spend time at the ocean before she moved. But would she want to go with me? Traveling with friends fit well in my plans. I ignored the whisper that wanted her all to myself, not sharing the beach house with Daniel, Angi, Jake, Chris, and Sid like I hoped.

The bearded man at the podium said, "And, the winner of the weekend stay at Bay House is ... Ed Delancey."

My racing heart made a lie of the cool façade I tried to project. Rita turned to me. "You bid? Congratulations!"

I held back the invitation to join me at the last minute. Now was not the time. "Thanks," I said instead.

Professor Cummings finished the bid awards, and winners were asked to check in at the back as the evening wrapped up. I wished our table companions a good evening and left Rita and Sid saying their goodbyes as I made my way to the auction tables.

"Ed, I didn't expect to see you here," Jake said from behind me.

I turned. “That makes two of us. What brings you here tonight?”

Jake smiled sheepishly. “My mom. She needed a plus-one. Since my dad passed, that duty falls to me.”

“You took off work to escort her?”

Jake shrugged. “Helps when I know the boss.” He scrubbed a hand over his head. “It’s also part of my deal with her. No family embarrassments for a year.”

“A year?”

Jake grimaced. “She knows better than to ask for more.”

I chuckled. “You’ll be at the food bank tomorrow?”

“Yep. I’m there Tuesday through Saturday for the next few weeks.”

Jake wished me a good night, and I inched forward in line, waiting for my turn to make good on my bid. The man behind me cleared his throat aggressively, and I turned. His nametag read PROFESSOR ERIC SPALDING.

“Hello,” I said.

The meticulously dressed man held out a hand. “Professor Spalding.”

“Nice to meet you.”

I didn’t have anything else to say. While I searched for something appropriate, Spalding filled the silence.

“Are you here with Professor Culver tonight?” the other man asked curiously.

“At her table, yes.”

The bald man nodded. “Then you must be here with Rita, her assistant?”

I nodded, and Spalding's expression turned lecherous. "You're a lucky man. They make great scenery at the business college."

The way he said it made me queasy. Insulting. Wrong-headed. Staying civil took all my energy. I didn't want to embarrass Rita or Sid. I was a guest. If only this dick weren't.

"She's a great *colleague*. So is *Professor* Culver. I've enjoyed working with them." I forced out through a stiff jaw.

Spalding smirked. "I'd like to 'work' with them, if you get my meaning."

My wooden-faced "Good evening" should have been his first clue, but he didn't take the hint.

He winked and licked his lips, and I held back my shudder of revulsion, angry on Sid and Rita's behalf. The creep. I turned my back to him, and blessedly, the line moved forward so I could close out my bid with the attendant. I pretended Spalding didn't exist as I brushed past him when I was done.

Leaving without wishing Rita and Sid a good night would be rude, but they were caught up in conversation with the department head, and I didn't want to intrude. I found a comfortable wallflower spot and leaned against a trophy case, scanning the groupings of people chatting and trickling out of the alumni center.

I caught sight of douchenozzle Spalding again out of the corner of my eye, and my smile dimmed when he flagged down Rita as she broke away from her conversation.

Watching him put a hand on her elbow made my skin crawl. Was Rita's smile genuine? My money was on forced, and I took a deep breath, willing the taut muscles in my jaw to relax. She didn't need saving. If anything, I'd learned Rita would be the one rescuing me. She had these events down pat. Something about the way Spalding scowled as she walked

away reassured me that she'd shut him down, albeit with more class than I would have managed.

"There you are," Rita said after she took leave of Spalding and spotted me along the wall.

"Thanks for joining me tonight. Do you have your car, or do you want a ride home?"

Sid joined us on the tail of my question. "That's a wonderful idea. Rita rode with me, but I have more to do before I can take off. Why don't you head out?"

Rita side-eyed her boss. "Are you sure you don't need my help?"

Sid shook her head. "You've done enough. Go. Have fun."

Her playful grin had me checking Rita's expression. She looked sincere as she asked, "Do you want to go for a drink?"

I relaxed at her easy acceptance. "Sure, I know just the place."

Setting a hand to the small of her back as we wished Sid a good night came naturally. Spalding's raised brows had me dropping the contact like I'd been burned. I didn't need to jeopardize Rita's reputation.

"You're quiet. Everything okay?" Rita asked as she slid into my car.

"Sorry. I'm a little preoccupied." But that didn't mean I had to let jerks like Spalding steal space rent-free in my mind. "I was thinking we could go to Porter's Pints. My friend Jake works there."

Rita's soft smile eased the last of my tension from Spalding's comments. "Sounds great."

Porter's was busy when we arrived, but the crush was less daunting with Rita beside me. After seeing her in action, I

was confident she'd help us charm our way through. I spotted an open barstool and gestured her toward it.

"You sit, I'll stand behind you until another opens up."

Not an excuse to stand close to her. Nope. Purely showing friendly consideration.

"Hey, Ed. What can I get you?" Chris asked from behind the bar.

Rita ordered a glass of wine, and I asked for a beer.

"You're out front tonight?"

He nodded as he slid my pint toward me on the glossy wood. "Joys of Jake being at his mom's beck and call. But I expect him anytime. He'll be glad to see you."

I thanked Chris and he returned to the other end of the bar to help another customer. Did Rita share Sid's ambivalence about Jake and his mom? I cleared my throat.

"Hey, just so you know, my friend Jake who works here, I met him at the food bank. He was at the dinner tonight too. Jake Nelson."

Rita's face remained calm as she sipped on her pinot gris. Then a mischievous grin washed over her face.

"President Nelson's son? The Student Loan Streaker?"

She chuckled, and I relaxed.

"So, you've heard of him, huh?"

I shifted closer to hear her over the crowd around us.

"Heard of him? I've seen his junk." Admiration bled through her tone. "The whole school has. Running naked is not subtle."

I squirmed at the idea of Rita appreciating Jake's naked body. Should I tell her he was taken? By the burly man behind the bar? I pushed past the discomfort. Talking about Jake's bait and tackle hadn't been in my plans.



“Ready for a refill?”

Speak of the fishing rod. Jake had slipped out of his suit and into what I considered his everyday uniform—jeans and an outrageous T-shirt. At least he hadn’t worn the IT’S BUSINESS TIME tee to the symposium. Probably not a lot of Flight of the Conchords fans in the alumni crowd.

“Rita, this is Jake. Did you want another drink?”

She exchanged an easy smile with Jake.

“Nice to meet you. Nothing more for me.”

“Same.”

Jake tipped his head, seeming pleased that I wasn’t alone from the smug tilt of his lips. “Let me know if you change your minds.”

He moved off to pour other drink orders, and I watched Rita’s response. Her focus stayed on me, and my chest warmed. Maybe all that talk about Jake hadn’t meant anything after all. The barstool to her right finally opened up as the grizzled older man left, and I reluctantly slid into it. I’d lost my excuse to hover. The upside was my own stool brought me face to face with Rita, and I could enjoy the warm light in her eyes as we spoke.

Rita gossiped about the other faculty and alumni we’d met, and I teased her about her smooth moves sussing out name tags. She brushed off my compliments and we argued amicably about the pros and cons of scrum methodology for development, and she gave me a hard time about some of my more particular tendencies for database field nomenclature. I basked in the warm glow of her attention.

When we’d finished our drinks, I grudgingly slid from my stool and placed a hand at the small of Rita’s back, following her as we exited the bar. I didn’t want the evening to end. We were quiet on the drive to Rita’s apartment, and my pulse thundered with possibilities. Walking her safely to her

door shouldn't trigger my fight or flight response. Never mind the other "F" word that had my body tightening. *Friend. The only other "F" word allowed is friend. Get your mind out of the gutter.*

I cleared my throat as Rita dug for her keys in her jacket pocket.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight. I enjoyed seeing you in action."

Her liquid brown gaze behind her glasses locked on me like a tractor beam, pulling me in slowly. Every centimeter closer made me want to kiss her more, to see if her mouth was as soft as it looked.

"What are friends for?" she said as she finally pulled her keys out. The discordant jangle broke the spell.

Right. The "F" word. Friends. I backed up a step, giving her more room and cleared my throat again.

"Good night."

Was it my imagination, or did her answering good night sound disappointed?

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Jake and I shelved food companionably Saturday during my shift at the food bank. We'd already gone over the fun run plans with Barb, and she seemed cautiously optimistic about our joint fundraiser. Sid had helped me contact the right department for permission to use the forest land and trails associated with the college. Jake had begged off that task, though he arguably had better connections, saying he couldn't play his mom card so soon after his stunt at the football game.

We'd finished the repackaged rice and moved on to the pallet of canned beans when Jake broke the silence.

“So, how was your date Friday?”

“Date? Oh, you mean Rita.”

“Yes, the hottie with the body.”

“She’s more than a body, Jake.”

He grinned at me unrepentantly. “That’s how I know it was a date.”

“And there you’d be wrong.”

“Nuh-uh. I know the signs.”

He held up his thumb. “Close body language.” He flipped up a second finger. “Lots of smiles and laughter.” His third finger joined the other two. “And protesting any hot takes about your time together. All the signs and symptoms of a date. So, tell me more. Who is she?”

“She’s a friend. She works for Professor Culver. We’ve been spending time together for the project I’ve volunteered on.”

“Spending time together?”

Jake’s skeptical face and air quotes had me shifting uncomfortably, a can of beans in each hand. He shook his head at whatever he saw in my expression. Jake gestured between us.

“We’re friends because no offense, I don’t want to sleep with you. But Rita? You guys have *vibes*.”

“Vibes?”

Had I been missing signs?

“Vibes.” He nodded wisely. “Listen to your bartender. We’re the unpaid couples’ counselors of the college crowd. She wants you.”

Then why had she emphasized our friendship when I dropped her off? It seemed like a clear sign to back off.

“You’re misreading things.”

“One of us is,” he said archly, returning to his shelving.

I stood, staring at the string beans in each hand. Not heavy, but weighing me down just the same. Like my commitment to my plan to stay friends with Rita? Like Daniel’s desire to hire her? I bit back my groan. The interview. So many opportunities to bring it up with her, and I’d missed them all. At what point did I admit it was because I didn’t want to? Not an option. I’d made a commitment to Daniel. My oldest friend. Letting him down for something that might be one-sided was pointless. I had to ask her.

# CHAPTER 15: RITA

I'd had a productive weekend after my Friday evening with Ed. Whether it was the medicinal power of wine, or just where I was at in my cycle, I hadn't had any headaches and churned out words on my thesis like a champ. I glanced down at my calendar app and sighed. I was due for a migraine. It was like watching sand slip out of an hourglass, and not knowing when it would empty. Migraine roulette. I wished I could be done with them forever, but that wasn't the game. It wasn't if the wheel would stop, it was when.

Ed stuck his head around our office door ten minutes before our scheduled lunch. "Hey."

"Hey," I said. He stepped fully into the office, and I appreciated the pull of his shirt across his shoulders. He'd shucked his jacket already, and had it tossed over one muscular forearm. "Sid here?"

I hid my disappointment that his first question was about Sid. I shook my head. "Not yet. She should be back any moment. I think she took her lunch to the microwave."

I gestured to the open chair and he took a seat, pulling a sandwich from his brown paper sack.

"PB&J again, no salad? What happened to all of your big talk about adulting?"

He looked up at me sheepishly from behind his dark-framed glasses. "Yeah. I'm not really one to cook."

I gestured to my salad. "You're not alone, but I'm surprised you didn't bring your meat."

He stalled on his bite of sandwich, then chewed and swallowed carefully. When his airway was clear, he chuckled, and the low sound rippled through me, sending tingles down

my spine. “Nothing like mystery meat. You’re right, I should put together a meat and cheese platter for lunch. My meat would be much tastier than this sandwich.”

It was juvenile, but it still made me giggle. “And tastier than my salad. Feel free to bring enough tasty meat to share.”

Sid chose that moment to reappear in our office door and shot us both a glance with raised brows. “Do I want to know?”

I laughed. “It’s safe. We’re laughing about lunch. Total dad joke territory.”

I caught Ed’s wince. Oops. I hadn’t meant to refer to him in a dad-like capacity. At most, he was a couple of years older than me, and there was nothing paternal about him. I shot him an apologetic glance, but he just shook his head.

Sid watched our interplay before breaking in. “I’ve only got a couple of minutes today, so, Rita, why don’t you bring us up to speed?”

I spoke at length about the changes we’d made to the data model, and Ed asked thoughtful questions. We identified some modifications, and I took notes to bring them back for our next meeting.

Sid pushed back from her desk after she finished her lunch. “Excuse me, guys. I’ve got to run. I’ll see you next week.”

Ed turned his focus to me.

“I’m really impressed by the work you’ve done on this project. My partner Daniel has been wanting to hire an associate to get us caught up and help out after he and Angi have their baby. Would working with us be something you’d be interested in?”

I opened and closed my mouth. I didn’t know what to say. I needed a job, and I’d been hoping to stay in the area.

Outside of the university, the town was too small to support multiple IT businesses. Firms in Portland and Eugene were my most likely alternatives. But staying in Benton was tempting. I got along well with Ed, but I wasn't sure about working together. I glanced from his broad shoulders to his blunt-tipped fingers. Is that all he saw in me? A friend and colleague?

“Daniel would love to have you in for an interview.” His eyes searched mine. “There’s no pressure if it’s not for you, but we’re hoping you’ll meet with us before deciding for sure.”

He interpreted my silence as hesitation, but not for the right reasons. “If you’re nervous about Sid, don’t be. We know you have a commitment to her and would want you to keep it. This would be a position after you finish school.”

The silence carried on a little too long, and he cleared his throat. The sound shook me out of mooning over his stubbled jaw and brought me back to our conversation. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Sure. I’d love to meet with you and Daniel.” I smiled. “It couldn’t hurt, right?”

He nodded slowly. “If you’re sure.”

“Will you text me the details?”

“Of course. I’ll let you know after I check his schedule. See you soon?”

I nodded, and he gathered his things and left. There’d been no mention of returning to his place to finish our movie. Did an interview mean the end of our friendship? My stomach sank. I’d been enjoying my time with Ed. He was easy to be with. I admired his analytical brain. He listened and asked thoughtful questions. But spending time with him at work wouldn’t be the same as hiking in search of geocaches and

Bigfoot. The more relaxed version of Ed was my favorite. If anything, I liked that version a little too much.

Having a crush on a friend wasn't a big deal but having a crush on my boss would be. Working with him full-time would change things. He'd be management. Granted, Sid and I were still friends and she was my boss, but we didn't hang out the same way. And I wasn't attracted to her. The teasing and flirting would have to end if I worked with Ed.

I didn't want to grow attached to Ed. He already knew about my migraines, but that didn't mean he understood what they meant for my life. For my work. He liked me now, but as I broke more plans he'd grow frustrated like others before him. Our banter about planning had been all in good fun on the trail, but if he worked with me on a continuous basis, our different approaches would eat away any friendly feelings. We'd both end up disappointed if we came to rely on each other. We were better off as just friends. Even if I couldn't quite bring myself to believe that what I wanted from him was friendship. Was self-deception wrong if the only person you hurt was yourself?

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I groaned when I saw my mother's name on my caller ID. I'd been dodging her, but it couldn't go on forever. I took a deep breath before answering. "Hi, Mom."

"Mija, you've been hard to reach lately. You must be studying hard. Does this mean you've changed your mind about your doctorate?"

Trust my mother to interpret the facts in the way that most suited her.

"No, Mom. I've been working on my job search."



“I sent you a few roles based here in Arizona. Gene knows someone who works at Parker Integrated. I’m sure if you submit your résumé, we can get you an interview.”

I held back my groan with an effort. They were sweet to want to help. Controlling, but sweet. She only wanted me closer.

“Mom, I’m looking at a few other openings right now, but I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Can I ask where?”

Cue her disappointment. “Here and on the east coast.”

“There are IT analyst jobs here, too, you know. You probably can’t even get a decent pozole in Oregon.”

Cooks across Oregon were probably shaking their fists at her words. Arizona thought it had a lock on all things Mexican American.

“Mom, no one makes pozole like you do.”

It was blatant flattery, but it worked.

“It’s true, but never let your abuelita hear you say that,” she said.

“Mom, no one makes pozole like you and Abuelita do, but they have restaurants here.”

Her snort was audible. “Restaurants. I’ve failed you, Margarita. You need to be with family.”

“I have family here.”

I regretted the words as soon as I said them. They were true. I’d become close with Cheri and Sid, but there was no way my mother would interpret my family comment well. Guilt trip in three ... two ...

She huffed. “Well, *we* miss *you*.”

“I miss you too, but I’ve been busy with my job search and dating.”

A rapid change of subject was in order, but I immediately regretted my choice of a red herring. Cue the inquisition.

“Dating? Anyone special?” she asked.

If I admitted that my friendship with Ed was like dating and later announced I worked with him at Kwon and Associates, my mother would have questions. So many questions. I cleared my throat. “No, not really. Just someone nice to go hiking with and have a little fun.”

“Well, don’t let anyone distract you from your studies. And don’t get too attached to someone local. I still think you should come back home.”

Not happening. I shook my head, glad my mom couldn’t see me.

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I was more nervous about my interview with Daniel and Ed than I expected. Something about meeting them at a coffee shop threw me, though it should have put me at ease. I wasn’t sure if I wanted the job with them, but the description Daniel had sent me was interesting. They had a variety of clients. Most were small businesses who needed temporary staff to assist with software upgrade projects. Daniel and Ed specialized in organizing and executing the data transfer from the legacy systems to the new software.

Staying in town was tantalizing. Moving again, starting over, even if Maddy were nearby, filled me with dread.

The work itself was right up my alley; my reservations were about working for Ed. Our regular Tuesday lunch with Sid had been uneventful, and I hadn’t reached out to him about finishing our movie. With the interview hanging over my head, it would be weird. I didn’t want any favoritism. If I got

the job, it needed to be on my merits, not because I was friends with one of the partners.

Ed and Daniel were already seated in a booth when I arrived for our appointment. I double-checked my phone. I wasn't late, but the way Ed was tapping his pen impatiently on the table had me worried. Daniel smiled. "Hey, Rita. It's nice to see you again."

The "again" made me cringe on the inside. Right. When I met Daniel for the first time, Ed was proclaiming to anyone who would listen he didn't want to get me pregnant. Good times. I smiled weakly.

"Hi, Daniel, it's nice to see you too." I nodded to Ed. "Ed."

"Please, take a seat," Daniel said. "Can we get you something?"

I nodded. I needed something to occupy my hands. "Yes, please. I can always drink coffee."

They scooted out of the booth, and we went to the counter together to place our orders. Daniel did his best to make small talk while we waited for the barista to pour Ed's coffee and fix Daniel's drink and mine. Ed was quiet. Did he not want me here? I shifted a quick glance his way, but his impassive face told me nothing.

When we'd collected our drinks, we took seats back at the booth and Daniel reviewed my résumé and asked questions about my previous positions. He asked me about my thesis and work with Sid. I was nervous, but I answered well. I did my best to focus on Daniel, instead of why Ed was acting so strangely. I'd expected him to pepper me with questions too. His silence reinforced my belief that Ed wasn't thrilled at the prospect of working together.

Daniel seemed most interested in my answer on data ethics, and I had Ed's attention for once too. I made brief eye contact with both of them.

“Consumers have to weigh convenience and privacy. I see many give up personal data without knowing how it’s going to be used. Take a large, well-known resort in Florida for example. They own hotel properties, restaurants, retail, and theme parks. One of the ‘perks’ of staying at their hotel properties is a special wrist band that allows guests extra conveniences. The band is their hotel room key, payment method, and automatically links their theme park pictures to their online account. What data are they giving away? The resort is tracking their every move. They know when the family is in their room, at the pool, and where they eat. Every movement through the resort can be tracked. The consumer gets convenience, but I’m not sure they realize what they’re giving up.” I shrugged. “It’s a treasure trove of data they’re collecting about their patron’s habits. Targeted ads, targeted promotion. To me, it’s invasive.”

The interview wrapped up without Ed saying much. I glanced at Daniel to see how I’d done, but his face was friendly. It made him hard to read. “We’ve got some more interviews this next week, but we’ll be in touch,” Daniel said.

I thanked them for the opportunity and smiled at Ed before leaving the coffee shop. I walked the few blocks to campus and dropped my things off in the office. Sid was there, and she looked up from her desk. “Hi, Rita. Wasn’t your interview this morning? How’d it go?”

I tilted my hand from side to side. “Eh. Hard to tell. Ed was impassive, but Daniel was friendly. I’m honestly not sure if I want the job.”

Sid peered at me. “Why not? It seems like it’d be in your wheelhouse. You and Ed get along. Is Daniel a problem?”

I shook my head. “No. Daniel’s fine. Seems like he’d be a good boss.” I smiled. “Not as good as you, but a good boss.”

Sid scoffed. “Charmer. Still, what’s the problem? I thought you’d be over the moon about this. Didn’t you want to stay

local if you could? Or is Arizona calling?”

I shuddered. “As much as my mom would love that, I’m done with the Arizona heat and sun.” I looked at Sid, sitting confidently in her office chair, the ruler of her domain. True, she answered to her department head, but she didn’t work daily under a boss. Of course, I was used to working daily for her. Would Ed and Daniel be that different?

I finally put voice to my concerns. “I’m worried about working full-time with Ed.”

“He’s a bit of an odd duck, but he seems like he’s the good sort. Not a serial killer or anything,” she added with a smile.

“Hardee-har,” I said tonelessly. “He’s not odd,” I defended. “Maybe a little quirky,” I acknowledged, “but he’s sweet. And sexy,” I added.

Sid’s brows nearly reached the stratosphere. “Sexy, huh?”

I nodded reluctantly. There. I’d said it. Out loud. I stared up at the ceiling, waiting for lightning to strike me. He was a friend. A friend that hadn’t expressed any interest in me. Maybe I wasn’t his type. But I was coming to realize he was mine. Even mute at the interview, I’d been distracted, wondering what he was thinking. When we were on our own, things were effortless. We complimented each other; he was the pivot chart to my pivot table. We each made sense on our own, but we were better together.

“What are you going to do?”

I shrugged. “I really don’t know,” I admitted. “He’s friendly, but I don’t think he’s interested. If they offer me the job, I’m going to have to decide if I can handle working for him, being his friend, and watching him date someone else.”

Sid nodded slowly. “Good luck.”

“Thanks.” I was going to need it.

# CHAPTER 16: ED

Daniel peered at me, a smile toying with his lips. “What did you think?”

I met his gaze calmly. “Eh, she was alright.”

Daniel snorted. “All right? Were you and I even in the same interview?”

“She was two minutes late.”

“Ed. I’m regularly five minutes late. Does it make me a bad partner?”

I squirmed in my seat. He had a point. I could handle him being late. “Yes, but this was an interview. You should absolutely be on time for an interview.”

As excuses went, it was thin. Daniel shook his head. “What’s up with you? I thought you liked Rita?”

“I do.”

“Then what’s the problem? She seems great.”

“SHE IS GREAT.”

The words were out before I realized how loud I’d gotten. Other patrons in the coffee shop turned to stare at us. I guess they’d never heard two men argue about how great someone was before. So. Great. Too great.

I shifted in my seat. Daniel waited me out, staring. “It’s just —” I paused and sighed. “She’s distracting,” I admitted. “She has all that hair, and that energy.”

I wanted to call them back as soon as the words left my mouth.

Daniel’s brows raised. “She’s distracting. With the hair. And the energy.” He repeated, running a hand through his own

short, dark hair, smoothing it back. “Buddy. Last time I checked, a large portion of the population has hair. And energy. If we didn’t, we’d be dead. Or at least crummy employees. I want to hire her *for* her energy. Not so much the hair,” he acknowledged. “That’s really not relevant. But she’s smart. She’d be good at this. Great with clients. Don’t you want to hire someone with her talent?”

“Yes,” I expelled. I didn’t know how to explain myself. Looking at Daniel, I could tell he wasn’t buying my excuses. “She’s not in the plan,” I finally blurted.

Daniel’s brown eyes lit with understanding. “The plan, huh? The infamous, twelve-step plan? The one you designed for friendship, not Rita, right?” A shit-eating grin overtook Daniel’s face, creating big creases and dimples highlighting his eyes. “You don’t want to get her pregnant, my ass.”

“I’m sorry, your what?”

“My ass,” he insisted. “Or really, *you’re* the ass here. You *like* her.”

I shook my head. Denial was a thing.

Daniel didn’t let it go. He pointed at me. “No. You like her. Admit it. She’s distracting because you have *feelings*. Inconvenient feelings that don’t fit with your friendship plan.”

I scowled. “That’s not it. We’re just friends, but she seems to move around a lot. What if she gets tired after a short time? We’d have to train someone new.”

“Oh, really? You’re worried about training someone new? Even though there’s no guarantee that might happen? Are you sure this is about work?” Daniel asked.

His questions hit too close to home. She’d leave me. Sooner or later. Her wanderlust was too familiar. There’d be a bright and shiny new opportunity somewhere else, and she’d go. Leave. I couldn’t afford to let her closer. Casual friends

until she moved on, sure. Working together? I'd never want her to go.

"We're just colleagues on this grant, nothing more."

Lie. I held back the throat clearing that would betray me. Pushing those words through my tight jaw had taken effort.

"Not just that. You hike and watch movies together. You see her every week and text with her."

I opened my mouth to refute his statement, but he wasn't wrong. I tried again. "So?"

Even I knew that was the world's weakest argument.

"I think you need to read those notes you're keeping and ask yourself some hard questions. Is it truly about friendship with Rita, or something more?"

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When I got home, I pulled out the notebook I'd been using to track my interactions with Sid and Rita. I totaled my metrics, including my notes from Jake.

My progress relating to Sid wasn't stellar. We'd barely scratched the surface of anything more than professional courtesy. I'd been more successful with Jake. With all his irreverent charm, he was fun to be around. Also, probably one of the most open and easy-going people I'd ever met. Then there was Rita. She got me. Playful differences in work approaches aside, we made a good team. I couldn't begin to remember all our smiles and laughter, but there'd been a lot.

And the touching. Sleeping next to her, trying to give her relief from her migraine. There'd definitely been touching. I reread my data. I'd written no notes about how much I wanted to nibble on Sid's ears. In fact, I couldn't picture her ears or much about her. It took almost no effort to picture



Rita's springy dark hair and deep brown eyes. The curve of her shoulder and the shape of her calves in her hiking clothes were clear as if she were standing next to me. But that didn't mean she felt the same. And it didn't mean she'd stick around unless she had a reason to. Friendship was the safer bet.

My data danced in the back of my mind through the rest of the day. I tried to focus on actual work for a payroll system conversion, but I made limited progress. The data I was manipulating into the new format kept swimming before my eyes. Instead, I played hooky and spent more time on the fun run registration site, finalizing the web launch and emailing the link to the team members focused on social media and advertising, including Jake and Barb. It was a relief to log out when five thirty rolled around and get ready for dinner with Daniel and Angi instead.

I knocked at six on the dot and Angi opened the door with a smile. She appeared happy to see me, which was a good thing since tonight's dinner invitation had been a command performance issued only this morning.

"Hi, Angi. Thanks for having me tonight."

Her smile turned wry as she pushed a hank of long, dark hair behind her shoulder. "Thanks for coming. Apparently, none of us had a choice tonight—emergency meeting for your love life. Or lack thereof."

I followed her into the kitchen where Daniel was pulling something out of the oven. He looked up when Angi and I approached. "Just in time. Grab your seats. We'll give this a minute to cool, then we can eat."

I danced around my reason for being there as we ate, instead asking Angi questions about her job and focusing on small talk. When we'd cleared most of the meatloaf and roasted veggies from our plates, Angi asked the question I'd been dreading.

“So, how’d the interview go today? Weren’t you meeting with Ed’s friend from the university?”

I nodded and let Daniel answer. “Yes. She was fabulous. I think we should hire her.” He gave me a penetrating stare. “But Ed disagrees. We’re going to analyze his reasoning tonight after dinner. You’re welcome to join us.”

Angi shook her head. “Oh no. I know better than to get in the middle of you two when you talk business. I’m going to go read in the other room and let you hash it out.”

She pushed back from the table and placed a quick kiss on her husband’s cheek before leaving the kitchen.

“Did you bring it?” Daniel asked.

I nodded and went to my coat to retrieve my notebook from my jacket pocket. I set the black leather moleskin notebook on the kitchen table between us, then used a finger to push it closer to Daniel.

“It’s all in here.”

Daniel nodded and flipped open the book. Each page detailed a different meeting, and he quickly flipped through my notes.

I wasn’t sure how to interpret Daniel’s soft hum. He pushed back in his chair. “How are you interpreting your data?”

It was a trap. But I opened my mouth anyway. “Well, I’m making okay progress.”

“Uh-huh.”

Daniel didn’t sound impressed, and I moved into bluster mode. “We’re just friends.”

“With Rita,” Daniel said before staring at me.

I nodded. He shook his head. For sure, trap.

“This morning you told me she was too distracting. Are you sure you don’t have stronger feelings for her? You’ve been spending a lot of time together.”

Any feelings were likely one-sided. Friendship seemed possible. Anything else was an unreachable dream. “I’m sure.”

“Okay, and now that you’ve had time to analyze your data, what’s your position on hiring Rita?”

“You should make her an offer.” She was still distracting. Way too distracting. But I was a grown man, capable of avoiding temptation. I’d stay focused on friendship and we’d be fine.

Daniel stared at me for a few moments. “You know if we hire her, you can’t date her, right?”

I nodded. We were friends. That was all. If she wanted the job, I wouldn’t stand in her way. Opportunities like this would be rare in town. If she didn’t get the job with us, the chances of her moving away after graduation were high. My gut clenched, and I took a deep breath. It was better to keep her as a friend, than lose her from my life.

Daniel scowled down at my notebook. I didn’t know what he was upset about. He wanted to hire Rita, and I was ensuring we could. He had no reason to complain. He stared into my eyes before shaking his head. Somewhere in this conversation I’d failed him.

“I want you to be happy.”

“I’ll be happy if we hire Rita for our office. She’s smart and she’ll be a good addition.”

Daniel nodded slowly. “I’ll call her this week and let you know what she says.”

“Great.”

“Great,” Daniel echoed.

Everyone was getting what they wanted. I'd have a new friend and colleague in the office if she accepted. Daniel would get a skilled analyst and more time with Angi and Rita would have the means to pay off her student loans. Why did I not feel great?

# CHAPTER 17: RITA

I didn't hear from Daniel after the interview. He'd told me they wouldn't decide right away, but the waiting was torture. I obsessed. If they offered the job, would I take it? It was my best chance of working in town after graduation, staying near my friends. Staying near Ed. But, it'd be a death knell to anything besides friendship with him. Maybe we were destined to be friends. He'd made no overt moves. He hadn't asked me for anything more. Maybe I was the only one with inconvenient thoughts.

True, he'd invited me over for movie night, but Cheri and I had movie nights all the time. He hadn't touched me romantically. But I'd wanted him to. And therein lay the problem. My feelings were entirely one-sided. Could I work alongside him and focus solely on friendship? Ignore his blunt-tipped fingers on the keyboard during team meetings. Ignore the masculine scent of soap and skin when he moved in close. Ignore the sensual curve of his bottom lip and the way he pushed his glasses up that aquiline nose. The list of things I'd have to ignore grew obnoxiously long by the minute.

Working together would force us into regular meetings and assignments even if we didn't share an office. Teaming with him short-term for Sid's grant would only last a matter of months, but employment could run years. Decades. It'd be awkward when he introduced a new girlfriend. I'd always wonder what if.

I couldn't do that to myself. My infatuation was dangerously close to something more. I could hope immersing myself in a friendship as coworkers would disillusion me quickly, but I didn't want to bet my future on it. If I accepted the job only to quit a few months later, the short stint would tarnish my résumé. I could see the impending train wreck, and

it'd be foolish not to avoid it. Opting to leave before I got in too deep would be smarter.

If I didn't take the job, there'd be another. Not with Daniel and Ed, but I'd find something that fit my talents. Just not in Benton. I glanced up from where I'd been staring sightlessly at my thesis on my laptop. I needed to get serious about my job search.

I switched gears and pulled up the latest list of job ads Maddy had sent me. She was good at nudging me along. Two sounded interesting, and I completed the applications and attached my résumé. One way or another, I'd have options, because working with Ed wasn't in the cards. The work itself would be interesting but being close to him would be torture.

I needed a job without distractions. Something wholly mine. It would be painful to move away from Cheri, Sid, and even Ed, but it was the right decision for my career. I had a solid plan for my future. Graduate. Get a job. Pay off my loans. I ignored the little voice saying it would take more than a new place and job to make me happy.

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The next morning, my phone rang with an east coast area code at 7:00 a.m.

"Hello," I answered cautiously.

"Margarita Ryan? This is Colleen, HR Manager for Teknon Consulting calling about your application."

"Hi. I wasn't expecting a call so soon. Yes, I go by Rita. It's nice to hear from you."

The speed of Colleen's phone interview gave me whiplash, but I'd agreed to fly out for an in-person office tour and interview with her hiring manager. In Philadelphia. Maddy

would be thrilled. But what would I tell Daniel and Ed? And how desperate was Teknon to call me so fast? Maddy would claim it was my brilliant application and her recommendation, but something about the speed of their process raised red flags.

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Tuesday morning Daniel called, and a fine tremor ran through my hands as I swiped to answer.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Rita. Ed and I enjoyed sitting down with you last week. Your background is impressive, and we believe you’d be a good fit at Kwon and Associates. I’d like to make you an offer to join us as our newest associate. Is that something you’re still interested in?”

I took a deep breath and blew it out before responding. An offer. Everything I wanted. Along with complications I didn’t. “I enjoyed meeting with you too, Daniel, and I appreciate your faith in me. However, after giving it some thought, I don’t think it’s the right opportunity for me.”

“Can I ask why?”

He could. He could absolutely ask why. But how straight did I want to be with him? We didn’t know each other well, and he was too close to Ed to risk it.

“I, um, have decided a larger firm would be a better fit for me.”

Daniel was quiet a moment. “I see. I’m disappointed, but I understand.” I could hear the smile in his voice as he wrapped up our call. “I wish you all the best. I would have loved working with you, but I think you’re making the best decision considering other factors. I’ll hope to see you around.”

Other factors? What other factors? It was on the tip of my tongue to ask, but I chickened out.

“Thanks again, Daniel.”

He said goodbye, and I stared at my phone as it lay on my desk. He’d made the offer. They’d made the offer. I blew out a sigh. My feelings were one-sided. Had to be. I packed up my disappointment, shoving it down deep. Ed would be here for our Tuesday lunch meeting in a few hours. I dreaded telling him I’d declined their offer. I’d have to gaze into his blue eyes and hear him ask me why. And then I’d have to lie my ass off. He couldn’t know it was because of him. My pride wouldn’t allow it.

I pretended to work until it was time for lunch. Mostly I clicked around on my Excel workbook and stared off into space. It was a blessing Sid was out of the office, or she’d have called me on my lack of focus. I should have been excited when Daniel called me with the job offer. They liked me. It was proof I was employable. Yay. But it was also proof Ed didn’t care, and that stung. It more than stung, it burned. As a partner, he had to have agreed to the offer. My value to him was as a colleague, nothing more.

My eyes welled with tears, and I took deep breaths, trying to pull them back. Reabsorb them into my tear ducts by will alone. It was a crush. Nothing more. My heart wasn’t involved, no matter what the welling tears tried to tell me. It was just the sting of rejection.

Sid blew into our office a few minutes before lunch, and I debated making an escape. I could fake a migraine and go home instead of facing Ed. I stared at my screen and gritted my teeth. I couldn’t. I’d promised myself never to use my migraines to get out of things. I lost out on too much unwillingly to let them take one more experience from me. Even a crappy experience.

“Hey. Are you ready for our meeting?” Sid asked.



I faked a smile for my friend. “Yep.”

She caught something in my tone that made her peer deeper. “What’s wrong?”

I looked down at my desk, shuffling my notes from our last meeting. “Nothing I want to talk about now.”

She gave me one last penetrating stare before nodding slowly. With a quick glance at the door, she said, “Later.”

I took another deep breath and blew it out slowly. I could do this. Sid and I grabbed our lunches from our fridge, and I was dressing my salad when Ed knocked. I pasted on the same fake smile from earlier. “Hey.”

“Hey,” he said.

He smiled at me expectantly. Crap. Daniel hadn’t told him. He wouldn’t be looking at me like that if he knew. I stared back, waiting for him to ask. The silence stretched. His faint smile faded to a frown, and he opened his mouth to speak as Sid came back in the room. He shot me a quick side glance before saying hello.

Sid didn’t waste any time and jumped into an update and posed a few questions for Ed on our approach for loading sample patient data and the scripts we’d outlined to make it easy to wipe the records when we finished our testing. He answered readily but kept casting glances my way. If he could Vulcan mind-meld to get the answer to the question he clearly wanted to ask, I think he’d try. Lucky for me, he was too far away to lay his fingers against my scalp.

When Sid closed the meeting by thanking Ed and wishing me a good afternoon before whisking off to a department meeting, I thought he was going to burst.

“So? Will you be joining Kwon and Associates?” he finally asked with a smile.

His blue eyes sparkled behind his glasses and every hair was in place. As if he wasn’t breaking my heart by asking.

I summoned a smile of my own, though it wavered along the edges. “No,” I said softly.

Ed’s head reared back slightly. I’d surprised him. Which sucked, because it meant he’d never entertained even the faintest hint of something more with me. I was good old Rita, a great friend to trade favors with, but nothing more.

“What are you talking about? Daniel called and made the offer, didn’t he?”

I nodded. I hadn’t even listened to the offer. Possibly that was a mistake. If Daniel was going to shower me in cash to come work for him, maybe I could shove bills into the cracks of my battered heart to soothe the pain. Enough cash could buy a lot of wine. Or cupcakes. Because those sounded like healthy coping mechanisms.

“Why not?” he asked.

I cleared my throat. He wasn’t asking why I didn’t want cupcakes. My chest ached. Coping wouldn’t be that easy.

“I, ah, I’m considering opportunities in bigger cities, with bigger firms.”

It was true. Ish. True-ish. I would be considering opportunities in bigger cities with bigger firms, because Kwon and Associates was the only local firm of their kind.

“Oh.”

I mustered a smile. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out. I’m sure you had other strong candidates.”

“But none of them were you,” he said softly.

Bastard. He said it with such sincerity. If he was talking about something more than a job, my aching heart would be pirouetting in my chest. Then I said the words that made me want to rip my tongue out. “We’ll still be friends.”

# CHAPTER 18: ED

I swallowed and didn't meet Rita's eyes. I shouldn't take her rejection personally. Maybe it wasn't me; maybe she thought Daniel was a tool. No one thought that, so she'd be the first, but it was possible. The rejection stung. Working together would have been a great opportunity. We could continue our friendship. Over the course of the grant project with Sid, it'd become clear to me how much she relied on Rita. Rita had done the bulk of the planning and a lot of the modeling. Sid was brilliant too, but Rita was a powerhouse behind the scenes.

Did I not measure up? Did she not want to work with me? We'd collaborated smoothly together thus far, and I couldn't understand why she didn't want to continue. Did she want to move away that badly?

I pushed down the spinning sensation. I was off track even though everything had gone to plan. Rita was meant to be a friend, and I'd take what she offered.

I mustered a smile. "Of course. I'd still like to finish our movie. Do you want to come over Thursday night?"

I had balls of steel. Nay, titanium. I'd taken the first rejection and invited her to give me a second helping. Boom. Nailed it. Living the dream. Or the nightmare.

"Sure."

The underlying sadness in her eyes made me question her response. I cleared my throat. "What?"

"What time?"

I almost asked her *time for what* before my brain switched from disbelief to relief. "Six? We can order a takeout for dinner if you want. Maybe Thai?"

“I want. Next, you’ll be offering wine, you seducer of women. I still have a thesis to complete.”

My shoulders relaxed as it sunk in she was accepting. Maybe turning down the job wasn’t about me. “I ... have wine.”

Her smile was more sincere as she pushed to her feet from behind her desk. “Then I’ll see you Thursday.”

“Great,” I said.

I’d expected Rita to accept Daniel’s job offer. The weight of that expectation lay across my shoulders since my dinner with him. Hearing she’d turned it down should have felt like a lift. Instead it felt like an indictment. Why weren’t we good enough? Was it something I’d said? Something I did? I was tempted to remind her of the rubric we’d developed together and ask her how our offer rated, but I resisted. She had a right to her own decisions. Her own path. But if she was still willing to hang out, to be friends, then we were okay.

I squashed the secret voice whispering “new plan” when Rita told me she wouldn’t be joining Kwon as an employee. Rejection trumped relief, but now that the sting of her refusal had faded, and we had plans to spend time together, I was drowning in relief. I was free to be her friend. If that voice at the back of my mind kept whispering about more, I couldn’t listen. Rejecting our offer had likely cemented her plans to move. She wouldn’t be around long enough for more.

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When I got back to my home office, I called Daniel. “She refused?” I asked without preamble.

She’d told me herself, but I wanted to hear it from him. I thought he’d text me after speaking with her.

“She did.”

“Did she say why?”

“Something about wanting to work with a larger firm. It’s fair, she’d have more opportunity if she goes with a bigger outfit. Is that relief I hear in your voice?”

Another trap. But I bluffed my way through. “No, not relief. We still need to find someone.”

“Uh-huh. How long did it take you to ask her out after she told you she wasn’t going to be working with us?”

I huffed. “I didn’t ask her out. What are you insinuating?”

“Yeah? Do you have plans to see her again?”

I cleared my throat. “We started a movie last week. She’s coming over tomorrow to finish it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s only a friendly movie night. You know I don’t like to leave things unfinished. It’s been driving me crazy.”

“Then why didn’t you finish it without her?”

He had a point. If I told him I couldn’t imagine watching it without her next to me on the couch, he’d use that as evidence my plans were faulty. I wouldn’t give him the ammunition. “I’ve been busy.”

“Sure. Sure, you have.” His tone was knowing.

Definitely a trap.

“If you don’t wake up and face facts soon, you’re going to lose her,” he said. “Do me a favor. Research confirmation bias tonight. Then read your data from your friendship project and call me.”

Daniel hung up without another word. I couldn’t understand why he was upset. I was doing the logical thing. Rita and I would be friends and we’d all hang out in the time

she had left. It'd be perfect. Never mind that I hadn't invited Sid or Jake to movie night.

I was making myself a simple supper of canned tomato soup and grilled cheese when my phone buzzed.

*Daniel: Did you look up confirmation bias yet?*

I snorted. It wasn't like Daniel to be pushy.

*Ed: No, not yet.*

*Daniel: Do it. Thank me later.*

I shook my head. Unlikely. I scrolled to a browser and searched as directed after finishing the last bite of my sandwich. *Confirmation bias—the tendency to search for facts and data in a way that confirms or strengthens one's prior beliefs or hypotheses.*

Was this Daniel's way of telling me my plans were wrong? I scowled. I could usually rely on Daniel to accept me, warts and all. Still, he'd asked me to learn about confirmation bias and review my data.

I opened my latest notes and summary. If I was reading them with fresh eyes, what would they tell me?

*Ed: I give up. What am I missing?*

*Daniel: What happens if you consider that good friends make the best lovers and add chemistry into the mix?*

*Daniel: Now take another look at your diary and your time with Rita.*

I sighed but did as he directed. Daniel was trying to be helpful. My urge to flip off my phone was unwarranted. And childish. Didn't stop me from extending my middle finger. He was trying to lead me to my own conclusions, instead of telling me the answer. As much as I loved data, some days, I just wanted to know the answer.

And it was staring me in the face.

I didn't want to nibble on Sid. I had no desire to kiss Jake.

Yes, Rita had become a friend. Her quick mind kept conversation flowing. We could disagree and battle about work styles without making either of us feel like a loser. She didn't laugh at my Bigfoot hobby. Okay, she didn't laugh *much*. And it wasn't at me. Like Daniel, she accepted me as-is. Wanted to spend time with me. Had been there when I hurt myself, pitching in. Her beauty extended beyond the curvy and outgoing package to her soft heart underneath. Her quick smiles and teasing about everything from mystery meat to sharing the popcorn bowl only added to her appeal.

But oh, that mouth. Snarky. Sexy. I shifted, remembering her effervescent grin as we looked out at the horizon to the ocean from the trail. Remembered the feel of her hands, searching my body for possible broken bones. Even the memory of her platonic touch sent pleasure firing along every nerve. I'd resisted the urge to kiss her then. Barely. Burying any feelings beneath friendship.

*Ed: I want her.*

*Daniel: Don't you think it's time for a new plan?*

I'd failed before I began with Rita. She planned to move away after graduation. She'd already turned down the job offer to work with us. At best, I had mere months before

our grant finished and she moved on. She'd be leaving me. Friendship wouldn't change that. But hanging on to old patterns hadn't done me any favors so far. Was it time to reconsider? I wasn't rooted in Benton. If anything, I'd been holding myself apart, avoiding close connections. Ready for transplant. The lessons of childhood kept me separate from most of the people around me. Until now. Small tendrils, tentative roots, had been growing toward Rita, entangling beneath the soil's surface.

My heart ached thinking about the possibility of another rejection, another loss. Being ripped at the roots. But not trying with her hurt more. I read Daniel's text again. It was time to stop hiding from the light. Growth didn't happen in the dark. Time for a new plan.



# CHAPTER 19: RITA

Cancelling on Ed would be the smart move. Spending more time with him would only prolong the pain. I'd be moving on. I'd already set up two interviews thanks to Maddy and Sid and submitted a handful more applications on my own. One interview with a firm like Kwon and Associates in Philadelphia, and the other, the one I was most excited about, Sid helped me arrange after I conceded that a referral couldn't hurt.

Sid had discovered that the organization funding our grant wanted to hire a data administrator. I'd be responsible for the long-term management of the database we developed, and better still, I'd have more opportunities to work with Sid if she won the second grant for app development. A dream job. If the dream weren't in Boston. Then again, maybe distance from Ed would be better than eking out a one-sided friendship.

I stared at my phone. He'd texted earlier in the day, sharing a link to the menu for the Thai restaurant in town.

*Ed: Tell me what you want. And tell me how hot you like it. How many stars?*

He'd be shocked if he knew how hot I liked it. I was ready for the four-star treatment. I bit my lip.

*Rita: Hot enough to make me melt.*

There was a pause, and I saw the text bubble indicating Ed was writing his reply.

Then it went away. Then it was back. He was struggling, and I smiled. Good. I'd almost made that last text *hot enough to make my panties melt*. Even I knew that was too far to laugh off as friendly teasing. If karma was my girl, he was probably clearing his throat about now.

My mother would be ashamed. Not that I wanted to seduce Ed, but that I'd been too scared to go after what I wanted. She'd raised me better. Fading flowers didn't pick up and move for love. Even if it hadn't worked out with my father.

I might not get exactly what I want, but that didn't mean I had to leave town empty-handed. I could find out once and for all how he tasted. Learn if he was as much fun to tease in the bedroom as he was in the office. New resolve flooded through me. Time to make my mother proud. Be brave. Somewhere in Arizona, she was shuddering like I'd walked over her grave, but she'd been young and in lust once.

Letting Ed know I wanted to add hooking up to our list of friendly activities wouldn't be that painful. Either he'd be oblivious to my attempts, or he'd enjoy some inkling of the torture he inflicted on me. Tonight I'd get him out of my system. Cross the line between friendship and something more. Or at least play with it. The insidious idea took root. Could I do it? Sex him out of my system? And keep my heart out of it? My pulse raced. He knew I'd be moving. No one had to get hurt. We could do each other this last favor before I left. Never mind that I didn't want to leave. Not him, not the town. But I couldn't stay either. Not if it meant working together and denying my feelings. If I kept things short and moved on, I wouldn't have time to grow more attached.

I dressed with my assets and Ed in mind. I dug a shirt out of my closet that rarely saw the light of day; it was deceptively simple and sexy as hell. Teal blue and strappy, it showed just the right amount of cleavage. The weather was warm enough that I wouldn't freeze, but to be safe I added a light sweater.

My jeans hugged my hips and cupped and lifted to enhance every curve. It was as close as I'd get to a bandage dress and stilettos.

Cheri whistled when I entered the living room.

“Hey, good lookin’. Where are you off to on a school night?”

My lips turned up at the corners. “Ed’s.”

“Ed’s, huh?” Her dark blond brows crept up her forehead.

“Yep.”

“Hmm ... do I need to call out the cavalry if you don’t return tonight?”

I shook my head.

“No, don’t call the cavalry, or no, you won’t be out all night?”

I shrugged. “We’ve already established he’s not a serial killer. I think I’m safe for the night.”

Cheri tapped her chin. “I notice you didn’t answer my question.”

“Very observant of you, Cheri.”

She grinned at me. “Just remember, make memories, not babies.”

“Ha. I’ll remember.”

“See that you do. I won’t be fully certified for a few more years. You’ve got to wait to be my first patient.”

I shook my head. In Cheri’s fantasy, she’d get her midwife credentials in time for her friends to pop out kids.

“Not in my plans, Cheri.”

Her brows wiggled. “The best things never are.”

I grabbed my purse and wished her good night before making the short drive to Ed’s. His porch light was on, and it

beckoned with a welcoming glow as I parked in his driveway. His yard was neat and orderly, cut recently. The tang of cut grass floated on the air as I made my way to the front door and knocked.

Ed opened the door with a smile and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose before opening the door wider to let me in.

“Hey, Rita.”

I stepped into the entryway, sniffing for a whiff of cut grass, but all I could catch was soap, skin, and a hint of peppermint. I loved that he didn’t smell heavily of product. Men who bathed in cologne were an immediate recipe for migraine. “Did you mow today?”

Ed glanced down at himself in confusion. “I showered. Did I miss some grass? Sorry about that.”

He looked up, and I smiled at him. My mind raced with images of him shirtless and sweaty, mowing the front lawn. He’d use his T-shirt to wipe any stray grass from his forearms and chest. The soft fabric would brush over those corded muscles, dislodging bits of green from the dark hairs set in his golden skin. My nipples peaked beneath my shirt, and it took an effort of will not to glance down and tell them to behave. Hussies. Instead, I kept my focus on Ed’s eyes, willing him not to look down. Or to look down. Maybe him noticing my arousal would give me the extra boost of confidence I needed to cross the invisible line between us.

Instead, I laughed to hide my discomfort. “No, I noticed how nice it looked out front. I wondered if you hired a service.”

It would be a darn shame and *disservice* to the neighborhood if he hired a landscaper. The retired ladies and stay-at-home moms on the block probably loved that he maintained his own lawn. Lady-pervs like me loved to watch.

My eyes caught on his broad shoulders as I pictured them bare again. Ed cleared his throat, and my gaze flew back to his.

“Can I take your sweater?” he asked.

I nodded and slipped it from my shoulders, handing it to him along with my purse. He stepped into my space to maneuver around the small hall and stow them, and I didn't step away. His warm body brushed mine, and I hid a shiver. Goose bumps pearled across my bare shoulders at the contact, and I rubbed my hands across my arms.

Ed caught the motion as he swung the closet door closed. “I'm sorry. Did you want to keep your sweater?”

I shook my head. Was it a bad sign that he wanted to add clothing? Here I wanted to propose losing more. It was my turn to clear my throat. “No, I'll be fine.”

My pulse raced, and I'd barely made it through the door. I was. Not. Fine. I glanced at Ed to see if he noticed, but his eyes were fixed on the exposed skin of my shoulders. His gaze traveled down to where my nipples saluted before he cleared his throat.

“Right. You're fine.” He took a quick step back and his gaze met mine. “Would you like some wine? Food should be here any minute.”

I nodded and followed him into his small kitchen, where he poured glasses for each of us before leading the way back to the living room. We sipped quietly, and I let the silence grow. Ed shifted on his side of the couch, glancing from the glass of wine I was cupping, to my face, to my exposed skin. He couldn't seem to settle. Served him right. I shifted in my seat, tucking one leg beneath me. It made me uncomfortably aware of how warm the seam of my jeans was growing. I needed to focus on something other than how much Ed turned me on. The combination of pheromones and subtext floated on the air, seeping into every pore and amping up my awareness of his body next to mine.

We'd never struggled to talk with each other before, but I couldn't come up with anything to say. "Wanna get naked?" lacked a certain subtlety. But maybe with Ed, that's what I needed. He seemed similarly unsettled, but probably not for the reasons I hoped. We sipped silently for a few more moments before he blurted, "How's your thesis going?"

I relaxed my shoulders. I could do this. We had all evening. There was no rush. I launched into a description of my work, focusing on the progress I'd made. Ed's questions shouldn't have surprised me, but he showed genuine interest. He seemed to relax as our conversation focused more on research and the undercurrents eased.

Talk of research led to discussion of my academic career and how I liked living in Connecticut. Ed shared a few anecdotes about growing up an only child in Oregon, charming me with stories of the elaborate plans he had to build a fort at the edge of a local park before discovering the area was covered in poison oak. Thoughts of a younger, dirt-kneed Ed, floppy dark hair and big glasses over rashy, red skin filled my heart with tenderness I couldn't afford.

The doorbell rang, and Ed sprang from the couch to accept the delivery. He thanked the acne-riddled teenager and tipped him before returning to me with the paper bags.

"Ready to eat?"

I nodded, and he set the containers down before moving to grab silverware and plates from the kitchen. We dished up the fragrant noodles, and he turned on the movie.

"All right if we watch while we eat?"

"Sure."

Watching our movie was better than tackling him to the floor like a hungry lion. I was too distracted by his presence to carry on much of a conversation and pretend to eat at the same time. Once I quit denying my attraction, it was all I could see. The kind eyes. The muscular forearms with a light

dusting of dark hair. *Unf.* If I bit my fist, he'd have questions. Not a normal reaction to Thai food. Maybe focusing on one hunger would subjugate the other. That would be easier without my thigh pressed up against his. The heat radiating through me had nothing to do with our dinner and everything to do with his firm quad snuggled against mine.

I focused on the burn from my pad thai and ignored the warmth from contact with the man next to me. On screen, the Goonies defeated trap after trap. Old as the movie was, the major themes held up. Going after what they wanted, embracing the adventure. Overcoming fear. I glanced at Ed. How would he react if I asked for what I wanted? Would he tell me we were just friends? That my looks were kind of pretty when my face didn't screw it up? Or would it be the push he needed to see me as more?

I squirmed again. "Do you have any rum?"

His brows raised. "You want to do shots?"

"I want courage."

I shivered as his gaze drew a line from my eyes, to my neck, to my breasts. His attention slipped like a fingertip, leaving goose bumps in its wake. I couldn't help picturing unending kisses. His hands caressing my body. The big, blunt-tipped fingers could probably soothe all my aches and raise an army of new ones.

"What do you need courage for?" he asked hoarsely.

I stared into his blue eyes. Was that desire or fear? Would laying out what I wanted ruin our friendship?

We had weeks left on the grant. Weeks until I would leave. How would I spend my time? Did I want to live with the constant ache for someone I couldn't have? Or could I take what I wanted, burn him out of my system, and be ready to move on without any what-ifs?

The movie played on, but we were oblivious, focused only on each other. I reached out to cup a hand under his jaw and leaned in closer. He'd shaved after his yard work. He probably hadn't done it to avoid abrading my skin with his whiskers, but the smooth texture gave me confidence. "I want you."

Direct and to the point. Drawing him a map of the erogenous zones I wanted him to explore would be overkill, right? Our very own treasure map. Then again, that discovery would please us both.

Ed's eyes darkened, and he wet his lips, drawing my attention to them. Would they be soft or hard on my own? "To be clear, there's no more to that sentence, right?"

I leaned back slightly, gazing into his eyes.

"Like, 'I want you to review my résumé again,' or 'I want you to mow my lawn.' I've been wrong before."

I smiled slowly. "Only if that last one is a euphemism."

"Are you flirting with me right now?"

"I don't know, is it working?"

He nodded slowly. I didn't even realize he'd moved, but his big hands cradled my hips and lifted me until I straddled his body on the couch. I sank down onto his lap until my progress was impeded by the bulge of his erection. He groaned as I pushed more firmly against him, and my own groan joined the chorus.

"You feel so good in my hands," he whispered in my ear as he kneaded my ass, rubbing me against him in a slow rhythm. My breath shuddered and I trembled at the sensation. The friction built, and I regretted the fabric between us.

"I'd feel even better wrapped around you," I breathed.



He groaned again, bringing his lips to meet mine. What started as a gentle exploration turned into a dance I'd nearly forgotten the beats to. It'd been too long. Tendrils of heat burned everywhere we touched. My clothing clung too restrictive, too tight, and I reached down between us to pull my shirt off. Ed sighed at my display of skin and ran his lips down the arch of my neck before cupping my breasts in his palms. My nipples hadn't found Jesus in the last forty minutes, and they continued to announce my arousal to anyone listening. Ed's gentle scrape and loving lave proved he'd been paying attention.

I tugged the hem of his shirt out of his jeans and pulled it off over his head. I stroked his chest, trailing my hands over his pecs, enjoying the firm swells of muscle beneath my fingertips. His eyes dropped to half-mast behind his glasses as he took in my curves and zeroed in on the button at my fly.

Ed's thumb traced the round button. "This okay?" he asked.

I nodded and arched up, giving him more room to flick the button open and loosen the jeans at my waist. His big hands cupped my hips and started to lift me from him.

"Where do you think you're going?" I asked.

"My condoms are in my bedroom."

I shook my head. "You're not the only one who can plan. Check my back pocket."

Ed's smile stretched wide as he slid his hand into the back pocket of my jeans, pulling out the foil-wrapped circle.

"Be still my heart."

I leaned in for a hard kiss. "Not yet. I have plans for you that require blood flow."

I grabbed the condom from his hand before urging his palm down to my center. Ed took the hint and pressed between us

before rotating the heel of his hand against me. Hot need rushed through me. More. I arched against him before sliding off his lap and pushing my jeans down my hips.

Ed's gaze traveled from the curves of my breasts, tilted toward him at attention, down the swell of my stomach and over the arch of my hip. My black lace bikini panties were the closest thing I had to lingerie, but he licked his lips like anything more elaborate would have been overkill.

“Your body is beautiful. I want to sink into you so badly.”

I shivered and held my breath. I wanted it too. The heat. The friction. Feeling full and connected. I reached out a hand, and instead of letting me tug him into the bedroom, Ed pulled me forward, settling my knees on either side of his hips and keeping my hips elevated until he could pull them forward and let his breath blow along my hip bone. He placed a quick kiss there before gripping my hips more firmly, bracing me for his full attention.

My head fell back, and I arched into his mouth as he found my center. At first, it was just a gentle breath against my mound. Shivers cascaded down my spine, then he pressed, and his tongue covered my clit, dampening the silk between my thighs. My shiver turned into a full body shudder. He'd barely touched me, but my body was so pent up, I was already on edge.

He paused before gazing up at me. “This okay?”

“More,” I sighed.

He hummed against me, and another shudder racked my body. Ed hooked his fingers into my panties and pulled them over the curves of my hips until they caught above my knees, holding me captive on his lap. Knees to either side of his thighs, he slouched down against the back of the couch until he reached the perfect height. I could push off and slip away, but something about the posture, panties down, legs spread, everything on display, felt deliciously naughty.

I grasped Ed's shoulders with a gasp as he moved in earnest, lapping at me. My eyes closed as I focused on the rough pad of his tongue against my sensitive skin. Swipe after swipe stroked me. So close. He maintained a steady pace and I burned at the contact. He kept me there, churning on the precipice, before muttering, "You're everything."

My hands clenched, digging into the muscles at his shoulders as he picked up his pace and I dropped over the edge. My head fell back again as the ripples of my orgasm washed over me. Ed stared at me through half-closed eyes as I melted back into his lap, my panties still tight around my knees. Boneless and content. He reached out a hand and stroked his erection. At some point he'd freed himself from his pants, and he looked painfully ready for more.

"Condom," I demanded softly. My throat was scratchy and dry. I scrambled around for where I'd dropped it on the couch, but Ed found it first. My lips twitched. Someone was motivated.

I tore along the perforation and settled the condom on his crown, slowly rolling it down to the base of his erection. It was his turn to groan, and I watched as his eyelids dropped. I sank down until I was fully seated, absorbing him in my heat. Full. Aching with the desire to move. To stroke him like he'd stroked me.

"You feel amazing," Ed breathed. "But don't move."

"Why not?"

"I want to last."

"That's too bad. I want a ride," I challenged.

He opened his blue eyes with a groan. "What the lady wants, the lady gets."

He gripped my hips again, urging me against him. He tried to nudge me faster, but I held to a slow beat. "Faster," he growled.

“Now, now. What happened to what the lady wants?”

He groaned. “I hope the lady wants me.”

I leaned back in, letting myself sink further into our connection. “She does.”

That was entirely too much truth. I sped up my hips, working myself against Ed, enjoying the thrust and pressure until his eyes closed again and he groaned out his climax.

I rested my forehead against Ed’s, breathing hard. The crowd on the beach was going wild in the background as the movie played into the credits. Yeah. Hard agree. We’d earned that. The movie crowd didn’t know what they were missing. I gasped with every breath, but my heartbeat was slowing and my body cooling.

I pulled back slightly, and Ed placed a quick kiss on my forehead before lifting me off him and heading to the bathroom to clean up. I’d wanted to burn him out of my system. Instead, I invited him under my skin. Before I could only speculate on how good we’d be together. Now I could be certain.

I stopped the movie and glanced around the living room. Thankfully, the coffee table was far enough from the action we hadn’t tipped over any takeout containers or spilled wine. Earth shaking for me, but the tremors in my body hadn’t spread beyond us.

I slipped back into my shirt, panties, and jeans, then packed up our leftovers and carried them into the kitchen. After putting them away, I rested my forehead against the cool metal of the fridge. Ed and I had made the leap into intimacy. And I had no regrets. *No regrets*, I repeated as I moved back to the living room to face Ed.

He’d pulled on shorts after the bathroom, but I wished he’d put on a shirt too. That much chest on display was distracting. Even after what we’d just done. Maybe because of it. My hormones weren’t done with him yet.

“You’re dressed.”

I gave him a tight smile. “Yeah. I’ve got to head home.”

“Now? I hoped you’d spend the night.”

I shook my head. I couldn’t afford to spend the night. I needed to establish firm boundaries. Or risk my heart. “Look, Ed. Tonight was great, but I don’t want to make it a thing.”

Lies. I couldn’t afford to make it a thing. I’d believed I could handle a casual affair. Every second together eroded my resolve to leave.

His eyes crinkled, and his lips turned down. “A thing?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m moving on soon. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. Friends?”

His expression collapsed like the time lapse of a cactus flower closing, until only his spikes were showing. “I see. Well, you’d better get going then.”

I’d expected a little cajoling. Maybe an argument. Not swift agreement. Was it wrong that I wanted someone to fight for me, just once? My stomach sank and a lump formed in my throat. His expression read as disappointed, but his gruff words all but kicked me out the door. Hurt pride, or something more? If I hadn’t thrown myself at him, would Ed have pursued me? He took what was on offer, nothing more. Maybe any connection I’d felt was one-sided. If I cared more, then inevitably, he’d grow tired of me while I just grew more attached. He’d professed a desire for me to stay the night, not love him forever. Protecting myself had to come first. The only person I could count on long-term was me.

My chest tightened, and it grew hard to breathe. I’d chosen this. Well, not *this* exactly, but I’d wanted him. And I’d gotten everything I desired and then some, it was no use complaining. One night to get him out of my system. Clear my head before my trip. A chance to answer all my questions

about our relationship. Even if I didn't get the answers I wanted.

# CHAPTER 20: ED

My chest ached like it was shrouded in rubber bands, but I forced myself to act normal. I could ask her to stay. Beg for a real chance. But I wouldn't. My mom had proven time and again that any pleas to stick around fell on deaf ears. She always moved on. To the next town. To the next city. You couldn't hold someone back who wanted to leave. It was better not to ask. Then you avoided the disappointment of removing any doubt. Having confirmed that your wishes didn't matter, that the fertile soil over the next horizon was better than any roots you'd put down together.

I pulled Rita's jacket and purse from the closet and handed them to her, trying not to feel underdressed in my shorts. She'd seen all there was to see already. I'd have felt as naked fully dressed. Because she'd exposed me. Exposed me as a fraud. All my careful planning, and for what? For her to finish with me and move on.

I mustered a smile. "Thanks for coming over tonight. I had fun."

"I'll see you Tuesday."

Kill me now. Of course, *I'd* had fun. There was no hiding that. I believed she had too, but she was leaving. When I'd put a friend with no drama on my rubric, this wasn't what I'd meant. I watched as she made her way to her car in the dark and got safely inside. I waved as she pulled out of the driveway, before stepping back. Idiot. She hadn't even looked.

I was the sad, half-naked man standing at his front door waving to the woman who already left. I glanced back at the couch. She'd cleaned up. There was no sign of the time we'd spent writhing on the living room couch. No detritus from our dinner. Even the TV was silent and cold.

I'd crashed and burned. Hard.

I rubbed my forehead. By most metrics, we'd done fine. Hell, we'd done more than fine. Any finer, and my brain would still be mush. I kept replaying the evening in my mind as I lay in bed. No matter how many times I reran things, we still ended in the same place. I couldn't imagine a scenario where Rita wanted to stay with me. I'd thrown out my preconceived notions about what I wanted for my life. But that didn't make Rita want the same things. I couldn't make her want me.

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Daniel's text the next morning caught me raw.

*Daniel: How was your movie?*

How was the movie? I couldn't honestly answer. I'd had trouble focusing on it with her beside me. We'd given up any pretense once I shifted Rita to my lap. I vaguely remembered cheering at the end, but it could have been mostly in my own head.

*Ed: I need your help.*

*Daniel: Good. I need yours too. A couple of our fence panels blew down in last night's storm. Come over today after work and help me fix it?*

There had been a storm last night? I scraped my hands through my hair. I was missing things left and right. Still, doing something productive instead of stewing might ease the



hollow feeling no amount of rubbing at my chest seemed to ease.

*Ed: Yes, please.*

*Daniel: See you at four.*

I relaxed into the rhythm of my morning routine, glad for the distraction. Walking from my home office to the kitchen to refill my coffee cup became an exercise in self-control. I struggled to avoid glancing at the couch in the living room on my way. Instead of picturing Rita, her lush body pressed against mine, head thrown back as she rode me to oblivion, I pictured her as she was when she left. Fully clothed. Done with me. It helped, but my stubborn body kept wanting to revisit other, more pleasurable memories.

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I pulled up to Angi and Daniel's with a sigh, more than ready to share my burdens and stop spinning. Every pass by the couch at home was a form of self-abuse. Pouring myself a cup of coffee and adding cream was torture, because it reminded me of her special blend. Opening a damn spreadsheet—torment. Not because it was hers or something we'd worked on together, but because it made me think of her. Every. Damn. Thing. Made me think of her. I couldn't get away. And I wasn't sure if I wanted to. At least not until I tried to fix it.

Angi answered my knock with a smile. Her long hair was swept back in a ponytail, and the apples of her cheeks were pink with health. I glanced down to her stomach.

“Eyes up here, Romeo. There’s still nothing to see down there.”

I smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Angi. But you look great.”

“Thanks. The nausea is pretty much gone now, I’m feeling great.”

She peered at me more closely, taking in the dark circles beneath my eyes from tossing and turning. “What about you? You don’t look so hot.”

I shrugged. “I screwed up, but I’m not sure how.”

She patted me on the shoulder. “Admitting it is the first step. Come on in. Daniel’s in the backyard. Come tell Ajumma Angi all about it.”

“You don’t resemble any Korean aunty I’ve ever seen,” I acknowledged.

She smiled, and I watched the twinkle light up her face. “As far as you’re concerned, trust me—I’m wise beyond your years or mine.”

I followed her through the house to the patio slider, and Daniel glanced up from reading a bag of concrete mix and smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey, thanks for having me over.”

“Thank you for coming to help. Have you ever built a fence before?”

“Nope.”

Daniel grimaced. “That makes two of us. I’m hoping we can finish before it gets dark.”

Two panels had blown over, taking the support post with it, leaving a gaping hole in their cedar fence. Daniel must have already done a hardware store run, and bless him, he’d purchased two new pre-built panels.

“How can I help?”

I put on my work gloves, and we discussed the plan for the project, which included digging out the old post base and pouring concrete for a fresh piece of pressure treated lumber to replace it. We dug in companionable silence for a few moments, letting the late afternoon breeze cool the sweat from our exertions.

“You said you needed my help?”

I nodded and swallowed. I’d been stubborn and it was time to eat crow. “I screwed up, and I’m not sure how.”

“Your date that wasn’t a date?”

“It turned into a one-night stand that didn’t last the night,” I admitted.

“Did you say something?”

I shook my head.

“Did she say something?”

Again, I shook my head. “No. I went to clean up, and when I came back, she was dressed and halfway out the door.”

Daniel winced. He was quiet a moment, and I had a feeling what he wanted to ask.

“As far as I can tell, she had a good time too.”

Daniel grimaced. “Okay.” He stared at me. “And what about today? Did you call or text her? Try to reach out at all? Let her know you want more?”

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t want to seem pushy. Was I supposed to?”

Daniel closed his eyes briefly. “Only if you want to see her again. Do you?”

“Absolutely. My plans have changed.”

“Talk to her. Let Rita in on your plans; it sounds like she might not know what you want.”

I laughed without humor. “To be fair, I didn’t either until recently.”

“But now you do?”

I nodded emphatically. “Absolutely.”

I wanted Rita in my life. For however long I could have her. Hopefully forever.

# CHAPTER 21: RITA

If Cheri was surprised to see me home, she was too smart to say anything. Or comment on my visibly mussed curls. She didn't judge. I tossed and turned in my own bed that night, wondering what it would have been like if I'd stayed with Ed. We'd slept together once before, but that had been different. There hadn't been so many new feelings involved. I'd realized my mistake almost as soon as the glow from my orgasm faded. Any longer, and I wouldn't be able to leave when the time came. My life in Benton was drawing to a close unless I magicked up another job nearby.

It was kinder to cut ties than prolong the agony. I'd had my fix, and now I needed to put Ed behind me. Thinking about putting him behind me had me thinking about him taking me from behind, and my pulse thundered. I couldn't stop spinning on erotic images of the two of us entwined. I tossed and turned before giving in and getting up to channel my energy into something more productive.

Cheri was asleep and the apartment was dark, so I turned on one light and set my laptop across my legs. I channeled all my frustration into my work. At two I rubbed my eyes and reread what I'd written on my thesis. It was a compelling piece. I sighed and shut down my laptop. Sheer exhaustion claimed me when my head hit my pillow. But at least thinking about my thesis had temporarily shut out thoughts of Ed.

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I was worthless at the office Friday. Sid called me on it after I sent her a file with mistakes multiple times in a row.

“What’s up with you? You’re a zombie today.”

I grunted. “Late night. Sorry, won’t happen again.”

Her brows raised. “Oh? Doing anything fun?”

Fun. Ed had told me he’d had “fun.” I shook my head. Of course, he did. His heart wasn’t involved. I rubbed my chest before leaning back with a groan.

“What? What is it?” Sid asked.

“I made a mistake,” I acknowledged, staring up at the ceiling above my desk.

“So? Screwing up the file is no big deal. We all make mistakes from time to time.”

I groaned again. “That’s not it.”

Ed was radio silent all day. No texts. It affirmed my belief that he was only having “fun.” I was out of his system, and he should be out of mine. But I couldn’t stop thinking about him, and that was the problem.

“What were you doing last night? Or should I say who?” Sid asked with an arch of her brows.

My cheeks colored, but I didn’t need to be embarrassed. Not with Sid.

“Ed,” I muttered.

“I knew it!”

I scowled at her. “Knew what?”

“You’re made for each other,” she crowed, grinning.

Just because he took what I offered didn’t mean he cared.

I shook my head. “No. Just no. We are one and done. It was a mistake. He’s out of my system.”

“A mistake you’re moaning and groaning about the next day is not one that’s out of your system.”

Curse Sid and her infallible logic. He wasn't out of my system. *Yet.*

"Do I need to cancel our Tuesday lunch with him?" she asked.

I appreciated the offer. But I was a big girl. Hooking up with Ed had consequences, and I was prepared to pay them. I swallowed and forced the words out.

"No, don't do that. I'm going to be gone this week for my interview trip anyway. We're adults. We can be friends."

"Friends who bang?"

"No, just friends now."

Though friends who bang did have a ring to it. Or a death knell.

"Let me know if you change your mind. He fulfills the external review requirement for our grant, but he's a volunteer, and I can meet with him on my own if needed. We've finished most of the design." Sid was serious as she searched my solemn expression. "For you, I'd cut him off like *that*," she said as she snapped her fingers.

The first smile of the day crossed my face. "Thanks, Sid. I appreciate your support."

She smiled back. "Anytime."

I made a better show at pretending to work without screwing up everything I touched, but my focus was faked. Every stray thought circled back to Ed. My traitorous body had a taste of something it liked, and cravings for more twined through me, licking like flame at my self-control. Sid made the mistake of suggesting we go out for Thai at lunch as a change of pace, and I don't think she expected my full body shiver. I was grateful when she amended her suggestion to sushi.

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My phone buzzed with an incoming message as I was brushing my teeth before bed. I glanced down and tried not to choke on the toothpaste froth when I saw who it was from.

*Ed: I missed you today. It would have been nice to wake up together.*

I coughed and foam went down the wrong pipe. I kept hacking until my airway was clear, tears streaming down my face. I ran a finger over the bubble of his text, debating my response. Silence was a response. Probably the wiser one, especially given my pending trip to Philly and Boston for interviews. If everything went as planned, I could be moving in a few months. My self-protective instincts kicked in. Better to remind us both of that fact.

*Rita: I'm headed out of town this week. Interviews on the east coast. One with the MRI that I'm really excited about. Thanks again for your help with my resume.*

Maybe my response was a little cold, but it was all I could muster, trying to set us back on friendly footing. I ran my finger over the string of his text again. "Nice." He thought it would be *nice* to wake up together. Such an insipid word. Not enough to hang a future on. Though the sentiment was sweet. I sighed. Ed was caring to a fault and willing to volunteer his time for a good cause. But not willing to admit he might have feelings beyond friendship. I needed more. *Deserved* more. Fantasizing the message was Ed's bicep instead of words on a screen was unhealthy. Mostly it was unhealthy for my heart. I shook my head and closed out of the app. I didn't need more temptation.



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I boarded my flight for Hartford with a distracted smile for the perky gate attendant. I should be thrilled to fly. A free trip to see Maddy. She'd offered to pick me up at the airport and everything. For all the jokes about real friends helping you bury a body, only family would drop you off or pick you up at the airport. Sid had dropped me off in Portland. At five in the morning. With minimal bitching. Sisterhood status unlocked. And to thank her, I planned to move away. Then there was Cheri, who'd volunteered to pick me up on the return trip. During Portland metro rush hour. Bless her. It was more than just Ed I'd be leaving behind if I moved.

Ed. My leaden feet stumbled in the aisle between seats, and I banged my knee on an arm rest. Pain radiated up from my patella, and I breathed through clenched teeth. I deserved that. Where did he fit in my decision? I sighed as I sank into my assigned seat. He didn't. My mother had moved for my father, and I saw how spectacularly shitty—Shittily? Whatever, craptastically that had turned out. Staying in Benton for Ed would doom us. As much as I loved the town, it was time for me to pursue my career. And staying at the college would suck the life out of me.

I spent the flight chatting with my grandmotherly seatmate and preparing for my interviews. Behavioral questions. Factual queries. Samples of my work. I practiced and rehearsed mentally until I felt ready. It was dark by the time I collected my suitcase and made my way to arrivals, and I rolled my shoulders to stretch out the kinks from flying all day. It only took a few minutes for Maddy to pull up from the cell phone lot.

“Rita!”

“Mads!” I squealed back as I threw my arms around her.

We grinned at each other for a moment before a throat clearing interrupted us. I shifted my gaze to the man standing at the trunk of Maddy’s car.

“Hi, Connor.”

He nodded. “Rita.”

Connor helped me load my suitcase, and Maddy and I used the time driving back to their apartment to catch up.

“Are you hungry?” she asked.

“Starving. Any chance we can hit up Sorelli’s for a bowl of their carbonara?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

Maddy and I slid into our familiar rhythm, talking fast, as we filled each other in on the last few weeks. Phone calls weren’t the same. I’d missed her. Missed her face. Seeing her happy with Connor eased something inside me. Maddy was fine. More than fine, she was fabulous. Watching Connor watch her at dinner, the adoration on his face, speared my heart. Ed watched me like that. Sometimes. Usually when I was arguing with him about a data attribute I wanted to add. I’d thought it was passion for our project, not me. But like so many other things with Ed, had I misjudged? The pangs in my chest grew stronger. Would moving away from him, from Sid and Cheri, really make me happy?

My interview with Teknon Consulting was a crushing disappointment. I’d been right to be suspicious of how quickly they wanted to move. The hiring manager, Ted, validated every red flag. The scripted interview questions were fine. It was when he asked me if I had any plans for children that the interview was over for me. Nopety nope. None of his business. It hadn’t even come up in the guise of casual chitchat.

*Ed: How are the interviews going?*

I started and deleted a response to him about the Teknon interviewer no less than ten times. He was the only one who'd appreciate another man who didn't want me to get pregnant. I smirked, thinking of my overnight migraine and subsequent meeting with Daniel in the kitchen. Funny, *not funny*. The memory hit a little too close to home, making me miss him more. Instead, the chirpy text I sent back was designed to hide my regrets.

*Rita: Great! I can't wait to tell you about it at our next lunch.*

I'd chopped him off, not really giving us a chance. Maybe the best thing for my career, but something in my heart whispered *mistake*.

*Ed: Good. I just want you to be happy.*

Happy. My chest clutched. Such a throwaway phrase, but knowing Ed, he meant it sincerely. When had I become such a surface-dweller that I couldn't handle the deeper waters of a relationship? Gliding over the surface with everyone I met meant they couldn't pull me under. But protecting myself from disappointment shouldn't prevent me from trying. Ed wanted me to be happy.

Meeting Beth, the director for the Migraine Research Institute, had reaffirmed my belief in the private sector. The middle-aged black woman radiated competence and professionalism. She'd provided a whirlwind tour of the tiny Boston offices and treated me to coffee in the shop at the base

of the office tower while grilling me on my technical experience and career goals. Her enthusiasm for the institute's mission inspired me. Making a difference with my talents fit what I wanted to do perfectly.

Maddy set a mug near my elbow Saturday morning as I sat at her kitchen table, staring at my notebook. After the interviews Tuesday and Wednesday, I'd used my rental car to check out apartments near Boston. I didn't know if I got the job yet, but if Beth offered, I wanted to be ready to move.

“What's that?”

I glanced up from my notes. “Thanks for the coffee. It's a rubric.”

Maddy's lips twitched behind her mug and she took a sip. “You? With a rubric?”

I shrugged. “A friend encouraged me to make it. To help me with my job search.”

“A 'friend,' huh? Is this the same friend you've been moping about all week?”

“I haven't been mopey.”

Her snort was audible. She coughed “liar” and cleared her throat as if she hadn't called me out. “What factors did you include?”

I showed her my notes, including my analysis for the Boston and Philadelphia roles, along with the job at Kwon and Associates.

“Hmm ...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What?” I pressed.

“The Migraine Research Institute job sounds amazing. On paper.”

“And?”

“I’d love to have you closer.”

“But?” Her tone clearly implied there was one.

“Don’t move for me. And don’t move for him. Ask yourself—do you really want to live in Boston?”

“What’s wrong with Boston?”

“Nothing. If you actually wanted to live there. But you bitched about how big Hartford was when you lived here. *Hartford*. Our population is three percent of the Boston metro area. You chose a grad school in a town with a little over sixty thousand people, which is smaller still. And you think you want to live in Boston? Every day you’ve been here and driven into the city, I’ve seen you tense more. I debated slipping you decaf to encourage you to chill out.”

I huffed. It’s not like I hadn’t thought about staying in Benton. Incessantly. “The jobs I want aren’t in small towns.”

“This Kwon and Associates seems to make it work.”

“Yes, but I don’t want to work there.”

“With him?”

“More like *for* him.”

“Are their clients local?”

“Well, no. They work remotely.”

“Can you?” she asked softly.

Could I? I stared at my rubric until the words blurred. Daniel and Ed made it work. I’d wanted to find a way to stay in Benton. Even moving to Portland or Eugene was less appealing. And I thought moving cross-country again would somehow fix my aversion to big cities? But working for MRI was perfect. I traced the lines of text. I sighed. Trying for a remote role if Beth offered me the job wouldn’t hurt. Much. MRI’s doctors already practiced at multiple clinics around the

country. Maybe their IT support could too? The more I considered the possibility, the more it appealed. But first, Beth had to offer me the job. And I had to convince her that I could be effective remotely.

\*\*\*

Ed's presence in our office on Tuesday hit me like an anvil to the chest. Every muscle tightened as he walked in the door, and it hurt just as much. He gave me a charming grin and pushed his glasses up his nose before holding up a bag in his hand.

"I brought lunch."

My heart. I rubbed my chest, hoping to ease the ache there. I'd missed him.

His grin showed a hint of dimple on one side and made his blue eyes spark. My knees melted to mush in response. I was afraid to check on my lady parts. If he got much hotter, and I continued to deny myself, my pants were sure to start smoldering. I stayed behind my desk to hide any potential pants-on-fire issues and kept my face calm.

"That's thoughtful, Ed. Thanks."

I could be nice. I could be normal. I could be professional. No burning lady bits here.

His blue gaze ran up and down my body as he smiled. "For clarity, this lunch is one way for me to say I like you and want to see more of you. I mean that in the figurative sense, not just literal." His gaze stroked from my curly ponytail to my neck, to the T-shirt covering my chest. "Though I'd love to get literal with you too. This is me wooing you. Asking you to make me part of your plans." He gazed at me earnestly, waiting for a reaction.

Mouth agape, I struggled to find words. Bold Ed was sexy as hell.

There was no resisting his keen expression. Or his honesty. The vise constricting my chest eased. I hadn't been alone in thinking of him as more than a friend. Wanting more. It wasn't a duel to the death over my honor, but somehow his sincere words counted for more in my internal battle, turning the last of my armor to mush. Protecting myself from someone who wanted my happiness, who asked to be part of my plans, and wanted to be my friend before he was my lover sounded more and more like shadowboxing the truth. Past failures didn't predict future pain. If anything, I liked to think I'd learned from my failed relationships, but maybe I'd been listening to the wrong lessons. Our path might not be easy, but that didn't mean it wasn't navigable. If Ed had the optimism to search for bigfoot, then I could muster the strength to tackle my insecurities and give us a real chance.

I cleared my throat and opened my mouth to respond, but Sid chose that moment to rush into our shared office.

“Sorry I'm late,” she said.

She cast me a quick look of apology. My plan had been to use her for a buffer. She made a poor shield from outside the office. And after his admission, I wished she'd stayed out there. His honesty demanded mine in return. But the moment was broken.

Ed set an open Tupperware container down on my desk, and I couldn't resist peering inside. He'd created a small charcuterie plate with salami, crackers, and pickles. No cheese. Any remaining resolve softened. He'd brought me mystery meat. I glanced back up at the handsome planes of his face. He watched me intently behind his glasses.

I couldn't help the smile that tilted my lips. “Thanks.”

His smile in return made me worry for the state of my pants. “I'm glad you like it. Maybe after lunch we can talk?”

I'm hoping if lunch goes well, you'll consider dinner."

I nodded slowly and his grin returned.

"Dinner sounds great," I said.

Sid called attention back to our project work, and I nibbled my way through the food he'd brought. I shouldn't be swayed by a simple lunch. It wouldn't fix anything. I still might have to move. But long-distance relationships were a thing, right?

By the end of our meeting, my nether regions were sufficiently cooled by data value talk that I felt safe spending time alone with Ed again. Arguing about whether numerical seconds were a valid and relevant timeframe for symptoms in the values list wasn't as hot as it sounded. Sid watched me for a cue as she prepared to go on to her class, and I gave a quick tip of my chin toward the door.

After she cleared out, Ed turned the power of his blue gaze on me. The smile from earlier was gone, and he cleared his throat and searched my face. For what, I didn't know, but whatever he saw there gave him courage.

"I like you." He sighed. "I hate the way that sounds like I'm twelve. But I've been warned I'm too ambiguous and need to give you concrete data to make your decision about moving forward." He pointed to himself. "Hopefully with me, if that wasn't clear."

The smile spread across my face of its own volition. His words shouldn't have been charming, but he was obviously flustered. By me. At least it was mutual.

It was my turn to clear my throat. "I like you too."

His smile radiated warmth. "We can be twelve together."

I raised my brows.

"Scratch that," he amended. "The things I want to do with you are rated R, definitely for adults only."



He stepped closer and propped a hip on my desk, leaning closer to me. “So, how about a real date?” he asked.

“What did you have in mind?”

“Anything you want. But I was hoping for dinner Thursday as a start.”

I nodded. I didn’t have plans for the evening. And I’d missed him.

“Great,” he said with a smile. “I’ll pick you up at six?”

“It’s a date.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he smiled. “It absolutely is.”

He leaned in closer, his big body looming over mine. “Can I kiss you?” he whispered as his face grew closer.

The open office door revealed an empty hall. I nodded and Ed leaned in, brushing his lips against mine. The soft contact flushed my skin with heat, and I squirmed in my seat. Researching fire resistant underwear needed to move up my priority list. Doubtless, it would be scratchy and uncomfortable, but it might be a necessary investment if Ed was going to kiss me at work. I couldn’t walk into my next class with my ass smoking. There would be questions. And fire extinguishers.

Ed kissed me gently, and I enjoyed the soft contact before his tongue gently traced the seam between my lips and I opened to him. My brain checked out as my libido checked in. Ed tasted faintly of the pickles we’d both eaten, and I smiled against his lips thinking back to one of our earliest text exchanges. He’d brought lunch for me. Only me.

My phone buzzed between us on the desk with an incoming call, and we broke apart reluctantly. I glanced down at the caller ID. Boston area code. I swiped to ignore the call and glanced up at Ed. He seemed oblivious to the interruption, his gaze still focused on my face, entranced by my mouth.

I smiled and watched as his grew hazy watching the motion. I needed to use my newfound power over him for good.

“Sorry about that,” I said.

Ed’s smile was wry, and he glanced at the open door. “As much as I hate the interruption, it might be for the best. You do things to my self-control. I’m going to head out. I’ll see you later?”

I nodded, staring at the empty doorway a few beats after he left, picturing him leaned against our office door, sleeves rolled up, smoldering at me. Maybe not the best image to get my heart under control before calling Beth back. My hand shook as I picked up my phone. She’d left a message. To turn me down gently, or offer me the job? I took a deep breath and released it slowly. No way to know her answer until I listened to her message.

“Hi, Rita. This is Beth. I wanted to talk over an offer to join our team. Please give me a call back when you get this.”

I couldn’t contain my grin. I hadn’t blown the interview. They were interested. But would they be willing to let me work outside their office? My hand trembled as I hit the button to dial Beth back.

“Hi, Beth?”

“Hi, Rita. It’s good to hear from you.” The obvious pleasure in the other woman’s voice eased some of my fears. Beth had been so welcoming. I could only hope she’d be receptive to my counteroffer. First, I had to hear hers.

“I enjoyed meeting with you on your trip. As you can imagine, your references from previous employers were nothing but glowing. We’d like you to join us after graduating.” She named a salary figure in my range. “How does that sound?”

“I loved learning more about the Migraine Research Institute, and I believe I could add a lot. I’m very interested, but would like to look over the offer details first so I understand the total package.”

“Of course, I’ve got it ready to send. It has more information on benefits and time off. Are there any other questions you have at this point in the process? I’ll hope to hear from you soon. I’d really like to work together.”

“Me too.” I bit my lip. “I did want to talk to you about one thing though—the location. Is there any option to work outside the Boston office?”

“You don’t like Boston?” she asked, confusion tinging her voice.

I pushed past the nerves clogging my throat.

“I’d be happy to visit regularly for meetings, but I wanted to see if you’re open to making it a remote role. With so many of the doctors operating out of their clinics across the country, I thought it might be a possibility.”

“Can I ask why? I thought you were open to relocation.”

I swallowed. How much to tell her?

“That was my original plan, but I’ve realized that I have roots here. I thought staying in Benton could also help if Dr. Culver picks up the second grant for app development. Then I’d be available to collaborate with her on the dev and test database instances.”

It was the thinnest of business reasons but telling her I wanted to bang my new boyfriend twenty-four seven wouldn’t help my professional image. Beth seemed mollified by my reasoning and said she’d discuss it with her board at their next meeting.

“I’ll send you the offer as-is while we wait,” she said.

“Thanks, Beth. I appreciate your support. I’m excited to look over the offer.”

“Of course, call me if you have any questions after you review it.”

I shook out my hands, trying to dissipate some of the nervous energy left over from our call. I’d asked. She hadn’t said no, but it hadn’t been a yes either. Waiting would be torture. Did I dare put more in my counteroffer than the location change? Never taking the first offer had been drilled into me by my mother. But asking more seemed like a big risk. I straightened my shoulders. It was *all* a risk. Life. Ed. Not moving. All of it. But being true to myself, what I wanted, mattered. Maddy’s words had stuck with me. Leaving Benton wouldn’t make me happy. I loved the small college town life, the weather, the friends who’d become so much more. Finding a way to stay near Ed, Sid, and Cheri and still move forward with my career gave me the clearest shot at my dreams.

# CHAPTER 22: ED

No one saw my fist pump in the air as I let the heavy door to the college building swing shut behind me. *Right*. A sea of students filtered past me on their way to class, but *I* was invisible. I pretended not to hear one jaded coed mutter “freshmen,” as she pushed by me. Okay, maybe, they witnessed my dorky glory. But she’d said *yes*. After the way Rita and I had left things and our time apart while she winged off for job interviews, I was justified in full-out twerking when she agreed to give us a real try. Unfortunately—fortunately?—my moves like Jagger were only in my head. As a *Serious Adult*™, my fist pump was more dignified and business-like, no matter the student slurs against my maturity.

