



EXTRA  
DIRTY

A MAN  
OBSESSED

KATE HUNT

# EXTRA DIRTY

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A MAN OBSESSED

BOOK 4

KATE HUNT

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## WARNER

The first time I see her, she already has a strike against her.

I'm in my back yard, tearing the dead plants out of my raised beds, the cool fall air feeling good on my hot skin. It's not difficult work, but I've got a hell of a lot of plants and raised beds. The sheer magnitude of my garden is what's gotten me all sweated up.

Ok. Fine. At forty, this shit is more tiring than it used to be. But I'm no old man. I'm still fit. Still virile.

Anyway. Point is: I'm tearing up the plants, clearing out the beds, thinking about what changes I want to make to my garden over the winter in preparation for next spring—in other words, I'm doing what I live to do, feeling content and in my element—when, out of nowhere, a dog starts yapping at me from the other side of the fence.

My jaw goes tense, my grip chokes the stem of the tomato plant I'm about to wrench out of the ground, and I mutter under my breath, “Of course there's a fucking dog.”

At this point, I still don't know who my new neighbor is. They moved in a few days earlier while I was at work. I've seen the marshmallow-white hatchback parked out front and the lights on in the house, but no other indications about who the new tenant, or tenants, might be. The previous folks who lived there were a polite married couple in their thirties who kept to themselves—in other words, ideal neighbors. I was disappointed to see them go.

I knew the chances of another quiet couple moving in probably weren't great. But it didn't even cross my mind that the new renter might have a dog, let alone a fucking yappy one.

I don't hate all dogs. The well-behaved ones? The lazy ones that snooze on the floor all day? Those type aren't bad. I just have a problem with the ones that can't shut up, or tear shit apart, or find another way to be a dick. It always seems like the more annoying the dog, the more its owner dotes over it and babies it and begs for kisses from it.

Never in my life will I let a dog lick my face. That's fucking disgusting.

I look up and am confronted by the face of a small, scruffy white-and-brown dog peering at me through the gaps between the pickets of the fence. I've always hated those gaps. For years I've been toying with the idea of tearing down the fence and building a new one with wide planks butted up right up next to each other.

That project will quickly be moved up the priority list if this nosy-ass mutt is going to be getting up in my business all the time.

"Get out of here," I mutter to the dog, waving a dismissive hand toward its tiny face.

In response, it throws its muzzle up into the air and lets out another piercing bark.

It's clear the little monster is going to do whatever it wants. So I ignore it. I go back to my work, pulling out the rest of the tomato plants and tossing them into the wheelbarrow beside me. I pretend like that stupid little dog isn't there, even though he keeps yapping at me, moving down the fence line as I move on to clearing out another raised bed. My blood is coming to a boil and my patience is wearing thin, but I keep going, because I'm not going to be the one to give in.

I'm nearing the point of losing my cool when I hear the screen door swing open on the neighbor's side and a pair of footsteps walk out onto the back patio.

“Ernie!” a woman’s voice calls. “You goofball. Come here!”

If I wasn’t so irritated, I’d probably have a different reaction to the sound of her voice. Because it’s a pretty voice, soft and sweet, almost angelic. But in my current state, none of that registers. All I hear is an obtuse-sounding woman calling for her dog, completely unaware of the nuisance he’s being.

“Sweetie, come on,” she calls again, then makes several loud kissing noises into the air. “I’ve got a treat for you. It’s your *favorite*.”

The dog’s pointed ears perk up at the word *treat*, and when the woman singsongs the last word, the dog spins around and books it across the lawn to the house. Thank fuck. At last, I’ve got my peace and quiet back.

I reach for a spent jalapeño plant, glad to get back into my work. But just as I’m about to tear it out of the soil, I find myself glancing up to peer through the gaps in the fence again.

My new neighbor is standing on her patio, holding open the screen door for her dog, smiling at the mutt like it’s the most perfect thing she’s ever seen. Meanwhile, *she’s* the most perfect thing I’ve ever seen. And it’s not just her excruciatingly pretty face. It’s also her platinum blonde hair that’s pulled up in a messy ponytail, her big hips that are filling out her sweats, and the rest of her curvy figure that’s hiding underneath the old Ramones t-shirt she’s got on.

My cock instantly comes alive at the sight of her.

But I still don’t want a single thing to do with her.

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The second time I see her, she’s carrying in bags of groceries from her car, one bulging paper bag in each arm. It’s been a week since she moved in, and her dog has still been a yappy little fuck. I’ve been reading up on fence building, sketching out plans, calculating how much lumber I’ll need.

I’m sitting in my study, going over the numbers again, when I see her out there bringing in the groceries from her car.



I only notice her because of the bright pink sweater she has on. It's practically neon, that thing, and as concentrated as I am on the legal pad sitting in front of me, I can't stop my gaze from leaving the page and tracking over to the window in front of my desk.

My study is on the second story of my house, and from this high up, I have a clear vantage point of the property next door. Nothing obstructs my view of my new neighbor as she hauls the overstuffed paper bags from her car up the walkway to the front door of the house. I can even see into the bags from where I'm sitting—or see the top layer of groceries, anyway.

Chips, deli meat, cheese, soda...

Why the fuck do I care what she bought at the grocery store?

I don't. That's the answer. I don't.

And yet I keep watching her. I watch the way the grocery bags push up against her full tits, and how the fabric of her pink sweater clings to her belly. I watch the way her thick thighs rub together as she walks. Those big hips of hers looked damn good in sweats, but in the jeans she's got on today, they're unreal. I can only imagine how sublime it would feel to push 'em open and settle in between them, driving into the heat of her wet—

Jesus. I'm such a dirty-minded prick, looking at her like that.

I lean against the hard back of my chair, removing her from my view, and stare up at the ceiling while I wait for my cock to calm down. That's a big ask right now. But what else am I supposed to do? Pull it out and jerk off, thinking about that pink sweater pushed up over her tits?

I keep staring at the ceiling. Keep focusing on the hairline crack running across the room. Keep pushing those dirty, filthy thoughts of her out of my head.

The front door of her house claps shut, and I figure that's the last of her I'll see for the time being. But when I lean forward and pick up my pen, she comes out of the house again. My fingers tighten around the shaft of the pen as I watch her walk back to her car, and go tighter still as she leans over to grab

something out of the back seat, pushing out her peachy ass like she's putting it on display just for me.

"Christ, woman," I snarl.

Like that, all the effort I put into ridding myself of a hard-on is undone. All the dirty thoughts have come flooding back. All I can think about is what it would be like to spread those peachy cheeks and push my tongue into her pussy, taste her juices, get the smell of her all over my face—

My thoughts cut short. She's pulled two cases of beer out of the back seat of her car, and a realization has just hit me.

She's having a party at her house tonight.

All my dirty thoughts vanish, instantly replaced by irritation. The cars, the loud music, the drunken idiots...I don't want to deal with that shit. Not on any night, but especially not on a night when I have to get up early the next morning for a twenty-four-hour shift.

A hard-on has never disappeared faster.

---

Six hours later, it's playing out exactly as I figured it would. The street is full of cars, her house is blaring some kind of godawful music, and there are more drunken idiots than I can count.

Meanwhile, I'm in bed, earplugs jammed into my ears.

I don't know what time I end up falling asleep. Two a.m.? Three? Maybe four in the fucking morning? Whatever time it is, I feel like death when my phone alarm jerks me awake. I slam my palm on the screen to shut it up and stumble into the bathroom to take a shower.

No amount of hot water can wash away the hostility I feel.

When I step out of the shower, I wipe the steam off my bathroom mirror and see that I look as shitty as I feel. I swear I even have more gray hairs on my head and in my beard than I

did yesterday. At this rate, I'll be full-on silver by the time that woman moves out.

The thought of a whole year of this, or *multiple* years of this, is not something I can deal with right now.

I finish getting ready, go downstairs and make myself a thermos of coffee and a plate of greasy eggs, then head out the door. It's sunny this morning, so bright I have to shield my face from the light, and I don't notice the damage at first. I just head straight to my truck, get in, and take a long draw from my thermos as the engine is warming up. Then I drop the thermos into the cup holder in the console and back out of the driveway.

Only when I turn my attention forward again do I see that the corner of my lawn is ripped to shreds.

For a minute, I just sit there, staring at the torn-up grass, the tire marks, the crushed empty beer cans lying on their sides. It's too much. I'm not even precious about my lawn, but it's too much.

I'm not driving to work with this much fury raging in my blood.

I punch the gas and hurtle the truck back into the driveway, then throw open the door. I'm out of my truck and over at the house next door in a handful of strides. With my hand curled into a meaty fist, I strike the side of it against the wood, pounding hard enough that the door shakes in its frame.

I'm not surprised when she doesn't answer.

It's early. She's gotta be asleep. No doubt she'll be hungover, too. But I don't give a shit. She threw a party, she can deal with the outcome. I pound on the door again, louder this time.

From the other side of the door, her dog starts barking.

I check the time on my phone. Blow out an impatient sigh. I don't have the luxury of waiting much longer for her to answer the goddamn door. I need to get to work. I have shit to do that's actually important, unlike this profound waste of time.

I raise my fist one last time and am about to start pounding again when the door cracks open. Her face appears in the gap, looking puffy and annoyed.

“Do you know what time it is?” she asks, her voice hoarse.

She’s kidding, right? She has a party at her house until the crack of dawn and she’s trying to scold *me* about the time?

I point to the fucked-up corner of my front yard. “Your guests from last night did that.”

She blinks against the sunlight, shields her eyes, and squints at my property.

“Shit,” she mutters. “I’m so sorry. I take full responsibility.”

It catches me off guard that she says that. Based on her behavior so far, I’d expected her to play dumb or deny it. But here she is, actually looking like she feels bad about it, chewing on her bottom lip in a way that’s making me notice just how plump and pink those lips of hers are, despite it being the worst fucking timing to notice such a thing.

“I’m really sorry about the noise last night, too,” she goes on. “I’m so embarrassed about how out of hand the party got. I know you must have—*Ernie! No!*”

A blur of fur shoots out from the crack in the door, and her dog takes off at full speed out of the house. She flings open the door and runs after him, barely avoiding crashing into me on the front step.

Jesus. She’s wearing a long t-shirt and nothing else. My eyes cling to her bare curvy legs, my gaze running up her calves, up her thighs, to the swaying hem of her long shirt.

“Got you!” she cries, scooping up the escaped dog into her arms. Clutching Ernie, she rushes back to the house, looking flustered. Her full cheeks are pink, flushed in a way that makes my cock twitch with betrayal. And her eyes...electric blue, you might call them. Never seen eyes so goddamn blue.

“I’ll write you a check for the damage to your yard,” she says in a hurry. “And help you fix it, of course.”

No way in hell do I want this woman attempting to fix my lawn. I don't even want her to write me a check. I don't need her money. All I wanted was for her to understand that her poor choices had consequences.

"It's fine," I say roughly. "Forget about it."

She looks confused. "But—"

"I need to get to work." I turn and head back to my truck.

I'm about to open the driver's side door when she calls out to me. "I'm Melody, by the way!"

I grudgingly call back my own name, get in the truck, and drive away.

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## MELODY

The embarrassment is almost unbearable.

I let my head fall back against the closed door behind me and exhale a long, dismal sigh. I haven't even lived in this rental house for a week and I've already screwed up. It's bad enough that my friends trashed my place last night, but to damage my neighbor's lawn like that?

It's not just embarrassing. It's mortifying. I really need to do something to make it up to him.

I never intended for the party to get as big as it did, or as wild. I just wanted to throw a little housewarming party, one that wouldn't disturb the neighbors or end with anyone throwing up in my front yard. I should have known better, with the kind of friends I have. They always take things too far. I loved how spontaneous and fun they were when we first became friends, but it's been a few years, and I'm ready for a more settled, tranquil life.

I feel Ernie's damp nose nudge my chin, and then he gives my face a few tentative, consoling licks. Despite how awful I feel right now, the gesture makes me smile.

"Thanks, Ern," I say, giving the top of his furry head a kiss before setting him down. He trots off toward his dog bed, which he turns around in three times before curling up in a circle and closing his eyes.

I wish I could go back to bed right now, too. I'm not hungover—I barely had anything to drink last night, because I was too busy trying and failing to keep things under control—but I *am*

drained. I don't mind getting up early, but this is way earlier than I normally get up.

I should clean up the mess from last night. If word somehow gets back to my landlord that there was a rager at his house last night, I don't want him showing up and seeing the ruinous outcome.

Besides, I can't stand the sight of it, either.

With a yawn, I pad into the kitchen and start a pot of coffee, then go around to open up all the windows to air out the house. Then I grab all the cleaning supplies I own and get to work. I fill up trash bags, sweep the floors, scrub scuffs off the walls. I go through several rolls of paper towels, and have to scrub one carpet stain for so long that I almost break down in tears, but eventually, it all gets done.

My stomach is rumbling by the time I finish, and Ernie is awake again and impatiently waiting by his food dish for breakfast. I feed him first, then make myself some scrambled eggs and toast, a meal that feels extra replenishing this morning.

As I lean against my kitchen counter and chew a bite of toast, I start to feel okay again—and then I remember my new neighbor's torn-up lawn.

I don't know much about lawn care, but I do know that you can't fix that kind of thing in one day. I hate that I made such a bad first impression on my new neighbor. He probably thinks I'm a reckless twenty-something with nothing better to do than throw parties. He probably thinks I'm a dumb blonde, too.

I've always wished my hair was a different color. People think I bleach it, but this is just the way it is. The few times I've tried to dye it, it always ends up looking like crap. If only I was a brunette. (A thin brunette, if I'm fantasizing.)

And if only I didn't have such irresponsible friends.

Here's the thing about my friends, though: as much as they frustrate me sometimes, when it comes down to it, they have good hearts. Case in point: right now, texts from them are starting to pop up on my phone, full of apologies and memes

expressing how bad they feel about the mess they left behind. I'm still annoyed with them, but the apologies help.

*We love you, Mel! We'll come over and help you clean!*

I text them back and tell them I already took care of it, that I'm never hosting a party again, and that I love them too. Then I set my phone aside and grab my favorite cookbook from the stack sitting on the end of the kitchen counter. It falls open to the exact recipe I have in mind.

Fifteen minutes later, I have a batch of chocolate chip cookie dough mixed up. The oven has just finished preheating, too. These cookies are the first thing I've baked since moving in, and it feels fitting; they're my favorite thing to make. *And* my favorite thing to eat. These cookies are a major reason why my hips are as big as they are. These cookies are impossible to resist, especially when they're still warm from the oven.