I sank into work when I got home, prepping an employee census to load in a clients’ new HR system. Focusing on something other than our impending dinner helped calm the lingering anxiety about getting it right with Rita. My phone rang, and I silenced it. It rang again, and this time I checked caller ID. My mother. She knew I’d ignore calls when I was in the zone, and she’d keep calling until she got through.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Rivers, I’m glad I caught you.”

After thirty-three years, hearing my first name shouldn’t make me wince, but she was the only one who used it. I’d christened myself Ed from a young age, a shorter, more palatable version of my middle name. There was no way I was a Rivers Edge Delancey. We were already weird enough without me advertising. I swore my mom had been given something psychedelic by mistake in the hospital to have chosen it for me, but she claimed it was an all-natural delivery.

If Rivers Edge was the result, I wished she'd had drugs. She'd clearly been out of her mind at the time.

"How are things in ... California?" I asked after a brief pause to remember where she was.

I could hear the smile in her voice. "Wonderful, but my feet are getting itchy. I've been talking to a friend in Cannon Beach about moving in with her and getting a job at one of the glass blowing studios there."

My mother, with her long gray hair and caftan-heavy wardrobe would fit right in with the artistic community there. "That sounds right up your alley."

"Maybe you can drive out one weekend and visit?" she asked.

"Sure," I said. "Let me know when you're settled."

My mother was never settled, but she'd probably stick around long enough for me to visit. It'd been a while since we'd been together in person. Occasionally, she flitted close enough for us to meet up, but those opportunities were few and far between. Cannon Beach wasn't far from the beach house rental I'd won. If I followed through on my plans to ask Rita, would she want to meet my mother? I gulped, rubbing my damp hands down my thighs.

"Unless you're too busy?"

"Not too busy, no."

"Rivers, I hear the hesitation in your voice. Is it work? Or is there someone you want to bring with you to meet me maybe?"

Mother's intuition, or just her witchy charm, but she'd nailed it. I shifted uncomfortably in my office chair. "I might bring a friend," I admitted cautiously.

"A friend, huh?" The teasing tone in her voice immediately put me on the defensive.

“Friends are forever and lovers leave, right?”

I’d heard it so many times growing up, it shouldn’t have dropped like a grenade in the conversation. As family mottos went, it was only moderately better than “not all who wander are lost,” which was her other favorite saying.

Her sigh gusted over the line.

“Rivers. Just because I’m meant to be on my own, doesn’t mean you are. I’d like some grandkids someday.”

My ever young at heart mom wanted grandkids? I held back my surprised grunt. This was the first she’d mentioned it.

“Ah, Mom. We’ll see.”

She snorted. “*We’ll see*, huh? When did the apprentice become the master?”

I grinned. So, she *did* remember some of her favorite phrases from my childhood. “We’ll see” had been a staple. Eventually, I learned it meant, “don’t hold your breath.”

“I love you, Mom.”

“I love you too, Rivers. And not for nothing, I might love you more if you give me rug rats to spoil. Just saying.”

“We’ll see. Bye, Mom.”

I set down the phone, visions of curly-haired cherubs dancing in the back of my mind. They’d never been in my plans. But maybe plans could change?

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The last BFRO meeting before the fun run went much like the other before it. Thelma’s gloom and doom didn’t abate. She remained skeptical we’d raise enough to cover our expenses. Jake’s enthusiasm helped carry us, and we finalized the plans for volunteer stations and assignments. Registrations

had trickled in after the launch and PR push, and Thelma's skepticism aside, we only needed twenty more to reach our goal.

As the meeting wound down, Jake nodded my way. "Hey. I'm headed to the bar after this. Want to come hang out and keep me company?"

A long evening of staring at the clock, counting down the hours, minutes, and seconds until my date with Rita yawned in front of me. I could only entertain myself calculating our time apart to the second before it became too easy. And sad. Don't forget sad. And I had everything to be happy about. Not least of which was an invitation from Jake. If geeks like me had been the goal when I started my friendship quest, discovering our mutual interest in Bigfoot was a big part of that success.

"Sure. I'll meet you there."

Tonight his shirt read I WANT TO BELIEVE and boy, could I relate. I wanted to believe that I'd broken the habits of a childhood spent always preparing to move. Leaving people behind. As an adult, I could choose who I followed. I wasn't a little kid anymore, relying only on email or snail mail to keep in touch. I had options: social media, money to travel and visit. I could maintain relationships, even long-distance. I wanted to believe I'd made a true friend in Jake. Whether I lived in Benton or not.

By the time I found parking downtown, Jake had already taken his place behind the bar, a towel slung casually over his shoulder as he polished glasses. Wednesdays weren't exactly hopping at Porter's. Quiet conversations and patrons spread in small clusters lent an air of casual companionship to the bar.

"Your usual?" Jake asked as I slid onto a stool in front of him.

I nodded. He remembered. I'd be touched, but I'd have to surrender my dude card.



“Thanks. How have you been? Any naked misadventures lately?”

His quick bark of laughter made me grin. “Wouldn’t you like to know? Stop that, or I’ll tell Chris you’ve been flirting. Besides, I’m the one who should be asking *you* that. What happened to the woman you were here with last—Rita, was it?”

I couldn’t help smiling into my beer. He caught the tilt of my lips.

*“Just friends, my ass.”*

“At the time it was true,” I protested.

I sobered as he stared at me steadily. “Falling for her was not in my plans.”

“Well, as my mother, the venerated University President always says, ‘let love lead you.’”

Nothing could have emphasized the differences in our upbringings more. I laughed. “Well, in the wisdom of the Delancey clan, it’s ‘lovers leave and friends are forever, so follow your own path.’”

“Ouch,” Jake said. “Sounds lonely.”

I laughed without humor. “It was. And it’s taken me this long to realize it and try for something different.” I shook my head, stroking at a bead of condensation on my glass. “And to top it off, now my mother is talking grandkids. I don’t think I’m the only one feeling the sting of isolation.”

Jake’s smile made me feel like maybe he understood.

“I’ve already seen you and Rita together, and I called it, didn’t I?” He held his hands up to his chest. “I believe in you. Then again, I believe in Bigfoot, so don’t get too excited.”

Shaking my head, I paid my tab and saluted Jake on my way out the door. Belief. Faith. Maybe I wasn’t convinced that Bigfoot was real, but love? I believed in love. The love

between family. The bond forged between friends. But lovers? All the cautions against it couldn't stop me from taking the leap. Or more accurately, stumbling off the path. Fight or flight? I rubbed at my chest, remembering the hollow ache when Rita had ended our first night together so abruptly. She may have chosen flight, but I was ready to fight for her.

*I believed.*

Did she?

# CHAPTER 23: RITA

I dressed with care for my date with Ed, debating what to tell him about my trip. We were new—maybe it was too early. I didn't want to get my hopes up. There was every possibility the board wouldn't agree. Beth had been open to the idea of me working remotely, but the change had to be approved through her Board of Directors first.

I put on makeup and attempted a smoky eye before inspecting myself in the mirror. I'd arranged my curls in a cascading halo around my head. For once, they were behaving in the Oregon humidity; hair oil had tamed the frizz. The bronze skin I'd inherited from my mother glowed healthy and vibrant set against my royal blue V-neck and jeans. Looking good and feeling better. Considering how many days I felt like roadkill under the tires of my migraines, basking in the moment didn't ping on my vanity meter.

Cheri gave me a wolf whistle as I walked into our shared living space.

“Bom chicka wow-wow!”

I twirled in place and gave her a grin. “Thanks.”

She gave me a knowing glance. “Have fun tonight.”

Ed knocked on the door, and I opened it to a magnificent view of his broad chest covered in a close-fitting shirt. Drawing my gaze up from the pecs I wanted to lay my head against, I caught his blue eyes dancing behind his glasses.

“Eyes up here, Rita. You look beautiful, by the way.”

I smiled. “Thanks.”

We wished Cheri a good night before leaving the apartment.

“Where are we headed tonight?” I asked.

He led the way to his car and opened the side door for me. “Anywhere you want, but I have a restaurant in mind if you’re feeling adventurous.”

“Surprise me,” I said.

Ed drove to a spot along the waterfront, and we got out of the car. I glanced around the street but didn’t see a restaurant. A walkway hugged the river, but the surrounding buildings appeared to mostly be offices and apartments.

“The restaurant is a few blocks up. It’s such a nice night, I thought we’d walk along the path for a few minutes before our reservation.”

He clasped my hand gently in his and tugged me toward the walkway along the river. It’d been a glorious spring day, and it had turned into a beautiful evening. The crisp sky was fading to black, with only a few fluffy clouds coming over the range into the valley from the ocean. The moon shone on the water down below us, causing ripples to gleam in the softening light. The rush of the water was soothing and the path was all but abandoned in the twilight.

Ed’s hand engulfed mine, and I wished again for fire-resistant underwear. If handholding turned me on this much, dinner was going to be an exercise in self-control. We walked for a few minutes in silence, enjoying the peace.

We’d strolled for maybe fifteen minutes when Ed gently tugged me toward a side street. A small awning shadowed the door to the restaurant. BOMBA was scrawled over the door.

“You’re taking me to a restaurant called ‘bomb?’” I asked.

He smiled. “Have you heard of it? They’re supposed to have amazing tapas here.”

I shook my head and he put a hand to the small of my back. “If the tapas are a bust, they have lots of wine.”

I cast him a sideways glance. “You clearly know my weaknesses.”

His smile was wicked. “I’d love to be one of your weaknesses. And your strength,” he answered.

Ed’s words sparked a warm glow in my chest. I could imagine him as both. He greeted the hostess and we were escorted to our table. The restaurant had a unique design; it was tiered into multiple levels offering views of the river from every seat. It afforded each guest a lot of privacy, but I shuddered thinking of the poor servers navigating all those stairs.

“Is this okay?” he asked, catching the gesture.

I nodded. “Just thinking of all the stairs if I worked here.”

He raised a brow. “Oh? Did you work in food service?”

I regaled him with tales of my one restaurant job in high school as we reviewed the menu and placed our orders. “What about you?” I asked. “What was your worst job?”

He shrugged, and I enjoyed the play of his shirt stretching across his shoulders. “I don’t know about worst, but definitely my most boring was a data scrubbing project for a lumber company.”

“You were so board you wished something fun wood come along?” I asked with a smile.

“Be careful. I had a lot of time to think about wood jokes on that job. I was reconciling their data types and scrubbing invalid values for loading into a new system. A decades-old company can produce a lot of different kinds of lumber. I had ninety-nine trees, but a birch ain’t one.”

I groaned. He reached for my hand across the table, playing with my fingers. The stroke of his fingers against mine had me thinking about other areas he could be touching.

“I’m grateful you turned Daniel down so we could be here tonight.”

I narrowed my eyes behind my glasses. “You don’t think we could work together and date?”

He shook his head. “I wouldn’t do that to you. Or me. More than half of our population have had a workplace romance. Close to a third of those relationships end in unemployment for one of the romantic partners. Even if I’m not your direct boss, it wouldn’t be right. Our firm is too small to survive a breakup. I couldn’t do that to Daniel.”

I debated asking him to cite his sources, but knowing Ed, he could do it. Other men would try to bullshit numbers, but he reveled in facts. “What makes you certain it would end?”

His blue eyes looked sad. Were we over before we’d begun? “Do we have an expiration date?”

“I hope not, but what are you going to do after you finish your degree?” he asked.

He and my mother wanted to know. I glanced down guiltily at my phone.

“I’m still working on options,” I admitted. My gut churned as I debated asking him if he knew anything about the firms I was applying to in Portland. If things didn’t work out with the Migraine Research Institute, I needed a backup. “I’ve got a few leads. Mostly in Portland.”

Ed opened his mouth, but the server arrived with our first round of dishes and drinks, and I was grateful for the interruption. Conversation moved on to the state of my thesis (still unfinished) and the state of Ed’s Bigfoot search (still undiscovered).

“You don’t really believe in Bigfoot, do you?” I asked.

Ed pushed his glasses up his nose and gave me a mischievous smile. “Volunteering for BFRO is harmless fun. I don’t have to believe to enjoy the work. It’s my mom who’s the believer.”

I tilted my head. “Your mom? You haven’t talked about her much.”

He shrugged. “It’s complicated. She’s a free spirit.”

“So, not like you at all?” I laughed.

His expression of mock dismay made me smile.

“I’m a free spirit.”

I shook my head. “Anyone who arrives five minutes early for everything defies that description.”

“Agree to disagree.”

I raised my brows. “Did you get your early habit from your mother?”

“Ah, no,” he admitted.

“You said it’s your mom who got you into Bigfoot though?”

His face softened. “She worked a lot. We didn’t have a big budget for fun, but my mom was great at making our own excitement. Mom took me hunting for Bigfoot. This was in the days before geocaching, which would have been more my speed. She thought it would engage my imagination.”

“And did it?” I asked.

He shook his head and chuckled. “I think she gave up on that idea when she saw my field notebook.”

My eyes danced. “You were a data nerd from a young age?”

Ed nodded. “To my mother’s despair. She could have understood if I was doodling pictures. Maps, landmarks, and weather conditions were not her thing.” He laughed, and the haze of happy memories filtered over his face. “But it was quality time together, and she made it fun.”

He watched me carefully after setting the tab down. “Do you want me to take you home?”

A question for the ages. Want? No. Should want? Probably. I had classes and work tomorrow, and so did he. Ed had been attentive all evening. Hanging on my every word, aware of my every need. It had me thinking of other needs he could meet.

I shook my head, and he smiled. “Would you like to go to my place?”

I bit my lip. Like? More like love. My stomach sank at the “L” word. I pushed past the sinking sensation and smiled. “Sure.”

*Sure.* Was I sure about going to Ed’s? Absolutely. Was I sure about everything else likely to follow? Sex I could handle. The feelings, not so much. Especially if he didn’t expect us to last. Still, when he clasped my hand in his, it sent tingles radiating through my body.

Lust colored the rest of the evening in a hazy glow as we moved into Ed’s bedroom. Problems seemed further away, less consequential. Everything was Ed. His body. His skin. His smile. His touch. I lost myself in sensation and let it bleed through me, pushing out every concern. There was no past. No future. Just now.

When we’d both collapsed against his bed, breathing hard, it took a few minutes for speech to return. My hand lay across his heart, and my own heartbeat slowed as his returned to a more normal rhythm. My head nodded, and I fought to stay awake. I needed to get home.

“Will you stay?” Ed asked.

I bit back a groan. I wanted to. I took a deep breath to refuse. I needed to refuse. Sex triggered migraines. I made the mistake of glancing up at Ed and found him staring back at me, adoration on his features. He was asking for what he wanted, and it was *me*. Dammit. “Sure.”

Mistake. It was probably a mistake, but I was a sucker for his sincerity.



His smile gave me a short blast of his dimple. “Good. I’ll make you breakfast in the morning.”

“Before my walk of shame?” I teased.

Ed blanched. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“No. No. That’s not what I meant at all. It’s a thing the students say when they head home after a hookup.”

“I didn’t go to college,” he admitted softly. “And I hope I’m more than a hookup.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry, Ed. I didn’t mean that the way it sounded. It was thoughtless of me.” I peered at him. “Does it bother you that you didn’t get a degree?”

He seemed at ease discussing our project and grant; it didn’t occur to me his education would be a painful subject for him.

He grunted softly. “I wish I had one. It would make certain things easier, but logically I know the sacrifices to get it might not have been worth it. I was on my own and couldn’t afford the debt. I love working with Daniel, but not getting a degree limits my options.”

“You live close to a major university. Would you consider doing it now?”

He shrugged. “It’s not in my plans. Maybe.”

I traced a pattern on Ed’s chest, mesmerized by the drag of my fingertip through the light dusting of hair. I didn’t realize I was drawing a heart over his own until his fingers grasped mine and he leaned in for a kiss. “Okay if I turn out the light? Do you need anything?” he asked.

I shook my head and he reached out, turning off his bedside lamp. Darkness shrouded the room, and I tried not to notice the sounds of the house settling and focused instead on Ed’s deep breaths. My body was satisfied, but my mind

tumbled, trying to assemble the pieces I'd learned about Ed into a new picture.

He was thoughtful, caring, and somehow softer than I'd anticipated. His public demeanor cast his softer side in shadows. I shouldn't have been fooled. In many ways, Sid was much the same. She was all data and logic on the outside, but once you cracked the surface, her humor and heart leaked into everything. Ed hid his heart behind plans and data, but it was there. Vulnerable.

His tender spots called to my own. Protecting myself from rejection was second nature, but something about his openness soothed the hairline cracks left by countless snubs. My father picked his career over me in the divorce. I'd quit receiving invitations from friends in high school when others were easier to make plans with and less likely to cancel. Eventually, people faded away. I'd learned to keep my distance to protect myself from disappointment.

My shell shuddered, incredibly fragile under Ed's gentle touch. A few more strokes and it would dissolve altogether, leaving me exposed. Leaving the part of it he owned exposed. My breath caught, and I held it to see if Ed's breathing cadence changed. He was dead to the world, and oblivious to my revelation. I couldn't see him in the dark, but I traced one last heart over his own. Did I have a place there?

I blew out a sigh. Places. I was going to have to find mine soon. Telling Ed about Beth's offer and my potential alternatives was becoming critical. But it could wait a little while longer.

My breathing evened, and I relaxed into sleep, only to wake a few hours later in agony. Pain stabbed at my scalp, and I cursed softly. I detangled myself carefully from Ed before pushing out of the bed and searching for my purse. I fumbled through the pockets until I located my pills and swallowed one dry, trying not to gag. Nausea swirled in my belly, and I

staggered back to the bedroom. I stubbed my toe on the foot of the bed and cursed.

Ed stirred on the bed. "Rita? You okay?" he asked.

"Just a migraine," I whispered. "Go back to sleep."

I crawled into bed next to him, and he reached out, pulling me closer until my head rested on his chest. "Did you take a pill?"

I nodded and immediately regretted it. Every move hurt. "Do they have any side effects I should know about?" he asked.

"Oh, you know, just the terrifying ones. They may cause dizziness, vomiting, stroke, vampirism, spontaneous male pregnancy, the usual."

"I'm pretty sure you're joking," he reprimanded softly.

I sighed. "Only about the last two. Every time I refill it, the pharmacist reads me the riot act about overmedicating. The words 'fry your brain' were used, and honestly, I can feel it happening."

"You can feel it?" Ed's tone was horrified.

"I can feel a burning sensation traveling up my spine into my brain. It's not a far leap to picture the chemicals burning through my gray matter. But it's the only thing that gives me relief, so what are you going to do?"

"Do you want me to rub your temples?" he asked. "You said that helped too."

My chest burned. It was late. Or early, depending on your perspective. He had work. But he still wanted to help me. "That's not necessary, but thanks."

He grumbled softly. "I can hear the pain in your voice. It is. Settle down and guide my fingers if I get off track."

He scooted on his side next to me, and the pads of his fingers stroked my head. I'd make a joke about guiding his fingers, but I was too damned tired. And in too much pain. Instead, I sighed a quick, "thanks," and did my best to relax into his touch.

I didn't know how long he massaged my temples, but when I woke up later that morning, my headache was blessedly under control and the sheets next to me were cool. After a quick tap, I shifted my gaze to see Ed push the door open, a mug in each hand.

"Coffee?" he asked. "I can make you tea if it's easier on your stomach."

It shouldn't have been romantic. "Coffee is great, thanks."

He smiled in return. "You must be feeling better. I'm glad." He sobered. "I don't like to see you in pain."

He handed me a cup and we sipped quietly. Sun filtered in through his shades and it had me glancing at the clock. "Crap. I need to get going if I'm going to make my first class on time."

Ed nodded. "Let me throw on some pants and I'll drive you home."

I scurried into the bathroom to take care of business and washed the worst of the drool from my cheek. Dead sexy like I expected. I slipped into the shower and winced as the warm spray hit me. The day after I took my medication, shower droplets poked like a thousand toothpicks; my skin was ultra-sensitive to temperature. My brain confused the temperature signals and turned them into the sensation of pain. Yet another lovely side effect of my meds.

When I returned, Ed wore athletic pants, a T-shirt, and a smile. He approached me slowly before pulling me close, resting my hips against his. I could feel a bulge slowly

growing at his groin. “I wish we had more time this morning,” he admitted.

I stood on my tiptoes, reaching up to place a kiss at the corner of his mouth. “Me too.”

I dropped back down to my heels and smacked him lightly on the hip. “Time to get me home though.”

He grumbled good naturedly. “At least let me know I can see you again tonight?”

I needed to get work done. But his blue eyes earnest behind his glasses. I sighed. “Only if I can bring my laptop and work.”

He nodded swiftly. “It’s a deal. I just want to be with you.”

Sweet. He was so sweet. I glanced at my nearly dead cell phone as he handed me my purse. It was too soon for Beth to call, but reaching out to Sid’s Portland contacts was important to my plan B. I glanced up at Ed. And I needed to tell him more about my search and how my options were shaping up. He had a house and was established here. Being settled was clearly important to him. If I moved, or could only visit on the weekends, would our relationship survive?

# CHAPTER 24: ED

“Go right ahead.”

I slowed and waved my hand at the college student jaywalking in front of my car. Nothing could sour my good mood after Rita’s goodbye kiss at her apartment. After all, it was the university that brought us together. When I got home, my phone buzzed with a notification for a client call, and I couldn’t resist sending Rita a flirty text.

*Ed: Yew and me. I want to run my palms on your limbs.*

*Rita: Axe and you shall receive.*

I grinned at our exchange. Maybe my lumber data loading project had paid off after all.

I smiled when I noticed Rita’s backpack was stuffed with more than her laptop when I picked her up after work. “Ready?” I asked.

She nodded. “Come in for a sec. I need to grab one more thing from my room.” She glanced to the blond woman on the couch. “Ed, you’ve met Cheri.”

Cheri glanced up from her seat on the couch, a smile on her pink lips. Her blond hair was caught back in a ponytail, and she was dressed in a gray Thresher’s sweatshirt that swam on her small figure and made her appear younger than the twenty-something I assumed she was. “Ed. It’s nice to see you again. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Good things, I hope.”

She smiled, and I shifted uncomfortably. It was more a baring of teeth than happiness. “Rita didn’t tell you my specialty, but I’m working toward becoming a midwife. I’ve taken lots of anatomy courses.” She nodded and gave me a penetrating glance. “I know all the best places to cause massive blood loss.”

I swallowed and she smiled more sincerely as she caught the movement. Message received.

“Treat my girl right.”

Rita breezed out of the back with a smile. “Ready,” she said.

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My attempt at cooking was not a success, but Rita stepped in to help me after the first time the smoke alarm went off. Working through the recipe together made it fun. The laughter and teasing as I plated the fresh pasta had me wishing she’d decided to work at Kwon after all. We would have made a great team. Then again, if he saw the results of our labor tonight, Daniel might disagree. Thanks to an impromptu make out session, our meatballs still required scraping off the burned bits.

“That was delicious,” Rita said as she put down her napkin. She’d made good inroads on her pasta and sauce.

“I don’t know about delicious,” I admitted, “but it was edible, thanks to you.”

She smiled. “You know where there’s great Italian food?”

I scrunched my nose. “We don’t have much here in town.”

She hummed. “I’m thinking something farther away.”

“Like Portland?” I asked.

“Like Boston,” she said.

“Boston? What’s in Boston?”

Rita cleared her throat softly, watching my expression.  
“Maybe me.”

I swallowed. I’d had this conversation more times than I wanted to count, just not with Rita. My heart sank. She wanted to move on. “What’s taking you to Boston?” I asked hoarsely. Was she tired of me already?

She frowned softly before meeting my eyes. “A job offer with the Migraine Research Institute.”

“Oh.”

So, only everything she’d wanted in her job search. Mission, opportunity, the works.

“Beth at MRI seems like she’d be great to work for. I’d be learning a lot.”

“In Boston.” She nodded, and I swallowed down the protest that she should come work with Daniel and me. She’d already turned us down. She’d made her choice, and I had to respect it. I couldn’t hold her back. Even if all I wanted to do was hold her. I forced my lips into a smile. “I’m happy for you, if that’s what you want.”

“I’m not sure it is,” she admitted softly. “I’m working on other options.”

Suddenly lighter, my smile became more genuine.  
“Like what?”

“I’ve asked Beth if I can work remotely for the institute. I’m also searching for closer roles in Portland.”

“Having you close would be wonderful. If it’s what you want. Seeing you in Portland would be a lot easier than flying to Boston.”



“So, you’re saying you’d visit?”

In a heartbeat. I nodded. “A few of my clients are in the midwest. I could arrange a detour.”

“Is that what I am, a detour?”

No. More like the path to happiness. I cleared my throat, watching her steadily. She had to make her own decision. Would saying more about my feelings sway her? “I’m sure there are Bigfoot sightings in Boston.”

She snorted at my evasion. “So now, you’re coming for Bigfoot, not me?”

How could I tell her I’d follow her anywhere? My gut clenched as the thought materialized, and the truth of it sang through my soul. Her warm brown eyes and soft smile held their own real estate in my heart. And it was the only house that mattered. Everything else was lumber and sheetrock. I could find shelter anywhere. They had houses in Boston. But if Benton didn’t have Rita, it wouldn’t be home.

My feelings for Rita had blown past friendship. Beyond lovers.

Love.

Poleaxed, I couldn’t muster the words to make my position clear. I forced a smile to my lips. “I’d come for you, and only you.”

Her eyes gleamed as she smiled softly at me. “Yeah, lucky for us, planes work both ways.”

She nodded thoughtfully and pulled her laptop from her bag.

If her career took her to Boston or Portland, would I follow? Did she want me to? Long-distance was a far cry from living together. I’d moved so much growing up; buying my house was supposed to be the last time. If she was serious about moving, then I needed to factor it into my plans. I was

lost in my own thoughts as I cleaned the kitchen. Giving up my house would be hard. But giving up Rita wasn't an option.

My house was my sanctuary; it'd given me consistency. It was my first real success controlling my environment after I'd had too little of that growing up. Most kids had one or two addresses as a child, but I'd easily had twenty. We rarely stayed in one city a full year, let alone one address. My house had let me set down roots. But it didn't alleviate the loneliness. Only my friends and Rita had done that. I'd proven I could grow and make a life for myself. Making friends, putting myself out there, was something I could do with her wherever we lived. Sharing my life with Rita, my best friend, was worth setting down new roots.

I swallowed. It was beyond time to make my position clear. I stroked a hand down her arm and she looked up from her laptop.

"You already turned down the job with Daniel and me, and I can understand your reasons. We don't have to work together to be together. I'd move for you; say the word and my house is up for sale. I can get a place wherever you go."

"You'd give up your house for me?" she asked softly.

I nodded. "My home is with you."

It was as close as I could come to an admission without influencing her decision.

"I can't let you do that, Ed."

My chest clenched in disappointment. She wasn't ready. Too soon, I kicked myself.

"I'm going to keep searching for other options. It would have been nice to live closer to Maddy, but Benton has Sid and Cheri. And it has you." Her face shone with sincerity. "I don't want to leave town if I don't have to. It already feels like home. *You* feel like home."

I tugged her hand, waiting patiently as she shifted her laptop out of the way to stand in the circle of my arms. Her warm curves settled naturally against me as she leaned in and up for a kiss. I lost myself in the moment, soaking in the soft slide of our lips and exploring tongues. Eventually, she broke away and leaned her forehead against mine, breathing hard. I couldn't resist sneaking one last kiss against the corner of her mouth.

"I still have to work tonight," she grumbled.

Her disgruntled tone eased the ache of the pent-up desire gripping me. Supporting her dreams was part of the deal.

"Do what you need to do," I rumbled.

After a few moments wiping down the already spotless kitchen to cool down, I joined her on the couch with a book, pretending to read while I watched her work. Rita's brow was furrowed, and she nibbled at her bottom lip in concentration. Watching her teeth worry her full lower lip had me fantasizing about boosting her over my shoulder and carting her to the bedroom. Plans to work be damned. There were better uses for those lips. When she closed her laptop, I took my cue and stood, stretching ostentatiously. "Well. It may only be," I paused to glance at the clock, "seven thirty, but I'm quite tired. Care to turn in with me?"

Rita tilted her head and smirked. She pushed up her glasses as her gaze dropped down my body, and I swelled in response. She pushed off the sofa, and I watched the sway of her hips as she sauntered toward the hall. She paused and looked back over her shoulder. "Coming?"

*Hell. Yes.* I hoped so. "Just enjoying the view," I admitted.

She reached for the hem of her T-shirt, inching it up slowly. I watched as a strip of golden skin appeared over the waistband of her jeans. The dip of her belly button came into

view, and my mouth watered. She cleared her throat and arched a brow when my gaze met hers. “It gets better,” she promised. She pulled the shirt the rest of the way over her head and let it dangle from her fingertips.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I advanced toward her, eating up the space between us in a few steps. My body brushed hers where she leaned against the wall. The scrape of my clothing against her lower body sent a thrill arcing through me. I needed to get my pants off before they became unbearable. I searched her gaze, then let my own travel down the curves of her breasts lifted and exposed by her bra.

“You are so beautiful.”

Her smile broadened. “You’re not bad yourself. But you’d be better with fewer clothes.”

I laughed before following her down the hall, stripping off my shirt and unbuttoning my pants along the way.

“Just call my pants leaves, because they’re falling for you.”

*So is the rest of me*, I added silently.

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I examined Rita carefully as I caught my breath. Her skin glowed with vitality and the faint hint of sweat. “Are you worried about a migraine tonight? Do you want to put your pills in the bathroom?”

“Probably a good idea, but I’m hoping I can beat my brain chemistry into submission with enough orgasms.”

I barked out a laugh before smoothing my expression into something more serious. “I’m happy to help you try. For science.”

“For science,” she replied solemnly.

With one last laugh, she pushed up from bed, and I watched with a smile as she slipped into her panties and grabbed my shirt from the floor. My pants were still somewhere down the hall. The soft gray fabric puddled around her hips, playing peekaboo with her black panties.

I shook myself as she turned the corner into the hall. My brain was mush. I shouldn't want her again so soon, but seeing her curves disappearing from view only made me want them back. Back in sight, back in my hands.

I glanced at my bedside table. My black notebook perched on the edge. Science. I'd be happy to science my way into Rita's pants. I rubbed my chest. *Not pants, heart.* Logic dictated the small moleskin was innocuous. It had no feelings. No intent. But I could feel it mocking me. Whispering. *Use me or fail.* I glanced back at the empty hall. I couldn't fail, not this time. I reached for my notebook but dropped it like a hot potato when Rita swished back into the room. Her backpack rubbed against her leg with each step, drawing my eyes down to her full thighs.

"Okay if I leave a few things in the bathroom?" she asked.

"If it means you'll stay over, you bet. I want you to be comfortable here."

Introducing her to my more anal tendencies could wait. I could handle her toiletries spread across the counter if it meant she was here. Clutter here was better than Boston. She smiled and walked back down the hall, and I glanced again at my notebook. With a sigh, I grabbed it and flipped it open to a blank page. I bit my lip as I stared at the lined paper, trying to think of what to write. I'd moved beyond my original purpose for note-taking. Friendship. Rita had fast become my best friend and more. How did I put everything I'd been feeling on the page?

"You keep a diary?" Rita asked.

She stood on her side of the bed, smiling down at me indulgently.

I cleared my throat. “Sort of. I’ve been using it to keep me accountable in my friendship search.”

“Am I in there?”

I bit my lip and nodded.

“Hmmm,” she hummed.

“What does that mean?”

When in doubt, ask.

“It means we’ll all respect your privacy unless I become a strange smell in the attic. Then you’d better hope my mom never finds your little black book.”

She surprised a laugh out of me. Someday I hoped to meet her mom. But not as part of an investigation.

“I promise, it’s nothing bad. Mostly the ramblings of a sad and lonely man.”

Ouch. Too close to the truth. Still, she glanced at me, eyes narrowed. “Before I met you,” I amended. She nodded, and I let a playful grin spread across my lips. “*And* Jake. *And* the BFRO crew. *And* my fellow volunteers at the food bank.”

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and her lips twitched as her gaze met mine. “Well, if you have that plethora of admirers to keep track of, why do you need me? Should I pack up and go home?”

“Ah, but no one gets me like you.”

I let the sincerity shine from my eyes, trying to find the courage to say more. To tell her how much she meant to me. My new friends were wonderful, but she’d quickly become one of my *best* friends. Not to knock Daniel, but our friendship had limits. Mostly that we didn’t want to tear each other’s clothes off. Not that sex was the only thing that Rita and I wanted from each other—far from it. I wanted to tell her

about my day and hear about hers. Cook for her. Okay, maybe order takeout for her. We didn't need the smoke alarms cheering us on a regular basis. Bottom line, it was her I wanted beside me at the end of the day. Every day. And I'd work up the courage to tell her so. *After* she made a decision about her future. I couldn't risk holding her back.

Rita pulled out her e-reader and settled in beside me. I cast a quick glance her way, trying not to let the hint of curvy thigh exposed by a fold in the blanket distract me. With her glasses on and wearing my T-shirt, she was an adorable mix of studious and sexy. Without thinking, I wrote "sexy librarian" on the page. I bit my lip and held back a groan. Later.

*Rita—Step 20 and Counting*

*Smiles: Not sure.*

*Laughs: Lots, I think?*

*Personal Revelations: She might be moving.*

*Awkward Moments: See all the touching ...*

*Notes: First real sleepovers.*

*Recommendations: Continue to shower her in orgasms—for science.*

The next few weeks passed in a haze. I avoided asking about her job search. It was cowardly, but motivated by self-preservation. Most nights, Rita stayed with me. I'd introduced her to her cupboard beneath the sink, and she didn't say anything when I gently relocated her toiletry items back to the space I created for her. She seemed to realize clutter made me twitch.

We settled into a rhythm, and I relaxed into the routine. I could do this. For the rest of my life if she'd let me. The only cloud was that Rita avoided conversations about the

future. She'd had a couple more day-trip interviews in Portland, but she didn't seem excited after either meeting. Not having a plan for our future nailed down made me antsy. I had plans for days. For years. But falling in love with a woman who wanted to leave hadn't been part of them. Waiting for her to decide left me paralyzed. I wasn't sure she was ready to commit, and I didn't want to hold her back. Not blurting out my feelings took willpower.

Any restraint I had in the bedroom was burned out by holding back those soft words. My frustrated feelings transmuted into pouncing on Rita at every opportunity. The kitchen. My desk. The shower. Every square inch of my house had been soaked in our sexual energy. I could hang a WE HAD SEX HERE sign on every surface. If I were classy like that. Instead, I reveled in the memories when she was at school. Daniel teased me more than once about my slowed work output, but so long as I kept ahead of client deadlines, his words had no heat.

Sid's brows raised when I continued to bring lunch for Rita each Tuesday, but she didn't comment on the obvious change in our relationship. I hoped it meant Rita was happy. Sid didn't seem the type to stay silent if she had concerns. I continued to give our science experiment my all; Rita and I showered each other in orgasms. While I wanted to believe my magic peen could cure migraines, it was wishful thinking at best, and gross hubris at worst.

Rita disabused me of the magic dick idea when her monthly migraine cycle hit. I argued we should continue to try for a cure when she was feeling better. She'd agreed with a smile, but she was humoring me. If sex was involved, even failing would be fun. Rita didn't seem to notice my awkward moments, and the more she accepted me, the less I noticed them too. Whether they were gone, or just not something I obsessed about, I could focus more on being with her.



My “diary” became an inside joke at bedtime. I openly added to it every night, and Rita respected my privacy. I poured my hopes and fears for the future between the pages, trying to leave the anxiety there and enjoy every moment with her. Each day brought her closer to defending her thesis and making decisions about her future. Our future. If she’d have me.

# CHAPTER 25: RITA

Late spring in Benton was glorious. The weather warmed, and we saw the sun more than occasionally. The hills were the bright new green of fresh grass, and the trees around campus had leafed out to match. Marys Peak on the horizon made me smile, thinking about our hunt for Bigfoot and how Ed's injury and my subsequent migraine brought us closer. Maybe my happiness was due to an excess of vitamin D now that we were dating, and by *D* I meant *dick*, but I had a sneaking suspicion my happiness grew from spending time with Ed. He'd helped me see I was at home. Not just in Benton, with Sid and Cheri, but with him. For all his insistence on being on time, he'd forgotten to reschedule dinner with Daniel and Angi when I wasn't feeling well. No recriminations, only support. Starting over in another city had never sounded less appealing. Not when everything I could want was here. Except a job. I turned from contemplating the sun streaming in through our office window at a knock on the door.

"Hey, stranger," Cheri said.

She leaned against the doorjamb, working her perky blond cuteness in a pink T-shirt and jeans.

"Hey, Cheri."

"I haven't seen you around the apartment. It's like living with a ghost. Should I start searching for a new roommate?" she asked with a mischievous smile.

I smiled back and pushed down the guilt. "I'm sorry, Cheri. I know I haven't been around."

"Why do you think I had to hunt you down at work?"

"How about a girls' night out Thursday?" I asked.

She shimmied her shoulders and grinned. “Yes. I need a Thirsty Thursday in my life. What will Ed do without you? It seems like you’ve been joined at the hip lately.”

“Accurate,” I admitted with a laugh. She didn’t need to know exactly *how* accurate. “But I’m sure he has things he’d like to do. Other than me.”

Cheri snickered. “Great, it’s a date. I’d say I’d see you tonight, but ...” She gave me a onceover and a smile. “I have a feeling you have plans tonight. Thursday?”

I nodded. “Thursday.”

Before I forgot, I texted Ed.

*Rita: I’m going out with Cheri Thursday. You should make plans.*

*Ed: Plans? I do love plans. Plans to do what?*

*Rita: Whatever you did when you were single.*

*Ed: You mean sit alone, in the dark, planning and pining for the day I’d meet you?*

*Rita: Creeper.*

*Ed: Only for you. I’ll see if Jake’s free. Maybe Daniel can join us at the bar.*

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Thursday morning, I kissed Ed goodbye with extra passion to remember me by. It was ridiculous that I was worried about missing him. It was only one night. One night with my roommate, sleeping at what was still technically my apartment. Living apart appealed less and less every day, but

the longer I waited to hear from Beth, the more my hope waned. Portland was the more likely option.

“Have fun tonight. I’m going to miss you.”

“Are you always this sweet?”

“Stick around and find out,” he rumbled back, squeezing my ass, and pulling my hips into his.

I stepped back with a laugh and wagged my finger. “Enough of that. I’ve got to get to class.”

Ed chuckled and held up his hands with a gleam in his eyes. “That’s where you’re wrong; I can never get enough.”

I snorted. “Hold that thought. I’ll be home tomorrow night.”

His eyes lit behind his glasses, and I realized what I’d said. Home. His smile took over his handsome face, flashing dimples.

“I’m glad you don’t want to leaf me,” he said.

I groaned. “That pun is terrible. I won’t be log.”

It was his turn to groan. “Get out of here. I’ll see you Friday. *At home.*”

I couldn’t help the goofy grin on my face all day. Sid didn’t let it slide once I finally made it to the office.

“What has you all twitterpated?”

I laughed.

She shook her head. “I don’t know why I bother asking when I know the answer. Do you and Ed have big plans this weekend?”

I shook my head. “Not really. I’m having a girls’ night with Cheri tonight. Do you want to join us?”

Sid tilted her head. She’d never accepted my invitations in the past, but in those days, she’d been seeing

Paul. I hadn't invited her since they broke up. Had she been waiting for me to ask? She'd been mum on her love life, but I was used to that. When she was with Paul, there wasn't much to tell.

"Will there be drinking involved?" she finally asked, tapping a finger to her chin.

I chuckled. "They don't call it Thirsty Thursday for nothing."

She smiled. "Then I'm in. I could use a little liquid therapy. Text me and I'll meet you at the bar."

\*\*\*

Cheri and I were turned up and turned out for our night together. She'd taken the time to straighten her blond locks until they hung in a curtain around her face and let me do her makeup. The girls were on display in a low-cut blouse. She kept pulling at her top, and I kept slapping her hand away.

"Quit it. Let the girls out to play."

She snorted. "It's more like the infants. My chest is too small for this shirt; it gapes on me. It looks better on you."

I pointed at her. "Not true. Knock it off. No negative talk. We're going to go out and enjoy ourselves."

I gave her a gentle shove out the door, then turned to lock it behind me before following her down the steps and outside.

It was her turn to point. "If I see you on your phone, texting with Mr. Naughty Pants tonight, then I'm confiscating it."

I hooted. "Mr. Naughty Pants? Where did *that* come from?"

I snickered as it became Mr. Knotty Pants in my head. I was totally stealing it for future pun wars.

Cheri's brows telegraphed her disbelief. "What? You're going to tell me you didn't have nicknames for the guys I dated?" She fake coughed. "I seem to remember a Mr. Pleather rather fondly."

I laughed. Mr. Pleather had been vegan. I couldn't understand why he thought wearing fake leather was a good idea. To me, it messed with his whole mojo. Drenching yourself in polyurethane didn't seem like a better solution for the environment. At least, not when perfectly serviceable jean jackets were available for posers everywhere.

"He was a jerk. Didn't he cheat with someone from his study group?"

Cheri shuddered, and I marinated in guilt for bringing up bad memories. "Never mind about Mr. Pleather. His affection was as fake as his jacket. We're not here for him tonight. We're here for girls' night."

I gave her my best mock-serious face and gestured to my breasts.

"Mine are reporting for duty."

She groaned. I hadn't made quite the same level of display as Cheri, but I liked to think I was representing in my boatneck black top. I was going for reserved and untouchable, at least to the masses. I smiled. There was one man I wanted very much to touch me.

"Stop it," Cheri said.

"Stop what?"

"Thinking of him."

My cheeks colored. "How do you know I'm thinking of anything?"

Cheri snorted. “If he’s Mr. Naughty Pants, then he’s turning you into Ms. Dirty Mind.”

“Who, moi?”

She laughed and shoved my shoulder as we turned the last corner toward the bar where we planned to meet Sid. I was still smiling as we moved inside. Sid hadn’t arrived yet, so Cheri and I claimed a table. The server whizzed by on her way to another section and told us she’d be right with us.

“Hey, ladies. Is there room for one more?”

I smiled at Sid. “Only if it’s you.”

She slid into another chair at our table and grabbed a drink menu from beside the napkin holder. Most of my time with Sid was spent in work situations where she was my boss. Taking in her outfit, she was most assuredly *not* my boss tonight.

“Whoa, Sid. You do not play.”

Her crimson lips turned up in a broad grin. “I’ve only been single for a few months, but I have to admit, I’m enjoying myself.”

She’d dressed to kill. Where Cheri and I were college-girl casual in cute tops and jeans, ready to maim at best, Sid slayed in a red dress that hugged every curve. With her dark hair and glowing bronze skin, she would have anyone with a pulse taking notice.

Cheri added her praise. “Well, enjoy away. That’s what tonight is for.”

Sid smiled and we ordered a round of lemon drops. A few hours and too many tequila shots later, I was feeling *fine*. I kept reaching for my phone in the back pocket of my jeans, only to abandon the unconscious gesture when Cheri gave me a death glare.

We'd been entertaining each other with stories of dates gone wrong. I thought Sid wouldn't have much to add since the demise of her relationship with Paul, but I was wrong. She had us in stitches talking about her procession of bad dates.

"I met Brad through our running club." She glanced at Cheri. "I do a 5K club run every weekend." Sid took a sip of her mule. "Anyway, he asked me to do a run with him, and I thought sure, why not? It was a shared interest, and I believed it would take some of the awkward out of our first date." She shook her head and laughed. "Oh, no. He didn't want to run *with* me, he wanted to run *from* me. It was symbolic."

"Did you chase?" I asked in horror.

Sid chuckled. "He really wanted to race. My times are pretty good, but it wasn't what I was expecting. Anyway, he took off, and when I caught on, my competitive instinct kicked in." She shook her head. "I won."

Cheri clucked her tongue. "And how did Mr. Competitive take it?"

"Not. Well." Sid admitted. "That was the end of the date. Originally we'd planned breakfast after."

I shook my head. "Sorry, Sid. At least you found out fast he wasn't a keeper."

She groaned. "Yeah, for all his faults, Paul had his high points."

Her mention of him fired my curiosity. "What happened with you and Paul?" I asked.

She frowned, and I wondered if I'd overstepped. She'd been quiet about her breakup. They'd seemed like a strong couple. Boring, but solid. She'd teased with hints of drama around their breakup, yet I struggled to picture it. Paul was an accountant and she had a cool head; it was hard to



imagine them striking sparks off each other. Maybe that was the problem?

Sid stared into her empty glass before one side of her mouth tilted up. “Apparently, I’m too much for him.”

“Too much what?” I asked.

She gestured down her body. “Too much red lipstick and bright clothing. Too independent. Too career-oriented. Too unwilling to bend to his idea of a perfect marriage prospect for him as a partner in his firm.”

“Has he met you? Those are the things I love about you.”

She smiled. “Thanks, Rita. I’ve worked too hard to cultivate my professional image. I may not fit Paul’s idea of a partner’s wife, but I’m okay with that. He had his career and I had mine. There was no way I wanted to give up my work and be his idea of a perfect wife. I’ve invested too many years in being the perfect professor. So, we broke it off.”

Cheri raised her glass with a loopy grin. “Well, here’s to being perfect just the way you are.”

Too many drinks and hours later, I was all laughed out. Cheri and I walked Sid to her place before linking arms and continuing to our much humbler apartment. I was pleasantly fuzzy. Time with Cheri and Sid had energized me. I grinned to myself. I had girlfriends. Good ones. People who cared about me and supported me. They had snuck up on me. I looked fondly at Cheri. She’d chosen me.

We’d had fun, but it didn’t stop me thinking about Ed. I cast a quick glance at Cheri. How much would she smack me if I took out my phone to text him?

She caught my gaze and shook her head. “Not even one night? You can’t go one night without him? Does he have a magic stick I don’t know about?”

I burst out laughing. “Is that what they call it in midwifery school? Is that the technical term now? ‘Magic stick?’”

She gave me a friendly shove. “Ha, ha. Still, I’ve never seen you like this. He must be something special.”

My smile softened. Was he pining, thinking of me, like I was thinking of him? I focused my eyes long enough to unlock our door and pushed it open before taking the few steps to the couch and throwing myself down. A few moments later, Cheri’s weight joined mine on the couch, and she gestured broadly in the air.

“Go ahead. Call Mr. Naughty Pants. Let him cart your drunk ass home. It’s clear you don’t live here anymore.”

I glanced up from the text I was writing. My spelling and grammar probably left something to be desired, but I was hoping Ed wouldn’t mind. “Cheri, you’re the best, you know that?”

“Just so *you* know. I’m going to bed. If you leave, remember to lock up.”

I nodded and focused back on my phone, using my limited motor control to hit send.

*Rita: You up?*

I nodded. Short. To the point. I squinted at the numbers on my phone. Crap. Maybe he wasn’t up. It was late. I might be doomed to sleep alone.

I giggled when my phone buzzed, and I read his text.

*Ed: Are you safe? Do you need a ride?*

It was sweet. And sexy. Because boy, did I ever need a ride. With effort, I focused to send him another message.

*Rita: Need, no. Want, yes! At apt.*

I didn't have to wait long for his response.

*Ed: 5 min.*

I shook my head. I was going to take shit from Cheri for this later, but I didn't care. The cold bed here in my apartment didn't appeal. Not when I could have warm man-arms around me and Ed to wake up to.

\*\*\*

Friday morning my phone rang, and I picked it up from my desk instead of letting it go to voicemail. Beth's warm voice answered. "Rita, I had a chance to talk with the board, and we want to make you an offer to join us full-time remotely. How does that sound?"

A fine tremble took over, and my breath sped up. It sounded amazing. My voice cracked as I answered. "Beth, that's wonderful news. I'm honored. I know you're putting a lot of faith in me, creating this position."

"You've worked hard on developing our database, it seems only right you help administer it. I'll email you the revised offer details and we can talk more after you have time to look it over."

I set the phone down like any sudden moves would cause it to explode. When nothing had come of my interview and first conversation with Beth about the possibility of my

working remotely, I'd focused on job opportunities in Eugene or Portland. None of them were as intriguing as the job with MRI, but at least they were local. There were too many good things going on in my present with Ed. Getting the institute to let me work remotely seemed unlikely. I blew out a shaky breath. They liked me. They wanted me. And I could be anywhere I wanted to be. Including with Ed.

My pulse thundered. I could stay in Benton on my own terms. I laughed, relief coursing through me until I shook from the adrenaline high. My lips twitched, and I pulled out my phone to share my news with Ed. Ed.

We'd come so far in so short a time. The odd man who'd met Sid and I for coffee months ago was now my closest confidant.

The man I loved.

I breathed through the cocktail of hormones buzzing under my skin as I stared at his contact on my phone and willed my pulse to calm.

I could stay. Without asking him to sacrifice his home for me. We would have made a part-time relationship between Portland and Benton work, but the relief of not having to released the chains holding me back. No more guilt. I could tell him. Lay it all bare. Without worrying I'd be pushing him into something he didn't want. We had time. I could give my love without strings.

Ed picked up on the first ring, and I grinned.

"I spoke with Beth and they've agreed to let me work remotely. Apparently, their office in Boston is already crowded and most of the physicians operate at different clinics around the US. So long as I'm willing to travel for occasional meetings, they've agreed to remote work."

I'd tried to control the squeal at the end but couldn't keep the excitement out of my voice.

“But you wanted the job in Boston.”

Ed’s quiet tone had me rushing to reassure him.

“The job—not Boston. It would have been nice to live closer to Maddy, but Benton has Sid and Cheri. I don’t want to leave town. It already feels like home. You feel like home.”

Telling him I loved him over the phone isn’t how I wanted to share my good news. And I hoped it would be good news.

“That sounds like an amazing opportunity. You’re sure it’s what you want?”

Cautious man. Stupid, sweet, loving, cautious man. Next, he’d be asking me if I ran it through my rubric.

“Yes.”

I infused the word with every ounce of sincerity I could muster. Imbuing it with the love I wasn’t quite ready to confess to. Not over the phone. Not when I couldn’t see him. Touch him.

“We need to celebrate,” he said, sounding relieved.

The response I was waiting for.

“Take me to dinner tonight?”

“Anything you want.”

I grinned at his promise. We had time.

# CHAPTER 26: RITA

“Knock, knock.”

“Ed. What are you doing here?”

He leaned nonchalantly in the office door, sporting a mischievous grin, dressed in jeans and a gray Henley pushed up at the sleeves.

“Kidnapping you.”

His blue eyes danced behind the frames of his glasses as he paused for effect.

“Yeah?”

I’d meant that to sound challenging. Strong. Instead, it sounded more like puberty caught me late, cracking voice and all.

“Yeah. I can’t wait for tonight to celebrate with you. Pack up. I’ve got a surprise.”

He looked so pleased with himself. My heart raced at his words but messing with him had become a habit I couldn’t resist. I arched my brows. “What if I’m not ready to go?”

He cleared his throat and pushed away from the door, advancing on me steadily. My blood thundered at the playful light in his eyes.

“Too bad. I cleared it with Sid. I packed the car. Over my shoulder so everyone can ogle your ass, or on your own two feet, but we’re leaving. We have celebrating to do.”

Tingles spread at the meaning he infused into “celebrating.”

I laughed, letting the last vestiges of worry about the future dissipate. Clearly, Ed was thrilled that I’d be staying. High-handedness aside, I couldn’t fault his enthusiasm.

I shut down my laptop and grabbed my phone and purse before following him out to the car.

“Where are we going?” I asked as I buckled my seatbelt.

It was too early for dinner. The sun was still high in the sky, and students crawled across campus in waves, making it difficult to leave the visitor lot.

He cast me a sideways glance before returning his attention to his driving.

“To the beach.”

“What about the fun run tomorrow?”

“We’ll come back tonight. Your news calls for a special celebration.”

Relaxing into my seat, I turned to watch him at the wheel, tracing the lines of his handsome face. Such a sweet gesture. I’d expected dinner. Maybe takeout and a movie. The fact that he’d remembered our earlier conversation and arranged a beach trip warmed my heart.

We talked quietly on the trip. I alternated between watching the man beside me and looking ahead at the trees to avoid motion sickness from the bends in the highway. The towering trees and curves conspired to make it challenging as a passenger. Ed probed for more details on the offer from Beth, and we talked through the mechanics of me working remotely and my job duties.

“You’re sure you’ll be happy here?”

“You think the rubric you helped me build would advise against it?”

“You turned down the job with Kwan because of a lack of opportunity to grow. Are you sure you’re going to get everything you want working remotely for MRI?”

His posture behind the wheel looked guarded. Tense. Past me would have assumed he was pushing me away. But maybe I'd learned a thing or two in our time together. He'd been protecting himself too. Surrendering my pride to reassure him would only hurt a little.

"I may have stretched the truth a bit when I turned Daniel down."

He flicked a quick glance my way, and I answered the unasked question.

"I didn't want to work beside you every day if I couldn't have you. I may not have been ready to admit it aloud but watching you date someone else would have hurt. My feelings were already too strong."

Ed puffed out his chest.

"I *am* irresistible."

"What can I say? I like men with massive ... throbbing ... data dictionaries."

His bark of laughter made me grin. My sense of humor may never graduate past middle school, but Ed seemed to appreciate that about me.

"Don't blame it on the data. I'm sure it was my towering intellect and lengthy rubric that really computed in my favor."

I sighed, letting the contentment wash through me.

"All kidding aside, I'm glad to stay in Benton. Visiting Maddy crystallized my Goldilocks moment."

"But it's not just for me?"

I smiled softly. "No. I won't lie and say missing you didn't factor into my decision but realizing that Cheri and Sid have become like sisters also helped. I have a life and family here. What about you? When we first met, you were looking for friends, not a girlfriend."



He cleared his throat, and I held my breath, beating back insecurities from using the word first.

“For a long time, I believed that lovers leave, and friends are forever. You could call it the Delancey family motto.”

And I’d done nothing to disabuse him of that idea. My heart clenched, realizing how our first night together would have played into those doubts. How brave he’d been to pursue me after I’d shut him down.

He glanced my way, his lip quirked. “Then Daniel reminded me that friends also make excellent lovers.” He reached for my hand, placing a quick kiss on the knuckles. “And he wasn’t wrong.”

My hand tightened in his where he’d rested our clasped hands against his thigh, enjoying the strength in our connection. I smiled reassuringly. “Sounds like Daniel is pretty wise.”

As we crested the final hill into Newport, the sun started its descent into the sea. The orange glow lit the horizon, bathing everything in soft light. Ed drove through town as if he’d visited before, parking at a public beach. He grabbed a small cooler and a backpack of supplies from the trunk and grasped my hand in his.

The wind gusted, bringing with it the tang of salt and kelp, and I shivered, huddling into my light jacket. Gulls cawed above us, riding the currents. Ed frowned before moving in closer, throwing his arm around me to block the breeze. We paused at the edge of the parking lot, and I stared out at the rolling waves. A few other families and couples strolled along the expanse of sand, and I marveled at the crests of frothy white hitting the beach. The hypnotic rhythm slowed my breath to a matching cadence.

“It’s beautiful. Thank you.”

Ed smiled at my undoubtedly dopey expression.

“Come on.”

He tugged me gently north, and we trudged through the soft sand toward a circled pile of driftwood that formed a windbreak. He set the cooler down and opened his backpack, pulling out a blanket. The shelter of the large logs shielded us from the wind. Ed laid out the blanket near the ashes of partially-burned wood fire and turned to me with a grin.

“My lady. Your table is ready.”

I huffed a laugh, admiring the white slash of his grin under his glasses. Goofy and gorgeous.

“So fancy. Can I help with setup?”

“Nope. I’ve got us covered. You just sit back and enjoy the waves, and I’ll get our fire started before sunset.”

I lounged against the rough log, enjoying the support at my back and removed my shoes, letting my toes scrunch in the cool sand at the edge of the blanket. The crash of the waves was mesmerizing, but so was Ed, and I couldn’t help but split my attention. Pinks and oranges washing in the sky couldn’t compete with his strong shoulders and capable hands. He pulled lighter fluid, a bag of marshmallows, and chocolate bars from his bag.

“Dessert for dinner? Decadent, Ed.”

He looked up from where he crouched in the sand with a boyish grin.

“We could. But wait—there’s more.”

My heart probably couldn’t stand more. He was already everything. I swallowed down the feelings, watching him instead. Tongue caught between his teeth in concentration, he applied lighter fluid liberally and rearranged kindling. He lit the fire and grinned at me over the crackling blaze.

“We flame to please.”

I groaned, holding back my chuckle.

He lifted the lid on the cooler, pulling out a bottle and a handful of small Tupperware containers. Plates, napkins, and flutes appeared like magic from his backpack. He set them all before me with a flourish. Grapes, cured meat, crackers, olives, and pickled red peppers filled out our celebratory feast.

“My lady, dinner is served.”

I shook my head. “Again, so fancy. I’m not sure I’m dressed for this.”

He scanned my jeans and T-shirt with a wolfish grin. “I’m happy to get you undressed for this, but I think the fire needs more time to warm us up first.”

Laughing softly to cover the flash of heat arcing through me at his words, I filled a plate while he popped the cork on the sparkling wine and poured our flutes. He handed me a glass, our fingers grazing, his eyes dark.

“Congratulations, Rita. I’m so proud of you.”

Warmth flooded me at the light in his eyes.

We sipped from our glasses, and I let the bubbles tickle my nose, trying to blame them for the heat pricking at the back of my eyes. I almost gave this up. Without fighting for it. I glanced up at Ed sitting next to me, his gaze steady on mine. Sudden shame washed through me. He’d been brave, and I’d been protecting myself. Trying to move on before he rejected me. He may not have said the words yet, but he’d been showing me with every step how much he cared.

“I’m so glad you fought for us. And I’m so sorry I didn’t,” I admitted from a tight throat.

Ed’s shoulders tensed as I finished, and I rushed to reassure him.

“I can’t imagine being anywhere but here.”

“At the beach?”

“With you. You taught me an important lesson, you know.”

“Always be prepared? You never know when your boyfriend is going to whisk you off to the beach.”

I quirked my lips. He definitely could have been a boy scout.

“No. That I don’t have to leave people before they leave me. Staying, fighting for what I want, is so worth it.”

He anchored his glass in the sand before advancing on me. The flicker of the flames reflected on his glasses, shielding his eyes, but in my heart, I knew they’d be full of warmth and acceptance. My gaze caught on his full lower lip and the hint of stubble on his chin as he drew closer.

“And what do you want?”

“A life with you. Arguing about data structure techniques. Watching movies. Hunting for Bigfoot. Maybe the occasional consensual kidnapping.” The words tumbled from my lips, laying my desires bare.

I felt Ed’s smile against my mouth as he closed the distance between us. His lips caressed mine before deepening the kiss into something more urgent. Needy. I sank into the moment, letting warmth wash over me. The heat of the fire battled with the fever building between us.

I lost track of time, and when we pulled apart, breathing hard, we’d missed the sun dipping below the horizon. Darkness cloaked us, warm and cozy by the fire. The logs surrounded us like a rough fort, providing a semblance of privacy. The beach around us appeared deserted. Other beachgoers had succumbed to the wind whipping along the sand and decided that going indoors was the better bet. I gestured to a few homes in the distance.

“Do you think those houses on the cliffs have a good view of us?”

“Nope.” Ed dipped his chin and cleared his throat. “I may have scoped out this area yesterday while you were busy with your girlfriends.”

“Oh?”

“I wanted to bring you to the beach on our next date and ensure we’d have privacy if we wanted it.”

Of course he did. And that was why he was the only man I’d trust enough to risk sand in delicate places.

I relaxed against the blanket, tugging him down on top of me until the weight of his body crushed me gently, compacting the sand beneath our blanket. Reaching for the hem of his shirt, I slid my hands beneath it, stroking up to his chest. His heart thundered beneath my palm, and my own rushed to match his rhythm.

Ed rained kisses along my collarbone, letting his fingers explore at my waist, rucking up my T-shirt until the caress of his lips and stubble traced along my ribcage. His magic hands unhooked my bra and let my breasts spill free, kissed by the night air. I shuddered as a gust of wind whispered through our little enclave, trickling along my exposed skin.

Ed traced a finger along a particularly ticklish spot on my ribcage, and I trembled.

Two could play that game.

I tugged until he took the hint and stripped his shirt off, before folding it neatly and placing it on top of his backpack. He peeled mine over my head, showing it the same care before tugging a small bag from a side pocket of his pack.

No doubt a condom. I suppressed the urge to tease him about his fastidiousness, instead reaching for the fly of his jeans, unfastening them to caress the hot skin beneath.

“Rita,” he rumbled. “I thought we’d take this slow.”

My good intentions burned to ash at his strained expression.

“What can I say? Watching you fold our shirts? Huge turn on.”

I bit my lip, letting the humor leak into my expression as I stroked him more firmly. His body formed a protective cage over mine, but another gust of wind drew goosebumps over Ed’s bare shoulders. Clearly, he needed my full body heat. He groaned when I removed my hand and hastened to remove my own pants and underwear. His gaze traveled across my exposed skin, alight with appreciation.

I sank into the moment, cataloging every aspect. His hot perusal, desire burning bright in his gaze. The bumps and valleys of the sand beneath the soft blanket at my back. Waves crashing in the distance, providing a timeless soundtrack. The soft black sky, glittering with stars up above.

Love washed through me as I examined Ed’s expression.

Adoration. Desire. Need.

My emotions mirrored those I saw sweep across his face, and I melted, slick and boneless. Ed worshipped at my breasts before traveling to the sensitive spot at the corner of my neck and collarbone, studiously ignoring the juncture between my thighs, wet and ready for his touch. I let my hands caress his firm chest, playing with the small trail of hair.

“Kiss me.”

Ed abandoned stroking his tongue across the skin of my torso and returned to my mouth, meeting my lips in a clash of open-mouthed kisses that left me gasping for air. I shuddered as he pushed his hips into mine, rotating to add friction to the pressure at the juncture between my thighs.

Naked. He needed to be naked. Now.

“Lose the pants.”

His dark chuckle sent tingles racing through me, but he followed instructions, pushing his boxers and jeans off. I bit my lip as he paused to shake out and fold them.

Kill me now.

His eyes gleamed as he crouched over me. Staring up at him silhouetted against the night sky, I pressed my thighs together, clenching the muscles around nothing, aching for him.

Using only one fingertip, he traced across my parted lips, down to the hollow at my throat, and I arched as he skipped down my ribcage, twirling around my belly button. His palms smoothed along my hips, gently parting my thighs, making room. I reached for his shoulders, intent on crushing him to me, but he evaded my grasp, diving down to the juncture between my thighs instead.

I gasped as he lapped at my entrance, focusing on my clit.

I held my breath as his rhythm intensified, letting my head fall back, until all I could see were stars. The constellations blurred as Ed pinned my abdomen with one hand, holding me still for his ministrations, while tracing gentle patterns on my inner thigh with the other. Sensation rushed through me, seizing every muscle as I bucked beneath his mouth, my orgasm washing over me like the waves pounding the sand. Ebbing and flowing in ecstasy with every heartbeat.

I gasped to catch my breath while Ed kissed leisurely up my side, hitting that ticklish spot on my ribcage again, before lounging next to me. His self-satisfied smirk would have fooled me into thinking he was totally relaxed, if not for the hard-on nudging at my hip.

I snuggled into the heat of his body, ignoring the chill night air. Ed looked down at me indulgently, and I sank into the rosy glow of contentment sifting through me. Stark naked

in what was still technically a public place, and I'd never felt safer. I shook my head ruefully, and Ed pulled me closer.

“What was that for?”

His question tickled my ear, and I shivered.

“The things you do to me, Ed Delancey.”

“What? Make you come?”

“That too.” I wrinkled my nose at him before continuing. “But mostly take risks.”

He wiggled his brows suggestively, keying into my playful mood. “I can't be the only one following my new motto.”

“To take risks?” I asked, staring up at the stars above us.

“To follow the path, not the plan.”

I smiled softly. Following the path. I'd planned to move away, never anticipating wanting to stay. Needing to stay. Needing Ed. I shivered again, and Ed tugged me closer, his erection a reminder that talk of the future could wait. We had more pressing matters to attend to.

I pushed him away gently, taking the newfound confidence in our bond and using it to change the tone to one I thought would please us both.

Trailing a finger from the corner of Ed's smile, to the stubble on his chin, I marveled at the man spread before me in front of the fire. The flames cast shadows on the defined muscles of his chest, and I couldn't help but caress across that path, heading down across the hard planes of his belly. He inhaled sharply, and I let the light of challenge flare in my eyes.

“I think this path is leading me somewhere I very much want to go.”



Ed cleared his throat and shifted beneath me, silently nudging my thigh with his erection.

“Please, can we take a shortcut?” he begged as I trailed his hipbone with my tongue.

His tortured tone had me holding back a chuckle as he grasped my head, tugging me gently until I tipped my face up to his. The last of the flames glared in his glasses, but his earnest expression prompted me to take pity on him. I sheathed him in the condom he’d placed so conveniently next to us before pressing my body to his, open and wanting.

With a groan, he pushed up into me, and I let my head tip back, closing my eyes to the stars above, blind to everything but the stars behind my lids.

“You feel so good.”

He clasped my hands, anchoring mine over his head in the sand, using the leverage to thrust up into me. I stilled for a moment, enjoying the full sensation, before acquiescing to the silent urging of his hips beneath mine and kicking into a steadier rhythm. Giving thanks for the large logs sheltering us, I rolled my hips, angling them just so to hit the spot I needed. His fingers bit into my hips as we bucked and ground together, racing for the pinnacle. The wave crested and broke against my nerve endings, and he stiffened beneath me before collapsing back against the blanket. I melted forward, resting my forehead against his damp shoulder, trying to catch my breath.

Sleepy and sated, I lay boneless on the blanket. After a few minutes Ed pulled away to paw through his toiletry bag, pulling out wipes and a plastic bag to dispose of his condom.

I sighed on a smile. Trust Ed to be prepared. Just one of the many ways he showed he cared, planning for my comfort and his.

The wind gusted, and Ed paused from his clean up.

“Shall we pack up and head home?”

I nodded, the warmth generated by his words protecting me from any inkling of a chill. Home.

# CHAPTER 27: ED

On Saturday morning, I coaxed Rita out of the house before the Bigfoot Hunt Run with the promise of coffee. By the time we'd arrived home from the beach, it'd been late, and we'd fallen into bed exhausted. She grumbled good naturedly about the early start but smiled when we pulled up to the parking lot and met up with the rest of my BFRO event team. Thelma and Jake split to place our Bigfoot cardboard cutouts at different stages along the racecourse, while Jim and I worked to set up the registration table. We'd squeaked by, meeting our pre-registration goal of one hundred participants. It was enough to both cover our hosting fees for the coming year and provide a healthy cushion of donated items and cash for the food bank over the summer.

Rita had jumped in to help organize the number bibs and start checking in early arrivals. Barb arrived a little before the starting gun with her own contingent of volunteers to staff the booth. Rita perked up when Sid arrived in her running gear. A few more familiar faces from the college filtered into the lot, and everyone milled around as they stretched. Rita's jaunty ponytail and rainbow-hued running tights made me smile. For all of her protestations that running wasn't her thing, she seemed excited. Sid was clad in black, with a running belt and hand-grip water bottle that screamed serious athlete. As much fun as it'd be to test myself against her, I had a feeling I'd be hanging back to chase my own personal rainbow. I grinned at Rita, and her warm smile in return had me fantasizing about stripping those rainbow leggings off her. Later. To the victor may go the spoils, but to the slowpoke went the sunshine. And she was mine.

I caught Sid sizing up Professor Cummings from her department. Men's black running shorts didn't do a thing for me, but the way Sid licked her lips while staring at the man's

thighs, maybe I wasn't the only one fantasizing about tackling a running partner into a naked detour today. When she turned away to talk to Rita and stretch, the good professor followed every bend and curve of her lithe form. A few minutes before the starting shot, Sid stood and moved toward Professor Cummings.

“What’s the story there?” I murmured to Rita.

She glanced to where her friend was talking with the other man.

“Sid and Nate?” She smirked. “Fierce rivalry in the department. He’s the golden boy, and Sid wants his spot.”

I watched as Sid and Nate squared off. They were too far away to eavesdrop, but their body language and the tilt of Sid’s head radiated challenge.

“Interesting,” Rita murmured.

“You ready? I want to get a spot toward the front,” Sid said as she returned to us, bouncing on her toes.

“You go right ahead. Maybe Ed can run with you. I’m going to hang at the back, walk more than I run, and take the ‘fun’ part of the ‘fun run’ seriously. Running is not my idea of a good time.”

Every nerve tingled at the emphasis she put on ‘fun.’ I cleared my throat. “I’ll, uh, hang back with Rita. You go to the front, Sid.” I grinned at her. “Give him hell.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sid said serenely.

“Right.” I nodded.

She grinned. “See you at the finish line,” she said and took off toward the front of the waiting group.

Rita hid a smile behind her coffee cup, taking a last sip and dropping it in the trash can before returning to me.

“You can go with her if you want,” Rita offered.

“I know. But I’d rather be with you.” I reached out and tugged her toward me, letting our hips bump gently. Even that brief contact raced through me. Though I knew the route by heart, it might be worth the teasing from the BFRO crew to get “lost” with Rita along the trail.

Rita’s dark eyes sparkled behind her glasses before her gaze dropped to my lips. I snuck the quick kiss she’d obviously been angling for before leaning back, my arms wrapped loosely around her.

“Did you ever imagine we’d be here when you agreed to help me out?”

“Running with you? Absolutely not. Running from you? Maybe.” The teasing light in her eyes lit an answering warmth in my own.

“Running from me?” I asked in mock hurt.

She laughed. “You only say that because you don’t know my mother. She had me well-trained, always ready to run. Can’t be too careful about serial killers.”

I sobered. Running. Something my mom had taught me too. But no more. I was in it to win. Rita’s heart. If she ran, I’d follow. I loved her that much.

“I hope you’ll never run from me.”

Her eyes lit. “I’m here to stay. My life is here. With you.”

Warmth washed through me. I cleared my throat.

“I’d have done it, you know. Moved. Followed you any way I could.”

Her soft smile in answer sent a frisson of heat straight to my heart.

“I love you too, Ed.”

My grin couldn’t be contained. It wasn’t the private moment I’d planned, but sometimes, you had to follow the path laid before you.

“I love you, Rita.”

“Friends and lovers forever?”

My pulse raced at her words. If I grinned any harder, I’d break something. But I was reassured that my heart at least, was secure in her hands. Lovers may leave, but I’d found the best of both worlds in Rita.

“Want to get out of here?” I asked hoarsely. Privacy. We needed to be alone. Everything I wanted to do to her would scandalize my fellow racers. Foliage could only hide so much.

The starting shot pinged in the back of my consciousness, but I was too focused on Rita to notice the other runners taking off. She grinned playfully and shook her head. “As much as I’d love to take you up on that offer, you promised me a fun run. And we can’t abandon your friends.”

I shoved down my disappointment. She was right. But the selfish part of me still wanted to take her someplace where we could be alone.

“Come on.” She grinned. “Catch me if you can.”

I laughed. “My own personal Bigfoot?”

“Only if you believe.”

“Oh, I believe.”

In her. In us. Together, we could do anything.

# EPILOGUE: ED

I pushed open the door to the house to see Rita stretched out on our couch, her laptop covering her thighs. She looked up with a smile. “Hey. How was your run?”

“Good.” I leaned in to kiss her on the forehead. “How are you feeling?”

“Better, Mr. Knotty Pants. The meds and sleep did the trick.”

I smiled. “Glad to hear it, Smarty Birches. Will you be ready to leave on time?”

Rita rolled her eyes. “Yes. We won’t be late for the baby shower. However, I maintain that arriving too early is as annoying as showing up late.”

I shook my head. “Ah. You haven’t met Angi’s family. They will have been there since nine this morning. Angi will be begging for a distraction and someone to run interference by now.”

“I’m ready when you are and happy to be part of the rescue squad.”

I showered and dressed quickly, and Rita gave me a onceover as I met her back in the living room. “Looking sharp.”

I let my eyes trail down her body. Her curves were accentuated by the casual cotton dress in vibrant pink. Ripe and sweet. Lush.

She must have seen hints of my lusty thoughts in my expression because she held up her hands. “Hey, now. I know that look. Keep it up and we will be late. We should leave if you want to rescue your friends from the horrors of extended family.”

My lips twitched. She wasn't wrong. I sighed and grabbed my keys. "Okay. I'm ready if you are."

Rita brushed her body against mine in the doorway, pausing to reach up and lay a quick kiss on my lips. "Later."

My body tightened at the promise in her eyes. I never got tired of later. Or now. Or whenever. Really, any time worked for me if I was with her.

We'd made the drive to Daniel and Angi's many times in the last few months. Our monthly dinner was a tradition we kept as Rita transitioned to full-time work with the institute. She seemed to love her job. Daniel still had dreams of wooing her to Kwon and Associates, but in the meantime, we'd hired a new teammate.

As predicted, there were already a couple of cars I recognized in their driveway when we arrived. Angi's sister met us at the door.

"Hey, Ed. Welcome. And you must be Rita."

Bugs held out her hand to shake Rita's. "I'm Jiao Liu, Angi's sister, but most people call me Bugs."

"Are you an entomologist?" Rita asked.

Bugs laughed and pushed a hank of long dark hair behind one ear. "Sadly, no. Just a pest and younger sister." She shrugged. "If you prefer, you can call me JiJi, but most family friends call me Bugs."

Rita smiled. "It's nice to meet you."

"Come through the house. We're taking advantage of the nice weather to barbecue out back."

We followed Bugs' petite figure through the house to where the rest of the family and guests were assembling in Daniel and Angi's backyard. Angi made a beeline for us, practically knocking over family standing in her path. I didn't think we were that popular, but maybe she was that desperate.



Angi was all stomach, and for once she didn't chide me for staring. It was both cool and frightening, Angi growing a human inside her. I shivered. Rita caught the motion and smiled at me. Her smile was full of love, and I glanced down her body. What would it be like if we were growing a tiny human? I could picture Rita flushed and round. An infant with her curls would be adorable.

"Thank God you're here. Please talk to me about anything other than how I'm going to screw this baby up."

Rita glanced at the clusters of people chatting in the green grass. "Who do I need to fight on your behalf?"

"Settle down, rookie," Angi admonished. "It's my family. This is normal."

Rita wasn't ready to give up. "You're going to make a wonderful mother. Don't listen to the haters."

Angi smirked. "The haters, huh? Luckily, they're not that bad. Just annoying." She rubbed her back and grinned at me. "You've got a keeper."

I wrapped an arm around Rita's shoulders. "Don't I know it," I agreed.

"Well, hop to it then. My kid needs honorary cousins."

I cleared my throat, stalling for time. I looked at Rita to see how she was taking the reference to the first time she and Daniel met. Humor lit her brown eyes, and I relaxed.

"Focus on your own brood first, Kwon. Leave mine to me."

Angi's brow rose. "A brood?" She shifted toward Rita. "Did you hear that? He said he planned a *brood*. I'd run now if I were you. No one would blame you." She rubbed her stomach and grimaced. "Least of all, me."

I held up my hands in surrender. "Hey, now. You put words in my mouth. I'm reformed. No more plans for me. I'm firmly

following the path instead.” I shifted my gaze to Rita. Her smile made her brown eyes sparkle.

Rita shook her head before grinning at Angi. “Lucky for him, I’ve taken over the planning reins. He’s not going to know what hit him.”

Angi hugged Rita’s arm and turned to me. “Again, keeper. Don’t screw it up.”

I saluted. “Yes, ma’am.”

Angi moved on to other guests who’d recently arrived, and I introduced Rita to our new associate, Jay. If I was an acquired taste, Jay was next level. He was lucky he was brilliant, because otherwise he’d get his ass handed to him for being cocky. He toned it down with clients, which was his saving grace. A little of Jay could go a long way. He was tall, but still stood with his shoulders back, puffed up like a fighter in the ring.

“Hey, Ed. Bro. Good to see you.”

Even his social handshake set my teeth on edge. He did the manly clasp-hug. He stepped back out of my personal space and perused Rita.

“And who’s this lovely lady?”

Was it wrong that I didn’t want to tell him? I was silent too long, and Rita introduced herself. “I’m Rita, Ed’s girlfriend.”

“Ri-ta. Short for Margarita?”

She nodded and I could practically hear her teeth gritting. She hated when people made jokes about her name. One more thing we shared. She loved tequila jokes as much as I loved jokes about how my dad must be a rock star. Rivers Edge Delancey was not a subtle name. That’s what having a music-loving mother and unknown father got you.

Jay saved himself from certain death by clicking his teeth together and smiling. “Nice.”

I extricated us as soon as humanly possible from the conversation, but guilt consumed me when I saw him move on to corner Bugs. I didn't care how annoying she'd been as a younger sister. No one deserved Jay. I watched from a distance, hoping I wouldn't need to save her. I shouldn't have worried. Angi's sister wasn't little anymore. She might still live at home, but she was a fully-grown woman. I couldn't hear what she said to Jay, but whatever it was had him backing away, hands raised, in record time. Reassured, I turned back to Rita, who gave me a knowing smile.

“What?” I asked.

She leaned against me, resting her head against my shoulder. “Just thinking back to the beginning and how much things change,” she murmured as she watched the crowd around us.

“Mmm. A lot has changed,” I agreed.

Rita tilted her head up, and her gaze met mine. It was lit with love. “You're going to have to eat your words, you know.”

I tilted my head. “Which words would those be?”

I'd said and done a lot of things I regretted in our time together. Mostly, not recognizing what I had sooner. I'd been so focused on my plan. I'd nearly missed that the best friends also made the best lovers.

Daniel chose that moment to appear on my other side and clapped his hand against my back. “When's it going to be your turn, Ed?”

“My turn for what?”

Rita winked at Daniel. “I'm breaking him in slowly. It's all part of the master plan.” She turned her head back up toward me with a laugh. “Don't worry. We'll start with the easy stuff. But for now, I want to hear you admit you were a liar.”

“Liar? About what?”

She and Daniel exchanged glances again. Then she went up on her tippy toes and leaned in until she could whisper in my ear. “That you didn’t want to get me pregnant. You’ve got to quit watching me like that. I’m halfway there from your eyes alone.”

A flush creep up my cheeks and cleared my throat. “I’d be honored.”

Daniel laughed at my discomfort before shaking his head. “You earned that.”

I smiled as my gaze met his. “So long as I keep earning her every day, that’s what matters.” I looked at Rita. “You’re my best friend and my family; even if we never grow it beyond the two of us, I’ll always want you.”

She leaned in with a smile and whispered. “I love you too, you know.”

# FORMULA FOR LUST

*Excelling @ Love Book 2*

Amelia Simone

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Visit my website at <https://ameliasimoneauthor.com/>

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# BOOK DESCRIPTION

*Can the poster boy for irresponsibility and his strait-laced department rival find common ground, or are lust and loathing all they can hope for in Las Vegas?*

## **Sidney Culver:**

What happens when the bad boy of academia challenges you to a duel of wits and cunning? You win. You win BIG. Victory comes with a trip to DEF CON, full of hackers and sheep galore. Where you are most definitely out of your league. Does Nate's black hat hide a heart too big to keep their rivalry going in the face of a hacker army, or is trying to seduce you all part of his plan to best you in your ongoing competition for department favorite?

## **Nate Cummings:**

How do you tell the woman who hates you that she's the best thing in your life? You don't. Instead, you plot. You plot BIG. You scheme so she wins a free trip to DEF CON. Where you will most definitely pull out every hacker trick to get into her heart. Also, her pants. But mostly her heart. You hope. Because if she truly hates you, all you have left is hope.

# CHAPTER 1 – SID

“You’re working late, Princess Perfect.”

The deep voice startled me. *Sonofabitch*. I bit back the cuss just in time and looked up from my laptop. The light in my office had faded as the sun went down, but I hadn’t noticed. I’d been too engrossed in editing my paper.

Nate leaned in my doorway. Six feet of bad boy holding up my office door. Tattoos on display in his short-sleeved shirt and wearing a baseball cap, he had to be violating at least a couple lines of our academic dress code. Not surprising given he was closer in age to our students than most faculty at twenty-seven. He made me feel every one of my thirty-two years. Ever since he had joined the department a year ago, Nate lived to needle me, and his smug smile tipped me off that today was no different.

I couldn’t make my face stretch into a real smile, so the tight twist of lips was all he was getting. “Hey, Nate. What brings you by my office?”

*My office, my turf.*

“I was curious if you’d heard,” he said, his tone deliberately tantalizing.

Yep, he was here to mess with me. The dancing light in his hazel eyes gave it away. I bit my tongue. No way was I going to ask. I held out for a hot two seconds.

“What?” I asked, trying to keep the edge out of my voice.

“Bernard is starting a department fundraising challenge tomorrow.”

“Oh?” There had to be more. He wouldn’t waste an opportunity to get the upper hand for news that trivial. “Is



*Doctor Bernard doing anything to make it interesting?”*

Nate shrugged. “Depends on if you think a free trip to DEF CON is interesting.”

Now he had my attention. DEF CON was hacker Disneyland. Held every year in Vegas, it was the premier event for hackers to test their mettle and show off. I’d never been. In my mind, I’d imagined it was a bunch of unwashed teens separating retirees from their gambling money. But the experience would be invaluable to my career. While slipping away to attend unsanctioned was a possibility, attending with the full blessing of my boss would protect me from any blowback to my reputation. And my goal to make department chair by thirty-five was always lurking in the background, guiding my choices.

My doctorate had focused on analysis, not security, but intrusion protection and security were part of my networking class curriculum. I’d have more credibility with my students if I could share DEF CON war stories.

I wasn’t a hacker like Nate. Or *\*cough\** an “IT security expert” as our department chair, Dr. Bernard, liked to say. White hat nonsense when anyone with eyes could tell Nate was more of a dark network assassin than altruistic security defense.

“I could be interested. Got any good philanthropic ideas?” I asked.

A slow smile spread across his handsome face. Damn him and his kissable lips. I wouldn’t have been surprised if they had been molded by angels. Luscious and firm. My work nemesis shouldn’t be a freaking smoke show. I had competed against him too hard for our department chair’s favor, doing my best to edge him out in my bid for promotion to get taken in by his attractive package. He was evil. Or as evil as someone who wrote some questionable emails in my name could be. Stupid hackers. I hated being a sheep, taken

advantage of. And Nate seemed to fleece me at every opportunity. I scowled.

“Spit it out, Nate.”

His low chuckle stroked my nerve endings. “Kissing booth, maybe?”

Letting his lips loose on the general public likely *would* raise a lot of money. But he didn’t need me stroking his ego by acknowledging it.

“With you as the prize? You’re going to need a surgeon first. Aren’t your lips already permanently affixed to Dr. Bernard’s backside?” I asked with an arched brow.

“Touché, Sid. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“What, a sick burn?”

He shook his head and smirked. “No. The ability to say ‘backside’ at work. Watch out. Pretty soon you’ll be using unforgivable words like ‘butt.’ It’s a slippery slope.”

He surprised a laugh out of me. “What? I say what I want to.”

“Do you? Or do you say what’s *appropriate* for a professor at Oregon College?” he asked, pushing away from the doorjamb.

My thoughts were anything but appropriate as I watched the bulge of his biceps as he uncrossed his arms and relaxed. Good thing he wasn’t privy to those. I met his gaze. “I contain multitudes.”

Wasn’t that the truth. I could both lust after Nate and curse him at every opportunity. In addition to the time he’d taken advantage of my unsecured computer and emailed teaching memes to our whole department, there was the day he’d broken into my office and filled it with packing peanuts. *To the ceiling.* I’d chased those darn things for weeks. He hadn’t done any real damage to anything except my pride, but

that was enough. I'd fought too hard for my reputation as an excellent instructor and grant project and publication powerhouse to cede a centimeter of my professionalism to his chaos. Not everyone could be the chair's golden boy.

Pushing to my feet, I felt Nate's eyes travel down my long body. I almost matched him in height. I was more than a match for him in other areas.

"I suppose you're competing for this trip?"

DEF CON would be right up his alley. There were plenty of rumors about Nate's life prior to joining the college a year ago. Whispers about a serious hacking background. He didn't have a doctorate, and without it, he should have been a nobody to the administration. How he had so quickly achieved pampered and indulged status with Dr. Bernard was a mystery. Especially for someone who continually flouted dress code and any other rule that didn't suit him.

Rumors ranged from him working for the CIA to owning a video game empire. Personally, my vote was that he spawned in his parents' basement when a toaster and obsolete laptop got frisky. That happens, right? He didn't have a LinkedIn profile or a social media presence. At least not associated with the name he taught under. I checked. It wasn't stalking. I may have looked one lonely night after a few too many glasses of wine, but that was just opposition research. It was practically a professional obligation to investigate him.

Nate's words brought me back to the present. "Maybe. I do love a good competition. Who am I kidding? I mostly like winning. What about you? Would you like a trip to DEF CON?"

*Yes.* For once I hadn't overcommitted to other summer projects. The stars were aligning.

I kept my expression smooth and shrugged. "It sounds interesting, and I'm always ready to help the department."

Nate pitched his deep voice high. “*I’m always ready to help the department.* Sure, Sid. The prize is a weekend of debauchery in Vegas with our fellow nerds. I have a hard time picturing you among the wolves.”

My back stiffened. I wasn’t always formal. But I had an image to maintain. Not just for work, but to avoid hearing about any perceived image failures ad nauseam from my father. A small-town mayor with big aspirations, he squawked over any public indiscretion that tarnished the Culver name. Even minor news about his daughter living more than two thousand miles away. Pushing my irritation away, I mustered a smile. “Thanks for the heads-up, Nate. Have a good night.”

He was dismissed, and he knew it. He sketched a quick salute. “Have a great weekend, Sid, I’ll see you at the staff meeting. Better exfoliate and get those lips kissing booth ready.”

There was no way in hell that Dr. Bernard was hosting a kissing booth. But hearing Nate talk about kissing sent warm tingles through my body. Did I want to admit how easily I could be convinced to pay outrageous sums to touch that mouth to mine? Again, sculpted by *angels*. It was a shame such a lovely package contained such an irreverent turd of a human.

I shut down my laptop and made my way through the deserted hall to the building exit. My office was on the third floor, and all was quiet this late on a Friday. There were probably at least a few hardy students burning the midnight oil in the computer lab downstairs, but class had ended for the week. We were free. I was free. To go home. To my very quiet apartment downtown. I sighed, pushing aside the loneliness. If I’d stayed with Paul, I’d be going home to him right now. I wrinkled my nose. Nope. Alone was better.

# CHAPTER 2 – NATE

My swagger faded as I turned the corner. There was no one around to see me wilt. Why did I always say stupid shit to Sid? My mouth had a mind of its own. And no filter. It was just too fun to mess with her; I couldn't resist. And that was my downfall. Because the thing I couldn't resist was her. Something about Sid drew me in.

Maybe it was her long dark hair and dark eyes. Maybe it was her wide, sensual mouth. Maybe it was her professional façade. I snorted. Maybe it was Maybelline. My sister would give me so much shit if she could see inside my brain. I knew why I was drawn to Sid. She was smart, funny, and a pure spirit. She was a true believer, a devotee of hard work, ethics. The whole package. I wanted to be her when I grew up. My lips twisted. Okay, so I never wanted to grow up. But some of us didn't have that option.

I got into my hand-me-down blue hybrid. Technically, my first car. My lifestyle in Seattle hadn't needed one. Life had revolved around the city streets. I went from my condo to my office, to whatever bar or restaurant was hot. No responsibilities and not a care in the world.

Now, I had a car, a mortgage, and a teenage ward. "Ward" always sounded so cool. Savannah liked to remind me that I was her brother, not Batman. I'd rather be Batman. He had Alfred. Plus, he had the cool gadgets and life of fighting crime. Really, I was as close as you could get to Bruce without the backing of Wayne Enterprises. Savannah and I had lost our parents in a car accident the previous year. Orphaned, check. I had a ward in my twelve-year-old sister, my own personal wise-cracking Robin, check. In my past life, I'd fought cybercrime in IT security for a major online retailer before

moving to contracting. Really, I was a superhero. Maybe just not one with a cape. If only I had an Alfred. And Sid.

I pulled up to my childhood home, the 1950s rambler painted a muted coffee color that always reminded me I needed to buy half-and-half. Weeds sprouted in the front yard, almost choking out the grass. My dad would be so ashamed. My chest tightened, and I took a deep breath. Waves of sorrow still struck at weird times. Like now, when I was bemoaning my lack of gardening skills. It had been my dad's hobby, puttering in the yard. He'd taught in the biology department at Oregon College for years and loved gardening in his time off. I sighed, kicking at one spiky interloper half-growing over the walk. Maybe I could bribe Savannah into helping me weed this weekend.

I unlocked and pushed open the door. Savannah was sprawled on the couch playing a video game. "Is your homework done?" I asked.

She groaned. "Yes, Nate. I did my list before you got home."

"Good. What do you want for dinner?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Are my choices grilled cheese or grilled cheese?"

Again, where was my Alfred? I'd moved home and taken over my sister's care and my family's debts. Was it too much to ask that I continue my takeout lifestyle?

"Unless you're cooking, it's something from a can, box, or bag. Take your pick."

"It's Friday. Do we have a frozen pizza left?" she asked.

"I think so. I'll go turn on the oven."

Savannah pumped a fist in the air and went back to her screen.

If only I could be that satisfied with frozen pizza. After pretending to parent Savannah for almost a year, I should have figured this shit out. It couldn't be healthy for her, eating as much canned and frozen crap as we did. I took off my ballcap and scrubbed a hand through my short hair, scratching my scalp. I needed to learn to cook. Or she did.

The phantom taste of scorched cheese slid over my tongue, and I shuddered at the memory. Last month Savannah had gotten hooked on a reality cooking show. She was convinced she could make anything edible with her creativity and the right set of spices. She was wrong. So wrong. I still gagged thinking about her creations. Yes, there was such a thing as too much soy sauce. My sister didn't have a light hand.

Rubbing my chest, I moved into my room. I still slept in my childhood bedroom, *Final Fantasy* posters and all. Making changes seemed sacrilegious. I was adult enough to recognize that keeping their bedroom a time capsule wouldn't do anything to bring my parents back. Where they'd gone, there were no return trips, even though it felt like my mom could walk in my room any second and tell me to quit my game and come to dinner.

I flopped down on my bed, then flipped on my back to stare up at the poster of *Charlie's Angels* on my ceiling. I'd always had a thing for Lucy Liu. It was no shock I was attracted to Sid. She had long dark hair and the icy perfectionist vibe going for her. I bet like Alex she could kick ass too.

Thinking of Sid made me think of *kissing* Sid. I groaned. Cute the way my neuro-linguistic programming suggestion technique had backfired, catching me in its web. Sid didn't want to kiss me. But I sure as hell burned for her. It'd be interesting to see how she rose to my challenge. And she'd rise. If I'd learned and come to appreciate one thing, it was how well her competitive streak matched mine. With luck,

I'd dangled the right carrot. It'd taken some careful maneuvering to encourage our chair to offer DEF CON as a prize. A few well-placed comments about the conference's learning potential and how it'd spur faculty to make more ticket sales dropped into Bernard's ears had done the trick. It didn't hurt that it was one of the more affordable infosec conferences to use as a reward. I could only hope that my ambush in her office would strike the spark I hoped for in her, her drive to *win*.

A weekend at DEF CON, aka nerd Valhalla, should be enough to get her in the game. If I'd guessed wrong, then my chances of ever getting her to see me as anything but a rival were doomed.

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Our Monday morning staff meeting started promptly at eight. I did not. It hadn't been in my plans to arrive late, especially not for this meeting, but Savannah's first period had other ideas. I was beyond thankful that our mom had "the talk" with her before I entered the scene as her guardian. She didn't freak out, but we weren't exactly prepared. I'd pawed through my parents' bathroom to raid my mom's old supplies. They weren't ideal for a twelve-year-old, but I promised Savannah I'd take her shopping after school. I'm not sure who was more horrified at the prospect.

The feminine products search ate up my morning buffer time, but I walked into the conference room as if I were perfectly prompt. Sid's glance at her watch reminded me that even if I fooled everyone else, she knew I had rolled in fifteen minutes late.

Dr. Bernard looked up from his agenda. "Nate. Please take a seat. I'm getting to some news that I think you'll enjoy."

Thanks to a flirtation with Bernard's admin assistant, I'd gotten an early preview of the agenda. I stopped myself from rubbing my hands together and took the chair next to Sid



instead. She scowled as if personally affronted. “Had to drop my date off at home,” I whispered.

She frowned at me, and I instantly regretted my lie.

Stupid. Shit. I always said stupid stuff to her. Yanking her chain was my one pleasure in the early days after the loss of my parents. It beat back the fog to see her flush and lose her cool, even if it was only a microsecond before she regained her composure.

It took me months to realize why I was so drawn to Dr. Sidney Culver. I’d been too lost, too consumed by my new responsibilities to recognize the attraction. But teasing her was the only thing that made me feel anything but numb. Now, I couldn’t escape my feelings for her. I didn’t even want to try.

“I have a very important announcement,” Dr. Bernard said, breaking into my reverie.

I shifted in my seat. Finally.

Dr. Bernard pushed his glasses up his nose, pausing for dramatic affect. The older man glanced around our assembled team. Six professors in all, we were a motley crew. Sid, who taught the introductory IT courses to general business students and the data analysis and network administration classes to advanced students. Darshan Babaria, who taught quality assurance and project management. Carly Anderson, new this year like me, always seemed to attend meetings under duress. Like she’d rather be in a corner with a book. Eric Spalding was convinced he resembled Stanley Tucci but his greasy smiles and prolonged eye contact put him firmly in the Mr. Burns category.

“This year, I’ve added a special prize for the biggest fundraiser at our annual department awards dinner.”

Bernard paused to look around the room, attempting meaningful eye contact with each of us. The pause made Darshan squirm. Eye contact was really not his thing. I met Bernard’s kindly blue eyes and smiled. He nodded and moved

on to Sid before saying, “An all-expense paid trip to DEF CON to the professor who sells the most tickets and brings in the most total donations for the department.”

Darshan looked nonplussed, but I could tell Carly and Eric were interested. Every programmer fancied themselves a hacker, capable of besting or protecting their systems. Based on the sniffing I’d done, those two were merely sheep. Sid was another story. She’d smiled wide at Bernard’s announcement. *Jackpot.*

Bernard cleared his throat. “I know you’ll all rise to the challenge. We’re raising money to fund next year’s scholarships.” He paused. “We’re also trying to raise enough to set up a new hardware lab.”

Bernard spoke for a few more minutes about how much the funds would help the department before excusing us.

“Nate, Sid, can you hang back for a minute?” Bernard asked.

The room cleared, and I shot Sid a quick glance. Had she requested a meeting for some reason?

Dr. Bernard took off his glasses, cleaning them on his shirt before perching them back on his nose. He looked at each of us with a faint smile. “I’m hoping I can count on both of you to help me with this year’s dinner.”

I paused mid-nod as he continued. “As co-chairs.”

I looked at Sid for her reaction. Spending time with her wouldn’t be a hardship. For me. However, her smile was cool to the point of icy. “Of course, Dr. Bernard. But may I ask, why co-chairs? I usually manage the dinner myself.”

He nodded sagely. “Yes, Dr. Culver, and I appreciate it. This year, I thought we’d get some fresh energy from Nate here.”

“Fresh energy?” Sid asked on a croak, looking nonplussed.

I held back a wince on her behalf. She didn't look excited about sharing power. And I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of more responsibility, but if it gave me an excuse to work alongside her, it'd be worth helping.

Bernard nodded. "Yes. Shake things up a little." He tilted his head and considered us. "I think it will be good for you to collaborate. Consider it a teambuilding exercise."

Judging by Sid's face, she disagreed. Heartily. But her sense of propriety wouldn't let her contradict her boss. She looked at me as if she expected me to attempt to weasel out of the assignment. If anyone but Sid was my partner, I would have tried. But not this time. I grinned.

"I look forward to working with you, partner," I said.

Sid's smile was tight, and about as genuine as someone calling to tell me my social security number had been hacked.

"Me too, looking forward to it." She turned back to Dr. Bernard. "Is that all?"

He nodded, and Sid pushed back from the table to stand, smoothing her black dress over her hips before giving me one last insincere smile. "I'll contact you about our project plan, Nate."

I nodded. It was cute that she thought I'd adhere to a project plan. Not exactly my style. But talking about our plan would give me the opportunity to ask her a favor. I'd do anything for my sister, including revealing my ineptitude and asking Sid for help.

She left the room, and Bernard turned to me. "Everything all right, son?"

I swallowed, hating that he called me "son." I wasn't his son. But my father had been one of his dearest friends, and their close relationship helped me land my teaching gig when I moved home to take care of Savannah and my parents' estate.

I mustered a smile. “Just a little drama with Savannah this morning, nothing to worry about.”

The older man nodded. “Don’t waste this opportunity, Nate.”

I tilted my head, and he answered my unasked question. “With Sid. Don’t blow it. She’s good people. I’d like to see you make friends here. It could mean a lot for your future in the department.”

Did he really mean friends and securing my career, or was he matchmaking? A flush crept up beneath my skin. Shit. Did everyone know about my crush on Sid? Had I been that transparent—to everyone but her? I cleared my throat. “Uh, thanks. I’ll do my best not to let the department down.”

Bernard nodded before leaving the room.

Would Sid believe I hadn’t put Bernard up to the assignment? It was one thing to manipulate her into winning a prize. It was another thing to make her think I’d finagled my way into a favored assignment. Sid was used to ruling solo over the department dinner and seemed to relish it. There was a fine line between making her notice me and making her hate me more. She already seemed suspicious of me and my motives.

How did I tell her I didn’t want anything but her?

# CHAPTER 3 – SID

I scowled, stomping down the hall toward my office. Days like today, I missed Rita. My former grad assistant would have understood my foul mood and let me vent about Nate and his underhanded maneuvers. I just knew that he had put Dr. Bernard up to our shared assignment. Competing for the DEF CON tickets was one thing. I relished the challenge and knew it'd spur my colleagues to sell more tickets, making all my work to create a fabulous dinner worthwhile.

But I'd worked too darn hard to accept second place. Having Dr. Bernard pull chairing the dinner hurt. As extra assignments went, it was one of the more glamorous and useful for our department. A good vehicle for visibility with college administration and a way to make valuable business contacts for future grants. I thought I'd done an adequate job the last couple of years, given I wasn't a party-planner by trade. We'd raised record amounts since I'd taken over, and I'd thought Dr. Bernard appreciated that.

Ego bruised, I focused on grading student assignments on data nomenclature, willing thoughts of working with Nate away.

My thoughts must have conjured him. The sharp rap against my door was all the warning I got before Nate leaned, arms crossed, in my doorway. What was it with him and shirts that stretched around his biceps and showed off his corded forearms? My pulse ticked up as I visually traced the dusting of hair lightly covering the artwork on display.

“Shall we meet up later and get our plan on?” Nate asked, his voice hitting a deeper register than I was used to.

I glanced from his arms to his sloped nose and slumbrous eyes, catching a hungry expression there. Did it mirror my own? Marshalling my emotions, I smoothed my

face, hopefully hiding any hints of lust. Nate didn't deserve my horny thoughts, not if he was playing games with my future. I refused to be sexed into second place for the DEF CON tickets.

"Yes. Excellent. Shall we meet in the conference room?" I asked.

He shook his head to the negative, before running his hands over his short-cropped hair.

"Can you come to my place instead?"

Eyes narrowing, I couldn't help the suspicion leaking into my tone. "Why?"

Surely, he wasn't a mind reader. He hadn't guessed that I found him attractive, had he? I shifted in my chair. The last thing I wanted was to puff up his ego any further. Nate and I were never happening. Any fantasies there were strictly between me and my vibrator.

Nate shifted, avoiding my gaze, which only made me more suspicious of his motives.

He cleared his throat, breaking the silence left in the aftermath of my question. He'd yet to explain his invitation, as if waiting me out. Too bad I was a veteran of the silent game. He couldn't guilt me into compliance that way.

"I'm hoping you'll help me with a small favor when you come over after work. I'm my sister's guardian. She's twelve," he added, watching my face for my reaction. I kept my thoughts to myself, shielding the sympathy they elicited. Parenting a tween probably wasn't easy.

"You don't want to leave her alone?" I asked.

Nate shifted again, uncrossing his arms to lean one forearm against the doorjamb before meeting my gaze, looking visibly uncomfortable.

“She started her period today,” he finally blurted out. “I was able to scrounge up some stuff from my mom’s old stash to get her through the day, but I could really use your help to take her shopping.”

I arched my brows. “You can manage everything with one hand tied behind your back *but* the feminine product aisle?”

He scowled, before tempering his expression into something approaching beseeching.

“It’s not that. I can take her shopping,” he grumbled softly. “She told me she’d rather have a woman’s advice. And for all my stellar qualities, I’m short on womanly attributes.” He shrugged, letting his arm drop to cross them over his chest again. “I did some research, but I’ve got to admit, I’m mystified. What the fuck are wings? And why would you want them on your underwear?”

The giggle popped out before I could get myself under control. It was reassuring to see that Nate wasn’t invincible, all his posturing to the contrary. I couldn’t imagine his poor sister, starting her journey into womanhood with him as her guide. Then again, it’s not every big brother who’d research period products. My heart clutched, choking back the laughter.

Something about my expression must have reassured him because Nate lost the defensive stance, relaxing.

“You’ll do it? You’ll help?” he asked, as if suspecting a trap.

Slowly, I nodded. “Sure. Your sister shouldn’t suffer because you’re an ass.”

His wince made me regret the harsh words. Unprofessional. *And unkind.*

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

He brought out my competitive side, but my drive to compete was as much about me as it was about him.

Something about Nate struck a nerve. He'd seemed so young and carefree, constantly breaking the unwritten rules of our college culture. Discovering there was more behind the confident mask, a caring brother, put him in a new light.

"Thanks," he said, surprising me with the true gratitude in his voice. It would have been more like him to pivot and make a joke at my expense.

"I'll buy dinner after, and we can work on our plan."

Right. *Our* plan. I suppressed my grimace with effort, forcing a smile.

"I look forward to meeting your sister," I said instead.

"I'll text you my address and see you there at five?"

I nodded, and he turned on his heel, apparently ready to escape.

"Don't you need my phone number?"

He pivoted back, a broad grin carving dimples in his cheeks.

"What kind of hacker would I be if I couldn't find one measly phone number?"

With a short salute, he backed down the hall. I pressed my thighs together, unwilling to admit what his wicked grin did to me. Hah. *Hacker*.

He probably could find my phone number. Maybe my bra size and favorite brand of ice cream too. What else did he know, or think he knew about me? Getting paired together for the department dinner project was already teaching me loads about him.

Nate as a guardian. Peter Pan in the flesh. I shook my head. Poor, poor girl.

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As promised, Nate texted me his address, and I couldn't help the little thrill inside as I labeled his contact Peter Pan. As private jokes went, it was harmless. Nate didn't seem the sort to care what I thought.

I pulled up to the squat house a few miles from campus and parked in the driveway next to Nate's Prius. The beat-up car matched the overall atmosphere of the house, and I winced as a stray bramble caught my forearm on the way to the door. The yard was an eyesore, full of weeds and overgrown shrubs. Nate may be a talented technical professional, but he sucked at house maintenance.

I pushed the doorbell, and a few seconds later, a petite girl with elfin features and honey-hued hair answered. Thin and reserved, she gave me a tight smile.

"Hi, you must be Dr. Culver?" she asked politely. "Come on in."

I stepped over the threshold, quickly taking in the living room and entryway. Old photos of the younger girl and Nate coupled with what must have been their parents crowded the hall. I tried not to stare at the resemblance between Nate and his dad. The older man had been a silver and sedate version of Nate. No tattoos or T-shirts, but the confident posture of a happy man.

Looking to Nate's sister, my heart hurt for her. So young to have lost so much.

"You can call me Sid. Dr. Culver is too formal when Nate and I are friends, yeah?"

I smiled, hoping to hide the lie. Nate and I weren't exactly friends, but I didn't need to burden his sister with that revelation.

"What's your name?"

"Savannah."

Nate strode from the hall, smiling when he caught sight of us.

“I see you’ve already met. Sorry, I was taking a quick call. Is it okay if I drive? I thought we’d swing by the store, then pick up takeout. What are you in the mood for? Does Thai sound okay?”

I smiled at the energetic rush of words. Was Nate nervous? I glanced conspiratorially at Savannah. “What do you feel like? I’m easy to please.” I didn’t miss Nate’s snort at my claim. What? I was easy to please when it came to food. Other things? Not so much. “As the woman of the house, I’d say you’ve got the deciding vote tonight. What will it be?”

Savannah smiled shyly, and I was glad I’d deferred to her. I couldn’t imagine losing my parents young and having my older brother step in as a parent.

“Thai is my favorite,” she admitted.

I looked up, enjoying the camaraderie when Nate returned my smile with a grin of his own. Maybe I shouldn’t have underestimated him. After all, he knew his sister best.

“That sounds like a decision,” Nate said, ushering us toward the door.

I peppered Savannah with questions about her school as Nate drove us almost sedately to the grocery store. I slid a sideways glance his way, enjoying the calm competence he exuded behind the wheel. The Prius and below speed limit driving didn’t exactly fit with his Lost Boy image.

Savannah and I made quick work of picking out a range of products for her to try, discussing the pros and cons of each. Nate was gentleman enough to give us space, cruising the aisles and picking up a variety of what looked like ready-to-eat meals in his cart.

We hit Bow Thai and ordered an enormous number of dishes he wouldn’t let me pay for before heading back to

Nate's with our purchases.

"Don't worry, it won't go to waste," Nate promised.

Savannah giggled from the backseat. "Yeah, it means we don't have to cook for the rest of the week!"

I followed Savannah to the kitchen and carried silverware and drinks back to the living room while Nate put away their other purchases and unpackaged our food.

Savannah turned on *Jeopardy!* while we wolfed down pad thai, basil fried rice, and curry in quantities guaranteed to give me heartburn later.

We'd spent a whole ninety minutes together, and Nate hadn't done anything irritating. Watching him argue *Jeopardy!* answers on the couch next to Savannah was nice. Companionable even. And much more low-key than I would have suspected from him. This new, down-to-earth side of Nate was one I liked. He looked up from his plate, catching my gaze on him, and winked.

*Gah.*

It should have been cheesy, a major turnoff. Tell that to my racing pulse.

"Savvy, please put the food away and the dishes in the dishwasher. Sid and I need to get some work done now." Gesturing toward the back of the house, he said, "How about we head onto the deck? Do you want anything to drink?"

Suddenly parched at the thought of spending time alone with him, I nodded.

"Water," I croaked. "Water would be great."

"You sure?" he crooked a devilish brow. "I've got beer and wine. Or do you not drink on a school night?" he teased.

How big a prude did he think I was? I almost took the bait, asking for a glass of wine to prove him wrong, but I truly wanted water.

“Water’s fine,” I said instead.

I picked up my purse from the entry, pulling out my notebook before following Nate.

He grabbed glasses from the cupboard, and my lips twitched as I noted he filled both with water. He handed one to me and strong-armed the sliding door open, ushering me outside.

The wood deck was as dilapidated as the rest of the house, but from Nate’s relaxed shoulders, I guessed it held happy memories. We took seats at an iron table and chairs, making me glad I’d dressed warmly for the spring day. The sun was already dipping low. It’d grow cold soon.

I flipped open my notebook, noting the date and subject of our meeting.

“I’m thinking of using the same caterer as last year, any complaints?” I asked, looking up from the list of decisions I’d jotted down.

Catching his gaze, I struggled to identify his expression. Indulgence? Admiration? Pushing away the warmth washing through me, I poised my pen, waiting for him to agree.

Nate scrubbed his hands through his hair, watching me steadily. I tilted my head, silently urging him on as the silence lingered.

“I was thinking we could go a little different direction this year.”

His soft suggestion shouldn’t have caught me by surprise. Either Dr. Bernard wanted something new, or Nate had lobbied for the job. And I couldn’t imagine Nate volunteering for more work. Had Dr. Bernard been dissatisfied with last year’s event? A classic dinner with speaker and auction, we’d raised record amounts for the college scholarship fund. What was wrong with that?

Seeming to guess the question on my lips, Nate rushed ahead.

“Last year’s event was ... lovely.”

I narrowed my eyes. “Lovely” sounded a lot like “boring” based on his intonation.

“What are you suggesting?”

“How about a Black and White Hat Ball?”

I snorted. “You barely ever wear anything but jeans, and you want to plan a *ball*?”

“You got me there.” His mischievous grin zapped straight between my thighs, and I filed his expression away to reflect on later. Possibly with some battery-operated accompaniment.

“But if the prize for highest fundraiser is a trip to DEF CON, wouldn’t it be fun to carry the theme throughout? Maybe not a full ball,” he admitted, “but everyone can dress in black or white, and we could have a cyber security speaker. Maybe in addition to the auction, play a table game, like a hacker version of Mafia?”

Dammit, it was a fun idea. Much cooler than my IT Through the Ages concept.

I shoved down my jealousy. Nate had given this serious thought. And his suggestion had merit. Begrudgingly, I started taking notes as we brainstormed further. After a solid forty minutes of tossing ideas back and forth, we had a plan. And I couldn’t argue that Dr. Bernard had been wrong to give me a partner. At least until it came time to execute our ideas. Would Nate step up to his half of the chores, or weasel out while still claiming credit? Only time would tell.

I yawned, and Nate took the hint. “That’s enough for tonight. Can we do this again next week, finalize everything then?”

I nodded and Nate grinned. “Savannah would love another excuse to get takeout. Usually, I torture her with grilled cheese or cardboard pizza.”

“You don’t cook?”

He shook his head good naturedly. “Nah, never learned to my parent’s dismay. Too many awesome restaurant options when I lived in Seattle.”

“Too busy working for the CIA to cook?”

His soft snort at my teasing had me biting back a grin. As often as he needled me, putting him on the spot seemed fair.

“I can neither confirm nor deny any rumors about my past employment.”

His pious and long-suffering tone helped soften the blow of the canned response. Frustrating as it was that he wouldn’t reveal more, I could respect if a non-disclosure agreement meant it wasn’t his story to tell.

“Still, your life must have been different in Seattle. Not a lot of big city excitement here in Benton. Did you move back to become Savvy’s guardian?”

His expression fell, and my stomach bottomed out. I didn’t need to remind him of his loss.

“I’m sorry.”

He glanced up, shrugging off my apology. “For what? It’s natural to be curious. And I want us to get to know each other better.”

“You’ve never mentioned Savvy at work.”

If I’d known, it would have changed things. Nate’s charm and confidence as he swanned in late to meetings or avoided helping with department functions had given me the impression that he lived a care-free, irresponsible life. Too busy playing video games for adult duties. I’d thought he

skated on his good looks and bromance with Dr. Bernard, unaware he shouldered more responsibilities than I ever dreamed.

Nate frowned. “You’re right. Dr. Bernard knows, but I wasn’t ready for questions. Taking over for Savvy has been too raw to talk about.”

I winced, and he waved away my chagrin. “Sid, it’s *fine*. I need to start sharing more. My folks were hit by a drunk driver. Thankfully, Savvy wasn’t in the car, but it’s left a big hole in both our lives.”

I could imagine. Reaching out, I squeezed his hand in mine, silently sharing in his sorrow. After my parents’ divorce, my mother had settled in Arizona with me. My dad demanded I spend summers with him in Michigan, but it wasn’t the same as living together full-time. When I stayed with my dad, I ached for my mom. Other times, I missed my dad. You could paper over those wounds, but that didn’t mean they healed.

Still, I’d been relatively lucky. My mom taught me so much in those teen years. Including how to cook. How long had it been since Nate and Savvy had real, home-cooked food?

“Do you want to cook something together?”

I bit my lip, wishing I could call the words back as soon as I said them. My soft heart made me do it. I imagined living on takeout and frozen pizzas would quickly lose its allure. I couldn’t imagine it was healthy for a growing girl.

Nate paused, as if he’d refuse, but he let a smile overtake his features, bringing out those darn dimples again.

Like *whoa*. Those cute slashes in his cheeks might be the death of me. Or at least my dignity.

“That would be amazing. Text me the ingredients, and I’ll make sure to have everything you need,” he promised.

I resisted fanning myself at him offering me everything I needed. Just.

Impure thoughts about the sometimes asshole at work were *not* my friend. But maybe Nate could be? Our evening had been productive. And he'd been almost charming throughout, as if being with his sister humbled him. The new side of Nate tugged at my heartstrings. I nodded, worried my voice would crack if I said anything more, and gathered my things in the entryway.

I needed to shore up my defenses if I was going to survive planning the Black and White Hat Ball with him. Falling for his charm wasn't in my plans. Sleeping with my colleague and co-chair would never do. The gossip alone would be unbearable if it got out. Our college community was relatively tiny, and word spread fast. Even the implosion of my relationship with Paul had made waves, and he hadn't even worked for the college. I'd suffered sympathetic comments for weeks and more than a few blistering phone conversations with my father, berating me for leaving the "perfect" man. Chatter about my brilliance and dedication were fine. Getting judged for who I slept with or pity when I got dumped was not. Especially when my father's assistant seemed to search social media regularly for anything that might besmirch her precious mayor's community standing. Nate may not care about his reputation, but I had a career to protect and family scrutiny to avoid.

Nate pulled the front door open, leaning against it. *Could the man not stand up straight?* Or did he know what he did to me every time he crossed his arms over his massive chest. Muscles that didn't belong on a nerd, dammit. I forced a smile, pretending I didn't want to brush up against him as I slid by, waving at Savannah.

"Nice to meet you."

I released my breath when I gained the safety of my car, but Nate still leaned, watching me.

*Dammit.*



# CHAPTER 4 – NATE

Surely it was my imagination that Sid was avoiding me. She'd attended the Monday staff meeting as usual, but every time I stopped by her office during the week, she'd been elsewhere.

I'd hoped we could talk more about our plans and any ingredients she needed, but I had to find her first.

Finally, I gave in, texting her after another failed attempt to catch her in her office.

*Nate: You've been as elusive as a Microsoft breach. We still on for dinner?*

Before she could back out, I typed out another message.

*Nate: Savannah is super excited. Text me your ingredient list.*

Shameless. I should have felt guilty, using my sister to get closer to her. But Sid had proven she could resist me over and over again. It was only when I introduced Savvy that her heart softened. Shared project aside, there was no reason we had to eat together.

*Sid: Ground turkey, ginger, sesame oil, hamburger buns, breadcrumbs, hoisin, and mayo.*

It wasn't as sexy as inviting me into her "breach," but at least she wasn't bailing on dinner.

*Nate: Fresh ginger or from the spice aisle?*

*Sid: Fresh!*

I could practically hear the censure in her response. At least she wasn't avoiding me.

"Nate, just the man I was looking for."

The forced joviality had me looking up to find Dr. Bernard hovering in the door to my office.

“Yes, what can I do for you?”

“Just checking in on your fundraiser dinner plans. Things going well with you and Sid?”

I shook my head; sure I’d heard him wrong. The kindly older man’s expression remained innocent. Polite interest in our work project, or did he suspect my feelings?

I forced a confident expression, trying to look reassuring. “Sir, it’s all going to plan. I think you’ll be pleased.”

Bernard rubbed his hands together. “Good, good. I can’t wait for your report at the next staff meeting. We’re excited to hear what you come up with.”

Pausing, he seemed to think I’d say more, and when I waited him out, he pushed ahead. “I’m so glad you and Sid seem to be getting along. Your dad would have wanted you to make friends here, get settled.”

Face hardening, I struggled to keep my expression friendly. Dr. Bernard wanted the best for me. Just like my dad. Why couldn’t I shake the sneaking fear that I’d disappoint them all?

The last thing I’d wanted was to return to Benton, and Dr. Bernard’s words only served to remind me of my U-turn. Life in Seattle suited me perfectly. Work, women, and wine. All the finer things in life at my disposal. In Benton? The Podunk college town didn’t have a fifth of the options or appeal. Until I met Sid. Which was part of the reason keeping Bernard happy was important. He’d given me a chance when most wouldn’t, hiring me. I owed him a lot.

Swallowing back old disappointments, I pushed a smile onto my face.

“I’m glad to be here, sir.”

Not exactly true. But anticipating my dinner with Sid, for the first time I thought I could be.

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I beat Savvy home from school by only a few minutes. My usually chipper sister seemed more sullen than usual, and I dreaded the question I needed to ask.

“Everything okay with you? Is it your period?”

Savvy rolled her eyes, pushing a hank of hair behind her ear.

“No, Nate.”

Silence stretched between us, and I waited her out. But after living together again for the last year, Savvy knew I’d break.

“So, what is it then? You seem down.”

“Do you think I’m pretty, Nate?”

My heart clutched at the raw vulnerability in her blue eyes. I wasn’t cut out for this shit. Of course she was pretty. She was my sister. But is that what you were supposed to say? The ache of loss washed through me. My mom would know. Savvy was still in the awkward years, but I bet she’d be every bit as beautiful as our mother.

“Savvy, I think you’re gorgeous inside and out. Don’t ever forget it.”

There. It sounded like something a parent would say. So why did I feel so fucking inadequate?

I grabbed Savvy in a bear hug, squeezing and lifting her until she giggled, washing away the somber mood.

“Is everything okay at school?”

She shuffled toward her room, seeming ready to escape.

“Yeah, fine,” she said, waving me off.

Why did I suspect that things were not in fact, fine? Did I confront her, or let it go? This being a parent thing was harder than it looked. Constant questions with no concrete answers. Running a finger over the portrait of my parents smiling down on us, I wished I could hug them, just once more. Ask their advice. For Savvy, for me. I hadn't imagined becoming a parent at twenty-seven. And I wasn't ashamed to admit I was lost without them.

Savvy returned from her room to flop on the couch, seeming unaffected by our earlier conversation, and I let out a breath I'd been holding. Maybe I'd said the right thing.

I scrambled to clean up the kitchen, wanting to show Sid I could be an adult with a (mostly) clean house.

The doorbell rang, and Savvy yelled, "I got it," before I could move from the counter.

Deciding it would be undignified to sprint and beat her to the door, I listened as Savvy welcomed Sid, inviting her to join me in the kitchen before Savvy returned to the living room.

"Hey," I said with a smile, as Sid stepped onto the faded linoleum.

Seeing the kitchen through her eyes, I was embarrassed by how run-down everything was. But my parents hadn't had much life insurance, and I tried to save everything I could for Savvy's education. New flooring and cabinets could wait. Maybe forever, if I moved back to Seattle once Savvy was in college.

Pushing away from the counter, I gestured to the ingredients I'd staged for her.

"I think I got it all." I clasped my hands together and beamed at her. "So. What are we making?"

"Turkey burgers."

I wrinkled my nose.

“You have a problem with turkey, Cummings?”

Her challenge made my heart race, and I couldn't help my grin.

“Nah. I may not have learned much about cooking, but I did learn never to argue with the chef.”

Sid nodded. “Wise man.”

“I can be taught!” I claimed as I extended my pointer finger toward the ceiling.

“That remains to be seen,” she teased, smiling to take some of the sting out of her words.

I saluted. “Reporting for duty, chef.”

“Hmm ... I think I like this.”

“What?”

“Having you under my control.”

Was now the time to admit I'd been under her spell much longer than she'd been standing in my kitchen? Sun shone through the window over the sink, striking glints of auburn in her dark hair. Sid looked like the woman I'd imagined she could be behind the serious slacks and bright work blazers. Soft. Funny. Sweet.

“Now, get to work.”

“What can I do for you?” I asked with a playful grin.

“What are you capable of?”

My lips twitched. That was the competitive, snarky Sid I'd come to admire.

“Not much. I'm a noob in the kitchen.”

She pretended to think, squinting at me. “You look like you could probably mix patties.”

“I do like to squeeze soft things between my fingers.”

Her burst of laughter had me chuckling along, watching as she peeled the ginger and started chopping it. The sharp zing, fresh and fragrant, only served to highlight the relaxed moment. Sid seemed to be warming to me.

“Well, I ... I don’t like to get my hands dirty,” Sid said.

I winked. “I’m willing to get dirty for you.”

Her soft guffaw thrilled me. A month ago, I couldn’t have imagined Sid and I joking in my kitchen. Now, she was here. With me. Almost friendly. Did she sense the undercurrent of serious offer beneath my teasing?

I grabbed a mixing bowl from the cabinet at her request and watched as she confidently added breadcrumbs, sesame oil, and the chopped ginger before gesturing to the ground meat.

“Drop the turkey in and start mixing. I’ll add salt and pepper, then you can form the patties.”

She hovered at my shoulder as I dug my hands into the cool mixture, humming her approval.

“I told you I’m willing to get my hands dirty.”

“Yeah, I bet,” was her dry response.

The desire to push her up against the cabinet and prove it to her nearly overwhelmed me. Maybe she saw the flare of lust in my eyes, because she cleared her throat. “I think it’s fine to form the patties now. Do you have a grill, or do you want to do these on the stove?”

I wanted to do *her* on the stove. Scratch that. Savvy was here. I couldn’t let my heated imagination run away with me. Even if Sid were into it, not just teasing, we had an audience.

“I, uh. I can light the grill,” I offered.

Her smile of approval had me turning more firmly to hide my erection behind the counter. *Nothing to see here, folks. Just a totally normal man, fondling his meat, wishing it was something altogether different.*

Sid slid a plate next to me, and I pressed the meat balls into patties, hiding my grunt of pain as she hummed her approval. I ached for that soft sound coming from her lips. But I wished it was happening under more private circumstances.

Savvy bounced in from the living room, long hair pulled up in a ponytail that bobbed behind her.

“What’s for dinner? It smells good.”

Sid shared her smile with Savvy. “Turkey burgers with sesame and ginger. Can you help me mix the sauce? Then Nate can grill, and we’ll be ready to eat.”

Sid helped Savvy spoon the mayo and hoisin into a bowl, mixing until they were a golden brown. The sweet of the hoisin competed with the spice of the ginger in the turkey, and my stomach growled audibly. I washed my hands and lit the grill, pleased when Sid accepted my offer of a beer on the deck.

Sid and I settled at the outdoor table while the burgers sizzled, gentle smoke wafting from the grill. Sid shivered, and I felt like a jerk. I always ran a few degrees warmer than those around me, it was part of why I eschewed the button-down wardrobe most of the other professors favored. I’d sweat through them in a hot minute. But Sid didn’t have my superpower.

“Can I get you a blanket, or do you want to shelter with me? I’m big enough to block the breeze.”

Sid scooted her chair and snuggled closer, though not quite close enough that we touched, and I held back my triumph with effort. She’d chosen me over other options. For maybe the first time ever. If Savvy came outside, I’d claim she’d huddled next to me only for the extra body heat, but I

could admit the lie to myself. Having her so close filled me with contentment. Peace. As if things were finally going my way. I inhaled Sid's sweet scent, laced with something floral, probably leftover from her shampoo. Slowly, I extended my arm over the back of her chair, giving her time to pull away. She fit perfectly against my shoulder, warm and willing, and my mind naturally went to other warm activities we could enjoy.

"Time to flip the meat," she murmured softly.

Was that a new euphemism the kids were using? She could flip my meat *anytime*.

Sid dug an elbow into my side, derailing my train of thought. "The burgers," she said insistently, gesturing to where the grill had gone from a gentle thread of smoke to something darker and more ominous.

"Shit." I sprang away from Sid, grabbing the spatula and opening the grill. I flipped the burgers quickly. One was a bit charred, the rest looked passable.

"Sorry about that," I muttered.

When I sat back down, she didn't sit as close, and I mourned the lost connection. Still, she'd agreed to join us for dinner tonight. I could count the meal as progress.

"We've talked about my family, but what about yours?" I asked. "Do you have anyone nearby?"

Sid shook her head, soft strands of her hair whipping at her shoulder. "Mom is in Arizona with Frank and my dad still lives in Michigan."

"What do they do?" I asked, trying to imagine the paragons that raised Sid.

"Mom is a math teacher. Dad is the town mayor. Has been for nearly twenty-five years."

"No shit? You were a campaign kid?"



It explained so much. Precise, organized, and always aware of the optics. Sid came by it naturally. Had likely been groomed from childhood to be perfect in every way. As if she weren't already amazing all on her own.

Nose wrinkled, she shook her head. "Not exactly. Mom and I campaigned with Dad for his first few terms, but I had a lesser role once we moved to Arizona."

"Still, what was that like? Small-town spotlight? Did you get away with murder?" I asked, hoping that a few funny stories lurked beneath her clipped words.

Shuddering, she looked horrified. "Not even close. I couldn't get away with crying over a skinned knee, let alone any pranks or mischief."

Her dad sounded like a prick if that was the case.

Toying with a strand of her hair, I regretted my line of questioning. Sid seemed to fold in on herself when she spoke about her dad. I didn't like seeing the confident woman I admired shadowed by ghosts of the past.

I pulled the finished burgers from the grill a few minutes later, and we returned inside.

Those moments with Sid sheltered in my arms had felt right. Peaceful for the first time in forever. Enough that the feeling scared me. I doubted she'd admit we were friends, let alone flirting. I needed to bide my time. Wait until she was ready. Dare I hope she'd make the first move?

Savvy chattered about school all through dinner, and I relaxed, enjoying the sparkle in her eyes. Our earlier conversation appeared to have been forgotten, and I could only hope that some of the tougher parenting issues would pass me by. My parents had given me everything—every advantage—and I couldn't help but be sorry Savvy had a pale imitation in me.

After dinner, I was tempted to invite Sid back to the deck, but I figured more attempts at cuddling might push my luck. She'd retreated to her more serious façade, and I mourned our earlier teasing and flirting in the kitchen.

Sid seemed wholly unaware of her impact on me. A damn shame.

We finalized our plans for the department dinner, each volunteering for different duties. Sid examined me suspiciously every time I took a task but seemed to accept that I truly meant to contribute. Knowing she'd expected less stung. Had I been so awful? Sure, I'd played a few pranks, but nothing destructive. Shenanigans were practically de rigeur for new hires where I used to work. Part of settling in. You had to test the defenses of the newbies; ensure they were up to snuff. Me challenging her was just that: a little test to show I considered her an equal.

As we wound down, Sid bit her lip, and I sensed hesitation in her.

"What is it?" I asked.

She shifted a glance to the living room, where Savvy was no doubt engrossed in a show on Disney. "How's Savvy doing?" she whispered.

My heart clenched. Had Savvy asked her for a favor? Told Sid a secret she hadn't wanted to talk about with me?

"I think we're fine. Why? Did she say something to you?"

Sid shook her head quickly, and I let my shoulders relax from where they'd been creeping toward my ears. "I know how tween girls can be," she said softly.

"Well, you've got me beat. Today she asked me if she was pretty," I admitted, clenching my hand where it lay on the table.

Sid's palm covered my knuckles, and I let the warmth of our connection soothe me, ignoring the prickles firing beneath my skin at her touch.

"I'm sure you're doing the best you can," she said.

I winced. Why did that strike me as not being good enough?

"I keep joking that I'm her Batman."

Sid's lips twitched, and she chuckled softly.

"Casting yourself as a superhero? Why does that not surprise me, Cummings? I can one hundred percent see you flying in at the last moment, saying *I'm Batman*."

I shrugged off her words, letting a thread of naked honesty bleed into my voice. "I'd fight anyone for her. Do anything. But sometimes, I don't know what to say. I'm not sure I'm doing it right." I spread my hands against the table, "I'm not sure I'm doing *anything* right."

More used to sparring than support, the hand Sid put on my shoulder shook me. Pity. Not what I wanted from Sid.

"The night is darkest before the dawn. And I promise you, dawn is coming."

I glanced up, my mouth falling open. "Did you—did you just quote Batman to me?" I asked on a chuffing laugh.

I hadn't thought Sid could surprise me. But working together was no substitute for getting to know the real woman beneath the professional veneer

Her answering grin kindled warmth in my gut.

"It seemed appropriate," she said with a sheepish grin. "Corny, but apt. I can't believe I'm saying this, Cummings, but I believe in you."

Probably the nicest thing Sid had said to me. Ever.

"You're that girl's world. So don't blow it."

And there it was. Sid's other side, ending the tender moment.

"Thanks for joining us tonight."

Her soft smile made me want to capture her mouth with mine.

"I'm glad I came."

I kept my expression neutral with an effort. She hadn't *come yet*, but it didn't stop me from hoping that maybe, someday, those words would mean more. If I couldn't have my freedom and the life I led before my parents died, hot monkey sex with my crush seemed like a good Plan B.

I flushed as Savvy burst into the kitchen, beelining for the freezer and the pint of ice cream I kept there for her. "Dessert time!"

# CHAPTER 5 – SID

“They’re at your regular table,” Vicki, the café’s hostess said, gesturing to our usual spot in the corner at The Windmill.

“Thanks, Vicki. How’s your daughter? She enjoying school?”

The matronly woman smiled, patting a few strands back into her graying bun before slipping the hand into her apron. “Yes, she’s doing great, thanks. Really loves the campus in Arizona.”

“Glad to hear it.”

I wound my way through tables of diners and slid into my seat at the wooden table.

“Good morning.”

Rita looked up from her menu with a smile. Not that she needed the menu at this point. None of us did. Our brunch habit had formed when Rita moved into her new job for the Migraine Research Institute, leaving her role as my teaching assistant.

Rita looked happy, the contentment of living with her boyfriend, Ed, and working full-time at something she loved radiating from every pore.

By contrast, Angi, Ed’s best friend’s wife and a new mom, looked like hot garbage.

“Is Ari teething again?” I asked.

Her tired nod only reinforced my sympathy, and I pushed the carafe at the center of the table closer to her. Long black hair snuck out from her messy bun, and the polished professional I’d first met through Rita snagged the pot, pouring a fresh cup of coffee.

“Hey, Cheri.”

Rita’s former roommate nodded her acknowledgement, hunkering down over her own steaming cup of coffee. “Late night?” I asked.

“Yeah. Studying for an exam,” she said around a yawn. “What’s new with you?”

I shrugged, going for casual. “I’m planning this year’s department dinner,” I said, taking a sip from my cup and watching the others as I added, “with Nate Cummings.”

Rita’s brows rose, and Angi choked on her mouthful of coffee. Cheri reached over to pat her on the back during the ensuing coughing fit.

“With ... Nate?” Angi choked out.

“What do you need? An alibi? An attorney? Bail money? New identity maybe?” Rita asked with a grin.

“Possibly an exorcism?” Cheri asked.

“For me or him?” I asked, chuckling.

Angi side-eyed me over her cup. “If you have to ask, I’m going to go with you? Who are you, and what have you done with our Sid? I’d expect you to be spitting nails over this. How did you two get paired up?”

“Dr. Bernard assigned me a co-chair.”

“And you went with it?” Rita asked.

I lifted a shoulder. “I didn’t have much choice. It’s not so much volunteer as volun-told when the department chair asks.”

Rita folded her hands together, placing her chin on them, watching me. “And how’s it going?”

“Better than I could have imagined,” I acknowledged on a gusty sigh, staring at my fingers where they clasped my mug.

Maybe if I didn't make eye contact, they wouldn't see what I didn't want to admit. Nate wasn't all bad.

Angi leaned back in her chair, disbelief plain on her face. "You ... and the man you've called the "Poster Child for Patriarchy," are ... getting along?"

I shifted in my seat, before nodding.

"I knew it!" Rita jumped in, rubbing her hands together.

"Knew *what*?" I asked.

"Professor Cummings has it bad, and now you do too," she crowed.

"I do *not*."

I *did not* want to admit that might be true. Snuggling with Nate on his deck, learning more about his life, had changed my perception of him. His offer of shelter had surprised me, but turning down the overture felt churlish, and I'd taken the olive branch instead of going inside for my jacket. I never imagined how being that close to him would make my heart race, hints of his soap ensnaring me in a cloud of pheromones. Nate's arm thrown across my shoulder had seemed almost friendly. *If* I ignored my body's reaction.

As if sensing the unsaid bits, Rita leaned in. "You haven't seen how he looks at you when you wear your blue dress. I used to think he watched you so carefully to see his jibes land or keep an eye out for retaliation, but now? I know I'm right. He has it bad."

"Rita, it's not like that. We've just had a few meetings at his house, planning the dinner together. Nothing more," I said firmly.

Angi's eyes lit with mischief, and I realized my mistake.

“You’ve been *to his house?*” she asked. “What’s it like?”

“Neon beer signs and broken-down sofas?” Cheri guessed.

“Ooh ... all leather and bondage gear on display?” Rita grinned.

Angi snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it—if I were the bad boy of academia, I’d have my Harley in the living room. Probably in pieces, because I’m too manly to take it to the shop, but too inept to actually fix the darn thing.”

I groaned, regretting admitting to seeing Nate’s house at all. Revealing details about his private life didn’t feel right but joining in their joking didn’t sit well either.

“Guys.” I held up my hands. “He lives in the house he grew up in. He’s the guardian for his twelve-year-old sister. That’s why we met at his place, so she wouldn’t be alone.”

“Oh.”

Angi shifted the creamer and sweeteners on the table, rearranging them to align. “I like my answer better.”

I rolled my eyes, and Rita leaned in, her eyes sparkling. “I don’t know, the reality is much better than the fantasy sometimes. Don’t you agree, Sid?”

Shaking my head, I did the only thing I could: deflect. “No. I’m not fantasizing about Nate. We’re working together, that’s all.”

Rita’s face telegraphed her disbelief, but she let me get away with dropping the subject when Vicki came to take our orders.

After a leisurely brunch, I felt renewed. The break among friends had been just what I needed to put Nate in perspective. Sure, he wasn’t the jerk I’d first assumed. Or not only a jerk. There had to be a heart lurking in that muscled



chest to take over custody of his sister. I could cut him a little slack. But it didn't mean I needed to accept Rita's conspiracy theory, that he was interested in me. Our moment on the deck aside, our time together had been friendly. We were nothing more than colleagues.

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My blue dress called to me from the back of my closet as I flipped through options. Our Monday staff meeting loomed. With the dinner fast-approaching, Nate and I were due to give the department an update. It'd be a true test of my new partnership with Nate. Would he hog all the credit? In the past, I'd expect it, but now?

I bit my lip, examining my dress as if it had the answers. Fitted, with a deep V-neck, the bright blue hugged every curve. I slipped it on with a smile, thinking back to Rita's observation. Totally false, but the extra shot of confidence might be the boon I needed.

I helped myself to coffee, sliding into my usual seat and nodding my greeting to my colleagues. Carly gave me a grunty nod. New to the faculty, she hadn't mixed much with the others, and her monosyllabic responses in staff meetings hadn't helped me get to know her. She kept her head down and taught an armful of courses on digital marketing and analytics.

Nate slid into his seat as Dr. Bernard started the meeting, asking for course updates and outlining the schedule for fall. Summer semester was always quiet at the college, mostly allowing time for projects or research and a handful of summer classes. And DEF CON. Held every summer in Vegas, attending the conference would help me round out my intro to cyber security courses. I could learn more about infosec from the attendees and demos in a single weekend than I could from all the textbooks published to date. Anything printed was already old in the tech industry.

“And, Professor Culver, Professor Cummings, any updates for us on the year-end department dinner?”

I glanced up from my notes, clearing my throat.

“We’ve got it covered, Dr. Bernard,” Nate butted in, all brash confidence.

“I’ve got the venue and caterer locked,” I said, projecting loudly.

“And I’ve been working on the auction donations,” Nate slid in. “I think they’ll be record-breaking. We make a great team.”

I relaxed into my chair. It had been uncharitable to think he’d swoop in and take credit for our work. Nate’s praise for me might be over the top, but he’d come through on his action items. Dr. Bernard beamed beside me, clearly pleased.

“Excellent, excellent. I look forward to announcing ticket sales.” He glanced around the table. “Just a reminder: the faculty member with the most ticket sales will get the all-expense paid trip to DEF CON this year.” Eyes sparkling, he seemed intent on challenging us all. “Remember, it’s for a good cause.”

Nate straightened in his seat at the reminder, and I stiffened. I wanted that trip. True, I could probably pay my own way, but winning and going on the college’s dime would add a sweet edge to the experience.

“Sid,” Nate called to me as I tried to slip out at the end of the meeting.

Was it my imagination, or did his gaze trace my figure?

My pulse stuttered before speeding up as he smiled at me.

“Can I talk you into one more planning dinner this week?” he asked.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say no. Nate was starting to get to me. And that way lay madness. If he wormed his way inside my defenses, what damage could he do? Too much.

“Savvy really enjoyed the turkey burgers. She’s hoping you’ll add a new recipe to my arsenal.”

Any thought I’d had of turning him down crumbled in the face of his plea. Rejecting confident, cocky Nate was easy. But my heart ached for Savannah.

I swallowed, pushing down the no in favor of the answer I could live with.

“Sure. I’ll text you my ingredient list?”

Nate’s grin showed off the deep creases of his dimples, and I couldn’t help but return his smile.

Dammit. As tempting as he was, I’d resolved to date around and keep things light after Paul. Our split still stung. I’d thought I knew him and that he respected me. Finding out that he wanted me to make myself less to accommodate his career had broken us. And made me question my judgment. I’d thought he understood that we were equally ambitious and appreciated that, but I’d been wrong. He’d wanted a paper doll to prop him up, not a real woman with goals of her own. Since then, I’d avoided serious commitments. Nothing social media official. Not that Nate screamed long-term, but we’d never be able to fly under the radar as a couple on campus. And I didn’t need my love life exposed to scrutiny from my family or colleagues.

Hard pass on having to constantly dodge calls from my dad to avoid hearing how unsuitable Nate was as a partner and how my life choices reflected on him. He had a way of making me forget it was *my* life.

The man was contagious. But letting my guard down wasn’t an option. If he could use Savannah to make me say yes, maybe she was fair game as a shield? There could be no

more cuddling on the back deck, no more flirting. Nate and I were just business colleagues, and we needed to stay that way.

# CHAPTER 6 – NATE

If Sid knew what her blue dress did to me, would she burn it? I'd believed she was thawing toward me, but at our staff meeting, her armor seemed perfectly intact. *Impenetrable*.

She'd have a fit if she knew I wanted to penetrate *her*. I snorted. *Knock it off, perv*. Mostly I wanted to crack the fragile shell she used as protection, nothing more. Shaking my head at my wayward thoughts, I couldn't help but remember the feel of her snuggled against me in the cold. What were the chances she'd choose another grill recipe?

I'd become the pathetic, pseudo-single dad who fixated on a coworker instead of dating for real. Dancing the line between professionalism and flirting was too damn enticing. It'd be easier to give up if it didn't seem like she was flirting back. True, it was only in the scant minutes when she forgot our rivalry, but I could only hope more time together outside of work would help her see the real me.

Bernard's co-chair assignment had been a blessing in disguise. I'd thought I'd have to get her all the way to DEF CON to fulfill my goal of spending time with her. He'd given me a golden opportunity to warm her up beforehand.

After a morning of teaching, I drove downtown for lunch, easily finding parking near the bar so early. It was only at night that small-town Benton morphed into college-nightlife Benton.

Jake called out a greeting as I pushed through the doors to Porter's Pints.

"Hey, Jake. Is Chris around?"

Jake shook his shaggy blond head. "Naw. He's gone to a tasting at one of our distributors."

“Ah,” I said wisely. “That explains the T-shirt.”

Jake looked down at his chest, proudly sporting a worn THIRST RESPONDER slogan. “What? You think it’s inappropriate? This is a bar.”

I shook my head, used to Jake’s sense of humor. It was a wonder Chris put up with him, but they’d been nearly inseparable since hooking up. Somehow, they made it work as co-managers of Porter’s Pints with their different personalities. Gruff Chris and his extrovert partner Jake had been the first friends I’d called after moving back to Benton. In high school, Jake and I had run the halls of Benton High. Chris, hard-working townie, had usually been too busy bussing tables at his parents’ bar to join in our shenanigans. Then again, judging from Jake’s mischievous expression, maybe things hadn’t changed.

“You ask him yet?” I asked, thinking of things that *had* changed. Mostly, Jake’s comfort with himself, and the clear love in his eyes every time he talked about Chris.

Jake scowled, the unfriendly expression looking unnatural on his usually open features.

“No. I’m still working on my strategy.”

I shrugged, grabbing a handful of nuts from the bowl on the bar and crunching them between my teeth. “What’s to strategize? Will. You. Marry. Me. It’s four words. How hard can it be?”

“Spoken like a single man.”

“Jake, the ballsy guy I knew in high school would have sprayed it in whipped cream on Chris’s lawn by now or spelled it out in nuts on the bar. What’s the hold up?”

Jake held up a finger. “First, nuts on the bar.” He shuddered. “*So* wrong. *Please*. This is a respectable establishment.”

I squinted. “You work here.”

He extended his middle finger. “Fuck you very much, but I am respectable.”

“Whatever you say, *thirst responder*. Just fucking ask him. He loves you.”

Jake grunted, and I snapped my fingers. “Hey. Before I forget, I can count on you for a Porter’s gift certificate for the department auction, right?”

“Sure.”

“And you’ll ask your mom to join you at my table?” I asked hopefully.

“*Nate*. I did that for you last year. Can’t you find a different sacrificial lamb this time?”

“What? Your mom is the college president. She helps sell tickets. And I need all the sales I can get if I’m going to challenge Sid.”

“Are you sure you want to beat Sid?” he asked, brows raised.

“She won’t respect me if I don’t even try.”

“Why don’t you just ask her out, instead of all the subterfuge? What happened to the ballsy guy *I* knew in high school?” he said, parroting my earlier words back at me.

“Maybe he’s waiting for his best friend to hurry up and get engaged.”

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I thrummed with anticipation to see Sid again. Passing her in the halls at work just wasn’t the same. It was part of the reason I’d harried her with pranks when I first started. Getting a rise out of her made my day, made my week, when it felt like I had nothing else.

As much as she liked to pretend she was above it all, when my entire office was papered in movie posters from

*Peter Pan*, I suspected her. I'd heard her mutter the nickname for me under her breath too many times to buy her innocence.

Unable to resist any longer, I reached out for the ingredients we'd need for Wednesday.

*Nate: What can I get you this week?*

I'd left the question intentionally vague, an invitation to flirt. But would Sid take the bait?

She didn't immediately respond, and I put my phone away, shuffling toward my next class. After an hour lecturing on social engineering techniques to my 400-series class, I picked up and smiled at Sid's name in my notifications.

*Sid: World peace. A trip to DEF CON. An hour with a cuddly kitten.*

I resisted the impulse to text her that I'd wrap myself in fur if she meant she'd hold me close. No reason to ping her creep alarm if she wasn't into me.

*Nate: Would that I could, Princess Perfect. How about ingredients for dinner instead?*

*Sid: An onion, frozen tater tots, ground beef, cream of chicken soup, cheddar cheese, and three cans of green beans.*

I bit my lip, trying to piece together the ingredients and thinking through her other requests. World peace was out. Even Batman couldn't deliver that one. But the trip to DEF CON and a kitten? Those were both possibilities.

A quick text to our neighbor, Jan, and I had a rough plan. Maybe not perfect, but something small to show Sid I'd try to give her what she wanted. What she needed. Even if it wasn't me.

*Nate: Don't worry. I'll get you everything you need.*

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“What time will Sid be here?” Savannah bounced through the kitchen, grabbing juice from the fridge.

“Soon, I hope,” I answered lightly.

“Yeah, you do. You *like* her.”

“I do.”

“No, you *like, like* her. Is she going to be my sister-in-law?”

The tiny frown on her face made my heart clutch. Sid and I weren’t in that universe, let alone that ballpark, but I didn’t like seeing the hint of fear in Savannah’s expression.

“Savvy, Sid and I aren’t dating. We work together. And if *someday* I marry, it won’t change anything for us. But I have no plans to do that while you’re still at home.”

As fast as the clouds overtook her expression, they cleared. “You know, if you had a baby, I’d be a great babysitter,” she promised. “So long as I don’t have to live with a baby. Visiting aunt only.”

“Whoa. *Whoa*. I am barely competent parenting you. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

She slid a thin arm around my waist, causing my heart to stutter in my chest. “Nate, I love you.”

“I love you too, Squirt.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Don’t call me that.”

“Or what?” I asked, teasing.

“Or I’ll tell Sid something embarrassing.”

“Like what? You’ll tell her I’m an awesome, amazing brother?”

“No ... that you used to eat bugs.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I would. Just watch me. Mom always thought that story was hilarious, how Jake convinced you they’d give you superpowers.”

“Savvy, spill the beans and you’ll be eating hot dogs for a week.”

“It’d be worth it,” she whispered, trailing back to the living room.

I rubbed my sweaty palms along my jeans. Surely, she wouldn’t tattle on me? I’d been an extremely gullible thirteen-year-old, but a risk-taker even back then. Her sharing ancient history wasn’t exactly the projection of strength and maturity I wanted to give Sid now.

The doorbell rang, and I blew out a sigh when Savvy yelled, “I got it.”

Sid smiled as she caught sight of me at the counter, pulling the last of the dinner ingredients from my shopping bags.

“Have you guessed what’s for dinner?”

Her bright smile made me wish we were alone, and that her excitement was for me. Instead, she included Savannah in her question. The devilish light in my sister’s eyes were all the warning I got.

“So long as it’s not bug stew, I’m in.”

Sid side-eyed her. “Bug stew?” She shook her head before meeting my gaze. “I can tell my cooking lessons didn’t come too soon. What have you been feeding that girl? I picked out a comfort favorite for tonight—tater tot casserole.”

Sid’s dark hair lay like a cape around her shoulders, and she looked comfortable clad in a soft gray T-shirt and jeans. She’d become my comfort favorite. The thing I looked forward to most in my day, week. Any attempt to maintain a professional distance was doomed to failure after seeing her barefoot in my kitchen. Mesmerized, I leaned closer.

Sid's gaze caught on mine, and I swear she swayed toward me before my blond dynamo pushed between us to snag an apple from the counter.

"Sounds amazing, I'm starved," she said as she chomped on the apple, drifting back toward the living room.

I cleared my throat. Savvy wasn't the only starved one, but I wasn't hungry for food.

The sound seemed to break the spell, and Sid shifted, rearranging the cans and onion on the counter.

"Can you get me a casserole dish and a sheet pan? I like to brown the tots first."

I pushed aside the lingering desire to press her against the cabinets, focusing instead on light conversation, keeping things friendly as we worked through dinner prep. Rushing Sid wouldn't help. Only one of us had been pining for months. All appearances to the contrary, she probably still believed I was a raging asshole. Correcting that mostly false impression would take time. I couldn't dig myself out of the hole I'd created with my own silly pranks overnight.

As she chopped onion, I peppered Sid with questions about her past.

"So, you know my story. What's yours, Princess Perfect? How did you become a professor at Oregon College? None of the big cities wanted your sass?"

She rolled her eyes at my obvious attempt to goad her. So much for my resolution not to be an asshole who said stupid shit to her.

"Open the cans there, Batman. Show me you can be useful, not just pretty."

I held a hand to my chest, thrilled she'd taken my teasing at face value instead of finding it offensive. "Aw. You think I'm pretty?" I fluttered my lashes, hamming it up.

Ignoring my antics, she focused on grating the cheese. “I took a job here to follow my boyfriend.”

“Paul?”

She looked up, seeming surprised I knew about her past relationship. May she never find out about my fist pump of victory when I heard they’d broken up.

“Yep, Paul. He and I didn’t work out, but I love it here. Benton is beautiful, and the campus is large without being overwhelming. What about you? You miss the city?”

“I do. But I’m finding things to love about Benton again too.”

“Yeah, like what?” she asked with a grin.

Her eyes sparkled, and she looked too cute, mixing the beans, soup, cheese, and browned meat together in the casserole dish, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the stove.

“Having you in my kitchen ranks high on my list,” I admitted, skating too close to the truth.

She chortled, likely at my expense, and I hip-checked her gently.

“What? I’ve learned a lot from you already.”

“Cummings, that’s just sad. I know what you’re getting for Christmas from me this year.”

“Is it you in only an apron? I’d love to unwrap you beneath my tree.”

She swatted my arm, her laughter spilling over me in waves.

Not exactly the response I was going for, but better than her storming out at the implication that my interest in her extended beyond her cooking skills.

“No. A *cookbook*, you tease.”

I let the most pathetic expression I could muster take over my features.

“You sure I can’t have you in an apron?” I moaned.

“Nice try, Cummings. Not. Gonna. Happen.”

The smile flirting with her lips gave me hope that the last little bit was a lie.

Savannah shared stories from her day over dinner, and peace flowed through me, watching her open up under Sid’s attention. It was a far cry from our cardboard pizzas in front of the TV. Pangs of regret washed through me. I should have tried harder to cook something real for us, create a family dinner atmosphere like I’d had growing up. Then again, I’d had my hands full, locked in my own shock and grief, adjusting to a new life and job, becoming Savvy’s guardian.

Still, seeing Savvy blossom and dig into her food with gusto reminded me there was more to life than just existing. Managing. Even if Sid never returned my feelings, she’d given me something precious already.

I pattered around the kitchen, cleaning up our dishes, while Sid and Savannah chatted, not wanting to end the moment. Savvy, finally all talked out, retired to the living room to watch a show, and Sid gathered her notebook from her purse.

“Do you want to take glasses of wine out on the deck?”

Her quick shake killed any hopes I had of keeping her warm. “Not tonight. How is soliciting donations going? Have you hit everyone on the list?”

I nodded, sharing my progress, watching as Sid scratched notes in her notebook. Dark tendrils of hair obscured her expression, and I bit back the urge to push those soft strands back. As if sensing my longing, she looked up, winding her hair behind her ear, and smiled at me. “Things are

really coming together. Dare I ask how your ticket sales are going?”

Her teasing tone hit me right in the gut. No longer combative, the hint of respect shone in her brown eyes. I wanted to bathe in it if she'd let me. Clearing my throat, I cast for an answer to her question. Right. The ticket sales.

“I think I've got one table sold out. I'm working on my second.”

“Same.”

“Why do you want to go to DEF CON so badly?” I asked.

She laughed softly, almost self-deprecatingly. “What? I guess it's not the image you have of me. Too stuffy for a conference full of hackers?”

My lips twitched. Her competitive attitude would fit in fine with my people, buttoned-up appearance or not. But she was right, they'd still label her a suit, possibly a sheep.

“I think you can hold your own, but it doesn't seem like your crowd.”

The hint of hurt in her eyes had me wishing I could pull back my statement. She shrugged, as if dislodging the weight of my words between us. “It sounds exciting. And after doing what's expected for so long, taking a little walk outside my comfort zone sounds like just what I need.”

“Princess Perfect goes on vacation?”

Her soft scowl had me backpedaling. “Not that you don't deserve a vacation,” I hastened to add.

“Why do you call me that?”

“What? Princess Perfect?”

I swallowed. She'd have to pull the real reason from my rotting corpse. There was no way in hell I was telling her that I'd fixed on her as my role model when I joined the

college. Clearly Bernard's golden child, I'd thought emulating her would offer some semblance of security. But I could never get it quite right. And when I'd slipped and called her by her nickname after she castigated me for being late to a department meeting? Any lingering indulgence she'd had for the new guy had died.

"You don't like it? I mean it as a compliment."

"Sure."

Her wry tone belied her agreement, and I infused my voice with as much sincerity as I could manage. "I respect you, Sid. You work hard. You get results. And you're mostly kind too."

"Mostly?" she asked, brow arched.

"A-plus with the cooking, C-minus with the welcoming committee to the college."

She contemplated me silently, not seeming to follow.

"You don't remember," I accused, the moment still etched in my memory. Scarlet lipped and professional, she'd looked the epitome of a college professor when I greeted her in the hall.

"What?"

"My first day? You took one look at me and told me the Exercise and Sport Science Building was two doors down. You thought I was a *student*."

She covered her mouth, and I grinned to show her I didn't hold a grudge. She recovered quickly, waving a hand at my jeans and T-shirt. "Can you blame me? You look like *that*."

"And now you know why *you're* Princess Perfect."

"What does that make you?" she asked playfully.

The doorbell rang before I could answer, and I grinned. "The man who can make your wishes come true."

I couldn't wait to show Sid I could make at least some of her dreams reality. Hopefully, she'd come to realize and trust me with all of them.

I pushed to my feet, greeting my neighbor Jan at the door as she thrust the small bundle into my arms. "Have her back in an hour, please."

"Thanks, Jan. I owe you one."

She rolled her eyes at me. Forty-something and the neighbor who hassled me the least about my dismal yard, she fostered kittens and had been my first call when I saw Sid's text.

"Next time I need a cat sitter, you know who I'm calling."

Pinprick claws pierced my hand, pulling my attention to the ball of fluff between my palms. White and orange, the kitten mewled at me softly.

"What's his name?"

"*Her* name is Peaches."

"Right. Thanks, Jan. I'll return Peaches in a bit."

I closed the door and brought my small charge back to the kitchen, extending my palms to show Sid our visitor.

"Peaches is here to give you a cuddle."

"*Shut. Up.*"

"What?" I asked mystified.

"You did *not* get me a kitten."

I grinned at her obvious horror-slash-longing.

"Nah, I'm just borrowing her for a bit. My neighbor Jan fosters, and she was willing to loan Peaches for a little socialization."



Sid's eyes welled, and my gut clenched. Had I gotten it all wrong? I'd thought I was doing what she wanted. What she needed. Offering comfort and distraction. Something soft to cuddle. Not creating pain. I stared at the tears welling in her eyes, unsure how to fix it.

"What did I do wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, swiping away a tear almost angrily.

"Then why do I feel like you're mad at me?"

My heart was cratering toward my toes with every second. I hated seeing her this way. Echoes of Savannah's grief swamped me, followed by my own. Feeling powerless sucked. It left me feeling like my skin was too tight. I ached to act and could only stand there, helpless. Making her sad had never been part of my plan.

"Why do you have to be so damn sweet, Cummings?" she sniffled, cuddling Peaches close.

She cooed over the kitten, petting its soft fur while regaining her composure. I moved around the kitchen, cleaning up the last odds and ends from dinner, trying to give her space and grasping for understanding. She was mad because I'd done something *right*? Shaking my head, I tried to push down the disappointment that she still thought so little of me, that me doing something unexpected to please her had caught her so off guard, and focus on the fact that I'd achieved my goal: bringing her happiness.

Sid swung her pen above Peaches' head, encouraging her to attack, and laughing when her small charge clung viciously to the tiny wand of torment. A few minutes later, tired of the game, Peaches walked up Sid's long-sleeved T-shirt, curling at her neck with a purr.

Watching Sid gently stroke Peaches made it hard to focus on anything else. Like why I couldn't kiss her.

Unconsciously, I moved closer, sliding into the chair next to hers.

“Dessert time!” Savannah busted in, heading for the freezer. She glanced up from the container, smiling when she spotted our visitor. “Peaches! Isn’t she adorbs? I just love Jan’s kittens.”

Sid’s soft smile warmed my heart as she nodded. “She’s adorable. It’s going to be hard to give her back.”

“You could adopt her,” Savannah said matter-of-factly. “Jan is always looking for good homes.” Her gaze swung to mine. “I’d love one, but *someone* won’t let me,” she said, rekindling an old argument.

Sid seemed to sense the sibling mine field and retreated. “Well, I think it’s lovely that you can visit with them. Tonight has been a real treat.”

Savvy huffed, likely annoyed to have lost a potential ally in her battle for a kitten, and left us carrying a full bowl of ice cream.

“Thanks for not winding her up more about the kitten.”

Sid’s lips twitched. “Thanks for arranging tonight. It really was sweet, but I have to be getting home now.”

“Of course, I can take Peaches back to Jan.”

I gently tugged the kitten away from Sid’s neck, commiserating with the fur ball when she tried to cling there. Me too, kitty. Me too.

Sid’s soft smile and the warmth in her eyes as she said goodnight soothed some of my earlier hurt feelings. Maybe she hadn’t expected kittens and cuddles from me, given our past antagonism, but I’d proven I could deliver. Now, to prove I could satisfy *all* of her needs.

# CHAPTER 7 – SID

At brunch, my friends loved the kitten story. *Of course* they did. If Angi weren't already happily married, I was convinced she'd hunt Nate down to ask him out.

I wasn't ready to examine the feelings Nate stirred. I'd tossed and turned last night, replaying the first few tearful moments with Peaches. Nate's expression of pure panic had finally jarred me from my internal battle for control enough to reassure him that I wasn't angry. It still shook me that he'd arranged a kitten visit. For *me*. My resolve to stay business colleagues and nothing more threatened to crumble under the weight of his sweet assault. Maybe it shouldn't surprise me that Nate played dirty. But I still planned to play to win. I wouldn't give up DEF CON or my fundraising records because he knew how to hit all of my buttons.

Pushing back my shoulders, I changed the subject away from my charming co-chair.

"I can count on you all to buy tickets for my tables at the department dinner, right?" I asked. "I have to fill my tables before I tackle the extras, and I need every seat spoken for if I'm going to win the fundraising challenge this year."

Rita nodded. "That dinner will always hold a special place in my heart. Count Ed and I in."

"If I can get a sitter, Daniel and I will come."

"What about you, Cheri?" I asked.

She shook her head. "It's a Saturday? Sorry, I have a shift that night."

"You can't ask for the night off?" I wheedled.

"To hang out with a bunch of business stiffs at a chicken dinner? No offense, Sid, but I'm pretty sure Jake's

already requested that night off so I need to help cover at the bar. Possibly for the same dinner.”

Right. Last year, Jake had accompanied his mother and sat at Nate’s table. The potential to mingle with the college president was sure to help him sell more tickets.

“I need a draw. Anyone have any popular friends we can wrangle to my table?”

Angi’s brows arched. “*Excuse* me? We’re not your popular friends?”

I waved my hand at her. “You’re my *best* friends. And I love you all dearly. But no one will buy tickets to sit next to my married and coupled friends. I need a celebrity or something.”

“In Benton?” Rita scoffed. “The closest you find here is football royalty. College football royalty, at that.”

“I might know someone,” Angi said.

“Who?” I asked.

“Well, I would tell you, but I want to confirm if he’s available first. You’d probably have to make him your date. That wouldn’t be a problem, would it? For you and Nate?”

I swallowed back the easy denial that stuck in my throat. Landmines peppered both paths. If I admitted to any feelings for Nate, she’d be merciless. And if I denied them, the glint in her eyes promised matchmaking hell. Especially after my popularity comment.

Closing my eyes, I succumbed to my fate, opening them to see her staring at me steadily.

“No problem here. I’ve held a space at my table. Who did you have in mind?”

“I’ll confirm if he’s available, then text you.”

If Angi’s mystery celebrity helped me sell tickets, I would be one step closer to DEF CON. One step closer to a

weekend of freedom and securing my crown as the department's best fundraiser. I could suffer through an evening of stilted conversation if it meant winning.

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I'd nearly forgotten about Angi's mystery friend when she texted me later in the week.

*Angi: I checked with Ben, and he's in. Mark him down as your plus one.*

*Sid: Ben? Do I know Ben?*

*Angi: I don't know, do you watch football? Ben O'Reilly?*

*Sid: COACH Bear Ben O'Reilly HEAD coach?*

*Angi: It sounds dirty when you say it like that ...*

I guffawed, imagining her devilish expression.

*Angi: But yes, he's the head coach for Oregon College. That celebrity enough for you, Princess Perfect?*

I winced, regretting telling them about Nate's nickname for me.

*Sid: Thanks, Angi. You're the best.*

*Angi: And don't you forget it. Ben will meet you at the dinner. Daniel's mom can watch Ari, so add two tickets for us.*

Soliciting buyers for the department dinner became oodles easier, once I casually mentioned they'd be rubbing elbows with Coach Bear himself. O'Reilly had become something of a local legend, becoming the youngest head football coach in Oregon College's history. And athletics faculty didn't typically hang with the IT geeks. That alone made securing his attendance a coup.

I hadn't met him personally, but Coach Bear exuded calm confidence in his TV interviews, unflappable whether the team won or lost. Between his dynamic coaching presence and

silver fox handsomeness, he drew every eye on the field. It was easy to picture him as a former star athlete. Going into his second season as coach with only a middling record in his first year, there was gossip that he might not last long if the Threshers didn't have a winning season this fall. Still, he had serious draw, and I was grateful he'd agreed to come.

I slid into my seat five minutes before the staff meeting, already armed with my coffee. I noted the gleam in Dr. Bernard's eyes as he smiled at me, gesturing to the chart he projected on the screen.

"You're still in the lead, Dr. Culver. Think you can hold out until Saturday?"

The bar chart compared ticket sales, and I'd pulled ahead of Nate, but only by two. With one last table to fill, chances were we'd already arm-wrestled everyone possible into buying tickets.

"Certainly, Dr. Bernard. You can go ahead and book my hotel for DEF CON."

He chuckled, seeming to enjoy my confidence, as the rest of my colleagues took their seats. Nate's seat sat suspiciously absent, and Bernard caught my stare.

"Professor Cummings is out with a personal matter today. We'll carry on without him."

Dr. Bernard talked through revisions for the fall quarter plans, but I struggled to focus. Texting Nate beneath the table would be disrespectful to Dr. Bernard, but it was difficult to resist the temptation. Five minutes late? Totally like Nate. But being absent altogether had me worried. Nate was worming under my skin, with his kitten cuteness attacks and his care for Savvy. He used to make my gut churn in annoyance. But now? The way my chest constricted at the thought of him or Savvy sick or injured was a complication I hadn't expected.

As soon as Dr. Bernard closed his notebook, I whipped out my phone.

*Sid: Everything okay? Missed you at the staff meeting today.*

I hit send before thinking better of my phrasing.

*Nate: Savvy has a sore throat. I'm taking her to the Dr. Should be in later.*

Relief washed through me, accompanied by sorrow for Savannah.

*Sid: Tell her I hope she feels better soon.*

*Nate: I did, she said thanks. And something about wishing for mashed potatoes?*

I groaned. Savannah knew how to play to my sympathies. We'd talked comfort foods last time I'd been over, and she'd shared that mashed potatoes were one of the things she missed most in the time she and Nate had been on their own.

*Sid: Tell her I'll bring some by tonight.*

*Nate: You don't have to come and risk exposing yourself. But I'll admit, there's some very hoarse cheering going on in the waiting room next to me.*

Glancing at my watch, I calculated the time I'd need to hit the grocery store after work.

*Sid: Fill a large pot with water. I'll be there about six.*

*Nate: Anything you say, Princess. Want me to see if Peaches is available for another visit?*

I bit my lip. The edge of pain helped call me back from sinking into a puddle at the sweet suggestion. If Nate kept upending my preconceived ideas about him, I'd be in trouble. At a minimum, I needed new batteries if I wanted to avoid jumping him. We were supposed to be friends.

Colleagues. Not flirting. And yet, resisting him was harder than refusing Peaches's cuddly allure.

*Sid: You'll have nothing but a puddle of goo in your kitchen if you do. Better not.*

I sighed, as much as I'd love to cuddle the kitten again, I wouldn't be able to resist taking her home with me, and my apartment wasn't very cat-friendly.

Nate opened his door with a broad grin as I trundled up the walk that evening, carting my bag of potatoes and dairy.

"How's the patient?" I whispered, nodding to Savvy, snuggled under a blanket in the front room, eyes closed.

"The doctor confirmed it's strep. Don't worry, I've disinfected everything I could," he said.

"Did she say how long until Savannah feels better?"

"She's taken her first dose of antibiotics, so a day or two."

"You'll still make it to the dinner on Saturday?"

His swift nod eased some of the tension in my chest. Not that I *needed* Nate there. Sure, he was my co-chair, but I'd handled the event on my own in the past. And if Savvy was sick, I could manage again.

"My neighbor Jan said she'd stay with Savvy either way, so I'm covered."

"Good."

I followed him to the kitchen, and Nate helped me peel potatoes before adding them to the pot of water.

"I really appreciate you doing this," he said softly, watching as I checked the water level.

"I'm happy to do what I can to make her feel better."

I pulled together a quick meatloaf with Nate's help, and we sat down at the kitchen table with glasses of water



while everything cooked.

“Would you mind if I borrowed your Wi-Fi? I wanted to download the menu for the dinner to show you how it turned out.”

Looking uncomfortable, he nodded. “Yeah. We’re, uh, Batcave69.”

“Real mature there, Cummings.” I clicked the right network, then raised a brow, waiting for the password.

“*Savvys brother will kill you if you hurt her.* No spaces or punctuation.”

“Suddenly, I’m glad I’m an only child.”

Nate looked sheepish. “Yeah, I figure it’s only a matter of time before she wants to have boys over. I wanted to set the tone early.”

I whistled softly. “Noted.”

Navigating to the page I wanted, I frowned when the location service flagged me as being in ... Nigeria?

“Nate, is there a reason the internet believes we’re in Africa right now?”

He ran a hand through his hair, shrugging. “You can’t be too careful on the internet? I route through a few VPNs to protect my identity when I’m online.”

“Right,” I said wryly. “A totally normal, and not at all suspicious, thing to do.”

His boyish grin was unrepentant. “Just because my NDA won’t let me disclose what I used to do, doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten all of my skills. I have to stay sharp somehow.”

I swallowed, my imagination taking a nosedive into hotter territory, musing over what *skills* he could show me.

He shrugged casually, “Let me know if you want me to do a security audit for you sometime.”

“Security audit?”

He winked. “See if I can reveal all of your secrets.”

I shifted in my seat, trying to imagine Nate’s face when he got a good look at my browser history. It’d blow my public persona as his Perfect Princess to smithereens.

“I’m content to remain a mystery,” I said.

“Well, how about a few minor revelations, then? We’ll start with easy stuff. Like, what do you do when you’re not teaching? What do you do for fun?”

There was no harm in sharing, at least a little bit.

“I’m a pretty serious runner.”

“Like marathons and stuff, or the 5K your friend put together last year?”

“Weekend 5Ks,” I said with smile.

“What, like *every* weekend?” he asked, eyes wide.

I chuckled. “Yes, it’s more fun than you think. We’ve got a local Parkrun. Some weekends I volunteer, but most Saturday mornings, I run. I’m always chasing a PB.” At his confused look, I clarified. “Personal best.”

“I too run frequently.” His dancing eyes warned me not to take him too seriously. “But, mostly, I run my mouth. Occasionally, I run out of money. And one time in Vegas, I ran out of breath just playing the slot machines.”

“But you completed the Bigfoot Hunt Run,” I protested. “You can’t tell me you got *that body* behind a keyboard.”

He smoothed hands across his chest. “Oh? You noticed my body?” He grinned, lighting a fire somewhere between my thighs that I did my best to squelch immediately. “Nah, I’ve never been much of a runner. I’m more into martial arts.”

“What kind?”

“Tae kwon do. My parents thought it would give me a sense of discipline and humility. It’s actually where I met my buddy, Jake.” He shook his head. “Our poor, poor parents.”

“Tae kwon do didn’t help with the humility?” I asked archly, pretty sure I knew the answer.

He rubbed a hand over his chin, unsuccessfully hiding a grin. “Maybe a little bit. But not nearly as much as my folks hoped. I did learn a lot about perseverance though, which did help me with ... other things later in life,” he hedged.

“The NDA again?”

He nodded. “You could say I’m world-class at not giving up.”

“So, that’s a ‘no’ on the modesty, then.”

“What would be the fun in that?” he asked, reaching across the table to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear.

I felt the contact along the delicate shell of my ear all the way to my toes, tingly in all the right - and wrong places. Resisting Nate was becoming harder and harder with every revelation. Each touch whispered that he’d be worth breaking my personal rules.

The timer beeped, and Nate’s lips quirked in a wry smile. “Tortured by the bell.”

“Isn’t that supposed to be saved?”

“Not if you’re me right now.”

Savvy popped into the kitchen, breaking the spell, and I shook myself, trying to dissipate the lingering desire to lean forward and see if his laughter-tilted lips made me burn as much as a simple touch made me vibrate, hungry for more. Writing off the friction between us as simple rivalry may have kept me safe, but now that he’d touched me, however innocently, it was hard to lie to myself.

After a quiet dinner chatting with Savvy and Nate, watching as they laughed through memories of family nights at their favorite ice cream shop and mini golf course in Benton, I excused myself, feeling Nate's eyes like a trickle of heat down my neck as I made my way to the car. He waved from his spot leaning against his front door, and I bit my lip. He had no right to look so confident, feet bare and at home in his skin, when my body felt too tight, almost itchy with desire. Listening to the interplay between him and Savvy, the rehashing of good times, and his invitation for me to join them in a mini golf massacre soon, only reinforced how much I'd misjudged him. The brash confidence hid a heart filled with love for his sister. Every layer I uncovered in the mystery that was Nate made me determined to learn more.

Which wasn't fair. Or even a particularly good idea. We might be forging a tentative friendship, but anything more wasn't in the cards. I needed to stay focused on my career. On my goals. Making department chair by thirty-five. Nate Cummings had distraction written all over him.

But what a glorious one he'd be.

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Saturday morning passed in a whirlwind of final details for the ball. I'd ticked off everything on my to-do list in time to go for a run, clear my head. Feet pounding on the pavement as I wound through campus, I tried not to dwell on my co-chair for the evening but found it impossible.

Nate. He was fast becoming a dilemma. Not that he hadn't done his part for the dinner, he absolutely had. To a surprising degree. And that was the problem. Spending so much time together had only ratcheted up my nighttime fantasies of him. Him holding me. Kissing me. More.

Lusting after a younger colleague wasn't the end of the world. If I were a man. And not my father's daughter. Scowling over my dad's last text, I pushed his admonition

away. *I hope you're behaving yourself in Benton* didn't have the same ring at thirty-two as it did at thirteen.

It would serve him right if I conducted a wild affair with Nate under everyone's noses. After all, who would we really be hurting? No one. We were both of age, adults. It wouldn't be my first foray into satisfying an urge and moving on. Just my first time with a coworker.

And in Nate's case, I'd have to work with him afterward. With the possibility that he'd sneak further under my defenses over time. Making me need him, rely on him, instead of being able to walk away when the spark fizzled.

Breathing heavily, I waved at a group of familiar-looking students walking from the other direction as I jogged by.

There wouldn't be an escape from notice for us on campus. Or really, off-campus either. Benton was so small, flying under the radar would be tough. If I succumbed to my feelings for Nate and we weren't discreet, we'd be blabbed about from the library to the quad. Our students would know. The other faculty wouldn't be long after. I may not have my father's laser focus on public relations, but even I could see potential problems. For me and Nate. It was hard enough for a woman to rise to department chair, but one who had a well-known affair with a younger colleague? Forget about it.

Getting to DEF CON was job one. Going on the department's dime would lend it a patina of respectability and still let me dig into the darker side of IT that secretly thrilled me. My thirst to learn more was almost as strong as my drive to make department chair. Dr. Bernard had dropped enough hints about retirement to put it in my grasp. *If* I didn't screw it up. I'd worked too hard, for too long, to lose my perfect professional image now. Only my breakup with Paul had threatened that persona. That small taste of gossip, the whispers, still left a bad taste in my mouth. The faculty water cooler twisted what had been a relatively amicable parting into something more dramatic, with rumors of infidelity on both

sides. I'd been side-eyed and snubbed by Dr. Bernard's wife at the faculty mixer after the news circulated. As if I'd go after her precious husband. I couldn't afford to spawn a new scandal.

Slowing, I walked to cool down before starting my stretching routine in the sports field south of campus.

Maybe scratching the itch with Nate could be done. *If* we kept it secret. And that was a big if. Still, I tingled at the possibility, unable to write it off as my runner's high. Running had never made me feel like Nate had, just by brushing away a lock of hair. But did my body react to the thrill of keeping a secret with him, or the man himself?

# CHAPTER 8 – NATE

“You look great, Nate,” Savvy said with an approving nod to my black suit and matching shirt. True to expectations, I’d chosen the dark side for the Black and White Hat Ball.

Her scratchy voice caught at my heart. “Are you sure you’re okay with me going tonight?”

“*Yes*. For the last time, Jan will stay with me, *even though* I think I could stay home by myself, and I’ll be fine. This is a big night for you. You can’t miss it.”

“Thanks, Savvy. You know I love you, right?”

“I *know*, Nate. Now quit stalling. You don’t want Sid to think you stood her up, do you?”

“It’s not a date, Savvy.”

Her side-eye at my slicked back hair and polished shoes before she snorted made her opinion abundantly clear.

“It’s *not*.”

“Whatever you say, big brother. Just remember: no glove, no love.”

I choked, claspng a fist to my chest. “Excuse you?”

She pointed at me, expression all too knowing. “I want to be an only child, Nate.”

“And I don’t want to be an uncle too soon, but I’m still your brother.”

“I know, I know, no one can replace Mom and Dad. It was just a figure of speech.”

And a minor heart attack for me. I should have realized she already knew about birth control, she was twelve, not six. Still, I should have been the one to tell her.

“Did Mom give you *the talk* about condoms too?” I asked softly.

She wavered a hand in the air. “Minus some *very* important details. But don’t worry, brother dear, Sid has you covered.”

“You’ve talked with Sid? About sex?” I forced the words out through my too-tight throat. “With me?”

“No. *No. Ew.* I just meant, she filled in the details for me. We’ve been talking and texting. That’s how I know: no glove, no love.”

I laughed weakly. “Right. Well, this sounds like the beginning of a much longer conversation for you and me to have—” Her groan interrupted me, and I paused until she quieted. “Later.”

Jan knocked on the door, and I let her in, thanking her again for taking over with Savvy. With a quick wave to my sister, I was out the door.

Maybe it was Savvy’s suggestive comments or possibly pure anticipation making my hands clammy on the steering wheel as I drove to the alumni center. The chances of Sid wanting me to “suit up” for her after this evening approached nil. But a guy could dream. She seemed to be thawing toward me, incrementally. Maybe in ten years she’d be ready to date me for real. But I wasn’t sure I could wait that long. Trusting my ability to find happiness to a far-off future only worked if I lived to see it. And I’d become painfully aware that life could change, *end*, in an instant.

Shaking off that maudlin thought took effort, but we had a dinner to get through. The alumni center lobby was mostly empty, save for a handful of event staff setting up tables and chairs for the auction. I dropped my box of bidding supplies off before seeking out Sid.

Stepping through to the banquet hall, I was struck by how much life had changed. A little over a year ago, planning



a stuffy plated dinner would have been the last thing on my agenda. Now, impressing Sid with my skills and ability to pull off a major event was all I could think of.

Sid glanced up from where she was conferring with the event manager, a small woman named Adele, and I stopped in my tracks. Sid's dark hair swung free and easy around her face, only serving to highlight her bright red lips. She looked like a cartoon princess, if princesses ruled from the boardroom and not the throne. However, I knew the curves highlighted by her sleek white blouse and slacks were all too real. She looked magnificent. Regal. Like she could absolutely kick my ass without smudging her lipstick.

I forced a smile as I approached. "Ready for tonight?"

Her quick smile and nod seemed confident. "My tables will be full. I even sold a few tickets at Carly's table. What about you?"

"Oh, I'm ready." Maybe not to win, but to watch her walk away with the prize. After all, it had been the point of all this. With luck, in a few short weeks, she'd be joining me at DEF CON. And maybe revealing more of myself, the pieces I kept carefully hidden, would convince her we could be more than our silly rivalry.

"Are all of the auction items set up?"

"I'm headed there now," I assured.

She frowned. "Everything needs to go perfectly."

I held up my hands. "I'm aware. Don't worry, I've got you."

She relaxed infinitesimally at my words, and I took solace from that glimmer of confidence in my abilities. I'd convinced her I wasn't a total disaster.

I spent the next forty minutes setting out the auction descriptions and bid sheets, then briefing my student

volunteers on their duties as bid attendants. The first few alumni and guests trickled in as we finished, and I looked up, hoping to spot Sid.

Instead, my gaze connected with Dr. Bernard, and I hid my disappointment with effort when he approached me.

“Nate, my boy. Everything looks marvelous. You and Sid did a great job. More than one donor has commented on the creative theme. I couldn’t be more pleased,” he said.

Something about his approval helped soothe the hidden worry that he’d hired me solely to satisfy his conscience as my father’s best friend. My chest puffed up, and I enjoyed the moment.

“Too bad you didn’t win the DEF CON trip,” he said. “But Dr. Culver out fundraised you—barely.”

I debated feigning disappointment, but couldn’t bring myself to bluff, since that was what I’d wanted all along. Dr. Bernard’s eyes narrowed when I grinned.

“That’s okay. I’m happy for Dr. Culver. I can still have those days off, right? I’m thinking I might make my own way to the con,” I said, pretending I hadn’t had this planned for weeks.

He slapped me on the back with a laugh. “Sure, sure. I’m glad to see you and Dr. Culver getting along. You young people can go and have fun. I’m glad you’re making friends in the department.”

I scratched my head to hide my suppressed laughter. Dr. Bernard was my boss now. Revealing that I’d heard all of my dad’s gory stories about their own Vegas adventures might make him uncomfortable. I’d let him revel in the belief that I had no idea he’d streaked along the boulevard after a few too many shots of tequila in the seventies. He’d had his heyday before social media, lucky bastard.

“Thanks, sir,” I said with a straight face.

He excused himself to go speak with donors, and my smile died as I watched Sid gently embrace a man I recognized. Coach Bear.

I growled, cutting off the sound when I realized it was a little too on the nose. What was she doing with him? I pretended not to stare as she slipped her arm through his, urging him toward the auction tables. Did Sid ... have a date tonight? Crestfallen, I realized I hadn't asked what her plans were. I'd assumed, that rivalry aside, she was more or less my plus-one for the evening. As co-chairs, I hadn't expected her to have her own arm candy.

I scowled. And *Coach Bear*. How did she know him? Is that what she went for, football jocks?

"If you keep staring like that, he might call an audible and have you tossed out of here. You know he's sports royalty, right? Mom would never approve of you fighting him."

I glanced over my shoulder to see Jake next to me, trademark grin in place. He'd followed the dress code for the evening, abandoning his usual quippy T-shirts for a proper suit.

"Where is your mom?"

He waved a negligent hand toward the bar. "Somewhere around here. Probably chatting up donors, doing the College President schtick. Speaking of which, I expected you to be doing the same, not standing around, brooding in the corner while the coach charms Sid."

I grunted, unwilling to admit the jealousy that he'd undoubtedly spotted, and I would never acknowledge.

"So, you didn't ask the beautiful Sid to be your date tonight? Or she turned you down?" Jake asked.

"I, uh, assumed we'd attend together," I admitted, hearing how stupid it sounded aloud. I should have buried my

pride and asked her directly. It was my own damn fault I hadn't.

"How to make good assumptions: step one—reconsider and just *ask*."

"Hey, Jake. You're so wise, and all-knowing. How's that asking working out for you, huh? You ask Chris to marry you yet?"

His scowl answered for him. "There's no reason to get nasty. I'm waiting for the right time. It needs to be a *moment*."

President Nelson joined us, and I abandoned chiding her only son for not proposing. She'd accepted Chris in her son's life, but I wasn't sure if he'd shared his plans with her. He may be irritating, but I wouldn't reveal his secrets.

"President Nelson, thanks for coming tonight."

Jake's mom smiled her company smile, nodding elegantly to me. She had one of those fancy silver updos and had dressed in a white suit which complimented her softly rounded figure.

"You know I'm always glad to help the department and you, Nate. How's Savvy doing?"

The motherly concern in her expression nearly undid me, it reminded me so much of my own mom. I swallowed to cover my dry throat.

"We're hanging in there," I admitted.

She clasped her hands in mine, blue eyes sympathetic. "I miss Jake's dad every day, but it gets better."

Sid and Coach Bear approached our group, and I struggled to suppress any remaining pangs of jealousy.

"President Nelson, we've met before. I'm Sid Culver, a professor in the Business Information Systems department. And of course, you've met my companion, Coach Bear?"