This batch, however, will not be going into my mouth. I'm making these for Warner. They're apology cookies, if you will. They won't fix his lawn, but I'm hoping they'll at least counteract a little bit of the bad impression I've made on him.

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That evening, I listen for the sound of Warner's truck pulling into his driveway, but it doesn't come. I don't know his work schedule, or what he even does for work, so it's not like I know what time to expect him back. Still, as the hours pass and it gets later and later, I start to feel a little restless, wondering where he is.

And then a possibility hits me: maybe he has a girlfriend, and he's spending the night at her place tonight. It *is* Saturday night, after all. I don't know anything about his life, but that certainly seems like a plausible scenario.

Weirdly, I actually feel a twinge of jealousy at the thought of Warner being with a woman right now. Which doesn't make *any* sense. I know absolutely nothing about the man. The way I feel right now must be more of a general reaction to the fact that other people in this world are in relationships, are getting



laid, are experiencing love. Because I want those things, too. I want to love, and be loved, more than anything else.

That's the only way to explain the unjustified jealousy I feel.

Tired of waiting for Warner to come home, I make a big bowl of microwave popcorn for myself and put on a movie. Ernie immediately hops up onto my lap, and he stays there until the movie's end credits roll. I go to bed after that, resisting the urge to peer out the window one last time to see if Warner's truck is back yet.

Even if it is, it's way too late to go over there and knock on his door.

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The next morning, his truck is back. My heart does a funny little hiccup when I see it parked out in front of his house. I wait until after breakfast, then grab the plate of cookies that I wrapped up yesterday in plastic wrap and ribbon and walk it over.

The front door of Warner's house is black. A *deep* black. When I knock, he answers the door in a gray t-shirt and sweats, filling the frame of the door, towering over me. Was he *always* this big and burly? Yesterday, when our positions were reversed and I was the one answering the door, I don't think I realized how much of a...*man*...he is. Then again, I answered the door half-asleep, and not exactly in the most observant of states.

Now, however, I'm very aware of him. I'm very aware of how tall, and built, and imposing he is. I'm also very aware of the woodsy smell of the body wash wafting off him and the gruffness of his bearded jaw and the brutal dark green of his eyes.

He does not look pleased to see me.

"These are for you," I say, holding out the plate of cookies. I offer him a smile, too, which he doesn't return.

He does take the cookies, though. And then says, “All right. Uh, thanks.”

I pull my checkbook out of my back pocket and give it a little shake in front of him. “Now, can I *please* pay you for the damages to your yard?”

He frowns. “I told you to forget about it. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fine.”

“I said it’s fine, so it’s fine.” He stares down at me, looking freshly annoyed. “I’ll throw some new grass seed down, call it good. Is there anything else?”

Well, crap. I guess getting on good terms with this guy is going to be a lot tougher than I thought.

“No,” I say with a sigh. “There’s nothing else.”

An awkward moment of silence follows, and then I say something about needing to get back home and leave before I unintentionally make things worse. I hear his door slam shut behind me before I even make it more than a few steps down his walkway.

Discouraged and a little bewildered, I head back to my own place.

On the way, I notice my neighbor on the other side—Ginger, an elderly woman I met the day I moved in. She’s out in her front yard watering her roses, and she waves when she sees me.

“Hi dear,” she calls out.

“Good morning,” I call back. As I walk toward her, a new wave of guilt rises in me. “I’ve been meaning to stop by to see you, Ginger. I wanted to apologize for the noise Friday night. I had some friends over for a housewarming party, and it got out of hand.”

“Oh, don’t worry yourself about it,” she says, chuckling a little. “I know what it’s like to be young.”

I appreciate the kindness, but I also think she’s being too generous. “Well, I’m really sorry if it kept you and Don up at

all.” Don is her husband, and just as friendly as she is. I peer nervously into their yard. “My friends didn’t cause any damage to your property, did they?”

“Damage?” she says. “No. Not that I’m aware of.”

“If you do notice anything, please let me know.”

She smiles and nods. Then she says, “I know it’s nosy of me, but I saw you going over to Warner’s house just now. Has he been giving you trouble?”

“No,” I say. “If anything, I’m giving *him* trouble.” I gesture toward the shredded-up patch of his front lawn. “That happened the night of the party.”

“Ah. I see.”

Hmm. Maybe Ginger would know how to get on Warner’s good side. “Do you know him well?”

“Warner?” she says, and shakes her head. “No. In fact, despite living two doors down from him for quite some time now, I know next to nothing about the man. Any time I’ve tried to strike up a conversation, it’s like talking to a brick wall. Some people just aren’t interested in getting to know others, I suppose.”

That makes me feel slightly better about the way he reacted to me just now. It’s also got my curiosity piqued. Is there *anyone* he’s not cold toward?

“Do you know if he has a girlfriend?” I ask, thinking again about his truck being gone last night.

“A girlfriend? I haven’t a clue. Why do you ask, hon?”

I shrug. “Just curious.”

“I see,” she says, her voice full of amusement.

Clearly, she thinks I have a crush on the man.

“That’s not why I asked,” I say.

“He *is* a handsome man,” Ginger points out. “If I was younger...and single...”

“That’s not why I asked,” I say again, the back of my neck going warm. “I was just curious what his girlfriend is like, if he does have one.”

“Well, as far as I know, she doesn’t exist,” Ginger says, still amused. “It would do some good for him to have someone special in his life, though, if you ask me.”

---

I’m still thinking about what Ginger said as the day goes on. Not in the romantic way she meant it, but more in the sense that maybe Warner just needs a friend. And that maybe I could be that friend for him.

Is that such an outlandish idea?

Based on my interactions with him so far, the answer is yes. But the glass-half-full part of me thinks that maybe, somehow, it could actually work out.

The problem is, I don’t know how to go about trying to become Warner’s friend. The only thing I have working in my favor right now is the fact that he lives right next door, so we’re bound to run into each other now and then. Maybe the next time he’s leaving his house, I can act like I’m heading out at the same moment, and then...

And then what?

Once again, I’m stuck.

Feeling thwarted, I rest my chin on my palms and gaze out the window in the direction of Warner’s house. He’s got curtains pulled closed on all the windows that are facing me, so I can’t even get a glimpse into the interior of his home.

I can see a little bit into his back yard, though. Not much, because there’s a fence obscuring the view, but I can see that most of the space is filled with raised garden beds instead of grass. I wonder if it was that way when he moved in or if it’s something he did himself. He doesn’t strike me as a gardener.

I've always loved the idea of having a garden. I've never lived in a place that had one. Growing up, we had a small back yard that my dad used for barbecuing and my mom used for suntanning, and in the years since, I've lived in apartments. My last apartment had a small balcony, but it didn't get very good sun exposure, and half the time my roommates were out there smoking pot anyway.

The house I'm renting now is the first place I've lived where I actually have outdoor space of my own. My landlord told me I'm welcome to plant things if I feel inclined. Both the front and back yards are currently pretty minimal, landscaped with a few ordinary-looking shrubs here and there. I'm not sure if there are even any flowering plants. It would be nice to add some, or to even put in a little vegetable garden in the spring.

Would Warner be willing to give me advice about it? Who knows. But it's worth a shot. It's not like I've come up with any other ideas about how to make a connection with him.

Just then, I notice some movement over in his yard. Warner just walked out of the back of his house. Perfect. I'm taking that as a sign. Throwing on some shoes, I go out the back of my house, letting Ernie out at the same time.

While Ernie runs off to find a place to pee, I head for the fence between my yard and Warner's. It's too tall of a fence for me to see over, but there's a small pile of loose pavers sitting nearby, so I stack some of them in front of the fence and step up onto them.

With the pavers beneath my feet, I can just barely see over the top of the fence. I have a much better view of Warner's yard now, and damn, is it ever nice. There's no grass at all, but there are different types of bushes and small trees planted along the border, and the rest of the space is filled with raised beds. Between the beds, the ground is covered in a thick layer of gravel, along with some pathways made from large flat stones. Many of the raised beds just have soil in them, no plants, but a few over on the far side of his yard have what I'm assuming are the last of his fall vegetables.

Warner is crouched by one of those garden beds, his back turned toward me. I watch him for a few seconds, curious to see him work. His shoulders are more relaxed than the last time I saw him. And though I can't see his face, I imagine that his expression is more relaxed, too. It's suddenly obvious to me that this is his happy place.

Maybe I'm staring at him too hard, because he suddenly stops what he's doing and looks over his shoulder right in my direction.

I startle, the pavers beneath me suddenly unsteady. Then I quickly regain my composure and smile over the fence at him, hoping I don't look like a creepy peeper.

"Hi Warner," I say. "Do you have a sec?"

I can hear him sigh from all the way over here.

"For what?" he asks.

"I was wondering if I could get your advice about what type of plants I should get for my back yard."

"There's a garden center in town. You can ask someone there."

I smile. "They can't come and look at the yard I'm working with."

"Bring photos, then."

Sheesh, he's difficult. "That's a good idea. I'd still love to get your opinion, though. I love how you've designed your yard. It's gorgeous."

The compliment seems to work. Or at least it's enough to get him to stand up and slowly walk over. His expression is still serious and unsmiling, but the fact that he's coming over to me feels like a small victory. Maybe he's only indulging me to get rid of me faster, but I don't care.

At over six feet tall, Warner can easily see over the fence and into my yard. He takes a moment to silently survey the property, then shrugs. "You could put in anything you want."

"But what do you think would look nice?"

“Doesn’t matter what I think. You’re the one who’s gonna be looking at it.” He gives me a stern look. “You sure your landlord’s okay with you planting stuff?”

I bristle a little at his patronizing tone.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I say. “Do you want me to call him up so you can hear his consent for yourself?”

He stares at me, unamused. “Did he also give his consent for that party you threw the other night?”

Ouch. “It wasn’t my intention for the party to get so out of hand. I wasn’t happy about it, either.”

Warner looks like he doesn’t believe me.

“I’m serious,” I say. “I didn’t even enjoy myself that night. I was so stressed out the whole time.”

He looks at me a second longer, makes a wordless noise in his throat, then turns his gaze back to my yard. “The most important thing you want to be mindful of is the amount of sun the different areas of the yard get. Some plants need full sun, while others thrive in partial or full shade. A plant’s tag will tell you what kind of sun it needs.”

I nod. “Okay. Noted.”

“You also need to take into account how big the plant is going to get, because that’ll dictate how much room you need to leave around it. You don’t want to overcrowd plants. They won’t be happy like that.”

It amuses me, him talking about happiness, when he’s easily the least joyful person I’ve ever met. But I resist the urge to laugh and just nod again. “Gotcha.”

“Other than that, just plant what you want to plant. Like I said, you’re the one looking at it.”

Clearly done with our conversation, he turns to go back to the work that I pulled him away from. I chew on my lip, wishing he wouldn’t leave yet, that he would talk to me more—about plants, about *anything*.

“Hey, Warner?” I call out.

He makes another one of those guttural sounds in response without turning around.

“Did you try the cookies yet?” I ask.

He crouches in front of the raised bed he was working at before.

“Yep,” he answers, still not looking at me. “Not bad.”

I break into a smile, then hop off the pavers, scoop up Ernie into my arms, and head back inside.

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“How was your weekend, Mel?”

My coworker, Taylor, perches herself on the edge of my desk as she asks the question. The way she says it, I can tell that what she really wants is for someone to ask how *her* weekend was. I don't mind. Taylor is a little self-centered, but she's sweet. She's also a gossip, though, so I'm not about to tell her about my disaster of a housewarming party—or my new Befriend Thy Grumpy Neighbor project.

“It was fine,” I say. I finish copying the file I was working on over to the server and give Taylor a quick smile. “How was yours?”

“Tiring,” she says, and sighs loudly to emphasize the point. “Wedding planning is exhausting. There's so many details! So many decisions to make! Well, someday, you'll see what I mean.”

“Has your wedding dress come in yet?” I ask.

“Yes! It did. Oh, it's *gorgeous*, Mel. It needs a lot of alterations, of course, but that will all be taken care of.” She looks down at her skirt and fiddles with the fabric. “I hope it's not a problem if I lose more weight than I was anticipating before the wedding.”

“I'm sure they'll be able to make last-minute alterations if that happens,” I say. Melody is already on the slender side, and she'll look beautiful no matter what. The last time she brought



up the fact that she's been working out like crazy in preparation for her wedding, I told her she looked great, but she ignored the compliment and just kept talking about her workout schedule.

"I hope you're right," Taylor says, and sighs again. She squints at the clock on my computer screen. "Shit. We have that meeting in two minutes and I haven't uploaded my files."

While Taylor books it back to her desk, I gather everything I need and head down the hallway to our office's main conference room. I'm the first one there, so I grab a seat and pull up my files on the large display mounted on the wall so they're ready to go when it's time to review them.

I've been a packaging designer at Candor for over six years now. They hired me as a junior designer straight out of school, and I've worked my way up to be one of a small handful of lead designers for the firm. Candor is a relatively small firm, but it has a reputation for its professionalism and its excellent work, and because of that, I've gotten to work with a lot of major clients over the years.

Do I like my job? Yes. Am I *passionate* about it? If I'm being honest, no. I'm proud of the work I've done, but at the end of the day, I'm not saving lives.

Two project managers walk into the conference room together, talking about some other project, and take seats across the table from me. A minute later, Taylor rushes in, a fresh cup of coffee in hand and a notepad tucked under her other arm. She drops into the chair next to me and steals the computer mouse so she can pull up her files too.

"Oh, damn it," she mutters. "Did I save the wrong version to the server?"

"Don't worry about it, Taylor," one of the project managers says. "These look great. We can still get a clear feel for your concept."

It won't be anything new if Taylor's design concept is chosen over mine. Sometimes I agree with everyone's preference—Taylor *is* a talented designer, no doubt about it—but

sometimes it feels like her concept gets chosen over mine because she's really good at talking up her own designs and just has this *way* of charming people. I don't know. Maybe I'm just not as good of a designer as her.

"Hey, folks," says our director, stepping into the room and sliding the conference room door shut behind him. "I'm on a tight schedule today, so let's get started."

The meeting goes about how I expect. Taylor and I each present our design concepts, explaining why we made the decisions that we did, and then the project managers voice their thoughts about what they like about each option, ending with our director making the final call and picking Taylor's concept. I'm a little disappointed, of course, but it is what it is.

"You know, yours was great too, Mel," Taylor says as we walk back to our desks.

"Thanks," I say. I appreciate the compliment, even if she's just saying it to be polite. "Want to talk about how we're going to tackle the wireframes for the client?"

"Sure. But first—" she says, steering me toward her desk, "I *need* to show you some candle holders I'm thinking of getting for the wedding."

Taylor got engaged to her boyfriend, Josh, seven months ago. I didn't expect to be invited to the wedding since we don't socialize outside of work, but one day I showed up to work and there were cream-colored envelopes sitting on everyone's keyboards with our names in handwritten calligraphy on the front.

That same day, I walked my RSVP card over to Taylor's desk, with the *accepts with pleasure* box checked. Taylor looked happy to see my response on the RSVP card, but then she looked at me questioningly and said, "No plus one?"

I told her no, and she shook her head at me as if I was doing life wrong, then told me to let her know ASAP if I found someone to bring.

Nothing has changed about my lack of plus one since that day.

Even though I have a bunch of emails in my inbox that I need to take care of, I let Taylor pull me over to her desk and show me the candle holders she's swooning over. They're pretty, very elegant and weddingy, and I tell her I think they would look lovely with the rest of her decor.

"You think so?" she says, twisting her lips.

I nod.

"Okay. I'll keep thinking about it. Thanks, Mel." She smiles up at me, then raises an eyebrow. "You still coming to the wedding solo?"

"Yep," I say. "Still coming solo."

"Great," she says, her eyes lighting up. "Because I have this cousin, and I'd love to introduce you to him. I think you two would really hit it off."

"Oh...I don't know, Taylor. I don't really..."

"He's so great, Melody. He doesn't have any baggage, and he's successful, and really tall—"

I can't help but laugh.

"What?" she asks.

"Sorry. It's just...that's really why you think we'd hit it off? Because he's successful and tall?"

"No," she says, sounding affronted. "I just want you to know what he's like."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm not really itching to be set up."

"Why not?"

Taylor's question is one I'm not sure how to answer. I don't even completely know the reason myself. Because it's uncomfortable? Because I know it will feel forced? Because despite how much I want to experience love, it scares me too, because it's such unfamiliar territory?

"Okay, fine," says Taylor, saving me from having to explain myself. "I get it. It's a lot to be set up with someone at a wedding."

I breathe out in relief. But I do it too soon.

“You wouldn’t say no to just a regular date, though, would you?” Taylor presses. “Come on. One date is harmless.”

I don’t really want to say yes, because it still feels like a forced situation, but Taylor is right—one date is harmless. And who knows? Maybe I’ll hit it off with her cousin. I’m willing to give anyone a chance. I still don’t love that it’s a set-up situation, but...

“Here,” says Taylor, holding up her phone to show me a photo of her cousin. “This is him.”

The photo is of the two of them with their arms slung around each other, taken at what seems to be a family gathering. Although I don’t get butterflies or anything looking at Taylor’s cousin, he’s not *unattractive*, and he does have an open, friendly face that makes me feel a little more at ease with the idea of going out on a date with him.

“So?” says Taylor, sounding impatient. “Can I give him your number?”

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## WARNER

It's not like I'm keeping an eye on her. I don't sit here all day watching her house. I just happen to be in my living room, looking out the front window, when I see some guy park in front of Melody's place and walk up to her front door.

He looks around her age, in his twenties. He's tall and dressed in a button-up shirt and dark pants. There's no swagger in the way he walks, nothing about him I should find offensive, and yet I inexplicably feel my hackles rise at the sight of him.

He's here to pick up Melody for a date.

For all I know, this dude is her boyfriend. They could be years into a relationship. Hell, they could be engaged. But she doesn't wear a ring, does she?

I don't care what her relationship status is. I'm just saying.

I watch as he goes up to her door and knocks. She comes out wearing a smile and a dress that looks like a long sweater, a cropped leather jacket, and dark brown boots. She doesn't greet him with a kiss or a hug, just a smile, so I'm guessing he isn't her boyfriend after all. Just a date.

Maybe a first date, because even from here, she seems a little nervous, the way she's tightly clutching the bag she's carrying.

They walk to his car. I shake my head, watching him go straight to the driver's side. It's been longer than I care to admit since I've gone on a date, but it pains me to see him fuck up something so simple. Come on, man. You can't even open her door for her?

Whatever. I yank the curtain closed and go back to my own life.

---

Three hours later, she's still not back. I don't know why I care. Her life has nothing to do with mine. I'm not her guardian, not her father. I lack the right to be even the slightest bit protective of her.

But here I am. Sitting at my dining table, a dirty dinner plate in front of me, my thumb rubbing the lip of a diminishing glass of whiskey, waiting to hear the sound of a car pulling up in front of her house. Every time an engine purrs in the distance, my ears perk up, but the vehicle always goes down our street without stopping, carrying someone who isn't her.

Then one finally does stop. Outside, the car parks, and I hear two car doors open and close. I'm listening with such focus that I can hear their footsteps treading up her walkway together. They go all the way up to her door, then stop. There's nothing audible for a brief time, then her front door opens and closes.

Did he go inside?

No. I can hear his footsteps retreating. Then his car door opens, and the engine comes to life again, before it fades as he drives away.

Feeling settled, I down the last drop of whiskey from my glass.

---

The next time I see her, it's the weekend again. She's out in her yard digging holes for the new plants she bought. Through the gaps in the fence, I can see all the plants sitting in their black nursery pots. Guess she was serious about sprucing up the landscaping. I thought she'd just pick up a couple things, but she went all out.

Well, good for her. It's nice to see someone young show interest in gardening. But that doesn't mean I'm going to strike up a conversation with her about it. I've got my own project underway. Some of my raised beds need rebuilding, and I want to get it done while the weather's still decent. A month from now, we could be getting snow, and I'm not going to be out here trying to build the boxes in that.

I've got all the supplies I need. I've got my saw set up and my tools nearby. I just need to get going and get this work done.

It's not a tricky endeavor, building a raised bed. Four sides, two different lengths of wood: it doesn't exactly require a bunch of engineering or hyperfocused concentration. And yet as I start to work, I keep finding myself getting distracted from the task at hand.

Because, goddamn it, I can hear her grunting next door.

Look, I get it. Digging into compacted soil, which is what I'm assuming is the issue, can be hard work. I doubt it's something she's done before. But does she have to grunt like that? It almost sounds...I don't know. Sexual. I don't need to hear this shit.

I'm already having a hard enough time keeping my dirty fantasies of her at bay. The last thing I need is the sound of her grunting seared into my memory.

I throw my measuring tape down and stalk over to my garden shed. A few seconds later, I've got the tool I want in hand and am carrying it over to the fence line.

"Use this," I say, holding the hand tiller over the top of the fence.

Melody looks over at me from the far side of her yard. Her cheeks are flushed from physical exertion, her blonde hair piled up in an unkempt bun on the top of her head. She has one foot on the step of a shovel, her hands gripping the handle.

Blowing a strand of hair out of her face, she leans the shovel against the fence and comes over to take the hand tiller from me.

"Step on it and twist," I say. "It'll break up the soil."

She breaks into a grin. “Awesome. Thanks, Warner.”

“Yep.”

We part ways, and I’m relieved to hear not a single grunt out of her in the half hour that follows. Instead, there’s an initial exclamation when she first starts using the tool—“Oh, god, this is *so* much better!”—and then the quiet, soft sound of soil being worked. At last, I’m able to fully concentrate on the pieces of lumber I’m cutting to length.

That is, until her damn dog starts barking at me again.

Three barks in, my blood pressure is already rocketing. I’m about to go over to the fence and tell Melody to put that damn animal in the house when she beats me to the punch.

“Sheesh, Ernie,” she says, coming over to the fence to scoop him up. “Leave Warner alone. He doesn’t want to be barked at.”

I watch through the gaps as she carries him into her house. When she comes back out, she calls, “Sorry about that! I don’t know what his deal is. He usually never barks at anyone.”

“Lucky me,” I say.

I’m not trying to be funny, but she laughs, the fence between us doing nothing to dull the sound.

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A few hours later, I’m in the middle of shoveling soil back into one of the raised beds I just finished putting together when I see Melody peering over the fence at me, waving to get my attention.

“Hey again, sorry to interrupt,” she says. “I was just wondering, you don’t happen to have a flower bulb planter, do you?”

I’ve never been a tulip or daffodil kind of guy. Just not my thing. But as soon as she asks, I remember that I do have one somewhere in my shed. I think I came into possession of it when I bought a boxful of tools at an estate sale years ago.



“One sec,” I say, and spear my shovel into the mountain of soil in front of me. I disappear into my garden shed and come out a minute later with the tool in hand. As I hand it to her over the fence, I ask, “You know how to use it?”

“Seems pretty straightforward,” she says. “Thanks so much. You’re a lifesaver, Warner.”

I don’t mind letting her borrow my tools. But I could do without all the interruptions. “When you’re done, you can put it back in the shed yourself. Same with the tiller.”

She looks amused. “You don’t mind me coming onto your property?”

“To return the tools, no.”

That damn amused smile is still on her face as she steps off the pavers she’s standing on and grabs a bag of tulip bulbs off the grass. “Okay. Thanks again. It’s really lovely of you to let me borrow this stuff.”

Lovely? Yeah. Uh huh. I’m about as lovely as a punch to the gut.

I go back to my work, continuing to make progress on the new raised beds for the rest of the afternoon. By the time I get around to the last one, which is the largest, the sun is starting to set. I don’t like stepping away from a project in the middle of it, so I push harder so I can finish it before I lose the rest of the day’s light.

When the sound of Melody’s footsteps go crunching past on the gravel behind me, I don’t even bother turning to look.

“Just returning your tools!” she says, and I grunt in response. I don’t look up from the wood planks I’m hammering together as the sound of the shed door swings open. There’s some light clinking as she puts the tools back, and then the shed door closes and her footsteps start across the gravel again. Toward *me*.

“Do you need some help?” she asks.

“No.”

“Are you sure? I think if I held the boards for you, it would be easier for—“

“I’m *fine*,” I growl.

An uncomfortable moment of silence follows my outburst. Fuck. She doesn’t deserve to be talked to like this. She hasn’t done a damn thing to me. Well, no. That’s not true. Her goddamn friends ripped up my yard. Her dog barked at me. But she’s a sweet girl. I’m being an asshole to her and she doesn’t deserve it.

“Sorry,” I mutter, finally looking at her. “Sure. You’re right. It’ll help. Hold the boards, if you don’t mind.”

“I don’t mind at all.” She circles me and takes hold of the planks. Instantly, it makes things a lot easier on my end.

“Little higher,” I say.

She makes the adjustment. “How’s that?”

“Good.”

I grab my hammer and pick up where I left off. With her help, I manage to hammer in the final nail as the last wisps of daylight disappear. I’ve got outdoor lights that automatically come on when it gets dark out, but I’m glad to have finished up the project when I did.

“Thanks,” I say. “Appreciate it.”

“Of course! I’m happy to help.” She smiles at me, then winces, looking down at her hands. “I should’ve worn gloves, though. I think I got a splinter.”

I should have offered her gloves. I wasn’t thinking. I take a step toward her. “Is it in deep?”

“It’s...yeah. Ouch.” She sucks in a breath and stops trying to pull it out herself.

I tell her to stay put, that I’ll get some tweezers. Then I head into the house and go upstairs to my bathroom, which is connected to my bedroom. I search through the drawers, but I can’t find those damn tweezers anywhere.

Do I even own any? I must. I can't be a forty-year-old man and not own a pair of tweezers.

I must be searching for them longer than I realize, because after a while, I hear her coming into the house. I freeze, listening to her footsteps padding downstairs, and then hear her call my name.

What is she doing in my house? I told her to stay outside.

People. They never listen.

"Warner?" she calls again, and then her footsteps start up the stairs, and for some fucking reason I can't move or say anything in response. I'm stuck like that, standing in the bathroom like a goddamn statue, all the way up until she appears in the doorway.

"There you are," she says, then wiggles her hand demonstratively in the air. "I just got the splinter out on my own."

"Oh," I say. It's all I can say. Because right now, the sight of her standing in my house, on the threshold between my bathroom and bedroom...it's enough to make me feel like I can't breathe. Her skin is glistening from the sweat of doing physical labor all day, and there are dirt smudges on her arms and her cheeks, and her hair is a wild, sexy mess. She's dirty and beautiful and all I want to do right now is pull her into the shower with me and soap up her curves and then fuck her until she forgets her own name.

"Are you okay?" she asks, looking at me with concern.

I swallow roughly, my throat painfully dry. "Yep."

"Well...I'll leave you be. Goodnight, Warner."

"Night."

She smiles, then steps out of the doorway. Her footsteps trail through my bedroom and start to descend the stairs.

"Wait," I say, going after her. "Stay. Have a drink."

*What the fuck am I doing?*

“What?” she says, turning around on the stairs, clearly surprised.

“Have a drink with me.”

She tries to restrain a grin. “Really?”

*You’re playing with fire. You shouldn’t do this.*

I nod.

“Okay,” she says. “Sure. That sounds nice.”

I’m still in disbelief that I’ve asked her to stay as I go down into the kitchen and get a pair of clean glasses out. What’s the point of this? To get to know her better? There’s no reason to do that. There’s no benefit to having her here in my home, especially not so late, especially not when I was just imagining fucking her against the tiles in my shower.

I don’t like doing pointless things. I don’t *do* pointless things.

Whatever this is, it isn’t a good idea.

“Whiskey okay?” I ask.

She nods. “Just a little for me, please.”

I pour her a little. Pour myself more. When I turn around, she’s already made herself comfortable on one of the bar stools at my kitchen island. It feels too intimate to walk around and take a seat next to her, so after setting the glass in front of her, I stay on my side of the kitchen, leaning back against the cool counter behind me.

With my hand wrapped around my glass, I watch her take a sip out of hers. I expect her to react to the strength of the alcohol, either wince or cough, but she doesn’t, she just swallows and smiles and says, “Wow. That’s good. What kind is this?” Then she reaches out for the amber-filled bottle sitting on the kitchen island and turns it around to look at the label.

“I’ll have to get my dad a bottle of this,” she says. “He likes whiskey, too, but I don’t think he’s had this kind.”

The last thing I want to hear about right now is her dad. It’s a reminder that she’s someone’s daughter, someone’s little girl,

and she shouldn't be drinking whiskey with a man who can barely control his filthy thoughts about her.