Jake's mom's girlish giggle as she clasped hands with the burly coach had me biting my lip. Was no one immune? So maybe he looked professional in his game day suit, his silvering hair short and spiky, held in place by too much gel. He had the good ol' boy demeanor down pat, a friendly smile already in place as he turned to greet me after shaking hands with President Nelson.

I wanted to hate him. Harsh, but he was standing where I wanted to be—next to Sid.

“Nice to meet you, Dr. Cummings.”

“Professor,” I said sharply. “I don't have my doctorate.”

Ever the charmer, Bear held up his hands, “Right, right. My bad.” He smiled at me, his eyes squinting as he took me in. “Do you play football, Professor? You've got quite a build to you. Do you follow the game at all?”

Did he want me to fanboy? In a word, no. I'd had my hands too full with Savvy to get wrapped up in college athletics. The small amount of time I carved away for classes at the dojang was as close as I came to sports.

“Not really. I'm more of a martial arts guy.”

“Really? I took a few classes back in the day. What do you practice?”

I nearly groaned. Was he one of those? An anything you can do, I can do too-er? Maybe I'd have viewed him differently if he didn't have a proprietary arm wrapped around Sid.

“Uh, Jake and I actually teach tae kwon do. You should drop by sometime. Classes are at nine on Saturdays.”

I failed to mention Jake and I taught eight-year-olds, not adults. But that was for Coach Bear to find out on his own. Petty revenge, which hurt no one, still might soothe my bruised ego.

I forced a tight smile before excusing myself to check on the auction bids. Slipping into a side room we were using for staging, I hoped for a moment alone to collect myself.

I shouldn't begrudge Sid her date. She deserved to be happy. Even if it wasn't with me. But the disappointment coursing through me wouldn't dissipate. I'd believed we were moving forward, becoming friends. Would it have killed her to at least mention she had a date for tonight? In my efforts not to spook her, had I lost my opportunity?

"Everything okay in here, Nate?"

Sid's soft question pushed my buttons, and I couldn't help growling. "I'm fine. You should go enjoy your date. I wouldn't want to pull you away from a good time. You seem like you're really hitting it off." Is what I should have said. Instead, what burst from my lips was, "I'm fine. You should go enjoy your date. Have you been seeing each other long?"

Why, oh why, did I need to turn the knife? It didn't matter how long she'd known him. She'd chosen him. And that was that.

Her light laughter shook me from my dark thoughts.

"Coach Bear? I'd never met him before tonight. Angi set me up with him as a draw for ticket sales. But he seems nice enough. Football just isn't my thing, you know?"

Her self-deprecating smile quirked at the corners, inviting me in.

I cleared my throat. "Oh."

Eloquent as always. Catching her brown eyes with mine, I couldn't resist saying, "You look beautiful tonight."

She glanced down at her suit, brushing at the lapels. "This old thing? Thanks. You make a pretty smart impression yourself. Not the scruffy professor everyone knows and loves," she teased.

I rubbed a hand over my freshly trimmed beard. “I’m not *that* scruffy, am I?”

Her peal of laughter made me smile, even if it was at my expense. I couldn’t help taking a step closer, until I caught the barest hint of her soft perfume. Something floral, but fresh.

“I wish I’d thought to ask you as my date tonight,” I admitted.

I held my breath, waiting to see how she’d respond. Had we moved beyond pranks and petty rivalry to something resembling respect, even if my feelings weren’t returned? Would she have said yes, if I’d asked?

“President Nelson isn’t your date tonight?” she teased, deflecting my claim.

Her non-answer hit me like a punch to the gut, and I exhaled on a sigh, taking my lead from her. If she wouldn’t even entertain the hypothetical of us dating, her answer was clear. “Alas, no. Once a woman has seen you in your awkward teen years, she’s immune to your charms.”

“You had awkward teen years? Are you sure it wasn’t a bad five minutes?”

I grinned at the light of challenge in her eyes. “If you’re really good, maybe someday I’ll show you the pictorial proof.”

She watched me steadily for a moment, taking in my suit, a strange expression passing over her features. The shift was hard to put my finger on. Sid always seemed confident, but her body language changed subtly as she stood taller, leaning my way.

“What if I’d rather be bad?” she asked playfully, and I faltered, shocked.

I’d told her I wished she were my date for the evening, and she’d avoided the question, asking me about another woman. The deflection had seemed like a subtle, yet clear

rejection. Classy, just like Sid. Nothing overt to hurt my feelings. And now she was flirting? I checked her expression, sure I'd misunderstood. Had her earlier comments about the president been a test of some sort? Checking my reaction to dating an older woman?

She ran a lone finger over the shoulder of my jacket toward the valley of my throat, catching it briefly on the highest button at my collar. It shouldn't have been enticing. But everything about Sid drew me.

"I ... thought you didn't want to be my date tonight. After all, you have your own guest."

Her mischievous smile stopped my heart briefly, before it thundered ahead, telegraphing straight to my dick that there were happy times ahead. Afraid to touch her, lest she realize her mistake, I stood stock-still, curious what her next move would be.

"Well ..." she pushed up onto her toes, bringing her lips a whisper from mine, "we've already established that the coach is just for show. And I'll admit that while I'm not ready to be seen in public as anything but a colleague, it doesn't mean I haven't been aching for a little private time with you."

Her voice faded away to a whisper, and my gaze narrowed, until all I could see were her bright red lips. Luscious and full, the playful smile tugged at the corners, drawing me in.

One rough breath, two, and I couldn't resist any longer. On a groan, I tugged her hips toward mine, steadying her as she wobbled in her heels, and let my lips drift toward hers.

Her hot breath sighed against my mouth before she closed the distance between us, surprising me with the hunger in her kiss. Small nips turned to more urgent kisses, and my hands gripped her hips as if anchoring to her would keep me in place under the onslaught of lust.



Sid's soft heat engulfed me, and I worried her cherry red bottom lip with my teeth, stroking up her sides to unbutton her shirt. She hooked a leg around my hip, pressing us closer together, and I groaned. The fabric of our slacks couldn't hide that she was hot for me, and my erection thrust against the placket of my trousers, blood rushing, beating an insistent tattoo beneath my skin.

I'd stumbled back against the door, holding it closed with my weight, and we stilled as the handle jiggled behind my back, digging into my ass.

A muttered, "Huh. I didn't think this room was locked. I'll go get the key," filtered through the door.

Spell broken, I could only curse the hundreds of people waiting outside for us to break our clinch and get back to work. With a groan, I tore my mouth from hers, breathing hard.

"Princess, your timing is perfectly rotten."

She stiffened, seeming to come back to herself, resuming the mask she effortlessly maintained. Watching her transformation hit me like a face full of icy water. I released her hips but was nearly undone when Sid let out a husky, self-deprecating laugh as she tried to catch her breath.

Someone else could finish the auction and MC the dinner. They didn't need us, did they? Sid had already won the DEF CON trip. Anything else was icing. I'd be content to spend the rest of the evening, maybe my life, in this closet of a room if she'd let me.

I reached for her again, intent on picking up where we'd left off, but Sid slid away, evading my grip.

She smoothed her hands through her hair, straightening it. Watching each strand fall into place, it was as if our shared moment of madness faded under the weight of that curtain. Hundreds of guests were counting on us to finish

the evening. Every impulse to chuck it and stay with Sid fought against that knowledge.

“We have to get back.”

“Do we?”

“We do,” she said severely before grabbing a tissue from a nearby side table. “Can you imagine the talk if we disappeared? But before we return, a little clean-up is in order.”

Disappointed, but catching her meaning, I accepted the tissue she handed me. The image-conscious woman I’d grown to suspect wasn’t the full story once again had eclipsed my passionate Sid. The one who’d come alive when we kissed.

“Red’s not my color?” I teased, trying to get us on more familiar, friendly footing.

Her eyes darkened, and I breathed deeply to manage the raw lust that washed through me, needing to control my erection before I faced the crowd outside.

She swiped at her own mouth, righting her lipstick, until it didn’t look like she’d been kissed senseless in a closet. I mourned the loss, missing the passionate woman who’d come to life in my arms for a few short minutes. Back in her place was the prim and proper Dr. Culver. Paragon of professionalism.

“Image is everything in this business, Cummings. Besides, I think black’s more your color. Nice suit.” With a wink, she sauntered from the room, leaving me staring after her.

Sid’s comment about image bothered me. Is that why she didn’t want to be seen together? Did she think I would hold her back or undermine her somehow? The idea of hiding didn’t sit well with me. Office romances were common in the private sector, and I didn’t see why it had to be a big deal for

us. I was proud to be seen with Sid, and the idea of the reverse not being true stung. While I'd had my share of meaningless hookups, she was more to me. I respected her brain and lusted after her body. Wanting both wasn't a crime. But that didn't mean she felt the same.

I needed to learn from my earlier mistakes and ask what she wanted from us, but not in a crowded ballroom. I'd have to find the right time to share my intentions. Later.

## CHAPTER 9 – SID

The hint of vulnerability as Nate had asked me about being his date, and his humor when I turned our conversation to President Nelson had slayed me, overcoming the last of my inhibitions. Nate had gone from the golden lost boy who pricked me at every opportunity to a flesh and blood big-hearted man with his own scars. The prick I could resist, but the charming and unguarded man beneath only made me want to comfort him. And apparently, my heightened hormones read “comfort” as “kiss.”

I wobbled back toward the banquet hall, hoping Nate wouldn't see my unsteady steps. The man kissed like a fiend. Dammit. I'd hoped a quick kiss—my very own seven minutes in heaven—would release me from my crush and satisfy my need to reassure him all at once. Massive miscalculation. Huge. I closed my eyes briefly, remembering the bulge in his slacks as we pressed together. Enough. Thoughts of Nate's bulge would only lead to more trouble. My thirsty hormones clamored to disappear with him, but we still had a job to do.

I smoothed my face into my professional mask, finding Coach Bear surrounded by some of our other tablemates.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized, smiling at the others in his circle. “Angi, Daniel, great to see you as always.” I leaned in to give Rita a hug before shaking hands with her partner Ed. “Rita and Ed, you met Coach Bear?” They nodded, and I continued introductions, slipping away from the coach when he fell into easy conversation with a CEO I'd done work for, Darius Butler, who was also clearly a fan.

Angi and Rita sidled up next to me, and I flushed, wondering if they could sense what I'd been doing. Their knowing looks worried me.

“Coach Bear is hot, right?” Angi asked.

Looking sleek and beautiful in a black dress, her dark hair a glossy curtain shielding her expression, I relaxed, realizing she was looking for gossip. With luck, I could bury the real juicy bit.

“He’s very handsome. Thanks again for helping me rope him into coming tonight.”

Her light laughter tinkled gently. “It didn’t take much convincing. I think he’s a little lonely.” She paused to sip her wine before arching an eyebrow. “You should fix that.”

“Me?” I knew better than to enlist Rita to help me. She was lost in her own haze of lust, mouthing what were likely inappropriate suggestions to Ed across the room.

I fanned myself at Rita and Ed’s display, before realizing Angi would interpret it incorrectly.

“*You*,” she said. “You need to get back out there.”

“Maybe,” I prevaricated, “but not with Coach Bear. What’s his real name again?”

She shrugged. “It’s Ben. But everyone’s called him Bear since high school.”

“Is that how you know him?” I asked, suddenly curious about the older man. I didn’t follow football closely enough to know exactly where he came from.

“Nope. I knew Bear in college. He played professionally briefly before transitioning into coaching. It’s only since he moved here that we’ve reconnected.”

The catering staff announced dinner, and we shuffled to our tables, finding our seats. Coach Bear, *Ben*, pulled my chair back, and I smiled my thanks at the courtesy.

Our table included Darius, the CEO who had gushed over Coach Bear, Rita and Ed, Daniel and Angi, and Carly, to even up our numbers. I hid my surprise when Carly staked out

a chair with us. I'd expected her to host her own table, but instead she'd claimed the spot between Darius and Coach Bear. Interesting.

The redhead remained silent through dinner, letting the easy conversation wash over her, but she kept sneaking glances at Bear. Was she a secret football fan? Or just a sucker for big, burly teddy bears? The Coach looked sleek in his black suit, good tailoring emphasized his broad shoulders and height. He was one hundred percent believable as a retired football player. The short graying hair and weathered features would have had me placing him as older, if I hadn't known he was under forty thanks to the media attention he'd garnered as a young coach. Still, his courtly manners and charm made him seem older. I should have known better since he was a friend of Angi's, but I'd half expected a braggard and a bore. All football, all winning, all the time. High on his superiority as the king of college athletics in our small town. Instead, Bear engaged everyone at our table in polite conversation, asking after their jobs and families.

Sharing the stage with Nate to announce the winning bidders in the auction felt like sandpaper along my nerves. My polite smile faltered around the edges when his fingers grazed mine, bringing back the rush of feelings from our time in the back room.

I accepted with alacrity when Bear asked me to dance afterward. Stepping into the big man's arms, expression smooth and pleasant, I did my best to regain my composure.

"Sid, thanks for inviting me tonight."

Glancing up at Bear from beneath my lashes, I felt a pang of shame. We were dates in name only, but I still had a responsibility to make him feel welcome. I'd been so distracted by Nate, I'd only accomplished the bare minimum in introductions.

“I’m glad you could come. I appreciate you making time in your busy schedule. You were a big draw for fundraising. Thanks to you, I won our department ticket sales challenge. The donations from tonight will help to fund more students in need.”

“Well, winning isn’t everything, but I’m glad I could help you out.”

Disbelief washed through me, and I tilted my head. “Winning isn’t everything? Don’t let President Nelson or any of the sports reporters hear you say that,” I teased.

The coach’s soft smile only emphasized how handsome he was. How age appropriate. How nearly perfect. Damn Angi and her matchmaking ways, but she had her finger on what I’d said I wanted. But he wasn’t Nate.

The song wound down with me stuck in contemplative silence, wishing that I could ignore my growing feelings for Nate. Our time in the closet had been a mistake. I’d thought, for one brief moment, that if I indulged, maybe I’d get him out of my system and be able to move on. But every moment in Coach Bear’s arms made me feel less and less like looking at another man.

I thanked Bear for the dance, and he excused himself to get us another round of drinks.

“May I? It’d be remiss of me not to congratulate tonight’s winner, and my lovely co-chair, over a dance.”

The deep voice sent immediate shivers down my spine, and I closed my eyes briefly before turning to the man behind me.

Nate.

“Unless you’re worried people will talk,” he added softly, extending his arms to me.

Oh, they’d talk all right. But we could play it off as a celebratory dance, enjoying our fundraising triumph. Clinging

to that justification let me sink into his arms, breathing a sigh of relief. In the shelter of his strong body, I could drop my pleasant expression, at least momentarily, and just be. Aching to lay my head on his shoulder, I resisted. Barely. Keeping anything between just the two of us would be impossible if the whole department and most of the who's who in Benton saw us cuddling on the dance floor.

Clearing my throat, I forced out a response to his earlier comment. "About before ..."

"Hmm ..." he grumbled softly in my ear. "Let's not worry about our time in the back room for now. Talking about us can wait until we're alone."

Relieved, I still felt the need to explain myself, at least a little. "I can't do this under a microscope, Nate. I'm not built that way."

"What about in an anonymous crowd of thousands in Vegas?" he whispered, the tickle of his breath sending fresh shivers down my spine.

I could carve out time at DEF CON to satisfy more than just my desire for learning. My heart raced at the intimation that he wasn't giving up on me. On the possibility of an us.

"Kinky, Nate."

"That wasn't a *no*," he murmured.

A throat cleared nearby, and I started, turning toward the noise. Dr. Bernard beamed at us, hands clasped over his rotund belly.

"Congratulations to you both. I'm sorry for interrupting, but I wanted to thank you for putting together a wonderful evening. Somehow, I knew you could be friends if you found common ground."

Friends. Friends with benefits. Dr. Bernard had no idea what he'd started. And it needed to stay that way. I forced



a smile, ignoring the residual tingles from being held in Nate's strong arms.

"I'm glad we met our fundraising goal, Dr. Bernard."

"Yes. It was a marvelous evening. I can't wait to see what you do next year."

"The theme was Nate's idea," I said.

"Y'all have talent," Coach Bear agreed as he walked up, handing me a glass of wine and effectively breaking the last of the spell from dancing with Nate.

"Sid's a dynamo though," Nate agreed. "She's been great to work with."

The W word reminded me that I had responsibilities left to fulfill: thanking our guests, entertaining the coach. Shirking them wasn't an option. I nodded at Nate to acknowledge his kind words, trying to ignore the lingering desire to sink back against his body and forget the world existed. Vegas was a few short weeks away, *if* I was brave enough to reach for him.

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Sunday morning, I woke up feeling like roadkill. Pounding head, achy joints, and throat on fire. Groaning, I cast back to the end of the evening, but nothing explained my symptoms. I'd barely touched my wine, too busy chatting and ushering all of our guests through the evening.

I flopped over in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering what could be wrong. I swallowed, wincing at the pain. Smacking my forehead, I finally put it together. Strep throat.

Embarrassment washed through me. Could it be that easy? I'd kissed Nate and gotten strep? It seemed too soon, and maybe it was. We'd also had dinner together when his sister was first diagnosed, had we not been careful enough after all?

Groaning, I fished for my phone on the bedside table.

*Sid: Do you feel like death?*

*Nate: Well, good morning to you too.*

*Sid: Do you?*

*Nate: Sore throat, trouble swallowing?*

Crap. What would Dr. Bernard say when both Nate and I called out with strep symptoms tomorrow? Gossip burned like wildfire through a small department. Would our peers be pairing us together, whether it was true or not?

*Sid: Yes.*

*Nate: Why don't you come hang out with us, sicko? We'll make Savvy take care of us for a change.*

I snorted. Pride wouldn't let a twelve-year-old coddle me. But if Nate had shared his germs, maybe he owed me. Feeling miserable home alone didn't sound great. I'd still be miserable at his house, but at least I'd have company.

*Nate: We have ice cream. I stocked up on all the comfort supplies already for Savvy.*

I nibbled my lip, imagining the cool relief sliding down my throat.

*Nate: We can do telemedicine visits and get prescriptions called in for both of us since we had exposure to Savvy. Sorry to get you sick. ☹*

I could get myself to a clinic or my own doctor. But on a Sunday when I already felt lousy, letting Nate take care of it sounded like heaven.

*Sid: You've got a deal. Anything I should bring from my place?*

*Nate: Keep it casual. PJs welcome. We'll open a can of soup here for lunch.*

I could shower and change into fresh pajamas, but my soft black lounge pants and T-shirt were good enough if I tossed a sweatshirt over the top to ward off the chill.

*Sid: On my way.*

Savvy stood at the door, a glass of orange juice in one hand as I made my way up the steps of their house.

“You don’t look so hot,” she said.

“Thanks,” I said hoarsely.

By contrast, she looked much better, her eyes bright and the glow of good health returned to her cheeks.

“Ooh. You sound like Nate. Come on in, he’s already on the couch. I’ve assembled our fuzziest blankets and Nate has a movie marathon ready to launch. I’ll grab you some water.”

Curious, I followed her inside. Nate held up a hand in greeting from his prone position on the couch. Hair mussed, he was dressed in plaid flannel pajama bottoms and a navy T-shirt that clung to his chest. His wry smile as he silently gestured for me to join him tugged at my heart.

Their couch was one of those massive sectionals, and Nate pulled in his feet, leaving plenty of room for me to get comfortable on my end. I settled with my back to the arm, extending my legs beneath the blankets. Savvy set my ice water on a side table next to me.

“Can I get you guys anything else?” she asked.

I shook my head, wanting to save my voice.

“I’m waiting for a call back from Dr. Macias,” Nate said, his voice so gravelly it made me wince.

He sounded terrible.

“Thanks,” I whispered.

“Least I could do, seeing as we got you sick. You up for a movie?”

I nodded, and he pressed play.

The opening scenes for *Batman Begins* played, and I suppressed my smile. As Bruce Waynes went, Nate ticked most of the boxes. Glancing at his mussed hair and sleepy eyes, he certainly hit the mark for brooding. I could easily imagine him swooping down to scoop me away from danger in a dark alley. Warming to my fantasy, it didn't take much to imagine his body pressed against mine against cool bricks. Heat rushed through me, remembering our kiss.

Nate smiled at me from his end of the couch, and I shook myself from my fantasy, focusing back on our movie.

Savvy heated up chicken noodle soup and brought us bowls in the living room as we switched from *Batman Begins* to *The Dark Knight*. After one too many painful attempts to talk with our sore throats, we'd taken to texting each other during the movie.

*Nate: Hard to believe the Joker used to play an Aussie heartthrob talking about beer-flavored nipples.*

*Sid: ❖❖ Surprise, surprise, someone's seen a romcom... Just don't make Savvy wear a pregnancy belly when she gets older. The dad in that movie was extra.*

*Nate: You think I'm the overprotective FATHER in this scenario?*

*Sid: Network password Savvys brother will kill you if you hurt her... sound familiar?*

*Nate: You got me.*

*Nate: The pharmacy texted – our prescriptions are ready for pick up. Go after lunch?*

*Sid: Sounds good.*

Was it silly, texting when we sat right next to each other? Absolutely. But also, kind of fun. Like we were trading notes in class.

After picking up our antibiotics, we spent the rest of the afternoon watching the last of the Batman trilogy. My eyelids fluttered, increasingly heavy as the credits played, and I let them close briefly.

“Dinnertime.”

Savvy’s soft call jarred me from my cozy cocoon of darkness. I’d dreamed of being wrapped in Batman’s arms, swooping across Gotham. With a start, my eyes popped open. That had been a dream, right? Nate was pushing up to a sitting position on his end of the couch, and I relaxed. He’d stayed on his end. A flash of emptiness washed through me. It would have been nice to be sheltered in his arms, cuddled close. *Scratch that.* Nate was a colleague and a friend. Saturday’s kiss aside, I didn’t have any business snuggling with him. Fantasizing about it wouldn’t help me keep him at arm’s length. We’d almost been discovered. It would have been a small scandal by some standards, but I couldn’t imagine having to explain my lapse of judgement to Dr. Bernard. Flirting with the idea of a fling in Vegas didn’t mean that crossing the line in Benton would ever be a good idea.

“Do you guys want to eat in here?” Savvy asked.

Nate nodded, and I smiled at Savvy. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

She carried in fresh bowls of soup, ramen this time.

“Thank you.”

We slurped quietly, and Nate turned on the news while we ate. My phone buzzed, and I checked the message.

*Dad: Congratulations on your big win, sweetheart.*

He’d linked a university article about the ball that listed Nate and I as co-chairs and lauded our record-breaking

fundraising. *Dad's assistant strikes again.* At least she had good news to share this time. Still, it was an unpleasant reminder that the message could have been the opposite. What if Nate and I had been discovered feeling each other up behind the scenes last night? The headlines could have been much different. As if merely thinking about my transgressions against propriety would somehow transmit them to my father over the ether, I shut down all thoughts of kissing Nate. Challenging, given he was sitting so close, a constant reminder.

After dinner, I carried my bowl into the kitchen before stowing my pills in my purse.

“Leaving so soon?” Nate asked, his expression forlorn.

He looked more than a little out of sorts, hair sticking up on one side and face still sleep-creased from our siesta on the couch. The desire to cuddle close struck me once more. Without his cocky veneer, Nate was nearly irresistible.

“Yeah. I have to go home and email my class for tomorrow and call Dr. Bernard.”

He nodded, looking glum.

“I’ll see you Tuesday?”

Was it wrong that I didn’t want to leave? As miserable as I felt, being with Nate had been comforting. The quiet day together had been what I needed to decompress after the department dinner and get some rest. On my own, I would have tried to push through and done too much, likely resulting in feeling even worse tomorrow.

I thanked Savvy before slipping out the front door. My apartment seemed cold and empty, and I shivered as I donned fresh pajamas before getting under my covers with my laptop.

Work would wait for no woman. Nate may be the golden child who could get away with anything, but I had a

reputation for reliability to maintain. Following up with my students and notifying the department of my absence for Monday had to take priority over anything else. Playing hooky with Nate had been wonderful, but I couldn't put off real life forever.

*Nate: Sorry again for getting you sick.*

*Sid: You know what would make me feel better?*

I bit my lip, smiling as the text bubbles appeared and disappeared. Teasing Nate was more fun than I'd anticipated. That thrill of skating close to the edge, doing something I shouldn't, made me feel more alive than I'd felt in months. Breaking up with Paul, burying myself in work, had been the right move at the time, but picking my head up to find Nate was an unexpected pleasure. One I wanted to indulge.

*Sid: Showing me a picture of your dorky years.*

*Sid: You know, to convince me they exist.*

*Nate: Oh, no. I'm \*sorry\*, not stupid. I may show you the pictures, but text you a copy? Nah.*

Pouting over the lost opportunity to see a no doubt adorable younger Nate, I couldn't fault his decision. After the pranks he'd pulled, I wouldn't trust me with an unflattering picture either.

*Sid: I'll show you mine if you show me yours.*

Devilish, but I couldn't resist the taunt. His text bubbles appeared and disappeared, and I chuckled. Mr. Smooth couldn't handle a little text flirting? He really must be feeling poorly.

Frowning, I decided to put him out of his misery.

*Sid: Alas, if you're not feeling up to it, we'll have to hold that for another time.*

*Nate: Hey now, I'm UP for anything. You're usually the one holding back.*

My eyes widened. I'd opened myself up to that. Rereading my last text, I could see how it pricked his delicate male ego.

*Sid: You're right, I'm fresh out of back rooms, red lipstick, and incriminating photos.*

There. Bomb diffused. Conflict averted. I snorted. *Right.* Just thinking about our interlude at the department dinner had me conflicted. Did I give in to my feelings for Nate and indulge my hormones, or keep it professional and protect myself?

*Nate: Challenge accepted.*

I swallowed, the pain reminding me that all our big talk aside, Nate and I wouldn't be up to backroom shenanigans anytime soon. And I had to decide how far I was willing to go. If Vegas was a potential opportunity to let loose. A little flirting and a kiss or two harmed no one. But if I let go, indulged in a full-fledged affair with Nate, someone was likely to get hurt. From experience, me. Would I really be able to indulge without free-falling into something more serious with Nate? Losing my heart to someone I couldn't openly date, but had to see day after day would be torture.

Though Benton swelled to a respectable size with its student population, at heart it was still a small town. And I'd already lived through one close-quarters breakup with Paul. Hearing my colleagues whisper behind my back hadn't been a picnic. Even though I'd been the one to initiate him moving out, my least favorite colleague had spun it differently. It was my bad luck that Paul was friends with Slimy Spaulding. Spaulding oozed, but not charm. Nate could pull off a sheepish awkward comment or two, but Eric Spaulding's backhanded comments had made my blood boil. Spreading gossip about me and Paul and sucking up to Dr. Bernard, Eric had been the man I loved to hate before Nate hit the scene. Not that I *hate* hated Nate. He'd been a pain in the ass, but not *an* ass. I



couldn't imagine him spreading rumors that I cheated or hadn't been woman enough to hold onto Paul.

At my heart, I trusted Nate. Maybe he wasn't perfect, but he was a good man. Caring at his core.

Was it wrong if hanging out with Nate and Savvy, even when I felt like flaming garbage, was one of the nicest Sundays I'd had in a while? The quiet companionship of spending time together, even when we didn't talk, highlighted that since Paul and I split, I'd become too much of a hermit. Sure, I did brunch regularly and participated in my running club, but otherwise, I was work, work, work.

Once we set the one-upmanship aside, Nate wasn't half-bad. But now that the department dinner was over, there was no reason for us to hang out. No cause to risk my professional reputation or incur any familial wrath over a relationship with a younger, tattooed man with a murky past. My gut churned, and I tried to name the sensation. Relief. Sure, right. Because relief usually felt exactly like disappointment.

# CHAPTER 10 – NATE

Dr. Bernard sang our praises during the following Monday's staff meeting, but Sid seemed uncomfortable with the kudos. Had our indiscretion in the back room ruined the progress we'd made? Her mixed signals made my head spin.

My texts during the week had gone unanswered. I'd thought inviting her for dinner again was innocent enough, but clearly, she disagreed.

By the time Saturday morning rolled around, I was more than ready to take my stilted feelings out on the mat. I grunted my greeting to Jake, as I dropped my workout bag at the front of our class.

"What crawled up your ass?" Jake asked as he caught my scowl.

"Nothing."

"Doesn't sound like nothing. You're usually happy to be here. What gives?"

Grunting, I shook my head. "Sid has been avoiding me this week."

"You mean, as opposed to every other week when she thought you were a total pain in her ass?"

Scowling, I debated doing a heel sweep to bring him down a peg. But, discipline. "We've become friends," I argued. "We've made dinner together, hung out while we planned the fundraiser. I thought we'd become friends. I don't know why she's avoiding me now."

"Did you do something?"

Kiss her senseless at our department dinner? Did that count? Of course, it did. But I didn't want to admit she blew

me off after what had felt, at least to me, like a goldilocks moment.

“I believed we’d moved past some of the rivalry. She won the trip. I did my part at the dinner, and it was a success. I don’t know why I’m getting the cold shoulder.”

Except her comment about not wanting to be under a microscope. I’d thought it related to us being found in a compromising position at the dinner, not that she’d avoid any private conversation and opportunity to hash things out together afterward. She’d seemed normal and friendly during our movie day. We’d been too sick to talk much, but I’d thought we were back on familiar footing. I could understand if she wanted to keep her private life private. But I’d still believed she’d continue to talk to me, that we were starting something. All I’d had from her since then was polite professionalism, and I couldn’t figure out what I’d done wrong.

The first of our students arrived, ending any options for private conversation, and Jake greeted the kids. Our eight-year-olds may be tiny, but they were fierce.

I was just helping a few kids get settled when a familiar figure trailed in behind Lee and Lily, clad in sweatpants and a black T-shirt. Coach Bear hulked over the second graders, looking like a benevolent shadow with his bemused smile.

“Hi, Jake, Nate. I remembered you said you taught on Saturday mornings and wanted to check it out. Am I in the right class?”

Bear glanced around at his pint-sized classmates, and I bit back my smile.

“You’re in the right place,” Jake assured. “Most adults take the beginner class from the owner in the evenings, but you’re welcome to join us.”

I half expected Bear to bail, his pride unable to let him take a kids' class, but he smiled affably and claimed a spot on the mats.

Jake and I moved into our warm-up sequence, then worked with each student one-on-one to instruct them in blocking. Bear's brow furrowed in concentration as I adjusted his stance, and new respect blossomed at his attempt to tilt his forearm.

When we finished our cooldown, our class filtered out, meeting their parents in the lobby, but Bear hung back.

"Thanks, guys. That was fun. Should I continue with the Saturday class, or should adults really be in one of the evening ones you mentioned?"

Bear's gentle question made me glance at Jake guiltily. I shouldn't have egged Bear into attending our session, but the older man's confidence with Sid had pricked at my ego. I'd worked for almost a year to get into her good graces, and he waltzed in and pwned, *er owned*, me at the last minute.

"Are you sure an evening class fits with your other commitments? Some find it hard to fit around dating and other things."

Transparent as fuck, but I hoped Bear wouldn't spot my fishing expedition for what it was: naked jealousy. Had he and Sid started dating? Is that why she'd been avoiding me since the department dinner? Had she decided the coach was a more *appropriate* romantic partner?

Bear rocked back on his heels, hands stuffed in his pockets. "Nope. Not me. I'm pretty new to town still. Not a lot to fill my evenings, and sometimes I need a break from football."

His easy admission made me feel like even more of an ass. I'd had Savvy when I moved back to town and Jake. Just because Bear was a minor celebrity didn't mean he had friends

here. But it didn't answer how he'd hooked up with Sid for the department dinner.

"You and Sid aren't close?"

Bear's lips twitched, and if I hadn't given myself away before, he'd clearly caught on now.

"Nah. I just met her the other night at the dinner. A friend set us up. Nice lady, though. Hell of a woman."

Jake had watched our interplay silently, no doubt enjoying watching me twist in the wind.

"Well, you might like the evening class, then. You're a bit big to be sparring with the second graders," Jake broke in, offering a smile to soften his words.

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Any attempts to blame the other man for Sid's retreat had died after my little interrogation. Leading up to DEF CON, it became clear, Sid had re-established professional distance. She ducked out of our department meetings as soon as they finished and was a ghost in the halls between classes. Unsure if she was angry about us infecting her with our own personal plague, I tried to give her space, but I couldn't stop myself from texting her in the days leading up to her trip.

*Nate: Are you excited?*

*Sid: For?*

*Nate: DEF CON, of course. Vegas is calling my name.*

I'd hoped she'd open up to me about her trip plans so I could share mine, but she'd been quiet. Luckily, sweet talking Sharon, our department secretary, into booking my travel alongside Sid's hadn't been too difficult. I'd have a seat next to hers on the plane ride over, and we had hotel rooms next door to each other in the Paris resort. All it had taken was my credit card and the promise of lunch from Sharon's favorite café, the Windmill. Sharon's turkey sandwich was worth every

penny if it meant that Sid and I could at least be friends again. My original plans to woo Sid at the conference were in jeopardy, thanks to her cold shoulder. I could only hope my appearance wouldn't be unwelcome, that we could rekindle some of our earlier closeness away from the prying eyes in Benton. If we were even a tenth as good together as I believed we'd be, surely, she'd see it too, and let down her walls?

One more day, and we'd be winging to Sin City for four days of nerdery. DEF CON had become a legend over the twenty-plus years the massive hacker party had been hosted in Vegas. As sure as I was that Sid had done her research about what to expect, most of the information she really needed was hidden from prying eyes.

Fake ATMs, late-night desert raves, a sea of laptops and cords entwining a mass of mostly unwashed dorks. DEF CON had become a rite of passage for every security professional and hacker alike. Four days to party and learn together. Geek nirvana.

I set down my phone and pulled the tater tot casserole I'd tried to copy from Sid's recipe for dinner from the oven. Golden and perfect. Sid would be proud.

"Savvy, dinnertime!"

Fully recovered from our bouts with strep, Savvy bounced into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of juice.

"Are you sure you're okay to spend the long weekend at Ally's house?" I asked.

Savvy only rolled her eyes at me. Spending a few days with one of her best friends wouldn't be a hardship. It didn't stop me feeling guilty about leaving her however. The longest we'd been separated since our parents' accident was overnight. Last year I'd skipped DEF CON. I'd had too much on my mind, processing my grief and caring for Savvy. No headspace to party.

"Does Sid know you're going?"

“I mentioned the possibility, but we haven’t really talked since last time she came over,” I said, focusing on scooping casserole onto my plate without dropping any on the floor.

Savvy’s gentle snort made me look up, catching her incredulous expression.

“What?”

“You should tell her you like her.”

I shrugged. She wasn’t wrong. Mostly it was sad that I was getting solid dating advice from my twelve-year-old sister. And not taking it.

“I’m not sure she’s ready.”

Committing my feelings out loud to Sid still terrified me. I was working up to it. Piece by piece, trying to change her perception of me as I felt out her own feelings. Or felt her up. The kiss at the department dinner had been a mistake. Too early, born out of petty jealousy. Which I had no right to.

Clearly, she hadn’t been ready, if the cold shoulder she’d given me since then was any indication. I shoved away the voice whispering she’d never be ready, that I’d blown my chance with her. That she wouldn’t want a Peter Pan struggling with responsibility and adjusting to moving home. Sid deserved better than me. A man who had shit figured out, who was free to sweep her off her feet. But wishing wouldn’t bring my parents back, and as much as I missed them, caring for Savvy had changed me for the better. I would have missed out on a lot of her life if I’d stayed up in Seattle, only visiting for holidays. We’d always loved each other, but experiencing love up close felt a lot different.

“Nate. I don’t want to say this because you’re my brother and all, but you’re not completely disgusting. According to Ally, you’re *hawt*. Blech. But you’re smart. Just because I pretend not to know why the Wi-Fi always says I’m

in Africa, doesn't mean I'm a total noob. Sid would be lucky to have you. And I think she likes you too."

My chest swelled and tightened at the passionate cadence in her voice.

"Everyone needs a hype woman like you, Savvy. I love you, you know."

Cue fresh eye roll. A smile tugged at my lips at the predictability of it.

"I know," she grumbled to cover her smile.



# CHAPTER 11 – SID

Excited nerves filled me on the ride to the airport. It was silly, to be this excited about what was at least nominally a professional conference.

As if sensing my mood, Rita asked, “Are you ready for this?”

I grinned at her behind the wheel. She’d been kind enough to drive me the hour and a half to the airport to catch my flight.

“I hope so.”

“Knowing you, you’ve researched DEF CON to death.”

“True, but it’s a culture that likes to fly under the radar. I’m sure I’ll still learn a lot.”

Rita shook her head. “Nerd.”

“Sounds a lot like you, too.”

“I know, but I never expected you to go over to the dark side.”

“Going to DEF CON doesn’t make me a hacker,” I chided.

“No, but I’m worried it makes you a sheep. Engineers at that conference are notorious for sniffing out poorly secured electronic information and making it public to teach attendees a lesson. Be careful.” Her tone turned mischievous. “Unless you have an opportunity for other kinds of Vegas fun. Then, go wild. Call me if you need bail money.”

“Wild, huh? Like strippers wild? Gambling? Running naked and talking dirty?”

“Sounds like a healthy list to me. But I meant more like find someone handsome and smash.”

“Smash? Is that what coeds call it now?” I teased.

“I’m just saying ... I think you could use a little relaxation. Don’t waste any opportunities.”

“Thanks. I’ll take that under advisement,” I said dryly.

Rita dropped me off with a quick hug, and I passed through security, grabbing a coffee before arriving at my gate. Curious, I glanced at my fellow passengers, wondering if I could spot anyone else going to the con. Most of the others milling around or sitting in the hard plastic seats looked like retired couples, though I spotted one bachelor party. A few quiet ones seemed fixed on their phones, and I examined them more carefully, but nothing screamed hacker.

My boarding group was called first, and I shuffled along until I reached my seat, stowing my backpack beneath the seat in front of me and pulling my phone out so I could read during the flight. I debated texting Nate, sending him a selfie of me on the plane. Would he think it was silly? Or that I was rubbing in my win? I’d ignored his texts all week. It wasn’t fair to start things up again.

I’d been struggling to find my equilibrium with him after our kiss at the department dinner. Exploring the attraction between us seemed like the obvious answer, until I met with Dr. Bernard the week of our strep throat sick day. He’d not so subtly warned me that as he contemplated retirement, he wanted the transition to a new department chair to go smoothly. Dr. Bernard didn’t call out Nate by name, but his comment about not forming any “unfortunate romantic attachments” that might put me at odds with our university’s consensual relationships policy and create a conflict of interest had still hit its mark. He may have wanted us to patch up our differences and become friends, but hooking up with Nate

would be a mistake. Working together and sleeping together was sure to end in disaster.

Nate had more depth than I'd given him credit for, but I didn't want to put any potential roadblocks between me and moving up the ladder. If I moved up, being with him would jeopardize morale within my department. I'd never be viewed as impartial, even if we worked around our personal relationship by farming out his faculty reviews to another department chair. I'd seen gossip and personal relationships blow up more than one academic career. Paranoia and loneliness paid the bills.

A sleek older woman slid into the aisle seat, and I smiled my greeting. She appeared to be alone. Did it mean we'd scored the holy grail of seating assignments, an empty middle seat? Flying was always easier when I had the extra space and didn't feel like I was elbowing my seatmate constantly or tangling feet.

"Excuse me."

I'd recognize that masculine voice anywhere. My jaw dropped as Nate shuffled around the woman in the aisle seat, settling next to me.

"Nate?"

"Surprise."

He looked delighted, but I didn't know how to feel. DEF CON was a little intimidating. Thirty-thousand hackers in one place didn't sound like an innocent opportunity to learn. More like a recipe for trouble. And who fit that bill better than Nate?

His boyish grin invited a response, and I let loose with the first thing I could think of.

"Are you following me?"

His excited expression fell into something approximating hurt, and I regretted my accusation. But it sure as heck looked like it.

All my self-talk about standing on my own and avoiding gossip, and a secret part of me was thrilled he'd decided to come. His comment about Vegas at the department dinner pinged along my memory. He hadn't flat-out told me he'd be attending, but we hadn't exactly been communicating well lately. Or at all. And that was my fault. Did he think I was awful for dropping him so suddenly, or had he accepted that we weren't meant to be anything more than colleagues?

"You want me to ask to be reseated? I thought this would be fun. I bribed Sharon to make my travel arrangements. I didn't think you'd mind."

Of course, he asked Sharon to make his reservations. That sounded more like the Nate I knew. He'd found someone else to do his dirty work. Maybe his seat had nothing to do with me.

"But what are you doing here?"

"Duh. Going to DEF CON. You didn't think just because I lost our competition I wouldn't go, did you? I've gone to nine of the last ten conferences."

I should have suspected. His Wi-Fi situation and claims of a nondisclosure agreement fit the profile.

"Real friends tell each other things," I grumbled.

"Is that what we are? I would have gladly told you my plans, but you've been avoiding me since the dinner. If you'd prefer to pretend to be strangers at the conference, we can do that. But I thought we'd moved beyond playing games with each other. I thought we were at least friends."

I shifted in my seat at his gentle accusation, as if it would dislodge the tendrils of guilt shooting through me. His earlier words pinged. Sharon. That traitor.

“Did Sharon book your hotel too?”

“Yep.”

His satisfied grin answered my question before I could ask it. Of course, he'd be booked near me. Did hotels still have adjoining rooms? Suddenly feeling warm, I reached up to fiddle with my seat's air flow as the attendants closed the cabin doors and started preparations for takeoff.

Deciding to make the best of it, I cast around for a safe question to ask.

“Okay, oh experienced one, what can you tell me about DEF CON? What does a first timer need to know?”

Nate rubbed his hands together, looking pleased I asked.

“First of all, you're going to need a code name. No real names allowed.”

My research had uncovered a few details about the conference, and this advice I'd prepared for. But I was curious about his handle.

“Yeah? What's your hacker name?”

He cleared his throat. “My *handle* is Dark Knight.”

I should have known. “Of course, it is. Mine is Professor D.”

His gaze slid to my chest, chastely covered in a red T-shirt. “Only if you want to be called Professor Double D all weekend.” He shrugged, pretending innocence. “But it is Vegas, if you're okay with it, that works for me.”

I groaned. While IT security had moved beyond the clichéd basement-dweller stereotype, DEF CON was billed as more party than professional organization. Was I setting myself up for ridicule with my handle?

“Do you have a better idea?”

“Princess Perfect has a nice ring to it.”

I groaned, but couldn't hide my smile over the affectionate way he said it. He pulled a phone from his backpack, slapping it into my palm.

“Burner phone. Already has my contact in it under Dark Knight, of course.”

“Burner phone?”

I'd been warned electronics were fair game in the online forums, but I'd figured that traveling alone, I'd leave my phone in my room. Getting a burner seemed extreme.

He nodded. “Not only do we not use real names, but you're also not going to want anything hackable with you. Leave your real phone in your hotel room and pull the battery out to be safe. Any smart watches too. Only dumb devices allowed, unless you want to get pwned. It's better not to give off sheep vibes.”

“And do you have a burner?”

He nodded. “And a clean laptop. Everything paid in cash, nothing to tie me to Nate Cummings.”

Intrigued, I had to ask. “Are you playing in the challenges?”

A smile twitched at his lips, a streak of competitive glee flaring in his dark eyes. “Maybe.”

*Who was Nate Cummings?* Flighty professor who struggled to get to work on time? Caring brother holding down the fort for his bereaved sister? Or mystery hacker about to do some illegal shit on vacation?

“Who are you?”

“Stick around and find out. I promise to make it worth your while.”

I loved the light of mischief in his eyes. Something about it called to me. Not the buttoned-up, professional

persona I worked so hard to maintain, but the secret side, which thrilled at taking chances. Even if they were little ones.

Teaming up with Nate for the weekend promised to be an adventure.

Nate shared stories of previous years at DEF CON during our flight, and my heart clutched, seeing his eyes sparkle as he talked of pranks and outing undercover journalists and law enforcement to the other conference attendees. Apparently, “spot the Fed” was a favorite pastime. Attendees were encouraged to call out potential government infiltrators in their midst.

So much for the reformed bad boy. It shouldn't have been attractive, dammit. But something about his zeal thrilled me. His enthusiasm only served to highlight the pale imitation of this Nate who'd been co-existing with us the last year. Seeing him away from campus, away from his responsibilities, he shed some of the weight of life. He glowed. Men could glow, right? Because that's what he did. In his element, Nate kept up a steady stream of chatter as we picked up our suitcases and hailed a car to the hotel.

As predicted, the front desk gave him the room next to mine, and I didn't have the heart to protest. It was nice having Nate alongside me. With him, the lights and constant roar of the slots seemed less overwhelming and foreign. I'd been to Vegas before, but a romantic weekend with my boyfriend off-Strip was a far cry from being in the thick of the action.

We walked under the ornate chandeliers to the elevators at the Paris. Since arriving at the hotel, I'd noticed a handful of mostly men with distinctive badges around their necks. Mohawks and beards were common, but I spotted the occasional close-cropped khaki-wearing dude who screamed “Fed.” Nate had explained that law enforcement and corporate IT made up an ever-growing population at the conference, but the atmosphere remained more of an oddball family reunion.

“Meet me in five and we’ll head down to registration? You brought your cash, right?” Nate asked.

I chuckled, remembering Sharon’s excited expression as she handed me an envelope overflowing with bills.

“Yes, I’ve got a fistful of twenties to pay my way.”

His eyes danced. “Sharon was excited, wasn’t she? Between the cash she got to slip to you and making my travel arrangements on the sly with my credit card, she told me she felt like a secret agent.”

I grinned. Motherly Sharon would make an excellent agent. No one would see her coming, dressed in loud flower-print shirts, her glasses perched on her bird-like nose, the beaded cord swinging gently against her generous bosom. Flashy and fun, she didn’t exactly blend. But apparently she could keep a secret, because I’d had no clue about Nate’s travel itinerary.

Nate knocked on my door after the prescribed five minutes, and we made our way downstairs, winding through the slots and gambling tables, toward the conference area entrance. A long line snaked through stanchions. Maybe a few hundred people clustered in groups, waiting for their turn at the table up front.

“Holy crap.”

Thirty-thousand people was an epic group, but the conference’s magnitude hadn’t really struck me until I saw the line.

“Yeah, it will probably take hours. It’s the downside of a cash-only registration. They estimate the crowd size for the conference badge order, but some years they misjudge and run out. But I think we’re still early enough to get this year’s badges.”

“What’s the story with the badge bling?”



“They’re half art, and half tech, but all puzzles.” He scrubbed a hand through his hair, and combined with his boyish grin, I couldn’t help smiling back. “DEF CON is a puzzle mecca. It’s all a game. From the badges to the competitive events, just about everything here is a quest that awards prizes to the winners. Electronics builds, game play-throughs, coding challenges, they’re all opportunities to win.”

“Have you solved one of the DEF CON challenges before?”

He tugged a thin metal badge from beneath his T-shirt, the black skull and crossbones stamped into the front highlighted with rivets and backed with LED lights. “Yes. A couple of years ago.”

Awed, I examined the intricate design. My research had revealed a few photos of previous years’ winners, but I hadn’t seen one of the famed black badges up close. They were rumored to give you free DEF CON attendance for life.

“No way. What did you win?”

“Crash and Compile. We’re given a coding challenge but also unlimited beer and distractions. The goal is to create a flawless program for points.”

“Where do the beer and distractions come in?” I asked suspiciously.

“Any time you compile or your code doesn’t work, you take a drink. Team Distraction is also there to screw with you. I’ve seen lap dances, strip teases, and air horns. Team Distraction takes their role *very* seriously.”

I could only imagine the chaos.

“And what did your program have to do?”

“Take a list of random words and alphabetize them, then create a haiku as a second-stage output including two new words of your choice.” Pausing, he stared off into the distance,

holding up a hand as if reaching for the sky, his expression solemn.

“DEF CON is to me, a glorious family, though fucked up and drunk.”

Snickering, I shook my head. “Did you get paid for coming here in the past? For work, I mean?”

He nodded, grinning. “Well, it certainly wasn’t for the poetry.”

“And were you with the Feds?”

Somehow, I doubted it. Nate didn’t strike me as the color within the lines kind.

Nate looked mildly offended by my question. “First, NDA. And second, no.”

“Hmm ...” I pursed my lips, pretending to doubt him.

“You’ll see. You’ll meet a few members of my old crew this weekend. But in the meantime, can I get you a drink?”

Nate slipped out of line, sidling up to a kiosk selling cocktails and returned with a glass of wine for me and a beer for him. Sipping and chatting, I watched as the line inched forward, until we were finally at the front. The conference organizers all wore bright red GOON T-shirts with the DEF CON cartoonish skull and crossbones logo. For a group of supposed hackers, they all looked normal. I could imagine running into any one of them at the grocery store at home.

Finally we reached the registration table and I handed over cash for my ticket and was issued a badge. Nate showed his black badge and received a shiny bling badge of his own, then he tucked his black skull back beneath his T-shirt.

“You don’t want to advertise?” I asked.

He shook his head. “For some, it’s an immediate challenge. Shall we get something to eat?”

I nodded. I was already half loopy on one glass of wine. I'd snacked on the plane but hadn't had a real meal in hours. We settled on a small bistro table after piling up plates at the buffet.

"So, if your contact is Dark Knight, what's mine in your phone?" I asked, curious.

Nate's flushed cheeks seemed ominous.

"Teacher's Pet," he mumbled, swiping a fry from my plate without looking at me.

"Nate, you've got to be joking. That's the title of a sex tape, not a hacker handle! And you thought Professor D was too suggestive? What gives?"

"Title of *our* sex tape," he mumbled as I smacked him on the shoulder.

"Not funny, Nate. I need something else. There's no way I'm spending the weekend with you calling me Teacher's Pet."

"But aren't you?" he asked with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. "No."

My denial was weak, even to my own ears.

"Sure about that? This trip seems like evidence to the contrary."

"I'm not using that as my nickname. I'm going to pick something else."

"Whatever you say, Princess Perfect."

I wrinkled my nose. It wasn't great, but it would do.

Examining my badge, I held it up to the light. The back was a collection of circuitry, while the front held a beautiful tarot design of a jester juggling.

"Is that The Fool card?"

“Could be. Here. Hold it up to mine,” Nate said.

Once connected, lights flared as if the jester were throwing the balls.

“That’s so cool.”

Nate seemed pleased. “They’re part of a quest. I believe this year, you’re trying to find Goons at every event, like in a Pokémon collect-them-all kind of way, and it unlocks more lights and function in your badge. You can try it with other attendees too. I think it’s intended to force us geeks to mingle.”

“Is everything here a game?” I asked, delighted.

“Pretty much. This con is like fifty smaller cons all packed into one. You can find everything here. Games, puzzles, challenges, a scavenger hunt.”

I could only imagine what hackers would put on a scavenger hunt list.

“Do I want to know what goes into the scavenger hunt?” I asked. “I’m not committing any crimes this weekend.”

“Not only do you want to know,” he said, “we should play. Crime is totally optional. Once my buddies Gnome and Adrenaline get here, we’ll have a big enough team to compete in the scavenger hunt.”

Crime optional and no crime were *not* the same thing. But judging from Nate’s satisfied expression as he wolfed down his pile of chicken wings and mac salad, I wasn’t sure he cared.

This new side of Nate was exciting and a little scary. The man I knew in Benton, the caring older brother and responsible-ish professor, seemed far, far away. The new Nate practically rubbed his hands together in glee as he marked up his attendee program and the talks and villages he wanted to attend. I was excited to meet Gnome and Adrenaline and piece

together more of the puzzle that was Nate. He'd been so closed-mouthed about his past, getting to know his hacker friends promised to be revealing. My own personal DEF CON game.

I turned to my own program to scan the scheduled events as I cut my lasagna into manageable bites.

Orientation—definitely something I should partake in. I'd seen too many horror stories online to trust that Nate's guidance was all I'd need.

The Beard and Mustache Challenge I could probably miss, seeing as I had neither and wasn't overly interested in facial hair. Glancing up at Nate and his golden stubble, I had to admit that while it wouldn't win any awards at the con, between my thighs he might get a gold star. Shoving away the inappropriate thought, I refocused on the program.

Hacker Jeopardy sounded like fun, and something I would at least recognize and possibly learn from.

Crash and Compile intrigued me after hearing Nate had won it.

I ticked off more events on my program, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of talks, vendors, and things to do. Four days wouldn't be enough time to see it all.

After dinner, we wandered down the Strip, waves of strangers washing past us. The desert night air was different from home. The heat had faded, but a slight hint of ozone and exhaust still hung over everything.

Nate bumped against me and apologized, before his fingers tentatively tangled with mine. I took a deep breath, letting the buzz trickle through me before meshing our hands more firmly. Vegas was a different world from Benton, Oregon. Far away from responsibilities and reputations. The atmosphere around DEF CON and along the Strip only reinforced the otherworldly feeling. Time out of time. A place

beyond worry. I let my shoulders relax and embraced the moment. Nate's hand felt right in mine. Warm and sure.

I let Nate tug me along, excited to watch the fountains at the Bellagio. We snaked our way through the crowds until we reached the balcony over the water, and I leaned back, enjoying his strength and support as he cupped my elbows from behind. More intimate than anything since our kiss at the department dinner, it should have scared me. Instead, I sank into his warmth.

I shivered at the contact, and he must have thought I was cold, because he rubbed his hands up and down my arms before pulling me closer into the shelter of his body, his hands linked with mine at my waist.

Oh, how I wished we weren't caught in a sea of other people. Alone, I would have turned in his arms. Let go. Instead, I pretended to watch as the Bellagio's fountains danced to the tune of "Bad Romance," trying not to be charmed when Nate sang the lyrics softly in my ear.

All about wanting my love and everything I'd give.

Could I give, without giving everything? Adopt Vegas rules and take what was on offer this weekend, then return to our normal lives afterward? I tugged my lip between my teeth.

When the song finished, Nate flung an arm over my shoulders, motioning back toward the hotel. "Ready to head back? I know it's late, but a lot of things will just be getting off the ground. You game to check it out?"

I nodded, glad I'd worn tennis shoes instead of anything fancy. The amount of walking we'd already done made my feet ache. I couldn't imagine managing it in some of the torture devices I saw strut by as we maneuvered our way back to the Paris hotel.

"Yo! Dark Knight!"

The deep bass call had Nate turning his head before nudging me to change directions and meet up with a burly man, presumably the owner of the booming voice.

“Gnome. When did you get in?” Nate asked, doing one of those complicated male backslap and fist bump combos.

Gnome, who was approximately six and a half feet tall without the mohawk, loomed over us. Neither Nate nor I were built particularly small, but Gnome still managed to make me feel Lilliputian with the extra inches his hair gave him. Clad in cargo shorts and a DEF CON 20 T-shirt, he grinned.

“Just now. Have you seen Adrenaline yet?”

“Naw. I figured she was probably driving. She likes to have a car for the BBQ. Gnome, I’d like to introduce you to Princess Perfect.”

When he said it aloud, I nearly groaned. So pretentious. But Gnome didn’t seem to mind. Another affable smile spread across his features, making his blue eyes twinkle beneath.

“Nice to meet you, Princess. Did the Dark Knight finally get a girlfriend? I thought he spent too much time hanging in the nerd cave for that.”

I started guiltily. Did Gnome just read the vibes between us, or had Nate said something about me? Eyes narrowing, I caught the teasing glance Gnome exchanged with Nate and relaxed.

“I wish,” Nate said lightly. “And also, nerd cave”—*cough*—“title of your sex tape.”

The big man laughed, the booming sound attracting attention from the people passing around us.

Gnome and Nate talked me into coming with them to get drinks, then to hear a DJ in one of the conference rooms. In addition to the blinking DEF CON badges, attendees had

blinged out about everything they could, and I felt severely underdressed in my jeans and T-shirt. Bustiers lit with rainbow colors, flashlight shoes, and at least one LED bullseye drew the eye in a raucous cacophony of light and motion on the dance floor.

Nate seemed to use every excuse in the teeming hall to touch me, a hand at my hip or clasping my hand in his to draw me through the crowd. And darned if it didn't stoke my desire for him. All the pent-up feelings I'd been suppressing for weeks bubbled to the surface. Any pretense at not caring, not wanting him faded moment by moment.

And then the bastard started to dance. Not like a dude, bouncing up and down. He moved his hips. With purpose. Women peeled out of the woodwork, moving steadily closer, and I made the split-second decision to stake my claim.

Hooking a finger through the waist of his jeans, I let go.

Channeling every girl's night I'd had with Rita, Cheri, and Angi in the last year, I let my hips swing like I was charming a snake. Granted, a pants snake, but it still counted, right? Letting my pelvis circle before brushing his, enjoying the heat bubbling between us, I looked up at Nate from beneath my lashes to see his gaze darken.

Briefly, I regretted shutting Gnome out of our little circle, but he recovered quickly, smiling at a passing woman with a head of rainbow-colored mermaid hair and turning to follow her.

Nate ran his hands over my hips, short-circuiting thoughts of anything but him. His firm palms cupped my butt, pulling me more tightly into the cradle of his thighs.

I moaned softly as he aligned his pelvis to mine, slowing the sway of our hips. Soon, we wouldn't be anywhere near the beat, and I didn't freaking care.



Fire raced everywhere we touched, and my pulse beat insistently, making me want to follow the primal rhythm into another, even more basic activity.

Our first kiss, I could write off as a fluke. An aberration. But this needy ache for Nate was something altogether different. I could blame it on the drinks. On the small touches all evening long. But the truth was something deeper, darker. I wanted Nate Cummings. Desperately. The last year of teasing and pranks may not have looked like foreplay, but now that I knew him better, could interpret him slightly, I could see the beauty in the design. He'd made me notice him.

Every drugging movement of our hips swiveling to the beat sent a fresh wash of sensation through my limbs, until I felt heavy. It was easy to let everything else fall away but the feeling of him pressed against me. The *shoulds*. The *musts*. Every expectation dissolved, leaving only Nate. Here with me.

Nate must have seen my desire in my expression, because he leaned forward, nibbling along my neck. The soft nip and slide of his tongue along the tendon there had me shivering and fantasizing about more. Wishing urgently for his tongue between my thighs, enjoying the soft rasp of his beard chafing gently against my skin instead. Pushing me higher and higher, until I had no choice but to surrender to sensation.

“Do you want to get out of here?” I asked, raising my voice to be heard over the pounding bass.

He pulled back, and my knees nearly collapsed at the expression of pure need there.

# CHAPTER 12 – NATE

I stumbled a bit in my haste to navigate us off the dance floor.

*That corner looks promising.*

I shook my head. Nope. Not for Sid. She deserved better than a dark corner fumble. Pausing as we slid out of the party room, I glanced up and down the hall. Most of the conference spaces would be occupied, even at this late hour. If anything, a lot of the gaming would just be getting started.

“Come on, let’s go up to our rooms.”

Sid tugged at my hand, casting a mischievous look over her shoulder. “The wait for the elevator will take forever. Let’s see what else we can find.”

Slowly, I let a grin spread across my face at her suggestion. Sid’s wild Vegas side was a *beast*. Granted, she was always firm in her convictions, seeming to know exactly what she was doing at all times. But I’d only imagined her confidence turned on me. The reality was hotter than I’d dreamed.

Briefly, consequences danced through my mind. Waiting would be torture, but in Vegas, there was always an eye in the sky watching. Luckily, with DEF CON Goons on the job, the Paris’s network security didn’t stand a chance. Asking the right person could get any incriminating footage deleted. The last thing Sid would want when she was thinking clearly again was an amateur sex tape highlighting our time in Vegas.

We wound down the hall, testing doors, but every one we peeked into was already occupied.

“I’ve got an idea,” I said, pulling her toward the exit to the pool.

Still warm, the desert air kissed our skin, and Sid shivered.

“Too cold?” I asked as I tugged her toward a cabana near the edge of the empty pool deck, the striped canvas rippling in the breeze.

“Just right,” Sid whispered, hooking a finger through the belt loop at my waist.

In the shadows of the cabana, sheltered from the outside world, it was easy to forget everything but her. Sid’s dark eyes gleamed in the sliver of light filtering in from the outside lights, and my body tightened at the desire clear in her expression.

I focused on Sid, dragging my lips across hers before diving into a kiss that left me breathless and panting.

I stumbled toward the cabana’s lounge chair, laughing when our feet tangled, and Sid followed me down into the cushion’s soft embrace. Abruptly, my amusement cut off as I absorbed the full weight of her body on top of mine. Sid’s breasts pressed against my chest, and her thighs bracketed mine, placing her firmly against my erection.

“You’re so sexy,” I said, as I pushed up on my elbows, tracing kisses along her collarbone.

She pulled back briefly, grinding her heat more firmly on top of my aching cock, and I nearly whimpered at the sensation. Sid stripped her shirt over her head, leaving her clad in a lacy bra that I’d give anything to get her out of.

“Shirt. Off,” she commanded, and I obeyed breathlessly, eager to do her bidding. Anything that got us naked and closer to finding relief would receive my full agreement.

I shrugged out of my shirt, groaning my approval when she unhooked her bra and let her gorgeous breasts swing free.

With a muttered curse, I used my two remaining brain cells to adjust the height of the lounge, bringing myself to a seated position, the better to worship her from. Sid let her head fall back as I urged her closer, cupping a soft breast in my palm. She stroked over my shoulders to my elbows, tickling briefly at my ribs before her hands settled at my waistband.

A quick pop and the snick of the zip, and Sid reached her hands inside to where I was already hard and ready. Her soft murmur of approval as she gripped my cock nearly undid me.

I wanted to do anything and everything to elicit that sound from her again. With new determination, I suckled one hard nipple, letting my hands trail down the smooth skin at her sides to her fly. The soft rasp as I lowered her zipper was music to my ears. With a growl, I pulled her up on her knees, bringing her to my mouth where I could nuzzle at her sweet heat. Working her jeans down her thighs, I helped her shuck them off before hoisting her into a reclining position on the lounge. Only a small scrap of fabric covered Sid, wet and nearly transparent. Hair splayed around her head, eyes slumbrous with desire, I pushed my clothing off, discarding it on the cabana floor.

She crooked a finger at me, and I could do nothing but obey, leaning over her on the lounge. Inhaling deeply, I growled my approval into the apex of her thighs, feeling them judder around me as she trembled. Licking over the slick fabric with a broad swipe of my tongue, I couldn't help but place a quick kiss on her thigh.

"More," she commanded, and I pulled the damp fabric away from her clit, blowing on it gently as she cried out. Smiling at her strangled sounds, I worked at her entrance,

wishing the slick heat were clutching my cock instead of bathing my tongue.

“Nate. Tell me you have a condom.”

Her urgent words had me pulling back, kissing her quickly before searching the floor for my jeans. I fumbled with the foil packet in my urgency, only made worse when Sid’s hands fluttered at my thighs, gripping my buttocks to encourage me closer.

Notching my cock at the entrance to her slick heat, I leaned forward to kiss Sid, trying not to crush her beneath my weight. She bit at my lip, and I surged into her on a groan, feeling her engulf me completely. Hot and wet, she nearly overwhelmed me in sensation, and I paused, breathing hard.

“You feel like fire, like flame, and I want nothing more than to burn,” I muttered, seeking control. At the current rate, two thrusts and I’d be finished.

Sid’s hands gripped the back of my thighs as she ground herself against me, and I held back a sound that might have been a whimper. One thrust.

Reaching between us, I rubbed at her clit as I kissed her, using the tempo of her tongue to adjust my rhythm. Staying seated in her to the hilt, but not moving, was torture, but I worried that as soon as I moved, I’d come, and I didn’t want to go it alone. Not if I could bring her with me. Sid deserved all the rainbows, starbursts, and vibrations of pleasure I could bring her.

“Nate. Move,” she urged, and feeling her near the brink, I obeyed.

Steadying myself above her, I watched Sid come apart as I thrust, grinding against her. She seemed to grip me tighter, and I groaned, regretting I couldn’t last longer.

Collapsing on top of Sid, I tried to catch my breath, letting the ripples of my orgasm wash through me. Still

tingling, I placed a quick kiss at the corner of Sid's mouth before pulling away. She still lay boneless beneath me, and I checked her expression, unsure if I'd mistaken the signals.

Sid's smile caused a different round of flutters to arc through me, and I rubbed my chest, relieved. She pushed to her elbows, and I marveled at the picture she made in the shadows, all graceful curves.

After taking care of my condom, I snuggled into the lounge next to her, cozy against her warmth. Sid walked a hand over my chest, tracing the tattoos that whorled across my skin.

She traced the stylized DEF CON skull and crossbones covering one shoulder, giggling softly.

"Hey, now. My ink is very manly," I intoned officiously, hiding my smile.

"Or, very nerdy. I see both the DEF CON logo and a yeti? And is that some kind of cipher text too?"

I pointed to the Bigfoot. "That's for my buddy, Jake. He's my big, hairy goofball. The skull, of course you recognized."

"And the cipher?" she asked hesitantly.

"Can you figure it out?"

"Is it based on substitution?"

"Yes. A basic shift cipher."

A rose entwined around the letters *ST WTXJ  
BNYMTZY YMTWSX*.

She paused long enough that I worried she'd fallen asleep before whispering, "No rose without thorns."

Sneaking a quick kiss on her exposed shoulder, I frowned when Sid shivered.

“You’re getting cold. Come on, let’s get dressed and go upstairs.”

Silently, Sid and I fished around, hastily pulling on our jeans and shirts. With every quiet moment, my feeling of impending doom grew. Where Sid had been warm and willing earlier, urgency fueling every touch, she seemed withdrawn now.

“Everything okay?” I asked, trying to keep my tone easy.

Sid paused after smoothing her shirt into place, glancing around the cabana.

“I can’t believe we had sex in a pool cabana.”

I scrubbed a hand over the back of my neck, unsure how to interpret her mood.

“I don’t know about you, but it’s a memory I’ll cherish,” I said, going for playful. “As DEF CON shenanigans go, we showed restraint.”

Sid’s soft snort made my gut clench. “For me, this was the opposite of restraint.”

“You’re welcome?” I said hesitantly.

She’d come to Vegas for an adventure. Maybe it hadn’t been the most circumspect way to start our relationship, but in the heat of the moment, it had felt right. Free, easy, and everything I’d wished for.

She shut her eyes briefly, and my heart sank. When her lids raised, a Sid I was all too familiar with stared back at me. The consummate professional. Not the warm woman who’d orgasmed in my arms.

“It’s Vegas, right?” she asked, smoothing her T-shirt again.

I nodded slowly, unsure where she was going with her soft statement.

“We’re at a conference for rule breaking, so doing a little of our own isn’t the end of the world, certainly?”

Was she trying to convince herself or me? I nodded again, not sure I liked her describing the hottest sex I’d ever had as “not the end of the world.”

“You aren’t looking for anything serious, are you?” she asked, watching me carefully.

I had Savvy to think about. So the answer *should* be no. I shook my head.

Her relieved smile eased something inside me. “Good. Then we’re agreed. A few days of sex and fun to take the edge off with a return to friendship and our real lives when we get back to Benton. We could both use a vacation fling.”

As if not wanting me to dispute her claim, she pushed open the curtains for the cabana, and I followed her across the abandoned pool deck.

Sid’s shoulders remained rigid as she weaved her way through the crowded halls to the elevators. Unwilling to make a scene, I waited until we reached the line before asking my question. “What are you saying, Sid?”

Her smile looked forced, and I remained on guard. “We want the same things. Something casual. A little fun on vacation. Nothing more.”

Was my immediate urge to argue routine competitiveness, or something else? While I might not be ready to elope, I hadn’t expected Sid to hit it and quit it so fast. Had I misread her signals? Or was her reluctance about something more than me or us?

“Are you sure that’s what you really want, Sid? The real you, not the version you’ve been groomed to present to the world?”

Her eyes darkened, as if I’d hit a tender spot, and I regretted my harsh words. Why was I arguing against



something I'd wanted for months instead of embracing what she offered? Shoving down my deeper feelings, I swallowed, rushing forward before she could walk away altogether.

"Casual is fine. I don't need to push. We can keep things quiet, just between us. But we're good together, Sid. Strip away the outer trappings and differences, and we work."

Sensing the retreat in her expression, I clenched and released my fists, trying to project cool.

Sid's eyes shimmered, and I felt like a heel. For all my talk about not pushing, I may as well have given her a shove. I could only hope it wasn't straight out of my arms. I didn't want to lose her, her friendship, her warmth. Even a sliver of Sid was worth holding onto.

"I need time, Nate. Time to process. Time to think."

Nodding, I let her go. If she needed space, I had to give it to her. Sid's reluctance to move forward felt like a slap in the face after the leaps we'd made over the course of the evening. I could only hope distance would bring perspective. For us both. Feeling bereft, I turned to wander the halls, unwilling to face my empty room.

Not being ready for anything serious didn't mean I didn't want her, wasn't lonely without her. We made a great team. Rivals or friends, trading insults or touching, together, we were fire.

# CHAPTER 13 – SID

I swiped blindly at the lock to my hotel room, anxious to get inside. Still shaky from my interlude with Nate, I struggled to get control of my breathing.

Slamming the door shut behind me, I leaned against it, taking in the neat and tidy hotel room. Its extreme order was in direct contrast to the shambles of my thoughts.

I'd had sex with Nate. In a freaking pool cabana. Anyone could have discovered us.

What had I been thinking? Oh, right. I hadn't. I'd been feeling. Huge mistake. If our interlude went public, I'd never live it down. Changing my number and moving into witness protection to avoid the fallout with my dad might not be enough to shield me. Sad, that at thirty-two he could still get under my skin, but a lifetime of conditioning couldn't be undone overnight. Accepting that I lost control with Nate, that being with him changed me, scared me.

Even tacking on a Vegas Rules disclaimer to the whole thing wasn't enough to salvage my sense of self. The conference had barely started, and I was already doing things I'd never in a million years do at home. Was it the influence of DEF CON or Nate?

Nate. Which man had I slept with? Professor Cummings, or his alter ego, the Dark Knight?

And who did that make me? Princess Perfect seemed about as far from a moniker as I could get. And a far cry from how I'd been behaving. I'd freaked out on Nate, babbling about vacation flings. Totally lost my cool. He did that to me. But I had no one to blame but myself. He made me want to forget about keeping things casual, avoiding entanglements.

Maybe it had been too long since I'd had amazing sex. Hormones had addled my usual good sense. That was it. But it didn't excuse the fact that I didn't want to stop. Even after my orgasms, I was tempted to shut the door on the rest of the world, on the con, on my father's good opinion, and lock myself somewhere quiet with Nate to explore.

I'd carved out a life of my own on purpose. Contemplating throwing out the last vestiges of caution felt wrong, but Nate tempted me beyond reason. If he weren't a coworker, things would be easier, but there'd still be talk. My father might want me settled, but he'd still give me grief over choosing younger, devil may care Nate. Everything had happened too fast. But that didn't stop me from replaying my evening with Nate over and over, like a loose thread I couldn't help worrying.

I shed my jeans and T-shirt, pulling on pink flannel pajamas instead, washing my face and brushing my teeth before sliding beneath the covers. Nate's room on the other side of the wall was quiet. Had he followed my lead, turning in for the night, or was he still roaming the con downstairs? And what did I want him to be doing? Pining for me? Or moving on? Conflicting feelings roiled through me as I tossed and turned, straining to hear something, *anything* through our shared wall.

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I made my way to orientation in the morning after a solo breakfast, not ready to face Nate. The large conference room held maybe five thousand people, and as I waited for the session to begin, it became progressively more packed. While there were other women in the crowd and a range of dress, the vast majority of the attendees leaned toward white men.

I kept an eye out for Nate, but since he wasn't a noob, I doubted he'd attend this session. Glancing at the burner he'd given me, I debated texting him, but I didn't want to wake him

if he'd had a late night. I needed to hit the reset button with him and talk, but it could wait.

A large nearly bald man took the podium in one of the red Goon shirts and introduced himself as Preacher.

“Welcome to DEF CON. We hope you'll make lots of connections this weekend. You can make of DEF CON what you want. Hang out in your room and code with your friends, participate in the challenges and talks, or simply party. Whatever you do, we hope you explore and learn. But, before we get started, I want to introduce you to a favored game here at DEF CON, called Spot the Feds. Look around the room. Our attendance has shifted over the years, there are a lot of law enforcement present these days. Can you spot one? Look carefully, and if you have a guess, let me know. Like aliens, they walk among us, but no one knows who they are.”

The room was silent as heads turned, assessing our neighbors. A few attendees looked more mainstream than my preconceived hacker stereotypes, but it didn't mean they worked for an alphabet federal agency. Somehow, I doubted most of the government employees moved freely through the conference. It seemed more likely they were lurking in hotel rooms, monitoring remotely.

A guy with a long ponytail pointed at me. “I think she's a Fed.”

Startled, I was embarrassed to be caught open-mouthed at the accusation. Not exactly smooth secret agent behavior. Wrinkling my nose, I stared back at ponytail guy. What about me gave off a law enforcement vibe? My academic roots? I'd really tried to blend in.

“Miss, come to the front. Sir, you too,” Preacher said, gesturing us forward.

I apologized to others in my row as I squeezed out and joined Preacher on stage, feeling all eyes were on me, examining my every move. Under the bright lights, it was

harder to see the other attendees. Ponytail joined me and shook my hand. Very cordial, considering he'd accused me of being undercover. He seemed comfortable under the spotlight, and I wondered if he'd played before.

"First, what's your handle, and second, what makes you think she's a Fed?" Preacher asked.

"I'm Fire Dragon. She's just too neat to be a hacker. She's got a tan like she works out outdoors a lot and the build of a runner."

Holding in my snort, I kept my face neutral. I'd been called to the front of the class because I liked to run outside?

"Prime law enforcement exercise," Preacher agreed, nodding wisely.

"Exactly, and her shirt is so plain. She's really vanilla."

None of it sounded like a compliment, but it didn't make me law enforcement either.

"Okay, time to ask her your questions."

Fire Dragon turned to me with his mic. "Are you a runner?"

"Yes," I said.

"Do you have to pass a Firearms Course Qualification for your job?"

I shook my head.

"She's probably not a Fed," Preacher warned.

"If I punched you in the face, would I be committing a misdemeanor or a felony?"

I flinched, and Preacher laughed, along with most of the audience. "I'm going to go with not a Fed on this one, but go ahead and answer."

“I guess a misdemeanor?” I said, uncertain. I hadn’t given it much thought, but Preacher’s laugh implied they’d had brawls at DEF CON before.

“Fire Dragon, this one’s not a Fed, but thanks for playing. Sadly, no I SPOTTED THE FED OR I AM THE FED shirts for you today. Better luck next time.”

Preacher shook my hand, then Fire Dragon’s, excusing us back to our seats.

A few other newbies offered fist bumps as I returned to my seat, and I relaxed, feeling like I’d passed a test. *One of them.* At least everyone who’d witnessed Fire Dragon’s display wouldn’t be wondering if I was investigating them. Relaxing back in my seat, I focused on Preacher.

“The most important rule at DEF CON is the three-two-one rule. At least three hours of sleep, two meals, and one shower.”

Laughter rumbled through the audience, and Preacher nodded. “You laugh, but it’s going to get ripe in these halls if you don’t follow the rules. Please do everyone a favor and shower daily.”

Shaking my head over his final advice, I could still picture Nate attending in years past, hopped up on energy drinks, with little sleep, still wearing rumpled clothes from the day before. It checked out. No wonder Fire Dragon assumed I might be law enforcement. Preacher made it sound like a bacchanal, not a professional conference. But I was still here to learn.

Once we were excused, I filtered out, consulting my program for the first talk I wanted to attend. DEF CON attracted world-class speakers and demonstrations, and I wanted to absorb it all.

I slid into a seat at a session on social engineering and examined the other attendees, hoping to spot Nate. My heart raced when I observed one dark blond head that looked like

him from behind, but he turned, disappointing me. The clean-shaven man looked nothing like Nate.

I sat through the presentation, watching in amazement as they called a random number out of a phone book and convinced the woman who picked up to give up her username and password in under two minutes. Then did it again. Afterward, I strolled through some of the different villages, visiting the hardware mod stations where attendees soldered LEDs and other components on their badges and the Packet Hacking Village, where the Wall of Sheep scrolled. I'd thought I had a healthy level of paranoia before about IT security, but everything I witnessed at DEF CON amped up my distrust. I'd have plenty to caution my students about when I returned to teaching.

Feeling lonely in the sea of people, I fingered my burner phone, grateful for Nate's foresight in buying me one. So many here recognized each other by handle from their online communities, making real-life connections, that it only emphasized my outsider status. But I had Nate. I could text him. As if the thought summoned him, my phone buzzed.

*DarkKnight: Want to hook up?*

Did he mean for sex or the conference? Either way, my heart raced, and I knew my answer.

*PrincessPerfect: Yes.*

*DarkKnight: I'll meet you at the entrance to the Exfiltration Team Challenge in five.*

*PrincessPerfect: Got it.*

I wound my way through crowds until I spotted Nate standing outside the conference room hosting the challenge. Hair mussed and tired-eyed, he still wore the same clothes from last night. Had Nate even gone to bed? Gnome stood beside him, hulking over the crowd, and at his side was a Black woman with her hair in braids.

“Princess, I’d like you to meet Adrenaline.” I exchanged handshakes and smiles with the other woman. As much as I would have liked having Nate to myself, having his friends join us was probably a good idea. It’d be easier to keep my hands to myself and avoid pool cabanas with them along.

Gnome clasped his hands together, rubbing them. “You ready to get in line?”

“For what?” I asked cautiously.

“To see if we can beat the challenge, of course,” Adrenaline said.

“The Exfiltration Team Challenge gives us fifteen minutes to gain entry to a mock office, copy all the data, and get out without setting off any alarms.”

As we waited for our turn, Gnome, Adrenaline, and Nate discussed different strategies and strengths.

“I’ll pick the physical locks,” Adrenaline said.

“I’ll cover the old-school tech,” Gnome added.

Nate smiled. “And that leaves me and Princess Perfect to team up on physical evidence and newer electronic devices.”

“I’m not sure how much help I’ll be.”

In theory, I understood hacking, but I’d never exploited a system on my own. And certainly, never under a time limit.

Nate reached out, squeezing my hand in his. “Don’t worry, we’ll make a great team.”

The echo of his words from last night made me smile, and I squeezed his fingers back. In the light of day and fully clothed, his words no longer scared me. Maybe taking a time out, slowing down, had been the right call.

Forty-five minutes later, we burst out of the conference room, laughing.



“That was a rush,” I said, grinning at Nate.

“That was nothing,” Adrenaline said. “You should have seen us back in the day, before this one here went soft. Our times used to be the one to beat.”

Curious, I couldn’t help but ask. “Did you work together, or just play at previous cons?”

Gnome’s lips twitched. “You mean Dark Knight didn’t tell you? We used to be a team, here and at work, with Adrenaline as our fearless leader.”

Adrenaline winked. “Dark Knight may be subject to an NDA, but my lips get loose after a few shots of tequila.”

I slipped my arm through hers. “Then you and I have a date at the bar later.”

“If you’re going to be bad ... invite me,” Gnome chimed in.

Nate groaned, and I shivered, remembering the last time I heard that husky sound. Any claim to restraint crumbled.

“Y’all are going to convince me to drink tonight, aren’t you? Tequila and I are not a good combination. One disappears and the other ends up naked.”

Unable to resist, I threw my arms around his neck, bringing my gaze to his. “Promise?”

Nate looked tired but happy as he nodded before sneaking a quick kiss.

“Told you Dark Knight has a girlfriend,” Gnome muttered to Adrenaline.

Nate laughed, the sound booming across the hall, drawing eyes to us. Maybe I wasn’t ready to claim the moniker, but it didn’t stop me from claiming him. At least for the length of our trip. Maybe if I indulged in all my fantasies with him here, I’d be content to return to the shelter of my

professional life at home. Never mind the voice that whispered I'd never be satisfied again without Nate.

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After I had my fill of presentations, I found Nate with his friends in the Packet Hacking Village, clustered around a bar height table, watching the folding tables of people at computers and the Wall of Sheep.

Adrenaline grinned when she noticed me approaching and poured a shot into one of the glasses in front of her. "Princess, come join us. I ran down the street for a bottle of tequila and glasses. We are ready to spill our secrets if the price is right."

Uneasy, I glanced at Nate, and his relaxed stance reassured me. On the wall, I observed as an array of data scrolled. Usernames, passwords, and the occasional photo flashed up for those watching.

"This is why I needed a burner phone?"

Gnome nodded. "Don't do anything in the clear here."

"Clear?"

"Without encryption. I'm assuming that Dark Knight approved your phone?" he asked.

At my nod, he smiled. "Good. I'd still avoid doing anything online you don't want everyone to know about here."

I shifted in my seat. His warning came too late. I caught Nate's gaze and he smiled. Did it mean he was okay with everyone knowing about us? I straightened my shoulders. I was an adult. Living it up in Las Vegas wasn't a crime. I suppressed any fleeting thoughts of hacked video footage.

Adrenaline poured a round of shots and toasted me. "Welcome to the family."

I downed my drink, shivering as the tequila hit the back of my throat.

Their easy acceptance warmed me from the inside out, just like the liquor. Nate slid a hand over my knee, and I trembled. He wasn't the only one who didn't need tequila to make bad decisions. But were they still bad decisions if I liked them? Maybe I was being too hard on myself, on him. What was a little gossip, if it meant we could be together? Every hour ran down the self-imposed clock on our relationship. Could I really make do with only a couple more days with Nate?

Gnome and Adrenaline shared stories of cons past, but Nate seemed content to sip quietly, smiling indulgently as they talked. A few veiled comments about clients they'd worked for confirmed some of my suspicions. Watching him with his friends opened new doors into the mystery that was Nate. I bided my time before asking my question.

"So, did you and Nate work together? Are you and Gnome an incident response team? Is that what Nate used to do with you all? Some kind of corporate IT security?"

It was the most likely answer. Nate's sense of humor aside, I didn't think he was taking down foreign governments in his spare time.

Adrenaline's brown eyes lit with mirth. "Something like that. You might think of us more as security auditors for hire."

"Auditors?"

My nose wrinkled involuntarily. Not exactly as cool as I'd imagined.

"Adrenaline, you're telling it all wrong," Gnome complained. "She's going to think our boy isn't sexy."

I snorted. No danger there.

"We're paid to run exfil drills. Withdraw information or equipment from supposedly secure businesses or

organizations. Mostly to audit and test internal security measures for weaknesses,” Adrenaline said.

“Is it dangerous?”

I could imagine them, clad in black, breaking into corporate buildings to steal secrets, much like the drill we’d run in our earlier challenge. But in the real world, the police and security carried guns. The threat of violence if they failed was real.

“Only if you get caught,” Gnome said before toasting us and tossing back his drink.

Turning to Nate, I asked, “This is why Savvy didn’t move to Seattle with you?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Exfil drills happen day and night. It doesn’t mesh well with family responsibilities.”

His expression looked wistful as he said it, and I wondered if he missed the adrenaline rush of beating supposedly secure systems

“Do you wish you could go back?”

His smile turned wry. “As much as I love these hooligans, I’m where I need to be.”

“With Savvy?”

“And you.”

His words settled across my shoulders like an invisible weight. The sincerity in his expression scared me. Too serious for a weekend fling in Vegas. Was he hoping for more than I was ready to give when we returned home?

Adrenaline moved us off of rocky ground, pouring another round of shots.

I needed to pace myself, or I’d be worshipping porcelain instead of making it to any of the Saturday talks. Still, I knocked back the drink, letting it burn all the way down.

Gnome slammed the empty bottle of tequila on the table after pouring the last drop into his glass, and I stared at my empty shooter as he stood unsteadily.

“Come on. Let’s go check out some of the other events.”

He and Adrenaline strode ahead as Nate helped me from my stool, grasping my hand when I wobbled.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.”

Pleasantly buzzed, I peered at Nate, who grinned back goofily.

“How much did you have?”

He shrugged. “Adrenaline and Gnome started without me, and they gave away a few shots too. I only had a couple.”

“So, we’re not in naked territory yet?”

“Is that an invitation?” he teased. “I’d be game to skip the Capture the Flag hall. Want to go back to one of our rooms? Or the pool?” he asked, raising a brow.

Coloring, I didn’t dare admit how much the images of sneaking into a pool cabana again excited me. Would our connection be as strong without the thrill of discovery?

Clearing my throat, I gazed up into Nate’s open face, marveling that he’d go along with whatever I wanted. Was it lust in his eyes, or something more?

I shivered, not wanting to admit to anything other than the basest desire.

“Let’s go back to your room.”

“You’re done processing?” he asked with a raised brow.

Nodding slowly, I smiled. “I’ve had all the space I can stand for the moment.”

Clasping my hand in his, we wound through the crowded halls toward the elevator. He used his free hand to text, I assumed letting Adrenaline and Gnome know to count us out.

We'd barely shut the door to Nate's room when I jumped him, wrapping my legs around his waist. He stumbled back toward the bed, letting gravity carry us down.

His deep chuckle only egged me on, driving the achy need to be closer to him.

I writhed across his lap, squirming to get the right angle against the bulge in his jeans. Straining to get closer, he responded, thrusting his hips up, rubbing against me as he caught my hands and tugged me forward for a kiss.

The soft nip and suck of his teeth along my lower lip sent fresh tingles arrowing between my thighs, and I rubbed harder against his erection, seeking relief. Nate smiled against my lips before tangling his tongue with mine in a silent duel.

He pulled away, and I heaved deep breaths, trying to restore oxygen to my lungs. Everything about Nate set me off, from the devilish light in his hazel eyes as he took in my mussed hair and no-doubt kiss swollen lips, to the fingers he'd meshed with mine. I wanted to crawl over his body and sate myself, like a cat rubbing against its territory.

Mine.

Maybe he saw the possessiveness in my gaze, because Nate's darkened, and he tugged me forward to wrap his arms around me.

"Princess, are you sure you don't want to slow down, take our time?" He stroked his big hands down my side as he said it, and his tone was pure tease. "I know how you like to plan, make sure everything is perfect."

It would serve him right if I took the bait, pulled back. After our last round of orgasms in the pool cabana, I should

have been able to wait him out. But the thrill of exploring Nate's body, giving him access to mine, drove me.

"Sometimes done is better than perfect. And Nate, I need you to *do* me."

Pushing back, I sat on my heels, letting my thighs bracket his as I stripped my shirt slowly over my head. His low moan as I tossed it across the room brought a smile to my lips.

Using my thumbs for leverage, I slid my hands along his shirt, rucking it up his chest. Inch by inch, his abs came into view, toned from something that was most definitely *not* coding. I paused, placing butterfly kisses along Nate's ribcage, smiling against his hot skin when he chuckled.

"While I am *always* happy to oblige you, to me, you are perfect," he whispered.

Sweet and full of shit, that was Nate. Still, I grinned as I sat back up.

"You say the nicest things, Nate, but do you think you can put your mouth to better use?"

Taking the hint, Nate pushed up from the bed, pulling his shirt over his head, before flopping back with a smile. He reached for the fly of my pants, unbuttoning them with unsteady hands, and I paused. I assumed we were just having fun together, but something about the light in his eyes, focused and serious, made me wonder if this meant something more to him.

After working my jeans open, Nate encouraged me to push them off, and I obliged, shucking them over my hips and onto the floor by his bed. Clad only in my silky red bra and underwear, I lifted my chin at Nate.

"Take it all off."

"I will if you will."

Suiting action to words, we ditched the last of our clothing, eyes gleaming as we took each other in. Nate was a fantasy come to life, stretched out on the bed, erection saluting. The arms folded beneath his head highlighted his tattoos and the bulge of his triceps, and I pressed my thighs together, eager to ease the ache there. Nate's body was a masterpiece. One I wanted to devour.

He crooked a finger, and I clambered back on the bed, snuggling until his erection notched between my thighs.

All pretense at play dissolved on a groan as he tugged me forward into his arms, kissing me passionately. I writhed against him as he flipped us, placing open-mouthed kisses along my neck to my breasts, stroking and cupping their weight before trailing more kisses to my hipbone.

Sensitive and aching, I couldn't help but thrust my hips up, wanting more contact. More of Nate.

Gently, he spread my thighs, and I squirmed, a fresh rush of moisture gathering at my entrance at his hungry expression. His fingers traced my opening, testing me, and I groaned.

"I can't take much more."

He glanced up from my bikini line, expression devilish. "Sid, it's not like you to quit. That's one of the things I like about you," he husked.

Caught up in his hesitation on the word like, I missed his dive toward my clit, crying out when the sensation of his tongue delicately swiping caught up with me.

Gripping his short hair, his name slipped from my lips without conscious thought.

"I like it when you say my name," he whispered, the soft puff of his breath against my inner thigh only making me squirm harder.



The next few moments passed in a blur as he stroked me, testing my wetness with his fingers and tongue.

“Nate. I need you.”

He pressed against me, using his weight to maintain pressure over my clit as he reached for protection on the bedside table. In my eagerness, our hands tangled over the condom, and Nate groaned when I abandoned my task to cup him instead. Hastily, he finished my chore, sheathing himself.

He thrust inside me eagerly, and I arched against the bed before tilting for maximum contact. Nate laced his fingers with mine, and stared into my eyes, his own dark with desire as he worked within me. Stretched full, but slick with my own moisture, I absorbed every thrust.

“You are so beautiful,” he whispered, gaze intense, as we strained together, reaching for the stars.

Another rough thrust, two, and I tipped over the edge, losing myself in the spasms of my orgasm. My undulations triggered Nate’s, and he collapsed on top of me, breathing heavily.

Slick with sweat, I couldn’t bring myself to care, the lassitude of satisfaction still rolling through me. Exhausted, I lay panting as Nate rolled to the side to lay beside me. Slowly, he wound his fingers through my hair, combing it gently.

“You are amazing. I never want the weekend to end.”

His words arrowed through my heart, causing it to seize. I wanted to believe it was the sex talking. Because truth be told, we had that amorphous *it* that turned teasing into intense chemistry. But his words seemed deeper than simple sexual satisfaction. More sincere.