"They live in the area?" I ask. If I have any chance of surviving this...whatever this is...I need to keep the conversation going. "Your family, I mean?"

"Yep," she says. "My parents are still in the house I grew up in. My brother stuck around the area, too. He and his wife have been fixing up an old row house for the past year. What about you? Do you have any family here?"

"No."

She's sharp enough to pick up on the fact that I don't want to elaborate further than that. Gracefully, she changes the subject, asking, "Do you work close by?"

"I'm an EMT," I tell her. "My station isn't far from here, but the calls take me all over the place."

"Ah. So that's why you're gone for long periods at a time."

She's noticed when I'm away? I don't know what to make of that. "Yep. It's no nine-to-five."

"Is that hard, having such long shifts?" she asks.

"It's not easy."

"Right. Sorry, stupid question."

Something pricks in my chest. "It's not a stupid question. What I should have said is that it's not easy, but I'm used to it. And I like having bigger chunks of time off between shifts."

"I can see how that would be nice. That's awesome that you do work like that—that you're saving people's lives. We need more people like you."

I can't help but laugh. She's wrong. The world doesn't need more people like me. "Don't imagine me as some superhero."

"Don't want me to picture you in tights, huh?" she asks, hiding a smile behind her glass.

I don't even know how to respond to that. Is she trying to push my buttons? Trying to flirt with me? This is exactly why I

shouldn't have asked her to stay for a drink.

Time for me to change the subject. "What do you do for work?"

"Graphic design. Packaging."

"Huh. Okay."

She laughs. "I love that you're not even going to pretend to be interested."

Jesus, I'm bad at this. I tap a finger awkwardly against my glass. "What kind of packaging do you design?"

"It's okay," she says, still smiling. "You don't have to ask. It's refreshing, actually, talking to someone who doesn't pretend to care about things they aren't interested in. I like it."

"No, I want to know. What kind of packaging?"

She sizes me up for a moment, trying to figure out if I mean it, before she goes on. "Food. Bath and body products. Cat litter. All kinds of things. Usually a company hires our firm to redo their packaging, but sometimes we work with brand new companies and help them develop a visual brand from scratch."

"And you enjoy it?"

"Sure. But, I mean, it's still a job. Even though it's creative, it's not like I'm just sitting around making things look pretty all day. As far as jobs go, though, yes. I enjoy it. It's definitely what I'm meant to do." She pauses, then frowns. "You know what? I've never said that out loud. And now that I have, it feels kind of depressing. I'm basically saying that the purpose of my life is to make bags of dog food look appealing."

I shake my head. "Your job doesn't define you."

"We spend so much of our lives working, though."

"Still doesn't mean it defines you."

"No, you're right." She looks down into her glass and swirls the remaining liquid. "I guess the problem, though, is that I don't have much else going on besides work. I think that's why I've been so excited about putting those plants in the

yard. It's a lot different than what I normally do in my free time, which is watch Netflix and stuff my face with junk food." She laughs a little. "I know. Real tough life I have, right? Someday I'm going to look back and realize how easy I had it. No kids, no mortgage...meanwhile, all I want is to have those kinds of responsibilities. It's ridiculous, right?"

She wants kids? A mortgage? Who *is* this woman? She can't be older than in her mid-twenties.

"That dog of yours seems to keep your hands full," I say.

"Ernie?" she says, and laughs. "Yeah. That's true. But taking care of a dog is nowhere near the amount of work that taking care of a kid would be. I mean, with a kid, you need to be a parent non-stop, and lead by example, and teach them about right and wrong, and constantly clean up after them, and there's just so much more to worry about..."

"You sure you want one?"

"Oh, *yeah*. Absolutely. I want three kids, maybe four. I don't care how much hard work it is, or how crazy they make me. I want the big, noisy, chaotic family."

I can't help but picture her pregnant, her hand resting on her full bump, glowing and somehow even more beautiful than she already is.

And then I imagine a house full of screaming, sticky-fingered kids, not a moment of peace and quiet to be found.

"Well, I hope you get what you want," I say, and drain the last of the whiskey from my glass. I set my glass down, then grab the bottle from the kitchen island and tuck it back into place on my side of the kitchen.

She takes the hint and slides off the stool she's sitting on.

"Thanks for the drink," she says, bringing her glass over and setting it inside the sink. "We should do this again sometime. It was nice to chat."

She isn't serious, is she?

"Uh...yeah. We'll see." I clear my throat. "I'll walk you out."

I lead her to the front door and hold it open for her as she steps out of my house.

“Goodnight, Warner,” she says, smiling at me over her shoulder.

I watch her go, a mess of feelings twisting inside my chest.



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## MELODY

I'm at the grocery store, trying to decide which type of pasta sauce to choose from the million options in front of me, when I hear someone say my name. It's not a voice I immediately recognize. In fact, as I look away from the shelf of endless pasta sauces, I'm assuming I probably misheard.

Then I see Pete, Taylor's cousin, coming down the aisle at me with a victorious smile.

I smile back, but my stomach clenches a little at the sight of him. Especially with that self-satisfied smile on his face. It sends me right back to the night we went on a date. Pete isn't a bad guy, but he spent the whole date talking about himself... and giving me a history lesson about the region of Italy our meal was apparently inspired by.

"Hey! Look who it is!" he says now. "I'm glad I ran into you, Melody. I've been meaning to text you."

Shit. I was hoping his lack of reaching out meant he wasn't interested in anything further, but I obviously read into that wrong.

"Hi Pete," I say. "How are you?"

"Great," he says. "Wonderful. That promotion at work I was telling you about? It finally happened yesterday."

"That's great. Congratulations."

"Listen, I was thinking, I should take you to my favorite restaurant. We can celebrate. Get some bubbly."

"Oh, I—"

“I know the owner, so I can even get us a private room there. It’ll be the best meal of your life.” He winks at me, and I feel myself recoil even more.

“I can’t,” I say. “I’m sorry.”

He laughs. “I didn’t even say what night I wanted to take you out.”

My stomach clenches again. I need to put a firm end to this. I don’t want to be rude, especially since he’s Taylor’s cousin, but I need to make it clear that nothing more is going to happen between us.

“I’m dating someone,” I blurt out.

Immediately, I feel awful for telling such a blatant lie. I hate lying. I don’t want to be a disingenuous person, and lies always end up getting more complicated than you think they will. But in that moment, it’s like my mouth works independently from my brain.

“You are?” Pete says, suddenly confused. “But we went out less than a week ago.”

See? It’s already started to get complicated. The less I elaborate, the better. “I met someone.”

Pete sniffs in a breath. “Oh. I see.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again. I don’t know why I’m apologizing. Pete never had any claim over me.

“It must be serious, if you’re already exclusive,” he says stiffly.

He doesn’t believe me. He can tell I’m lying. I see it in his eyes.

“Well, when you know, you know,” I say.

“Right.” Pete pushes his tongue against his teeth. “So what’s the lucky guy’s name?”

His question, so unnecessary and childish, throws a switch inside of me. What the hell is his problem? Why can’t he just get the message and leave me alone?

Annoyed, I brusquely say the first name that comes to mind. “Warner. Any other questions?”

Pete looks surprised at my sudden defensiveness and leans away from me. “No. Jeez. I was just curious.”

I give him a tight smile. “Well, now you know. Excuse me. I have more grocery shopping to do.”

I feel sick as I turn away from Pete and walk off. Both sick from telling a lie, and sick at myself for using Warner’s name. It’s not like Warner will ever find out, but it still bothers me, dragging him into my own dumb problem. He spends his days helping people out of bad situations, but I’m sure he wouldn’t be happy about helping out someone like this.

I quickly grab the last few things I need from the store and get in the shortest checkout line. To my relief, I don’t see Pete again. But as I’m pulling out of the parking lot, I remember that I *will* see him again in a few weeks at Taylor’s wedding, and at the realization, I let out a groan.

Well, if he confronts me at the wedding about being there by myself, I guess I can always lie and say that things didn’t work out with Warner after all. Either that, or that he simply couldn’t make it.

Both options make me feel pathetic.

“Maybe I can convince Warner to come with me to the wedding,” I mumble to myself, then laugh at the utter improbability of it. My next-door neighbor is not the kind of man to enter willingly into a fake relationship. No way.

Maybe I can find a *different* man name Warner to pretend to be my boyfriend for a day.

Ugh. Why does he have to have such an uncommon name?

Stupid name. Stupid *lie*. The light turns yellow in the intersection ahead, and I’m just barely too far away to safely make it through. I slam on the brakes, let out another frustrated groan, and slump back in my seat, staring at the red light blazing back at me.

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“Can I ask you a completely ridiculous question, Warner?”

It’s been a day since my run-in with Pete, a day since the birth of my stupid little lie, and I’ve finally worked up the nerve to ask Warner if he’ll do me the biggest favor ever.

Warner looks up from the bag of gravel he’s cutting open, a wary lift of an eyebrow directed at me. He definitely has no idea how hot he looks when he does that. It does...*things*...to my body. Things I’m choosing to ignore. The man needs a friend, not a neighbor uselessly crushing over him.

“Guess so,” he says. “What’s up?”

Ever since our chat in his kitchen the other night, Warner hasn’t been as severely cold toward me when I see him. That’s not to say that he’s suddenly warm and friendly. He’s just not *as* cold. I don’t know how much of a chance I have of getting him to warm up any more toward me, but I’m taking it as a good sign that things have improved between us.

I just hope the question I’m about to ask him doesn’t backfire on me and undo the progress we’ve made.

I steady my arms on the top of the fence between us and tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I have a favor to ask of you. A big favor. I probably shouldn’t even bother asking, but I’m going to anyway.”

Warner sighs softly and stands up. “What do you need help with?”

“It’s about a wedding I’m going to. A coworker’s.” I smile, as if that’s really going to make any difference, then ask hopefully, “Are you a fan of weddings?”

“No.”

Of course he’s not. “Right. Well, I was planning on going solo, which I was cool with. But I have a predicament on my hands now. See, my coworker, the one who’s getting married, recently set me up on a date with her cousin. It seemed like it

wasn't going to go anywhere after that, but then, yesterday, he asked me out again. And in a stupid moment of panic, I told him I'm seeing someone. In an even stupider moment, I told him I'm seeing *you*."

Warner stares at me. "What?"

"I wasn't thinking. Obviously. I just blurted out your name, because it was the first name that came to me. I only did it to get the guy to back off. And it worked. But now I'm going to see him at the wedding in a few weeks, and obviously it's not going to look good if I'm there by myself, which brings me to my completely ridiculous question—"

"You want me to go with you."

"Exactly."

Warner closes his eyes and rubs his fingers along his forehead. I can tell he's struggling to contain the reaction he's naturally inclined to give, which is probably along the lines of *No fucking way*.

"I know it's an enormous ask," I say. "I certainly wouldn't expect you to say yes without getting something out of it in return. Whatever you want in exchange, just name it. It can be anything."

He's still just rubbing his forehead, not saying anything. Maybe that's a good sign. He isn't rejecting the idea outright.

"You wouldn't have to decide what you want right now," I say, feeling hope rise in my chest. "That can be figured out later."

After another moment, he says, "You said it can be anything?"

More optimism sparks inside me. "Anything."

"So..." he starts to say, then clears his throat, and looks at me with those serious green eyes of his. "If I wanted you to leave me alone, you're saying you'd do that?"

My heart drops. *That's* what he wants?

I blink at him, taken aback. I wasn't prepared for a response like that. I thought...I don't know. I don't know what I

expected him to say, but it never occurred to me that he would ask me to leave him alone.

God, what a slap in the face. Am I really that annoying? That insufferable?

There's no way that saving face at the wedding is worth losing out on a potential friendship with Warner. Except now I know that Warner doesn't want a friendship with me. Whatever little bit of progress we made the other night...well, maybe I was wrong and it wasn't progress at all. Maybe I talked too much, annoyed him even more, pushed him away.

"If that's what you want," I say, hurt.

For a fraction of a second, I think I see a flash of guilt on his face. But it's gone as quickly as it appeared.

"It's what I want," he says with finality.

It feels like he just stabbed me in the heart. Because the thing is...I know I went into this wanting to be his friend, but the truth is, a tiny, ridiculous part of me was secretly hoping for more. And so this rejection isn't just him shutting down the possibility of friendship. It feels deeper than that.

I want to walk away and never look at his stupid, grumpy face again. But that would just be giving him what he wants. And where will that leave me?

"Fine," I say, gritting my teeth. "But when we're at the wedding, you're going to have to act like we're actually dating. If it's not convincing, there's no point."

"I understand." He pauses, then adds, "I'm not kissing you, though."

I don't want him to kiss me. Still, it's salt in the wound.

"I'm not asking you to," I say sharply.

"Good."

"You'll have to be nice to me, though. *Sweet* to me."

"Fine."

"And we'll have to dance."

“I’m not promising you that.”

God, he’s infuriating. “Seriously? You’re going to agree to everything else but not dance?”

Warner exhales a tired breath. “Don’t worry about it. It’ll be fine.”

But I am, in fact, now worried about it. Not just the dancing, but the whole ordeal. It suddenly feels too risky. Too much of a hassle.

Why did I have to get myself into this mess?

The smart thing to do would be to tell Warner to forget it. I should cut my losses and walk away. But I’m hurt and angry, and the stubborn, prideful part of me wants to go through with it so I can show Warner exactly what he’s missing out on before I fulfill his request to never bother him again.

I want him to see me in the most beautiful dress I’ve ever worn and not be able to have me. I want him to feel like the asshole he is and be inundated with regret.

It’s immature of me. But I don’t care.

If he’s going to do me dirty, I’m going to do him dirty right back.

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Over the next few days, I confirm the plans with Warner. I make him give me his cell number—which *of course* he’s resistant to—and I text him the wedding details, tell him what time I want to leave that day to make it to the venue in time, and emphasize the dress code he needs to adhere to. I don’t have any other interactions with him after that, and whenever I go outside to water the plants that are still settling in or let Ernie go to the bathroom, I don’t even bother looking in the direction of Warner’s yard.

If this is how things are going to be, I may as well get used to it now.

I wish I could say that the bitterness I feel toward Warner doesn't bleed into the rest of my life, but it does. My overall mood feels like it's weighted down. My favorite snacks aren't as tasty. My favorite TV show isn't as funny. It feels like there's this big gray cloud hovering off in the distance, one that's gradually drifting closer and will eventually pass overhead, but is taking *so damn long* to get there.