What had I done? My feelings were too big for a no-strings attached affair. Nate was unreasonably sexy and sweet. There’d be no ignoring him once we returned to Benton. Even now, my nerve endings zinged, eager to start round two.

And our time together had shifted my perception of him. Yes, he was the always late, slightly irresponsible professor who Dr. Bernard seemed to love and believe could do no wrong. But he'd also become my friend. And now, my lover. Sex for sex's sake had been a mistake. I'd never be able to forget how he made me feel. Like the only woman for him.

I shivered, uneasy with the direction of my thoughts. Had I let myself fall? Tenderness for Nate washed through me as I stroked his chest, enjoying his fingers playing in my hair.

So why couldn't we be more? We worked together, but he wasn't my boss. I wasn't his. Gossip wasn't the end of the world. Eventually, people would move on, and we'd become unremarkable. My rationalizations were easy to believe with the soft glow from my orgasm making me feel warm and rosy. If we presented a united front to Dr. Bernard and the department, maybe we could be accepted. My dad's influence made me lean into negative thinking, but my fears weren't necessarily reality. Taking a few risks to be with Nate seemed more reasonable with every moment in his arms.

Unless he broke my heart. Nate hadn't hidden that he hoped his time in Benton would be temporary. Would he decide Savvy needed a fresh start somewhere else and move? And what would it mean for us? Catastrophizing a possible future that hadn't happened yet and might never materialize was Benton Sid. Not Vegas Sid.

Nate's palm cupped my shoulder, and I pushed away thoughts about the future. For now, I would revel in Nate's warm arms. Enjoy the tender shoots of possibility that spread with every moment together. Nate seemed as eager for me as I was for him, and I let it feed my faith that things could work out between us. That maybe I wasn't alone in wanting more than the weekend. Relaxing, I let myself drift off. Future Sid could handle the potential heartache. When I was with Nate, I could only embrace the moment.

# CHAPTER 14 – NATE

Waking with Sid in my arms, snuggled into my side, filled me with contentment. Hair mussed, makeup long gone, she looked real. Not like the perfect shell she presented to the outside world, but like a flesh and blood woman who could live and love. Maybe with a man like me.

I'd accepted her offer of a fling, willing to take any piece of her. Maybe I'd regret it later, but after feeling her slip and slide around me, I couldn't feel sorry about last night. The time together, away from the pressures of everyday life, helped reveal the real Sid. Smart. Funny and more adventurous than I ever dreamed. A far cry from the perfect persona she presented at work.

I wanted her in my life. My bed. But how to convince her to stay? She seemed resolute that our conference fling wouldn't become anything more. I'd agreed to respect her decision. But did it mean ignoring my feelings, staying silent? Or risking more rejection by telling her that I'd always admired her and how hard I'd worked to see that we had this chance?

My phone buzzed, and I reached for it, trying not to wake Sid.

*Adrenaline: You and PP want to meet us for breakfast? We're hitting up the buffet in ten.*

"Who's that?" Sid asked sleepily.

"Adrenaline. You hungry?"

Sid slid a hand between us, reaching for me. "Mm-hmm."

"I meant for food."

"That too," she said, mischief lighting her eyes. "Just tell her we need twenty minutes."

My fingers flew across the screen as Sid's fingers worked to an altogether different tempo. Throwing the phone aside, I cupped her chin urging her to me for a kiss. She smiled against my lips, and I couldn't help but let my own mouth quirk up.

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Adrenaline spotted us right away and flagged us down as we ambled through the bistro tables. She lacked her usual energy, but part of that could have been the dark sunglasses shading her eyes.

"Morning," Gnome mumbled around a bite of pancakes.

"Morning," Sid replied, all chipper.

"How late did you guys stay up?" I asked.

"A better question would be, did we go to bed," Adrenaline grumbled.

Gnome sipped at his coffee. "Spoiler alert: we didn't. Stayed up all night in the Capture the Flag room. You should have come."

"Oh, we did. Multiple times."

Gnome laughed, slapping the table hard enough that his coffee spilled. Sid smacked me on the shoulder, and I rubbed at it, pretending hurt.

"What? I don't lie to these guys."

"You don't have to tell them everything either," she grumbled.

"You mad?" I asked, wondering if I'd miscalculated. I considered Adrenaline and Gnome family, but I had to remember that Sid had only met them this weekend.

"I'm not used to everyone knowing everything about me." She paused. "But no, I don't mind. You're lucky you're telling the truth, or I'd be forced to correct you."

Adrenaline grunted, taking a sip of her coffee. “Okay, gang. What are we doing today? More talks? Crash and Compile? Scavenger Hunt?”

Gnome held up his fork. “My vote is for the Scavenger Hunt. My brain can’t handle anything too complicated this morning.”

“Or ever,” Adrenaline grouched. “But I agree. You guys in?”

Sid nodded, and I added my support. “Do you have the list?”

Adrenaline laid her copy in the center of the table, and we read through it together.

“Wear a tinfoil bikini? Easy,” Adrenaline said.

“Fake an orgasm in public?” Sid read in horror. “No way.”

I grinned. “As glad as I am to hear that, Gnome here has no shame.”

The big man nodded. “True. I’d fake it anywhere, anytime. Want me to go now?”

“No. No, I’m good.”

“Where are we going to get a live chicken?” I asked.

“That I might be able to help with,” Sid said.

After filling up on pancakes, bacon, and pastries, we hit the Strip, taking video and collecting the items to fulfill our list. Five hot, sweaty hours later, we’d laughed ourselves silly and only committed one misdemeanor in our bid to complete it.

Gnome carried a giant dildo like a sword, and I chuckled, thinking about the picture we made. Adrenaline sported a boa from the strip club we’d infiltrated, I’d bought a cowboy hat off a bewildered tourist, and Sid had surprised me most of all. She’d embraced the silliness, talking a bachelorette party guest into swapping clothes. Sid now wore a dick-themed dress, complete with a crown and sash. If only our colleagues at Oregon College could see her now. From their perspective,

she'd given up perfection, but from mine? Sid was the epitome of magnificence.

I could only hope that our growing confidence in each other would carry into real life. Savvy had to stay my first priority but didn't I deserve something of my own too? Dating Sid, carving out time to be together, seemed like a reasonable ask. But Sid had to agree too. And thus far, she'd only committed to a weekend fling, away from prying eyes. Would the scrutiny of our colleagues change her opinion of us? Make her revert back to the more contained version of herself that saw me as nothing more than a friendly rival?

Sneaking a quick kiss on the sidewalk, I enjoyed her soft moan of surrender. Pulling away with a grin, I asked, "Care to spend tonight just the two of us?"

Her eager nod soothed some of my worries. She'd embraced our weekend with abandon. That had to bode well for the future. "Great," I said, rubbing my hands together. "Then I have plans for you. Change and meet me in an hour?"

"What should I wear?" she asked. "I didn't bring anything fancy."

"Just be you. Everyone else will adjust." She rolled her eyes, and I relented. "Casual is fine. I promise it won't be formal."

Sid snorted gently. "Pretty sure the faculty dinner is the *only* time I've seen you formal, so I guess I can believe that. I used to think you didn't own a shirt with buttons."

I squeezed her hand. "See? We've already learned so much about each other." I leaned in, sneaking one last kiss at her door. "See you in an hour."

Humming happily, I showered and changed into fresh clothes after confirming our plans.

Sid opened her door with a smile, clad in figure-hugging jeans and a bright blue shirt that made her skin glow.

“Ready?”

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see,” I promised, clasping her hand in mine and tugging her toward the elevators. Spotting the Magnum Helicopters van, I waved to the driver.

“Mr. Cummings and guest?” the rotund man asked, a hint of Jamaica in his accent.

“That’s us,” I said, winking at Sid. She looked a little nervous at the idea of a helicopter flight, but grinned gamely when I squeezed her hand.

Swooping around the Las Vegas landmarks with our pilot, lights flashing from the buildings, was every bit as thrilling as I’d hoped. Sid’s ear-to-ear grin when we landed made me glad I’d gone for a date night unlike anything we’d find in Benton.

“That was amazing. Thanks, Nate.”

Sid hugged me before leaning back. Totally worth it to see the stars in her eyes. Vegas at night really was beautiful.

“Anytime, Princess. Ready to grab some dinner?”

At her nod, we thanked our pilot and grabbed a car to a restaurant I’d booked off-Strip. The quiet ambience was a far cry from the Las Vegas bustle. Intimate and casual, Sid seemed pleased with my choice. Over sushi and sake, we relaxed, and conversation moved beyond our favorite hotels and light displays.

“Do you miss Savvy?” she asked when I glanced at my phone.

“A bit. Okay, yes. But we’ve texted every day. This is the longest we’ve been apart since I became her guardian.”

“You’re a good one, you know.”

Her soft words soothed some of the ever-present fears that I’d never fill the hole in Savvy’s life.

“Not quite a full-fledged parental figure, but not a total Peter Pan either?” I teased, trying to keep things light.

“You saw your contact name in my phone?” she asked, looking chagrined.

I waved away any concern, chuckling. “I’ve felt more than a bit like a lost boy on occasion.”

She reached out, playing with my fingers where they rested on the table before meshing our hands together.

“Seems like you’ve found your way to me.”

Heart clenching, I let the warm glow of her approval soak in. It shouldn’t mean so much, but I’d be lying if I claimed it didn’t. Sid had become one of the most important people in my life. Knowing I had her admiration mattered.

“I tell you where I’d like to go,” I said mischievously, instead of acknowledging aloud how her words pricked at my emotions.

Sid raised her brows. “Do tell. You’ve been full of surprises tonight.”

“Want one last night of debauchery?”

“Define debauchery.”

Grinning, I wiggled my brows at her as obnoxiously as possible.

“You. Me. A hotel room.”

“And a box of sexy souvenirs?” she asked playfully.

*Cough.* “Title of our sex tape.”

“Never. Gonna. Happen,” Sid said on a laugh. “Not even if you signed a million NDAs, Cummings.”

“I know. But it’s fun to needle you about the possibility. Life wouldn’t be nearly as sweet without something to tease you about.”



“Nate, a different *kind* of teasing could be twice as sweet.”

Blood rushing, I swallowed at the light in her eyes, enchanted by everything about her.

“Let’s go explore those souvenirs,” I said hoarsely, gesturing for the bill.

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After a night spent in each other’s arms, I awoke satisfied, stretching luxuriously. Until I realized the sheets beside me were empty and cold. Sid had returned to her room. Glancing at the clock, her absence made more sense, though it was no less disappointing. We needed to check out soon if we wanted to make our flight home.

I packed swiftly before knocking at her door. She opened it with an easy smile and something inside me relaxed at her open expression. I’d feared the return of the prim and proper Sid. Seeing my easy-going lover of the night before helped release some of the tension tightening my shoulders.

“I missed you this morning.”

“I had to pack,” she said matter-of-factly before brushing her lips against mine in a quick kiss that left me tied in knots. “But I’d like to grab breakfast together before our flight.”

Sid and I found an outdoor table to sit with our coffees, suitcases at our feet. I examined Sid as she cupped her coffee in both hands, inhaling it with obvious pleasure. She looked tired, but happy, and if I looked in the mirror, I’d see that same lazy satisfaction. The days had passed too quickly, full of laughter, learning, and exploring every inch of her luscious body behind closed doors.

In a word the trip had been perfect. Just like Sid.

But did she agree? The deal had been a fling for the weekend, not forever. But I wasn’t ready to let go. Might never be ready.

I cleared my throat, trying to move the lump constricting my airway.

“The fun doesn’t have to end,” I said tentatively, watching her expression for clues.

Sid’s eyes wrinkled before smoothing, and I held my breath. She’d seemed adamant before that nothing would interfere with work or jeopardize her reputation. And I couldn’t blame her for being protective of her career. While I didn’t think gossip was a big deal, I wasn’t sure I was a lifer at the college. I enjoyed my job, but I didn’t love it like she clearly did.

“If we dated, I’d want to be open about it,” she finally said. “We’d have to tell Dr. Bernard. The college has rules about disclosing personal relationships.”

I let relief wash through me, grinning as I realized what her words meant.

“I wouldn’t have it any other way. After all, dating you only improves my reputation.”

She groaned before softening it with a smile. “Don’t remind me. You’re lucky it’s hard to resist a bad boy who’s a good man.”

“Shhh, that’s my secret.”

# CHAPTER 15 – SID

Monday morning, I dressed with care for my meeting with Dr. Bernard. We'd made plans to debrief after DEF CON, but with the change to my relationship with Nate, our meeting gained more importance. After talking about it with Nate on the plane ride home, we'd decided he would join me at the meeting. To share about his own experiences at DEF CON and show solidarity when we reported our relationship. I could only hope that with Nate present, Dr. Bernard would pull back on his fatherly disapproval. He was my boss, and in more normal circumstances, my love life would be none of his business if it didn't involve a colleague.

Too nervous to finish my coffee and already twitchy, I pitched my cup before pulling open the heavy doors to the college building. Nate had texted that he was—shocker—running a few minutes late, and I wondered if I should go ahead and beard Dr. Bernard in his den to give him a heads-up that Nate would be joining us.

I knocked at Dr. Bernard's door, pushing it open when he called for me to enter.

“Sid, come in, come in.”

He gestured me to a chair, and I collapsed onto it. There was no reason to be nervous. Nate and I were consenting adults, and we were doing the right thing, following protocol. But looking at Dr. Bernard's kindly face, I could only remember his earlier warnings about Nate.

Nate knocked, pushing the door open to greet Dr. Bernard, and I tried not to let my relief show. Our conversation would be much easier with his support.

“Nate. I wasn't expecting you this morning. Did I accidentally overbook myself?”

Nate shook his head. “No, sir. I’m horning in on your meeting with Sid, just like I crashed her trip.”

Dr. Bernard’s gaze swung between us, and he heaved a big sigh. “You don’t say. What a coincidence.”

Nate winced. “Not exactly. Not that Sid planned it,” he rushed on, “but I had hoped to spend time with her at DEF CON.”

“I see, I see,” Dr. Bernard said, taking off his glasses to clean them. “Before either of you say anything more, I should inform you I’m planning to retire soon. This will be my last year as department chair.” His gaze connected with mine. “And I’m hoping one of you will replace me. But, that would be complicated, if say, either of you had a romantic relationship with another professor in the department. The power differential and potential for favoritism could impact your viability when it comes to a department vote for chair.”

I swallowed hard, feeling the color drain from my face. While he was careful not to name names, his words were clearly for me. Would I be forced to choose? Dr. Bernard’s steady gaze communicated what he wanted me to do. Lie. Deny any feelings for Nate.

A week ago, I could have done it. Because it would have been true.

But now? I blew out a shaky breath. Now, things were exponentially more difficult.

“Sid, can I see you in the hall for quick minute?” Nate broke in before I could respond. “I just realized I’m late for another meeting.”

Dr. Bernard shooed us out, and I closed the door carefully behind me.

“What is it?” I asked Nate when we were alone.

“I don’t think you should tell him. Don’t ruin your dreams for me.”

Nate's steady gaze made my stomach clench. Vegas Sid would have put him on the spot, asking about his intentions. Benton Sid was too busy calculating the angles, trying to decide if this meant he wasn't all that serious about us to begin with. Did Nate already have plans for an exit, or was this it? He'd seemed all-in after our weekend together. Was he bowing out for him, or for me? My stomach clenched as another option struck me—did he think we'd sneak around?

"I can't be with you and not tell him. It wouldn't be right."

"Then we won't be together."

At my gasp of indrawn breath, Nate rushed on. "We'll be friends. Don't worry, it'll give us time to figure this out."

Something inside crumpled at his easy acceptance that there was no future for us. My chest burned, making it hard to breathe. I'd been ready to take the leap and trust we could make it work. But Nate folded at the first hint of resistance. Hoarding the broken pieces of myself close, I struggled for control. My instinct to protect myself reasserted itself, and I forced a smile to cover the cracks in my heart, striving for the persona I'd perfected for years. "Of course, we'll be friends."

Saying it nearly choked me. I'd fought so hard against caring for Nate, never imagining it would be him who'd fold in the face of scrutiny. Had I misjudged his feelings for me? Shadows of Paul intruded. I'd followed him to Benton only to watch things between us crumble under the pressure of differing expectations. My time with Nate in Vegas made me think he was different. That *we* were different together. But had I been fooling myself? Had I found another man who only wanted the shiny shell and bailed when things got tough or didn't go to plan? Smoothing my expression to hide my emotions took effort, but I couldn't reveal how much he'd hurt me with his casual acceptance of Dr. Bernard's ultimatum.

He'd asked for friendship. It was a pale imitation of what I wanted from Nate. I'd thought I was through not asking for what I wanted. But in this case, Nate reminded me of what I *should* want. What I'd claimed to want all along: becoming department chair. Shoving down the disappointment that washed through me, I took a deep breath to cleanse the hurt that clamped down my lungs.

The new distance between us was highlighted when he reached out a hand to shake instead of pulling me close. An hour ago, a day ago, he wouldn't have hesitated.

I moved through the rest of the week in a haze. Dr. Bernard's beaming smile every time we passed in the hall demonstrated his approval of my choice, but I couldn't help worrying I'd made a mistake.

Nate had been true to his word. Instead of playful dinners and cuddling at his house, he'd taken to swinging by to share carefully friendly lunches with me in my office. With the door wide open. His avoidance of anything personal stung, rubbing salt into my already tender wounds.

Seeing him and not being able to touch him was death by a thousand cuts. No brushing the hair that liked to fall forward away from his eyes. No grasping his big hand in mine, tugging him into dark closets. He'd backed off. Not that he'd ever come on strong, but there was a new reserve in his expression. Like a line had been drawn between us, one I couldn't cross. He'd said we'd work things out together, but the longer he avoided the topic, the more I lost faith.

Was friendship his idea of a solution? Because it low-key sucked. Not that Nate wasn't a caring friend, asking about my day and listening intently as I shared stories about my students. I quizzed him about Savvy, how she was doing at school, and he reciprocated. We talked, but not once did we discuss our feelings. And god forbid if I happened to accidentally touch the man. He acted like I'd tased him every time our fingers even brushed.

Sunday brunch arrived as both a blessing and a curse. I needed the distraction from Nate, from all the feelings overflowing at each thought of him. But my friends were likely to pick up on the change a mile away. I arrived determined to share fun DEF CON anecdotes and avoid talking about the man who'd hacked his way into my heart over the weekend.

Cheri glanced up from her menu with a smile when Vicki showed me to our usual table.

Rita said, "Hey, stranger. We missed you last weekend. I have to admit, I'm disappointed you didn't need to call me for bail money."

I shrugged off Rita's teasing. "We can't all be scofflaws."

Taking my seat, I poured a cup of coffee, doctoring it how I liked it while we waited for Angi to arrive. After ordering, I let the usual ebb and flow of our conversation wash over me.

"Sid. *Sid*. What's up with you?" Angi asked.

"Sorry, what did I miss?"

Angi snorted. "It's more like, what did *we* miss. How was Vegas?" Her eyes narrowed. "Did something happen there?"

Rita wiggled in her seat, doing a little dance. "Ooh! Ooh! Did you take my advice?" She grinned. "Everyone needs a solid smash every now and then."

"But the good kind, not the one where you slam your hand in the car door," Cheri cautioned. "Was it the good kind?"

I glanced at each face, eager to hear the details of my trip. Kissing and telling would be gauche, but who was I kidding? I needed advice, and with two out of three girlfriends happily settled, they were well-suited to offer it.

“Nate joined me on my trip.”

Rita held up a hand. “Wait—Nate? As in Professor Cummings, your hot nemesis?”

“The same.”

“Was this a planned thing, like you invited him? Or ...”

“Oh, *he* planned it. Finagled his way into Sharon’s good graces long enough to have her book his travel along with mine.”

“Romantic,” Cheri cooed.

“Stalkerish,” Angi corrected.

“*Not* stalkerish. We were friends.”

“Were? Past tense? What did he do?” Rita asked. “Tell me he wasn’t an asshole at the con.”

I shook my head. “Anything but. We hung out the entire time.”

“Is that what the kids are calling it these days?”

“Angi, I meant as friends,” I chided.

“Friends who smash?” Cheri asked hopefully.

I gusted a sigh. “Maybe.”

“How do you not know? It seems like a question you’d have the answer to,” Rita said.

“First it was a fling, and then we decided to date when we got home, and now, we’re not.”

“Why not?” Angi asked.

“Conflict of interest.”

“As in, you’re interested but conflicted about it?” Rita asked, accurately reading my expression.



I shook my head. “No. Dr. Bernard warned me that a relationship with Nate would exclude me from the running for department chair when he retires this year. He made me choose. Nate or my dream job.”

“And you chose your career. Smart,” Angi said.

Her words rang hollow. If I was so smart, then why did I feel like I’d flunked my shot at love?

Some of my thoughts must have been apparent in my expression because Rita reached out a hand to cover mine.

“What did Nate have to say about all this?” Rita asked.

Scowling, I stared down at my empty coffee cup. “He’s the one who ended it.”

“Jerk,” Angi butted in.

“Not a jerk,” I said. “He says he wants to be friends while we ‘figure things out.’ But I’m fresh out of ideas. I don’t want to lose this opportunity, and I don’t want him to leave Benton to return to his old life.”

“Where does that leave you?” Cheri asked.

“Friends without benefits,” I said glumly.

Rita squeezed my hand, and I worked up a smile for her.

“Coach Bear is still single,” Angi said, a teasing note in her voice.

Scowling, I shook my head. “I’m not ready for more matchmaking, Angi.”

“Just checking,” she said wisely. “Does this mean your feelings for Nate go deeper than casual bedroom buddies?”

“Maybe?”

At Rita's raised brows, I relented. Opening up didn't come easily, but if I couldn't tell my closest friends, who could I tell?

"Okay, yes." Eyes growing shiny, chest tight, I let go. "I'm afraid I love him."

Cheri reached out a hand to cover mine. "Oh, honey."

Her sympathy slayed me. As if she were acknowledging that my feelings were doomed.

"Enough of that," Angi said in her no-nonsense way. "All is not lost here."

"You sure about that?" Rita asked wryly.

The face Angi made over Rita's question was dry enough to parch the river of self-pity her dismissive words unleashed in me.

"I seem to remember another couple of 'friends' who figured out a way to make it work. Eventually." The heavy emphasis Angi put on the word *friends* made my lips twitch. We'd both witnessed Rita falling in love with Ed, though from different perspectives.. Rita had been convinced that she'd never find a way to stay in Benton to be with Ed after finishing her thesis, but the stars aligned and they were now disgustingly happy.

"Hey, I didn't mean it the way it sounded. I meant that it's clear *she's* lost," Rita said turning to me. "You were not like this with Paul."

"Not like what?" I asked.

"Willing to give up control."

"Is that what I've done?" I asked, bemused. Could that be why I felt so crappy? Ceding control over my future, trusting my heart to someone else's care?

"If he's going through the motions of being friends, trying to convince you and himself that you can keep things

platonic, he's probably doing it to protect you. To safeguard your dreams. You should talk to him," Angi said.

Angi sipped at her tea, staring me down over the top of the cup, as if she could cow me into broaching the subject that Nate and I had diligently avoided since our meeting with Dr. Bernard. Turning to Cheri, I said, "enough about me. What's new with you?"

Rolling her eyes at my transparent bid to change the subject, she nevertheless chose to bail me out. "Did I tell you my sister got engaged?"

Conversation moved on to Cheri's family drama, and I breathed a sigh of relief, more than ready for a break from contemplating my own.

I tossed and turned that night, visions of Nate's body eclipsing mine, thrusting into me, replaying over and over in my mind until I was feverish with wanting him. Finally, I gave up and picked up my phone.

*Sid: I miss you.*

Not exactly talking with him, but allowing myself to admit my feelings still felt like a weight had been lifted.

*Nate: We'll figure it out.*

*Sid: Together? Or are you going to go Batman on me and work alone?*

My phone rang, and I picked up immediately.

"As much as I'd love to be your Batman, he never gets the girl. I want you more."

His husky admission made my throat constrict.

"So, what are we going to do?" I asked, working to keep the plea out of my tone.

I wanted a solution. Needed a solution. Because as much as I valued Nate's friendship, I wanted more.

“I’m not letting you give up your dreams,” he warned.

“Good. I don’t want that either. But I do want you.”

“I called Adrenaline,” he admitted softly.

I swallowed, trying to push down the lump that formed at his words.

“Are you moving back to Seattle?”

“No.”

My breath whooshed out, and I shook my head to dispel the stars.

“Then what are we going to do? You’re a talented guy. Have you thought about a transfer to the College of Engineering? They have a lot of coding classes in their Computer Science curriculum.”

His soft snort dispelled my hopes. “I’d get fired in a hot minute. I’ve only lasted this long in the College of Business because Dr. Bernard is a family friend. He’s used to my ... eccentricities.”

I couldn’t help my laugh, though it sounded sad to my ears. “Is that what we’re calling them these days?”

“Ah, Princess. There’s a reason I’ve never really sought out traditional employment. I make a great independent contractor, but a pretty lousy employee.”

“Harsh, Nate. You’re brilliant. You did an amazing job with the auction.”

“Still, I’m not a nine-to-five guy. Academia is your dream, not mine. This stint at the college has been my longest traditional job. Going to DEF CON only made me miss IT security more. I’m not cut out for teaching. My time at the college served its purpose.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“I’m looking into contracting again. Starting my own business is too risky with Savvy to consider. I need something steadier. Adrenaline referred me to a local firm who may be interested in expanding into IT security.”

Hope filled me at the magic word *local*.

“In fact, you may know them. Kwon and Associates?”

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in days. “You’d be working with Daniel and Ed? Somehow, I think you’ll fit right in.”

“I didn’t want you to think I haven’t been working on the problem, or that I didn’t want you to be part of the solution,” he said. “As far as I’m concerned, the only solution I’m willing to accept is one that allows us to be together.”

Heart lifting, a grin blossomed across my face. “For once, Cummings, we agree.”

# CHAPTER 16 – NATE

“Nate? I’m Daniel Kwon. It’s nice to meet you.”

I shoved down my nerves as I gripped Daniel’s hand in a firm shake. It wasn’t like everything depended on my meeting with the principals from Kwon and Associates going well. It represented my chance at moving back into work I enjoyed and just as importantly, getting a shot at a real future with the woman I loved. Chest clenching, I tried to breathe through the anxiety that admitting it to myself created, forcing myself to project a calm front so I didn’t screw up my interview.

They’d chosen a coffee bar near campus for our meeting, and as much as I wanted a cup of coffee to keep my hands busy, the idea of adding espresso on top of my already brewing anxiety didn’t sit well.

“Same. I’ve seen you around town, but I had no idea you were in the IT field.”

“Nate, this is my partner, Ed. Our other associate is visiting a client this week.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said easily. Daniel was vaguely familiar, but Ed I recognized through Sid’s friend Rita.

We spent a companionable hour talking business, Daniel and Ed listening as I shared my ideas for contracting in IT security to expand their business, Daniel sharing more about current clients and past projects.

Excitement buzzed at the picture they painted. The freedom to develop my own clients and schedule appealed. Daniel seemed seasoned, a calm hand at the wheel of Kwon and Associates. Ed was harder to get a clear read on. He didn’t

speak as freely as Daniel, seeming content to observe. It made me more determined to win him over, sharing tales of past projects.

We were returning our empty mugs to the barista counter when it hit me where else I'd seen him.

“Wait. You're in the bigfoot group with Jake, aren't you?”

A grin split Ed's serious features. “You know Jake?”

“We went to high school together. He's one of my oldest friends. Are you in on his plans for this year's fun run?”

Ed nodded and pushed his glasses up, his expression mischievous. “I wish I'd thought of it myself. Hopefully Chris will approve.”

At ease now that I knew he was friendly with Jake, I said my goodbyes, and Daniel promised to get back to me the following week.

Feeling optimistic about my career for the first time since leaving DEF CON, I pulled out my phone.

*Nate: Meeting with Kwon went well. With luck, soon you'll have one less coworker.*

*Sid: And one more lover?*

*Nate: Hopefully the only one. Can you come over tonight?*

*Sid: Will Savvy be there?*

*Nate: Yes.*

*Sid: OK.*

*Nate: Did you ask so we'd have a chaperone?*

*Sid: Maybe.*

*Sid: OK, yes.*

I grinned. At least I wasn't the only one struggling to keep my hands to myself. I never expected to rely on my twelve-year-old sister to help me keep an evening friendly, but the past year had thrown all sorts of new changes my way.

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Humming, I cleaned the kitchen, glancing at the clock. Sid would arrive anytime.

"What has you so chipper?" Savvy asked, going to the fridge to pour a glass of juice.

"Sid's coming over."

"Good. You're a moody ass when she's not around."

"*Savvy.*"

"What? It's true. And she cooks better than you. Not that that's hard."

She escaped with a laugh as I picked up the dish towel, snapping it at her. I dropped the towel at the soft knock on the front door, but Savvy beat me to it.

"Sid! I missed you."

They exchanged hugs while I just stood there, wishing it was me with my arms around Sid.

Savvy went to flop in her usual spot on the sofa, and Sid hovered shyly in the entry.

"Hey."

I couldn't help the pleasure that washed through me at her soft greeting.

"Hey."

It took everything not to grab her hands and tug her into my arms. But I didn't want to put Sid in an awkward position with Dr. Bernard.



“I’m going to miss seeing you at staff meetings,” I admitted.

Sid tapped her chin, pretending to think about it. “Hmm ... Whatever shall we do about that? *I* know. Maybe the occasional sleepover so we get quality time together?”

“Savvy’s going to think you should sleep in her room,” I warned.

“We’ll work it out,” she soothed, eyes sparkling as she stroked her hands over my biceps.

I loved this new, more playful side to Sid. Maybe it had always been there, but something about her seemed freer, stronger after our time together at DEF CON.

She teased me with playful touches all through dinner, amping up my longing. Savvy eventually caught on to the change between us.

“Did Nate finally admit he likes you or something?” she asked bluntly around a mouthful of beef stew. “You guys are acting all lovey-dovey.”

“Is that okay with you?” I asked, searching her blue eyes.

“Sure. Just do a better job camouflaging your sex sounds than Mom and Dad. The walls in this house are way too thin.”

I choked on the very adult request, shocked my innocent baby sister had apparently heard and understood more than I’d given her credit for.

After dinner, Savvy escaped to the living room to watch a show, and I stalked Sid around the kitchen. She grabbed dishes, and I picked up the remaining handful, following her to the sink and scooting into her space, letting our bodies brush.

“Nate. Get any closer, and I’m dropping these dishes.”

“Is that a threat or a promise?”

“I don’t know, do you have an unending supply of dishes?”

I could hear the smile in her voice, though she kept her back to me.

Sliding my plates into the sink, I encouraged her to do the same before spinning and caging her against the counter.

“Is a robust dish supply something you look for in a man?” I growled, leaning in to nip a quick kiss against her neck.

Giggling, she pushed at my shoulders.

“Honestly, I’ve never thought about a man’s ... dishes. I’m more interested in other attributes.”

Her fluttering hands traced my shoulders, alighting briefly on my wrists before settling on my hips. I wanted her to tug me toward her, let our bodies align, until she had no doubts about my attributes.

“It’s awfully quiet in there all of a sudden,” Savvy called from the living room. “Is it safe for me to come get dessert?”

Laughing, I pulled away, releasing Sid from her position at the sink.

“It’s safe, Savvy.”

She scowled at me as she slid by to the freezer. “Is this what it’s going to be like now? Me having to call out before I enter rooms?”

A year ago, I couldn’t imagine being this happy ever again. The formula had been lost to me in the wake of my parents’ death and taking over with Savvy. Tonight, I could only marvel at the crinkles in the corners of Savvy’s eyes as she teased Sid and me. Maybe it wasn’t perfect, but we’d come a long way since those first few nights together.

I attacked Savvy with a bear hug, squeezing her until she squealed.

“Nate! You’re going to make me drop my ice cream.”

Letting her go, I grinned. “There are worse fates, Savvy.”

Aghast, she pointed her spoon at me. “Take that back. Ice cream is life.”

“Get out of here, you.”

Shooing her toward the living room, she escaped with her bowl of mint chocolate chip, leaving a smiling Sid behind.

“You’re really good with her, you know.”

The glint in her eye looked a lot like admiration. Yet another example of how far we’d come in the last year. Sid’s opinion of me had gone from the basement to something I’d be proud to claim. If she’d admit to it.

“Princess, I’m good at a lot of things.”

I added an overblown wink for extra goofiness, and she laughed, the gentle peals washing over me.

# CHAPTER 17 – NATE

“You nervous?” I asked Jake, as he bounced on the tips of his toes, warming up.

Glancing toward where Chris chatted quietly with Ed and Rita, Jake shook his head. After decades of friendship, I knew to be suspicious when he didn’t talk. My friend had the gift of gab and an easy way with everyone. It was part of what made him an excellent bartender.

“You’re all set up, right? It’ll be easy, you’ll see. I’ll trail you to the 5K mark and take the video. Just like we planned. You’ve got this.”

Jake swallowed and smiled weakly back at me, looking a little green in his fluorescent yellow Bigfoot fun run T-shirt. Seeing my über-confident friend ready to toss his cookies at the idea of proposing to his long-time boyfriend made me smile. They deserved each other, and they deserved happiness.

The only one worried Chris would decline Jake’s proposal was Jake.

“You ready to race, Cummings?”

I wrapped an arm around Sid. She held out a hand with my bib number, and I gave her a quick squeeze before releasing her to take it and pin it on my own bright yellow monstrosity. The things I did for love. At last year’s race, we’d been competitors. Rivals, even. And now? I couldn’t imagine my life without her. Not just to spur me to run faster, but to be the best version of myself. Including being a better best friend, even if that meant losing out on the opportunity for a little friendly athletic competition with Sid.

“I’m going to hang back, take it easy with Jake and Chris this year. You go right ahead, Princess.”

Sid's lips turned down in a quick pout. "Does that mean you're not going to chase me? You're just going to let me win?"

"Haven't I already caught you?"

I laughed at her exaggerated eyeroll. She looked like she'd been taking lessons from Savvy.

"You guys are so cute, I think I'm going to puke," Jake said.

"Sure, Jake. There's no other reason, standing nearby and over six feet tall, why you might have a nervous stomach."

Sid glanced between us, puzzled, and I smiled. "I'll tell you later," I promised. "See you at the finish line?"

She nodded, and I leaned in to sneak a quick kiss.

Playfully, she pushed me away. "None of that now. Not until we come clean with Dr. Bernard."

I held up my hands, but when she turned away, I reached out and goosed her.

"Hey! Nate!"

"*Monday*," I mouthed.

Her look of censure couldn't quite hide the smile flirting at the corners of her mouth. Daniel had come through with an offer to join Kwon that sounded nearly perfect. I couldn't afford to strike out on my own, but with the backing of another firm and some easy referrals, it wouldn't be hard to earn comparable to my current salary. Finishing out my contract at the college for the quarter would give me the time I needed to prepare, and by the new year, I'd be free. But there was no way I was waiting that long to claim Sid. I figured our relationship wouldn't cause much stir when it became clear I had given my notice.

An older woman in a Bigfoot T-shirt grabbed a megaphone and explained the race rules. Each kilometer marker would

have a Bigfoot sign for the runners to spot. Photographs with the elusive creature were encouraged, the sillier, the better. Prizes would be given for the best pictures and the best times. Proceeds benefitted the food bank where Jake volunteered and fees also paid for the Bigfoot Research Organization's administrative expenses. All in all, a worthy cause, even if I hated running.

After the starting gun exploded, our pack of runners took off, and I jogged easily with Jake and Chris. Like me, Chris didn't exactly love running, but he did love Jake. We huffed and puffed through the first four kilometers, stopping to take photos at each marker. I laughed until I was out of breath when Jake dropped trou and mooned the Bigfoot at kilometer three. Granted, they'd painted the seven-foot stand-up cutout as if he were a fan of Oregon College's rival. I had to wonder what Coach Bear would think. I'd spotted him with a group of his serious-looking athletes at the starting line. Maybe our photos wouldn't be the most scandalous. Oregonians rivaled Georgia or Texas fans for taking rivalries seriously.

Chris was breathing hard by the time we approached the fifth marker, sweat beading down his forehead. I'd only fared marginally better, and I fumbled for my phone while I gasped for breath, wanting to catch the moment he spotted the last Bigfoot.

I hit record as we turned the bend in the trail. Front and center, the last marker had been painted in a tuxedo and bent down on one knee. Chris started laughing, and came to a stop to catch his breath in the middle of the bark path. A few other runners jogged past us, and I paused a few feet back, recording as Jake sank down to his knee next to his partner. Chris sobered as he caught Jake's pose, an expression of wonder flitting across his usually stoic features.

"Chris Porter, I love you."

"I. Love. You. Too," Chris returned around gasps for air, still looking poleaxed by Jake's scheme to propose.

“You support me in everything I do, no matter how wild. You’ve always let me be me, even when I wasn’t exactly sure who that was. But, I think I’ve figured it out. I’m going to love you forever, Chris Porter. Will you marry me?”

Touched, I watched as Chris nodded before grabbing Jake in a rough bear hug. A few of the runners must have caught on to the event unfolding because they clapped and hollered for the couple as they ran by.

“Congratulations, guys. I’ll see you at the finish line,” I said, as I jogged away.

Jake’s ecstatic grin stayed in my mind as I finished the race. He’d looked so happy, so relieved. No one else had doubted what Chris’s answer would be. But the big questions were always hard to ask, they took the most vulnerability.

My gaze arrowed to the one person I most wanted to see as I crossed the finish line. Sid. Her dark hair slicked back in a ponytail, cheeks still flushed, she looked gorgeous. Clustered in conversation with Carly from our department, she glanced up as I approached.

“Hey. What happened to Jake and Chris?” she asked.

“They got caught up celebrating.”

Something about my expression must have clued her in, and she smiled.

“I wondered about the theme for this year’s distance markers.”

“I don’t get it,” Carly admitted.

“My friends Jake and Chris got engaged back on the trail.”

“That’s so sweet, at the proposing Bigfoot in the tux?” I nodded, and Carly looked at me slyly. “I don’t know how you’re going to top that when it’s your turn someday,

Cummings. You're such a jokester, I can't imagine your proposal being tame."

"That's easy. It'll never be my turn."

"Excuse me?" The way Sid's head whipped toward me only served to highlight her surprise. The hurt in her expression caught me off guard. Though maybe it shouldn't have. Just because we hadn't discussed the possibility of marriage didn't mean she wouldn't assume it was on the table. I rushed ahead, willing her to understand.

"Not for years. I can't ask someone while I've got Savvy. It wouldn't be fair."

Pleading for understanding and torn between my promises to Savvy and my love for Sid, I didn't know what else to say.

Carly's eyes had widened to comic proportions as she caught on to the subtext between Sid and me, realizing her teasing had set off revelations none of us had been prepared for. She cleared her throat. "I see Coach Bear over there. We're working on a project together, so I'd better say hi. See you at brunch, Sid."

Carly's speed-walk away only made me wish I too had an easy exit. Swallowing, I looked at Sid's pinched features.

"You don't see yourself getting married?" she asked calmly.

"Not for years, if ever."

"Oh. Good to know."

Something about the clipped way she said it sucked the life from the words. I'd disappointed her again. The last thing I wanted to do. But I'd made a promise to Savvy when I took over as her guardian, and I intended to keep it. She'd be the most important woman in my life until she was grown.

"Sid, it doesn't mean we can't be together."



My chest constricted when her expression didn't ease. I hadn't meant to hurt her. My response to Carly had shot out without considering consequences. Sid deserved to hear my thoughts on marriage privately, when we could truly talk about our future. Not in a milling crowd of racers.

"I know. I feel like a walking stereotype right now. But this isn't a discussion I want to have here. I shouldn't have put you on the spot. I need to catch up with Rita, talk about our brunch plans for tomorrow. I'll see you Monday."

She walked away, and every step only served to hammer in the sense that I'd made a mistake, thinking without speaking.

Jake and Chris arrived at the finish line, Jake carrying Chris in his arms. Those still milling around laughed and cheered them on as Jake dropped Chris and wiped his brow, throwing his arms up in victory.

"He said yes."

Jake and Chris accepted congratulations from the others, and the finish line turned into an impromptu engagement party. Thelma tugged a cooler from behind her table out, passing around paper cups. Chris popped bottles of sparkling wine, and he and Jake circulated, toasting their well-wishers. Rita rolled her eyes when Ed complained about Jake stealing his proposal idea, but the smile she hid behind her cup took the heat out of it. Sid surfed the edges of the crowd, careful to avoid me, slipping away in the chaos.

Frustrated, but still wanting to celebrate with my friends, I debated going after her. Sid had called me Peter Pan, all but accusing me of not being responsible in the past. Putting Savvy first, it was me being an adult. Why couldn't she appreciate that I was growing into the man who'd deserve her? Savvy had to be consulted on decisions that impacted her. And Sid was the one who'd chafed over any hint of commitment from the beginning. She and Paul had lived

together for years without marrying. I'd thought she'd want to take things slow.

Breath choppy and hands clenched, I shook out my fingers, realizing how I sounded. Desperate. Rationalizing. Keeping my commitments to Savvy shouldn't mean hurting Sid. Having two women I loved in my life should be a blessing, and I'd bumbled, inadvertently pushing Sid away.

# CHAPTER 18 – SID

I got up early Sunday morning for an extra-long run. Maybe if I went far enough, I'd escape my disappointment and the sneaking suspicion I'd been foolish.

My feet pounded on the pavement, and I worked to control my breathing. The scent of cut hay and grass hung heavy in the air. Damp with morning dew, the crisp fall air made me glad I'd chosen leggings instead of shorts as I followed the rural road outside of town. It wound through farms and the occasional winery. Maybe the peace of my surroundings would help me achieve some version of calm inside.

I'd believed that Nate and I had reached a new level of understanding. Hearing him disavow marriage had hurt. It had also brought up uncomfortable reminders of Paul. Had I fallen heart-first into yet another relationship where our expectations for a future together differed drastically? Or was I letting my past color my present?

Yes, I'd been the one to suggest a no-strings affair in Vegas. And he'd been the one to propose friendship so I wouldn't jeopardize my shot at department chair when we returned. He'd considered leaving the department to make way for a relationship between us. I'd taken it as a sign he cared. You didn't change jobs for a fling. Except, maybe Nate did?

His denial had hit me hard. True, I'd opened my big mouth first, and it was too soon to be discussing marriage. I wasn't ready for marriage—I shouldn't expect him to be either. But all along, he'd seemed one step ahead in our relationship. Finding out we might not be on the same page jarred me.

After a quick shower and change, I drove downtown to the Windmill, glad to have the distraction of brunch to help

me escape my circling thoughts.

“Hey, Sid.”

Carly’s soft greeting drew a smile to my face for the first time that day. I’d hoped she’d accept my invitation and join us.

“Hey, Carly. Glad you could make it.”

Vicki seated us at our usual table, which had been expanded with an extra chair.

“The others should be here soon. Vicki, can we please have a pot of coffee?”

Silence lingered as we waited. Carly seemed like she wanted to ask me something, and I had a feeling I knew what it was. She’d witnessed my reaction to Nate’s denial yesterday. But I wasn’t ready to talk about it yet. I distracted her the only way I could.

“So, how’s your project going? Didn’t I hear that Dr. Bernard paired you with Coach Bear? What are you doing for him?”

Carly flushed at my words, and I wondered if I’d missed something.

“Fine. I’m working on competitive analysis for him. Trying to help him set up an analytics program for the team.”

“To help him do what?” I asked.

“Decide on most effective plays against opponents and develop a recruiting strategy. I wasn’t excited about it at first, but I have to admit, I’m learning a lot. The sheer number of stats is overwhelming.”

“And how is working with Coach Bear?”

He’d struck me as soft-spoken for a football coach, but it was still hard to imagine him working with the extremely introverted Carly.

“Ben? He’s been a perfect gentleman.”

Her use of his first name didn’t escape me. Maybe I wasn’t the only one struggling with feelings for a colleague.

Angi dropped into the chair next to me with a sigh.

“Vicki, can I get a pot of tea, please? I might need the whole thing this morning.”

“Rough night?”

She nodded glumly. “If Ari doesn’t sleep through the night soon, I’m going to lose it. This teething stuff is for the birds.”

Rita and Cheri arrived, and we ordered. Carly mostly observed quietly as we chatted, but I could tell she was taking it in, soaking up the camaraderie. She caught my eye and I smiled; glad she’d accepted the invitation to join us. I’d hoped with enough encouragement, she’d open up. It was usually a struggle to get more than five words out of her in our staff meetings.

“Did anyone catch the engagement yesterday?” Rita asked after our breakfast arrived.

“I saw Jake carry Chris over the finish line. Very romantic,” Angi said.

“Ed and I are happy for them. Jake’s already asked Ed to be a groomsman, and he’s over the moon. It’s cute to see him this excited.” She looked at me. “I imagine Nate’s going to be Jake’s best man?”

I shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“You didn’t stick around while they were making plans?”

“Nope.”

Rita’s eyes narrowed at my clipped response.

“Something you want to share with the class, Sid?”

“Not really.”

“Nate said he’d never propose,” Carly burst out before looking at me guiltily.

I snapped my teeth around my biscuit, chewing with vigor. Hearing the words spoken aloud, reminded me of just how humiliated I’d felt.

“That dumbass,” Angi muttered, clearly aggrieved on my behalf.

“It’s fine,” I said, holding up my hands. “He owes me nothing. I was reading too much into things, and it’s my own fault. I shouldn’t have said anything. Ask stupid questions, get stupid answers.”

“How exactly did the topic come up?” Cheri asked.

“I said I didn’t know how he’d top Jake’s proposal when it was his turn and he said it’d be easy because it’d never be his turn,” Carly admitted softly.

“Ouch.”

“Did he have a reason?” Angi asked.

“He doesn’t need one. Not everyone wants to get married. I presumed too much.”

“He said something about a Savvy. Is there another woman?” Carly asked.

“He’s raising his sister.”

Rita wrinkled her nose. “Still, I could come up with ten more diplomatic responses.”

I blew out a breath. “Yeah, it wasn’t one of our finer moments. Part of me understands, but I thought we’d really gotten to know each other. His response took me by surprise. Savvy and I have become friends. She’s a sweetheart. I can’t imagine she asked him to put his life on hold, but then again, she’s only twelve.”

“Are you going to keep seeing him?” Rita asked sympathetically.

My heart ached. I missed him already. And if there's one thing I'd learned at DEF CON, it was that the man I'd grown to love there could be trusted to keep my heart secure. We might have different approaches to life, to coding, to just about *everything*, but it didn't mean we couldn't collaborate on the final solution and create something seamless together. A relationship that worked for both of us. If this was our very own Crash and Compile contest, then Team Distraction had gotten a big win with Nate's panicked response to Carly's teasing and my overreaction.

Rita reached out a hand, covering mine where it played with a packet of sugar on the table.

"I may have a little experience with changing my mind. I couldn't imagine my life without Ed in it now. Maybe talk to Nate?"

An idea kindled as I thought about my time with Nate at DEF CON. Maybe not better than talking to Nate directly, but more *us*.

"How about helping me with a little hacking expedition first?" I asked.

Rita's eyes narrowed. "Who are you, and what have you done with our Sid?"

Thrilled at the prospect of beating Nate at his own game, I grinned. "Princess Perfect's been compromised. In the *best* possible way."

"What exactly do you have in mind?" Angi asked. "Do I need to have bail money ready?"

I flapped a hand, waving off her offer. "Nothing too nefarious."

Nate and I'd taken a hit. Crashed our compilation. But it didn't mean we couldn't pull off the championship in the end. We just needed to debug our code. Together. But I had to get his attention first.

# CHAPTER 19 – NATE

“Who are you texting?” I asked as I flopped down on the couch in my running gear.

Savvy tilted her phone so I wouldn’t see the screen, eyeing me warily. “No one.”

Shit. Please let this generation of twelve-year-olds have advanced beyond the dick pic if it was a boy. I’m not ready for this.

“Really?” I asked drily.

Savvy huffed a sigh. “It’s Sid, okay? She said I could text her if I had questions or needed something from another woman,” she said sullenly.

“Oh. Do you text with her a lot?”

“Only every day.”

If I hadn’t loved her before, I’d be a goner after Savvy’s revelation. Sid didn’t owe Savvy anything, but she saw a need and stepped in to help. It was her to a tee. Sid had been solid at every turn. When she committed, she went all in. Which meant I’d fucked up royally in letting her think I wasn’t ready to commit and work just as hard at being together.

We’d made a great team at DEF CON. Just because I was used to flying solo as the Dark Knight didn’t mean it was my future.

“Yeah? You’re pretty close friends then?”

“Yep.”

“Does she talk about me at all?”

Her look of disdain could have really gone either way. Disgust that I asked for private details of her conversations with Sid, or horror over how needy I sounded, hoarding any



crumb I could get about Sid. I was saved from probing further when she clarified. “Why would we talk about you?” Peering at me, her eyes narrowed. “Why? Did you do something dumb?”

I scrubbed my hands through my hair, tugging at the strands.

“Maybe,” I muttered.

Okay, yes. I’d made a monumental mistake. My only excuse was that I hadn’t had time to process it all, and Sid took me by surprise with her question. But I’d regretted my words almost as soon as I said them. By then, it’d been too late. She’d been gone, and I’d considered maybe it was for the best. But that was the fear talking.

“What did you say?”

“That I’d never propose.”

“*Nate.*”

“You and I, we’re a team. I wouldn’t do anything to change us. You’ve got me as long as you need me, Savvy.”

I swallowed hard, watching her young face crumple with emotion.

“I love you, Nate, but does that mean I can’t love someone else? Am I supposed to stay alone forever too?”

“Of course not. You’ll grow up, start to date when you’re thirty-five, fall in love, and get married. Just like Mom and Dad wanted.”

“Thirty-five? Keep dreaming, brother. Do you really think that’s what Mom and Dad wanted?”

Her steady stare drilled into me, accusing.

“For you? Absolutely. They only wanted the best for you.”

“And do you deserve the best, Nate?”

“I already have it, I’ve got you, Savvy.”

“Barf. Don’t get me wrong, I love you too, but *no*. You deserve all the things. Sid. Marriage. Kids if you still want them *after* me.”

My lips twitched, catching the ‘after.’

“So, I can get married while we live together, but you draw the line at babies?” I teased, tension easing. Savvy was taking to the idea of growing our family, at least by adding Sid to it, much more easily than I anticipated. I’d thought she’d need years to rebuild the sense of security she’d lost with the death of our parents. Her willingness to embrace Sid in our lives took me by surprise.

She nodded emphatically. “Yes. I can ignore the sex sounds with a quality pair of headphones, but diapers stink to high heaven. And babies smell like spoiled milk. You can get a cat, but no babies, please.”

“I’ll remember you said that. When you’re forty and pregnant.”

Savvy shook her head, clearly over my teasing. Sobering, I exhaled.

“You’d really be okay if Sid lived with us? If we got married someday?”

“Yes. What did you think I’d say? I love you, you doofus. And I think Sid does too.”

I winced. “Maybe not after yesterday. I screwed up, Savvy.”

“Well, what are you going to do to fix it?”

Her matter-of-fact question struck a chord. Plotting system takeovers was kind of my thing. And DEF CON had given me all kinds of fresh inspiration. Could I hack my way back into Sid’s heart? Would she forgive me for being careless and give me another chance to show I took us seriously? Or

had I ruined things between us, making her think we wanted different futures?

I'd decided against texting Sid or trying to see her on Sunday. I'd needed time to put my plan in motion, and I'd hoped distance would dull the sting of my words.

But still, Monday's staff meeting was painful. Sid avoided eye contact all through the meeting as Dr. Bernard droned on and on about the fall schedule. She split as soon as the meeting ended, leaving me milling around with Dr. Bernard.

"You got a minute?"

My resignation from the department went better than expected. It helped I'd agreed to finish out the quarter, giving the college time to find someone else to teach my classes for winter. Dr. Bernard smiled like he almost expected it, and I wondered if he'd picked up on my feelings for Sid long before I had. For sure, he suspected after Vegas. But before the dinner, when she'd rolled her eyes every time I was late to the staff meeting or I made a snarky comment, had he picked up on the underlying attraction?

Now that I considered myself free to pursue Sid openly, I moved on to the second phase of my plot: apologize.

Sid never asked how I infiltrated her office in the past, and I never divulged my secrets either. If she wanted to leave her office window open, I'd gladly take advantage. True, I could have picked her lock in under thirty seconds, or likely charmed Sharon into letting me in with her key in about the same time, but part of me thrilled at the challenge of doing the unexpected.

My trusty drone, Rocinante, had helped me in the past, and that delivery method felt less invasive than actually stepping foot in her private office.

I maneuvered the pincers beneath Rocinante to enclose my offering, then piloted the small drone up, until I

could fly it through her open window. The small video display revealed when I hovered above Sid's desk, and I released the clamp holding my gift. Thirty seconds later, I'd packed Rocinante safely away. I caught a few knowing grins from students passing me in the courtyard, but my hobby of teasing Sid was a pretty open secret.

It was possible she was the last to know I'd had feelings for her. Tied for myself, in realizing how deep those feelings ran. I hoped the single red rose, tied around a step-shift cypher would send a clear message. Inside, I'd nestled one of the tiny lockpick sets I'd picked up at DEF CON. The note read, "M TMGO CSY." *I pick you.*

Unwilling to trust that my simple infiltration would be enough to capture her heart, I enacted phase three for the afternoon. Jake helped me wrangle the BFRO secretary, who'd made the fun run T-shirts, into a special late-night order just for me. I'd been lucky she had spare shirts on hand, or the turnaround would have been impossible. I'd pilfered the enrollment count for Sid's intro class, and I arrived twenty minutes early with a dozen pizzas to bribe her students into wearing them with me.

Most of her students giggled as they donned the black DEF CON knock-offs. A riff on the Fed spotting T-shirts offered to winners at the con, the group wore I SPOTTED THE SORRY ONE! shirts, while mine, in red, proclaimed, I AM THE SORRY ONE! Maybe a little cheesy, but I figured it was worth a shot, reminding her of happier times at DEF CON while publicly making my apology.

Sid smiled distractedly as she entered the lecture hall before the wash of monochromatic shirts caught her attention. Her gaze skipped across the class, before meeting mine.

"If you're not enrolled in my class, please excuse yourself."

She hadn't even cracked a smile. Crushed, I slid out of my seat at the back.

"Professor Cummings?" I looked up at her soft words, aware her entire class had quieted. "Please see me in my office after class."

Her students' combined "Oooohhh" followed me out the door.

Dejected, I leaned against the wall outside, softly banging my head against the cork bulletin board behind me.

I might have miscalculated. Again. Forgetting Sid's dislike of gossip and making us both the target of it by involving her students had possibly been a step too far. Even by my own standards.

"Everything okay, Nate?" Carly's soft question took me by surprise.

"Nothing a fifth of tequila and a chaser of memory loss couldn't cure. Sadly, those days are behind me. I've got responsibilities now. And groveling to do."

She slid a knowing look at the classroom door. "Sid not interested in hearing your apology?"

"How'd you guess?"

She gestured to my shirt. "Oh. Yeah," I said. "It's a DEF CON thing. Probably yet another mistake."

"You know what I've learned, watching way too much football the last few weeks?"

I shook my head.

"Sometimes, you've got to believe you can win. In the face of errors and opponents who are stronger or faster than you, faith helps."

"Are you saying you believe I can win?"

“Sid’s a person, not a prize. But ask yourself this—has she ever asked you to stop?”

“Do exasperated eyerolls count?”

“Nope,” she said with a small smile.

“So, I should keep going unless she asks me to stop?”

Carly nodded. “Or issues a restraining order. Both of those are pretty clear indicators that the game is over.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, Carly. Or should I call you Coach?”

“Assistant Coach maybe. I’m learning from the best.”

Something about the way she said it made me smile. I wouldn’t have pegged her as a football fan. She excused herself, and I made my way to Sid’s office door. Slumping against the wall, I pulled out my phone, scrolling through social media to kill time. Waiting for Sid, wondering if she’d ever forgive me. It was hard to have hope. But I clung to Carly’s advice as best I could. Sid and I were meant to be together.

A few minutes later, my phone buzzed. And kept buzzing.

*Unknown Number: Ply her with wine.*

*Unknown Number: Two words: pinata therapy.*

*Unknown Number: Talk to her.*

*Unknown Number: Bring her coffee.*

*Unknown Number: Cook for her.*

My phone kept buzzing, alert after alert that I had a new text message wearing down my battery. Different numbers, and a range of what appeared to be ... dating advice? My first instinct was to call Adrenaline and accuse her of taking sides. Sid wouldn’t have had time to text her about my

attempts to woo her back. Though flooding my phone seemed like Adrenaline's style. Part encouragement, part punishment.

*Unknown Number: Tell her you're sorry. T-shirts aren't enough. But A+ for creativity.*

The last text clued me in. Only Sid's students knew about the T-shirts. Was my phone adversary not one of my hacker friends, but a whole roomful of newly anointed vigilantes? Led by one Dr. Sidney Culver?

Grinning, I relaxed for the first time. If she was playing with me, it had to mean I still had a chance.

It took all of my patience to wait outside of her office instead of rushing back to the classroom. She'd asked me to wait, and I'd wait. I'd do nearly anything to get back to where we'd been before I opened my big, fat mouth and spilled my insecurities, hurting her.

I pushed up from my slouch against the wall when I finally spotted Sid striding toward me. Dark hair glossy and sleek, she'd dressed in her usual work outfit—dress pants and a brightly patterned top. The red shade made her look like a warrior girding herself for battle. I wanted to fall at her feet in worship, but instead stood still, heart racing, longing to share the love that flooded my heart.

Swallowing, I pushed down my nerves, clinging to the hope and faith that she'd forgive me for bruising her gentle heart.

"I'm sorry," I husked, imploring her with my eyes. "I talked with Savvy. I should have talked with you."

Sid tilted her head, as if assessing my sincerity. Heart thundering, I melted against the wall when she nodded.

"Nice shirt," Sid intoned lightly as she unlocked her office door.

I glanced down, pretending confidence. "This old thing? Sometimes I'm bad with words. Say things in haste that

I don't really mean. I figured printing it on a T-shirt would ensure I didn't go off script."

Looking up, I caught her dark gaze with mine. Was that regret? She licked her lips, and I followed the motion hungrily.

"I got caught up, focusing on the external trappings of a relationship, instead of how I felt. How I was pretty sure you felt." Sid shrugged, looking rueful. "I know better than to focus on appearances as the arbiter of reality. If nothing else, my parents' divorce taught me that. We could be the strongest, most beautiful couple ever and never marry. It wouldn't diminish our commitment, not if we love each other."

I breathed through my panic at her use of "if." I was all in, and she needed to know it.

"Sidney, I have a confession to make."

Pulling her close, I inhaled her soft floral scent, basking in the woman I'd missed over the last few weeks. Her curves snuggled up against me, filling in all the gaps, seen and unseen.

She looked up at me suspiciously. "For the record, I'd like you to note that I'm not asking for a marriage proposal. Thinking about marriage so soon was letting Team Distraction get a hold of me. That was my father's voice in my head and insecurities from my past."

"I know. But you deserve everything. And that includes a few truths I wasn't ready to admit to at the run."

Her smile was wobbly, but I took courage when she didn't pull away.

"I've been in love with you for almost a year. When I heard you and Paul broke up, I hoped you'd look at me differently. When that didn't happen, I encouraged Dr. Bernard to offer the DEF CON trip as a prize for the fundraising



dinner, hoping it would give you a career boost and me a chance to shoot my shot.”

I said the words quickly, pushing them into existence before I could second-guess myself. She believed I lacked commitment. I could only hope learning the extent of my feelings for her wouldn't scare her away. She'd mentioned love. I had to hope it meant her heart was as much at risk as my own. Jake had been brave enough to ask the big question, and after all my teasing, stepping up to do the same was the only way forward with Sid.

She peered up at me, as if examining my expression for the truth. My heart sank at the uncertainty on her features.

“You ... love me?” She paused, considering. “You loved me when you followed me to DEF CON?”

I winced before nodding. “Guilty. I hoped you'd notice me. Maybe give me a chance if we spent more time together away from work.”

“And the pranks last year? You were never out to get me?” she teased, letting a smile flirt with the corners of her mouth.

I gusted a sigh, relief washing through me at her playful tone.

“Oh, I was always out to get you. Just not in the way you thought.”

“Hmm ... and what about now?”

“You breached all my defenses without me even realizing. Became part of my source code.”

“Is that your very nerdy way of saying I hacked your heart?” she asked tentatively.

“Dammit. I knew I needed another T-shirt. Yes. I love you, Sidney Culver. I have loved you. Do love you. Will love you. And I want you in my life. Sometimes, I cling stubbornly

to things that were true, or things I think could be true, irrespective of what's really there. But from the beginning, you woke me up. Made me feel. And while I may not always have understood those feelings or how they'd play into our future, I didn't doubt their existence.

"I love you, Sidney Culver. More than my pride. More than my fears. I've got to believe you're every damn bit as stubborn as I am, and that's enough to get us through anything. Will you forgive me for being an ass? I might not know what the future holds, but I know I want you in mine, and I'll do everything I can to make your dreams come true. We can decide what our future looks like together. As a couple, we're unstoppable. Team Distraction doesn't have a chance. I *pick* you."

Her soft chuckle stroked my nerve endings, sending my blood rushing. I never doubted she'd solved my cipher.

"And I pick you, Nate. I love you."

For the first time in what felt like weeks, I relaxed, content. Zeroing in on her soft lips, I couldn't resist the allure of her mouth. One kiss turned into ten, until we broke apart, gasping for breath, foreheads pressed together.

"The rose and cipher were a nice touch in your apology campaign." She leaned back, gazing up at me. "How do you keep getting into my office? Are you cracking the lock?"

I mimed zipping my lips. "I'll never tell."

Her eyes lit, and I realized my mistake. She'd have me crying for mercy in minutes. Sid was formidable when she set her mind to something. She gave me a small shove, pushing me toward her desk, and I swallowed at the lust in her eyes.

"I have ways of making you talk."

"You can't threaten me with a good time."

“Why don’t you take that lovely shirt off and we’ll find out?”

“Is your office door locked?”

Sid walked to her office door, twisting the deadbolt, her smile wicked and radiating love. “It is now.”

# CHAPTER 20 – SID

“Nate, we can’t be late.”

My attempts to protest as he kissed his way down my neck were half-hearted at best. He hit a particularly ticklish spot, and I squealed.

“Naa-te!”

He chuckled, redoubling his efforts to bury me in kisses. Succumbing, I clasped my hands behind his shoulders, and urged him to me for a proper kiss. Tingles from the contact spread through me and looped twice as fast when he notched himself at my entrance.

Waking up naked with Nate had gone from a Vegas mistake to my best decision.

Savvy banged on our door. “Twenty minutes and we need to leave. I’m going to the living room to watch TV now. Loudly.”

I giggled, feeling guilty at her pointed words. Poor Savvy. We’d worked hard not to scar her for life with our antics but learning to show Nate how I felt about him, wherever we were, had become a habit. One I never wanted to change.

“I only need a minute,” Nate promised on a laugh, pushing into me.

“That’s—Not—Something—To-brag-about,” I gasped between thrusts.

He picked up the tempo, stroking at the bundle of nerves between my thighs as every motion brought me closer to seeing stars.

“Are you sure?” he teased.

Nate redoubled his efforts to bring me to orgasm. Love washed through me at his intense expression. All for me. Pleasing me. Showing me he cared. Stroke after stroke hit just where I needed, until ripples exploded, dissolving my thoughts in pleasure. With a final grunt, Nate collapsed on top of me, gasping. When he could catch his breath, he smacked a quick kiss against my cheek before separating from me. I groaned at the loss of his body heat.

“Come on, Princess. We now have nineteen minutes to shower and get ready.”

“What’s Jake going to say when you show up barely thrown together?”

“That at least I showed up. If I’m less than twenty minutes late, he’ll be thrilled.”

We rushed through showers and dressing. I couldn’t help admiring Nate in his dark suit. Sleek and a little mysterious, he made my heart race. In a T-shirt and jeans or elegantly dressed, Nate was the same sweet, caring brother, outrageous hacker, and bad boy of academia that I’d come to love.

Savvy had asked me to take her shopping, and she looked darling in the formal dress we’d picked out. The flattering shade of lavender whorled around her calves in a bell shape. I’d found a purple flowered dress with cap sleeves that dipped to a sweetheart neckline for myself. Judging by Nate’s hungry expression as he admired me, he approved.

Jake and Chris had lucked out with the weather, throwing together a fall wedding in six short weeks at their friend’s winery outside of town. The vines wreathing the meadow were heavy with dark fruit as we made our way toward the barn for the ceremony.

Rita waved me over to a row of chairs as Nate veered toward a back door where the wedding party had been told to meet. The chairs filled quickly, and I spotted a range of

familiar faces. Some from the Bigfoot fun run, and a few from campus. I'd anticipated President Nelson's attendance, since Jake was her son, but Coach Bear surprised me. I hadn't realized he and Jake were close.

"Coach, it's nice to see you. Do you know one of the grooms?"

He grinned, looking at ease, even out of his signature athletic gear. "Jake is my workout buddy from the dojang."

"Nice," I murmured politely, reminded yet again of how small Benton was. Our evening together had been more professional function than actual date, but he'd seemed a little lonely under the easy charm that night, and I was glad to hear he was making friends in town.

We settled into our seats as the groomsmen strolled down the aisle to the tune of "Another One Bites the Dust."

I chuckled, imagining Jake and Chris arguing over the music selection. Something about the choice made me believe Jake won.

Jake and Chris made their entrance together, arms entwined, and the beaming pride on both their faces had tears forming at the corner of my eyes. They looked so happy. Nate stood up front, his broad grin expressing his love for his friends. Our gazes connected across the crowd and his eyes darkened, shining with something tender. Love. My eyes shimmered at the certainty there, the confidence in our own happily ever after.

Nate watched me throughout the ceremony, and I couldn't look away. My heart was too full. Happiness for Jake and Chris, and for us.

Jake and Chris had eschewed a more formal reception and dancing, opting instead for picnic tables among the vines and a casual buffet. The happy couple circulated with glasses of sparkling wine, being toasted by family and friends.

Jake's eyes sparkled as he approached our table. The quiet man at his side looked bemused by all the attention but handled it stoically.

"Greetings, family and friends. We hope you're enjoying yourselves?"

"Everything is delicious. Thank you," Rita said from the shelter of Ed's arms.

Ed held up his glass, face serious. "I'd like to make a toast."

"Hold up, I need more to drink if that's the case," Jake teased, refilling his glass and Chris' from the bottle on our table.

"May you always be the best of friends with love to share. I wish for you a love that lasts through the ages, much like the hunt for Bigfoot."

Groaning good-naturedly, we drank.

Clearing his throat, Nate gestured to Rita, flashing a hand signal I didn't quite catch. She smiled, and he grabbed my hand, urging me to my feet.

"Will you come with me a minute?" he asked.

Nodding, I followed, as he wound away from our friends and into a large grove of trees. They arched above majestically, casting shade that made the area below feel secluded, though we weren't far from the wedding party.

"Hammocks, Cummings?" I asked, as I spotted the canvas strung between trees. "You like to live dangerously, don't you?"

"If we're very careful, I won't end up on my ass."

Laughing, I tested one of the canvas slings.

"Here, I'll hold it for you."

Nate steadied the fabric while I scooched in, trying not to collapse inside. Giggling when he lost hold and I swung away before settling, I quieted when I saw his determined expression. He'd lost the jacket to his suit and pushed the white sleeves of his dress shirt up, revealing the ink on his forearms. The hint of the real Nate beneath the veneer made me smile. No matter how responsible and settled he seemed, caring for Savvy, loving me, there was still a hint of bad boy hacker beneath. He'd lived up to his infiltration artist past, burrowing his way into my heart.

My pulse thundered as he swallowed, appearing nervous. Not like the Nate I knew. He usually had all the swagger of Batman, and lately, a new lightness of happiness lit him from the inside. Both sides warmed my heart, but today's serious expression had it clenching.

He clasped my hands, drawing my arms wide to help control the sway of the hammock. His hazel eyes drilled mine as he used my hands to steady himself and dropped down in the grass at my feet.

I half expected him to push up the hem of my dress and slip between my thighs, and I clenched them together briefly as excitement raced through me. But when his face turned up to mine, love flaring in his eyes, my heart stuttered.

"I thought my life changed forever when I moved back to Benton. Unimaginable loss drove me for a while, blinding me to the people around me. To the love."

Dappled sunlight filtered through the trees, highlighting his sincere expression, and I squeezed his hands as he paused, seeming to gather courage.

"I love you, Sidney Culver. You're my Princess Perfect and my partner in crime. Will you marry me and be my wife and partner in life? Help me raise Savvy, since she's made it abundantly clear that she needs you in her life too?"



And maybe I can sweeten the deal by adopting Peaches for our family?”

Laughing, I couldn't help nodding through the tears gathering at the corners of my eyes.

“Yes. I love you, Nate. You've never asked me to be anything but me, holding room in your heart for both the perfect and the imperfect bits. Being with you has helped me embrace all that I am, even when I fail. I know you still support me, love me.”

“You're not worried about campus gossip? Rumors that your handsome new husband is a secret agent or a hacking vigilante?” he teased, laughter in his eyes.

I snorted. “You charmed my dad into believing that you're a respectable businessman in a single visit, so I have faith in your abilities, Dark Knight. And I've learned that worrying about gossip is just another kind of distraction that we can overcome. Together.”

He urged me forward, capturing my mouth in a kiss that started out gentle, a sealing of promises, but quickly morphed into something more urgent. Nipping and devouring, I lost track of our surroundings, basking in Nate's love and desire.

With a growl, he surged forward, climbing over me to join me in the hammock, and it swung wildly beneath us, making me squeal.

“Nate!”

He cocooned my body with his, holding still until the hammock calmed. Surrounded in the bright orange canvas, sunlight filtering into our little envelope, I couldn't help but grin up at the man above me. Dimples carved creases in his cheeks and his hazel eyes lit with love and laughter. My Nate.

We'd come a long way from lust and loathing in Las Vegas to a lifetime together. Grinning at the memories of the

pool cabana, I couldn't help the suggestive sparkle in my eyes. Lust and loving in Benton had a nice ring to it. We didn't need to leave *everything* in Vegas.

# FORMULA FOR SEDUCTION

*Excelling @ Love Book 3*

Amelia Simone

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Visit my website at <https://ameliasimoneauthor.com/>

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# BOOK DESCRIPTION

## *Formula for Seduction*

*Can the jock with a heart of gold and his data analyst secret weapon learn that practice makes perfect in the bedroom and on the field?*

Professor Carly Anderson:

What happens when the hot, out of your league football coach everyone worships specifically requests your help with his season? You use your big brain to help the team win. And maybe make a side deal with the sexy coach in the process. If you can help pull the Threshers out of their losing streak, Coach Bear will owe you a favor: tick off items on your Never Have I Ever list. No matter how kinky. After all, jocks may not be trusted, but they're always up for a good time, right?

Coach Bear—aka Ben O'Reilly:

How do you turn down the sexy data analyst who asks for your help with the hottest to-do list ever? You don't. Instead, you research. It doesn't matter if you've been a monk all season. Okay, all year. Okay, most of your life. For her, you'll figure out what a Dirty Schmiddy is. Because if she can trust you with her body, maybe she'll also trust you with her heart.

# CHAPTER 1 – CARLY

“Morning, Carly.”

I grunted my greeting in acknowledgement as I slid into a seat in the dining room next to the bubbly Lea and Neve. Oh, to be twenty-one again. Not that I’d ever been as young as my charges.

Sipping my coffee, I listened as Neve laughed while recounting her night to Lea.

“We played Never Have I Ever last night at Rho Upsilon, and most of us were lit after the first ten questions.”

Neve pushed a lock of dark blue hair behind her ear, eyes sparkling. “Grant and I both drank on the Dirty Schmiddy. Like it was fate.”

I squinted, unsure if it was the lack of coffee, or if Neve had succumbed to a foreign language I couldn’t quite decode.

Lea’s soft squeal of excitement only served to highlight my confusion. Clearly, I’d missed something.

“So. Did you?” she asked, clapping her hands together.

Neve chuckled. “You know I don’t kiss and tell. But he did ask me out.”

She sipped at her coffee, basking in Lea’s grin of approval.

“He’s hawt. What are you going to do for your date?”

Neve shrugged. “There’s a drive-in a few towns over, and he owns a truck. Maybe we’ll tick off something else on my list.”

Swallowing another mouthful of coffee, I listened as Neve and Lea chattered excitedly about her upcoming date.

*To be twenty-something and free.* Shaking my head to dispel the errant thought, I smiled when they turned their attention to me.

“What about you, Carly? Did you have a hot Saturday night?”

The teasing way Neve said it told me she expected a firm “no.” And she was right. As their house mom, I’d spent my Saturday night like always, answering the door for callers and working on the house’s books. No adventures for me. There’d been a distinct lack of slow dancing and skinny dipping in my life. Between my own full-time job and the part-time gig at the sorority, I didn’t have much time for fun.

“It was a quiet night. Just got some work done.”

Lea groaned theatrically. “Carly, you act like you’re sixty, not what—thirty-six?”

Thirty-four. But who was counting?

“When are you going to have some fun?”

“Between work and you all, I don’t have time.”

“You should make time,” Neve said. “You’re only young once.”

Some of us were never young. Never had that opportunity. Between caring for my grandmother and school, I hadn’t gotten out much. Paying off loans with multiple jobs didn’t leave any time for carefree stunts after she died.

“Hmm ... I’ll leave that to you. If you’ll excuse me, I have to get ready for brunch.”

“#SquadGoals,” Lea said with a hint of envy. “Neve and I usually settle for drive-through fast food to settle our hangovers.”

I held back my snort as I pushed to my feet. I'd been too busy for partying in school, which meant no morning-after bonding over sausage biscuits with friends. Thinking it only made me feel more melancholy for the things I'd missed. Living with a bunch of twenty-something sorority girls highlighted how narrow my life had become, and why trying new things and pushing myself was important. Lea wasn't wrong to remind me to act my age.

I spent a few minutes in my closet of an apartment, showering and changing into jeans and a soft sweater for brunch. My tiny space off the downstairs hall was at least semi-private, a precious commodity in a house of sixty women. The simple bedroom decorated in soft blues and greens with an en suite bathroom took up maybe six hundred square feet. Cloistered nuns probably had more space. But still, it was free, my favorite price. I earned a small salary and free room and board from the house's corporate board for being their resident chaperone. In return for ensuring the young tenants followed house rules, I took a chunk out of my student loans every month.

When I'd first moved to Benton, Oregon, I'd despaired of ever finding affordable housing. Renting a house on my own was out of reach on my tiny teaching salary. Taking on student roommates didn't seem like reliable income, so the house "mom" arrangement worked for me.

But it also highlighted the deficiencies in my own life. Still relatively new to town, I was just starting to make friends. I applied a few swipes of makeup to my fair skin, using cosmetics to highlight my brown eyes. Like Bambi, my ex Trevor used to say. He'd meant it as a compliment, but I couldn't help seeing the insult in comparing me to the naïve deer. He'd fixated on my eyes and red hair, assuming I'd be a hothead. Spoiler alert: not all redheads have a fiery temperament. I definitely broke the mold. His attempts to provoke me got old fast. And my one relationship of any



significance died a swift death well before I could trust him enough to try half the things I'd been wondering about.

Someone knocked softly at my door, and I grabbed my purse and phone before opening it.

“Lea.”

The other woman hovered in the hall, biting her lip.

“I hope I didn't offend you earlier,” she said.

I sighed before forcing a smile. She meant well. Lea reminded me of a younger me, if things had been different. Smart and shy, watching her blossom with the encouragement of her sisters over the last year had shaken a lot of my preconceived ideas about what it meant to be in a sorority.

“It's fine, Lea. I know I'm not the most exciting person to have around.”

Her lips twitched, the light of mischief in her eyes. “But you could change that. Think *Extreme Makeover: House Mom Edition*.”

Groaning, I shook my head. “I don't need a makeover.”

She examined my simple sweater and jeans. “Maybe not on the outside. But just think, we could come up with your own Never Have I Ever to-do list. Shake things up a little.” She arched her brows. “Maybe find you a boyfriend?”

“Lea, I appreciate the offer, but the last thing I need is sixty matchmakers. I have a sneaking suspicion that Neve's taste in men doesn't match my own.”

Lea grinned. “What, you don't like jocks? You know, they make up for what they lack between the ears with what's between their legs.”

Recoiling, I couldn't help expressing my disappointment.

“Isn’t that what some people say about sorority girls? How do you feel about that stereotype?” I asked pointedly.

“Touché, Carly. And message received. I should know better.” Lea paused a beat. “But the offer stands. We might make better matchmakers than you realize.”

Shaking my head, I left the house. Was that a promise or a threat? If I wanted a boyfriend, I’d find one myself.

Parking near the Windmill on a bright Sunday morning proved more difficult than I anticipated, and I circled the block a few times before finding a spot.

Vicki, the hostess, smiled when I pushed through the doors. The homey atmosphere welcomed me as I followed her to our usual table. Crowded with quaint wooden tables and a smattering of local artists’ works on the walls, the casual setting helped me relax.

Rita and Angi looked up from their menus, smiling, and I basked in their welcome. Angi had finally lost the tired cast to her features. She and her husband, Daniel, had recently welcomed a baby daughter who refused to sleep. Her long, sleek dark hair and dark eyes were finally starting to regain some of their pre-baby sheen.

Rita’s hair was up in a messy bun, and she pushed her glasses up as she greeted me. “Good morning, Carly. We’re still waiting on Sid, and Cheri is running late.”

Angi rolled her eyes. “Something about a walk of shame turning into breakfast instead?”

Sid arrived in time to catch Angi’s remark. “Aren’t we too old for shame?” she asked lightly as she slid into her seat. She looked sleek and cool, every long dark hair in place.

“I’ll drink to that,” Rita said, lifting her orange juice.

Angi snorted. “Some of us had no shame to begin with.” Cheri slid into a seat, dropping her purse over the back

of the chair with a quick smile for us. Gaze skipping to mine, Angi winked. “Others are a work in progress.”

I shifted in my seat, trying to shrug off the dig. A few years older than the rest of us, and the only one with a husband and infant at home, it wasn't like Angi to censure me. Then again, it shouldn't surprise me to have more of her attention than usual. Rita's boyfriend, Ed, worked with Angi's husband, and Sid had recently paired off with our colleague, Nate. That left Cheri and I as the lone singles eligible for her matchmaking.

“Enough,” I said. “I already had one lecture on how to make my life less boring this morning, I don't need another.”

“You are *not* boring,” Sid reassured. “Smart can never be boring.”

Cheri wavered a hand in the air. “I wouldn't go *that* far. Even my eyes glazed over when Professor Yang's lecture on gut microbiota lasted two hours. There may be as many bacterial cells in the gut microbiome as there are human cells in your entire body, but I am not convinced I need to know them all.” Her eyes narrowed. “So long as you stay away from GI tract TMI, I think you're safe from the boring label, Carly. Being low-key chill with no drama is a feature, not a bug.”

Touched that she thought of me that way, considering I hadn't known her as long as the others in our brunch group, I hid my reaction with a sip of coffee.

“Look at you, talking IT,” Rita teased gently.

Cheri shrugged, her lips quirking in a self-deprecating smile. “I hang out with y'all enough. It's not fair that it's the geek-speak that I've picked up from you, and not a hot boyfriend.” She rested her chin on her folded hands, fluttering her lashes. “You sure Ed, Nate, or Daniel don't have a long-lost brother tucked away somewhere who has a secret hankering to date a future midwife?”

Angi shook her head ruefully. “Unfortunately, no blood relatives, which leaves you with Jackass Number One and Jackass Number Two as your only real options in their circle.”

Rita groaned. “I assume you mean Jay, the insufferable dudebro that Daniel hired to work with him and Ed at Kwon and Associates? And Luke, the grumpy owner of Benton’s best winery?”

Cheri wrinkled her nose. “Pass. I get more than enough of Luke’s misanthropy at the bar.” She shivered. “And Jay’s arrogance rubs me the wrong way.”

Conversation shifted to the upcoming football season as we ate our meals. “Did you get season tickets?” Sid asked Angi.

“Daniel decided that he and Ed can write them off as a business expense if they use them to woo clients.”

“With football?” I asked, skeptical.

“Bro culture is alive and well, especially in a college town. Season ticket holders get access to the alumni tailgating section, which is its own networking ecosystem. You’d be surprised how many deals get made over beer and brats.”

I shook my head. I’d never been a sports fan, and the thought of wading through crowds of inebriated fans sounded like my idea of hell. Last season, I’d used Saturdays as an excuse to hunker down in my room, reading. There was no reason to brave game day traffic and the sea of jerseys clogging up every restaurant.

“Did you get tickets?” I asked Sid.

“Nope. Not my thing. Though I imagine Nate will get dragged to a game or two, now that he’s planning on working with Ed and Daniel. Maybe we could go as a group one Saturday?”

“I’ve never been to a football game, I’m not sure I’d like it,” I admitted.

Four gazes swung my way, varying degrees of shock apparent on their faces.

“Never?”

“Like *never*, never?” Sid asked.

“Never have I ever,” I said.

“Well, that’s gotta change,” Rita said with a grin. “You have to experience it at least once. The crowds, the yelling, the energy when your team wins.”

I shuddered. I’d heard enough complaints from the Chi Beta sorority sisters to fill in the rest. The lines for the bathrooms. Obnoxious drunks. *No thank you.*

“The men in tight pants with excellent physiques, all hot and sweaty ...” Angi said.

“And handsome head coaches,” Sid added with a twitch of her lips.

My breath caught. Ben. Coach Bear. Watching him on the field wouldn’t be a hardship. But watching him work from a seat in the stands wouldn’t be anything like running into him at our department fundraising dinner. Even I’d recognized the Threshers’ head coach when he was unexpectedly seated next to me at our table. A mountain of a man, he’d towered over me, the crinkles around his eyes exuding ease as he chatted over our meal. I’d spent the whole dinner watching him. Like a creeping creeper. Tongue-tied by the handsome man who radiated heat next to me.

Something about my expression kindled a gleam in Angi’s eyes.

“That settles it. I’m getting you a ticket for Saturday.”

I gulped. Ready or not, my Never Have I Ever list was about to become one item shorter.

# CHAPTER 2 – CARLY

“Boooo!”

I winced as fans around me took up the call, adding their own derision to the mix, until the stadium rumbled like thunder.

“Another bad call,” Angi muttered beside me.

I shifted on the hard seat, wishing I were somewhere else. Anywhere else. The fall day had started out sunny, but brisk. A perfect day for football, she’d reassured me as we’d taken our seats with Ed, Daniel, and Rita.

I had my doubts. The sweet grandmother on my right turned out to be a foul-mouthed fan, yelling obscenity after obscenity as the Threshers fought for every yard on the field.

Aside from having my eardrums accosted, the palpable disappointment from the stadium full of fans made for a somber mood.

I watched as Ben, Coach Bear, huddled with his team during a timeout, before clapping his hands as they took the field for another play. Dressed in Threshers athletic gear, he looked intent but calm on the field. I shuddered. Having that many eyes on me would stress me out, but he looked at ease, confident.

“Another turnover. Come on,” Angi muttered in disgust.

I could barely follow the movement on the field, but one thing was clear: the Threshers were losing. Badly.

The coaching staff kept conferring, but none of the changes they made helped. Play after play, the Threshers lost yards or fumbled in the face of their opponent from California. Coach Bear remained stoic, and I admired his cool. He’d caught my attention at our department fundraiser. Not my usual type,

something about the coach's big body and charisma made it impossible to look away. Handsome and distinguished, I hadn't expected him to also be kind. He'd listened thoughtfully to our tablemates, keeping the conversation flowing smoothly over dinner. Never boastful or loud, he'd drawn me in with his quiet smile and questions about my work. He'd made me feel seen. And in return, I couldn't help but root for him and his team, even though football wasn't my thing.

After a disappointing loss, Rita cajoled me into going with them to Porter's Pints, and reluctantly I agreed. Ed ordered pints for us, and we sat around the table, sipping quietly.

"Bear is going to get fired at this rate," Daniel said morosely, taking a sip of his dark beer. "Between last year's losses and having no wins this season, it's not looking good. Coming back from a zero and four record is going to be tough with the teams they're up against."

Angi gripped her husband's hand, squeezing it gently. "I don't want to say anything bad about a friend, but today was ... woof."

"I didn't realize you were close," I said tentatively.

She nodded, smoothing an errant strand into her ponytail. "We met at university. He's a nice guy. Maybe too nice for coaching."

I bristled. "How can someone be too nice?" I asked.

Rita's significant other and Daniel's business partner, Ed's brows rose. "Did you see how we played out on the field today? It was a massacre."

"Surely, that's not the coach's fault."

"Heavy is the head that wears the crown. He'll be blamed if the Threshers can't turn it around. This is the last year of his contract. He's in his second year of a two-year contract with an almost winless record. Last season the Threshers only eked

out three victories under his leadership. All the charisma in the world can't counterbalance losing. Coach Bear has gone from one of the winningest high school coaches in history to having one of the sorriest college records."

Part of me rebelled at his analysis, the insistence that winning wasn't everything, but I knew he was right. If nothing else, today had served as a reminder that football fans could be bloodthirsty. Ruthless. I couldn't imagine constantly working under that much pressure.

All over a silly game.

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"Dr. Anderson, can you hang back after the staff meeting? I've got a special request for you."

Our department head, Dr. Bernard, had clearly gotten the universe's memo that this was Challenge Carly Month. As relatively new faculty, I was still struggling to establish myself. Teaching introductory business courses, especially those focused on data collection and analysis, didn't exactly make me a hot commodity. I'd yet to bring in grants or publish to add to my prestige.

Mouth dry, I could only wonder what he would ask. Dr. Bernard had gained a reputation for volunteering members of our department for assorted tasks for the college. Last time, he'd paired Nate and Sid as co-chairs for the department fundraising dinner, ignoring their rivalry. I'd been sure we'd find either Nate or Sid's dead body littering the campus because of their forced collaboration, but instead they'd ended up a couple. Somehow, I doubted I'd get that lucky.

I closed my eyes briefly. *Please don't make me do something painful.*

"I promise, this won't hurt a bit."

My eyes popped open at his reassuring words. Dr. Bernard smiled beatifically at me, and every muscle tightened, waiting



for the ask.

“Our football program is very important to President Nelson. She’s invested a lot in our new Coach O’Reilly. After the disaster of last season—and Saturday’s performance—she’s asked for some help from our department.”

“Help? From Business Information Services?”

*From me?* Our department within the College of Business was relatively small. Somehow, I doubted she’d asked for me personally. I’d never met President Nelson. The possibility that Coach Bear had requested me flitted across my mind before I tamped it down. He may have made a big impression on me at the fundraiser, but it seemed unlikely the interest was mutual. He was small-town famous, and I was the stranger seated with him at a professional function.

“Yes. She thinks you’re perfectly suited to help the coach analyze his program and players, see trends the coaching staff are missing.”

I swallowed, fighting back my immediate refusal for a softer approach. “I don’t see how I can help. I’m not much of a football fan.”

“Exactly.” He smiled. “That’s what makes you perfect. I need someone who won’t be influenced by the coach or players. This is an excellent opportunity to impress President Nelson and help our college. Show them what us geeks can do, eh?”

A soft knock had me swinging my gaze to the door as Dr. Bernard moved to open it.

“Coach Bear, just in time.”

Betrayed, I glared at Dr. Bernard. Clearly, I’d been set up. He’d engineered this meeting to ensure I couldn’t refuse. Admittedly, helping my profile with the president wouldn’t be a bad thing for my teaching career. If we won. But what if we lost? I knew nothing about football. Saturday had been my

first-ever game. In high school, I'd been too busy with homework and caring for my grandma. After that, sports lost their allure. I'd just never made a point to go.

Why was the universe punishing me now, forcing me to participate in everything I'd previously missed out on? Choosing to embrace new challenges on my own terms was one thing; being manipulated into accepting them another. I pushed down the feeling that everything was crashing down on me at once, forcing a deep breath.

Coach Bear turned his kind gaze on me, smiling gently. "Carly, isn't it?"

Struck that he remembered my name after one awkward professional dinner, I held out my hand. His big paw engulfed mine, making me feel dainty by comparison. His corded forearms drew my gaze, and my hand tingled in a flash of fire at the warm brush of his palm. I was afraid to look up and confirm that the sensation was one-sided. I was too old for a crush on the high school quarterback, let alone the handsome older coach. The drafted man wouldn't even let me bury my feelings under a macho display that might kill the lingering feelings. Any fears of a crushing grip to assert his dominance and jock image died when he cupped my hand in both of his, his left hand gentle on top of mine as if to reassure me of his sincerity.

"Coach Bear. Nice to see you again," I mumbled to hide my overheated response.

Dr. Bernard clapped his hands together. "You're already friends. How wonderful. Coach, I was just explaining the project to Dr. Anderson."

Was it my imagination, or did Coach Bear's smile not reach his eyes as he took a seat at the conference room table? Maybe I wasn't the only one being strong-armed into this project?

Coach Bear's easy smile made me doubt my assessment. "What the boss wants, the boss gets. President Nelson seems

keen on this idea of utilizing a more structured data analysis for our players and plays. My own personal *Moneyball* analyst.” Turning to me, he said, “I understand you’re the brain to beat around here. Queen of the data and all that. I’m hoping you can help us out.”

Mesmerized by his blue eyes, I could only nod. A Threshers’ baseball hat covered his short silver hair, and he’d worn jeans and a team logo polo in blue and silver over his massive chest. His shoulders looked broad enough to carry the weight of the world, and peering more closely at the tired lines around his eyes, I thought maybe they did.

“Excellent.” Dr. Bernard clasped his hands together over his rotund belly. “I’ll let you get to work. Dr. Anderson, I’ve talked to Dr. Spaulding about taking over a section of your intro class to give you more time to devote to Coach, here. We want you to have everything you need to win, right? Go Threshers.”