At work, when I tell Taylor that I'll be bringing a plus one after all, she gives me a knowing smile and says, "Yeah, I heard from Pete that you're seeing someone now. Good for you, Mel. I can't wait to meet him."

The next weekend, I go shopping for a dress to wear to the wedding. I've never enjoyed shopping, because it's just a reminder of all the clothes that don't look good on a bigger body like mine. But I'm a woman on a mission, and the shopping gods are kinder to me that day than usual. Half an hour in, as I'm browsing the evening wear section of the nicest department store in town, I find The Dress.

It's midnight blue, elegant, pretty as hell, and fits me perfectly.

Staring at my reflection in the dressing room, I smooth my hands over the shimmery fabric, turn one way, then the other, then turn all the way around so I can see what it looks like from the back. I keep looking for an imperfection, but there are none.

Outside the dressing room, a pair of heels click down the row of doors. The attendant knocks on my door as she calls out, "How are things going in there, hon? Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you. I'm good," I call back. "I found exactly what I was looking for."



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## WARNER

I drum my fingers on my thigh as I wait for Melody to come out of her house and join me in the truck. The clock just turned over to four p.m., which is the time she told me we needed to leave to get up to her coworker's wedding venue in time. I'm not looking forward to this evening, but I do want to get going and get this over with. Then I can stop thinking about it and go back to my regular life.

I knew it was a mistake inviting her to stay for a drink that night. She misinterpreted it to mean we were suddenly all buddy-buddy, and the next thing I know, she's asking me to be her fake boyfriend for a day—I mean, what the hell? This nonsense needs to be put to a hard stop.

I didn't enjoy telling her I wanted her to leave me alone. I could see the hurt in her eyes that day, and I hated that I was the reason for it. But it was necessary. It's for her own good.

One night of going along with her foolish game, one night of pretending, and then it's over. All of it.

The passenger door of my truck flies open and I jerk to attention. I'd been so much in my head that I missed her coming out of her house. Now she's climbing into my truck, all dressed up in a long dark blue dress and heels, smelling of sweet perfume.

"Hi," she says neutrally, sliding into the seat.

I shift in my own seat, feeling suddenly hot beneath my suit. I knew she'd be dressed up, but I wasn't prepared for her to

look this good. I sure won't have to fake feeling attracted to her, that's for sure. Damn, she looks beautiful.

"You look nice," I say.

She gives me a little smile that seems to say, *Yeah, I know*, then she sets her handbag on her lap and buckles her seat belt.

"You look nice, too," she says politely. There's no true warmth in her voice.

"Can't remember the last time I wore a suit," I say. I start the engine and tap the screen of my phone to pull up the directions to the venue. "We good to go?"

"Yep. All set."

I back us out of the driveway and pull out onto the street. A glance at my phone tells me that we should arrive at the venue in just under an hour with the current traffic. I stab my thumb on the radio dial, letting music from a classic rock station fill the cab of the truck.

Melody reaches out to edge down the volume. "We need to make sure our story is straight before we get there."

"What story?"

"The story of our relationship," she says, sounding mildly annoyed. "You can't be telling people one thing while I'm telling them another."

"What's there to get straight?" I say. "We met when you moved in next door. Pretty simple."

Melody is quiet for a moment. "Right. Yeah, I guess that works."

I can tell she's not happy about it, though. "Did you have something else in mind?"

"It's just not very romantic," she says. "But it's fine. Hopefully it won't even come up, anyway."

"Let's hope not." I glance in the rearview mirror and change lanes. "Anything else?"

"Uh...well, do we have pet names for each other?"

“No,” I say firmly.

“Okay. What are some things I would know about you if we were actually dating?”

“You already know what I do for work, and what my schedule is like. You already know I garden. I don’t have any other hobbies.”

“What’s your favorite kind of food?”

I shoot her a dubious look. “You really think someone’s gonna quiz you on that?”

“No. But it’s the sort of thing you know about the person you’re seeing. So?”

“Mexican.”

“What do you order?”

“Enchiladas, usually. Beef.”

“Okay. So you like beef enchiladas, whiskey...what else? Do you have a sweet tooth?”

“Not really.”

“Okay,” she says, more impatiently this time. “Come on, Warner. You’ve gotta give me more than this.”

I sigh. Crack my neck. Drum my fingers on the steering wheel. “I don’t do social media. I’ve seen most Twilight Zone episodes. Went to Ireland once when I was a kid. Grew up in Ohio. That enough?”

“Do you still have family in Ohio?”

“Yep. I go back once a year.”

She nods. “All right. Here are some things about me. My family is *really* into Christmas. I don’t do social media, either, so sometimes I feel really out of the loop. I’m highly allergic to mango. Oh, and I’ve tried every Ben & Jerry’s flavor. Well, aside from the mango sorbet.”

“You must be really into ice cream.”

“It’s not an obsession or anything. I just like to try new things, and sometimes that urge manifests itself when I’m in the

freezer aisle. Or really late at night when I should be sleeping instead of eating ice cream.”

I try not to picture her standing barefoot in her kitchen, licking a spoon clean.

“So what’s the best flavor?” I ask.

“Right now I’d say my favorite is Milk and Cookies. But I’ve also really been into Dirt Cake.”

“There’s a flavor called Dirt Cake?”

“Yep. There was also, for a brief time, a flavor called Schweddy Balls.”

I shoot her a look. “You’re fucking with me.”

“I’m not. You can look it up. It was real. Vanilla ice cream, malt balls, a little rum...it was delicious. But it got banned.” She shakes her head in disappointment. “I really wish I’d had the foresight to buy an extra pint and save it.”

“The name didn’t gross you out, I guess.”

“Nah. I thought it was funny.” She tips down the mirror to check her makeup. “Guess that’s another thing you should know about me. Sometimes I have a dirty sense of humor.”

I snort a quiet laugh and return my focus to the road. When I turn up the volume on the radio again, she doesn’t interfere, and we drive the rest of the way to the venue like that. There’s no point in us making more conversation.

The wedding venue turns out to be a big resort on the water, with mountain views in one direction and a view of the ocean in the other. It’s a damn nice property, and expensive looking. As Melody and I walk over to the lawn where people are drinking cocktails, I set my hand on the small of her back, because it seems like something I should do.

Jesus, it’s strange to finally touch her, to feel the soft curve of her back. I’ve fantasized more than I’ll ever admit about things I wish I could do to her, but to actually touch her—it’s a lot. My palms are starting to sweat, and my heartbeat is pounding in my ears.

“Salmon bite?” a server asks, stepping in front of us with a tray of comically small appetizers.

Melody smiles and thanks the server, helping herself to one. I tell him no thanks. The server continues on, but we only make it a few steps further before another identically-dressed server swoops in.

“Mini fruit tart?” he offers.

Melody reaches for one, and I snatch it out of her hands.

“There’s mango on it,” I say, pointing at the bright yellow slice tucked between the pieces of kiwi and strawberry.

“That’s a slice of peach, sir,” the server says.

Oh.

I push it back into Melody’s hand. She’s still staring at me as the server drifts away.

“Nice reflexes,” she says.

“It looked like a fucking piece of mango,” I mutter.

“Sort of. You don’t usually see mango on fruit tarts.” Her expression softens for a second. “But thanks for looking out for me.”

I shrug it off. “You said you’re highly allergic.”

“Yeah. I get super swollen and red. It’s not a pretty sight.” She bites into the tart. It’s tiny enough that it’s gone in two bites. I watch in a stupefied state as her tongue darts out to lick her lips clean. “Yum. That was delicious.”

*She* looks fucking delicious. That dress she’s got on, it’s showing off every luscious curve. If she’s wearing it to make this evening more difficult for me, she’s succeeding.

I tear my gaze from her and look around us, wondering how long this stupid cocktail hour is going to last. Everyone else looks like they’re having a great time, with their drinks and appetizers and conversations—although what the hell is *that* dude’s problem? He keeps looking over here, giving me the stink eye.

Now he's walking over here. Great.

"So you're Warner, huh?" he says, smirking.

I stare at him, my feet fixed in place. "And you are?"

"Oh—" Melody breaks in. "Hi, Pete." She steps closer to me and places her hand on my arm. "Yes, this is Warner. Warner, Pete."

Ah. Right. The asshole who wouldn't even open her door for her when he picked her up for their date.

"How are things?" Pete asks, directing the question to Melody.

"Good," she says, leaning against me a little. "Great. And you?"

"I'm doing great, too. Couldn't be happier."

The guy is clearly still bitter about being rejected. I don't know what he thinks he's going to accomplish, coming over here like this. He's just making himself look pathetic.

"So, Warner. Don't you think you're a little..." Pete gives me a sneer. "*Old* for her?"

Melody scoffs. "You didn't seriously just say that."

"I mean, you're, what...over forty, right, man?"

I'm not taking this shit. "What does it matter to you?"

"It's just a little sad, no? The older guy chasing the younger woman?"

"Fuck you."

Pete laughs and holds up his hands. "Whoa. Calm down. There's no need to get physical."

My fists are clenched and I wasn't even aware of it. People nearby are staring at us. Staring at *me*. Suddenly it's real fucking obvious what Pete's objective was when he came over to us. Get me riled up, get me to make a fool of myself—and embarrass Melody to get back at her.

I'm not playing his game.

“Stay the hell away from Melody, got it?” I growl at Pete, then grab Melody’s hand in mine and pull her away, finding a new spot for us on the opposite side of the lawn.

“You can let go of my hand now,” Melody says.

I’m still squeezing it tight. I release my grip. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” She shakes her head as she looks up at me. “*I’m* sorry. I didn’t know he would be such an asshole to you.”

“Not your fault.”

“It’s so stupid, what he said. Who cares if I wanted to date someone older? Why is that such a big deal to people?”

Does she really not care? “An age difference can cause issues.”

“But people who date people the same age as them have plenty of issues, too.” She rolls her eyes. “It’s not *that* big of a gap, anyway. I’m twenty-seven. And you’re...”

“Forty.”

“Okay. Thirteen years. Big deal.”

I guess it’s nice to know that if this was real, she wouldn’t care about our age difference. But it’s not real. It doesn’t matter.

“Want me to get us drinks?” I ask, glancing toward the bar, wanting to change the subject.

She nods. “Sure. Thanks.”

I step away to grab us drinks, and when I return, Melody is talking to the bride, who is wearing a dramatic white dress that looks like something a movie star would wear.

“Don’t worry, he’ll get over it,” she’s saying to Melody, waving a dismissive hand through the air.

Melody nods and catches my eye as I sidle up beside her. “Taylor, this is Warner. Warner, Taylor.”

Taylor gives me a big grin. “Lovely to meet you, Warner. Oh, look at you two! Such a gorgeous couple.”

“It’s all Melody,” I say, smiling at Taylor before handing Melody the drink I got for her.

Taylor laughs. “Aren’t you sweet. He’s quite the catch, Mel.”

A moment later, Taylor is pulled away by another guest. When it’s just the two of us again, Melody looks up at me with curiosity. “Where did that come from?”

“You told me I needed to be convincing as your date.”

“Yeah, I just...”

“Thought I’d blow it?”

“No,” she says defensively. “I just...I don’t know. Had low expectations.”

An announcement is made that the ceremony is about to start, and we make our way over to another area of the grounds, where rows of chairs are set up in front of a flower-covered arch. Melody and I slide into seats in one of the back rows. When Pete walks past, I lay my arm on the back of Melody’s chair, but even when he’s gone, I leave it there. If I’m going to put on an act, I may as well go all in.

I’ll admit it, though—I sort of zone out during the ceremony. Weddings have never been my thing. All the slow walking down the aisle, the flowers, the talking about love and commitment and what have you—it’s fine, it’s great, it’s just not for me.

Melody, on the other hand, is clearly swept up in it all. She even gets teary during the vows.

“That was so beautiful, wasn’t it?” she says, turning to me with a dreamlike expression. The bride and groom have just walked back up the aisle hand-in-hand, and everyone is starting to get up from their seats.

I nod.

“Oh, come on, Warner,” she says. “It didn’t make you feel *anything*?”

“I don’t know the bride and groom,” I point out.

She rolls her eyes. “Okay. I *guess* you can use that as an excuse.”



From the ceremony space, we're guided into a decked-out dining room inside the resort. Melody checks the seating chart and points out the table we've been assigned to. We've been grouped with some of her other coworkers, and I'm relieved when the conversation turns to their work. I'm perfectly happy to sit here quietly without attention on me.

"Be honest," says Melody, leaning over to whisper in my ear after our salad plates are cleared away. "Are you having a terrible time?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

"Okay." She leans away, then leans back. "Is it just me, or do the candles on the table look really phallic?"

I can't help but laugh. She laughs too. And for a moment... fuck, I don't know. It's like we aren't here under false pretenses. We're just here together, attending her coworker's wedding.

The wine's getting to my head, clearly.

Even though I've barely had a glass tonight.

About ten minutes after dessert is served, the dancing starts. I've already made up my mind that I'm not going out on the dance floor, and when Melody gets up and looks expectantly at me, I shake my head.

"You go enjoy yourself," I say.

"You're seriously not coming with me?"

"I don't dance."

"You *told* me you would, Warner."

"No," I said. "I told you not to worry about it."

Melody sighs, looking annoyed, but doesn't push it further. She just walks away from our table and joins the dancing crowd.

I go back to finishing my dessert.

But I can't keep my eyes away from the dance floor for long. The need to keep an eye on her is real. She's in the middle of

the crowd, and I only get periodic glimpses of her...but I don't like what I see. Other guys are trying to dance with her. Trying to get close to her. What the fuck?

I throw my napkin on the table and get up, my eyes still trained on Melody.

I can't believe I'm walking onto a goddamn dance floor right now. I grit my teeth as people bump into me and upbeat music pounds in my ears. I force my way through the crowd to Melody, who's dancing with her arms up in the air, a smile on her face, those incredible curves of her swaying from side to side.

"You had enough yet?" I ask her.

She notices me standing there and her eyes go wide with surprise. Instead of answering me, she smiles and turns her body toward me, dancing right in front of me now. My chest tightens. My cock throbs. I'm entranced, watching her body move.

It's too close to the fantasy I had of her the other night: the two of us alone in my bedroom, her dancing for me like this in private before climbing onto my lap and sinking down the full length of my cock.

"Come on, Warner," she says above the noise. "*Dance.*"

I'm barely able to shake my head.

"Move your feet! It's not complicated!"

I want to grab her by the wrist and drag her out of this stupid crowd. Make her get in my truck and drive her the fuck home so we can be done with this night.

"I'm not going to hold up my end of the deal if you don't dance," she threatens, giving me a look that tells me she's dead serious.

"You can't do that," I snarl. "You can't change the terms now."

"Oh, really? I can't?" she throws back with a smirk. "It's not like we signed a contract, Warner."

That's true. All we have is a verbal agreement. If I want her to do as she promised and leave me alone after this, I need to keep her happy with the way this evening is going.

"One song," I say.

"Three," she demands.

"One," I repeat.

"Two! Two, and I won't ask for anything else. I promise." She's holding up a pinky for me to hook mine around, but I'm too annoyed to do it.

Instead, I nod, and start to dance.

She breaks out in a smug, triumphant smile, then moves closer to me as she dances. I try to ignore the scent of her, ignore the way her curves are nearly brushing against me, and focus on not making a fool of myself. I'm doing the bare minimum, just sort of shifting my weight from one foot to the other and swaying from side to side.

"See?" she says. "It's not so bad."

"I'm getting no enjoyment out of this whatsoever."

She rolls her eyes. "God. Sorry for torturing you."

She *is* torturing me, with those cock-teasing curves of hers.

"What *do* you get enjoyment out of, anyway?" she says. "Besides gardening."

"Peace and quiet."

"And?"

Why is she trying to have a conversation right now? Isn't the dancing enough? "I dunno. Stupid little things. Seeing the seasons change. Re-reading old books that I know I like. Waking up early and getting stuff done before everything gets busy."

She seems surprised by my answers. "Yeah. Same." She gives me a funny little smile. "Maybe we're more alike than we realize."

"I doubt it," I say. "I don't like yappy dogs, for starters."

“I don’t like when Ernie is yappy, either,” she says defensively. “He’s actually really calm and sweet most of the time, you know.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“What books do you like to re-read?”

I shrug. “A lot of Tolstoy. Dostoevsky. Dickens.”

“Those are authors, not books.”

“*War and Peace. Crime and Punishment. Bleak House.*”

“Oh, so real lighthearted stuff,” she says with a laugh. “Ever read any Jane Austen?”

“Sure. *Pride and Prejudice.*”

She stops dancing and stares at me. “You’ve read *Pride and Prejudice*?”

“Didn’t say I liked it. But yes. I’ve read it.”

The song currently playing comes to an end. Okay. Just one more song, just a few more minutes of this ridiculousness...

Fuck. A slow R&B song is playing now.

Melody looks at me, waiting for me to put my arms around her. I do, tentatively, wrapping my hands around her waist. The fabric of her dress is warm and velvety under my palms. My whole body stiffens as she wraps her arms up around my neck.

We start to turn, slowly swaying as the music melts through the air. All around us, couples are doing the same. No one’s watching us, but I know that if anyone looked in my face right now, they’d know. They’d be able to tell how tormented of a man I am right now.

“If you really hate this, we can stop,” Melody says quietly.

She’s giving me an out. I should take it. But I can’t. Not with our arms around each other like this.

“It’s fine,” I say.

“Are you sure? I know I said you had to dance with me for two songs, but I didn’t know one was going to be a slow song.

So if you really hate this—”

I cut her off. “I don’t hate it.”

“Okay. *Hate* is a strong word. It’s just...I know you don’t like me, or you find me intolerable, or whatever, so—”

“I don’t find you intolerable.”

“Well, my point is—”

“Melody,” I say, firming my hold around her waist. “Jesus. I don’t dislike you.”

She looks up at me, confused. We make another half-rotation before she speaks again. “But you want me to leave you alone.”

“I don’t *want* you to leave me alone. I *need* you to leave me alone.”

Now she looks even more bewildered.

I want to undo the last few seconds and keep my damn mouth shut. I also want to tell her everything. But that scares the fucking daylights out of me.

“Forget it,” I say.

She blinks at me. “*Forget it?*”

“Forget it.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it. She keeps staring up at me. It feels like a preview of the kind of reaction she’ll have if I actually go through with it and fess up about my feelings. I don’t like it. It doesn’t feel like a good sign.

“How long is this damn song?” I mutter.

“I think it’s almost over,” she says quietly.

When it ends, I immediately pull my hands away from her waist and remove myself from the crowd.

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## MELODY

I don't know what the hell just happened.

But I do know that I need to get out of this crowd. As the next song starts, I squeeze my way through the throng of dancing wedding guests, heading in the opposite direction from Warner, because I don't know what I would even say to him right now. I'm so confused.

*I don't want you to leave me alone. I need you to leave me alone.* Does he mean what I think he means? He can't. No way. No way does Warner have feelings for me like that. It doesn't make any sense. He's done nothing but push me away. And when he *has* done something nice, he's done it begrudgingly.

Like giving me advice about adding plants to my yard. Or looking for a pair of tweezers for me. Or telling me that I look nice in the dress I'm wearing tonight. Or looking out for my mango allergy.

None of that really counts as him being nice. Does it?

There's no way he's been thirsting after me this whole time.

Needing a minute to let my spinning thoughts settle, I duck into the women's restroom down the hall. It's the most luxurious restroom I've ever been in, complete with a plush chaise lounge tucked in one corner and soft mood lighting and a shelf of little toiletries available for whoever needs them.

As I'm heading toward an open stall, my eye catches the tail of Taylor's wedding dress spilling out from beneath one of the

closed doors, and I hear Taylor's frustrated sigh from the other side.

"You okay, Taylor?" I ask.

"Oh, thank God," she says, and opens the door to poke her head out. "Can you help me with my dress, Mel? I don't know what I was thinking, coming in here on my own."

"Sure." I step into the stall, close the door behind me, and gather up the fabric of her dress so it's not touching the toilet while she squats.

"I'm so sorry about this," she says, laughing as she pees. "I know this is way more personal than you probably ever wanted to get with me."

"It's totally fine. How are you doing?"

"Great." She beams at me. "Tonight feels like a dream. I'm *so* happy. Are you enjoying yourself?"

I nod. "The wedding is beautiful. Everything's really lovely."

"Is it giving you and your man wedding fever?" she asks, grinning.

"Oh, uh..." I laugh awkwardly. "Yeah, we're nowhere near that yet."

"I know, I know. I'm just teasing. I know your relationship is still very new. What's it been? Just a few weeks now, right?"

God, I really hate lying to people. "Yeah. Three weeks."

"Aw. I remember when Josh and I first started dating. We were really hot and heavy for the first couple months. Seriously, we were getting it on three times some days."

"Wow." I clear my throat. "That's...a lot."

Taylor flushes the toilet and doesn't bother waiting for the whoosh of the water to subside as she keeps on talking. "Is it? I have a friend who said she and this guy did it *six times* in one day. Compared to that, three doesn't seem like so much. What's a lot for you?"

I open the bathroom stall and let Taylor go out first. I'm at a loss for how to answer her question. I don't have a number. I don't have *anything* to spill.

"Sorry, that's rude of me to ask," Taylor says, giving me an apologetic smile in the mirror as she washes her hands. "I have zero filter right now. Champagne has that effect on me."

I laugh, relieved to be freed of the question.

"At least tell me your man is good in bed," Taylor continues, suddenly looking very concerned.

"I—uh—" The thought of Warner's body eclipsing mine on a bed, his hands pinning mine to the sheets, invades my thoughts. Heat rises in my cheeks as I see my face flush in the bathroom mirror. "We're taking things slow, actually."

Taylor spins to face me. "Hold up. Melody, you're telling me you're with a man as hot as that and you aren't getting dicked down? What is *wrong* with you?" She slaps a hand over her mouth. "Oh my God, I'm sorry. None of my business. Shouldn't have said anything."

"It's okay."

She drops her hand. "No, it's not. I shouldn't have made a comment like that. It's sweet that you're not rushing into physical intimacy. Really. It's good to get to know the guy first. Actually, I bet it will make it all the more hot when you do finally get down and dirty, 'cause, you know, emotional connection and all that."

"Uh-huh."

Taylor breaks into a grin again. "I'm excited for you, girl. It's going to be a magical thing when it finally happens. I just *know* it."

Two of Taylor's bridesmaids come into the restroom just then, and I'm more than fine with them stealing away her attention. While they're chatting loudly, I slip out of the restroom and head back to the reception area, still feeling just as bewildered about the whole Warner situation. Part of me wishes I could have told Taylor everything and gotten her two cents, but I



also know the only way I'm truly going to get any clarity is to talk to the man himself.

Where is he, though? He's not sitting at our table, and I don't see him anywhere else around the room.

My stomach drops, realizing there's a chance that he up and left. I don't *think* he would abandon me here without a way of getting home, but I can't say for sure. Hurrying toward the exit, I burst out of the building and rush toward the parking lot.

Okay. His truck is still here.

From the edge of the parking lot, I can see that the cab of his truck is empty, so I turn around and scan the expansive resort property sprawled out in front of me. Instinct tells me that he's probably out here somewhere. But there are a lot of places a man could find refuge in a place as big as this.

Hiking up my dress so the hem doesn't get dirty, I start to search the grounds. With all the landscaping, there are lots of nooks and crannies everywhere, and even with the pathway lights, it's a little difficult to see well. Plus my heels aren't exactly meant for this kind of thing—all evening, I've had to be careful not to stumble over something.

As if to make the point, I trip over a loose stone in the pathway.

My hands fly out to catch my fall, and I draw in a sharp breath as my knees hit the rough ground. As I'm pulling myself back up, I hear someone rushing toward me on the path.

"You okay?"

Warner's voice vibrates through me, and I nod without looking at him. He's helping me up even though I don't need his help.

"Fine," I say, brushing off my dress. "Just tripped."

"That fall sounded hard. Are you sure?" He takes my hands in his and looks them over. They're dimpled from being slammed into the ground, but I'm not bleeding.

"Where were you?" I ask Warner.

“Over there,” he says, nodding his chin toward the water’s edge.

“I couldn’t find you,” I say, both angry at him and relieved that he’s near me again. “I was looking everywhere for you.”

“I needed a few minutes to myself.”

“I wish you’d told me that.”

“I needed to get out of there.”

“Because of me?”

Warner doesn’t say anything. But he’s still holding my hands, still looking down at them. Finally he says, “I don’t know what to do about this. I don’t like pushing you away, but it’s not a good idea if I let you in.”

I search his eyes, wishing he would look at me, but he doesn’t. “What do you mean? Why not?”

“I’m fucked up. You don’t want someone like me in your life.”

“You don’t get to tell me what I want.”

“Why are you so damn set on getting to know me? Is this a thing you do? Find a fucked-up guy and make it your project to fix him?”

“No,” I say, taken aback. “That’s not me.”

“So what *is* it, then?”

“I’m just drawn to you, Warner. I can’t explain it.” I swallow. “Now tell me why you think you’re fucked-up.”

He drops my hands. Looks away. Shakes his head. “I don’t want to get into it.”

“Whatever it is, I’m not going to judge you.”

“I’m not worried about that.”

“What *are* you worried about, then?”

“I’m not worried about anything,” he snaps. “I just don’t want to fucking talk about it.” He runs a hand roughly through his hair. “Look, I’ve been an EMT for twenty years now. I’ve seen a lot of terrible things. Things you don’t want to know about.

Things that haunt me to this day. It's the sort of stuff that darkens your view of the world. That makes you distrustful of happiness, because you know how easily it can all be ripped away."

I try to process what he's saying. "You mean the emergency calls you've been on, right?"

He jerks his head in a nod. "Most of them, they're not a big deal. But there are some calls...like I said. They haunt me."

A few moments of silence pass between us. Even without him going into detail, it all suddenly makes sense. I can't imagine what kind of traumatic things he's encountered because of his job. He's seen things that no one should have to see. He's undoubtedly lost people who he tried to save. He probably feels immense guilt about that; I know I would.

"Have you ever talked to someone about it?" I ask gently. "A therapist, I mean?"

"Yeah. Years ago. Didn't help."

"Maybe it would be worth trying again." I put my hand on his chest, over his heart. "I'm sorry, Warner. It must feel really heavy, carrying all that around."

"It's part of the job. I just have to deal with it." He pulls my hand off his chest. "It's never going to go away. That's the point I'm trying to make. It's a part of me. It's the reason I'm like this. And that's why you need to stay away."

"What if I don't want to? Even knowing that about you?"

He lets out a humorless laugh. "I'd say you're not thinking straight."

"Maybe *you're* not thinking straight. Ever consider that?"

He grunts in response.

I smile. "Okay. It's settled. You're going to stop pushing me away. From here on out, we're going to be friends."

"What?" His eyes finally shoot up and meet mine. "Friends?"

"Yeah. You know. People who like spending time together? Who help each other out? Who joke around together?"

“Right,” he says skeptically.

Our gaze holds, and maybe I’m imagining it, but I swear there’s more than just doubt in his eyes. There’s also something secretive. Something yearning.

“Unless you want more than a friendship?” I tease, my heart banging away with nerves.

Warner studies me. Under his intense gaze, I feel suddenly weak in the knees.

“What do *you* want, Melody?” he asks.

I want to know what his kisses taste like. I want to know what it feels like to be claimed by him...once, twice, six times in a day.

“I asked first,” I counter.

He wets his lips, then reaches up, and brushes something off my face. Heat lingers from his touch even after his hand moves away.

“Let’s try this whole friend thing,” he says.

I’m both disappointed and relieved. It’s one thing to fantasize about him, another to actually act on it. What would I even *do* with a man like him?

“Great,” I say.

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MELODY

THREE WEEKS LATER

I knock on Warner's front door, my other arm wrapped around an oversized wreath that's partially blocking my view. It's the first week of December, a chilly, bright Saturday morning.

When he answers, I hear him chuckle, then say, "Jesus, Melody. That thing's nearly as big as you."

"You like it?" I ask, and hold it out to him. "It's for you. I just picked up one for myself and thought I'd get you one, as well."

"Oh. Uh, sure. Thanks." He takes it from me. "I'll have to buy a hanger for it."

"No need. I have one of those for you, too." I pull out the extra wreath hanger from where it's tucked under my arm and wave it at him. "I figured you probably wouldn't have one."

I watch, smiling, as Warner hooks the hanger over the top of his open door and then hangs the wreath on it, taking his time to adjust it and make sure it's positioned well.

"That looks good," I say. "It looks nice against the black of your door, don't you think?"

Warner nods. Then, after a brief hesitation, he asks, "You want to come in?"

His invitation might not seem all that welcoming, but it's miles away from the gruff way he previously acted toward me. I'm not sure if he'll *ever* be a warm and fuzzy guy, but honestly, I don't care. I'm just happy that he's giving our friendship a chance.