With that soft pronouncement, Dr. Bernard excused himself, leaving me alone with Coach Bear.

Silence stretched between us, and I searched for something to say.

“I saw the game on Saturday,” I finally blurted out.

No need to tell him it was my first ever.

He winced, and I felt bad for reminding him of the loss.

“Well, then I guess you know why you and I are here.”

His obvious reluctance over our assignment pricked my ego. It wasn’t like I’d asked for this either.

“I don’t really know anything about football,” I admitted reluctantly.

“According to President Nelson, that makes two of us,” he muttered.

Ouch.

He took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. “But data analytics are all the rage in the NFL right now, and working together can’t hurt, can it?”

His smile took the sting out of the words, and I mustered one of my own.

“I’m glad to help, if I can.”

“For both our sakes, we’ll hope you’re as much of a wiz as Dr. Bernard claims.”

“I have so much magic, I leak it out of my pores. So long as, if by magic you mean an unhealthy obsession with math and a hard-on for spreadsheets.”

I wanted to call the words back as soon as they popped out. Instead of letting him think I was cool, collected, and professional, I’d opened my mouth and said “hard-on” in front of him. Not exactly the image I was going for. Yes, I could crunch their stats and likely point out things the coaching staff had missed. My lack of football experience would be an asset. Up to a point. Then I’d have to lean on the coaching staff. After watching the team play, it wouldn’t take much guidance until my brain buzzed with the underlying patterns, ready to be teased out and quantified in a spreadsheet. Once I made the numbers concrete, finessing them into something the coaches could use wouldn’t take long. Thus, my undying Excel love.

Luckily, he seemed amused by my love for spreadsheets. His soft smile made my stomach swirl.

“I love a colleague with passion for their field. I look forward to working with you, Doc. Let’s exchange numbers, and we can figure out next steps.”

I used the excuse of looking at my phone, typing in his number, to let the sudden heat that flared in my cheeks cool, trying to maintain my composure. He was a handsome, mature man. Responding like a nervous schoolgirl with her first crush wouldn’t impress him. He was semi-famous on campus,

probably used to adoring fans, but that didn't mean I wanted to be lumped in with them.

Glancing up from my phone, I caught him watching me, an open smile on his face. He thrust out a hand for another businesslike shake, and I tried to project cool as I extended my own hand, letting our palms touch.

Resisting the urge to pull my hand back like I'd been zapped, I forced a calm smile to my face. I didn't need to betray the ticklish sensation his callused hand, warm and sure, elicited in me. On the surface, it was a perfectly professional handshake between colleagues. My eyes searched his, seeing only friendly affability there, and I bit back a ping of disappointment. I may be going up in flames inside, but the cute coach seemed unaffected.

“It's been a pleasure meeting you, Carly.”

I stood, frozen from the brief contact. Tingles radiated from where we'd touched. Shaking out my hands, I tried to ignore the lingering heat. Surely that was just the early onset of carpal tunnel. I couldn't afford attraction to my new partner.

Never have I ever ... been attracted to a jock. Even one as down-to-earth as Coach Bear appeared. And I wouldn't be starting now. Our relationship was purely professional. Friendly colleagues. Nothing more.

## CHAPTER 3 – BEN

Visions of red curls and brown eyes followed me out to my truck, Rammy, stroking the Starfleet emblem that swung from the rearview mirror, a reminder that I was the captain of my own destiny. Just my luck that the most beautiful woman I'd met since moving to Benton was now my project analyst. If it weren't for bad luck, I'd have none at all. I needed to turn my luck around, stat. By whatever means necessary. Even if it meant working with the attractive doctor, forced to inhale her spicy perfume day after day. Holding back every instinct to slip and call her Dr. Crusher, like the feisty redhead of *Star Trek* fame. Brains *and* beauty? *Yes, please*. The intelligence in her brown eyes drew me in, her quiet warmth only adding to her appeal. Everything about her reminded me of my teen obsession with the smart and sultry Dr. Crusher. Maybe she'd let me get away with the simple nickname of "Doc" to avoid embarrassing myself totally?

My body tightened, and I frowned. At this rate, my celibacy pledge would be as doomed as my college coaching career. Shaking off the thought, I focused on my goal: not to win, but to build a program, a family, I could be proud of.

President Nelson had brushed off my answer when she'd initially asked about my coaching goals. No doubt, she'd thought it was false modesty when I told her I never set out to win. As the high school football coach with the most career wins in a five-year period, maybe her skepticism was warranted. In Colville, we'd created football magic. I'd built a team that felt more like a family, and year after year, we scored for each other. For the joy of playing the game together. And try as I might, I was struggling to recreate that chemistry at Oregon College.

Maybe it was me who had changed? I'd thought the move would do me good, that stepping away from the influence of my small hometown would be a fresh start. But moving to Benton hadn't been the win I'd thought it would be.

In Colville, I'd been Coach Bear, but most of the town still remembered me as the scrawny kid with skinned knees. A big fish in a small pond, but still human. The reactions I garnered in Benton took me by surprise. More object than person, I'd been spit on, cussed at, and given free drinks and come-ons strong enough to make a grown man blush. I'd hoped some of the pseudo-celebrity status would wane after my first season, but going into my sophomore coaching year, the positive and negative reactions had only amped up.

And President Nelson was determined that we'd win. Returning home to Colville in defeat wasn't an option, so making the Threshers a winning team had to take top priority. Over everything else, including cute data professors.

Parking in my assigned spot, I pulled open the doors to the athletic center and entered the training room.

"Hey, Coach," Jaydon said from his seat on the bench press as I wound through the equipment toward my office.

"Shouldn't you be in class?"

The wide receiver shrugged. "I figured you'd approve of me putting in extra reps."

"Jaydon, extra reps won't mean much if you don't have the grades to play. Or graduate. Get to class."

"Yes, sir."

I winced as I continued on toward my office beyond the training room. They were all so polite. None of the casual comradery I was used to. Then again, half the team wasn't related to me by friendship or blood.

I flopped into my office chair, hearing it give a pained wheezed as it took my full weight. Spinning, I turned to my

whiteboard, and the roster assembled there. All fine players. Talented. So why couldn't I help them win?

"Coach Bear, you got a minute?"

I spun back toward the door, gesturing Mario forward. "Sure, Coach Ruiz. What have you got?"

We talked through film he'd been watching, diagnosing the previous Saturday's defense and their tells.

"Oh, and Ruiz? We'll have a new staff member with us Saturday."

Mario's brows rose, almost disappearing beneath his hat. "A new coach?"

"Nah. Data analyst. Dr. Anderson. She'll be joining us on the field. By special request of the President."

Mario wrinkled his nose. "The last thing we need is an outsider, interrupting our flow."

I bristled, the flare of protectiveness for Carly, no, *Dr. Anderson*, taking me by surprise. "Dr. Anderson is here to help. I expect the team to treat her with respect."

"What if she's a spy for President Nelson?"

"College football doesn't warrant espionage, Mario. I'm sure asking Dr. Anderson to help us is nothing more than what it seems: an offer of university resources to make the program stronger."

"Just so long as she's evaluating the team, not the coaching staff," Mario muttered.

Mario's words hung in the air long after he left. Would the other coaches and players share his suspicions? Carly hadn't seemed excited about her assignment, but I didn't see her as anything but an asset. And there was no way I'd seed doubts in my team's mind. Together, we'd present a united front.



To ensure that happened, I needed a different strategy. Bringing her in cold on Saturday, keeping her on the outside, would only serve to raise more suspicion. I pulled out my phone to message her.

*Ben: Change of plans. We need privacy and my schedule is packed. Can you meet me at my house tonight? I'll cook, and we can talk about our joint project before I introduce you to the team.*

Maybe I could prime her with a little wine and good food, ensure she struck the right note with the guys. Prep her a bit.

*Carly: Sure. Text me your address?*

I sent the location, biting my lip. She'd be the first guest I'd brought to Luke's guest house in over a year.

Friends since our days playing college ball, I'd rented his refurbished barn instead of getting a house in town, thinking the quiet would suit me. Set near his fields, the big building offered space and privacy, two things I'd grown to cherish.

I fidgeted like an antsy fourth grader while waiting for Carly after work. *Dr. Anderson*. As much as I wanted to eschew formal titles, keeping space between us might save my sanity.

Playing it safe, I'd prepared a simple meal for dinner: roast beef and vegetables. Not exactly glamorous, but filling and hearty. It was impossible to be annoyed with a full stomach. And with that in mind, I'd prepared appetizers too. Maybe feeding Dr. Anderson would take some of the sting out of her assignment on this project. Now, if only someone could take the sting out for me.

The gravel crunch on the drive before the soft knock at the door.

Carly, *Dr. Anderson*, stood on the postage-stamp concrete porch, twisting a bottle of wine in her hands.

“Welcome,” I said, taking her in as she stepped into the entryway. Soft light lit glints of flame in her hair, and the scent of jasmine wafted my way. Skin or perfume, either way, I was intoxicated.

“Here.” She thrust the bottle toward me. “Though it seems a little redundant now,” she said, waving her arms toward the vineyards beyond my front door.

“I had no idea you lived at Wilcox Vineyards. Are you involved in the winery at all?”

“Nah, Luke Wilcox, the owner, and I are friends from school. He offered me his vacation rental when I told him I was moving to town.”

“Wow. You lucked out. This is beautiful.”

She took in the soaring roof with exposed beams and the staircase leading to the loft bedroom. Luke had spent months poring over the designs, infusing the space with a rural charm. Pride in my friend swelled my chest.

“Woodworking is Luke’s hobby. He refurbished the barn when his family gave up raising livestock and planted the vines. If you like this, you should see the hay barn. It’s a really popular wedding venue.”

She smiled politely, and I realized I’d been rambling. “But you didn’t come all the way out to the boonies to hear me bumble on about construction. We’re here for football. Come into the kitchen. I’ll pour our glasses and we can enjoy the nibbles I made.”

I saw her mouth the word “nibble” and winced. Not exactly living up to my masculine image. Practically living at my Aunt Lydia’s growing up meant I’d picked up her flair for cooking and the occasional embarrassing habit. I pivoted on my heel, striding to the kitchen, hoping the motion would burn

away my nerves. Carly was a colleague. Here to talk about football. Not a date.

Turning in time to catch her first glimpse of the kitchen, I held back another wince at her expression. Jaw dropped, eyes round, I looked at the table, trying to see where I'd gone wrong. The spread showcased some of my better dishes. Stuffed mushrooms, a plate of cheeses, bacon-wrapped dates, and veggies with homemade dill dip capped off the display. The dishes looked complicated, but all came together relatively quickly. Speed was necessity when I juggled a full schedule of practices and coaching meetings.

“All this ... is for just us?” she asked faintly.

My brow cleared, and I grinned sheepishly. “Yeah. I forgot you're only yea big and not a strapping football player. I'm used to big appetites. Don't worry, I'll take anything we don't finish in to the team tomorrow and it'll be gone in seconds.”

“You cooked all of it?”

“Football may be life, but food is how I show love,” I said on a shrug.

Carly's eyes widened, and I wondered if I'd taken things too far. I loved cooking, and players loved to eat. Win-win. Pushing past the feeling that I'd exposed too much, I poured us each a glass of wine before joining her at the table. I watched in satisfaction as she picked through the array of goodies to fill a plate.

She bit into one of the dates and closed her eyes in what looked like bliss, and I hid my smile. Carly, *Dr. Anderson*, may have seemed dismayed by me overdoing it, but no one could resist a gooey, bacon-wrapped, cheesy bomb of goodness.

Clearing my throat to push away any lingering pride from watching her enjoy my cooking, I said, “I wanted to talk to you before we meet with the team tomorrow, make a game

plan.” I scooped a slice of carrot through the dill dip, enjoying the crunch between my teeth, before continuing. “Some of the guys may be a little ambivalent about having someone new watching them. Especially the coaches,” I admitted, watching her expression.

Brow furrowed, she said, “I’m not there for the coaches. I’m capturing stats on the players. Helping support your recruiting program with data for next year and eventually refining your play strategies.”

“Right, right. I just wanted you to know what you’re walking into, and that I’ll support you. The guys can be rough around the edges, but they’ve got good hearts. And they love the game.” I swiped another carrot, watching her as I munched. She’d devoured half her plate, and I could only shift in my seat as her blissed-out face made another appearance when she tried a stuffed mushroom.

“Oh. My. God.”

Her moan made me briefly uncomfortable, and I chuckled, trying to cover. “Nah. Just Ben.” I winked. “I’m a pastor’s son, I don’t aspire to anything higher than my current profession.”

“Sorry.” She smiled, and I resisted the impulse to push back the tendril of red hair that crept over one brown eye. “You can call me Carly.”

“Yeah, after hearing you moan, sticking to formal titles was going to be tough,” I teased.

She flushed red, and I grimaced. “Now I’m the sorry one. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

Carly shook her head. “Let’s agree never to be sorry, Ben. Just honest.”

Unable to break the connection, I nodded. “I can do that.”

With her dark gaze, she could have asked me to dance naked across the quad and I'd agree. For a man of thirty-nine, I should be ashamed to admit it, but something about Carly hit me like a linebacker with a grudge.

I loaded up a plate before gesturing back to my living room. "Shall we go watch some tape together, brainstorm a bit before dinner?"

Carly glanced from her plate to the spread on the kitchen table.

"This isn't dinner?"

"Uh, no. I made pot roast and root vegetables for the main course."

Carly glanced down at her jeans, muttering, "Why didn't he tell me to wear an elastic waistband?" She looked up with a tentative smile. "I'll follow your lead."

We settled on my leather couch, Carly with her laptop, and I queued up the feed from our last practice, playing it on the TV that took up one wall.

Carly stared at the screen, watching play after play while I narrated. We reviewed a handful of patterns, and she sighed, "I'm not sure I'm the right person for this assignment."

"Sure, you are, Doc." I said with as much confidence as I could muster. If the President thought I needed help to win, I wasn't going to let this opportunity slip through my fingers. With our win-loss record of 2-4, I owed it to my team to try everything. "Let me roll you through the playbook and the handful of numbers we already track on my laptop. The team may look like a mess of ants on screen, but once you see the order behind it, I bet it'll make more sense. To hear your department chair tell it, you're a whiz with databases and numbers and the like. This will be a piece of cake."

"But I don't know squat about football," she said softly. "The last twenty minutes have been a blur."

Shrugging, I tried not to let on my dismay. “It’s easy. I’ll tutor you. It’ll be like in high school, but in reverse.”

She arched a brow, smiling. “The jock schools the nerd?”

“I might not put it exactly like that, but you’ve got the idea. In tenth grade, Zander Nimitz helped me pass geometry, and I taught him how to tackle. We supported each other.”

Seeming soothed, Carly relaxed into the sofa, turning back to the TV, the soft glow from her laptop illuminating her features.

“Okay, then, Ben. Talk me through what I’m seeing, because honestly? I have no clue.”

An hour later, I’d talked myself hoarse, but I was more confident that Carly’s head nods were less to pacify me, and more because she was catching on to the plays I described and their relative value in different game situations. I excused myself to pull the roast from the oven, enjoying the aromatic steam tinged with garlic and rosemary.

“Ohh ...”

The soft exhale caught me by surprise, and I almost fumbled the pan before landing it safely on the stovetop. Carly stood in the door to the kitchen, her face soft and almost wistful.

“You’re acting like no one ever feeds you,” I chided gently, watching her face as what looked like sorrow arched across. “Everything okay?”

She smoothed hands down her jeans, bringing my attention to her delicate fingers as she nodded.

“Yeah. I just don’t usually eat quite this well. I live in a sorority. There’s a lot of salad and chicken, not so much red meat and rich food.”

I scratched my head. “Aren’t you ... a little old for that?”

She chuckled. “I didn’t mean I’m *in* the sorority, I’m their house mom. I live there. Kind of like a chaperone.”

“Do you walk around the house, yelling at everyone to leave plenty of room for Jesus?” Her laugh made me grin, and I shrugged, pulling plates from the cabinet. “Okay, maybe not everyone takes that job as seriously as my dad did at high school dances.”

Carly followed my lead, clearing room, and soon we had the roast cut and plates on the table.

“This looks amazing. How did you learn to cook?”

I tried not to puff up, but she was clearly impressed—about something I’d done *off* the field.

“My home economics teacher, Mrs. Smith, would be pleased to hear you say that. My first lessons started with her before I graduated to my Aunt Lydia’s kitchen.”

“Where did you grow up again?”

“A small town in eastern Washington, called Colville. You ever heard of it?”

“Nope.” She forked a bite and closed her eyes as she chewed. Watching the pleasure wash across her face, it seemed like Mrs. Smith deserved a thank-you letter from me. She’d always said everyone needed to learn to cook if they wanted something more than the smoke alarm cheering them on.

“Well, it’s tiny. Only a few thousand people. But it’s home.”

“Is that where you used to coach?”

I nodded. “We won the state championships. Five times in a row.”

Her face contorted into something approaching impressed.

“Don’t be too awed. I was far short of the record for the longest high school win streak when President Nelson offered me this gig in Oregon.”

“Do you mind me asking, why did you leave Colville? Sounds like you were the hometown hero.”

“And here, I’m a zero?”

She winced. “I wouldn’t put it like that ...”

My lips twitched in a smile. She wouldn’t. Others were much blunter. Including my father. A lot was riding on our fall season. Last year, we’d lost almost every game on the road, only winning at home. That record had to improve this season for me to keep my job.

“What about you?” I asked.

“Hmm ...” She looked up from her plate, seeming startled by the shift.

“What brought you to Benton? Are you local?”

“Not really. My grandmother raised me in southern Oregon, and I went to school down south after she passed.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” I said, reaching out a hand to cover hers. “My mom died when I was in middle school.”

She flipped her hand beneath mine, giving my fingers a soft squeeze, before moving her hand to her lap. The fleeting caress remained with me, long after her hand disappeared beneath the table. How long had it been, since I’d really been touched? Too long, if I was mooning over a brush of fingers at the dinner table.

Clearing my throat, I made an attempt to lighten the mood.

“You ready to learn the difference between a pooch kick and a squib kick?”

I chuckled at her pained grimace.



“Come on, it won’t be that bad. I’ll have you immersed in football before you know it.”

“I’m already convinced I’m over my head,” she said softly.

“Nah. I’ve got your life preserver, right here,” I said, tapping my temple. “We’ll make a great team, you’ll see.”

Her soft eyes had me spewing new levels of confident bullshit, trying to ease some of the tension on her face. We were in this together, whether we liked it or not. And something about Carly stirred my protective instincts. I wouldn’t let the other coaches push her around. As much as I hadn’t wanted to admit it to President Nelson, having Carly’s smarts on our side could only help. ‘Cause on my own, I wasn’t doing so hot.

# CHAPTER 4 – CARLY

Even after hours spent talking football with Ben, I wasn't convinced I'd pull off the meeting with his coaches without ending up rocking in the corner. For whatever reason, Ben didn't trip my survival instincts, he was surprisingly easy-going, but the thought of facing a room full of oversized testosterone junkies made me sick to my stomach. Skipping breakfast to soothe myself didn't help my nerves as much as I hoped.

I'd agreed to meet Ben and his staff at the sports complex bright and early before watching practice. We'd decided that I'd spend a week getting to know the team and his systems before I dove into any real analysis. To supplement, I'd started reading as much as I could about the sport, especially the underlying stats and acknowledged key performance indicators. Seeking first to understand, my motto.

I walked into the conference room on the first floor of the sports center beneath the bleachers, trying not to let panic overwhelm me. Ben's broad shoulders were suspiciously absent. Instead, the room was full of big bodies and the hint of sweat. As if it had been baked into the DNA of the building, that faint odor clung to everything, and my nose wrinkled.

The collection of men avoided my gaze, and I had to wonder what they'd been told about me. Since I had a class later in the afternoon, I'd dressed for lecturing—slacks and a deep rose blazer over a white silk shell. Classic and simple, in front of my mirror, I'd looked professional.

Now, surrounded by athletic gear, polos, and baseball hats pulled low over brooding eyes, my outfit only highlighted my outsider status.

Ben shouldered open the door, catching my gaze with a crooked grin.

“Carly! You made it. So glad you could be here with us. Right, fellas?”

He held eye contact with each of his assembled henchmen, and man-by-man, they nodded. He beamed. “Excellent. Before we get started, I brought treats. Thought I’d sweeten the deal, yeah?”

He dropped a picnic basket on the conference table, complete with red-checked cloth. *How did he have time to bake? Did the man never sleep?*

My stomach growled audibly, and his gaze caught mine. “Dig in, Carly.”

I didn’t even know what he brought, but my mouth watered at the kind light in his eyes. Positively Pavlovian. For the man, or the goodies? Shoving the errant thought away, I tugged the napkin aside, happy to have food to focus on to help me ignore the stares of Ben’s coaching staff.

“Scones?” I asked, recognizing the signature shape.

“Yep. Homemade. I hope you like them.”

Inhaling deeply, the rich butter and sugar scent overwhelmed the raw manly ambience of the room, and I relaxed, reaching for one. The others pounced on the basket, grabbing scones of their own, until only a few sad crumbs remained.

Sipping from my travel mug, I contemplated my scone. It was almost too pretty to eat. My gut gurgled, and Ben winked at me over his coffee. “Better take care of that. Can’t have you noodling on an empty stomach.”

I bit into my pastry, letting the buttery softness melt across my tongue. “So ... good,” I murmured. Too often, the dry texture of scones felt more like chalk in my mouth, but not Ben’s. There was probably a stick of butter in each one, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. His offering soothed my sour stomach, helping me relax.

Ben preened, seemingly pleased at the compliment, and I couldn't hold back my smile. Like the others, he wore a dark blue Oregon College polo that perfectly outlined his broad shoulders, nipping in at his lean waist. The ballcap shadowed his eyes but couldn't hide his contented expression.

“Right, then. Team, please join me in welcoming our very own team doctor of—hey, Carly, what are you a doctor of again?”

I swallowed, too hopped up on sugar and calories to care that he hadn't remembered. “Business administration,” I mumbled. True, my specialty was in business analytics, but there wasn't technically a degree that specific.

“Business administration,” he said, as if it was the most novel thing he'd ever heard. “She's here to help us with a data analytics program that will help us maximize our players' skills on the field and win. Our very own sabermetrics system. That's what the fancy front office people call their gut.”

I winced, not loving his descriptor, and a gray-haired coach two seats down shared my pained expression.

“Coach Bear, is my gut not good enough for you anymore?” the older man asked. “I've got thirty years of football experience to back it up. What does she have?”

My shoulders rose toward my ears with every word, picking up on the hint of scorn running heavy beneath them.

Ben held his hands out and down in a placating gesture. “Now, fellas. I love a good gut.” He paused, slapping at his obliques. I watched for the hint of a jiggle, but his side remained rock solid. “We've got to pull out all the stops to get this team firing on all cylinders. That includes letting the good doctor work her magic.”

I could have done without him referring to the years of work I'd put into understanding data analysis techniques like regression analysis and factor analysis *magic*, but at least the other coaches were nodding along with Ben.

“Okay then, sound off. Let Dr. Anderson know your specialty, then we’ll get down to business.”

One by one, the coaching staff introduced themselves. The older man who’d complained identified himself as Pat Stutzman, Ben’s assistant coach. Another burly dark-haired man grunted, “Matt Chun, offensive coach.”

The rest of the meeting passed in a haze. I did my best to take notes, jotting down any new football jargon I learned, but most of the group spoke so fast, it was difficult to stay caught up. When Ben dismissed us, the room cleared out quickly, but I held back, sensing from his gaze on me that he wanted to talk.

“Everything okay?” he asked.

I forced a smile. “The scones were excellent.”

He rubbed his hands together. “Good, good. I’m glad you liked them. I thought they might help break the ice with the guys.”

Maybe I wasn’t the only one with Pavlovian instincts?

“They were a bribe?”

He tilted his head back and forth. “Bribe is a strong word. And honestly, one we avoid in NCAA athletics. Let’s call it a goodwill gesture.”

“Doesn’t that only work if I brought the scones?”

His gaze swung to me, assessing. “I don’t know, can you cook?”

“No,” I squeaked, the intensity of his blue eyes making me feel like I’d been caught under a spotlight, instantly too warm, threatening to tilt into sweaty. Suddenly, the room’s odor made more sense.

“Then, you’d better leave the scone-baking to me.” He squinted. “Unless you want to come over and help me? That could be fun?”

I opened my mouth but couldn't form words. How had we gone from debriefing after what was essentially a business meeting to him offering to teach me to bake?

Something about Ben was just too disarming. Not the gruff prima donna athlete I was expecting. Instead, he radiated confident calm and had the kindest eyes I'd ever seen.

"Carly? Do you wanna build a sco-one?" He grinned after his mock-serenade. "It's not exactly snowman building season, but I'm pretty good at those too." He slapped his hands on his thighs, drawing my attention to the giant tree trunks of his legs straining against his dark blue athletic pants. "Whelp. What's the verdict, Doc? You in?"

Shaking myself, I focused on Ben's face. Were we still talking about baking?

"Uh, sure."

"Great, come over tonight? We can bake a fresh batch and talk more about our plans."

He rubbed his hands together, looking altogether too gleeful for a man who'd just offered to tutor me in the kitchen. Should I warn him that the fire department had urged my grandma to keep me limited to microwave duty?

"This is going to work out, Carly, I can feel it."

He sketched a quick salute before striding out of the room, leaving me staring after him.

The man was a menace. Did he twist everyone to his bidding without trying? How? His charm was undeniable. I lifted my hair off the back of my neck, winding it around my hands. Ben O'Reilly was a force to be reckoned with on and off the field.

After a day full of lecturing, I'd nearly forgotten about my plans to meet up with Ben for scone lessons. *Liar*. Okay, maybe it was *all* I could think about. I rushed through checking my email in my office, then home to change. Slacks

and a blazer wouldn't do for kitchen duty. Donning jeans and a T-shirt that I thought complemented my delicate coloring, I smoothed my hair into a ponytail. A cocktail of excitement and apprehension bubbled under my skin, pinkening my cheeks.

My eagerness was all about wrangling another dinner invitation from Ben and the opportunity to enjoy his delicious cooking, no offense to Jan, the Chi Beta sorority house cook. The poor woman was stuck making meals that appealed to the mix of dietary restrictions common in a house of sixty. It wasn't her fault that Ben drenched everything in butter and spices.

My stomach gurgled, and I grabbed my purse, striding down the hall.

"Carly, you have dinner plans? Not going to eat with us tonight? I hoped we could talk about the house wish list, see if we can squeeze anything out of the budget for this year," Neve called from the dining room door.

"Sorry, Neve, we'll talk tomorrow."

Proud of myself for pushing back, not letting another evening become consumed with house business, I waved jauntily and stepped out the front door and into the crisp fall air. Drawing in a deep breath, I caught the hint of damp and leaves running under the city exhaust. The drive out of town and to Wilcox Vineyards didn't take long, and I smiled when Ben pulled open the door, waiting for me on his front step.

He'd changed too, pulling on well-worn jeans and a plaid flannel shirt. Gone was the baseball cap from earlier, letting me see the full force of his easy grin.

"Carly! You made it. I've got dinner about ready, then we can get to baking."

I stepped inside, inhaling deeply, trying to place the scents. Ben watched, waiting, a playful expression taking over his features.

“Can you guess what it is?”

“Hmmm ... spaghetti and garlic bread?”

“Gosh, you’re good! Yep. I loaded the bread up with enough garlic to kill twenty vampires, so I hope you’re not planning on kissing anyone tonight.”

I laughed uncomfortably. “Not a problem. Not tonight ...” I smiled weakly. “Not any night,” I muttered under my breath.

“What was that?” he asked, his face open and friendly.

“Nothing,” I said, gesturing toward the kitchen. “I’m starving. Shall we eat?”

He nodded affably, and I followed him toward the stove, pulling plates and glasses from the cabinet. We sat down, and Ben consumed his pasta like a man possessed. I noticed he grabbed a second helping of the garlic bread. Everything was delicious. And probably garlicky enough to slay a whole vampire brood.

We’d been quiet through the meal, but it was a companionable silence. Not the awkward no-idea-what-to-say experience I usually had in the presence of near strangers. Smiling to myself, I acknowledged that Ben would be offended by me categorizing him as a stranger. Clearly, he was the kind of man who was friends with everyone he met.

I helped him clear the table and clean up before he offered me an apron from the back of a cabinet door. Ben slipped into a navy apron of his own, and I guffawed as I caught the slogan on the front.

“Mr. Good-Looking is cooking, huh?” I teased.

He mimed brushing dirt off his shoulders. “What? You don’t agree? This apron was a gift from my sister.” He pointed at me. “So was that one.”



Glancing down, I realized I hadn't escaped the kitschy apron sayings. Mine read, EVERY BUTT DESERVES A GOOD RUB.

Laughing, I followed his lead as he pulled a mixing bowl and ingredients from the pantry, gathering the butter from the freezer.

He measured and dumped flour into the bowl as I watched.

"The secret to a delicious and moist scone is frozen butter. Much easier to grate and mix that way."

Shivering, I watched his strong hands stroke the cube along his box grater. He glanced up with a smile before handing me a fresh cube.

"Here, you try."

Focusing on the grater in front of me so I didn't lose any chunks of finger, I followed his advice, slowly unwrapping the stick as the pile of shavings grew.

"And now, we mix," he said, mischief lighting his eyes.

"Where's the spoon?"

"We don't need no stinking spoon. Dig in."

He slipped behind me, until the bulk of his warm body eclipsed mine, and I stood frozen. Goosebumps bloomed along my arms, the fine hairs standing on end at the almost-contact. Circumspectly, he held his body back a critical few inches, and I resisted the urge to melt back against him, letting every plane of his hard body cushion mine until I reveled in his heat like a cat. Ben's strong fingers slid down my wrists, positioning my palms over the bowl, and I recoiled as his intent crystallized in my befuddled mind.

"Isn't this ... unsanitary?" I asked.

"Nah. We washed our hands. Plus, this is the secret ingredient," he said, his breath softly stirring the hair at my

nape. His hands covered mine, urging our fingers into the flour and butter shavings. The rough calluses on his fingers slipped over my skin, creating a gentle friction all their own, warming me from the inside.

Together, the mixture filtered through our fingers, and I tried to focus on the dough, instead of his hot body pressed at my back. Suppressing the shiver which would be a dead giveaway that I was more affected than I wanted to let on. He was showing me how to cook. Never mind that my hormones were standing up, screaming, like the randiest sports fans at the contact. It took everything I had not to sink back against him and prolong the feeling. Soak it up. When was the last time I'd had a strong man touch me? Never?

Swallowing, I tried to remember his last words. "Secret ingredient?" I choked out, doing my best to make it sound like an intelligent question instead of the death cry of my dignity.

"Mm-hmm ..." he hummed behind me, the vibrations sending a quiver along my spine. I pressed my thighs together, trying to ease the sudden ache there.

"Hand mixing provides just the right level of heat." He stilled my hands, pulling them back from the mixture. "But we can't handle it too roughly. Scones need a gentle touch."

He tugged me to the sink, running warm water over our fingers, using his to scrub mine clean. The mix of soap and stroke of his fingers felt more like a playful caress than a proper wash, and I bit my lip, trying to use the edge of pain to distract from the pleasure.

Damn it. Bending me over the counter wouldn't have hit me any harder than those sensual strokes. Glancing up at Ben's face, so near mine, his gaze remained focused on our fingers and the remnants of buttery dough clinging stubbornly there. Scratch that. Clearly, I was the only one in a horny haze over a little finger touching.

Clearing my throat, I did my best to look excited. About cooking. “Now, what?”

His eyes lit, clearly pleased that I was invested in our scone process. “Now, we scoop them onto pans and bake them.”

“What about the triangle shapes? Today’s batch looked like real scones.”

“That’s okay. These scones were made with love.”

Sure. Love. Lust. He could have told me they were made with the blood of my enemies, and I’d still have nodded along.

“This morning’s scones were made to impress. Tonight, we’re working on the basics.”

He slid the pan into the oven, setting the timer, before leaning back against the stove, arms crossed over his massive chest.

“So, what do you think? Are we going to work well together?” he asked.

Pulled away from my contemplation of the dusting of hair across his forearms, showed to perfection by the rolled plaid, I shook myself.

“Huh?”

“Carly, I was talking about the team. Now that you’ve met the coaching staff, do you think we can make this work? I need you to believe in us, Carly.”

His earnest plea turned my insides to mush, much like the scone batter beneath the combined warmth of our hands. I wanted to believe. In him, in the fairy tale, really in anything he wanted to tell me. I nodded, pasting a reassuring smile on my face.

“If you put a fraction of the care and attention into your team as you do into your scones, there’ll be no beating

us, Coach.”

I’d intended the words to sound chipper, encouraging. Then why did his eyes darken? Was it my use of his title, Coach? True, I’d used it in an attempt to put some distance between me and the trickling of lust he seemed to draw from my very pores. Had he taken it to mean something else?

He clapped his hands together. “Right. We’re going to make a great team, Carly. I can already tell we’re going to be pals.”

I narrowly avoided wincing at the word “pals.” But it had been me who insisted on tossing around titles. And really, friendship was the best possible outcome for me. Ben was an exciting man. A well-respected football coach with a history of winning and confidence to spare. He didn’t need a mousy geek hanging on his every word.

Pals sounded great. Friends was much better than most of the other possible scenarios. I infused my smile with confidence, trying to strike a tone that matched his.

“I’ll bring the data, you bring the football know-how. Together, we’ll be unbeatable.”

His grin transformed his face, easing some of the tension lingering around his blue eyes.

“That’s the spirit! I love it. Thanks for being part of the team, Carly.”

He held out a hand to shake, and I mourned the loss of our earlier intimacy. The businesslike clasp lacked the sensual nature of our fingers brushing through the dough together. But good teammates didn’t obsess about little things like touching, did they?

# CHAPTER 5 – CARLY

Saturday's game was an exercise in feeling overwhelmed. I'd expected to be ignored by the players, but a few approached during final warm-ups, introducing themselves rapid-fire, stretching my ability to remember names. Luckily, their jersey numbers would be a lifesaver later.

"Hi, I'm Jaydon." Confident and edging toward cocky, he looked every inch the college athlete: huge and muscled.

"Tyson, ma'am." Tyson's shy smile made it easy to smile in return.

"Yo, Tristan." The beefy blond sketched a quick salute, a move more sardonic than respectful.

I shivered, pretending it was the cold wind causing the reaction. They didn't need to know that I was nervous, uncomfortable with their attention. Jaydon and Tyson seemed friendly enough, but something about the arrogance in Tristan's expression set me on high alert.

"Good luck today," I said, acknowledging them each with a friendly nod.

"Hey, Doc." Ben's soft greeting caught me by surprise, and I glanced past Tristan to see him grinning at me. Ben was fully kitted out in Threshers' gear, from navy athletic pants emblazoned with the team logo along one leg, to a matching blue polo and down jacket. He looked fresh and alert, as if he thrived on the excitement of the sidelines, when I knew he'd probably been up for hours preparing.

I shivered again, this time for an entirely different reason. Ben's calm confidence, and the light in his eyes that seemed to be just for me, warmed me from the inside. He had that unique quality of making everyone he interacted with feel

important and seen, making it impossible to resist the spell of his charm.

“You cold?” He tsked softly and shook his head. “We can’t have that, Doc. Here.”

Before I could protest, he’d shrugged out of his jacket, urging me to slip into it as his players dispersed toward the field. Tongue-tied and unwilling to admit that I was more turned on than cold, I pulled it on, savoring the warmth it retained from his body. My heart beat just a little bit faster as he tugged the lapels together, tantalizingly close to grazing my breasts, and smiled down at me before jogging off to join his players.

I stood half-mesmerized along the sidelines as the game got underway, watching Ben pace and confer with Coach Ruiz, Coach Chun, and the other staff whose names I hadn’t yet committed to memory, as they called play after play. The large throng on the edges of the field made it easy for me to blend into the background. Players chatted or sat along the benches watching the game, while coaches and trainers advised or threw practice balls. It was loud with the crowd behind us, but I was able to let the band and cheers fade to a dull roar of background noise as I focused on the field.

I kept a death grip on my laptop from my spot on the bench, tracking each play and result, whether the Threshers gained or lost yards or control of the ball. But every time I caught a whiff of Ben’s scent from the collar of his jacket, I glanced his way, losing my place in my spreadsheet.

Ben’s sweet gesture made it difficult to remember that I’d come to help them win the game, not lose my heart.

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All eyes turned to me as I took my seat at our usual brunch table at the Windmill. From the eager faces, it was clear the girls were dying to ask questions.

“Carly, was that you on the sidelines during Saturday’s game?” Angi launched the first salvo.

“Yes. I’m working on a project with the team.”

Rita squealed softly, grinning. “That sounds super cool, what are you doing exactly?”

We spent the next few minutes talking through the technical aspects of the data model that was starting to take shape, until Angi and Cheri’s eyes began to glaze. Angi’s accounting background meant she followed along and asked pointed questions, but Cheri lost interest quickly. Still, I was excited to talk shop with at least a few others who really understood. Rita’s database administration work and Sid’s experience teaching IT meant they followed my thought process and shared their own ideas.

“Humph.” Angi grunted, fiddling with her dark hair in its bun. “I hoped there was something more than a work project to your sideline action.”

Cheri’s brow arched. “Are you sure there’s not? Luckily, we kept the game on at the bar. Did I or did I not watch Coach Bear give you his jacket, snuggling you inside it like he was tucking you in? Were you that cold, or just shivering having so much man in close proximity?”

“Ben’s very kind,” I said primly.

Slowly, Angi nodded, eyes narrowed. “He is. Almost to a fault. Bear’s the kind of guy who would do anything for a friend. I’m glad you’re helping him out.” Expression clearing, she smiled. “Maybe working with you will be just what he needs.”

President Nelson certainly thought so. Her call to congratulate me after the Thresher’s win only served to push me harder to understand and help the team. Thus far, I hadn’t done anything useful, no matter what the president believed. My protestations hadn’t convinced her, and it only made me

more determined to tease a real advantage for the Threshers from the data.

Standing on the sidelines with Ben and his team on Saturday had been a revelation. A world away from sitting up in the stands, getting my eardrums blown out by fans and squinting to follow the plays. On the field, everything seemed more immediate, more real. The clash of hits as players battled through the defense. Muttered curses from the coaching staff. The sharp sting of sweat as it cooled in the fall air. I shivered, remembering the heady cocktail of fierce competition. It had been easy to get caught up in their passion and the excitement at the end of the game, making it difficult to focus on the data collection. But even harder on my ability to focus had been the constant awareness that Ben stood beside me in the final minutes, shouting encouragement and play calls to his team. His jubilation when the team won made my heart race. The grin on Ben's face made it impossible not to respond with my own. Sinking into his warm jacket had been a bonus.

Lost in thoughts of Ben, I missed the subject change, tuning in as I realized conversation had moved on to discuss Chris and Jake's upcoming wedding. The two had become engaged at the Bigfoot Fun Run, and I'd caught the tail end of the celebration but didn't know either personally.

"Using the winery as their venue is perfect, since Chris refuses to get married in his own bar. I love the Wilcox wines," Rita said.

"Wilcox? The winery north of town? Ben lives out there, but I haven't met the owner," I said. "It's a beautiful property though. The rental Ben lives in is gorgeous. Lots of exposed wood and light."

"Yeah? How about the bedroom? Any notes on it?" Angi teased.

Blushing, I took a sip of my coffee. Never mind that I'd had a few choice dreams about what might be at the top of



that exposed staircase, I hadn't come close to checking out Ben's bedroom.

"Nope."

"I've always wanted to live on a farm," Cheri said, looking dreamy. "Especially one that grows wine. It sounds like a nice, quiet crop." She wrinkled her nose. "If only it didn't come with the owner, Luke."

"I first met him through the office," Angi said. "One of my colleagues does his books. Luke Wilcox is what I'd call an acquired taste."

"And that means ..." Sid asked, her brow raised.

"Professionally, I'd call him difficult." Angi looked around the table, a smile flirting with her lips. "But since we're all friends here, I'll tell you he's a raging asshole. Brusque and demanding, half the accounting staff run scared when they see him coming. There's no way in hell I'd wish him on Cheri."

I choked on my mouthful of coffee, surprised at how cheerfully she made her pronouncement. Almost as if she were challenging Cheri. Narrowing my eyes, I watched to see if Cheri would take offense over Angi's assessment of Luke's character.

"God knows I've already had enough of those in my life," Cheri muttered.

"Exactly. You can do better than Luke, Cheri."

Did Cheri even realize she was being baited?

We finished the last of our meals and emptied the coffee pot before reluctantly saying our goodbyes. I'd only been part of the brunch bunch for a short while and was still struggling to be myself in their presence. Luckily, Sid and I had suffered through enough department meetings together that I was becoming more relaxed around her. Her former

assistant, Rita, was such a ray of sunshine, it was impossible to feel anything but at ease with her.

Angi and Cheri both made me nervous at first, but for different reasons. Angi as the matriarch of the bunch, happily married and with an infant daughter, Ari, seemed to have it all. The perfect career, family, you name it. She intimidated the crap out of me. Watching her go through teething hell with Ari had finally made her seem somewhat human.

Cheri seemed nice, but she was sometimes difficult to read. A sadness lurked behind her smiles that I couldn't quite explain. That hint of pain made me question how well anyone truly knew her. I'd noticed she avoided mentioning her family, changing the subject anytime the topic came up. Bubbly like Rita, it was easy to picture her waitressing at Porter's Pints. She was also a full-time student, studying to be a midwife. I struggled with strangers and being part of someone's birth story sounded like my idea of hell. Extremely intimate, and not something I could imagine doing day after day.

The house was quiet when I returned, most of the girls either upstairs studying, downstairs watching TV, or out doing whatever carefree college co-eds did. My apartment was blessedly quiet. Especially after the chaos of the sidelines Saturday, I needed peace to recharge. Sinking onto my couch, I focused on my notes from the game, searching for patterns. The Threshers had a great passing game, regularly gaining yards. Maybe they weren't showy throws, but they eked their way forward almost every time. By comparison, their running plays tanked just as often as they succeeded, resulting in lost yardage. Given the popularity and overall stats of the team's star running back, expecting the coaches to use Tristan and running plays less was likely to get rejected, but I'd been brought on to share new ideas. Maybe with Ben in my corner, the suggestion wouldn't be dismissed out of hand.

My stomach rumbled, and I realized I'd lost most of the afternoon to work. Slipping into the house kitchen, I

glanced around the industrial fixtures. Jan had the weekends off, but sometimes she packed leftovers in the walk-in, and I crossed my fingers, hoping to get lucky. I spotted one silver steam pan covered in foil that looked promising.

After heating leftover chicken piccata, I scoped out the dining room, hoping for quiet. A small group huddled in one corner studying, and I breathed a sigh of relief, taking a seat at the other end of the dining room. I'd only taken a couple of bites when Neve bustled in, and I bit back a groan when her eyes lit up upon spotting me.

“Carly, just the woman I was looking for. Can we go over the list of house improvements now?”

Neve's persistence was one of her best and worst features. Really, I had no reason to avoid her, other than she exhausted me. She was best in small sips.

I gestured toward the chair across from me. “Sure. Have a seat.”

“Great!”

She collapsed into the wooden chair with a grin. With her bright blue razor-cut bob, she looked part woodland pixie, all elfin enthusiasm.

Neve ran me through her list: a hot tub, heated floors in the bathroom, and new mattresses for the sleeping porch.

“Neve, you're never going to get a hot tub approved through the corporate board,” I warned.

“But you'll ask for us, right?”

“I'll ask, but it's not happening. The other items are possibilities. The floors might have to wait for a larger remodel.”

“Thanks, Carly. Anything you can do would be amazing.”

Right. She overestimated my power with the board. Mostly, I was an employee, paid to supervise the residents so they didn't wreck the house. They held the purse strings, trying to balance maintaining and running the house for future generations of sisters and staying afloat financially.

"Speaking of amazing, I caught you on the sidelines with Coach Bear Saturday. What's that about? Are you dating?"

"Um, no. He wouldn't date me," bubbled out before I could think better of it. I knew better. Self-deprecating statements were Neve's catnip.

"Why not? You're amazing. He should absolutely want to date you. And if you're not together, what were you doing with the team?"

"I'm working on a data project for them."

"Hmm ... methinks you protest too much when it comes to dating Coach Bear. I'm pretty sure the entire female fandom swooned watching him snuggle you into his jacket."

Had everyone caught the private moment? I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. His actions had been kind, nothing more. So why did everyone else see it differently? Was I missing something?

"I'm sure he's already dating someone else."

A man like him had to be taken, right? Never mind that I'd seen no evidence of a girlfriend or boyfriend, and definitely no wife given I'd been to his place.

Neve shook her head. "Rumor says he's single. And believe me, every woman with a pulse has tried to catch his attention. What's your secret?"

"I like big data and I can't lie?"

She laughed softly. "Carly, you've got to put yourself out there more. He's into you."

“Doubtful.”

“Why? You’re smart, funny, beautiful. What’s not to like?”

“Sheltered. Uptight. Not interesting.” I ticked off on my fingers.

She scowled fiercely. “That doesn’t sound like you at all. What asshole has been filling your head with that kind of crap?”

Me. Okay, maybe some of the words were borrowed from Trevor, my last boyfriend. My only boyfriend. We hadn’t worked out, but he hadn’t been an asshole.

Shrugging, I avoided her question. “My life is pretty tame compared to Coach Bear’s.”

“Okay ... is that something you want to change? You know you have a house full of sisters happy to support you.” She rubbed her hands together, grinning maniacally. “If you want to be more adventurous, I’ve got ideas.”

My stomach cratered, opening up a yawning pit that threatened to pull me in.

“No, no, I don’t need any ideas,” I backpedaled.

“Okay, then what are your plans? Having someone to hold you accountable can make all the difference in achieving your goals. Do you have a list?”

The idea that had been frittering at the edge of my consciousness bloomed at her words, coming in a rapid-fire cascade. I wanted to hold hands in public. Kiss under the mistletoe. Slow dance to a sappy love song. Swim naked. With the right guy. Fleeting, Ben crossed my mind, before I pushed thoughts of him away. He already had every eligible woman in Benton throwing themselves at him.

Skinny dipping and slow dancing may not make the most thrilling list, but doable?

“I don’t have them written down.”

Neve grinned. “Well, let’s change that.” She pushed away from the table and out of the dining room, returning a moment later with a pink furry notebook and unicorn pen. Flipping to a fresh page, she bit the unicorn’s horn, staring at me. When I remained silent, she gestured toward me with her pen. “Ready when you are. What do you want to put on your list?”

I glanced around the dining room, relieved to see that in our preoccupation with each other, the other sisters had left. What I had to say was ten times easier to do alone. Or as alone as you could get in a house full of people.

“I want to hold hands.” Just saying it aloud made me want to cringe, embarrassed that I’d missed out on some of the most basic romantic milestones. My lone past partner had hated hand holding.

Nodding, Neve wrote in her notebook. “Okay. Good start. Keep them coming.”

Something about her urging helped unstop the flow, and my secret wishes spilled forward. Even the ones I could only whisper. Never judging, Neve kept scratching away in the notebook, until I’d exhausted my store of ideas.

“Wow, Carly. I haven’t even heard of a couple of these things, much less done them.”

Coloring, I regretted spilling my guts to Neve. I was supposed to be an authority figure in the house. How much respect would she have for a grown woman who’d never held hands in public?

Batting back the shame with effort, I focused on why I’d never done the things I wanted: lack of opportunity, money, or partner in crime. Living with Grandma, I’d lacked all three. Dating Trevor had been a short blip on my romantic radar. But now? Circumstances had changed, but I hadn’t. Still

stuck in my old shell, could I use the list Neve helped me build to break out?

As if she could sense me backing out and preparing to avoid anything to do with my list before I even began, she rushed ahead. “This Never Have I Ever list is pretty epic. Maybe we can help each other?” she asked hesitantly.

The sudden vulnerability in a young woman I viewed as invincible threw me. I should have smelled a trap.

“What do you need help with, Neve?”

“I’m failing my statistics class,” she mumbled. “If I can’t get at least a B this term, then my parents will make me move out of the house.” She looked up, eyes luminous. “I don’t want to leave Chi Beta. Can you help?”

I bit my lip, debating. I knew Neve’s professor, Dr. Pai, was an absolute hard-ass, not known for explaining concepts well or offering much support to his students. Especially his female students. Even if I didn’t want her help with my list, I couldn’t ignore Neve’s plea.

“Of course.”

Her eyes sparkled as she grinned, seeming relieved. “Thanks, Carly. Maybe I can study with you one night a week? And in return, I’ll check in on your list progress.”

She snapped a photo of the list from her book, texting it to me.

“This way, you’ll have it on you all the time. You can seize any opportunities that come your way to fulfill one of the items.”

Snorting softly, I looked at the picture. I took in her curly handwriting, hearts dotting over the I’s. Somehow spontaneously getting in a sexy food fight didn’t seem likely. Neither did swimming naked. And honestly, I wasn’t ready to do any of those things. What Neve failed to realize was that the thing holding me back was ... me.

My phone buzzed with a notification, and my lips pursed. Then again, maybe I'd have more opportunities than I thought ...

*Coach Bear: Want to come for dinner tonight? We need a plan for this week. Not much season left to flip our record.*

Swallowing, I debated putting him off. I had my own work to do. I couldn't spend every free moment with Ben. Even if I wanted to.

*Coach Bear: Please, Carly?*

My kryptonite. If he'd demanded or bullied, denying him would have been easy, but the coaxing killed any will to say no.

*Carly: Sure, Coach. What time?*

"Who's that on your phone?" Neve asked.

I'd forgotten she was still here.

"No one."

She arched a brow. "Right. Well, if *no one* is inviting you to dinner, maybe work up to one of the items from your list?"

"That wouldn't be appropriate."

"Why not? Because it's Coach Bear? I'm telling you, Carly—he's interested."

"We're working together."

"I thought you worked for the college, not the coach?"

"I do."

"Then—no problem. You're colleagues. On a temporary assignment, no less. He's not your boss. If you want to mash, I say DO IT. That needs to be your new motto."



“Pretty sure there’s an athletic brand that already has that particular slogan on lock.”

She grinned, and I regretted my stuffy response, because her eyes sparkled with good humor. “Okay, then. If you want to be that way, let’s follow my favorite philosopher badass, Brené Brown. Your new motto should be ‘Brave like Brené.’ Embrace your vulnerability and show no shame, Carly.”

“Nice TED Talk,” I thanked her, wishing I could borrow some of her confidence. She grabbed her fluffy notebook and left the dining room.

My phone buzzed again, and I glanced down.

*Coach Bear: See you at six.*

I swallowed hard, remembering Neve’s words: *show no shame*.

Clearly, she hadn’t been raised like me. Flying under the radar to avoid notice had helped me survive middle school. And high school. I hadn’t had the money for trendy clothes or the free time to hang out, learning the latest slang or watching the right movies to fit in with my peers. I stuck out. And not in a good way. Dated clothing and hair, usually with my nose stuck in a book, a few unkind souls had taken notice. I’d caught the snide comments whispered behind my back. That rejection, the stigma they wanted me to feel over being different, had influenced my strategy. Being quiet and learning to disappear meant you couldn’t get hurt. It helped if everyone already treated you like you were invisible.

# CHAPTER 6 – BEN

When I opened the door to Carly, she looked like a fantasy come to life. Well, at least my fantasy. Her turquoise blazer thrown casually over a turtleneck paired with black jeans even looked like something Dr. Crusher would wear. I bit my lip to avoid commenting. She didn't need to know about my geeky *Star Trek: TNG* fascination. Or that she looked like one of my teen fantasies in the flesh. By comparison, I'd dressed in gray sweatpants and a threadbare green T-shirt, throwing a ballcap over my hair to hide that I needed a haircut.

She shoved the bottle in my direction, smiling sheepishly. "I know you probably have lots of wine already, but every time I get to shop for it, I get a little giddy."

I tilted my head, taking a moment to get her meaning. "The sorority house is dry? Even for the house mom?"

Nodding, she smiled. "Yes. Sometimes I miss a nice glass of wine with dinner."

I gestured to the kitchen. "Then, by all means, let's get you sorted."

Following her to the cupboards, I tried not to notice the sway of her hips. She grabbed glasses, turning before I could adjust my gaze, and arched her brow.

"What's for dinner, Coach?"

Swallowing hard, I bit back my first instinct and offered the truth. "Tacos. I figured they'd be easy to prep ahead, leaving us plenty of time to work."

"Sounds great."

We loaded up plates, filling shells with beef and beans. I couldn't help but tease Carly over the cilantro she loaded on hers.

“Ick. Tastes like soap to me. But you do you, Xanadu.”

“Ben. Why did you buy it if you don’t like it?” she asked with a twitch of her lips.

“What if you love cilantro? A man needs to know these kinds of details.”

I wanted to know lots of things. If she loved cilantro. Had she ever watched *Star Trek*? How she felt about tall men who hogged the covers. Maybe, which side of the bed she preferred.

“Really? Is loving cilantro a deal-breaker for our partnership?”

“Ah, Carly. You couldn’t have any of those.” I paused, pretending to think. “Unless, of course, you’re secretly a fan of the Mallards.”

She winced, and I turned to her, pretending shock. “No! Dr. Anderson. Don’t tell me ... you’re a Mallards’ fan?”

Clearing her throat, she nudged a piece of tomato back into her taco. “Not exactly. But that’s where I went to undergrad.”

“Oh, Carly, *Carly*. If I’ve learned anything during my time here in Oregon, it’s that Threshers’ fans take this whole state rivalry thing dead serious. I’ll keep your traitorous beginnings our little secret.”

She seemed self-conscious over my teasing, and I quieted, wondering if I’d gone too far. I didn’t mean to make her uncomfortable with my teasing.

We grabbed our plates and glasses, sitting at the kitchen table. Carly took a sip, examining me over the top of her glass.

“Are you good at keeping secrets, Coach?” she asked softly.

Sensing my answer mattered to her, and that her question had moved beyond me poking her about her alma mater, I answered seriously.

“Honey, you better call me Ben if I’m keeping your confidences. And—I am all ears and a closed mouth for anything you want to share. Things that go into the bear cave stay there.”

I sipped at my glass, enjoying the tart wash of flavor over my tongue as I watched her absorb my words. Her mouth pursed, and I couldn’t help following the flex of her soft lips. Would kissing Carly have the same kick as my wine? And would she be interested in exploring the sexual tension between us? I had a difficult time reading her stoic expression. Flirting with her might not be advisable when I had a season to get through, but something about her made me want to try.

Carly took a swig from her glass, before smiling across the table.

“I’m glad my secrets are safe with you.”

That small gesture of trust helped loosen my shoulders.

“Good. Let’s devour these tacos, then I want to talk through what data you’ve assembled so far. Our defense on Saturday barely kept it together, and I’m having a hard time putting my finger on why.”

We settled on the couch after dinner with tape from the game, and I sped through play after play, diagnosing them with Carly. For someone who knew diddly-squat about football a few short weeks ago, she was picking it up quickly and made some insightful suggestions.

I lost track of time, watching tape, sipping wine, and talking with Carly. When I’d asked her why she hadn’t seen much football growing up, she’d laughed, explaining that she’d lived with her grandma, who was more interested in soaps than sidelines.

Tapering off, I switched to water as the evening progressed, but cracked a new bottle of pinot for Carly. She toasted me, and I wondered if I should cut her off, but if she only let herself off leash occasionally, who was I to judge?

She'd shed her jacket and relaxed against the couch cushions with her feet tucked beneath her. Her hooded gaze swung from the TV to me, and she caught me staring.

"What? Do I have salsa on my face or something?" she asked, swiping self-consciously at the corner of her mouth.

"Nah. Nothing like that. I'm wondering if I can tell you a secret, Carly."

She pushed up, and I regretted the loss of her more relaxed expression. "Sure, Ben."

Hearing my name on her lips eased something inside. How long had I been just "Coach" or "Bear" to everyone around me? Sure, it was part of who I was, but had I let it become everything over time?

"I wasn't so sure about us working together at first."

Her brows raised. "That's your big secret? Ben, I hate to break it to you, but your poker face isn't as strong as you think."

I waved away her teasing, not wanting to be derailed.

"I believe in our team. Having the president ask you to help us seemed like a betrayal of that belief. And it hurt a bit. But now, I can see you bring something we lacked. A different touch."

"Is that a nice way of saying ovaries?" she teased, eyes alight with mischief.

Chuckling, I shook my head. "Those are neither here nor there in football. I'm talking about your big, sexy brain."

Her expression clouded briefly before smoothing. Had I crossed the line by calling her brain sexy? Had she thought

I'd say something else? "Thanks, Coach."

Mourning the loss of our earlier closeness, I almost asked her to say my name, but resisted. She took a swig of wine, nearly emptying the glass, before staring into the ruby red dregs, expression contemplative.

"Ben, do you think you could help me with something?" she asked, meeting my gaze briefly before focusing over my shoulder.

Cheering the return of my first name, I nodded like a bobblehead. "Sure, sure. What do you need, Carly?"

She fished for something in her back pocket, pulling out her cell phone, fumbling with it for a moment before passing it over. Was it my imagination, or did her fingers tremble slightly? I nearly dropped it into the couch cushions as our fingers tangled, sending a zing of electricity through me. If a glancing touch revved my engine this much, making it through the rest of the season celibate would be torture.

"How-would-you-feel-about-helping-me-knock-a-few-items-off-my-list?"

She rushed through the words, like if she didn't say them, *right then*, they might never pass her lips. It took me a moment to parse her request.

Her expression remained a study in reluctant dread as silence stretched between us. Carly's wariness made me hold the phone in my hand delicately, cupping it to my chest like a catch I didn't want to drop.

She gestured toward the phone in my hands, and I examined the screen.

*Carly's Never Have I Ever List:*

I looked up, swallowing hard after reading the title. More than a little awed that she'd trust me with something so personal. Carly's face remained serious, almost stoic, and I returned to reading the rest of the list.

*# 1 Hold hands in public*

*# 2 Kiss under the mistletoe*

*# 3 Slow dance to a sappy song*

The first few items seemed innocent enough. Nothing I couldn't handle. Especially if it meant getting closer to Carly. Except, could I stop with a slow dance? Once I felt her gathered in my arms, there might be no going back.

*# 4 Talk dirty with a guy*

*# 5 Try cosplay*

*# 6 Get in a food fight*

*# 7 Go skinny dipping*

My pulse started racing as I read the last item. Hearing the soft lap of water against Carly's bare skin would be torture. Maybe it was a holdover from my horny teenage days watching *Star Trek*, particularly the holodeck mud bath scene, but the idea of skinny dipping with Carly wouldn't leave me alone.

*# 8 Sex in a tree house*

*# 9 Try the Dirty Schmiddy*

My brows arched. What the heck was a Dirty Schmiddy? With trepidation, I finished the list.

*# 10 Make a home movie/photo shoot*

*# 11 O in public*

Mouth dry, I tried to summon a response. Any response. Her list read like a lover's wish list, not something to share lightly. Glancing up at Carly, looking the tiniest bit hazy at the end of the couch, I had to wonder if she'd regret sharing this with me tomorrow. There were secrets, and then there were *secrets*. Did I dare share mine?

Something about my expression caused hers to crumple, and I backtracked.

“Carly, I’m honored you shared this with me. That, uh, took a lot of bravery,” I said.

Her lips twisted, and I rushed on. “I’m just worried this is the wine talking, not you.”

Her wry smile gripped my heart and twisted. “Oh, it is. One hundred percent. But that doesn’t make it any less than the truth. This is the list of things I’ve never done. But I want to.”

The pure longing in her expression struck a chord in me. The undercurrent of loneliness in her words made me think of all the solo nights and lonely days in the last year. Too many to count. If we could bring each other some comfort, as friends, was it so wrong? I shoved away the voice screaming that Carly’s list went well beyond *friendly*.

The truth was, I’d gladly learn what a Dirty Schmiddy was, if it meant getting closer to her.

“But are you sure you want to do them with me?” I asked, unable to keep the edge of doubt from my tone.

True, I’d been taken with her since we first met, using any excuse to spend more time with her, get closer. The teasing I’d endured for giving her my jacket on the sidelines had been worth it to see her warm, after I noticed her lips beginning to turn blue during the game. But it didn’t mean she saw me as anything more than a trophy. Been there, done that.

Would Carly’s list bring us together, or would I be blowing my celibacy streak for heartbreak?

The pause stretched out, and I regretted my hasty question. She’d chosen to reveal herself to me. Ask me to help with her list. Her trust was something to be treasured. Letting doubt creep in helped no one. Why question her choices, if I was one of them?

“I’d be honored to help you,” I said before she mustered a response. Her gaze met mine, and the smile



blooming on her face made my own face crease in a grin. Her happiness was mine. “*If* you still feel safe asking me tomorrow. And if we can take things slowly.”

Carly’s gaze narrowed, as if parsing my words for a lie. “Why tomorrow?”

I pushed to my feet, reaching out a hand to tug her up, enjoying when she wobbled, unsteady, and brushed against me. I bit my lip, calling on all my restraint, as I inhaled Carly’s soft scent. A generous mix of a floral shampoo, red wine, and a hint of cumin and chili from the tacos.

“Because, honey, you are soused as a mouse. And as much as I respect the honesty of alcohol, I want you clearheaded when I agree to help with your list.”

Carly squinted at me, and I had to wonder if she was seeing two of me. I thought she might stalk away, reject my condition, but instead she rocked back on her heels, a self-satisfied grin in place. I brushed a quick kiss against her forehead before stepping away, pulling her gently behind me.

“Come on, I’ll drive you home. You can pick up your car tomorrow when you ask me to do naughty things with you.”

Her soft chuckle stroked along every nerve, and I regretted my chivalrous side which refused to take advantage when she’d had too much to drink. I’d never been that guy. Tempting as she was, I wouldn’t ignore my morals. I’d meant what I said. Helping with her list would be a dream come true. But she had to trust me to ask without the aid of liquid courage for me to know she believed in me enough to be her partner.

“Never have I ever propositioned someone,” Carly whispered as I ushered her toward my truck.

“Ah, honey. See? It’s already working. We’re going to knock out your list before you know it.”

Which only begged the question, what then? If I helped Carly finish her list, what would it mean for us? And what did I want it to mean? I'd followed my path for so long, I'd stopped questioning it. Winning had been everything. And that meant sacrifice. Some people thought I got the nickname Bear for my temper, and they were *part* right. Though my sister started calling me "Teddy Bear" when we were still kids, my teammates often complained about my grumpiness stemming from my self-imposed celibacy. In retaliation, they shortened it to just "Bear," giving the nickname new meaning. Eventually I learned to channel that frustration into winning and my abstinence habit stuck. Maybe it was silly, but athletes had their superstitions, right? Mine meant no getting laid when a game was on the line. Chaste during the season, I only dated when I didn't need to be one hundred percent focused on football. But Carly and her list tempted me beyond anything I'd felt before. Would letting Carly in be a mistake, or had I grown strong enough to handle competition for my attention? If I were honest, she'd shattered my focus already, even without the extra distractions of sex. Winning with her in my life and bed sounded so much better than winning alone. All I had to do was make it happen. One play, one game at a time.

# CHAPTER 7 – CARLY

I rolled over with a groan. The familiar sounds of the house waking for the day filtered through my apartment door. Soft chatter overflowed from the dining room as my housemates drank coffee and started their days.

Stretching, I took inventory. Achy head, sour stomach. Yep, I'd had too much to drink. Casting through my memory, I had a hazy recollection of Ben pouring me into his truck and helping me get into my apartment. Groaning, I grabbed my head. Had there been witnesses? Was the house even now buzzing with gossip about me and Ben?

Ben. I had vague recollections of sharing my Never Have I Ever list with him. Crap. Asking him to help me with my list. Had I really done it, or just dreamed it?

I stumbled through a quick shower, wincing as the stinging spray hit my skin, before pulling on slacks and applying my makeup. The woman in the mirror who stared back looked like me, but different. If you looked past my bloodshot eyes and pallid complexion from overdoing it with the wine, was there an extra spark in my eyes, a more confident tilt to my chin? Did I look Brave like Brené?

My phone buzzed from my bedside table. I approached it as if it were a snake, afraid of what it might reveal about last night's wine admissions.

*Ben: Do you need your car this morning? If so, I'll come get you. After all, you have something to ask me, right?*



My stomach gurgled, a miasma of nausea and hunger filling me at the thought of asking him. Again, apparently. My hazy recollections of the night before were more than just dreams and nightmares.

I'd done it. Waffling between pride and fear, my fingers hovered over my response.

*Carly: I don't need my car today, but I may owe you an apology.*

*Ben: No apologies, I'm honored to have gained your trust. I'll pick you up in twenty after morning training.*

I breathed through my panic, trying to remember the feelings that had prompted me to share my list with Ben the night before. Had I gone overboard with the wine? Been enchanted by his blue eyes or bewitched by his thin gray sweatpants, thirst trapped into spilling my secret desires? Or just struck by his inherent decency? Did I really trust him, or had I been stupidly brave the night before?

Inhaling deeply, I blew out a calming gust of air. Ben had been a perfect gentleman. That much I could recall. And my comfort with him had been real, not just raw attraction to his male beauty, but appreciation for the man.

Barreling into the kitchen, I sloshed coffee and creamer in my mug needing the caffeine to gird myself for the time alone in the car with Ben. Sipping at the hot brew, willing it to jump-start my brain, I stumbled through to the dining room, immediately regretting forgetting that I wasn't alone. Chatter ceased as twenty faces swung my way. Neve broke the silence with a slow clap, which others joined in, as Isabel let out a wolf whistle.

Face coloring, I channeled bravery I didn't feel, curtsying to my audience before sliding into a free chair. Apparently, my return last night hadn't gone unnoticed or unremarked upon. Neve's delighted expression as she changed tables to sit next to me made me regret not taking my coffee back to my apartment.

"Carly. Way to go." She held up a hand, waiting for my high five.

Slowly, I extended my right palm, bumping hers gently. After another sip of my coffee, I broached what I wanted to know. “So, everyone saw me come home with Coach Bear last night?” I guessed.

She nodded. “Yep. You managed to catch a whole group returning from the library. They watched Coach Bear walk you up to the front door.” She stopped, wiggling her brows suggestively. “Holding hands. Dare I hope that you asked the good coach to be your list buddy? It seems like he’s already started marking things off your checklist.”

I rolled my shoulders, trying to loosen the tension, swallowing hard when I thought about what else was on my list. Tipping back my head, I finished the last of my mug as if it would give me courage.

Blowing out a final breath, I pushed away from the table, easing out of my seat.

“I’ll find out in about ten minutes. He’s picking me up soon. Think you can convince the other sisters to keep this quiet?”

She nodded solemnly, and the tension holding my shoulders tight eased.

“Also, color me impressed, Carly. When you go for it, you *go for it*.”

Nodding absently, I smiled. “I haven’t forgotten about our tutoring deal. See you tonight after your chapter meeting?”

“I’ll be there. I need all the help,” Neve said. “Thanks, Carly.”

“I believe in you, Neve.”

The other woman winked. “I believe in you too, Carly. Go, get ‘em.”

“Carly, caller for you,” the intercom announcement ended on a giggle, ruining the usually dignified message.

The chorus of *oohs* in the dining room made me flush. One of the house protocols was announcing visitors or callers, where visitors indicated a female guest and caller gave the receiving sister a heads up that their guest was male. It was entirely possible none of my housemates had heard a caller announcement for me before. I'd had plenty of female visitors, but the pleased faces as I made my way toward the front door made me more self-conscious about what I needed to ask Ben.

He turned to me with a grin as I approached the front door, towering over the handful of sisters lurking in the entryway, no doubt trying to catch the show. Dressed in jeans and his Threshers jacket, Ben looked well-rested, eyes sparkling beneath his ballcap as he assessed me, seeming to approve of my yellow V-neck sweater.

“Morning, Carly. You look bright like a daffodil. One of my favorite flowers.”

“I bet he wants to pluck you,” Neve whispered in my ear as she brushed by.

Cutting off a nervous giggle, I gestured toward my apartment. It was hard to remember my real age with Neve egging me on.

“Let me grab my purse and keys, then I'm all yours. I'll be right back.”

Slip of the tongue? I picked my purse and keys from where I'd dropped them by the door, returning to find Ben surrounded by Chi sisters.

Sensing my presence, he turned and caught my gaze. “Ready?”

He extended a hand toward me, and my heart raced, seeing his palm open, ready to receive mine. Holding hands in public. Ben didn't seem shy about claiming skin privileges in front of others. Swallowing, I let our palms touch, relaxing as he squeezed my fingers with his.

The immediate calm of belonging, of closeness, zipped through me. Is this how couples felt all the time? This sense that they were a team, not alone? Reveling in the feeling, we walked companionably to Ben's truck. I had vague recollections of him boosting me in the night before, and color washed under my cheeks. How badly had I embarrassed myself?

Glancing at Ben from under my lashes, he seemed confident. Happy, even. Taking courage from his easy manner, I pushed my shoulders back, climbing into the cab. Ben's truck was pristine. Not something I'd had the wits to notice on the ride home last night. A small Threshers logo swung from the rearview mirror, and my lips twitched, remembering my admission from the night before. Ben already knew some of my secrets and hadn't flinched. What were a few more?

Swallowing, I forced myself to break the silence. "Thanks again for the ride home last night. I appreciate it."

"No problem, honey."

*Honey.* He'd called me that last night. Was I his honey? Or did he call everyone that? Sharing my list hadn't been a bid for a relationship. Under the soothing influence of a few glasses of wine, asking him for help had seemed like a moderate risk. As a well-known and successful jock, I figured Ben had been propositioned every way possible. My request would sound mild by comparison. He'd seemed a safe bet to help me in my quest. I held back a snort. Sure. I'd approached Ben because he was *safe*, not because I couldn't stop thinking about him.

"Uh, about last night," I said. "Did you mean what you said?"

He glanced over at me before returning to the traffic headed out of town.

"You know it," he said, sounding confident. "If you want help with your list, I'm your man."

“But, why?” I asked, voicing the question maybe I shouldn’t. If his answer was pity, would I bail?

My list was about becoming more carefree; embracing and living out the secret desires I’d suppressed during school and the beginning of my career. Trying to recapture some of the lost opportunities from my twenties. I didn’t want to reach the next phase of my life to find I’d missed most of it. Stopping, slowing down, trying some of the things I’d always wondered about would make it easier to face the next five years, ten years, or twenty-plus alone, if that’s how things worked out. I hadn’t asked Ben for forever. For love. I had to accept what he was willing to give, which were apparently some very naughty lessons in adulting.

Ben let my question hang, choosing not to answer. Instead, he let the radio fill the silence between us, some song about being a backseat, trying to get what we can.

“I’m not your girlfriend,” I warned, unsure where the statement came from, but driven to fill the conversational lull. I didn’t want him thinking I was asking for more than he had offered. “We’ll stick to the list. Though, I suppose you can add to it too,” I added, feeling magnanimous.

“Gee, can I?” he asked, tone dry as dust. “I have one condition,” he said, and I held my breath, waiting. “No sex during the season.”

“What?”

His assertion surprised me. I’d figured if his agreement was about sex, he’d be all for as much as he could get as soon as I was ready. His stipulation created more confusion about his motives. Clearing his throat, he cast a quick glance my way before flipping his turn signal to pull into the Wilcox driveway.

“I am celibate during the season. Always have been,” he said, tone firm.

“Really?”



Some of the disbelief must have been apparent in my voice, because he rolled his eyes as he put the truck in park next to my trusty red Subaru.

“Really.”

“But ... why?” I asked, for the second time. Would he answer?

He stared ahead a moment before angling his body toward me in the cab. The small space suddenly felt downright tiny, Ben’s bulk assuming greater proportions, making my heart race.

He shifted, glancing away. “It started in high school. I told you my dad is a pastor, yeah?” At my nod, he continued. “Well, he preached a lot about ‘fleeing the evil desires of youth’ and having a ‘pure heart.’ The Saturday after I lost my virginity to Becky McMullins, we suffered the worst loss of my football career.”

“But ... weren’t you in high school?” I asked, incredulous that the experience had influenced him so long. Ben was what, thirty-something? And still practicing abstinence every fall?

He nodded. “Yes, but the idea of focusing purely on the game stuck with me. I’m always single during football season.”

“O-kay,” I said slowly, still processing. Ben had surprised me with his commitment, another preconceived notion about what it meant to be a popular jock falling away. He’d said he didn’t have sex during the season. So, either he was a horn dog the rest of the time, or I’d wildly misjudged him. Was I the more experienced partner in this endeavor, with my single relationship?

“So, we’ll take our time on your list. Hold back on some of the items until after the season wraps, deal?”

I nodded, calculating what that meant. I'd thought we'd burn through everything quickly, while I was still feeling brave. The prospect of taking our time, working up to sex, should have reassured me. Made me feel safe with him. But with every second ticking away, my bravado faded. Would I even go through with some of my dares if I didn't rip the Band-Aid quickly?

"I'll make it up to you in the off-season," he added with a saucy wink, grinning. "It'll be here before we know it, just a few short weeks." Basking in his confidence, I relaxed. Control was still mine. I had power over the list. He'd asked for a slower timeframe, but I could do that. Biting my lip, I remembered my earlier offer. To let him add to the list. Watching his full lips relax, his smile dropping, I had to wonder—would he? And would I be up to the challenge?

"Okay," I said hoarsely, wishing I could come up with something more intelligent. It was all I'd managed throughout our conversation.

"Excellent. You'll see, honey, this will be fun," he added with a nod, sliding from the front seat to come around and open my door. "Good for both of us."

I slid down, half expecting him to kiss me and seal our deal when he didn't move away. Heat from his body engulfed me, and I shivered, though the morning sun shone bright, bringing the Benton morning to a brisk sixty-some degrees. His eyes touched on my mouth before sliding away.

"I've got to get to a coaching meeting, but I'll see you tomorrow, right? You're presenting your findings to us Tuesday afternoon?"

Mouth dry, I nodded, wishing I could focus on work with him standing so close. The reminder of our professional relationship was unwelcome, raising a concern I foolishly hadn't considered — our private arrangement becoming public knowledge.

“I’d like to keep this between us, at least for now,” I said, trying to sound confident.

The fine lines around Ben’s eyes softened as he no doubt picked up on the worry I couldn’t quite hide. “Honey, I never comment on my private life with the press.”

Gulping, the whisper of fear bloomed into something much bigger. Ben didn’t exactly fly under the radar in Benton like I did. I had just been considering his players and coaches. The idea of being featured in any way in the media horrified me.

“I was thinking more about the team and university admin,” I said.

“Since neither of us have institutional authority over the other, I think we’re in the clear when it comes to a conflict of interest, but we can report it whenever you’re ready.”

I held my expression neutral with effort. *‘Institutional authority.’* I’d underestimated Ben. It sounded like he knew the university handbook better than I did if he could toss out such official phrases. Then again, he probably had to memorize the NCAA rules back to front too, so maybe I shouldn’t be surprised. Chewing my lip, I debated the best move.

“Let’s hold off on notifying anyone.”

After all, Ben and I hadn’t moved beyond friendship yet. Even the idea of disclosing something so private left me with a lingering unease. President Nelson wouldn’t look favorably on us hooking up if it derailed the Threshers’ season. Distracting the coach was the opposite of what I’d been brought in to do, but the idea of giving up on my list and the opportunity to explore each to-do with Ben filled my gut with angry bees.

His easy grin and the way silver strands flopped over his forehead as he nodded his agreement with my decision to

keep silent sent my stomach tumbling with a fresh host of emotions, primary among them, lust.

*What had I done?*

Everything I'd learned about Ben justified the gamble I was taking but that didn't ease the edge of panic. Putting my heart on the line was a risky play, no matter how I calculated the odds.

# CHAPTER 8 – BEN

*What had I done?* Waving as Carly pulled away, I let my hand fall when her car disappeared around the bend in the driveway. Researching the items on Carly's list needed to be my first priority if I wanted to have a shot at pretending I was as sexually experienced as she no-doubt believed. She'd seemed shocked enough that I didn't have sex during the season. Admitting how little overall sexual history I had could wait. Maybe forever.

The internal whisper that always sounded eerily like my dad whispered *fraud*, and I batted the thought away. She'd trusted me enough to approach me with her list. And I would work my ass off to help her fulfill it. Even if I had to call in reinforcements.

*Ben: Can I talk you gents into a pint at Porter's later tonight after class at the dojang?*

*Jake: You buying?*

Grinning, I shook my head. Considering he co-owned the bar with his partner, Chris, I guess I couldn't blame him for asking.

*Daniel: Ari is teething, so let me check with Angi first.*

*Nate: Oooh, look who has to check with his wife first.*

*Daniel: You just wish you had one. Trash talk me at your peril. You know the women share.*

*Nate: Oooh, look who's threatening to tell my girlfriend on me.*

*Ed: Now, now, children. Can't have my two best friends fighting.*

*Nate: Oooh, look who's not claiming his girlfriend as his best friend.*

I guffawed at the spate of middle fingers Ed and Daniel shot back. Nate wasn't usually so immature. That was Jake's job.

*Ben: I'm buying. Beers after class. Be there or be somewhere else. But consider this me sending out the bat signal.*

*Jake: Ruh-roh. Girl trouble?*

*Ben: More like a golden opportunity I don't want to fumble.*

*Daniel: Curiouser and curiouser. Gotham Knights assemble. Angi says she'll watch Ari.*

If I was going to impress Carly, I needed all the help I could get. Maybe turning to my favorite band of nerds wasn't my best move, but with Daniel and Angi happily married, and Ed and Nate recently coupled up, I figured their advice would beat anything from thrice-divorced Coach Stutzman. While he might be able to explain a Dirty Schmiddy without consulting Google, I didn't want him knowing Carly and I were playing bedroom games. My coaching staff was just growing used to seeing her around professionally. Getting them to take her ideas seriously would be impossible if they wrote her off as a piece of fluff I was pursuing. Protecting her had to come first.

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Like sharks smelling blood in the water, I heard more than a few pointed comments during our coaching staff meeting as we reviewed the highlights from Saturday's win.

"Hey, Coach. I'm a little chilly. Can I borrow your jacket?" Matt asked with a saucy grin.

They ribbed me throughout our meeting, slipping in digs right and left. I ignored all of them, trying to keep their focus on football. On the game. We couldn't afford distractions.

Class at the dojang helped settle me. The break from football, from thinking about my deal with Carly, helped me gain perspective. I could help her with her list. Most of the items were tame. And I'd already finagled a waiting period on the ones that weren't.

When I walked into Porter's Pints, Jake nodded from behind the bar where he spoke with Chris. He slipped under and gestured me toward a corner table where Daniel and Nate already sat with Ed, sipping from golden glasses.

"Your usual?"

"Yes please, put 'em all on my tab."

Sliding into the booth, I smiled my thanks when Jake joined us, placing beers in front of us both.

Rubbing his hands together, Jake looked like what my dad would have called a dippy hippy. Shaggy blond curls and a ratty T-shirt with a Bigfoot outline covered his chest, proclaiming, SASSY IS REAL, Y'ALL ARE THE FAKE ONES.

Nate had come straight from class, clad in athletic gear and a ballcap like me. Daniel's after-hours uniform matched his work-from-home style: jeans and a polo.

"What's the bat signal about, Bear? You worried about your sister again?"

I waved a hand. "Izzy? Nah, she's fine. Living on her own suits her. This is about something else."

Nate side-eyed me as he sipped his beer. "Is your 'something else' five-nine with red hair?"

"Technically she would be a someone," Ed corrected.

I pushed back my hat, scratching my head. "Carly's involved," I admitted, not sure how much I should share. The Knights were more used to me talking family and football, I'd never come to them with woman troubles. Then again, living

like a monk, I hadn't exactly had any to worry about. Carly had changed all that. Or I wanted her to.

Pulling my phone from my back pocket, I dropped it on the table.

"Nate, you're good with tech and security. My laptop is provided by the school and so is my phone. Do I need to worry about network folks knowing what I search for on the internet?"

His nose wrinkled. "You asked for help because you want to search out adult entertainment?"

"Not exactly. I need to do some research."

"Research you don't want anyone to know about?" Daniel probed.

"Except you all."

Nate picked up the phone, fiddling with the settings. "I could get you a burner, but anything on a university device is technically subject to their policies. If you don't want anyone to know, I wouldn't risk it."

I grunted. "Right. Plan B." Taking a sip of beer for courage, I glanced around at the assembled Gotham Knights. Married. Engaged. In stable relationships. One of them had to know, right?

"Whelp. Y'all are now my Google, if you don't mind, and I need your help."

Jake held up a finger. "Is it something we should be discussing in public? If you don't want the university network nerds to know about it, what about people overhearing?" he asked, gesturing around.

"I'll risk it." Taking a long pull on my beer to stall, I asked the question I most needed help with. "Not to get too personal, but are any of y'all good dirty talkers?"



Daniel choked on his mouthful of beer, and Ed slapped his back, trying to help him restore his airway. In the ensuing pause, I took another swig of beer, pretending like I hadn't just embarrassed myself.

Jake held a hand to his chest as Daniel quieted. "I, for one, like to think I'm excellent at it, but I don't see how that helps you."

"Are you looking for tips?" Ed asked baldly, appearing interested. "I'll admit it's not something I've explored, but I'm interested in learning."

Weirdest. Study group. Ever.

Daniel still wasn't making eye contact, and Nate played with his coaster, looking deep in thought. "I can't claim to be an expert," he muttered. "But I've tried a few things."

Resting my chin on my meshed fingers, I leaned in. "Do tell."

"Uh, I think it's good to talk about how beautiful she is."

"Well, gee, I could have guessed that, but I like where you're going. Walk me through it."

Nate rolled his eyes. "Coach, it's not a play you can call. It's more of an in-the-moment thing."

"You've got to feel it," Daniel added.

I nodded. "Right. Feelings. I've got those. Give me more."

"Compliments are great, the more specific, the better," Nate said. "It's about *her*."

"And what you want to do with her," Daniel added.

Nothing I hadn't guessed. I'd thought there would be more of a secret sauce. But maybe I should be reassured by the basic nature of their advice. Complimenting Carly when the time was right would be a piece of cake. Nothing scary about

that. Nothing to awaken my inner critic. Though the whisper of *fraud* still snaked through me, I pushed it away. I could do this. Be there for Carly, and maybe learn something along the way.

Finishing the last of my beer, I set it back down with a contented sigh. “Thanks, guys. I appreciate you taking your time to help me like this.”

They played it off like it was nothing, making me gladder I’d met them all. Not every group of guys could nonchalantly dish out advice like they had, or at least do it without ribbing me mercilessly. Their almost academic approach made it easier to share my insecurities. With them, I didn’t need to be perfect.

Conversation moved on to the upcoming game on Saturday against another California team, and Nate and Ed teased me good-naturedly about what was becoming known as “the jacket incident.” Who’d have thought one human gesture would spark a thousand rumors?

Then again, the gossip was more than half-true thanks to Carly’s list. We might not be sleeping together yet, but the possibility hung out there. Just out of reach. Until the season ended. Thinking about her lush body, that glorious hair, and the easy humor her quiet side hid threatened to make me hard, and I did my best to calm my randy thoughts. Taking my time with her was important. I needed the extended period to fill in the gaps in my own education if I didn’t want her to know how green I was when it came to her list. She’d come to me thinking I had all the experience, and I didn’t want to disappoint her. It took bravery to admit what she wanted, acknowledge what she didn’t know.

*You’re a fraud. In the bedroom. On the field. Poised for failure. You’ll go crawling home with your tail between your legs.*

Shaking off the negative self-talk with its all-too-familiar masculine voice, I filled it with something better.

*I'm smart enough to figure out what I don't know. Ask for help when I need it.*

But working up to asking for help took time. The Gotham Knights had come together to advise me on dirty talk, but I'd held back my one burning question: what the hell was a Dirty Schmiddy? After Nate's review, I was afraid to google it on any of my devices, since they were all provided by the college. How wrong would it be to borrow a phone off an unsuspecting friend and do my own research? Pretty sure libraries had filters for explicit content, which meant getting hold of a privately-owned phone.

After bidding the guys goodnight, I strolled back to my truck, breathing in the crisp night air. Loving fall was in my blood. After all, it had football season, bonfires, and colorful trees. But thinking of Carly, I wanted to rush to winter and the end of our scheduled games.

Shy Carly, sharing her hot to-do list with me had to mean something, right? I'd swiftly come to consider us friends, if unlikely ones. The hot doctor and the cool coach. Her decision to include me in her Never Have I Ever list had to be a sign.

Thinking of her made me excited to see her. Which I would. Soon. And letting her know would be a compliment. I liked the idea of sending her to bed with a smile on her face, even if I couldn't be there in person.

*Ben: Excited to hear you present to the team tomorrow.*

*Ben: But I'll have a hard time concentrating on anything but your sexy earlobes. I just want to nibble them.*

That was dirty talk, right? Grimacing as uncertainty gripped me, I tossed the phone aside and focused on driving home. She had perfect earlobes with intriguing whorls. And

I'd stated what I wanted to do. But was coming on to her before a big presentation the right move? It wasn't like I'd *act* on it during the meeting. But afterward? Game on.

# CHAPTER 9 – CARLY

He wanted to nibble on my earlobes? Imagining the phantom sensation sent a surge of desire through me. Imagining him nuzzling the delicate area behind my ear filled me with a heady mix of anticipation and lust, swiftly followed by doubt. Unsure how to respond, I let the text sit. Maybe asking Ben to help me with my list had been a mistake. Working with him and the team took focus. I couldn't risk making an error that would blow up in all our faces. My nerves had mushroomed with every passing hour. What had seemed like a good idea this morning, struck me as disaster now. Sure, I was attracted to Ben. But it didn't mean I should make him my list buddy. We still had to work together.

I'd combed through the football data, collating the stats I'd collected on the Threshers' players, trying to distill what I'd learned into manageable bites for the coaching staff. Collecting data wasn't the challenge, stats were everywhere. It was wading through, determining what was meaningful, that turned science into art. Every football "expert" on social media could hide behind their username, but I had to stand in front of a room of big, scary dudes and present my findings, then back them up. Sharing my recommendations with the entire coaching staff in one go. And they didn't have to take my advice, even if I thought they should.

Just because I'd found some interesting correlations, didn't imply causation. A plus B did not equal C. But it might. Other times, there was a missing variable. I'd become convinced the missing variable for the Threshers was in their quarterback's head. Every time Emory Smith had a math midterm, his passing game tanked. Could it be that the biggest obstacle to a Threshers' victory had nothing to do with what happened on the field? Maybe it had been extra of me to assign distraction values to the players' lives outside of

football, but as full-time students, I figured they had more on their minds than just the games. NCAA rules limited how much they could practice during a week and maintain their amateur status. It made sense to me, looking at where else they spent their time.

My other recommendations were just as potentially controversial, and I hoped they didn't push the other coaches or Ben over the edge.

I arrived early in the conference room, wrinkling my nose at the stale air. Is this what a cocktail of testosterone and dreams smelled like? Distributing report packets to each seat, I settled in one, waiting for the others to arrive. Coach Chun and Coach Stutzman ambled in, deep in conversation with each other, ignoring me. Coach Ruiz gave me a nod of acknowledgement, then focused on his phone like it had the answers to the universe's deepest questions.

Nervous, I watched as Coach Bear, *Ben*, took his seat at the head of the table.

"Morning, y'all. We have the very talented Dr. Anderson here to share with us today. Please give her your full attention. Doc?"

His soft smile gave me a boost of reassurance, and I dove in, explaining the facts and figures I'd collected. One by one, I watched as the men assembled around the table fidgeted. By the time I reached the fifth page, most eyes were glazed over, and Coach Chun had clearly given up paying attention, picking up his phone instead. Dread filled me, as I rambled on, trying to cover for their lack of attention with more convincing data. If I just said the right combination of words, maybe they'd understand?

Only Ben remained focused, his brow furrowed as I talked. I paused, and he held up his hands, glancing around the table.

“Doc, I think you may have lost some of us. Let’s rewind.”

“Doc? Attention – full – your – her – give – please.” A chorus of chuckles met Ben’s replay, and my shoulders relaxed as some of the tension in the room faded away. Smiling at me with a twinkle in his eyes, Ben continued. “Doc, I love that you’ve done all this research, but it’s going to take us some time to digest it all. So why don’t you treat us like a room full of big babies, and spoon-feed us some of the best bits?”

I glanced around the table, expecting his coaching staff to rebel at the idea of me infantilizing them, but Coach Stutzman looked relieved, and the other coaches at least put down their phones. I started over, trying to avoid jargon and keep things simple, emphasizing the value of getting Emory Smith a math tutor. That seemed to go over more easily with the coaches than my other recommendations: to risk bigger in the first quarter, passing on first down, and keeping possession on fourth downs rather than punting. Skepticism was clear in Coach Chun’s expression. Coach Ruiz looked equally doubtful. But the data didn’t lie. Luckily, Ben seemed more open to my feedback, his face neutral as I laid out my rationale.

“Whelp, gang. Let’s give Carly’s—Dr. Anderson’s ideas a try. Can’t hurt, right?” Ben said.

Pleased by his support, I couldn’t help but still hear some of the muttered rumblings from his staff.

“Does he want to try her ideas, or try her,” Coach Chun whispered to Coach Ruiz.

“I can’t believe getting Emory a math tutor tops her list.”

“Hey now, that’s enough,” Ben shut down Chun and Ruiz’s whisper campaign. “We want our players to be their best on and off the field.”

Stung by Ruiz and Chun's comments, I fought the urge to crumple in on myself. Ben believed in me. I held on to that thought with both hands. I needed to be strong. I'd have to weather much worse than a few spiteful comments if he and I really did become intimate after the season and complete my list. Remaining stoic and unflinching in the face of their criticism was a necessity if I wanted to keep my professional reputation. I didn't need the other coaches seeing me as a Coach Bear groupie. Pushing my shoulders back, I took a deep breath.

The list was just between us, but there were likely to be whispers if Ben and I spent more time together. He was a handsome single coach and minor celebrity. He drew notice wherever he went, from his charismatic presence alone. People were bound to wonder who the wallflower was. Maybe I was still working on confidence and finding my way with Ben, but at work, I was determined to show that I'd stepped into the ring a gladiator, ready to defend my ideas and expertise.

Turning to Chun and Ruiz, I lifted a brow. "If your way was working, I wouldn't be here. Let's withhold judgment until you've given my recommendations a try."

I could nearly hear the sizzle in the air as I pushed back from the table, striding out of the room after a friendly wave designed to show that their earlier comments didn't hurt. Maybe it hadn't been the most politic approach, but sometimes strength respected strength. And I needed to show Ben's boys' club that I was an asset, not a trophy.

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Dinner at the sorority house that night held an undercurrent of excitement, and it took me a moment to remember why: barn dance. I mostly ignored the social events on the house calendar. As a dry house, the planning committees always rented facilities that allowed more freedom. I didn't have to worry about hosting dances at the house. My ears perked up when I heard a familiar name.



“Barn dance is at Wilcox Vineyard this year?” I asked Lea.

She nodded. “The bus will drop us off there on Saturday. It’s beautiful, have you seen it? Gorgeous barn with real restrooms, no Porta Potties. Plus, close enough that no one is likely to blow chunks on the bus.”

That was a risk? Maybe there were some college experiences I could be glad I missed.

“We’re tapping on Monday.” She grinned at me. “You should ask the coach and join us for once. Some of the Threshers belong to Rho Upsilon and could ask him to Monday night dinner for you.”

I’d witnessed my share of tappings where fraternity brothers would issue invitations to house dances publicly at our weekly sorority dinner, and I was sure that Ben wouldn’t be interested. Monday night dinner was an institution for sororities and fraternities: a weekly meal followed by their chapter meeting. Tapping was another unique Greek custom. A bastardized version of an oral invitation, tapping involved the sorority or fraternity making up a song about their event and then going house to house, singing it before individual members asked a partner to the dance. The sharp-dressed men who visited often came bearing gifts of flowers or other trinkets. Sometimes, they’d play silly games with their invitee. It was a very public courtship ritual. Not exactly the vibe I was going for with Ben.

Still, I’d missed out on high school dances and hadn’t rushed or been invited to any of the frat events in school. Maybe it was worth a shot?

As if sensing my hesitation, Lea pushed harder. “Come on, Carly. Barn dance is the best. Music under the stars without the pain of heels or formal wear. You should join us.”

Slowly, I nodded. “If the coach will come with me, I’ll do it.”

“And you’ll join us for tapping? It’s not to be missed.”

Swallowing hard, I gave in. “If he goes to Monday night dinner, I’ll do the tapping thing. I won’t be alone, right? You’re asking Tyson?”

She grinned. “I am. You’ll see, it’ll be fun.”

I had my doubts but by the time Saturday rolled around, I’d buried any nerves at the idea of tapping Ben for the dance. Our game against the Wolves was too important. The first chance to try out the strategy I’d devised, assigning values to the most successful plays and writing a program to predict which one to use in a given gametime situation. The away game meant I wouldn’t be there in person, but I’d already commandeered the house TV for the game. Not that any of the sisters had put up much of a fight. Watching the Threshers games on Saturdays was pretty much a given.

I settled onto one of the oversized couches in between Lea and Isabel. Neve had popped a huge bowl of popcorn and passed it to me. Absently I munched, watching the screen for Ben. Pre-game, the talking heads took center stage in the studio, but B-roll film played behind them as they talked about the Threshers match-up.

“The Wolves are fierce competitors. We’ll see if Coach Bear and his staff can keep up,” one of the slick announcers said before cutting away to the field.

Ben scuffed his toe in the grass before looking up, clapping his hands, and yelling encouragement to his team.

“Go Threshers!”

Watching him prowl the field, directing his players, had me shifting in my seat.

“He’s handsome, isn’t he,” Isabel murmured, dropping a kernel into her lap when she couldn’t take her eyes off of Ben on screen.

“He’s more than that,” I protested. He was becoming more than that. To me. But I’d started out like Isabel, entranced with his big body, his strong jaw.

She moaned softly, as the TV panned to a shot of his firm glutes as he crouched in front of a seated Tristan, talking fast. “Just tell me he’s on your *vagenda*.”

Snorting, I laughed. “My *vagenda*?”

“Yeah, the camera loves that ass. Someone needs to tap it.”

“He’s not a piece of meat.”

Isabel turned, brows arched in disbelief. “Carly, he’s that and more. Men like him don’t come along every day.”

I felt like I should still dispute her statement, stand up for Ben in some way, but she wasn’t wrong.

We watched the game, swinging from excitement to terror as the score seesawed play after play. They’d gone aggressive in the first quarter as I’d recommended, and it paid off in an early lead. But when the Wolves gained possession, they slowly eroded the Thresher’s advantage.

“Where is the defense tonight?” Neve muttered.

Frowning, I had to agree. The team was struggling, and it showed. I needed to adjust my strategies to more heavily weight the defensive players and their impact. The game against Boise should have been an easy win considering the other team’s record, but the Threshers fought for every yard. When the game ended in a three-point loss in the Wolves’ favor, Isabel turned off the TV in disgust.

“I hope your man knows what he’s doing. That was hard to watch.”

I wrinkled my nose. She wasn’t wrong. I sighed, imagining Ben’s reaction. No one would feel the failure more strongly than him.

*Carly: Jaydon's catch made the whole house roar their approval.*

*Carly: Good game tonight.*

*Ben: Were we watching the same game?*

I shook my head. What happened to his usual positivity?

*Carly: Defense was a little rough.*

*Ben: Mario and I have a lot of work to do next week.*

*Carly: You'll get there. I have faith in you.*

*Ben: I think I need your faith on the sidelines.*

*Carly: You have it.*

*Ben: No, I mean in person. I need you.*

Heart racing, I set my phone down. He didn't mean it that way. He wanted my help with the team. It was superstition talking, that was all. Still, I traced the letters of his last text before bed. *I need you.*

For the first time in a long time, I didn't feel alone.

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On the following Monday night, I nervously smoothed my black dress over my hips. Barn dance may be casual, but Lea had informed me that we were expected to go all-out for tapping and that now included me. I'd swept up my hair on top of my head, letting wisps frame my face, before applying a dark red lipstick and smoky eyeshadow.

Neve wolf-whistled, grinning when she caught sight of me lurking behind the assembled sisters in the lobby.

"Carly, you clean up good. I'm glad you're coming with us tonight."

But was I glad? I was trying to be. The idea of singing in public filled me with dread. But if I couldn't sing a silly

song, how could I manage the other items on my list? Tapping seemed like training wheels for some of the scarier items on my Never Have I Ever list.

Lea linked her arm through mine, and I admired her black gown. Where mine was a simple sheath, she'd gone for full-length drama with a beaded bodice.

“Ready for this?”

“Nope,” I admitted.

“Too bad. We’ve got a great song tonight.”

She passed me a copy of the lyrics. Modified from “Written in the Sand,” I laughed reading through them.

“Are we a beer with a chaser or a hangover that lasts forever? Are we written in the barn baby, or are we a roll in the hay?”

“They’ll love it, you’ll see.”

She winked confidently, and I tried to channel some of her energy. Neve led our group outside, and we walked to the first frat house. All eyes turned to us as we filtered into their dining room, and I swallowed, nervous. Hiding in the back behind one of the taller sisters, I mumbled my way through the song, hoping to stay invisible. Our audience clapped politely when we finished, and I held my breath as Daiyu asked her boyfriend to the dance without incident, gifting him with a single rose.

Giggling and chattering excitedly the Chi Beta sisters retreated, and I followed our group to the next house and the next, as sisters extended their invitations. At each house, I got a little bit louder, hid less.

When we arrived at Rho Upsilon, Lea squeezed my hand, pulling me toward the front. The massive house would have been a mansion anywhere else. Large and white, with ostentatious Doric columns, it looked intimidating. One of the

brothers admitted us, and we walked along the corridor to their dining room.

Ben sat at the front table, dressed in a dark suit, looking relaxed. His easy confidence should have inspired my own, but he looked so slick and polished, like he *belonged*.

What had I been thinking? Coach Bear was campus royalty. I'd stumbled along in the background for as long as I could remember. Why change a good thing now? Trembling, words caught in my throat, I stayed silent as the house kicked off the lyrics to our tapping song.

When the last words of the song trickled into the night, I remained frozen.

"Carly," Lea whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "It's your turn."

"I can't," I hissed back.

She stepped forward, and I watched the elegant line of her back as she called her boyfriend forward. Tyson's white smile looked like a searchlight against the backdrop of his dark skin as he grinned at Lea. She pushed her braids over one shoulder, letting them sway gently as she teased him with a blindfold. Some of the Chi Beta sisters kept it simple, handing their dates a flower or other trinket as their invitation, but Lea clearly intended to go all-out with a game.

My gaze swung to Ben, and watching him observe the couple, I bit my lip. He seemed entranced by the pageantry, a small smile quirking up the corners of his mouth. Would I be letting him down if I didn't go through with tapping?

Catching my eye, he gave a small wave and a smile, just for me. Inside, I puddled. Ben had shown me time and again that he was Team Carly. If I didn't want to go through with the public ceremony, he wouldn't want it either.

Lea lined up four sisters, urging each to kiss her blindfolded boyfriend on the cheek in turn.

“Okay, Ty. Which lady was me? Get it right and be my date for the dance,” Lea said after removing his blindfold.

Lea turned to me after hugging Tyson when he correctly guessed which cheek kisser was her, and I shook my head. Tapping wasn’t for me. I’d enjoyed watching everyone else but being center of attention, and pulling Ben into that too, didn’t appeal. Part of the joy of approaching my list as an older, wiser version of myself meant I could pass on things that didn’t bring me joy. As much as I wanted to be brave, there was no shame in saying no to things that didn’t serve me.

Feeling lighter with the immediate panic of performance pressure behind me, I waved back at Ben, letting a real smile take over my face. He winked back. His small sign of approval, of solidarity, made me feel like we were a team. The crowd faded away, and I focused on Ben.

Handsome in his suit, confidently sprawled in front of a houseful of men and women, he looked like a lion among his pride. Self-assuredness rolled off him in waves, almost strong enough to leave its own scent. Was that what I liked about him? At the end of the day, did I spot something in Ben I lacked? Something that filled in my jagged edges, made me feel more whole?

Caught in my realization, I paused as the sisters trickled away until Lea threaded her arm through mine, turning me.

“Carly!”

Ben’s deep voice boomed behind me, and I paused, falling to the end of the line as the sisters walked toward the next fraternity house.

He strode into the mostly empty entryway, smile in place. “You aren’t going to leave without saying hello, are you? Or is this goodbye?” he asked, watching me.

Marshalling my reserves, I pushed my shoulders back. “Hi, Ben.”

“So, it’s hello then.”

His smile carved deep slashes in his cheeks, and I couldn’t help but grin back.

Lea elbowed me gently, and I stepped forward, looking up into his blue eyes.

“I wanted to ask you to the dance,” I whispered, mad when my voice lacked the confidence I wanted it to. He’d sought me out. Following through on my intention to ask him to the dance in private shouldn’t be so hard. I’d already made a much more difficult request in my list.

Ben rocked back on his heels, hands in his pockets and a pleased look on his face.

“Well, okay then. I’ll look forward to it,” he said.

Easy. He always made things easier on me. Holding the thrill of his response close, I just nodded.

“I’ll text you details later,” I added softly.

“I’ll dig out my best cowboy hat and boots,” he said, matching my gentle tone.

“Dammit, Ben. I’m a doctor, not a masochist.”

The *Star Trek* reference slipped out before I could call it back. Ben in a cowboy hat and boots sparked a few too many fantasies. If he understood the reference, he probably thought I was an unredeemable nerd. Ben’s lips twitched, confirming my fears that he caught the quote, and he tipped an imaginary hat to me.

“Carly. You are a nerd after my own heart, but I think you already knew that. Ladies.”

I watched him stride back into the dining room, frozen.

“I think he likes you, Carly,” Lea whispered beside me.



I followed the sisters back to the house in a daze.

Once I was alone in my room, my phone buzzed as I slipped into cozy sweats, getting ready for bed.

*Ben: You looked beautiful tonight.*

*Carly: Thanks for going to the barn dance with me.*

*Ben: Honey, you had me when you offered to let me keep you up pasture bedtime. You might say you baled it.*

Pure sensation washed through me, making me tremble. The word I was looking for? Giddy. Ben did that, just by being his goofy self.

# CHAPTER 10 - BEN

“Hey, Luke.”

My hermit-like landlord grunted, turning his flannel-clad back to me.

If Luke hadn't been my roommate in college, I'd be convinced he hated me. Once upon a time, he'd been an open, funny guy. Holding on to my memory of a more carefree Luke grew harder and harder with every day. Life had changed him. And not for the better.

“Luke, can I ask you something?”

Slowly, he turned from the pump, tilting his ballcap. Expression dead, I mourned the easy smiles and jokes we used to share every morning as we got ready for class. Forcing a smile, pretending I was talking to the old Luke, I asked my question.

“Would it be all right if I used your hot tub?”

Brows raised, he grunted.

“Was that a yes? I'm going to assume that was a yes,” I claimed on a grin. “Thanks so much. If I don't tell you enough, I appreciate you.”

“Just don't defile my tub.”

I snapped my fingers. “Got it. No peeing in the pool. Ten-four, good buddy.” Clearing my throat, I went for my second ask. “How would you feel about me building a tree house in one of the trees over yonder for entertaining?” I gestured toward the grove beyond the barn. Mature and full, the big-leaf maples stood majestic over the side yard.

He grunted. “I draw the line at building a tree house. I don't need drunk idiots climbing up there and falling.”

“Got it, Luke. No drunk idiots.”

“Nah, I didn’t say that. Drunk idiots make up like ninety-nine percent of my business. I just don’t need the liability of a tree house. Sorry, Bear. You’re going to have to seduce any ladies in your own place like every other poor schmuck.”

“Thanks, Luke.”

He grunted, returning to the pump motor. Backing away slowly, watching him, I felt a pang. This new Luke was a good guy. The old one had been too. If only we could convince him of that.

*Ben: Gotham Knights, anyone have a tree house they’d loan out for a good cause?*

*Jake: I don’t know about a good cause, but I’d loan my childhood one out for a devious one.*

Classic Jake. I scratched my head, doing the math. His childhood tree house?

*Ben: Wait. The one at President Nelson’s house? Pass.*

*Jake: Your loss. Many a shenanigan was hatched in that tree house. Just ask Nate.*

*Nate: I cannot confirm or deny anything Jake says.*

*Nate: For legal reasons.*

Chuckling, I could picture childhood Nate and Jake, up to no good, collaborating on plots in their tree fort.

*Daniel: Ed and I could barely build one fence panel together. But I’m game to try a tree house. Someday, Ari would love it.*

*Ed: No mature trees at my place. Best I can offer is a garage loft? Does that count?*

*Ben: Ah, guys. You’re the best. Appreciate all the offers. But I had something more romantical in mind, if you*

*catch my drift.*

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Attending a sorority barn dance after winning by a touchdowns over the Huskies gave me a much-needed confidence boost, but the Threshers needed more wins if I wanted to stick around in Benton. Thanks to Carly's guidance, we'd improved our record to five losses and four wins, but it wasn't enough. President Nelson hadn't said as much when she congratulated me after the game, but the subtext had been there. Only knowing I'd be spending the evening with Carly raised my spirits during my post-game shower and digging through my closet for well-worn boots.

When I moved back to Colville after college, boots and a cowboy hat had been my daily attire. I'd worked on my buddy's farm during the day and coached high school football in the afternoons. Drank beer at my aunt's pizzeria on the weekends and avoided my dad like it was my job. Now, seeing those dusty boots in the back of my closet filled me with regret. True, the new football gig was great. Nothing beat the excitement of a full college stadium cheering your name. But I wished I'd left things better with my family. My dad, especially. He didn't make it easy, but when had he ever?

I placed my boots by the front door, hanging my hat on the rack. Bonus of attending a barn dance where you lived: no travel. We'd walk out the front door and be there in moments. Carly had seemed thrilled to avoid the bus ride, and I couldn't blame her. A party bus filled with twenty-somethings was all fun and games until someone tossed their cookies.

Carly's soft knock brought a grin to my face. Just like the woman herself. I opened the door, admiring the shadow of cleavage highlighted by her tight plaid shirt. Carly had tamed her curls into two low pigtails.

"Honey, you are a sight for sore eyes."

She tilted her head, making her own inventory of my flannel over jeans. “I never understood that phrase.”

“What, sore eyes?” At her nod, I shrugged. “I think it means I’ve been aching to see you again.” I paused. “Or maybe you’re so beautiful you hurt my eyes. Come in, I’ve got dinner almost ready.”

“You didn’t have to cook for me. You had a long day today.”

Her soft sympathy made me want to ask for a hug. But it hadn’t been on her list. Forcing bravado I didn’t feel, I waved off her words. “I was glad to have you on the field. A few of the other coaches may still be skeptical, but you’ve made me a believer. We need one last win. You got any more genius strategies for us, Doc?”

Her soft snort soothed some of my own bruised ego over having to ask for help. Losing sucked. And I needed the win at Washington State to stay in Benton. As much as I wanted my coaching tenure to be about building good men, we still needed a winning record. I ran a hand through my hair, riffling the spiky strands.

“Ben, dinner smells great. What is it?”

“Come on, you can’t guess?” I teased. “Your nose is usually on point.”

She wrinkled said nose. “Thanks.” Inhaling deeply, she arched a brow. “Is it ... barbecue?”

“You can’t have a quality hoedown without barbecue.”

“Are you gonna teach me to do-si-do?” she teased. “It’s been a long time since my last square dancing lesson.”

“I don’t really dance. I had something slower in mind,” I said, watching her steadily for her reaction. “Maybe a little more hip action involved.”

“Hmm ...” she hummed, lids dropping to hood her whiskey eyes.

Something about that breathy sound coming from her made me shift, wishing we could jump past the slow dance and stay home instead. But I’d made a promise to myself. Celibate for the season. I was already dancing dangerously close to the line, spending so much time with Carly. Showing restraint was the only way I could look myself in the mirror. The team had to come first. For now.

Clearing my throat, I moved to the oven, pulling the baked beans and ribs out.

“That smells amazing.” Carly’s moan of pleasure nearly undid me.

Maybe I’d miscalculated, picking a finger food. Watching Carly lick her fingers as she ate ribs might be the death of my good intentions. Keeping my back to her to hide what her soft sound had done to me, I stirred the beans.

“It’s ready. Why don’t you grab us a couple of beers, and I’ll bring everything to the table?”

There, that sounded normal. Cool. Not like I wanted to forget about the bus full of partiers on their way to join us and hide away with Carly.

Over dinner, Carly picked at the newly-formed scab over the day’s mistakes. She’d grown savvy enough to spot the errors, even though we ultimately won.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“Nope,” I said as cheerfully as possible. “Nothing more to talk about. We didn’t execute on our nickel and dime defenses. The other team did. We should have won that game by two touchdowns, at least.”

“Hmm ...” Carly gazed at me, watching as I picked up another rib. “What happens if the Threshers don’t end the season with a winning record?”

“I go home.”

“To play again next season?” she asked with a smile.  
“Full of fresh strategies?”

“To Colville,” I corrected.

“What? You can’t do that. Your team needs you.”

Her earnest tone eased something inside. At least Carly seemed to believe in me.

I shrugged. “My contract was only for two years. If I can’t help them win, the Threshers might decide they don’t need me at all.”

She looked affronted on my behalf, and I held my hands up. “What are you gonna do? I was hired to do a job. If President Nelson decides I’m not the right man for the job, that’s her choice.”

“You’re perfect!”

“Honey, I’m glad you think so. But half the pundits think I’m a flash in the pan, a fluke. That what I did for Colville can’t be repeated.”

“You don’t believe that do you?”

I was starting to. The hubris that had brought me to Benton, high on my own success, had been fading with every loss. True, they hadn’t all been losses, but too many had. And the buck had to stop with me.

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that. I’ve got you, Doc. My secret weapon.”

Subdued, I noticed Carly seemed to have lost her appetite, pushing the remains of her dinner around her plate. I hadn’t meant to put too much pressure on her. That would never do.

“Honey, don’t look so grim. This is a party, remember?” I glanced at my watch. “What time does the bus arrive?”

“Seven,” she whispered, and I pushed away from the table, grabbing our plates.

“Well, let’s clean up and maybe have a drink before we get out to the barn. We don’t want to miss the fun.”

I’d kept my distance on purpose, avoiding brushing against her throughout dinner. My self-imposed force field threatened to come crashing down the moment I touched her. Carly seemed oblivious to her effect on me. Cute pigtails and butt-cupping jeans did something to me. The only thing better would be seeing her in full Trekkie garb.

Grabbing a bottle of whiskey from the cabinet, along with cranberry juice from the fridge, I held them aloft. Maybe if I had a tumbler to occupy my hands, they wouldn’t ache to reach for her.

“I can tell I need a little something extra to get you in the mood,” I said, injecting playfulness into my tone.

Carly’s brows climbed near her hairline. “You think liquor is the answer?”

“Only if the question is ‘who wants to have a good time tonight?’ I’m about twenty years past my prime in barn dance years. I need whiskey to cushion my knees in these boots.”

Shaking her head in mock despair, she grinned. “I find that hard to believe, Coach. There will be some *very* jealous sisters in attendance tonight.”

She laughed at the horror clear on my face. “You’ll protect me, won’t you?” I asked in a mock whisper. “Nothing scares me more.”

“Than sorority girls?” she asked, teasingly.

“They’re like locusts when they swarm,” I hissed, playing into the joke. “Don’t let them eat me alive,” I pleaded.



She slapped my chest with an open palm, and I gripped her wrist, enjoying the contact. Her hand slowly slid over my heart, eyes still focused on mine like caressing me was an unconscious move. The appreciative light in her eyes made me glad that I hadn't let my workouts slide under the weight of coaching pressures. My soft fingers caught the faint pounding of her pulse speeding up in her wrist as her palm warmed my chest. My heartbeat picked up pace to match hers. Carly licked her lips and swallowed, and I followed the motion, wishing I could trace her mouth and nibble down her neck.

“Don't worry, Coach. Lucky for you, locusts are vegetarian. And the Chi Beta sisters are harmless.” Lost in the moment, it took me a second to remember my earlier request that she protect me. At my skeptical expression, she chuckled. “Mostly.”

I mixed our cocktails and invited Carly out onto the porch where we could sip them and wait for the bus to arrive. Carly shivered, and I moved closer, wrapping one arm around her shoulders. Was it my imagination, or did she lean in and give me a little sniff? Suddenly self-conscious, I hoped she wouldn't notice me give my pits a whiff, but her husky giggle disabused me of any notion that I'd slipped it by her.

“You smell good,” she reassured. “Like a whiskey-soaked campfire.”

“Huh. And here I expected to smell like bear musk and bad decisions. I will have to write my cologne company a strongly-worded letter about their false advertising. Bear Decisions has some 'splaining to do.”

Giggling, Carly's mirth made my lips twitch, ruining my mock dismay. Teasing and laughing with her amplified my euphoria over our win against the Huskies, and I relaxed, enjoying just being with her.

Headlights flared in the night, and a rapid succession of honks announced the party bus as it pulled up to the event barn. Dark figures spilled out from the open doors, and I nodded their way.

“Looks like our party is here. Can I take your glass, and we’ll head over?”

“I don’t know, are you properly lubricated?”

I choked at Carly’s lifted brow, all saucy and serenely confident as she teased me about my old bones. Sputtering through my last sip, I chuckled.

“That sounds like something I should be asking you. *Eventually*,” I said, raising my hands to show I meant no harm, and snatching her empty glass.

After dropping our dishes off in the kitchen, I grabbed my hat from the back of my door, seating it firmly. Carly’s dark gaze followed the motion, and I grinned from the shadow under the brim.

“Ready?”

“Am I ever.”

Her throaty response made me wish we were headed somewhere more private, instead of strolling to a barn full of people and loud music. Grabbing her hand, I tugged her along the path. Music spilled out into the night, someone crooning about being a mind reader, and I noticed Carly slow. She’d seemed so at ease when we were alone together, but I’d noticed her freeze at the tapping ceremony. Did crowds bother her? She’d been unfazed on the sidelines at the game. Squeezing her hand in mine, I did my best to send strength through our connection. I knew a little something about faking it until I made it.

Stepping inside felt like joining a whole new world. Soft white twinkle lights lit the large space, and Chi Beta had contracted for an open bar along one side. A DJ played for the

crowd from a booth at the back, and before us a sea of bodies writhed to the beat. A few spun as partners, some freestyled on their own, and a handful of brave souls did something that looked like a line dance.

Beer, aftershave, and perfume mixed, making the air feel heavy, even with the barn doors open to the cool night. Carly shrank back, and I tucked her beneath my arm.

“Okay?” I murmured.

She nodded, and I noticed a young woman make a beeline for us, tugging Grant, one of the Rho Upsilon members I’d met, behind her.

“Carly, I worried you wouldn’t come. I’m glad you made it.” Turning to me with bright eyes, she said, “I’m Neve, house secretary. Nice to meet you, Coach Bear.”

I extended my hand to shake her delicate one, noting that she shook with a business-like grip.

Another couple called to her, and she excused herself. “Have fun tonight! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” she added with a wink.

Pausing, I examined her with fresh eyes. Did she know about Carly’s list? And that I was helping her with it? Neve seemed to have broken the ice for Carly, who gestured toward the bar.

“Come on, let me buy you a drink.”

Winding through couples and small groups, we were stopped repeatedly.

“Nice game, Coach Bear.”

“Yo, Coach Bear. You need to run more passing plays.”

On and on it went, until we reached the bar. I placed a hand at Carly’s back, smiling down at her.

“What will you have?”

“I think that’s my question. Just a beer for me. What about you?”

“Same.”

Gesturing to the bartender, we were served two beers in plastic cups from the keg.

“Is it always like that?” Carly asked, as she sipped.

“Like what?”

“Constant advice and comments.”

I shrugged. “Pretty much.”

Carly’s nose wrinkled. “I don’t know how you stand it, the criticism and scrutiny.”

She looked genuinely disturbed, and from her perspective, I could understand the concern. Carly seemed to like moving in the background, avoiding attention, whereas I’d been thrust front and center so long, I’d forgotten what anonymous felt like.

“You learn to disassociate.”

“How?”

The disbelief in her tone made me smile.

“They’re talking to Coach Bear.”

She tilted her head. “And who am I talking to?”

“Ben.”

The fine lines around her eyes relaxed at my softly-spoken words. My chest swelled at the understanding there. Without explanation, she seemed to get it.

I thought I recognized the opening strains to “I Try to Think About Elvis” and held back my smile. Too appropriate. Carly shouldn’t be at the top of my mind, all the time, but as introductory notes played, holding her in my arms was all I could think about.

“Would you like to dance?” I asked, placing my empty cup on the bar.

Carly’s eyes sparkled as she asked, “You think you can keep up? This is a pretty fast swing song.”

“Honey, you leave it to me. I have moves.”

Her burst of laughter brought an answering smile to my lips, and I noticed more than a few interested glances from other couples. Carly might not see it, but when she let down her guard, she shone with charisma.

I tugged her gently into the throng of dancers, starting out slowly with a basic swing step. Once we caught the rhythm, I pulled her into a spin, enjoying the brief moment with her pressed against me, back to front, before twirling her out. She laughed in exhilaration, and I grinned, enjoying the light in her eyes. We spun and twirled, moving into ever more complex steps that she kept up with effortlessly. Like we were made to dance together. As the song wound down, I pulled her close before dropping her in a dramatic dip. Pulling her back up, Carly’s flushed cheeks and labored breathing sparked an altogether different desire in me. I drifted closer, transfixed by her soft pink lips.

Applause broke the spell, and I shook myself, tipping my hat to Carly.

“That was some pretty fancy footwork, Carly.”

Her face flushing further at my comment, she nodded. “I now believe you’re a small-town guy. You’ve done this before.”

“My little sister Izzy used to make me practice with her in the living room since she wasn’t allowed to go to high school dances.”

Carly’s lips twitched at the admission, her eyes softening.

“Well, then you’re a good brother and a great dancer. I approve.”

It was silly that such simple words caused an immediate glow of contentment. But Carly’s approval already meant more than any football pundit or fan. They saw Coach Bear. But Carly? Carly saw me.

The sensual beats of a slow song boomed over the barn’s speakers, and I started swaying. I reached out my palm, feeling immense satisfaction when Carly laced her fingers with mine. Guiding her closer, I urged her hands up and around my neck. Goose bumps pebbled as she stroked the hair at my nape, and I bit back a groan as the zing struck a chord, tightening my groin. Letting my hands caress her hips only accentuated the torture. I took a deep breath, focusing on the song’s lyrics. Something about dying a happy man.

*Man, I could relate.*

Every step with Carly brought us closer. And in those moments together, I felt complete. No need to strive to be anything I wasn’t, to protect myself.

She snuggled closer, tucking her head beneath my chin, and I inhaled deeply. Flowers, sunshine, and Carly. Aromatherapy for the soul.

The last notes faded into the night, the DJ announced a break, and reluctantly, I pulled back. Carly stood on the dance floor, looking almost bemused. Her soft expression made me wish we were somewhere private. Where we could explore.

She shook herself as if breaking a spell, before focusing on me.

“Thanks for the dance, Ben. We’re blowing through my list. At this rate, I’m going to have to come up with new challenges.”

I loved the gentle teasing in her tone.

“Honey, sign me up.”

Glancing around, the other couples seemed absorbed in their own worlds, with a handful of more casual groups standing around the edges of the dance floor, drinking. No one was paying attention to us. Dare we slip away? The lure of her list tempted me to spirit her somewhere private.

“Would you like to mark another challenge off your list?” I asked finally, stroking a hand from her elbow to her wrist, marveling at the delicate bones there.

Part of me wanted to dance forever but having her to myself appealed more.

She leaned in, smiling conspiratorially. “What did you have in mind?” she whispered.

“Luke has a hot tub,” I murmured in her ear.

Carly pursed her lips, and I held my breath, sure she meant to turn me down. The hot tub might be relatively private, but it didn’t erase all of the Chi Beta sisters and their dates milling around the property. Ignoring the risks would be foolish. But Carly tempted me beyond reason.

She pulled away, and my heart sank, sure she was going to refuse, worried about our overabundance of witnesses. Instead, she grabbed my hand, tugging me toward the barn’s exit. Heart racing, I followed, hoping our absence wouldn’t be too noticeable. Luckily, most of the sisters seemed absorbed in their own shenanigans, uncaring about the two olds in the group.

I inhaled deeply as we stepped outside, enjoying the crisp night air after the faint tang of sweat and beer in the barn. Wind whistled through the trees and Carly shivered. Taking the lead, we wound down the path from the barn to the main house in the dark.

“Are you going to get in trouble with your landlord?” Carly asked softly, sounding nervous.

“I don’t want you to get evicted for breaking the rules.”

“A: worth it. But B: no, I gave Luke a heads-up.”

“That I wanted to skinny-dip?” Carly’s strangled squawk made me chuckle.

“No, I only asked to use the hot tub. Never fear, your secret is safe with me.”

“What about towels?”

I squeezed her hand. “I got you covered, honey. Luke keeps a chest by the hot tub.”

“What if he catches us?”

Her nervous questions made me doubt that she was ready for this step, her previous bravado to the contrary. My only skinny-dipping experiences had been with friends, horsing around in the creek at home. True, with Carly, the experience might feel altogether different, more intimate, but it didn’t have to.

“Carly, this is just two friends having an adventure together. It doesn’t have to be anything more. And we don’t have to do this tonight or at all if you don’t want to,” I reassured. “But one of the best things about Luke’s hot tub is the location.”

I gestured to the path as we emerged from the grove of fruit trees to the hot tub set near the vines. Close enough to the tasting room to run electrical, it was positioned for privacy. And an amazing view.

“Oh, Ben. The stars out here are fantastic.”

Carly’s awed statement made me want to show her more. She looked at me, a determined look coming over her face. “I’m in. What’s a little skinny-dipping between friends?”

I swallowed, focusing on that word. *Friends*. Maybe by focusing on making it a mini-adventure, I could suppress



any urges to take our time in the water to a more intimate place.

“Come on. I’ll remove the cover and then grab towels while you slip into the water,” I offered, hoping my voice didn’t sound as strangled as it felt at the prospect of having her so close.

I flipped the cover off, then turned my back, rummaging in Luke’s trunk for the fuzziest towels, trying to give Carly time to get settled. Hearing the soft lap of water and her hiss of breath nearly overwhelmed my self-control. Clearing my throat, I croaked. “Ready?”

“The water’s heaven. Join me.”

Her soft invitation had me stumbling in my haste to do as she bid. I hung the towels over the stair railing before toeing off my boots and stripping my shirt over my head. Glancing over my shoulder, I caught Carly’s dark eyes over the water. In the shadows, I couldn’t make out anything but rough shapes below the surface, but knowing she was naked made me pause with my hands at my fly.

“Don’t stop now.”

Carly’s soft words of encouragement nearly undid me. If she had any idea how much I wanted to dive into the warm water with her, pull her into my arms, she might not be so eager for me to strip.

Seeming to sense my hesitation, Carly said, “Do you want me to turn my back?”

She’d misread my pause, and I bit back a chuckle. “Naw, I’m wishing you’d do more than watch.” At her indrawn breath, I rushed on. “But I don’t think we’re ready for that yet.”

I bit my lip, hoping the edge of pain would calm the erection I couldn’t quite ignore. Carly had set the rules for her list, and respecting them, respecting her and my own

commitment, was more important. Breathing deeply, I struggled for control. Her silence only served to confirm my statement. We had time to check all the boxes. And I still had a season to finish. Wasn't part of the fun in the journey? In anticipation?

Gingerly shucking my jeans and the rest of my clothes, I slid into the welcoming water, letting the rush of external heat draw away some of my internal fever. Carly's steady gaze of admiration did nothing to help me cool down. Settling in the farthest corner from Carly, I bit back my internal admonition: *coward*.

There was brave and then there was stupid. Thinking I could sit close to her sleek body and not want to touch it was madness. The soft intimacy of the dark night and warm hot tub should have been soothing, but it only made me hyper-aware of every move she made.

Carly had let her head fall back against the edge of the hot tub, her hands slowly treading at the surface, and I desperately wanted those delicate fingers trailing over me like they swept through the steaming water.

Forcing myself to focus on anything but her, I sighed, staring up at the sky. Slowly, my vision cleared, and I named constellations in my head. The moon had moved behind a bank of clouds, but they hadn't yet obscured the big dipper.

"Never did I ever dream I'd be here," Carly whispered softly, jarring me from my contemplation of the skies.

Careful to avoid letting my gaze dip below her face, I took in her expression. A touch wistful, but mostly, she seemed ... satisfied?

"Is that a good thing, or a bad thing?" I asked, wanting to be sure.

"Oh, a good thing," she said, fluttering her hands through the water.

I focused on her fingers, trying to blot the gentle bob of her full breasts from my brain. That way lay madness. And hot tub defilement.

Shifting, I glanced back to the stars, letting my arms bob to the surface.

“I’m glad.”

As aware as I was of Carly, I shouldn’t have startled when her fingers brushed mine in the water. Maybe it was the soft bubbles and heat on top of the drinks I’d had, but I threaded my fingers through hers, pulling gently.

Carly glided toward me, and I swallowed, catching the light in her gaze. Her body brushed mine, and I closed my eyes, searching for strength. My original plan had been relatively innocent, relaxing with her under the stars. Nothing that would even come close to violating my agreement with Luke or risking the promises I’d made to myself.

Carly’s delicate hands settled on my shoulders and she let her body float away, giving me breathing room to exhale. The jets swirled water around us, adding to the hypnotic push and pull between Carly and me.

Her lips glistened, dark pink, and I leaned forward, letting the water force me closer.

Her eyes rounded, but she didn’t back off. I cupped her chin, giving her time to pull away, almost wishing she’d stop me. Help me keep my promises to myself. But instead, she leaned closer, and I was done.

Brushing my lips with hers, she tasted faintly of beer and chlorine. It shouldn’t have been intoxicating, but I couldn’t resist dragging my mouth across hers before nipping at her lips. Carly gave as good as she got, until we broke apart, gasping.

Stunned, I struggled for breath. I should have guessed kissing Carly would pack a punch.

Giggling and the crash of stumbling footsteps jarred me from the moment.

Eyes round, Carly hissed, "Someone's coming."

She crossed her arms over her chest, and I glanced from her to our towels. We had maybe seconds before whomever it was caught sight of us. Standing naked in a towel would be harder than brazening out our little dip.

Carly looked mildly horrified, and I cupped her chin, turning her face to mine.

"We've got this."

She mustered a smile, though it wobbled on the edges. "Sure. Because you're not their house mom," she muttered.

"Who's there?" the slurred voice asked, as two figures broke from the tree line and stumbled closer. "Ooh, hot tub!" an enthusiastic female voice exclaimed.

I could imagine a flock of naked people rushing to join us. Our interlopers seemed delighted, and I noticed Carly shift in discomfort. Time to nip this in the bud.

"Y'all, this is a private party. If you're looking for your own slice of privacy, might I suggest the hammocks in the tree grove back there?"

"I dunno, two is fun, but four is a party," the female voice teased as she drew closer.

"Carly?" Recognition and surprise battled for supremacy in the other woman's tone.

Carly heaved a long-suffering sigh. "Hi, Neve."

"Are you with Coach Bear? You *are* with Coach Bear." She tsked. "Treat her right, or the Chi Beta sisters will yeet you into the sun." She held her hands up, as if backing away slowly from a dangerous animal. With a giggle, she grabbed the bulky shadow next to her, tugging back toward the

trees. “Come on, maybe if Carly gets laid, she’ll look the other way next time I try to sneak you upstairs.”

Carly’s frustrated groan as the other girl disappeared immediately tightened my groin, making me wish she wasn’t so obviously distressed.

“You okay?” I asked as she waded toward the stairs.

“Turn your back, please?”

Not that she had to ask, I’d already averted my gaze. Tempted as I was to sneak a peek at her curves, our earlier closeness, the warm amazement, had fractured under Neve’s discovery.

“Is it a problem if the sorority sisters know about us?” I asked, suddenly uncertain. Neve had seemed more disappointed and playful than anything else. We were all adults, after all.

“The sisters? They won’t care. But if the corporation board that owns the house gets wind of this, I might lose my house mom gig.”

“For skinny-dipping?”

Wrapped in a towel, she turned back to me with a wry smile. “You haven’t met Belinda, president of the corporation board that owns the house. Her ideals of womanhood were forged in the fifties.”

“Would you miss it, living in the sorority house?”

She grabbed her clothes, and I waded out, drying off as she dressed in the shadow of a tree.

“It started as a way to get a leg up on repaying my student loans, but I have to admit, I like it. The comradery, never feeling alone. Not that it stops me from feeling lonely necessarily, but the sisters have been welcoming to a fault, regardless of the age difference.” I could hear the smile in her voice.

Rubbing my chest to ease the ache there, I made the offer my conscience demanded. “Are you sure you want to do this then? Risk your position with your list? I don’t want to jeopardize something important to you.”

“Ah, Ben. You have me half convinced that chivalry isn’t dead. But I asked for this. I *want* this.”

Was she trying to convince herself, or me?

A horn honked in the distance, and Carly released my hand. I trailed after her on the path as she picked up speed, walking back to my house.

“That’s the bus. They must be packing it in for the evening. Thanks for a memorable night, Ben.”

Should I tell her it was as close as I was ever going to get to a holodeck mud bath? Clearing my throat, I went for cool. “Thanks for the dance. And the swim.”

She smiled, a wry twitch of her lips, before climbing in her car for the drive back to town.

At loose ends without Carly, I wandered back down the path, pausing to tip my head up to the stars when I reached the clearing with the hot tub.

“Everyone gone?”

“Holy schnikes!”

Luke’s rough question from the shadows had me tensing up, the childhood curse leaking out before I could call it back. He chuckled, the sound low and gravelly. “*Tommy Boy*? I thought you’d given up all your Colville hick hobbies. What’s next? Taking your new lady cow tipping? You’d better not track mud into the hot tub.”

My lips twitched at the return to familiar, snarky territory. Luke loved to give me shit about being a small-town hick. But only because he thought farm life was perfect. It was also the most sentences he’d strung together since I moved

onto the property with him, and something in me eased, seeing a glimmer of the old Luke.

“Oh, I don’t know. We can’t all be grumpy assholes like you. Someone has to show the ladies a good time around here.”

He gave me a gentle shove before climbing the hot tub steps and slipping into the warm water.

He just grunted at my goodnight, and I wandered home through the trees, wishing I were still in the tub with Carly, turning pruney, instead of walking through the chilly night alone.

# CHAPTER 11 – CARLY

I'd wondered if things would be different between Ben and me after The Hot Tub Incident, but he remained his affable self during the coaching staff meeting on Wednesday. I walked the coaching staff through my latest calculations and projections, and watched as they argued strategy, Ben listening, taking it all in. Thus far, the move toward passing more early in the games had paid off. But Oregon's strong defense made it riskier, and Coach Stutzman urged more caution in play calling with a return to more of a running game, while Coach Chun argued that we should stay aggressive.

When we first met, I'd assumed Ben was all brash ego. The epitome of a hardcore athlete. But he managed his coaching staff with a deft touch. Listening more than he spoke. Listening for what wasn't said. My respect for him grew, as he navigated the latest argument between Coach Stutzman and Coach Chun.

Stutzman and the rest of the coaches filtered out of the conference room, and I hurriedly packed up my laptop. I needed every one of the next thirty minutes to make it across campus to the business school and get set up for my Data and Text Mining class.

“Carly.”

My name uttered in Ben's husky voice stopped me in my tracks, calling up skin pressed together in the warm water of the hot tub. I shivered, trying to keep my focus in the present.

“Yes?” I croaked before clearing my throat.



If I sounded like a boy going through puberty every time he said my name, there would be no hiding how much he was starting to affect me. As much as I argued that was the point of my list, to let go, part of me still craved control. And losing my head to the handsome coach had disaster written all over it.

“I appreciate all you’ve been doing for the team. You’ve certainly made a believer out of Chun.” His compliment sent a rush of warmth through me, which turned red-hot when he continued speaking. “Halloween is coming up; do you have any plans?”

Disappointment rushed through me as I realized I’d have to say ‘no.’ “I have to stay at the house on Halloween. It’s a red-letter chaperone supervision day.”

“What about the Friday before? One of my buddies is hosting a costume party. I thought we could dress up together. I’ve gotta take advantage of our bye week somehow.”

My heart stuttered to a stop before speeding ahead. Was Ben going off-list, asking me out? Before I could answer, he rushed ahead. “I thought we could cross off cosplay. Your list wasn’t very specific, did you have something particular in mind?”

Swallowing, I pushed down the chagrin at the realization that his offer had been list related.

“I’d love to.” Mind racing, I admitted, “I hadn’t thought much about dressing up, I don’t usually go out. Maybe something easy? I have to run to my next class right now, but let’s talk later?”

His blue eyes lit, seeming pleased with my agreement.

“I’ll text you.”

Nodding, I slipped out of the conference room, shaking out my hands as I strode down the hall. Ben was jumping into my list with abandon. At this rate, we’d check off

all the items I'd come up with in a matter of weeks. My gut churned, turning the remnants of my coffee sour in my stomach. Our agreement was meant to be temporary. Finishing the list should signal triumph, not whatever *this* was.

I'd picked Ben because he seemed easygoing, like we could play together and then go our separate ways. No harm, no foul. But the more I learned about him, the more I liked. Under the good 'ol boy jock lurked a kind man. Intelligent and caring. Willing to put an exquisite level of attention into everything he did, from coaching to cooking to making me laugh. Not the rough player I expected to hit it and quit it.

Fear crept into the crevices in my heart, sending fresh shocks through me.

I'd thought I'd picked the perfect man for my challenge. Warm, willing, and hot. But I'd underestimated him. I'd underestimated myself. Had I unwittingly picked the perfect man for me? The internal tug-of-war between jumping in wholeheartedly and protecting my heart from disappointment if he ended things when we finished my list kept me unsettled.

Distracted throughout my class, I breathed a sigh of relief when I reached the quiet of my office afterward. My peace was short-lived, when a swift knock at my open door broke my focus on my email inbox.

"Hey, Carly. Do you have a minute?" Sid asked as she hovered in the hall.

Dark hair swept up in a classic topknot and looking sleek in her kelly green silk shell, it was hard not to draw comparisons between us. Unfavorable ones. My reddish curls leaked from a messy ponytail, and I already felt wrinkled and mussed from my morning meeting and class.

Shaking off the envy that came from hanging with Sid, I nodded. "Sure, what's up?"

"Halloween. You have plans?"

“You’re the second person to ask me that. I have to be at the house on the day itself.”

Sid’s eyes flared with mischief. “Ah, then maybe my invitation is redundant. Has the handsome Coach Bear already asked you to be his date to Jake’s party?”

“He mentioned a party on Friday but didn’t say whose it was.” And I’d been too excited about the invitation to ask. Rookie mistake. But it made me feel warm inside realizing that Sid would have also invited me. She’d been very welcoming when I joined the department.

Sid’s grin stretched across her face. “Good. What are you going to go as?”

I shrugged. “Not sure, we’re going to brainstorm together. What about you and Nate? Are you going as Peter Pan and Wendy?” I teased.

From the very first time I joined in Sunday brunch with Angi, Sid, Cheri, and Rita, Sid spent most of the meal moaning about what a man-child her colleague Nate Cummings was. Watching her morph from irritation to infatuation over him in just a few weeks had been fascinating. If the perfect, in control Sid could fall for someone outside her comfort zone, maybe I should take the threat of Ben’s allure more seriously.

“Nah, he’s not such a lost boy anymore. We’re going as Batman and Catwoman. I’ve got a whip and everything,” she added with a shimmy of her shoulders.

Enjoying her obvious delight, I grinned. A year ago, I couldn’t imagine her wearing a revealing cat suit in public. Especially as part of a couple’s costume with Nate. But her relationship with him had eased some of her restraint, such that I could absolutely imagine them as the dangerous duo.

“Sid, you are going to be a fabulous Catwoman. I’m almost jealous of your choice. I don’t have much in the way of

costume pieces. We'll probably end up cutting bedsheets into ghost costumes or something."

"That would be a crying shame," Sid said, pursing her lips.

"Why, other than the obvious?"

"You're a pair of beautiful people. Think bigger. What do you love?"

"Excel and analytics?" I said, wincing. "How big a dork would I be if we went as a Venn diagram?"

Sid tilted her head. "What would your data sets be?"

Mind racing, I blurted the first ones I could think of. "Her costume, his costume?"

Sid chuckled. "Our costume?"

"Exactly."

"I guess it's on brand, at least for you ... but what about Coach Bear?"

"He mentioned something more in the cosplay arena," I said.

Never mind that he'd ripped the suggestion straight off of my Never Have I Ever list. I hadn't exactly meant to cross off that particular item in public; I'd envisioned a more private party when I'd put it on my list.

Sid tapped her chin, assessing me with a light in her dark eyes. "Hmm ... how about a classic? The quarterback and the cheerleader?"

I shuddered, imagining freezing my assets off in a short skirt. Maybe in the bedroom, but at a party? I wrinkled my nose. "He said he wanted to brainstorm together. We'll see what we come up with."

"Okay, but if you make it a Venn diagram, be sure to make it a *sexy* Venn diagram," Sid said, arching her brows

suggestively.

I laughed. “Aren’t all Venn diagrams sexy?”

She grinned good-naturedly. “Nerd.”

“You know it.”

“Well, I’m glad you’re coming to Jake’s party. I’ll see you there.”

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Ben texted me as I was snuggling under the covers with the latest Nalini Singh book that night, and I reached for my phone with more haste than was probably wise.

*Ben: Truth time. We need a costume. What are you into?*

I bit my lip, worrying it. The Venn diagram idea wasn’t *terrible*. Still ...

*Carly: I’m equipped with your basic nerd package. Books, geeking out over data, Star Trek. The classics.*

*Ben: Wait. You’re a Trekkie?*

If he declared his undying love for Star Wars, we were in trouble.

*Carly: Almost from the cradle. Used to watch with my grandma. She had a thing for Picard.*

I cleared my throat; glad Ben couldn’t witness the heat stinging my cheeks. Sure. *Grandma* had a thing for Picard. And Number One. *Sigh*. Riker. More recently, *Star Trek Discovery’s* Captain Pike had claimed my geek heart, and was it wrong that I found Ben a little more attractive because they looked alike?

*Ben: Me too. Not the thing for Picard, but we watched a lot growing up.*

My mouth hung open at his admission. I’d expected teasing, maybe a diatribe on how much better another

franchise was.

*Carly: Do you want to go as Captain Pike?*

*Ben: Only if you go as Dr. Crusher.*

Giggling, I couldn't help the grin spreading across my face. Maybe I wasn't the only one who'd imprinted on a favorite character young. Wouldn't the redheaded doctor have been too old for him? Not that I could judge ...

*Carly: So ... we're going full nerd. And you're okay with that?*

*Ben: I think you underestimate how many people have Trekkie fantasies ... anyone who sees me with you as Beverly Crusher is going to think I'm a lucky, lucky man.*

How wrong had I been about Ben? Sharing a love of *Star Trek* didn't make us soul mates, but his eagerness to embrace my nerdy side still warmed me. And I'd have to put those feelings on hold if we were surrounded by friends at a party. How likely were we to find privacy afterward? Ben had claimed he didn't want to boldly go where man hadn't gone in a ... while until after the season ended. With a record of four wins to five losses, the next few games required our full concentration.

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I endured the wolf whistles from my housemates with a good-natured grin as I made my way through the dining room to the front door. Still not used to hearing that a "caller" was there for me, I'd missed the first announcement, and it seemed like everyone had dropped what they were doing to watch me make my exit on Ben's arm. Twenty women milled around in various states of preparation for a night out whispering quietly. I spotted Neve in curlers and a robe, totally unfazed by her state of undress as she winked at me.

"Have fun tonight, Carly," she singsonged with a mischievous grin. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

“So, the field is wide open,” Lea muttered.

Neve pushed her but didn't lose her smile.

The crowd parted slightly, and I caught my first clear glimpse of Ben in uniform.

*Damn it, Captain.* Fanning myself would be too obvious, as would pulling the collar of my uniform away to give myself some extra air.

Ben had found a dark blue *Discovery* uniform and slicked his silver hair back from his face, emulating Captain Pike perfectly. His broad shoulders filled out the tight-fitting fabric, emphasizing his commanding presence.

“Do you need a napkin for the drool?” Lea mock-whispered, causing a wave of laughter in the surrounding clusters of women.

“Thanks, Lea, but I've got it.”

“Yeah, you do,” a freshman I couldn't name intoned, ruining the innuendo with a girlish giggle.

Ben's grin lit up his face as he examined my costume, the signature blue blazer over a black and blue Star Trek uniform that hugged every curve. Putting a hand to his chest, he paused dramatically. “Doctor, I might need a full exam. There seems to be something wrong with my heart.”

The collective sigh of twenty women nearly shook the foundations of the house.

I shook my head at his antics, knowing better than to take him seriously.

“Captain, permission to board?” I gestured toward the door and presumably, his truck.

“Doctor, I wish you would,” he said with a wicked grin. His blue eyes danced with good humor, and I couldn't help but smile back.

Snickers accompanied us as he grasped my hand in his, leading us out the door and to his truck parked at the curb. Yeah, I heard it. *After* I said it. My reputation as the quiet and reserved house mom was probably going up in smoke behind me.

“The party is at Jake’s?” I asked as Ben slid out of his parking spot and navigated the roads toward the north end of town.

“Yes. Halloween is pretty much gay Christmas, and he was excited to host with Chris this year.”

“Have you known each other long?”

“Not really. But I’ve been practicing at the dojang on Tuesdays with him and Nate.”

“Martial arts?” I asked, guessing from the context.

“Yeah,” he looked a little sheepish, as if having an interest in anything but football was something to be ashamed of. Maybe to him, it was.

“That sounds fun,” I said lightly.

Cars overflowed from the driveway, and we circled the block a few times before finding a spot that would fit Ben’s truck along the curb.

Jake and Chris’s house was a small bungalow perched on a lot in between other older homes. It was quaint and cute, perfect for a small college town.

Chris greeted us at the door, nodding in silent approval at our costumes.

“We’re hanging out in the backyard. Come on through.”

We followed him into the small, fenced backyard, torches lighting the area and a small fire crackling in a firepit.

“I’ll grab us a couple of drinks,” Ben offered, and I nodded. Spotting Sid in her dark catsuit, whip coiled over one



shoulder, I slid into her circle to say hi.

“Carly!” She pulled me close, hugging me. “I’m glad you could make it.”

The uncharacteristic hug surprised me. You’d think I’d never been to a party before. Feeling guilty at the invitations I’d turned down over my first months at the college, I mustered a shy smile.

“Hey, Sid. You look great.”

Her eyes gleamed as she flicked my Starfleet insignia. “So do you. Way to rock the uniform.”

Ben slipped up behind me, his heat making me want to lean back against him. He held a cup out, and I accepted with a smile.

“Ooh, you both look distinguished. Ready for first contact.”

Ben’s charm extended to Sid as he chuckled, amused by the obvious innuendo. “Thanks, Sid.”

I let the flow of conversation wash around me, yielding to the camaraderie of being among friends. His easy touches marked us as a couple, and each casual stroke of his hand against mine only served to emphasize our connection, making the crackle of possibilities stronger. I yielded to my earlier instinct, leaning against Ben, his deep bass rumbling behind me when he spoke. He and Nate argued good-naturedly about sci-fi franchises, and I joined in, professing my love for *Killjoys*.

When Ben, Nate, and Ed moved off to refill our cups, Rita leaned in, brows arched. “So, you and Coach Bear, huh? You make a cute couple.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, tired of denying it. No one believed me anyways. Least of all, me. I was having too much fun, just being with him. A year ago, I couldn’t imagine attending a party, surrounded by friends. And to be fair, that

wasn't only about Ben. It was about me. I'd taken the first step, accepting Sid's brunch invitation. Slowly, but surely, I was making a place for myself in Benton.

Ben slipped a fresh cup in my hands, and I glanced up, smiling.

"Can I steal you for a few minutes?" he asked huskily, and nodding, I turned to follow him.

He escorted me through the kitchen, nodding to Chris speaking quietly with a woman I didn't recognize. He set our glasses down on the counter before walking me down the hall away from the party. I turned to him, scandalized. "Are you sure we should be here? I don't want to intrude on Jake and Chris's privacy."

"Don't worry, they won't mind."

He opened a door, pulling me inside quickly before shutting it behind us. Dark and crowded, it took me a moment to realize where we were.

"Ben. Did you drag me into a closet?"

Bemused, I didn't know what to think. I batted at a heavy jacket that seemed intent on eating me, trying to make room to move without feeling claustrophobic. Ben's big hands cupped my hips, and I stilled as his body brushed mine, even though it was too dark to really see him.

"I just wanted to steal a moment alone," he murmured, leaning in to place a kiss where my uniform left my neck bare.

Shivering, heat arced through me at the contact, his urgency taking me by surprise.

"In a closet?" I asked, still not understanding why he hadn't chosen a bedroom, bathroom, or anywhere we could really *see*. He was too beautiful a man to grope in the dark.

"I can't wait any longer. Every little touch tonight has been driving me wild. Consider this me adding to our list," he

said, before capturing my lips with his.

*Our* list. Sighing, I let go, sinking into the soft brush of his mouth against mine. Unable to help myself, I reached for his shoulders, winding my hands around his neck, playing with the soft whorls of hair there. Ben groaned, deepening our kiss, stroking my tongue with his own. He urged me closer, lifting my leg to hook around his back, grinding against me until I whimpered.

“Is this too much?” he asked, breaking away, heaving for breath.

Struggling for enough oxygen, I shook my head, hoping he’d feel the motion and understand. I let my hands wander down his firm chest, enjoying the hard muscles beneath my fingertips. The bulge of his erection firmly lodged between my thighs made me ache with need, and I undulated against him, trying to get closer.

He dipped his head, kissing me with fresh urgency as his hands roamed my body. Ben cupped my breast, running his thumb over my nipple, which poked out rudely in my outfit, and I melted against him, wishing the fabric between us would just dissolve, leaving us skin to skin. Surrounded by Ben’s big body, his scent, and caught up in his kiss, I wanted to absorb and revel in it all.

Aching and needy, I shuddered as our tongues dueled gently in a deep kiss, amping up the tension. His hands stroked along my body, seeking out the seams in my uniform.

“Where are the zippers on this thing?” he muttered, and I smiled against his lips, loving the urgency in every motion.

I wanted to be closer to him. Naked. Able to touch. I conducted my own frantic search, looking for the fastenings, before giving up on a frustrated laugh.

“I’m convinced that even as the horniest of sci-fi franchises, these uniforms are cinematic cock blockers. I can’t

find the zipper.”

Need wound through me with insidious fingers, but none of the seams I traced led to the promised-land of his zipper.

Chuckling, he rested his forehead against mine, still breathing hard. “Yeah, at this rate, I’ll be boldly going nowhere. I’m afraid I’m going to rip your uniform. As much as I want to feel you against me, Jake might get suspicious if one of us has to borrow a jacket to make it home without scandalizing the neighbors.”

Still tight with desire, I moaned softly, blowing out a breath.

“I don’t want you to be right, but I’ve gotta admit defeat.”

“Ah, honey. It’s not defeat. We’re choosing to set the rules of the game.”

His easygoing response was both reassuring and disappointing. I wanted him as wound up as I was, but in the dark, I couldn’t see his expression. I untangled my leg from behind his back, and his soft groan gave me a small measure of comfort. I wasn’t the only one struggling with the remnants of desire.

“And one of those rules is don’t flash your neighbors?” I teased, yielding to the reality that we’d picked the wrong time and place for anything heavier.

Chuckling, he turned the knob, opening the door at his back to let light spill in from the hall. “Exactly.”

# CHAPTER 12 – BEN

Thoughts of Carly kept me tossing and turning well into the morning hours. Seven minutes in heaven for seven hours in hell. I was hard just thinking about her, as I had been ever since the closet. The short taste had only sharpened my desire until it cut like razor wire with every breath.

I grumped around the kitchen, brewing coffee before pulling my copy of her list from where I'd stowed it, slipped between the pages of *Coach Wooden's Pyramid of Success*.

We'd crossed off number one first. Holding hands in public. Reveling in her soft palm cushioning mine.

Slow dancing in the barn had satisfied number three. The sway of her hips and her dark eyes mesmerizing me with her quiet sincerity.

And oh, number five. Cosplay. Dr. Beverly. Fucking. Crusher. Groaning at the wash of memories, I closed my eyes.

By comparison, last night had been tame. Making out with Carly in the cramped closet, surrounded by a cocoon of winter jackets shouldn't have been sexier than feeling her naked curves slip around mine in the hot tub. Lucky, lucky number seven. At this rate, I'd never survive to the end of the regular season and number eight. I didn't even need the treehouse. Sex anywhere with Carly was sure to be amazing, when a simple brush of her hand turned me on.

But something about Carly made every experience unique. Important. We weren't only ticking away a list of fantasies, playing games together. I was slowly learning what made Carly smile. What made her squeal. And what made her somber. Every time we were together, I became more invested in making her happy. Learning more about her background, her hopes, her wishes.

Based on her list, if we continued, soon we'd be moving into irrevocable territory. Greater intimacy. Bigger risks. But wasn't that what the list was all about? Taking risks, moving outside our comfort zones?

As much as it had started as a superficial challenge, one that might titillate, but wouldn't fundamentally change either of us, I had to admit that maybe for me, it wasn't true. Holding onto the belief that Carly's list wouldn't change me—change *us*—had been a mistake.

I gulped a too-large mouthful of hot coffee, gasping when it went down the wrong way, making me sputter. All too apt a metaphor. I'd thought I could handle it, handle *her*.

After finishing my coffee, I pulled on ragged jeans and an old flannel before pushing outside into the frosty fall morning. The frigid morning made me extra grateful for the bye week. Normally, I'd already be at the field, preparing for the day's game.

Luke had asked me for help repairing a fence along the road, and I'd agreed, still thankful to him for letting me live at the vineyard, since the privacy gave me a much-needed respite from the grind of coaching. A little manual labor seemed a small price to pay. Especially when it might help soothe some of the lingering frustration Carly had left me with.

He barked orders as I held boards and pounded new nails at his direction. Was it my imagination, or did Luke seem *more* grumpy than usual? He'd surprised me by showing up at Jake's party, though less surprising had been his lack of costume. When Carly's friend Cheri had asked what he was supposed to be, he'd given a very abrupt, "a homebody," and left it at that.

"Did you have fun last night?" I asked, half wondering if I'd ever see the easygoing man I'd met in college again. The older, gruffer version of Luke still threw me sometimes. I kept

expecting him to crack a dirty joke or tease me about my half-baked swears. It was hard to believe that version of him was gone for good.

Luke's only answer was a grunt, and I continued. "I thought for sure the death trap you drive couldn't make it farther than the hardware store or Porter's Pints, and that's why you so rarely leave Wilcox. Imagine my shock to see you in public. *Almost* having fun."

"You and your fancy-boy truck are the only ones who've ever needed a bailout."

I held a hand to my chest. "I can't help it if Rammy and I went through some tough times. I meant to get my jumper cables back from Chun but forgot. How long are you going to hold needing a jump against me?" I grumbled. "Still, I was glad you made it to the party last night."

"Your boy Ed scared the shit out of me," Luke admitted grudgingly. "I nearly swung at him before I realized he was just a very realistic Bigfoot and not a demented bear come down from the Cascades."

Chuckling, I shook my head. "I get the sense that Ed plans to trot that same costume out every year. It's a little too on brand for him. I'm only shocked Jake didn't join him. If not as Bigfoot, then as a chupacabra or something equally obscure."

"Yeah, a damned Betty White look-alike pinched my ass and blamed it on Bigfoot."

Snickering, I noticed Luke's cheeks pinken at the admission, and I couldn't help teasing him further. "To be fair, that's probably the most action you've seen in what—months? Maybe years?"

His expression fell, and I regretted needling him. "Sorry, man. Didn't mean to hit a tender spot."

"I'm not tender," Luke grumbled.

“Sure, Mister I’m-going-to-stay-home-and-sulk-until-the-end-of-time-Wilcox.”

“I’m not sulking. I’m running a vineyard and family business.”

“Like it’s the only thing between you and the end of the world. No one thinks less of you for what happened.”

“I do, though,” he said softly.

“Someday I hope you can forgive yourself. Life’s too short to obsess about our mistakes. Every season is a fresh start, an opportunity for a win.”

“Whatever, Suzy Sunshine,” Luke grumbled, his brow wrinkled.

“That’s *Coach* Suzy Sunshine to you.”

Maybe I’d gotten through to him. Maybe. He seemed bent on atoning for his perceived sins by working himself into a solo grave. Having a business go bankrupt shouldn’t mean the end of your life. Failure was part of taking risks, but Luke seemed bent on covering himself in his mistakes until he built up a shell to protect himself from disappointment.

I showered and changed after wrapping up with Luke. We lived far enough out of town, and down a long enough drive, that he wasn’t worried about entertaining trick or treaters. At loose ends, I struggled to focus on game tape. Back in town, Carly was stuck at home, supervising her swarm, ensuring no harm came to the chapter house. Was she bored, reading a book in her room? Or answering the door to trick or treaters while her charges hit the town to party?

I debated texting her, but it wasn’t enough. Not if I could have more.

Sliding into Rammy, I patted the dash for good measure. “Luke didn’t mean the nasty things he said about you. You’re a strong, loyal truck.”



I drove slowly through town, keeping an eagle eye out for kids in costumes. Claiming a parking spot about a block from the Chi Beta house, I approached the well-lit front façade. From the outside, the sorority house didn't look like anything special. A bit boxy, and painted white with dark shutters, it lurked on the corner, with floors of windows lighting the yard below.

Pausing on the front stoop, my finger hovered over the doorbell. Behind me, the clatter of feet signaled approaching trick or treaters.

"Mister are you going to ring the bell?" a girl dressed as a goblin asked.

"If not, can I?" another young voice piped up.

Standing to the side, I gestured. "Be my guest."

Behind me, the mother of the goblin and spiderman muttered, "Creep," to her companion, and I winced. Clearly, she was one of the few in town who didn't recognize me. I looked a little old for trick or treating. And for calling on a college girl. Defending myself by saying I was here for the house mom might make me look less predatory.

Before I could explain myself, the door popped open, and I smiled as Carly gushed over the kids' costumes. My heart clutched at the gentle smile she shared with each tiny girl before loading up their bags with candy. She made a move to shut the door, not seeing me in the shadows beyond the porch light, and it forced me out of my trance.

"Wait! Carly."

"Ben? What are you doing here?"

She looked bewildered. Understandably so, since I was the dork who hadn't given her a heads-up I was swinging by. My need to see her overrode common sense. And courtesy. Embarrassed, I moved to cover my gaffe.

"Ah. Trick or treat?" I asked hesitantly.

Candy wouldn't soothe the ache inside me but being with Carly was a treat all on its own.

She stepped over the threshold, approaching me in the porch shadows.

"Where's your costume?" she asked softly, taking in my jeans and flannel under my jacket.

"I, uh, came as a man who can't get enough of you," I said hoarsely, drinking her in. Soft and round, Carly looked like a warm place to land. Like home. Shelter from the day, from disappointments. Someone I could talk to. I gestured to her casual shirt and jeans. "What about you? What's your costume?" I asked, holding my breath, unsure of how she'd respond.

"Horny but responsible woman," she said, dashing my hopes of enticing her back to my place later.

Shrugging, I smiled sheepishly. "I figured. Maybe I can help you hand out candy?"

She nodded, sharing a shy smile with me, and I followed her inside. We settled on the living room couch, chatting in between trick or treaters.

"Are you nervous about the game next week?" Carly asked, watching me carefully.

"Rivalry Week is no joke in Benton," I said, trying to shrug off the tension settling across my shoulders like a vise. "The sheer number of car flags I've seen this week is daunting. I keep expecting someone to recognize me and pull an action movie maneuver to stop my car to grill me on game strategy. Don't get me wrong, it'd be exciting as heck, but I'd hate to be the cause of a traffic mess."

Rambling probably gave away my nerves, when I'd been doing my best to distract her. Carly's brow wrinkled. "It doesn't help that you need the game against University of

Oregon and Washington State as wins to flip our record for the season, does it?”

I scrubbed a hand through my hair. “Not exactly.”

“Has President Nelson made any noises about your contract for next year?”

“Nope. My initial offer was a two-year contract, which is up after this season.”

“What will you do if you don’t get an extension?” she asked softly, looking worried.

“Cry?” Her eyes widened, and I rushed on, reaching a hand to cover her knee. “Don’t worry, honey. I’ll cross that bridge over troubled water when I have to. Until then, I’m focused on resting during this bye week and playing the best football we can when the time comes.”

She didn’t seem satisfied with my answer, the shadow of worry still lurking in her eyes. I did my best to shift to lighter topics. As the trick or treaters wound down, and the interruptions dwindled, I noticed the tired slump in Carly’s shoulders.

“You look beat. I’m going to take off, let you get some sleep. See you this week at practice?”

She nodded, and I took comfort in the pleasure on her face. Since football didn’t exactly thrill Carly, I could only hope her anticipation was for me.

“Good.” I paused at the front door, leaning back against it, drawing Carly toward me slowly. Her curls tumbled around her face, the sprinkle of freckles up close making her look younger than her workday armor of makeup implied.

She cast a quick glance around the entryway before sinking into my arms with a sigh. My grip tightened, though I was still trying to keep the hug friendly instead of dry humping her in the hall like I really wanted. ‘Cause I was mature and restrained like that. Or I used to be. Spending time

at the house with Carly had only emphasized how little privacy she had as house mom and how much she tested my resolve. Fortunately, or unfortunately, there were always people coming and going on the main floor.

“I wish we could be alone,” I growled, feeling every inch she pressed against me like my own personal purgatory.

Pulling back enough to peer up into my face, her lips twitched. “Kiss me,” she commanded.

Wasting no time, I boosted her up, leaning back against the door for support. She nipped at my lips gently, almost teasing, before unleashing the full force of her passion. The soft slide of her mouth against mine created delicious friction. Lost in her, in sensation, we devoured each other. I slipped a hand under her shirt, bringing it up to cup her breast and Carly moaned. Her soft noise shot straight through me. Gripping her tighter, I let the warm heat of her mouth seduce me further.

Eventually, the door rattling at my back pinged my consciousness.

“The door’s stuck,” a feminine voice muttered from the other side of the wooden frame, and I shifted, tugging Carly and I to the side to catch our breath.

The door flew open without me holding it closed, and two twenty-somethings tumbled in. They giggled when they caught sight of a very disheveled Carly. Thankfully, I was able to hide the bulge of my erection from prying eyes by canting myself behind her, but I felt foolish.

“Good night, Carly,” the two girls singsonged, giggling as they made their way up the stairs toward the private floors of the house.

I scrubbed a hand through my hair. “Sorry about that.”

My timing with Carly stank. But maybe the interruptions were for our own good. I had not one, but two

important games coming up. Maintaining my focus, my commitment to the team, had to be paramount. Beautiful distractions were still just that—distractions.

Heaving a deep sigh, Carly wilted back against the wall. “I’m not.” The satisfied expression on her face helped ease any lingering embarrassment at getting caught making out by her housemates. With privacy at a premium, the house was great if we needed chaperones. Which, based on tonight’s display, we might require if I wanted to keep my promise during the season.

On our own, touching Carly was too tempting.

# CHAPTER 13 – CARLY

Rivalry Week meant a bevy of distractions. In the classroom, students burbled with enthusiasm, and I tried to feed off of that by offering an extra credit assignment built around the game for my data visualization students. Asked to create engaging graphs and depictions of the rivalry stats, they didn't disappoint. Maybe it was pandering, but engaging my students still made it a win for me.

I'd taken to slipping into practice every day, taking extra notes. Ben's grateful smile when he caught me warmed something inside. I could lie and claim I'd developed a new love for football, but in truth, the attraction was the coach. The rest of the staff had begrudgingly accepted my presence, but I still felt a chill from Coach Stutzman. The older man seemed suspicious of anything that didn't originate from his famed gut.

I sat quietly on the bench with my laptop, tweaking my data model, as the quarterback called play after play. With one eye on their formations and the other on my data, I didn't catch Ben's whistle and barked play at first.

“Field Welcome!”

Instead of dropping into crouches and the usual running or passing play, the team scurried to different points on the field, dropping to the ground. It took me a moment to realize they were spelling a message. *Hi Doc.*

Touched that Ben would create a fake play—just for me—I smiled, catching his eye. The other coaches looked on, with varying expressions of indulgence and grudging respect. I may never be a coach, but it warmed my heart that they took

precious minutes of practice to show their appreciation. Even if it was embarrassing being the center of attention.

Clapping, I hollered, switching my focus to the team on the field. “Nice play! Good morning, everyone. Are you ready to beat Oregon on Saturday?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lea’s boyfriend Tyson yelled, grinning as Ben blew his whistle and they gathered on their feet. Ben wrapped up practice, sending his players to the locker room before approaching me on the bench.

“You going to use that new play on Saturday?”

He smiled at my teasing, lifting his ballcap and reseating it over his hair before shrugging. “You never know. But if we have to call that one, you’ll be sure we’re in trouble.” He shifted his weight, taking off and replacing his hat once more. It wasn’t like Ben to show nerves, and I examined him carefully. Dark circles under his eyes and a fresh set of frown lines around his mouth worried me. Whatever he wanted to say, he seemed like he’d been struggling with it.

“Uh, Carly. How would you feel about coming on the road with us next weekend for the final game against the Cougars?”

Unsure what I’d expected, my shoulders relaxed, pleased he’d asked.

“I’d love to,” I said, letting my smile reach my eyes.

Is that what he’d been so nervous about?

He shifted again, before meeting my gaze. “Good, that’s good. And, hey, if you’re up for it, we’ll be real close to my hometown. I’ve promised my old man I’d swing through and visit. Maybe you could, uh, come with me? I’ve already talked with Chun and Ruiz about chaperoning the team that night.”

The hint of vulnerability in his eyes surprised me. Ben usually came across as affable, confident. Did I want to see where Ben grew up? Absolutely. But was I ready to meet his family? I'd started my list thinking we'd be casual. Help each other out and move on. But Ben's invitation implied much bigger feelings, bigger commitment than I'd anticipated. And a little part of me thrilled at that. So, there was my answer.

"Sure," I said softly.

Relief washed some of the tension out of his features, and he grinned, the old Coach Bear swagger back in effect. "Great. I'm excited to show you Colville. And maybe my childhood tree house?" he added with a wink.

Whoa. Maybe this was about my list after all? I pushed back the trickle of disappointment that his invitation may have been an excuse to mark another item off our list, not a maneuver to introduce me to his family. My underlying chagrin that his request for me to come home with him might be purely about sex and not introducing me to his family only served to shake my confidence.

Excitement and terror tightened my throat at the thought of finally sleeping with Ben. I'd be going home with him after the last game of the season, his fate in Oregon decided. If we didn't win our last two games, would this be a goodbye trip and the end of my list? Every make-out session had only ratcheted up the tension between us until I ached for him. I wanted to learn more about Ben, where he came from, who made him. And that scared me. Almost as much as dropping the final barrier between us, and finally doing what we'd been working up to with my list.

"Great," I pushed out.

So what if my voice was slightly strangled? It *was* great.

Ben rocked back on his heels, a pleased smile overtaking his features. "Excellent. I'll see you on the field



Saturday?”

Nodding, I watched as he strutted toward the locker room, all hints of his earlier trepidation gone. At the door, he paused, looking back over his shoulder and caught me staring at his ass. What? He had a great ass. One I was becoming intimately familiar with. Tight and toned, with every step his bubble butt reminded me that if I got really brave, I'd like to bite it. Gently, of course. His saucy wink eased some of my embarrassment at getting caught. He didn't seem to mind however, judging from the extra sway in his step as he walked out of sight.

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Leading up to Saturday's game against U of O, I didn't see much of Ben, except during practice and coaching meetings. I'd been making inroads with the other coaches as we went over my data after practices and discussed strategy. Slowly, Coach Chun had become a convert, adopting and drilling more passing plays with the offense. While the change in the other coaches was gratifying, I was most surprised to recognize differences in myself. I'd gone from wallflower to full participant. And more shocking still, I'd become a football fangirl. Especially for the handsome coach. The buzz I got watching Ben with his team filled me with admiration. Seeing the respect in his players' faces as he spoke with them, all quiet reassurance, only emphasized how amazing he was at his job. Instead of barking and braying orders, his leadership style seemed to build confidence in his players, until they shone under his attention.

Saturday morning, I donned my Threshers jersey over a long-sleeved T-shirt to ward off the chill, layering long johns beneath my jeans and pulling on my warmest boots. We'd lucked out with gray skies, but no rain in the forecast. With temperatures in the forties, adding rain would have made for a damp and miserable day. And that was *if* we won.

I walked through campus to the stadium with a group of Chi Beta sisters, all chattering excitedly.

I endured their teasing good-naturedly as I peeled off, badging through the team access area and out onto the field to set up. The stands were slowly filling as we neared game time, and the buzz of anticipation cast an electric tension into the air. The feeling that we were about to watch something epic. I spotted Angi and Daniel up in the stands with Ed and Rita and waved like a maniac with big motions until they spotted me and waved back. A few moments later my phone buzzed.

*Angi: Good luck today!*

*Carly: Thanks. ❓❓*

*Angi: Does Bear know you're secretly an Oregon traitor?*

*Carly: He knows all my secrets.*

Laughing, I shook my head at the raised eyebrow GIF she sent back.

The band struck up the college fight song, and fans cheered as the announcers introduced the players and coaches as they ran onto the field. I stood and whistled, grinning and cheering along. Anyone looking at me today would marvel at the change. I hardly recognized myself. Where was the mild-mannered professor who faded into the background and had never been to a real American football game?

Gone, that's where.

Smiling at Ben, who grinned back and winked, I acknowledged that the change wasn't all about me. True, it was ninety-nine percent me, going after what I wanted, but that extra flare of happiness came from being with Ben. Watching the man I loved mold the athletes and young minds of tomorrow. *Shit*. Loved? Hands clammy, I shoved them into my pockets, pacing from my spot on the sidelines as I watched the pomp and parading on the field. The words rolled around

in my mind, and I felt them out for truth. Love. Heart shuddering, I breathed through the anxiety, striving for calm.

Ben spoke earnestly to Tyson, one hand on the young man's shoulder, probably imparting the wisdom of ages. He cared, so damn much. About his team, his players. The coaches. And me.

He'd made football his life. But was there room for me too? My heart said yes, but my inner critic whispered hard: *Two-year contract. No word on an extension.* If Ben lost his job at the college, I had no doubt he'd continue to follow his football dreams. Even if it meant leaving me.

After all, what was I? A casual hookup? Not exactly. A colleague? Not that either. His girlfriend? Were we dating, or only helping each other out? In the beginning, I'd approached him with a contract of sorts and he'd done nothing to indicate he wanted to break it. We hadn't even slept together yet. But he'd done everything else I'd hoped for. And then some. Including inviting me home with him.

Rubbing my chest, I tried to ease the ache there.

Love. *Not* on my list.

If I was lucky, Ben felt something for me too. But did I dare rock the boat by sharing my changing feelings? Or was it better to keep quiet, fade into the background, and hope for the best? How deep did the brave new Carly go? Was it all surface polish, or was I ready to put my heart on the line?

Gulping, I watched as Ben huddled with his team, admiring his strong back.

A man like Ben deserved to know he was loved. Even if my feelings weren't returned.

They broke huddle, and he glanced up, catching my gaze on him. He smiled at me, shaking his hands above his head in a silent cheer of excitement, and my heart stopped.

Chest expanding, my pulse raced. Is this what hope felt like? If so, I never wanted it to end.

The Threshers and Mallards were fairly evenly matched, making every play a battle for supremacy. Watching the score tilt in favor of the Mallards after they recovered a fumble and scored had me biting at my nails, unable to hide my nerves.

Emory Smith, the Threshers quarterback, passed the ball to Tristan, who ran it into the endzone seconds before the end of the third quarter. Even with the seven-point lead, the fourth quarter kept me on pins and needles, aware the score could shift in an instant. Ben paced on the sidelines, shouting encouragement and conferring with the other coaches. I tore my gaze away from him, focusing on the players. Emory passed to Tristan on the next play, completing a touchdown, and the crowd roared its approval. Grinning ear-to-ear, I shared a smile of victory with Ben across the field. His acknowledgement made me feel part of the game, part of the win, even if my contributions weren't on the field.

The Threshers waved at their fans before heading to the locker room to celebrate their victory. Delirious with exhaustion and satisfaction, they crowded down the tunnel, leaving Ben on the field, talking with the media.

I threaded my way toward his tall form on the field, noting his tired smile. Relieved for him, I let my shoulders relax as I crept closer, catching the tail end of his interview.

“We've done a lot of great things this year. Tried some new strategies, including engaging a professor from the college to help us crunch the numbers. She's given us some fantastic insights.”

Hearing him recognize my part in supporting the team, supporting him publicly, mattered. I'd been reluctant at the start of our partnership, unsure how much I could really

impact the game. But Ben had listened, when others might write off the data nerd's suggestions.

Ben answered a handful more questions before excusing himself with a boyish grin and a, "I gotta go celebrate with the team. We have to cherish every win, because we earned it."

He turned, nearly bumping into me, before steadying me with a swift hand at my back.

"Carly? You're here." His warm smile caused an answering flare of heat in me. "Come on back, join me with the team."

Aware of the hand at the small of my back, I let him escort me through security toward the locker room.

"You all decent in there? I'm bringing in the doc," he called out, before shoving the door wide.

The stench of sweat and steam hit me like a face full of dirty towel. Smiling over my wrinkled nose, Ben said, "Don't worry. You get used to it."

I winced and he chuckled, threading us through the players, thankfully all mostly clothed, with a few pulling T-shirts over washboard abs. My housemates would be jealous of the view, and I bit back a smile, thinking of Neve's reaction. She'd be urging me to take pictures, but I couldn't help imagining most of the players in diapers during my babysitting days. The age gap was too big for me to think of them as anything but boys.

I congratulated Tyson and the other players I knew by name, making small talk while Ben slipped away, returning with a bottle of water for each of us.

"Congratulations, guys. You played a great game today. I want you to go home tonight and celebrate, because you deserve it. But on Monday, we're going to be back on the practice field because our last game of the season against the

Cougs is going to be a tough one. And I won't lie, it's my old stomping grounds. It means I'll have family there, rooting against me. So, you know what that means."

"We're going to beat the pants off 'em, Coach Bear," Jaydon said.

"Exactamundo, Gumbo."

We chatted with the other coaches before Ben excused himself. I made the rounds, congratulating the other players. I debated leaving as the crowd in the locker room dissipated, players peeling off into small groups to head home or out to party, until I stood alone.

I smiled at Tristan, who approached me with a saucy grin and a bag slung across his body. Up close, he was huge, but with his long blond hair tied back from his face revealing angelic features, he looked harmless enough.

"Hey, Doc. You got big plans to celebrate tonight?"

His blue eyes sparkled with charm, and the ready grin pulled an answering smile from me.

"Nah. I've got some work to get done tomorrow, so I'll probably take it easy."

Something in his eyes shifted, and I had a moment of fear at the predatory flash there. He leaned closer, invading my space, and I stepped away, uncomfortable with how close he was standing.

"Don't skitter away now," he urged, using his lightning-fast reflexes to grab me by the hips, kneading into my buttocks with his massive hands.

I moved my hands to his chest, ready to push him away, when he released me with a low cry on his own. Glancing up, I spotted Ben, his expression thunderous.

Okay, *not* on his own. Ben looked furious with Tristan.

“You do *not* touch a person without consent off the field, Tristan. Do you hear me? Now apologize to Dr. Anderson.”

Ben looked like he might combust on the spot, and I marveled at his anger. Usually so easygoing, I’d never seen him this fired up. Not on the football field, not off it. But Tristan’s rough handling had sparked his ire.

Tristan’s sulky expression signaled trouble, and I almost rushed in to smooth things over before he did something stupid, but he beat me to it.

“What? It was no big deal. I just wanted to ask her to party with me tonight.”

“Wrong answer, Tristan. You’re benched for next Saturday.”

Shock colored his features. As the Thresher’s star running back, I could understand his disbelief. Ben needed to win on Saturday to keep his job. And benching Tristan would likely blow their chances.

“Ben, you don’t have to do that for me,” I murmured, guilt washing through me. Tristan may be an asshole, but I hadn’t asked for Ben to bench him. I didn’t want to put Ben’s job at risk. I would have handled Tristan on my own. Why had Ben interfered?

Ben grunted. “It’s not just about you, Carly. I refuse to have a player on my team who doesn’t respect others. Tristan’s been skating along the line at practice, mouthing off to some of the other coaches and players. This is the last straw.”

“But, Coach—” Tristan protested.

“The decision stands.” Ben’s abrupt tone and scowl cowed Tristan, who grumbled and slammed out of the locker room, leaving silence in his wake. No one had been around to witness our little drama, but judging from Tristan’s response, it wouldn’t be long before word spread.

I paced the room, trying to ease some of the tension holding me in its grip.

“You didn’t have to do that. I could have handled it,” I said, stopping in front of a rigid Ben.

I moved back a step at his fierce scowl, and his features softened.

“You can handle it, but you shouldn’t have to,” Ben said softly. “Not in my locker room. Not ever.”

“But Tristan is such a key player ...”

Ben shook his head. “Unfortunately, there are a million Tristans. On and off the field. It’s better for team morale to let him go. Jesiah can play his spot next week.”

The team was Ben’s domain, and I was secretly pleased that he stood firm on his principles. Backed me as strongly as he did. His integrity was one of the things I loved about him. *Love*. Biting my lip, I almost blurted it out. But the timing didn’t feel right. Ben still looked irritated by the whole exchange. As if realizing every dark thought showed on his face, he smoothed his expression, focusing on me.

“Come on, honey. I can drive you back to the house. Unless you feel like grabbing dinner with me?”

“I’d like that,” I said.

He extended a hand, silently asking for mine, and my heart stuttered, only to start racing as I placed my palm in his and he squeezed it, smiling reassuringly.

“Thai okay?” he asked, leading me out to his truck.

My stomach rumbled in response, and I laughed. “In case you couldn’t tell, that was a resounding ‘yes.’”

The sun had set causing the temperature to drop while we were celebrating in the locker room. I shivered and Ben turned up the heat in his truck, before driving us to Bow Thai.



We bickered amicably over our order, before settling on pad thai and a curry dish Ben claimed was life changing.

“Okay if we take our food to go?”

“Sure, where did you have in mind?”

My hormones were begging to go back to his place, find some privacy. But something about Ben’s serious expression made me doubt he had anything quite so horny on the brain.

“Just a quiet spot I know,” he answered mysteriously.

After collecting our food, he drove us south of town before winding up into the hills and pulling to a stop along the road. He’d picked a location that provided a view over the valley.

“Ben. Did you bring me to the local lover’s lane?” I asked, secretly delighted.

“No. Well, not on purpose. The astronomy club uses this as a lookout on stargazing nights. Sometimes I come out here after a big win.”

“To lord it over the peasants in the valley?” I teased, knowing it wouldn’t be his reason.

“To remind myself that to the universe, I am but a speck,” he said softly. “My problems, no matter how weighty in the moment, are nothing but a puff of dust on the universe’s horizon.” He smiled sheepishly. “I could use a little perspective after benching Tristan.”

“I still feel like you did it for me.”

“I did it for the team.” His no-nonsense tone shut down any argument, and we dug into our meals. I may have moaned a bit when I tasted the curry.

Ben wriggled his brows at me. “Good, right? You should learn to trust me.”

The moment crystallized, the sincerity in his eyes winning me over, as if I hadn't already become lost.

"I do."

His slow smile made my heart race. "Excellent. Now eat up. Then I can show you the stars."

"Are you sure that isn't a euphemism to get me out of my panties?" I asked, hoping my tone didn't reveal how much I wanted it to be the truth.

"Nah. Not tonight. We are here to contemplate the mysteries of the universe and plot how to win our next game."

"Any word on a new contract from President Nelson?"

Ben's brow furrowed, and I regretted bringing it up.

"Nope. But I did hear that Oregon might be firing their coach after this season. Could you still hang out with a traitor from the other school?"

I snorted softly. "You forget, I'm the traitor who graduated from that other school. And is that what we're doing? Hanging out?"

No need to let him know my heart hung in the balance of his response. I held my breath, waiting. Ben shifted in his seat, as if searching for the right words, and my pulse stuttered.

"That's one word for it," he said easily, making my heart race as he caught my gaze. "Could you see us adding more to that list of yours?"

My grin made my face hurt. "I can think of a few things to add ..."

"Well, so long as we have a list to cover, consider me your willing partner."

His promise wasn't an admission of love, but relief coursed through me.

“Coach, you’ve got a deal.”

After dinner, Ben pulled a heavy blanket from his back seat, lowering the tailgate and spreading it over the truck bed. He boosted me onto the blanket, and I shivered in the cold. Ben slid into place next to me, and I snuggled closer until he took the hint and wrapped an arm around me.

“Warm enough?” he murmured into my hair.

At my nod he started pointing out constellations. Listening to the deep timbre of his voice, absorbing his heat, I couldn’t stir myself to care which star cluster was which. Only enjoy the moment.

Sensing my fatigue, Ben nudged me.

“Come on. It’s cold, and I should get you home.”

“No list work tonight?” I asked.

“Honey, I’m beat. I wouldn’t do it justice.”

The honesty in his tone helped beat back the disappointment. It had been a long day, and I could tell that as much as he claimed it would be fine, he was worried about the game against Washington State.

“Good night, Ben,” I said, as he pulled up in front of the house. “Thanks for dinner.”

I unbuckled, grasping for the door handle.

“Not so fast. How about a quick kiss to remember you by?” he asked.

“Ben. Is your memory so poor that you’ll forget me between now and next Friday?” I teased, stalling to quiet my racing heart. “We’ll see each other at practice.”

“You know it’s just an excuse to kiss you. I can’t help myself,” he murmured as he tugged me across the bench seat.

One brush of lips, two, and I lost myself in the moment, running my hands over his broad chest and reveling

as he deepened the kiss.

Someone tapped on the fogged window glass, laughing, and we broke apart. Bemused, I only caught the back of someone walking away, indistinguishable in the lingering moisture on the glass. Maybe a fraternity brother from down the street.

Panting for breath, I scooped away, needing distance to gather my composure.

“Night, Ben.”

“Night, Carly. Sweet dreams.”

I slid from the pickup, nearly boneless at his last exhortation. Sweet dreams. Naughty dreams were more like it. Making love with Ben loomed large on my wish list, but I had to respect his commitment to the team. However, it didn't make waiting any easier. If anything, the magnitude of taking that final step tripled in my mind, gathering importance. What if we sucked together? It was hard to imagine, given our chemistry so far, but the lingering doubt made me nervous. Part of me wanted to rush into intimacy, prove to myself there was nothing to be afraid of. But I couldn't do that to Ben. Respecting his boundaries mattered. I wouldn't push.

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Cheri's grin as I navigated the tables to where she sat with Angi, Rita, and Sid warned me to expect teasing.

“Hey, Carly,” Angi greeted as I slid into my seat at the table, reaching for the coffee carafe.

“Great game yesterday,” Rita complimented.

“And a great interview with Coach Bear afterward,” Cheri added.

They must have caught the portion of Ben's interview I'd overheard.

“Yes, it was an exciting game,” I said cautiously.

“Only one more to go. If you help turn the team around, you’ll be a hometown hero,” Angi said.

“It’s Ben’s team. I’m just helping.” I protested, uncomfortable with the idea of being labeled any kind of celebrity.

Cheri blew a flagrant raspberry. “Quit being modest. You’ve been rocking it and it shows.”