“I’d love to come in,” I say, already stepping into his house. I slip off my shoes and leave them by the door, then peek into his living room. I’m disappointed, but not surprised, to see that he doesn’t have any sort of holiday decorations up. “Aren’t you going to get a Christmas tree?”

“No,” Warner says, leaning against the wall. “I’m not really into Christmas trees. Besides, I’ll be out of town.”

“I know, but you’ll only be in Ohio for that one week. There’s the whole rest of the holiday season.”

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those people who keep their tree until February.”

I cross my arms defensively. “And if I am?”

“I’m un-friending you.”

“Over a Christmas tree? You’re ridiculous. Now I kind of want to leave one up until March to see how angry it will make you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” I give him a sweet smile. “Any chance I can convince you to come with me to the U-Cut farm and help me pick one out for my place?”

“By ‘pick one out,’ you mean cut one down for you, don’t you?” he asks.

“No, I’ll do the cutting. I have a handsaw and gloves.”

“Fine. But we’re taking my truck.”

Thirty minutes later, we’re well on our way to the U-Cut farm, with the thermos of hot coffee I made sitting in the console between us and Warner’s favorite radio station playing low through the speakers. I’m feeling disproportionately happy about the outing. It’s the chill in the air, the coziness of being bundled up, the magic feeling of winter.

“Don’t you *love* this time of year?” I say, smiling over at Warner.

He laughs a little. “Yeah. Sure. It’s nice.”

He pulls into the farm's dirt parking lot and grabs his set of tools from the back. Of *course* he brought his own tools. I'm still set on cutting down a tree myself, though.

I lead the way down the rows of evergreen trees, searching for the perfect one. I mean, they all have their quirks—some of the trees are a little asymmetrical, others are really tall or really chubby—but I know there's one that will seem perfect to me.

“What's wrong with all of those ones we just walked by?” Warner asks, trailing behind me.

“Nothing,” I call over my shoulder. “But I want to keep looking.”

“Melody, any of these will work.”

“I'll know it when I see it, okay?”

Finally, I do see it: a fir tree about Warner's height that I can easily envision hung with ornaments and lights in the corner of my living room. I point it out to Warner and kneel down by its trunk, armed with my handsaw and ready to get to work.

Warner reaches down and touches my shoulder, urging me to move aside. “Let me do it.”

“Just please hold the tree, okay?” I say, and start to saw.

In my head, when I envisioned coming out here, I pictured myself sawing through a trunk with slow but steady progress, then feeling the triumph of having cut down my own tree. In reality, it's annoying and difficult work, and my hands are soon cramping, and my knees hurt, and I'm cursing my handsaw for not doing what it should be doing.

“For fuck's sake,” Warner mutters. “We're going to be out here for hours. Will you just let me help you?”

My stubbornness is wearing thin. I get up from my knees and huff out a breath. “Fine. It's all yours.”

Warner grabs the saw he brought with him, kneels down, and tears through the rest of the trunk like it's a piece of toast he's cutting through. It doesn't even get him out of breath.



“All right,” he says, hoisting the tree over his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

I gape at him, gather my stuff, and trail after him as he leads the way back to his truck. The branches of my tree shimmy as he throws it into the bed of the truck.

“How often do you work out?” I ask when we’re seated in the cab.

He gives me a funny look and starts the engine. “That wasn’t that heavy. You could’ve carried it.”

“You made it look so easy, though.” I unscrew the top of the thermos, pour out some hot coffee, and offer him the cup. He drinks it in two gulps before handing it back and starting to drive out of the lot.

“What’s in that?” he asks, nodding at the thermos.

“Just coffee and creamer.”

“Yeah, but it’s...different.”

“Oh, yeah. I used pumpkin spice creamer.”

“Huh. Okay.”

I laugh. “Not a fan of pumpkin spice?”

“Never had it before.”

“Well, now you have. It’s good, isn’t it?”

“It’s not the worst thing I’ve ever had.” He glances over at me as we’re slowing at a four-way intersection. “Well? You gonna pour me some more?”

“What am I, your waitress?”

He sighs through his nose. “Can I please have some more of that fucking delicious coffee, *please?*”

“That’s better.” I pour him some more and he downs it just before it’s our turn to go through the intersection. As he hands the cup back, our fingers brush.

“Thanks, Mel,” he says.

I don't think he even realizes that he calls me that instead of Melody. It just comes out of his mouth. It makes me smile so big it's like I've never smiled before.

"Anytime," I say.

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It snows the following week, and I spend all evening sitting in front of my living room window with Ernie by the lit-up Christmas tree, wrapped in a big fuzzy blanket, hands curled around a cup of hot chocolate, watching the snow mount up in my front yard. The next morning, when I wake up, I wake to the unfamiliar sound of scraping—and when I peer out my frosty living room window, I see Warner out there shoveling my walkway, a beanie pulled down over his eyebrows and a big winter coat puffed up around his arms.

He doesn't just shovel my walkway, either—he clears everyone's on our block, which is somehow the sweetest thing anyone has ever done, and when I stop by his house later with a plate of still-warm chocolate chip cookies to thank him, I tell him so.

"Didn't want anyone to slip and fall," he says, shrugging it off.

There's still some snow and icy patches around when the week of Christmas comes. Warner drives off early that Monday morning to catch his flight to Ohio, and it's weird, but I miss him the moment he's gone. I know it's stupid, but I wish we could spend time together on Christmas Day. I even bought him a gift, a little glass rain gauge for his garden, and it's sitting wrapped under my tree. I probably should have given it to him before he left, but I think I was secretly hoping that we'd get a big snowstorm and his flight would be canceled.

Such a dumb fantasy, I know.

Anyway, it's not like I'm sitting at home all by myself. I drive up to my parents' house on Christmas Eve, and stay there all day on Christmas, too. It's nice, hanging out with my family. It's great. I just...I don't know. I keep thinking about Warner.

Wondering what he's doing. Wondering what his family's house is like. Wondering what sort of traditions they have.

Just before my family and I are about to sit down to our usual big late-night Christmas dinner, I sneak away for a second to send a text to Warner.

Me: *Merry Christmas :) Did Santa bring you everything you wished for?*

Three dots appear, then disappear, then appear again.

Warner: *Nope. Maybe when I get back home. Merry Christmas.*

I stare at his text, not sure what to make of the cryptic answer.

Me: *Oh? What did you not get that you wanted?*

From the other room, my mom calls out that dinner is ready.

“Coming!” I call back, then drop my eyes to my phone again.

Warner: *We need to stop playing this game, Mel.*

Uh...okay?

Me: *What game?*

Warner: *The one where we keep pretending we don't want to fuck each other.*

I nearly drop my phone. He did not just text me that. No. No way. This is not happening.

“Melody!” my mother yells from the dining room.

I fumble with my phone, shoving it into my pocket, then quickly glance in the mirror hanging in the hallway as I rush toward the dining room to join my family. I look flushed and flustered, as anyone would look after getting a text like that.

I need to respond. But how the hell do you respond to something like that? And why did he have to say it to me now, of all times, over a *text*, when we're in different states?

*Think of something to say, damn it. Think of something, anything, to say.*

I make it to the dining room without a single idea.

“You okay, Melody?” my dad asks, looking at me with concern as I walk into the room. The rest of my family has all just sat down around the table, one empty seat left for me.

“Fine,” I say, sinking into my seat. “Can someone please pass the rolls?”

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## WARNER

I wake up in the guest room at my folks' house, my head throbbing like a motherfucker, the taste of tequila still lingering on my tongue. With a groan, I throw off the sheets and stumble into the bathroom down the hallway, splash some water on my face, and take a piss. I'd like to go right back to bed and fall asleep for another few hours, but as soon as I step out into the hallway again, a hand slaps me on the shoulder and my brother's laugh rings in my left ear.

"Morning, old man," Chris says. "I see you don't handle your liquor so well anymore."

"You and your goddamn tequila," I mutter.

"Come on. Mom's making chocolate pancakes. They'll do you good."

Pancakes do sound pretty good right now. I head downstairs with my brother, even though I'm still silently cursing him for busting out the bottle of tequila last night. I didn't mean to drink as much as I did, but since I hadn't seen my brother for a year, we got carried away, talking late into the night in front of the fireplace, him refilling our glasses too many times.

We walk into the kitchen just as our sister is setting a pitcher of orange juice on the table in the breakfast nook. She takes one look at me, laughs, and tells me she'll get me a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, Hillary," I manage to say, sliding onto the bench seating along one side of the table.

My dad is sitting in a chair on the other side, squinting through his reading glasses as he works on a crossword puzzle. “Morning, son.”

“Morning, Pop.”

Soon we’re all settled in, helping ourselves to the chocolate chip pancakes that Mom set in the middle of the table. I missed these pancakes. A year is too long to go without them. Those chocolate chip cookies that Melody makes are probably the closest thing to—

My fork freezes in the air, syrup dripping off the bite of pancake I was about to shove into my mouth.

*You drunk-texted her last night.*

The thought pops into my hungover head with screaming red alarm bells going off. But what did I say to her? I have no idea. Not a goddamn clue.

I drop my fork and slide out of the bench seat, muttering something about being right back. I take the stairs two at a time, burst into the guest room, and grab my phone from the bedside table.

As soon as I stab in my passcode, our texts from last night pop up on the screen.

“No,” I groan. “Fuuuck. *No.*”

It’s even worse than I thought. First there’s this trainwreck:

Me: *We need to stop playing this game, Mel.*

Melody: *What game?*

Me: *The one where we keep pretending we don’t want to fuck each other.*

And then there’s the worst thing of all: no reply, no anything, not a single fucking word from her in response.

I throw my phone on the bed, rub my hands over my face, and take a moment to figure out what the hell I should do. Things have been good between us these last several weeks. The whole being friends thing...it’s actually been really nice. I thought it wouldn’t work, because of those damn dirty

thoughts I always have of her, but somehow I've been able to keep them suppressed. Well, mostly, anyway. I'd be lying if I said my mind was wholly pure. But it's been manageable.

I pick my phone up again and send her another text.

Me: *Hey. I was drinking last night and obviously said something to you I didn't mean.*

I wait for her to respond, but there's nothing. Several minutes of silence pass. I'm about to give up and go back downstairs when she finally writes back.

Melody: *Gotcha. It's fine, don't worry about it.*

No. She's wrong. It's not fine.

Me: *I'm sorry. It was a stupid mistake.*

She doesn't reply. I send her another text.

Me: *Can we just forget it happened?*

Three dots appear by her name, then disappear, then come back.

Melody: *Sure. Of course.*

My thumbs hover over the screen of my phone, aching to type more. But I leave it there. I turn off the screen and toss the phone aside, my stomach in knots as I walk out of the room.

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That afternoon, I spend the entire flight home going over ways I can redeem myself. Melody might be acting like it's fine, but I'm not buying it. If she was really okay, she would have joked around or sent me a text with a smiley face or given me *something* other than the way she responded.

The plane's landing feels rougher than usual. The traffic on the freeway is definitely worse. By the time I pull into my driveway at home, the sky is losing light fast. I don't even bother putting my things inside my house. I walk straight next door to Melody's, stand on her front step in the freezing cold, and knock.

My stomach feels like it's in a fucking vise as I hear her footsteps come to the door.

She cracks the door open and looks up at me with an unreadable expression. "Oh. Hi. You're back."

"Can I come in?"

She hesitates a moment, then opens her door for me. I step inside and catch the aromatic scent of something cooking in her kitchen just as she says, "Hold on. I need to go check on the stove."

"It smells great."

"It's my mom's chicken soup recipe. You're welcome to have some. It's almost done."

Even though she's inviting me to stay, there's a stiffness to her words. It's lacking the usual warmth I've gotten used to.

At least Ernie is acting normal toward me. When the little dog trots up to me, I bend down and give him a few quick scratches on the head, causing his tail to wag. Yeah, believe it or not, we're buddies now. Little guy's not so bad, after all.

I follow Melody into the kitchen and watch as she adds some chopped herbs into the simmering pot, then stirs them in with a wooden spoon. Then she turns to face me, gently crossing her arms across her front, as if she needs to protect herself right now.

"How are you?" she asks. There's still that goddamn stiffness in her voice.

"I've been better." I tap my fingers anxiously on her countertop. "Look, I'm really sorry about those stupid texts."

"I told you, it's fine."

"Yeah, but I don't believe you. Clearly it's bothering you, Mel."

She looks at me for a few beats, not saying anything. I can tell she wants to say something and she's holding back.

"Look, we're friends, right?" I say.



“Yep,” she says.

“And don’t friends tell each other when they’re pissed off at each other?”

She nods, her crossed arms tightening a little.

“So?” I press.

“I’m just tired of getting mixed signals from you, okay?”

“What?”

“Oh, come on,” she says. “One moment you’re looking at me like you want to kiss me and the next moment you’re acting like the idea of anything ever happening between us is out of the question. It’s confusing. And frustrating. You have *no idea* how frustrating it is, Warner. And then you send me that stupid text, and I—”

What happens next happens as if I have no choice in the matter. I move forward, and pull her toward me, dropping my mouth to hers and capturing her soft, full lips before I can talk myself out of it. She inhales a quick breath of surprise against my mouth, and then quietly moans—so quietly I almost miss it. Afterward, when I pull my lips from hers, she looks up at me with wide, dazed eyes.

“What was that?” she asks.

“Clarification.”

She wets her lips. “I’m going to need it in words, Warner.”

“I want you. I’ve wanted you since day one.”

“Then why didn’t you do something about it?”

“I already told you why.” I shake my head. “You should be with someone who’s less fucked-up. Who’s better suited for you.”

“Don’t tell me who I should be with.”

“We both know this would never work.”

“That’s not up to you to decide.”

I breathe out a laugh. “What, you think it would work?”

“I don’t know, but I’m not going to write us off before giving it a shot.”

We hold each other’s gaze, both stubbornly convinced that we’re each right.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” she challenges me.

“We’d fight,” I say. “We’d break up. We’d end up with broken hearts. And I don’t want to break your heart, Mel.”

“Refusing to give us a chance is going to break my heart, too.”

“Not in the same way.”

She exhales a frustrated sigh. “God, you’re infuriating. What the hell did you just kiss me for, if you’re not willing to be with me?”

I grit my teeth. “I lost control for two seconds, okay? Jesus.”

“Well, I wish you hadn’t. It’s awful to kiss a woman like that and refuse to kiss her again.”

“I never claimed to be a decent man.”

She stares at me, hurt in her eyes, and then tears away from me and walks over to the stove so she can turn the burner off. Without looking at me, she says, “I think you should go.”

I think I should, too. But I can’t. I just can’t leave her like this, because if I do, I know it’s all going to be over. I crossed a line with her, and we can never go back to just being friends. And if I leave now, I’ll be giving into the lies I’ve been telling myself for years—that I’m not worth a woman’s love, that I’ll just drag her down with me, that I can’t give her what she deserves.

Fuck.

Melody has her back toward me, her head lowered, her hands braced against the kitchen counter. I hate that I’ve let my own bullshit get in the way of letting go and opening up to her. I hate that I’ve made this more complicated than it should have been.

“Just go,” she says, her voice cracking a little. She still isn’t looking at me. And I see, suddenly, that she’s right. Not taking

a chance on her is going to be a knife in the heart, too.

“No,” I say. “I’m not going to break your heart, Mel.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Well, *I* won’t be fine.”

I walk toward her. She turns around slowly and looks at me silently with cautious eyes.

“You make me feel like I’m losing my mind, you know,” I say.

“You’re all I think about.”

“If you kiss me again, Warner, you better mean it.”

“I know.” I lean down until my lips are hovering above hers.

“I’m sorry for not doing this sooner. And for being so fucking stubborn. I’m going to make it up to you. I promise.”

I brush my lips over hers. She makes a soft, little achy sound that instantly gets me rock hard. I push her against the counter as I press my mouth to hers, and my head goes fuzzy at the sensation of her lips. All those smiles she’s given me, all that backtalk, all the times she’s said my name—I’ve wanted to kiss her every damn time, and it’s killed me every time I haven’t been able to.

The way she moans into our kiss tells me the feeling has been mutual.

But I want to hear her say it, too. I want her to tell me exactly how she feels and what she wants. For too long we’ve been dancing around this, living with the unspoken desire, and I’m tired of it. From today onward, there’s never going to be any wondering about how the other feels. I owe her that.

“You have any idea how beautiful you are?” I murmur.

She shakes her head. “Stop. I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. You’re perfect.”

“Now you’re being ridiculous. I’m overweight. And I hate my hair.”

“I love your hair. And I’m fucking *obsessed* with your curves. Seriously. It’s tormenting.”

She looks stunned for a moment, then her shock melts into a smile. “Sorry for tormenting you. Actually, no. I’m not sorry. Because I’ve been tormented by your hotness, too.”

“Fine. We’ll call it even.”

“Fair enough.”

We go back to kissing and she pushes her curves against me. Reflexively, I pin her against the counter, unabashed at the massive hard-on in my jeans. She gasps and pulls her lips from me.

“Jesus, Warner.” She laughs, looking suddenly embarrassed. “Sorry. I’m just a little nervous. I’ve never been with anyone.”

Huh. Interesting. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“That’s not a problem, is it?”

“Why would it be?”

“I’m just asking.”

I steal another kiss. “I’ll happily be your first.”

She looks relieved. Then something flashes in her eyes, and her mouth curls up in a smirk. “Does that turn you on? You taking my virginity?”

My cock throbs. I’m sure she can feel it. It’s a monstrous hard-on. “It sure doesn’t make me any less hard.”

“Mmm. I see.” She runs her hands up my chest, tracing the lines on my shirt. “Are you going to be gentle with me?”

“I’m not really the gentle sort, honey.”

“I didn’t think so.”

“But I’ll go slow. I don’t want to hurt that sweet pussy of yours.”

Her cheeks flare with pink.

“I’m going to get you nice and wet first,” I tell her, my voice low. “Make you come a few times. Then I’ll fuck you nice and deep, and take what’s mine.”

Her hands tighten, bunching up the fabric of my shirt. “Keep talking like that.”

“Like what, honey?”

“Like *that*. Dirty. It turns me on.”

“Good. Because I don’t do this any other kind of way.” I brush the hair away from her neck and dip my mouth to suck a kiss there. “Fuck, I’m so hard, thinking about your pussy wrapped around my cock.”

She sighs and tilts her head to give me full access to her neck. “I’m yours, Warner.”

“You’re damn right you are.” I pull loose the little bow on the front of her sweatpants and slip my hand under the elastic. Underneath, I find the thin cotton of her panties, and I slip my hand into those, too. My fingers glide over a neat little triangle of soft hair on the way down.

When I find her clit, it’s already nice and slick for me.

“*Oh*,” she breathes. She closes her eyes as my fingers move in slow circles. Christ, she’s so warm and silky soft.

“Good girl,” I murmur. “Relax into it.”

She nods, her eyes still closed. She really is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. I increase the rhythm of my fingers, drawing a moan from her mouth. Her hips push against my hand as I stroke her, my fingers sliding over her wet clit, her brows furrowing as her pleasure builds.

“Oh, fuck,” she whimpers. Her eyelids fly open and her eyes look pleadingly into mine. I seal my mouth over hers as she tips over the edge, and she cries out against my mouth.

Hearing and feeling her come makes me impatient to give her that bliss all over again. Like a starved man, I shove down her sweatpants and her panties, tear them off, and rip off those little pink socks of hers, too. With a grunt, I hoist her up on the edge of the counter and drop to my knees between her thick thighs.

Her pussy is still pulsing from the orgasm I just gave her, wet and glistening, her inner thighs flushed as pink as her cheeks.

She's looking down at me, flustered and horny, her eyes simultaneously innocent and begging me to do every dirty thing to her on this kitchen counter.

"Jesus, look at you," I say. "Every last bit of you is so fucking pretty."

Her chest rises and falls as she breathes hard, watching me as I move my mouth between her legs.

I kiss her pussy. "And so sweet."

"*Warner*," she moans. "Just fuck me already."

"No. I need you dripping wet first." I wrap my hands around the backs of her heavy thighs and hold her legs open wider. I give her swollen pussy a few slow, long licks, then push my tongue inside of her, tasting her juices as they coat my tongue. She cries out, her thighs spasming in my hands. Oh, fuck, yes. I thrust my tongue in and out of her pussy a few more times, then pull it out and see with satisfaction that she's as wet as can be.

Ah, hell. A little more won't hurt. I close her swollen clit between my lips and suck it, then pop it out of my mouth and lap at her pussy, then go back to sucking on her clit, my hunger insatiable. She's more than ready for me, and I could plunge my cock into her right now, but I can't bear to pull my head out from between her legs until she comes for me again.

"Fuck!" she gasps. "Oh God. Oh *God*."

Her thighs start to shake and I smile around her clit. I suck the nub harder and she explodes against my lips.

In a daze, I pull my mouth from between her thighs, wipe my mouth off on the back of my hand, and tear down the zipper on my jeans. My cock springs out, rock hard and ready, sticky white pre-cum dripping from the tip. Vague thoughts about my lack of a condom float through my head as Melody wraps her bare legs around me and tells me it's okay, she's on the pill, we don't have to worry.

I guide the head of my cock to her slit and groan as I push into her hot tightness. Jesus Christ, she feels good. My cock throbs

as I push deeper into her, and I keep going until I'm most of the way in.

"Holy shit," Melody gasps, her voice muffled against my shirt. Her hands are clinging tightly onto my biceps.

"You okay?" I grunt.

"Uh huh. More than okay."

"Yeah? You like being stuffed full of cock, huh, sweetheart?" I start to thrust in and out of her, giving her slow but powerful strokes. "You want me to fill you up with cum?"

She whimpers and squeezes my arms tighter. "Yes."

"Just your pussy? Or that pretty mouth of yours, too?"

"My mouth, too."

"Good girl. That's what I like to hear." I increase my pace and start fucking her deeper, giving her the rest of my length. She's so tight it feels like I might blow my load with every stroke. "I know you're going to look so pretty sucking my cock."

She laughs. "Of course."

"I'm just sayin'."

"Yeah, well," she says, giving me a sultry look, "you look pretty good with your mouth between my legs, too."

"Eating your pussy is heaven." I punch my hips against her. "But this? Fucking you? It's beyond words."

She cups my face in her hands and pulls my lips down to hers. We're both panting, both sweaty and hot, our bodies on fire. "Come in me, Warner. Claim me. Mark me. Make me yours."

"You're already mine." I drive into her harder, almost punishingly so. "You were mine from the moment I laid eyes on you."

Her breathing goes shaky.

"I'm keeping you forever, sweet girl," I whisper, my voice low and hoarse.

She gasps for air, her body tensing around mine.

“Forever,” I rasp again.

She lets out a sob against my chest, her whole body tightening around me. With a groan, I shoot a load of cum into her, filling her up as she milks it out of me, our bodies and souls entwined. She’s mine. Mine. *Mine*. I’m never going to change my mind about that, never going to feel any different. I know this now, with more certainty than anything I’ve ever known to be true.

We were always destined to be together.



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MELODY

FIVE YEARS LATER

I hear Ginger's voice before I see her waving to me from her front yard.

"Hello, Melody, dear!" she calls out. "I have something for you!"

I just arrived back home from running a few errands. These days, with baby number two's due date fast approaching, I'm moving slower than normal and get exhausted incredibly easily. But I'm always happy to take a little time out of my day to say hello to Ginger. She and her husband are still doing well.

"Hi, Ginger," I greet her, smiling as she comes over to our front yard. When I see the gift she's carrying, I immediately shake my head. "Oh, you really didn't need to—"

"Yes, I did," she insists, pushing it into my hands. "I gave you one of these when Lily was born, and I'm going to continue the tradition with every other baby you have, too."

My heart warms, and I already know what's inside the box as I open it. As I knew there would be, there's a handmade baby blanket inside. It's gorgeous, a pattern knitted with the softest pale yellow yarn. "Oh, Ginger. It's *beautiful*. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome, dear. How are you feeling today?"

"Very pregnant."

She laughs. "The little one will be here before you know it. Anyway, I'll let you go. Say hello to Warner and Lily for me."

“I will, as long as you and Don come over for dinner tonight.”

She breaks into a grin. “You have a deal.”

Ginger and I part ways for now, and I head into the house, setting down my purse and the thoughtful gift on our dining table. When I call out that I’m home, my greeting is met with silence. The lack of response tells me exactly where my husband, daughter, and dog are.

I pad through the house to the back door and step out onto the porch. Sure enough, Warner and Lily are crouched down by one of the raised garden beds, and Ernie is lazing in the sun.

As the back door closes softly behind me, Warner looks up and smiles. “Hey, you. We’ll be done in a minute.”

“There’s no need to rush,” I say, walking over to see what they’ve been up to. The raised bed they’re working at has a bunch of little freshly planted seedlings in it. As Lily looks up at me, she beams with pride.

“Did you plant all of these, honey?” I ask.

“Yep! There’s carrots, and beets, and...” She looks to her father for help.

“Bell peppers,” he says.

“Bell peppers!” she echoes happily.

“Awesome,” I say. “It’s going to be so fun seeing everything grow.”

I watch, brimming with adoration for my daughter and my husband, as they finish planting the seedlings together. It doesn’t surprise me that gardening is something they’ve bonded over—I had a feeling that would be the case even before Lily was born. But their sweet relationship isn’t contained to the garden; Warner is the *best* dad, always making time for his daughter and making her laugh until she can hardly breathe. I’m in awe of him every day, and so grateful to have a man like him in my life.

Okay, so he’s still a grump at times, but honestly, I never want that part of him to totally go away.

A lot of things have changed in the past five years of our lives—like falling in love, getting married, and moving in together. Warner also decided to give therapy another shot, and actually found a therapist he likes. He goes once a week, and it's helped him a lot. I know his job is still tough, but he has better ways of handling the stress and strain of it now.

As for me, I scaled back to working part-time after Lily was born, and I'll be scaling back even more now that our family is about to expand again. We're hoping to have one more baby after this one, and *maybe* another one after that, too. Half the time, Warner is convinced he'll go crazy from all the noise, and the other half of the time, he tells me he wants to have as many babies with me as possible.

Whatever the future holds, I know we'll be happy together. Ever since that day five years ago in my kitchen, he's made sure I never have any doubts about the way he feels about me—whether it's a sweet *I love you* or the growliest, dirtiest whisper in my ear.

"All done!" Lily declares, rubbing the dirt from her hands on her gardening clothes. "Can I have a snack now, Mommy?"

"Absolutely, cutie."

Warner scoops our daughter into his arms. "C'mon, bug. Let's get cleaned up."

I call for Ernie, who perks up at the sound of his name, and the four of us head into the house together. As we're walking in, I notice some movement next door, and I glance over to see our new neighbors setting up a hammock in their yard.

"We really need to go introduce ourselves to the couple next door," I say to Warner.

"Yeah," he says with a light sigh. "I know."

I give him a playful swat on the arm. "Come on. In the last five years, *all* of the renters have been perfectly lovely. I'm sure this couple will be lovely, too."

"Six years," he says.

"What?"

“Six years. You forgot to include yourself.”

I break out into a smile and lean in to give him a kiss. “You’re sweet. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” He gives my ass a clandestine squeeze. “A hell of a lot.”

Then he goes to help Lily wash up, and I head into the kitchen to prepare us all something yummy to snack on. A few minutes later we meet around the kitchen island to indulge in the snack plate that I admittedly went a little overboard with.

“Raspberries!” Lily cries, grabbing at them with her tiny hands. “Oh, raspberries. You’re soooo yummy.”

I laugh and pop one into my mouth, too. Beside me, Ernie puts his paws up on Warner’s legs and gives him his best puppy-dog eyes, and Warner leans down to pick him up.

“I know, buddy,” Warner says. “It’s not fair, us getting a snack and you getting nothing. Hold on. I’ll get you a treat.”

Ernie wriggles with excitement, then starts to lick Warner’s face. Warner grimaces at first, but then sighs and gives in.

“Fine,” he says. “If you’re going to do it, do it.”

I can’t stop myself from laughing. More than anything, though, I’m filled with love for this man. I love the friendship we have, the life we’ve made, and the future we’re dreaming of together. Just this morning, even with me being bare-faced and messy-haired and very, *very* pregnant, he told me how obsessed he is with me still, and I felt it so deep in my soul that tears immediately rose in my eyes.

*I’m obsessed with you, too,* I told him.

*I mean it,* he said. *I’ll always feel this way.*

And so will I.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Hunt writes short, sexy, feel-good romances about irresistible men and the curvy heroines they can't live without. Kate is married to her high school sweetheart, unapologetically spoils her pets, and always has a love song stuck in her head.

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