Sid’s brows arched. “I heard rumors of an extra department stipend to keep your genius flowing into next season. This project has been really good for your visibility, Carly. Congrats.”

President Nelson had congratulated me briefly on the field after the game, and she’d made an oblique reference to a football donor who’d grown interested in my work, but I hadn’t heard anything official from Dr. Bernard about additional funds to keep working with the team next season.

“Thanks.”

Past me would have been uncomfortable with the praise. And truly, I still was. But if you couldn’t celebrate your successes with your friends, who could you celebrate with? Shuddering, I remembered Tristan’s invitation to celebrate from the night before. Something about the change in my expression tipped Rita off.

“What’s going on? Did something happen?”

Slowly, I told them the story of Tristan’s locker room misbehavior and Ben’s intervention.

“What a creep,” Cheri said. “I hope you kicked Tristan in the balls.”

“I would have, but I didn’t need to.”

“Are you going to press charges?” Rita asked, sounding concerned. “If he’d try that with you, he’s probably tried it with others.”

Shivering, I shook my head. “I reported it to the college. There will be an investigation. I’m glad that Ben was there to witness some of it.”

“I can totally picture Bear playing the hero,” Angi mused. “He was like that in college too. Very respectful. Not exactly what I expected from an asshole athlete with a nickname like Bear.”

“Did he though?” Rita asked. Flapping her hands, she clarified, “I mean I know he meant to defend her, but Carly’s a big girl. She deserves the credit. She can handle a little jerk like Tristan.”

Cheri took a sip of her coffee, considering. “True. But I like that he holds the team to a standard. Benching his star running back before a big game is a ballsy move. The boys’ club usually circles their wagons for each other. I’m glad he did the right thing. I only hope it doesn’t backfire.”

“If anything, I’d think President Nelson would applaud booting a predator from the team and the university,” Angi said.

The others nodded, the consensus seeming to be that Ben had acted within his duties as coach.

“Before I forget, you’re all coming to Friendsgiving at our place this year, yes?” Angi asked. Looking at me knowingly, she added, “You can invite Ben.”

I squirmed, uncomfortable that my reluctance, and the reason why, had been so transparent. He and I hadn’t even talked about the holidays, too concerned with getting through the last game of the season.

“Sure, what can I bring?” I asked.

We accepted assignments, divvying up some of the dishes to help with the cooking load. I’d volunteered to make a pie, before immediately regretting my choice. Maybe Ben could help?

The rest of the week leading up to the game sped by, leaving me madly throwing clothes into a bag Friday morning while I waited for Ben to pick me up and take me to the charter bus. The team would get a bus to the airport and fly into Spokane, before getting another bus to Pullman. Dr. Bernard had been happy to give me the day off, rubbing his hands in glee as he confirmed Sid's rumor that I'd secured a stipend from a generous donor for my work with the football team.

"Ready?" Ben asked as I opened the door, bag at my feet. I'd been too nervous and excited to wait for one of my housemates to announce him as a caller, instead, choosing to wait in the entryway. Jittery with nerves, I was quiet as he drove us to the stadium lot, grabbing our bags and following me toward the bus.

The catcalls started as soon as I crested the stairs, the team immediately noting the not-stranger in their midst.

"Welcome, Doc!"

"Are you here to keep Coach in line, or Tristan?"

I winced, unaware of how fast gossip spread among the team. I hadn't spotted Tristan yet but was sure he would have a seat somewhere with his team.

"Coach and Doc, sitting in a tree, F-U—"

"Enough!" Ben's rough bark was reminiscent of the man I'd seen correcting Tristan, all gruff command.

Clearly, his players had caught onto the vibe between Ben and me.

"There's no need to be crass, *gentlemen*. The good doctor has been working behind the scenes on strategies to help us win. You can thank her when we make it to a bowl game this year. She's also my guest this weekend, so please don't embarrass me."

Choruses of “Yes, Coach!” rang through the bus, and Ben gestured me to a seat behind the bus driver before sliding in next to me. The other coaching staff acknowledged me with a head nod or friendly wave.

“Well. That was awkward,” I whispered, aware of every eye on us.

“Yes. I don’t need to flirt. I will seduce you with my awkwardness and the fifty football players matchmaking on our behalf.”

His eyeroll made me giggle, and I couldn’t resist whispering back, “It’s working.”



# CHAPTER 14 – BEN

I should have been focused solely on the upcoming game, but thoughts of Carly and how critical this weekend was kept intruding. They say you can't go home again. While it felt like gross hubris to test that statement, when the opportunity to bring Carly home with me presented itself in the form of our final game, I couldn't resist. Showing her where I came from, introducing her to my family and friends, seemed important. Maybe too important.

We'd started as a silly agreement, a dare.

So why did making the choice to embrace her list, embrace her, seem like the most important decision I'd made in years? Up to and including pursuing coaching?

Showing her this piece of myself still felt risky. Like exposing my faults. Would she see the hometown hero, or the zero? Once my dad got a hold of her, there was no doubt he'd fill her head with evidence of the latter. Poor grades. Caught drinking and suspended from practice. My childhood sins hung heavy over my head. I'd outgrown my rebellion against my dad's carping years ago, but something about going home, seeing him, always brought the rush of bile back. Never good enough to be the pastor's son, except when I was winning games. The hypocrisy burned.

We could skip Colville, stay in Spokane instead, but it seemed selfish asking my sister, Izzy, and my friends to come to me. And the tree house at my dad's lingered at the back of my mind. It might be my only chance to mark that item off of Carly's wish list. Private and cozy, Izzy and I had built the tree fort to escape our father. Sometimes being out of sight was the best defense against his barbs. He couldn't berate what he couldn't see.

Shaking off the bad memories, I focused instead on Carly in the seat next to me. Eyes closed, she appeared to be napping on the plane, and I envied her the rest. I'd been so amped for the upcoming game; I hadn't slept well all week.

The soft shadows of her lashes against her cheeks made her look so sweet. Innocent.

She was a mature woman, fully capable of fighting her own battles, but her delicate appearance still called to my protective instincts. When Tristan had assaulted her, I'd gone full Bear in front of her. And she hadn't turned away. Instead, she'd gone toe-to-toe with me afterward, giving me what for. Unafraid of my display of temper. I'd worked so hard to control it, to manage my raw emotions with meditation and exercise. I hated that she saw the worst of me but consoled myself that at least it was in service of protecting her. Protecting the team. I couldn't stand bullies. And I couldn't abide by men who took what wasn't freely given.

As if sensing my gaze, her lashes fluttered. She smiled when she focused on me.

"Everything okay?" she asked softly.

Nodding, I reached a hand to hers, twining our fingers together.

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In the chaos of check-in at our hotel, Carly and I were separated, and I didn't see her again until breakfast. She looked radiant, clad in jeans and a Threshers' sweatshirt. Her curls framed her face in a halo of softness, and I ached to bury my face in it and hug her close.

Clearing my throat, I said, "Good morning. Sleep okay?"

"I had trouble falling asleep," she admitted. "I'm too excited for today."

I smiled at her enthusiasm. The rest of the coaching staff joined us with laden plates and talk turned to our strategy. As much as I wanted to be focused on the challenges ahead, I kept sneaking glances at Carly instead. What would it be like to see her at breakfast every day? Start my morning with her? Suggesting it might scare her off. She seemed content with her living situation at the sorority. But maybe I could entice her to join me at Luke's, assuming I stayed in Benton, that is.

Frowning, I refocused on what Coach Chun was saying about our offensive running game.

After nail-biting our way through a turnover and overtime, I high-fived Coach Stutzman as the clock counted down to zero. Puffing out my chest, I grinned like a fool as I congratulated the rest of the coaching staff and Carly. We'd done it. Pulled off the win. Jaydon and Tristan got a hold of the cooler, showering me in ice and the remnants of our sports drink, and I could only laugh, relieved.

We'd won.

My chances of staying in Oregon, staying with Carly, had just quadrupled.

Spotting Carly on the sidelines, I picked her up with a whoop, spinning her around the field. She laughed down at me, and my heart clutched, constricting my chest. I wanted to spin her like this until the end of time. Capture the moment, the sheer joy in her expression, and hold on for dear life.

"Ben, put me down. I'm getting dizzy," she said as she pushed at my shoulders, and reluctantly, I let her slide down my body. "Congratulations, Coach," she said, grin wide.

"I couldn't have done it without you," I said softly, wishing I was brave enough to haul off and kiss her in front of the TV crews and everyone. It's not like spinning her around the field was subtle. Still, she worked for the college, and I didn't need to confirm the gossip that was no doubt already spreading like wildfire. Just because my policy was to answer

‘no comment’ to press questions about my personal life, it didn’t mean there wouldn’t *be* comments.

She stepped aside, and half a dozen microphones were shoved in my face by eager sports reporters. After fielding their questions for what felt like forever, I excused myself to find Carly and congratulate my team.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I pulled it out, noting that I had multiple missed messages. The display flashed with a text from my dad, and I pushed down the sour sensation as I comprehended his words.

*Dad: At least you didn't screw that up.*

Sighing, I shoved my phone back in my pocket. He’d be expecting us by dinner. Any excitement at showing Carly off, showing off my hometown, had faded. Dread filled me at the thought of exposing Carly to his toxicity. I’d hoped he’d changed, mellowed with age. Could be happy for me. Based on his text, I’d been wrong.

Carly grabbed my hand when I approached her in the locker room, and I relaxed, finding strength in her hold. I was a grown man. Nearly forty. I could handle one small trip home.

“The rental car should be delivered to the hotel by the time we get back, if you want to meet me in the lobby with your bag?”

Carly nodded, and the churning in my gut eased. With Carly as my ally, maybe things would be different. Better. Izzy had been blowing up my phone, first celebrating our victory, then nudging for an arrival ETA. I’d promised to go directly to Izzy’s restaurant, instead of making her wait until she closed. My dad had been suspiciously silent since his text. Never much of a phone guy, I figured no news was good news from him.

Carly met me in the lobby with her bag and a smile that looked more than a little nervous around the edges. And

she hadn't even met my family yet.

What had I been thinking?

Oh, yeah. Tree house.

Drowning any family squabbles and embarrassments with sex had been my original plan.

Carly fiddled with the radio after buckling in beside me, and I pulled onto the freeway, heading north. Rain pelted the windshield, and sprays of water from passing trucks kicked up mist the wipers worked hard to dissipate. With visibility poor, I focused on the road, letting companionable silence fill the car.

After forty minutes of driving, listening to the local country station, the clouds parted, revealing the dusky wet landscape in all its glory.

"It's beautiful out here," Carly commented softly. "Did you like growing up in Colville?"

"Mostly. I liked the small-town atmosphere. Everyone knows everyone."

Carly's lips twitched in a quick smile. "But everyone knows everyone?"

"Exactly. It's a little hard to fly under the radar."

She snorted softly. "You? Under the radar? I thought you liked being front and center."

"Not really. I'm used to it now, but growing up, having my dad hear I cut class before I even made it home with a stupid lie really sucked."

"What about your mom? You never mention her."

Frowning, I realized she was right. The best part of my childhood, and I barely spoke of her.

"She was great. Warm, full of hugs and kind words. Soft in the best way. The scones recipe is hers."

“What happened?” Carly asked softly, the edge of sorrow already in her eyes as if she knew she wouldn’t like the answer.

“She had a bad fall on the stairs. Died instantly when I was in the eighth grade.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Her soft hand covering mine on the steering wheel was comforting.

“What about you? You were raised by your grandma?”

Carly cleared her throat, sounding froggy when she finally answered. “Yeah. She took over for my birth mom when I was a toddler. I don’t really remember my mom.”

“You don’t see her?”

Carly seemed intent on something outside her window, maybe focusing on the past.

“Nope. I think it’s hard for her to see me, admit she missed out on so much. Chose her career over keeping me with her. She’s spent most of the last thirty years on research vessels in the Arctic Ocean.”

“And your dad?”

“Not in the picture.” She frowned. “Honestly, I think he might have been a married man she met on one of her research trips. He’s not listed on my birth certificate.”

Carly always seemed so self-contained. Our scars weren’t the same, and had shaped us differently, but knowing more about her past helped me understand her better. I was glad she’d revealed more with me.

As if sharing my desire to lighten the mood, Carly changed the subject.

“Tell me about your sister. You said her name is Izzy?”

“Yeah. She’s a sweetheart.”

“Older or younger?”

“Ten years younger. She owns the local pizza joint in Colville, Slice of Heaven.”

“Is it a family business?”

“Yeah, on my mom’s side. My Aunt Lydia started it and is slowly handing the reins to Iz.”

“Is your dad involved in the business at all?”

“My dad’s the local pastor at the church. He objects mightily to the name Slice of Heaven. I’m pretty sure Aunt Lydia called it that just to irritate him.”

*And let’s face it, everything irritated him.* I didn’t say that part aloud. No need to ruin Carly’s opinion of my dad before she even met him. No doubt, he’d cover that all on his own.

Luckily, she’d meet Izzy first. And maybe Aunt Lydia. They were by far the best representatives of the O’Reilly clan, though Aunt Lydia was technically a Pruitt, as my mom had been.

I watched, enjoying Carly’s interest as we pulled into town, passing an auto shop on the outskirts. We passed Nimitz Construction and Sprouts and Sprigs Nursery. Carly laughed when she caught their signs.

*“Nimitz Construction: Our workmanship is love at frost sight. Hire us to build your garage today!” and “Sprouts and Sprigs: Why did the snowman name his dog frost? Because frost bites. Do the owners coordinate their signage or something?”*

Chuckling, I shook my head. “Coordinate. Compete. Ever since Zander took over for his folks, he and Gwen have had a running gag with their signs.”

“Are they a couple?” she asked, sounding entertained.

I scrubbed a hand through my hair, thinking of Zander's reaction if he heard Carly's question. "I'm not sure if they want to kill each other or kiss each other. Not sure they know either."

We passed Bluff Elementary and the high school before turning into the heart of town and the collection of small shops that included Slice of Heaven. I found parking relatively easily in front, admiring the façade. Most of my happiest childhood memories involved Slice. No surprise. What kid didn't love pizza?

I glanced at Carly who sat, transfixed, staring at the sign, and taking in the lit neon beer signs below the marquee. Was she nervous? I reached out, squeezing her hand and offering a reassuring smile.

"I promise, neither Iz nor Aunt Lydia bite. You'll be safe with me, Carly. Plus: pizza."

She smiled, just a small quirk of her lips, but it helped me relax.

"You had me at pizza."

I held open the door for Carly, letting the familiar scents of marinara and beer wash over me. Most of the tables were full on a Saturday night, which made me glad for Lydia and Iz. Running a small business was no joke, especially in a town as tiny as ours.

"Bear!"

Izzy rocketed from behind the counter, rushing to embrace me in a hug. I lifted her off her feet before releasing her with a grin.

"Hey, Izzy."

My sister radiated excitement, feeding my own. I'd waited too long between visits. She looked much the same, tall and lanky, her dark blond hair caught back from her face in a complicated braid.



She thrust a hand toward Carly. “Hi, I’m Azalea O’Reilly, Bear’s sister. But you can call me Izzy. You are?”

Her not-so-subtle interrogation made me smile. I’d warned Izzy I was bringing Carly, but that didn’t stop my curious sister from doing her own examination.

“Carly Anderson.” Carly glanced at me quickly with a panicked expression before continuing. “I’m a friend of Ben’s.”

I held back my groan. We hadn’t talked about how I’d introduce her to my family and friends. Massive fail. I chided my players to communicate clearly all the time. But when it mattered, I’d dropped the ball with Carly. Did I let her definition of our relationship stand, or shoot for something more?

“*Ben*, huh?” The clear skepticism in Izzy’s voice cued Carly in that she’d made a mistake. “I haven’t heard Bear’s friends call him Ben in more than a decade. You must be a *close* friend.”

Clearing my throat to bring Izzy’s attention back to me, I said, “Carly and I have grown close over the last few weeks. She’s important to me.” The implied censure had the intended effect. Izzy’s expression relaxed, looking almost contrite.

“Welcome, Carly. Pardon me for being rude. You didn’t come for an interrogation. Bear just doesn’t talk much about his life in Oregon. Most of what I know is based on what I see on the news.” She smiled, turning to me. “Congratulations on today’s win, by the way. It should mean a bid for a bowl game, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a nice way to end the regular season.”

“Are you into football?” Izzy asked Carly.

“I didn’t start out that way, but I’ve been working with Ben all season behind the scenes and it’s growing on me.”

Carly's stomach rumbled audibly, and I turned to Izzy. "Can we grab a few slices, maybe a beer? It's been a long drive and we haven't eaten yet."

"Of course, where are my manners? Come on back, I've got the family table ready. I'll grab your usual. Carly, what will you have?"

"It all smells amazing. Surprise me," Carly said as she scooted into the booth.

Izzy winked at me. "I like her. I'll be right back with your food."

I slid in next to Carly, leaving the other seat for Izzy if she felt like joining us. Sure. Not because I'd rather be close to Carly.

"Sorry about the fumble earlier," I apologized.

"Fumble?"

"We haven't talked about how we want to introduce each other," I said, watching her expression steadily. "Friends seems a little tepid, don't you think?" Her face remained placid, and I searched for clues to her real feelings. We'd moved beyond being list buddies, hadn't we?

"How would you like to introduce me? It's your hometown, after all."

She'd rightly turned my question right back on me. I scrubbed a hand through my hair, mentally flipping through options. "How about, covivant? It's just confusing enough to ensure no further questions and a mad rush to Google, even if the exact meaning doesn't fit yet."

"I'll admit, I haven't heard that one," she said, sounding bewildered. "What does it mean?"

"It's a term for an unmarried couple, but more adult than boyfriend/girlfriend." It could also be a term for a couple that lives together, though we had time to get there.

“Hmm ...” She considered my words for a moment, tilting her head. “I like it.”

Grinning through my relief, I toyed with her fingers on the table, enjoying the play of her soft skin along the rough pads of my calluses. “Good. Me too.”

Izzy placed pints in front of us, breaking the moment, and returned with steaming pizza slices before sliding into the seat across the table.

“You two look cozy,” she said, looking almost wistful.

I narrowed my eyes. “Are you dating anyone, Iz?”

She quirked her lip. “Just realizing we might be missing out on a few important developments in each other’s lives, huh? It would serve you right if I eloped with Ivan while you were gone.”

Groaning, I rolled my eyes. “I love Ivan like a brother, but you deserve better than my playboy of a former assistant coach.”

“Ivan’s not that bad,” she retorted. “Not everyone is a saint like you, brother dear.”

“And not everyone has the attention span of a toddler on crack like Ivan,” I said, taking a bite of my pepperoni slice, closing my eyes in bliss while I chewed and swallowed. No one made pizza like Iz and Lydia.

Iz shredded the napkin in her hands as the silence drew out between us. My gut tightened in premonition. She’d been joking about eloping with Ivan, hadn’t she?

“I’m just saying, he’s matured in the time you’ve been away.”

She still didn’t meet my eyes.

“Are you and Ivan ... together?” I asked, watching her closely.

“No.”

Her soft response lacked conviction, making it less than reassuring.

“This pizza is amazing,” Carly commented, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Thanks. Secret family recipe sauce.” Iz smiled mischievously, gesturing my way. “If you decide to marry this doofus someday, we’ll let you in on it.”

She caught Carly sipping her beer, and Carly choked, sputtering.

Chagrined, I wasn’t sure how to take that. Not well. Had marriage never crossed Carly’s mind? Granted, we’d held off on the more intimate items on her list until the end of the football season. I’d needed my focus on the team. And now that we’d secured a probable bowl invitation, I was waffling. Did I throw caution to the wind or stick to my habits and keep my distance? Or was that only my inner critic, making me doubt myself?

“What’s new in town?” I asked, to change the subject and dig for any new gossip. It was always best to be prepared before I met with Dad.

“Oh, you know. Same old, same old. Gwen and Zander still trade barbs via marquee. Last week, she accused him of stealing some of her letters to change her message.”

“Do I want to know what it said?” I asked.

“It started as *Everyone’s Been Talking About Your Patio*. The new version said *Everyone’s Been Talking About Your Paranoia*.”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “I’m guessing that didn’t go over well with Gwen?”

“Nope. I thought she was going to pop a vein.”

“Did she get her revenge?”

Knowing Gwen, it was a certainty. She and Izzy had been friends for years, in Campfire Girls and everything. If anyone would know, Iz would have the inside scoop.

She pursed her lips, looking mischievous. “I can’t say. But I noticed Zander’s sign went from proclaiming Nimitz had *Superpowers in Construction Excellence* to proclaiming that they had *No Superpowers, Everyone Rightly Assumes We’re the Villains.*”

“That fit on his outdoor sign?” I asked, impressed.

“Pretty sure there’s been a run on purchasing extra marquee letters in this little sign war of theirs.”

“What, like they need more?”

“Not exactly. Gwen is trying to convince Eve and me to participate. Add our own two cents with signs at Slice and her tattoo studio.”

“You’d gang up on Zander and Ivan?”

“Oh, Ivan’s too smart to get involved. This is all Zander’s doing. If he’d apologize for the first time, she’d cool off, but as it is, every response just eggs her on.”

“Well, I’d say it’s good to be back, catch up on everything, but next on our list is Dad.”

Izzy winced, no doubt anticipating the earful I’d hear from our father. It didn’t matter that we won by seven. In his mind, I’m sure we should have won by twenty-one.

“Are you staying with him, or Aunt Lydia?” she asked.

“You know Dad wouldn’t let me hear the end of it if we didn’t stay with him. *How would it look to the neighbors?*” I parroted in a deep approximation of his voice.

Her sympathetic gaze swung to Carly. “If he gets to be too much, my couch is yours.”

“What about me?” I asked, pretending offense.

“He’s our dad. *You’re* stuck with him. You dragged poor Carly into this, she doesn’t need to suffer.” She swung her gaze to Carly, who looked paler and paler with every word.

I reached out a hand to squeeze hers, trying for reassurance. “Don’t worry, Carly. Our dad’s bark is worse than his bite. And as a guest, you’ll be fine. I’m sure he’ll be on his best behavior while you’re in town.”

Izzy said, “It’s been nice to meet you, Carly. We’ll have to get together for breakfast tomorrow.” She glanced at me. “You’ll take her to Brewed Awakening in the morning?”

Nodding, I slid from the booth. “Yeah. We have to drive back to Spokane for our flight home with the team by midmorning.”

“Well, I’ll see you both there.”

“It was nice to meet you too, Izzy.”

I waited while Carly excused herself to the restroom, using the time to greet a few townspeople I knew. Parents of my former high school players congratulated me on the Threshers’ season.

Being back on familiar turf should have made me feel stronger, but returning home also reminded me that I’d chosen a fresh start in Oregon for a reason. As much as I loved Colville, I’d been ready for something new. Some breathing room.

Carly appeared at my shoulder with a smile, and I excused myself, feeling lighter with every step toward her.

# CHAPTER 15 – CARLY

Every step closer to our rental car felt leaden, until I struggled to lift my feet. Spending time with Ben's sister, hearing about his friends, seemed to have calmed some of Ben's nerves but it only served to make me more anxious. None of the allusions he'd made to his relationship with his father reassured me that their meeting would be anything but fraught with tension. Still, he'd asked me to come, and I wanted to support him.

I couldn't imagine someone being less than proud of Ben. Winning season or not, he was a tremendously talented coach. He showed so much passion and kindness to those around him. His career might be uncommon, but I admired how he worked with his players, trying to help them become better versions of themselves. Kind of like he'd done with me. Helping me with my list, becoming my friend. My covivant? It sounded French. And fancy. Which I was not. But it also sounded playful and loving, which more accurately described our relationship than I was ready to admit.

Ben drove in silence toward the outskirts of town, passing the nursery and construction business run by his friends, and beyond to a two-lane highway through rolling hills of what looked like dormant hops and grape vines.

"Is this a farm or vineyard?" I asked.

Ben gifted me with a small smile. "Yes, the Pruitt Farm. My mom was a Pruitt cousin. Today it's owned by Jo and her brother Davis Pruitt. I can never keep it straight, I think we're second cousins, or cousins somehow removed? Whatever, they're family."

"Are you close?"

He shrugged. “More so when my mom was alive.”

“What’s your dad like?” I asked, wanting to prepare myself. The hints Ben and Izzy had shared over dinner hadn’t exactly increased my confidence that I’d like the older man. But then, he’d raised Ben, so he couldn’t be that bad.

“Stern. Tough. But underneath it all, he loves us.”

“And he’s the local pastor?”

Nodding, he switched on his signal, turning into a long drive. “Yep.”

It was too dark to see much beyond the driveway, evergreens crowded the road, obscuring any other sights. A few moments later, Ben parked in the gravel next to an old pickup truck. He grabbed our bags from the trunk and gestured me toward the porch of a neat two-story home with the porch light on.

The door creaked open as we approached, and a barrel-chested older man stepped out. Wrinkles creased his weathered face, and I guessed his age at somewhere in his late sixties.

“Bear, that you?”

“Yes, sir. I brought a guest with me, Carly Anderson. She’s a professor at the college. Carly, this is my dad, Pastor O’Reilly.”

“Nice to meet you, professor. Come on in. I’ve got your old room ready for you, Bear, and your sister’s old room is ready for your guest.”

“Nice to meet you,” I mumbled, surprised at how formal Ben’s father was. From their descriptions, I’d expected an ogre, but he seemed more reserved than anything else.

The older man shuffled in front, escorting us up the stairs before gesturing to a shared bathroom and showing me to Izzy’s room.



“My daughter Azaelia hasn’t lived here in a while, but I changed the sheets. It should be all ready for you.”

Glancing around at the detritus of adolescence, including a smattering of photos and a poster of Taylor Swift, I smiled. “This is lovely, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Just mind that you stay here. No sneaking into my boy’s room. He needs to be focused on football. He can’t have distractions like you holding him back.”

Taken aback by the turn in the conversation and the reference to his son as “boy,” I stayed silent, but regretted not defending myself when he shut the door, leaving me on my own.

Ben was old enough to make his own decisions. And I didn’t need to justify myself to his father. Still, the older man’s words stung. Did he really think I’d hold Ben back? Was that what I was destined to do, derail the professional careers of people who loved me? My mom? Ben?

Pushing away the doubts, I unpacked the few things I’d need for the night, before peering at the array of photos Izzy had left behind. Grinning groups of girls around a campfire smiled out at me from the mists of time. A few family shots included a younger Ben, and I delighted in his gangly, awkward form captured on film.

A soft knock was my only warning before Ben slipped into the room, closing the door gently behind him.

“Do you have everything you need?”

His innocent question had me biting back my first, instinctual response: everything but him.

“Yes, thanks,” I said instead.

Maybe he heard something in my tone, because he watched me carefully as he asked, “Did my dad say anything to you?”

“Nothing worth mentioning.”

“That’s not nothing,” he growled. “I’m sorry. We should have gotten a hotel.”

I shook my head. “No. Wasn’t seeing family the point of this trip?”

His eyes darkened, sparking an answering fire in me. “Not exactly.”

He stepped closer, until his chest brushed mine, and my breath caught. The brief contact was enough to make my heart race. Ben cupped a hand under my chin, placing a gentle kiss across my lips before dragging his hands softly across the delicate skin at my neck to my shoulders. With a groan I leaned in, seeking more.

I stood on my toes, arching up to kiss him. Winding my arms around his neck, I leaned into his big body, trying to get closer as our kiss deepened.

*Knock. Knock.*

“I have a nightcap downstairs for you,” a gruff voice barked, more demand than invitation.

Breaking apart with a gasp, I stood, breathing hard, watching Ben. The passionate man of the last few minutes had disappeared with the knock. Mourning wouldn’t bring him back. I straightened my shirt.

“Shall we go spend a little time with your dad before bed?” I asked.

“We’d better. Sorry about earlier.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.”

Wrong place, wrong time. We needed privacy for what I had in mind. Lots of it. A few stolen minutes in a childhood bedroom would never be enough. I was starting to worry I’d never get enough of Ben, period.

He twined our fingers, leading me back down the stairs to a cozy living room. His dad had already taken a seat in a worn brown leather recliner, and we settled on a dark green couch.

“So, boy. Tell me which bowl game you think you’ll get into? Will it be enough for a new contract?”

No preliminaries, no respect for the fact his son was nearly forty. Ben’s dad jumped into an interrogation about his football prospects as if professional success was all that mattered. I didn’t know if I should be grateful or disappointed that he all but ignored me. Pastor O’Reilly dissected his son’s play calls and rebuked him for what he called poor decision-making without batting an eye for the fact that he hadn’t been at the game, didn’t know the players. It was clear that at least in his own mind, Pastor O’Reilly’s judgment reigned supreme.

Ben stayed calm throughout, and I marveled at his patience. It would have been one thing if they had a playful relationship like he had with Iz, teasing about calls or game-time decisions, but his dad seemed intent on correcting his son, and it rubbed me wrong.

“Ben’s done an amazing job coaching the team,” I inserted, breaking into yet another diatribe on the Threshers’ passing game. “I’ve been really impressed with the coaching staff and program.”

“Isn’t it why they brought you in? To fix my son’s mistakes?”

*Ouch.* I winced, regretting letting the emotion reach my face when his dad lasered in on it.

“What are you a professor of again? Something like computer programming? Even a dumb machine can tell when Bear makes mistakes.”

Offended on all the levels, I opened my mouth to defend Ben and myself, but he placed a hand on my knee, and I caught the faint shake of his head. Biting my lip, I let the

edge of pain take my mind off how badly I ached to respond. Ben wanted to fight his own battles.

“Carly’s an expert in data analysis. She’s quite brilliant. She amazes me every day with what she’s able to tease out of our stats.” Before his dad could respond, Ben glanced at his watch. “I’m afraid we’ve had a long day. I imagine Carly wants to turn in. We’ll see you in the morning, okay, Dad?”

Ben kept a warm hand at the small of my back as he ushered me up the stairs, and I tried not to be distracted by the burn from the contact.

“I’ll text you in a bit. For now, get ready for bed? But keep your shoes out.”

His whispered words made me tingle. Ben had mentioned something about a tree house at his family home. Did he really expect us to sneak out under his father’s nose? Then again, we were well over the age of consent. Was it sneaking out if we were adults, long past curfew age?

Nodding, I smiled when he placed a brief kiss at the juncture of my neck and shoulder, letting the shivers thrill through me.

Unsure what to do with myself, I pulled on a pair of soft pants and a T-shirt, taking a turn in the bathroom to brush my teeth. Anticipation wound through me, making it hard to settle as the minutes ticked on with no sign from Ben.

When my phone buzzed, I pounced on it.

*Ben: I know it’s dark, but how do you feel about exploring my secret tree fort?*

*Carly: Are you telling me you have wood for me?*

*Ben: There’s only one place I want to store it. ❓❓*

I chortled. Was that supposed to be sexy?

*Carly: What about your dad?*

*Ben: Snoring on the other side of my bedroom wall.  
The coast is clear. If you're up for it.*

I bit my lip, worrying it. Sneaking out with Ben could definitely go on the list of things I'd never done before. And privacy sounded like heaven after being surrounded by his players and family all day.

*Carly: I'm in.*

Silently, I slid out of Izzy's room, gathering my jacket closer around my shoulders, and smiling when Ben quietly closed his bedroom door behind him, turning to me with a broad grin. He beckoned with a finger, and I followed him slowly down the stairs, pausing when he did to gesture at what I presumed was a squeaky step from the exaggerated way he stepped over it.

I giggled softly when we made it to the safety of the kitchen, and he shushed me with a wicked grin before tilting his head to the back door. We tiptoed across the back porch, and he grabbed my hand, running with me to the tree line.

He tugged me to a stop, leaning back against the bark of a large tree and urging me into his arms. Placing a quick kiss across my mouth, he murmured, "That was some grade A stealth, honey."

"What about this tree house you keep talking about?" I whispered. "Are we even going to be able to see to get into it?"

"Oh, I got you covered. Come on." Regretting the loss of his warmth, I picked my way along behind him, as he wound through the trees. Loamy needles crunched underfoot, and I shivered in the cold. Catching the move, Ben whispered, "There's a trunk of blankets in the tree house."

Impressive. Growing up, I'd had a local park, but nothing so elaborate as a tree house with a trunk of goodies.

He drew to a stop, gesturing to wooden rungs nailed into the bark of a nearby tree.

“Let me turn on the lights.”

“You have electricity out here?” Was it a tree house, or some kind of elaborate cabin? “Won’t your dad see the lights?”

I squinted as a faint glow illuminated the tree above us, a strand of twinkle lights running down to the extension cord he had in his hands.

“We ran a power cord out here long ago. Don’t worry, it’s far enough from the house, there’s plenty of evergreens to hide the lights. Up you go, honey. I’ll be right behind you, don’t worry.”

Gulping, I looked up. Thankfully, there were only a handful of rungs. The tree house was maybe eight feet above the ground. Close enough that falling might not be fatal. Still, I had to wonder when his little retreat was last used. Sensing my hesitation, Ben said, “Don’t worry. I bribed my buddy Ivan into making sure things are still shipshape. Those Nimitz boys do quality construction. You have nothing to fear from our tree house.”

I grasped a rung, boosting myself up, squealing when Ben gripped my hips from behind, until I realized he was only trying to steady me. Determined, I pulled myself up the next rung, slowly making my way to the platform above. I belly flopped inelegantly across the wooden planks before inching forward, making room for Ben to join me.

He hadn’t been kidding about the Nimitz construction prowess. From below, it had looked like a simple structure, a few boards nailed to a tree. But from the inside, Ben’s hideout entranced me with its tiny details. Twinkle lights lit with the space and there were two windows in the steep pitch. Thanks to the nearing winter, bare branches allowed brief glimpses of moonlight and stars through the windows. It was breathtaking.

Windows and walls embraced the enclosure, making for a cozy nest. And as promised, a beautiful old trunk perched in a corner.

Ben pulled himself up behind me, landing more gracefully than I had as he rolled to his feet and strode toward the chest, propping the top open while he tugged out blankets. Ben gently laid out a fluffy sleeping bag and a soft-looking quilt, creating a cocoon of softness before returning to the box. He dug deeper, unearthing a bottle and two glasses.

“This is beautiful, Ben.”

I was touched at the amount of trouble he’d gone to. Would he have chosen to visit Colville if I hadn’t had a tree house on my wish list?

“Milady.” Ben’s eyes gleamed in the low light. “Can I interest you in another nightcap?”

“Sure. Is it strong enough to keep me warm?”

His lips quirked, eyes dancing. “Nope. But I hope I am.”

He splashed dark liquid into glasses, handing me one. I took a cautious sip.

“Wow. This is delicious. What is it?”

“The grapes are from the Pruitt Farm, but the wine is a new red blend, a label from a recent transplant, Cole Fenwick.”

“It’s lovely.”

“So are you.”

As compliments went, kind of corny, but wasn’t that one of the things I loved about Ben? My heart stuttered, my breath speeding. The evening was quiet around us, the dark embracing and cocooning us as if we were the only ones in the world. And Ben was swiftly becoming my world. Blowing out a breath to ease some of my nerves, I sipped at my wine.

“I couldn’t ask for a better partner in this adventure.”

I truly was lucky to have met Ben, chosen him for this journey.

“Are you referring to your list?” he asked hesitantly.

“And life,” I admitted, trying to communicate without words how deep my feelings for him had grown.

“To covivants,” I toasted, tipping my wineglass toward his.

“And to naughty to-do lists,” he added before touching his glass to mine.

I knocked back the rest of my wine, smiling when Ben’s eyes widened at the move.

“Are you trying to tell me something, honey?” he asked hoarsely.

I kicked off my shoes before tugging my sweatshirt over my head, enjoying watching his Adam’s apple bob as he caught sight of my breasts.

I reached into my jogger pockets, pulling out the foil packet I’d tucked inside, just in case.

“I came prepared.”

“I see that,” he said admiringly. He gestured toward the chest. “I too, asked that a few extras get stocked in preparation for tonight.”

“A few?” I asked, teasingly to cover my nerves. “Ambitious, aren’t you?”

He grinned. “Have you met me? You bet, honey. I aim to please.”

Eyes softening, I couldn’t help the words that popped out. “You do.”

Reaching out a hand that trembled a little, he placed a hot palm along my ribcage, urging me nearer. Maintaining eye



contact, he loomed closer, until all I could see was Ben. The warm blue eyes, the stubble on his cheeks. My whole world.

“Carly, how do you feel about letting me keep you warm tonight?” he husked, placing a soft kiss on one bare shoulder.

I shivered at the sensation, moaning slightly as he traced more delicate kisses along my arm to the sensitive skin inside my elbow. “I wish you would. I have a feeling you’ll be good at it.”

“You know, I’ve heard it works best skin to skin,” he murmured. “Feel free to help me out. I’m a little ... preoccupied.”

Each soft stroke and kiss made me tremble harder, until I was sure I would shake apart in Ben’s arms. I kept my hands busy, pulling at the hem of his soft T-shirt and urging it over his head. Then finding the waistband of his dark sweats, tugging them over his hipbones. His erection bobbed between us, firm and ready. Ben groaned as I gripped him, stroking from base to tip.

“It’s been a long time, Carly. I love what you’re doing a bit too much. Let me make sure you catch up.”

On those words, he stripped off the last of the fabric covering me, until I stood nude under the twinkle lights. In another time, another place, I might have felt self-conscious, aware of every imperfection, but under Ben’s hot gaze, I couldn’t feel anything but beautiful.

“Honey, you’re so soft, silky. A queen. Consider me your drone for the night.”

The reverence in his gaze made me feel powerful. He traced kisses along my ribcage, dropping to his knees as he made his way to my navel and right hip.

“I want to dive into your honey,” he husked, letting his hot breath gust across the sensitive skin at the apex of my

thighs.

I sighed, letting my lids fall heavy as he urged my thighs apart, grabbing my hips to nudge me toward his mouth. His delicate tongue foraged through my folds. Pinned by pleasure, I shuddered, boneless, bracing myself on his strong shoulders. Warmth pooled and his tongue followed, tracing patterns that made me mindless with desire. Every beat of my heart echoed in my clit, pushed faster with every stroke, until my release powered through me, tiny waves of pleasure making me cry out.

“Ben!”

Breathing hard, I pushed at his shoulders before folding down onto the blankets next to him, weak. He kissed up my hip, across my ribcage, cupping one breast before taking the nipple in his mouth. I gripped his head, enjoying the soft tickle, before letting my hands trail over the corded muscles in his back, reaching for his erection.

With a shove, I pushed him to his back, climbing over his big body. Eager to explore, I let my fingers trail over his biceps, his pecs, as I kissed him. Recovered from my earlier orgasm, I felt empty without him.

I scrambled for the condom, forgotten on the floor. My fingers trembled when I tried to open it, and Ben’s gentle fingers covered mine.

“Let me.”

The gleam in his eyes offered more than momentary protection, and my heart stuttered.

Never had I ever imagined that letting Ben get close would lead to us being here. Okay, maybe physically here, but my desire for him filled me up, overflowing into every area of my life. I wanted him in my bed, but not just there, I wanted him everywhere. Spending time together after work, laughing in the kitchen. Watching game tapes even. I’d become a sucker for him.

He sheathed himself in the condom, pushing up to his elbows as if to reverse our positions, and I shook my head. “Still my turn.”

I leaned over, letting him capture my mouth in a rough, open-mouthed kiss as I pressed around him, wanting to feel every inch filling me up. Stretching me with the best of aches. Still slick from my earlier orgasm, a single stroke brought us flush, and I groaned.

Every muscle clenched around him, and I broke our kiss as Ben gripped my hips, each finger welding into my flesh like if he held me hard enough, we’d fuse together for good. His low moan sent fresh shivers through me, and from the strain on his face, I could tell it was taking all of his self-control not to flip us and thrust into me with abandon.

“You don’t like going slow?” I whispered.

“Honey, I’ll go any speed you need,” he vowed. “Just so long as you stay right where you are. So hot. So wet ...”

His palms smacked me gently, belying his words about following my lead, and I took the hint, churning my hips in small circles.

Ben closed his eyes, his expression tense, and I caught a low mutter of words.

“Are you whispering football plays right now?” I asked, frowning.

“It’s the only thing keeping me from bucking you into next Tuesday,” he muttered hoarsely. “I don’t think you realize what you do to me. What I’d like to do to you.”

“Tell me,” I said, pausing my hips.

“*Carly.*”

“Tell me.”

“I wanted to splay you out in the hot tub, feast on every secret place.”

I rewarded him with a rough thrust of my hips, and he gasped, eyes wide.

“I ached to pin you back against the winter coats in that closet and make you scream my name.”

A second hip thrust, and the words poured from him.

“Carly, I could hammer and pound in your sweet heat for hours if you’d let me.”

“Show me,” I said, lacing my fingers with his as I pulled free, rolling onto my back.

“I don’t want to bruise your back on the floor.”

“Then make me forget everything else.”

Hands clasped, I watched his face as he entered me, pausing when he was seated to the hilt. The concentration and reverence on his face burned itself into my memory. Slowly, Ben rolled his hips, setting a steady, deep rhythm.

Each thrust nudged me along the blankets with the force of his hips, until our clasped hands hit the edge of the tree house, and Ben used them to help support us. He worked his hips, hitting my clit until I whimpered. Urging my hands to brace against the wall, Ben’s talented fingers found the hot button between my thighs, pressing as he pistoned his hips, rocking us together, until I was breathless and on edge.

One last kiss, and cascades rippled through me, my orgasm gripping me in waves of pleasure. Ben’s orgasm followed, and he collapsed on me, breathing hard, before placing a rough kiss against my shoulder.

“That was ...”

“Amazing? World-shaking? Worth the wait?”

“All of those,” he muttered softly, shifting to the side.

I wanted to give into the lassitude, but without Ben’s hard body covering mine, the temperature dropped quickly.

The soft blankets eased some of the cold, but not enough to make it through the night.

Ben placed a kiss on my shoulder. “I don’t want to, but we should probably go back inside. My bed’s going to be lonely without you.”

He talked about his bed. Not him. Had I just joined a long line of conquests? Unsure where the doubts had crept in, I couldn’t help blurting out my thoughts.

“This is a pretty slick setup you have,” I said, intentionally casual, even complimentary. “Have you brought a lot of girls to your castle in the sky, Prince Charming?” I infused my tone with teasing, even as I held my breath, hoping the answer was no. Why did I ask? Sure, he’d brought me home, sharing his family, some of his past. But that didn’t give me the right to push for more. Dancing on the edge of self-sabotage was foolish. Even as I asked the question, I didn’t want to know the answer. Why couldn’t I embrace the moment? Embrace Ben?

Ben cleared his throat, and I hated myself, just a little, for making us both uncomfortable. We’d had a beautiful evening. Why did I have to ruin it?

“I, uh, have a confession to make,” he said softly.

Heart cratering, I pushed the curious, “Oh?” out with the force of my last hope.

Stupid, stupid question. Never ask something you don’t want to know the answer to. I’d grown Brave like Brené alright. Choosing risks over protecting my heart time and again, and now I’d pay for it.

Clearing his throat, the silence stretched, and I counted heartbeats. *One. Two. Three.*

“I haven’t brought anyone here before, Carly.”

Ben had been direct and honest in the past, and I couldn’t doubt his sincerity now. Blowing out the breath I’d

been holding, I didn't know what to say.

“Oh.”

He smiled wryly, lips tilted, before glancing away as he rubbed his hands over his head.

“I may have overstated my experience in this whole list thing,” he said softly.

“Well, I had *no* experience, so you've got me beat,” I said, relieved.

“Me neither.”

The soft words hit me like a punch to the gut, and I whirled toward him, trying to discern his expression. Was he serious? At least one newspaper article had titled him the “sexiest coach in college football.” I'd assumed he was also the horniest, until he shared his season rules for celibacy.

“I ... don't understand.”

He shrugged, looking sheepish. “When you came to me with your list, I didn't know how to tell you. It's been a long time for me. When I said I devoted my life to football, I meant it. I've been feeling like a fraud this whole time.”

“Fraud? *You?*” I huffed a laugh, before realizing how he might interpret my humor.

I paused, grasping his hand, pulling him to face me.

“I'm glad I chose you,” I said softly.

“Even if I have no idea what a Dirty Schmiddy is?” he asked tentatively. “I couldn't even google it, I was too worried about the university policy filters.”

“You don't need a sex swing to keep me interested.”

“That's what that is?” he asked, sounding bemused and more than a bit intrigued.

“Slow down, Ben,” I said with a smile. “We've got time to work up to acrobatics. I need a few days to recover

from the tree house first. You wrecked me.”

“I did, huh?”

I smiled at his smug expression.

He placed a quick kiss on my bare shoulder, causing fresh shivers to roll down my spine.

“I’m glad I told you,” he said, eyes gleaming. “You just saved me a lot of subterfuge and research. There was going to be a burner phone and everything.”

Laughing, I shook my head. “So glad I could help.”

“We make a great team, Carly.”

He drifted closer, eyes focused on my mouth, before drawing me back into his arms. His kiss started off tender, becoming more soulful as I wound my arms around his neck. Fresh heat streaked through me, until I was writhing on his lap. He pulled away, breathing hard, to lean his forehead against mine.

“As much as I want to stay here with you, you deserve a warm bed. You deserve it all.”

My heart softened at the sweet words. Almost enough to make me brave the cold and stay outside with him but explaining to his father when we stumbled in with sex hair in the morning was a bigger leap than I wanted to make.

We tugged on clothing, and Ben bundled the blankets back into the trunk, placing the glasses carefully on top of the closed lid before shepherding me to the ladder.

“Careful on the way down. I’ll go first.”

His solicitousness made me wish we could just snuggle up, enjoy each other. Instead, I scooped over the edge of the platform, feeling for the first rung of the ladder and slowly making my way down. We weaved through the trees, tiptoeing over the back porch and easing the back door to the

house open. Silently, we climbed the stairs, avoiding the squeaky step.

Ben paused me with a hand at my hip outside my door.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispered, placing a quick kiss at the corner of my mouth before urging me inside. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Feeling light, I shed my shoes and sweatshirt, exchanging them for a T-shirt to sleep in and climbed beneath the covers with a smile on my face. Ben had been magnificent. We’d fit together like it was meant to be. I’d never imagined the goofy jock as the man of my dreams, and it had been short-sighted of me. My *Star Trek*-loving, scone-baking hulk of a man defied all expectations, all stereotypes. Just thinking of our romantic interlude in the tree house made me wish he was here, in bed. Beside me.

Morning light flickered across my face, making me squint as I came fully awake. I ached a little, no doubt thanks to the hard tree house floor, but I couldn’t bring myself to care. Alone time with Ben had been worth it. When could we do it again?

Pushing to my feet, I pulled my sweatshirt back on, gathering fresh clothes for the bathroom. After a quick shower, I felt refreshed and ready to face Ben’s dad. I slipped downstairs quietly, wondering if my guilt over our night together would telegraph itself to his dad somehow. Really, we had nothing to feel bad about. We were adults. In a mature relationship. And we hadn’t done anything untoward under his dad’s roof. Technically.

Grimacing over the hairs I split in my assessment, I stepped into the kitchen, unsurprised to see Pastor O’Reilly sitting at the table with a mug and the morning paper.

“Good morning.”



“Morning,” he said. “Coffee’s on the counter. I don’t have any creamer, but there’s milk in the fridge. Ben should be right back. He stepped outside to load his bag.”

The back door opened, and I turned with a smile. It froze on my face when I caught Ben’s expression. He looked crushed. What had happened since last night? I glanced from him to his dad, wondering what I’d missed.

“Morning, Ben,” I murmured, hoping the soft words were enough to express my concern.

He smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “Morning, honey. You sleep okay?”

I nodded, subdued. Something was wrong. The contented man I’d left last night didn’t bear much resemblance to the tired one in front of me.

“Cereal okay for breakfast?” he asked, and I nodded.

“I know we need to get on the road. You mentioned something about hitting Brewed Awakening on our way out of town?”

“Sure, my coffee is too strong for you,” Ben’s dad grumped. “Scamper away like a weakling instead of stomaching the good stuff like a man.”

I slammed my mug down, sloshing coffee on the table. His coffee was fine, it was his bitter attitude I objected to.

“What is your problem?” Inside I died a little at how rude I sounded, but Ben’s dad didn’t seem to care if he was horrible, and I couldn’t let his nasty words stand.

Ben didn’t deserve it. Not from his father, not from anyone. “Ben is one of the best men I know. Kind, caring, an excellent role model for the young men on his team. I love Ben. He’s such a good man, why can’t you see that? Why are you tearing him down?”

There was something freeing in letting loose, blasting the older man. But inside, my grandmother's voice rebuked me. *Mind your manners, girl.* Swallowing, I pushed past the moment of shame for my outburst. It'd been raw and honest.

No one who put that look in Ben's eyes deserved my pity.

The silence stretched between us. Ben opened his mouth and shut it, unable to form words. His dad kept sipping at his cup, ignoring my outburst.

"You'll be wanting to get on the road soon," he said. "I'm going to head up to shower. See yourselves out."

I winced. He was effectively kicking us out, not that we weren't planning to leave already, but my hasty words in defense of Ben had made the already tense morning worse. Pastor O'Reilly pushed away from the table, and I bit my lip, debating if saying anything more would make the situation better or worse. Did I owe it to Ben to smooth things over? Ben still sat frozen, staring down into his coffee mug, and my stomach sank. Had I messed things up?

Letting others walk all over me used to be my habit, but allowing them to mess with the man I loved? Unacceptable.

Maybe it hadn't been the smartest decision, but I couldn't watch him hurt Ben and do nothing. Love didn't work that way.

Ben finally lifted his gaze from his cup, meeting mine calmly. I tried to glean clues from his face, but his somber expression didn't give me much hope.

"I can't believe I did that," I said, still shocked I'd spoken my mind.

"You didn't have to do anything," he said softly.

Swallowing around a suddenly dry mouth, I pushed out the words that needed to be said.

“It’s all true, you know.”

“All of it?” he asked delicately. “Even the part where you said you loved me?”

Was that a spark in his blue eyes? His lips turned up, and my heart started to race. Playing back my words, my eyes rounded. I *had* said I loved him. Out loud. From my heart to my lips, no brain involved. But rolling the words around my mouth, tasting the truth of them, I had to admit it felt right. Everything about being with Ben felt right.

“Every word,” I vowed, blowing out a breath.

Ben reached out a hand, tangling his fingers with mine. “You make me so happy.”

Not an admission of love. But a start.

I mustered a smile. “Good. You make me happy too.”

He pushed his chair back, using the leverage of our hands together to tug me toward him, settling me on his lap. His massive thighs cupped my body, sending heat shooting through me, until I could only focus on his lips.

“Are you sure you want to do this in your dad’s kitchen?” I teased, as he laid his forehead against mine.

“I think we’ve already proven his opinion isn’t the important one here.” Tilting his head back, his palms came up to cup my face, his expression tender. “Carly Anderson, you’re one of a kind, you know that?”

Still not an admission of anything to justify my racing heart, but I found my smile again.

“I’m beginning to believe it,” I said.

“You ready to get out of here?” he asked, gesturing to our half-finished breakfast bowls.

“Absolutely.”

The sooner we put distance between us and his dad, from my hasty words in the kitchen, the better. I loved Ben. There were no takebacks. And pushing him for more, after an emotional morning, didn't feel right. We were in a good place, and for now, I only wanted to savor that.

# CHAPTER 16 – BEN

My hands trembled, and I tried to hide it by gripping the steering wheel more tightly.

How cowardly was it to listen to Carly confess her love and be unable to respond in kind? Watching her stand up to Dad for me filled me with immense pride. And shame. That should have been me. Were my dad's worries about me coming true? Was I hiding behind Carly, ever the fraud? Running away from the hard things in life? He'd been extra vocal this morning before she came downstairs, criticizing my team record, my coaching style, and my choice to move to Benton in the first place. Only when his nasty comments turned to my relationship with Carly did I find my backbone, shutting him down. Escaping to load our bags in the car gave me a few much-needed minutes of peace to collect myself. And resolve to get the hell out of my dad's house.

Shaking off the negative thoughts, I glanced at Carly beside me. She seemed unable to settle after the tense exchange in the kitchen. I'd tried to smooth things over at the end, but from her fidgeting hands, I hadn't succeeded.

She'd said she loved me. And I'd said she was *one of a kind*.

I was an idiot.

While nothing I'd said was false, it wasn't the right thing either. She deserved more.

And she deserved to hear it somewhere other than my childhood home with my dad upstairs showering.

Tapping my fingers on the steering wheel, I debated my options.

Blurting out feelings on the road didn't leave much room for romance. Ditto expressing myself in front of the team. While much of our time together had involved the Threshers, telling a woman you loved her should be just about her.

Carly deserved to have the whole package, a shining moment. Not a rushed one.

Clearing my throat, I broke the silence. "How do you feel about coming over Wednesday after practice to bake a pie together before Friendsgiving? Maybe pack a bag?"

The soft light in her eyes reassured me I'd made the right move.

"That sounds great."

Nodding, I turned my focus back to the road. Even without the words, Carly had to know how I felt about her, right? And I'd give her the words. Soon.

\*\*\*

President Nelson's call confirming that I'd have a contract in my email inbox by Monday added to my sense of victory as we waited for our flight home.

Grinning, I said, "Ma'am, I appreciate your faith in me."

"Coach O'Reilly, you've proven that your methods work. You turned this season around, and the alumni are pleased. So am I."

Running a hand through my hair, I glanced at Carly, approaching through the concourse crowd from a trip to the bathroom. She'd been a big part of my success.

"Dr. Anderson was a huge help with her analysis. I appreciate all she did for our team."

"The team, or *you*?"

The hint of teasing in the president's tone made me grimace. Carly caught the change in my expression over the heads of our fellow travelers and frowned, and I rushed to smooth things over, smiling to reassure her as she reached my side.

"Honestly, both. Is there someone I need to officially report our relationship to?" I asked, heart thundering in my chest as Carly tilted her head, likely catching on to the importance of my phone call.

My contract made me subject to the university's faculty handbook, including the consensual relationships policy. Carly and I were colleagues, and I didn't think there'd be any issue, but I didn't want to do anything to jeopardize her career.

Carly's eyes narrowed, and my heart quaked. "I want to make sure everything's above-board. I'd like to keep working with her, assuming that's what she wants and the university will allow it." Carly's eyes softened, and I released a deep sigh of relief when she smiled, expression warming.

"Hmm..." The president's hum constricted my throat, making my stomach churn with anxiety as I waited for her verdict. Carly didn't work for me, and I didn't work for her. In theory, continuing as colleagues and lovers could be managed. "I'll consult with our HR director, but I don't see an immediate problem with that. You seem to make a great team, at least on the field."

Relief rushed through me, and I sank into the seat behind me.

"Thanks, President Nelson. I'm excited about another year with the Threshers."

"Keep up the good work, and we'll look forward to many more. Congrats, Coach."

Carly settled next to me, and I reached for her hand, watching her face carefully. "Cat's out of the bag, Doc. You

okay with that?”

Her expression settled into something approaching playful, and I relaxed when her fingers tightened in mine.

“It’ll be much easier to finish our list with everything out in the open.”

Brows raised, I wondered if she was referring to item eleven. As much as I embraced being a public figure, there were some things I still wanted to keep private. But how I felt about Carly wasn’t one of them. However, I needed to figure out the right way to tell her first. Blurting it out in a crowded airport lacked a certain something. Carly deserved something list-worthy when I told her I loved her.

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*Ben: Gotham Knights assemble after class tonight?*

I’d made big plans to prepare an elaborate date for Carly. Complete at least one more newly added list item and tell her I loved her.

But as Wednesday approached, I was losing my nerve. My dad’s voice kept intruding. *She’ll never stay with you. She’ll find out the truth about you. You can’t keep her. This won’t last.*

Pushing past the negative self-talk needed to happen. And running my plans by the guys would help me make sure I hadn’t missed anything.

*Jake: We’ve got a new IPA on tap, first pitcher is on me.*

*Daniel: Angi has me covered with Ari, but don’t whine when I ask you to babysit next weekend. She wants us to go Christmas shopping and you owe her one.*

Luckily, Daniel’s young daughter was a toddler delight. Watching her would be no hardship.

*Ben: Deal.*



*Ed: Wait, we're asking for favors now? How about free tickets to next season's first game?*

*Ben: For you?*

*Ed: For all of us.*

With my freshly-minted contract for another two years with the Threshers, that was an ask I could agree to, no problem. It might be fun having them all at my back. It's not like I had family who'd be there. Other than, hopefully, Carly.

*Ben: Deal.*

*Jake: Now I feel like I should ask for something ...*

I sped to answer the question he was no doubt typing next.

*Ben: No. You cannot wear the mascot costume.*

*Jake: What? Why not?*

*Ben: I remember your tendency to get naked on the field. No one needs to see a pants-less Thresher.*

*Jake: That was ONE time. And for a good cause ...*

*Ben: No.*

*Jake: You're no fun.*

He wasn't wrong. His little streaking incident my first year had nearly given the president apoplexy. Never mind that she was his mother, she was my boss. I didn't need to do anything to anger her.

Hot and sweaty after the adult class at the dojang, at least my head felt clearer. Jake beat me to the bar and had already drawn a pitcher for the table. I spotted Luke at a table on his own and debated asking him to join us. How horrified would he be by the Gotham Knights?

"Hey, Luke. Jake and a couple of the guys are sharing a pitcher at the back table. Want to join us?"

Luke grunted, tracing condensation on his glass. "I'm not very good company tonight."

"You're not good company any night. But I need your help."

"With what?"

"Woman problems."

He groaned, knocking back the last of his pint.

"You're lucky I'm empty. I'm the last man you should ask about woman troubles."

He slid out of his seat and followed me. Pleased that he'd thawed enough to join us, I gestured to Jake as we approached the back table. "Jake, I've recruited another Gotham Knight."

Luke grunted, holding up his hands. "I agreed to beer, not whatever this is."

"Ah, Luke. You're in it now. No backsies. Once you're inducted into the Batcave, you never leave," Jake said.

"We'll see."

Luke's dry skepticism made me grin. Spending time around other people, tackling new problems that weren't his own, might help him pull out of his dour mood.

Jake gestured for another glass from the bar, and I caught Luke's hooded stare on Cheri as she dropped an additional glass at our table. She studiously avoided making eye contact with him but smiled at the rest of us. Interesting. Maybe the lack of kegs at Wilcox wasn't the only reason he made the trek into town for a beer.

"Thanks, Cheri," Jake said with a smile.

Daniel, Nate, and Ed pulled up chairs and Jake poured our glasses, slinging them around the wooden surface with ease.

Ed was the first to break the contemplative silence.

“Okay, we’re not here just for the beer. What’s up, Ben? Why have you called the knights to your aid?”

Rolling my eyes at his flowery language, I held back any comments about getting the nerd out of the library but being unable to take the library out of the nerd. Not the way to begin if I wanted their help.

“Is this about Friendsgiving?” Daniel asked.

“If you tell me this year you’re thankful for us, I’m going to puke,” Luke teased.

He wasn’t wrong, but I didn’t need to get all sappy.

“Oh, no. This meeting has Carly written all over it,” Nate said.

Narrowing my eyes, I asked, “What makes you say that? Can’t we be celebrating my new contract?”

Stalling gave me that much more time to decide how I’d broach the subject I’d brought them here for.

“You exhibit all the signs of a man in love. Beer. Dark circles beneath your eyes. That lost look in your eyes,” Ed added.

“I do not have a ‘lost look in my eyes.’ Take it back, Ed.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. You love her. Admit it. And what, you don’t know how to tell her?”

Perceptive asshole. Sighing, I scrubbed a hand through my hair.

“Yeah. That’s about the size of it,” I said.

“Why don’t you look happier?” Daniel asked. “This is not a bad thing? Aren’t you together?”

“Yes.”

“Then I don’t see a problem. Just tell her,” Nate said.

“Y’all are a gaggle of girls, talking about *feelings*,” Luke groused.

“You should try it sometime, instead of keeping things bottled up. Maybe then you wouldn’t be such an asshole to everyone,” Jake muttered.

Luke shrugged, accepting Jake’s pronouncement, making me frown.

“He’s had a rough couple of years,” I defended.

“Doesn’t mean he can be a dick to my staff,” Jake said.

Luke grunted. “I’ll apologize to her.”

“See that you do. And before Thursday.”

Clearly, I’d missed something. Glancing between Jake and Luke, I looked for clues, but both remained stubbornly quiet.

Ed cleared his throat. “We’ve lost the thread here, guys. Tonight is about Ben’s issues, not Luke’s. So, lay it on us, Ben. What’s the big plan?”

“I invited her to come over and bake pies together tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess that’s a start,” Daniel said, looking bemused. “Women do love a man who cooks. It’s like the flour is a stone-cold aphrodisiac. But how are you going to make your move?”

“Tell her: you’ve got a *piece* of my heart,” Ed said, looking thoughtful. “Or how about: I only have *pies* for you?”

Daniel groaned, tossing his balled-up napkin at Ed.

“Corny, dude. That don’t strike me as Ben’s style,” Daniel said.

“Too bad practice is over for the season. You could call a fake play and have the team spell it out for you,” Nate mused.

“*Sure*. Because that’s the private, thoughtful moment he’s looking for.” Luke’s sarcasm read loud and clear.

“You have something better, Romeo?” Ed asked, looking affronted on Nate’s behalf.

Luke closed his eyes, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else. Sighing, he stared at me. “Here’s what you do. Put the pies in the oven. Pour her a glass of our finest wine and settle on the couch. Gaze deeply into her eyes and say, ‘I love you, Carly. You’re my world. Whatever comes, I want us to be together.’”

“Whoa.”

Jake said it. We were all thinking it. Maybe there was still some of the old Luke in there somewhere after all?

Nodding, I glanced around. I’d never had brothers, but having teammates, then fellow coaches, had made me feel like I hadn’t missed out. Not that Izzy would let me live it down if I said as much aloud—she thought she was all I could ever need. Still, having other men in my life, real friends who talked about more than football, made all the difference at times like these, when I felt lost and unsure. It wasn’t like I could have these conversations with my dad. Having friends to build you up, help you out, was something I’d never take for granted.

“Thanks, Knights. I couldn’t do this without you.”

Snorting softly, Ed said, “Oh, you could. You’d just do it very, very badly.”

“You act like you’ve been married for decades, instead of coupled for months,” Daniel rebuked gently. “If I recall, you made your share of mistakes with Rita.”

“Who among us hasn’t made mistakes?” Ed said, seeming unconcerned.

“But telling the people we love about our feelings wasn’t one,” Jake cautioned, tilting his glass to me. “No regrets.”

“Noted,” I said.

Conversation moved on to the Threshers’ chances next season, and the upcoming bowl game as we finished the last of our pitcher.

Daniel stood, pushing in his chair with an ill-hidden yawn.

“Sorry, guys. I gotta head out. Good luck, Ben.”

Slowly, the others finished, and we said our goodnights. Luke ambled back to the bar, while I headed to my truck. Driving through town, sleepy on a Tuesday evening, I admired the streets of Benton. Carly had helped me earn two more years on the field, two more years of doing what I loved. And two more years to be with the woman I loved, with plenty of time to convince her to make it permanent.

*As if she’d want you.*

That voice, ever eager to pounce whenever it looked like I’d be happy, reared its ugly head. My real friends would never say something like that. So why did I let myself?

Carly had picked me.

I let that thought replace the nagging voice inside, repeating it over and over like a mantra. She’d picked me. Chosen me. Wanted me. Loved me. And I wanted her too. Forever. It was time to tell her.

\*\*\*

Carly knocked before slipping inside the house at my yell to join me in the kitchen.

“Hey,” I said, looking up from the dough I was mixing.

“Hey. I thought I was going to help,” she accused gently, tucking a red curl behind one ear.

I paused, catching my breath at how beautiful she looked. Dressed in jeans that hugged her hips and a soft looking sweatshirt, her hair back from her face, I wanted nothing more than to take her in my arms, carry her upstairs.

“You help just by being here,” I said.

“That’s sweet, Ben. Is that your gentle way of telling me you only wanted my company in the kitchen, without letting me touch any of your precious pies?”

“Not at all,” I said with a smile. I nodded to my stand mixer. “You can work on the filling; I’ll finish this crust.”

“What all are we making?” she asked.

“A peanut butter chocolate pie with graham cracker crust and a traditional pumpkin pie.”

“Yum. You had me at peanut butter.” She gestured to the jar and brick of cream cheese I’d set out to warm. “Tell me how I can help.”

“Yours is easy, I need you to mix the cream cheese with the peanut butter and whipped topping, then spread it in the graham cracker crust.”

“I like easy.”

Her brow wrinkled, and I wanted to kiss her to ease the cute little frown lines away. Curse my decision to start on the pie crust dough early. The flour on my hands would leave prints everywhere.

Things between us had been good since we returned from Colville, but we hadn’t had any time alone together. I’d been through a whirlwind of contract negotiations with

President Nelson, and Carly and I had mostly communicated by text.

As if sensing the direction of my thoughts, she looked up, tongue poking out from between her lips before her expression morphed into a wide smile. “I forgot, didn’t I? Congratulations, Coach. Two more years.”

The gentle pride in her tone eased some of my tension. I hadn’t fumbled things too badly when she told me she loved me, if she seemed this pleased I was staying.

“I can only hope you and the rest of the coaching staff will be there by my side,” I answered with a grin.

Her face fell, and I realized my mistake. Idiot. I’d lumped her in with the team, likely making her think I wanted her analysis, not her heart. How to get us back on better footing? Clearing my throat, I said, “I’m thrilled to be staying.”

“I’m glad too,” she said softly, before turning her attention to the mixer.

She eased the cream cheese out of its wrapper and into the bowl, before scooping the peanut butter and topping in to join it. With a flick of the switch, I lost my opportunity to say more. Unless I wanted to shout over the stand mixer’s motor.

Wincing, I focused on rolling out the dough for the crust, taking my frustration out on the pastry. Why did I struggle so much? It should be simple enough to say: *Carly, I love you*. Four little words. Just because I hadn’t heard them or said them to anyone but my sister in possibly decades didn’t mean my tongue couldn’t form the words.

Carly was everything. And she deserved to know it.

Something wet hit me on the cheek, accompanied by a husky giggle.

Pausing in my dough massacre, I reached a flour-covered hand to my face, swiping at the peanut buttery



mixture there, and approaching Carly with a challenge in my eyes.

“Oh? You want to play now?”

Maybe she saw the maniacal glint there or realized from my too-wide smile that she'd poked the bear. Her eyes rounded, and she backed away slowly. I picked up a handful of flour, advancing on her.

“Ben. I'm only playing. You looked too serious for pie crust. Don't you know you can buy those frozen?”

Gasping in mock horror, I pointed to her with my free hand. “You take that back, Carly Anderson.”

She pursed her lips, glancing from the handful of flour I held at the ready to my face. I thought she'd fold, apologize meekly, but I couldn't have been prouder when instead she dashed around the counter, grabbing the leftover bowl of flour.

“Take it back or what?” she challenged, holding her bowl aloft.

Eyes narrowing, I hid the smile that wanted to bloom at her playful tone.

“I'll make you.”

“Promise?” The dancing mischief in her dark eyes sent a pang of pure love through my chest. She looked poised to bolt if needed, dancing back and forth on her toes, eager to play.

“Take it back,” I urged.

“Nope. You're entirely too serious, Ben. As if the future of the world hangs on these pie crusts. It's just food.”

“Heresy.” Little did she understand the fate of my world hung on today.

When she didn't back down, I flung my handful, catching her in the face with a shower of flour.

“Ben!” she squealed. “I thought we were just pretending.”

Unable to stop laughing at the ghostly picture she made, I cut off when she retaliated, choking on a lungful of flour. Coughing to clear my airway, I reached for her, pulling Carly into a bear hug.

“Honey, you should realize that when it comes to you, I was never pretending.”

Her laughter cut off, no doubt sensing the seriousness in my tone. I handed her a towel, and we wiped off as much flour as we could. Taking a deep breath, I took the plunge.

“Never have I ever said I love you. To anyone. Before today,” I said huskily. Swallowing hard, I pushed past the emotion gripping my throat, watching her steadily. “Can I add that to our list? Plus a few more things?”

“Yeah, like what?” she asked with a small, pleased smile.

“Hmm ...” I hummed, pretending to think. “How about never have I ever lived with the woman I love? With an option to marry later, assuming she doesn’t get sick of me?”

“Ben,” she scolded. “I love you. But you want to move in together? Isn’t it a bit ... soon?” she asked.

“I understand if you need to finish out your commitment at the house or if you just need time to be sure,” I said, gripping her hips and pulling her toward me. “But I want to spend as much time as possible with you. Plus, more privacy would be nice,” I said, placing a kiss across her still flour-y lips. “It’d be difficult to have a food fight at the house,” I added with a wink.

“Hmm ...” She hummed, turning the tables on me, pretending to consider my offer. She quirked her lips. “I think I’m going to take some convincing,” she said, reaching for the hem of my shirt.

Loving the light in her eyes, loving her, I did the only thing I could. “Honey, I am happy to oblige.”

“What about the pies?” she asked, glancing around the kitchen. “Do we need to put anything away, shut off the oven?”

“Nah, if you love me, I’ve got better things to do than bake.”

She mock-gasped, holding a hand to her chest. “Are you—are you going to bring store-bought pies to Friendsgiving? You love me *that* much?”

Grinning, I said, “We’ll see how much convincing you take. If I don’t have time to finish in the morning, then yes, they’ll get what they get.”

Reaching up, Carly wound her arms around my neck, aligning our bodies, letting me feel her heat through our clothing.

“So long as I get you, that’s all that matters,” she whispered.

Unable to wait any longer, I boosted her up, urging her legs around my waist, as I stumbled toward the living room and the couch.

“No getting frisky on the kitchen counters?” she teased, nipping at my neck.

“Cleaning up my own butt prints in the flour lacks some appeal,” I admitted.

I cut off her giggle, kissing her deeply, until all thoughts of the kitchen faded away.

In a flurry of hurried caresses and flung clothing, we made our way to my bedroom, stumbling until we fell to the mattress in a heap of limbs. As gravity got the best of me, I did my best to shield Carly, taking pains to fall to her side instead of letting the full force of my weight settle on top of her.

Clad only in her bra and panties, I marveled at her flushed cheeks and the sparkle in her dark eyes. Beautiful. Confident. *Mine*.

With a growl, I pounced, caging her with my body, tracing delicate kisses along her collarbone to her ribcage, sucking at one nipple through the delicate fabric of her bra.

“Ben,” Carly moaned, and I grinned, enjoying the throaty way she said my name. Like she’d won a lifetime of orgasms and couldn’t wait to get started.

I loved the certainty in her gaze, demanding my attention as her due. Remnants of flour dusted her hair, a reminder of our kitchen play. Fuzzy warmth spread through me, competing with the desire to tug away the last scraps of fabric hiding her body. Carly’s trust, her love, meant everything.

As if she sensed the new meaning in every touch, her hand trembled slightly as she reached for me. Abandoning her breasts, I let her tug me up for a kiss. The soft brush of her lips reached straight into my heart and squeezed. I never wanted to let her go.

Settling in to sip at her lips, letting that soft, wet slide entrance us both, I couldn’t help but smile against her mouth.

Together, we were magic.

Carly grasped my wrist, urging my hand to her breast, and I did as she bid, shaping them with gentle hands before reaching for her bra clasp. Moaning as my fingers slipped over petal-soft skin exposed when I pulled her bra away, I scooted down her body, worshiping there, before tracing more kisses to her belly button and hip bone. Curvy and perfect. Carly arched as I hit the sensitive skin at her hip crease, scraping it gently with my stubble, and I smiled at the involuntary reaction. Inhaling deeply, I could scent her arousal, and it only stoked my own, making me painfully hard.

“Get naked,” Carly urged, and I fell to her side on the bed, eagerly shucking the last of my clothes.

She watched me with greedy eyes, and I couldn’t help but grin.

“See something you like?” I teased.

“I see something I love.”

The gentle certainty in her expression only made my heart beat faster.

“How did I get so lucky?” I breathed, as I prowled over her relaxed form, reaching for the scrap of fabric still covering her hips. She eased her pelvis up, arching as I tugged that last silky bit away, reaching for me.

Collapsing on top of her, rubbing gently at her slick opening, I groaned, dropping my forehead next to hers on the mattress as I sought control, suppressing the immediate urge to explode. I didn’t want to lose the opportunity to pleasure her, to revel in her heat. I wanted to drill into her, pushing Carly higher with every stroke. Watch the bloom of satisfaction on her pink cheeks. I couldn’t do that if I spent too early.

Carly’s nails scraping along my shoulders brought me back to myself, that edge of pressure letting me lift my head to focus on her.

Whiskey-brown eyes soft and sure, lips slightly open, Carly panted gently.

“I want you. Now.”

Biting back a curse at the urge to do her bidding without thought of consequences, I pulled away for protection, before returning to rest above her on my forearms.

Straining over the effort to go slow, I let the words tumble out. “I love you, Carly.”

Her expression tender, gaze steady on mine, she said, “I love you too.”

She wrapped a strong leg around my back, urging my hips toward hers, and I yielded, thrusting into her welcoming heat.

My vision washed to black, and I inhaled, seeking control.

Soft fingers traced my cheeks, and I met Carly's needy gaze. Maintaining our connection, I started to move, holding back a groan of satisfaction when she undulated beneath me, heightening the slide of friction between us. Slick meeting hard, I wanted to absorb every moment. Prickles spread through my body as I struggled to master the sensation.

Watching her for signs that she was close, I maintained a steady stroke, shuddering when I was seated to the hilt. Her soft sounds of encouragement only made it more difficult to hold myself in check, keep going until she found her pleasure.

"What do you need?" I asked, desperate to have her join me near the edge.

"Touch me."

Needing no other encouragement, I slipped a hand between us, seeking the center of her pleasure, adjusting pressure until her eyes went hazy. A final few thrusts, and she trembled against me, releasing me from my self-imposed restraint. With a cry, I let go, spilling myself. Pleasure rushed through me in waves, leaving every inch of my body tender. Collapsing on top of her, breathing hard, I did my best not to crush Carly, but I was boneless and unable to focus. Rolling to my side, I took a moment to dispose of the condom before pulling her into my arms, snuggling the blanket over us in an intimate cocoon.

"Never have I ever felt loved like that," I whispered quietly, reveling in the afterglow. Carly lay warm and soft, welded along my side, one hand tickling at my chest as we drifted together.

# CHAPTER 17 – CARLY

Light spread across my face, and I threw an arm over my eyes to shield them, groaning softly.

Ben placed a soft kiss on my shoulder before slipping out from behind me, and I whimpered at the loss of his warmth in bed.

“Don’t go.”

Ben hovered above me, kissing me gently.

“I don’t want to, but if I’m going to finish those pies, I’ve got to get on it.”

Chuckling, I slit my eyes, watching in appreciation as he slipped on a gray Henley, covering his massive chest before pushing up the sleeves to display his corded forearms.

“You’re such a liar. I thought store-bought would be fine?” I teased.

He grunted. “Food is love. And I love our friends enough to bake for them. Even though”—he gave a long-suffering sigh—“it means missing out on some time beneath the covers with you.”

“Food is love, huh?”

Nodding, he winked. “You didn’t think I made scones every day for the coaching staff, did you?”

My mouth opened. I thought he had. He’d made it sound like a tradition. I tilted my head. “It’s not something you did before me?”

“Well, maybe once a month or so. But I needed some way to woo you.”

“And you thought butter and carbs would do the trick?”

Grinning boyishly, his expression tugged at my heartstrings. “Didn’t it?”

“I guess it didn’t hurt,” I grumbled. “But I love you for more than your kitchen skills, Ben.”

“I love you in spite of your kitchen skills, Carly.”

Wincing, I laughed as he bounced back on the bed, caging me in his arms, raining kisses across my face. “Honey, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Pulling back, he grinned unrepentantly. “Okay, maybe I did. But the important thing is that I love you. So, so much.”

He smacked one last kiss across my lips, leaving me wanting more as he vaulted out of bed, striding toward the door.

“You are too tempting,” he groused gently as he paused, leaning against the doorjamb. His expression still held a hint of lust, and I bit my lip, debating my next move. He held up his arms as if begging for understanding. “These hands need to bake pies, not make love.”

Holding his gaze, I pushed to my knees, stripping the soft black T-shirt he’d loaned me over my head, exposing my rosy nipples for his approval.

“Are you sure about that?”

Groaning, he closed his eyes. “We’re going to the grocery store on the way to Jake and Chris’s, aren’t we?”

“Yep,” I said triumphantly, eyes heating as he stripped his own shirt over his head, prowling back to bed.

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We arrived at Jake and Chris's small house late and slightly disheveled. I'd run out of time to get ready and had to make do with a quick shower and damp hair.

Judging from Jake's knowing glance as he opened the door, the reason for our tardiness wasn't going to go unnoticed. Or uncommented on.

"Everyone else is already here," Jake said. "Welcome. Come on in, we'll get you glasses. We're all in the living room." He gestured to the sunken living room and a chorus of greetings rang out from our assembled friends.

Rita perched on Ed's lap, sipping at his glass. Daniel and Angi sat on the floor, Ari laid on a blanket in between them.

Daniel cast a knowing glance at our grocery bags. "I see pie baking went well."

Nate snickered, and he'd clearly clued Sid in on the joke, because her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter.

Ed chimed in, "Come on, they're pie-fect together."

Rita groaned, shaking her head. "Never mind the peanut gallery here. We're glad you could make it."

"Yeah, up until now the only entertainment has been watching these two bicker," Nate added, throwing a thumb toward a couple sitting arms crossed on the sofa.

Cheri. And was that Luke, Ben's landlord?

Glancing from Rita to Sid to Angi, I tried to figure out what I'd missed.

Angi mouthed, "I'll tell you later," and I shifted focus to Jake.

"Can I offer you or Chris any help in the kitchen?"

"Oh, honey, *no*. It looks like you've given all the help in the kitchen this Friendsgiving can handle. Come back and I'll get you a glass of wine, though."

Rita chortled, and I gave her a quelling look, covering with a smile.

“Thanks, Jake. That sounds great.”

We followed him down the hall, joining Chris in the fragrant kitchen.

“It smells amazing, Chris. Thanks again to you both for having us.”

The gentle giant smiled, a brief twitch of his lips behind his heavy beard.

“We’re glad to celebrate our first Thanksgiving together,” Chris said.

“What about your mom? Is she joining us? Or Chris’s parents?” Ben asked.

“Cynthia is on a singles’ cruise, and my folks drove to Idaho to be with my sister and her brood,” Chris answered easily. “Today is just us.”

Ben poured us each glasses of wine from a Wilcox bottle and we returned to the living room. He reached out a hand, urging me toward his lap after taking the remaining plush chair. I snuggled beneath his chin, inhaling the scent of fresh soap from our shared shower and wiggling to get comfortable.

His pained grunt and the hard bulge taking shape under my backside made me regret the move. I sat perfectly still, letting conversation wash over us.

The day passed in a pleasant haze of conversation and too much food. Ben colored at the gentle teasing over the store-bought pies, but nothing could pierce our happiness.

Surrounded by friends and the man I loved. Never had I ever been happier.

# EPILOGUE – BEN

*(Two years later)*

My blood buzzed, excitement making it hard to settle down as we waited for the run to start. Glancing at Carly, I thought she looked a little green.

“Are you sure you’re okay to run today?” I asked. “We can walk if you need to.”

Carly glanced to the players milling around us before shaking her head.

“I can do it. Just give me a minute to breathe.”

Rubbing at her back, I nodded. “Anything you say, honey.”

“Y’all make me puke,” Davonte, one of my youngest players, complained as he stretched his hamstrings.

Carly winced, and I squinted at Davonte. “Any more talk about cookie tossing, and you’ll run extra laps around the field at practice this week.”

“Sorry, Coach.” The young man saluted, before moving out of range. No doubt not understanding why I’d growled.

“You okay?” I asked Carly.

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Ben. Everything will be fine.”

I rubbed my chest, my gaze catching on the gleaming band there. A year of marriage, and I should be used to seeing it. But part of me still marveled that Carly chose me. We’d not only finished her original list, but continued to add things to it, both big and small.

Nate and Sid joined our group, along with Ed and Rita.

“No Daniel and Angi this year?” I asked.

Ed shook his head. “Nah. Angi’s not cleared to run yet. They’re home with Ari and Cooper.”

I swallowed. “Right.”

Nate squinted at me but didn’t say anything in front of our wives.

Jake bounced up, Chris at his heels. “Hey, gang. Any bets on who’s going to win this year?” He glanced around, gaze landing on Sid. “I know who my money’s on.”

Grunting, I avoided answering. In years past, I’d promised my team that beating Sid’s time would earn them a batch of scones, but this year, my focus was elsewhere.

I hugged Carly to me, both excited and wishing for the race to be over.

The grizzled volunteer who explained the rules at the starting line spoke over the loudspeaker. “Good morning, Bigfoot enthusiasts. Welcome to the Bigfoot Hunt Fun Run. Proceeds benefit the Benton Food Bank and fund our merry band of seekers.” She paused, and the milling group clapped. “Rules are the same as last year. At every kilometer, you should find a Bigfoot. Take a selfie or an ussie with him as proof and keep running. First runner back with proof of each Bigfoot will win the Bigfoot cutout of their choice.”

I wouldn’t leave Carly, but part of me wanted to win one very special cutout. Jake had leaned on Luke to design this year’s markers, and it hadn’t been difficult to bribe him into making what we wanted.

“On your mark, get set, go!” the gray-haired volunteer called, launching the runners along the wooded trail.

Most of my team took off, but I hung back, jogging slowly with Carly. We paused for photos at each marker, posing with Bigfoot dressed as a Thresher, hula-hooping, dressed as a presidential candidate, and playing peek-a-boo.

When we reached the final marker, I slipped the precious photo from my pants pocket, placing it strategically in our shot. Grinning, Carly said, “You ready to finish this with me?”

“Never have I ever wanted anything more than you,” I said, sneaking a quick kiss.

She took off with a playful squeal, and I followed, grinning like a fool.

We’d come so far. And I couldn’t wait to start the next phase.

Huffing hard, I caught up with Carly cooling down with our friends. Pausing to catch my breath, I couldn’t help but marvel at how beautiful she looked. Cheeks rosy, happiness radiating from every tired pore.

Nate glanced around our group as I caught up. Focusing first on Rita and Ed, before swinging his gaze our way.

“Does anyone have an announcement to make?” he asked delicately.

Jake cleared his throat. “I couldn’t help but notice the fifth marker this year ...”

Carly gripped my hand, and I used it to tug her closer, tucking her under my arms, letting my hands rest lightly on her abdomen.

“We’re having a baby!” Ed and I shouted in unison.

Ed and I exchanged shocked looks, laughing along with Rita and Carly.

Jake swiped a hand across his face, not really trying to hide his smile.

“Congratulations to you *all*,” he said.

“Yes, the next generation of Gotham Knights is secured,” Nate intoned with mock seriousness. Sid smacked him gently on the chest. “You don’t know if they’re having boys,” she chided with a smile.

Nate shook his head, looking sheepish. “No, but girls can be superheroes too.”

“And don’t you forget it,” his wife said with mock-severity. “Congratulations.”

Grinning, I cuddled Carly close, accepting their good wishes.

Never did I ever imagine I’d be standing here, holding the woman who loved me, when I accepted Carly’s list challenge. But the more we conquered together, the more we added to our list of adventures, until we decided we were ready to embark on the toughest, most satisfying challenge of all. Parenthood.

Loving Carly, showing her every day, had convinced me I had what it took to be a good father. That I could conquer my inner critic and embrace the good things in life. Including having a little boy or girl, who hopefully looked just like their mother.

And never had I ever wanted anything more than her and our own family.

## CARLY’S NHIE LIST

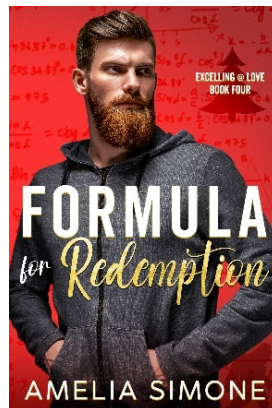
1. Hold hands in public
2. Kiss under the mistletoe
3. Slow dance to a sappy song

4. Talk dirty with a guy
5. Cosplay
6. Get in a food fight
7. Go skinny dipping
8. Try the Dirty Schmiddy
9. Home movie/photo shoot
10. O in public

# BEN'S NHIE LIST

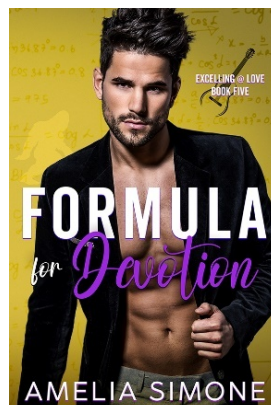
1. Make out in a closet
2. Say I love you
3. Live with the woman I love (option to marry later)
4. Be loved in return
5. Start a family

Want more from the Excelling @ Love world? Check out the last two books in the series, Formula for Redemption and Formula for Devotion.



One-click [Formula for Redemption](#) now!

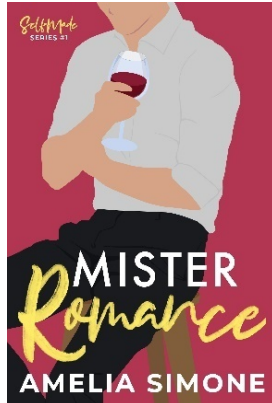
- \* Holiday Romance
- \* Fake Relationship
- \* Feel-Good, Flirty Romance





**Formula for Devotion is coming soon!**

- \* Roommates to Lovers
- \* Double Dating
- \* Feel-Good, Flirty Romance



**Find out how Chase proves that Tamra is the only romance that matters...**

**One-click [Mister Romance](#) now!**

- ✓ Friends to Lovers
- ✓ Trading Favors
- ✓ Romance Author Hero

**He's living a double life, and she's vowed to *get* a life ...**

### **Tamra Shaw**

Every aspect of my life is drab. I need more than my nursing career. Nothing will change if I don't. I'm determined to do it – three things that scare me: Reach out to my favorite romance author. Try pole dancing. Flirt a little. Nothing's stopping me but me.

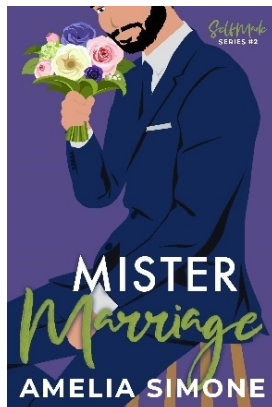
My brother's wedding is the perfect opportunity to show everyone the new me. Now, to find a date...

### **Chase Hoffman**

The sultry siren masquerading as a practical nurse can't fool me. Tamra is romantic lead material. Being her date to her brother's wedding is a dream come true. Or my worst nightmare.

There's a reason I live my life behind a keyboard. No one wants me running my mouth without preparation. Boobs. Aliens. You never know what might pop out. Me and my blundering mouth can keep it together for one tiny favor – right?

High heat and light-hearted fun abound in this friends to lovers romance. *Mister Romance* is book 1 of the Self-Made Series and can be read as a stand-alone or before *Mister Marriage*.



**Find out what happens with Jimmy heads to the altar for all the wrong reasons...**

**One-click [Mister Marriage](#) now!**

- ✓ Marriage of Convenience
- ✓ Firefighter Hero
- ✓ Found Family

**Jimmy's first kiss with Melena tanked hard** and ended where they least expected. One expensive diagnosis later, a

marriage of convenience doesn't sound so bad. Melena gets his insurance. Jimmy gets someone to come home to. The pledge: one year, drama-free. Fated to fail or fated to fall?

### **Jimmy Torres**

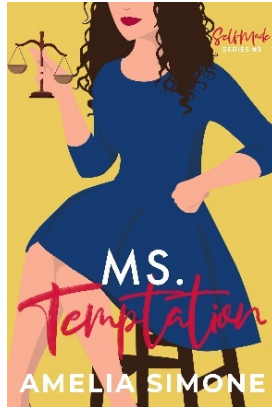
My life as a firefighter revolves around serving and protecting.

The last thing I wanted was to be the kiss of death. When Melena collapsed at my feet, I knew I'd do everything in my power to help the woman who'd already stolen a piece of my heart. Our marriage was a match made for mutual convenience, but my feelings were anything but. Did Melena share my malady? Or was I the only one suffering from a different kind of heart ailment?

### **Melena Nemitz**

Jimmy was amazing when I needed him most. His insurance was life-saving in more ways than one. My faulty heart may recover medically, but something tells me Jimmy's impact is long-term. He's been so kind, but does it mask something more, or am I alone in thinking this marriage deserves a real shot?

Humor and all the feels abound in this modern marriage of convenience romance. *Mister Marriage* is book 2 of the Self-Made Series and can be read as a stand-alone or after *Mister Romance*.



**Competitive to a fault, who will surrender to temptation first?**

**One-click [Ms. Temptation](#) now!**

- ✓ Competitors to Lovers
- ✓ Flirty Banter
- ✓ Found Family

### **Andi Torres**

Andi Torres is B-U-R-N-E-D out. Getting called for jury duty seems like a vacation after being passed over for a promotion she desperately wanted. The outspoken boss babe wasn't expecting Ty Sheldon to wade into her jury pool, but the sexy 911 dispatcher has his own reasons for not being excused from service.

### **Ty Sheldon**

Ty should be too self-disciplined to have impure thoughts about his friend's sister. Pursuing Andi ought to be a no-go. Ty tried his best to ignore the attraction sizzling behind their trivia rivalry, but when their jury is sequestered during a high-profile case, will his good intentions yield to the temptation of her undeniable appeal? Or will he and Andi be able to keep their relationship strictly business?

Come for the competition and stay for the kissing in this trivia rivals to lovers, jury duty romance. *Ms. Temptation* is book 3 of the Self-Made Series and can be read as a stand-alone or after *Mister Romance* and *Mister Marriage*.

# READ MORE AMELIA!

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Grumpy & Sunshine / Fake Relationship / Excelling @ Love Book 4

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