

“bubbly and sizzling”
—an Apple Books best book



a real love novel by
Jessica Lemmon

EYE CANDY

A REAL LOVE NOVEL

JESSICA LEMMON



Eye Candy is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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jessicalemmon.com

PRAISE FOR JESSICA LEMMON

“...a bubbly and sizzling rom-com that doesn’t shy away from the realities of post-divorce life. We love a good friends-to-lovers romance, and we delighted at Vince wooing Jackie away from her mystery jogger. Vince and Jackie’s unwavering support for each other made this romance a sweet, heartfelt treat.”—**Apple Books Review (Best Book of the Month)**

“...a fun and funny romantic comedy about friends becoming lovers, with the added complication of an office romance. Swoon!”—**NPR (recommended read)**

This book made me smile from ear to ear.”—**Scandalicious Book Reviews**

“I can’t wait for the next book. This is the perfect summer read that should not be missed.”—**The Subclub Books**

“This was a really wonderful book to read! I liked how both characters start out as good friends, have seen each other through the worst (divorces), and then [their] feelings become much more. I can’t wait for...*Arm Candy!*”—**Books and Boys Book Blog**

“This is a fun friends-to-lovers romance that will suck you in from the start and having you laughing, your heart aching for love and your body tingling.”—**The Heathers’ Blog**

“This is the first novel in the Real Love series and what a great start. It’s enjoyable, frisky, and highly entertaining.”—**What’s Better Than Books?**

“A friends to lovers/office romance/kind of second chance contemporary story with a romantic comedy vibe.”—**Bobo’s Book Bank (five stars)**

“Sweet and Sexy, fun and witty. A true Summer Read... grab it, go sit by the pool and prepare to be amused.”—**Simply Love Book Reviews (Purest Delight award)**

“Friends-to-lovers story get your mojo going? Then, be sure to take a look at *Eye Candy*.”—**The Romance Reviews (Top Pick)**

“*Eye Candy* has a very rom-com feel to it that I enjoyed.”—**All About Romance**

“*Eye Candy* is a humorous and sexy friends-to-lovers and workplace romance. Jessica Lemmon entertained with the dialogue and interactions among a strong cast of characters. Ms. Lemmon created a nice balance of friendship and romance with good character development.”—**Harlequin Junkie**

“Such a cute romance between Jackie and Vince. A friends-turned-lovers story...I really enjoyed this one. Can’t

wait to read book two, *Arm Candy*. I'm hoping [in that] one Davis will find love. I would recommend this one to my romance book friends.”—**Island of Reading**

“*Eye Candy* was a very realistic, cute story. I enjoyed the writing, the characters and real-life issues between the two main characters. Phenomenal read.”—**Nay’s Pink Bookshelf (five stars)**

“I liked this book, I loved Vince.”—**A Crazy Vermonter’s Book Reviews**

“Sweet and sexy and oh so fun, Jessica Lemmon’s *Eye Candy* had me laughing out loud and swooning all at the same time.”—**New York Times bestselling author Tracy Wolff**

“Lemmon does it again! A smart, sexy rom-com with heart.”—**USA Today bestselling author Kate Meader**

“Truly the perfect romantic comedy—the banter made me grin, the sexual tension had me breathless, and the perfect happy ending left me smiling long after the book was done.”—**New York Times bestselling author Lauren Layne**

“This book had a very Christina Lauren feel to it. Very witty, sexy, and kept me wanting more with every page. I absolutely loved it.”—**USA Today bestselling author Sidney Halston**

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CHAPTER ONE

JACQUELINE

My office phone to my left purrs and I smile at it before I lift the receiver. It's 11:41 A.M. on a Tuesday, and I know who it is without looking. Kayla does this at least three times a week.

The second I hold the handset to my ear, she says, "Four-minute warning."

We're waiting for my mystery man to run by the window. Well, not *mine*, but she calls him mine and I let her, because nothing is safer than fiction.

"Thanks," I say. As if I don't already have an alarm set. I tapped the screen of my phone to silence the musical reminder just before she called.

"Now we wait."

As you can see, I'm not the only one watching for him.

Three minutes.

He's one of those guys who shouldn't be real. His upper half is shaped like an upside-down triangle: wide chest, broad shoulders, fantasy-grade muscle mass and physique. For a

terminally single woman consciously stocking her fantasy bank, he's a perfect candidate.

“What do you think he does for a living?” Kayla asks, her voice dreamy. She's married to a nice guy named Kevin and has a six-year-old special-needs son who is the greatest kid on the planet. I haven't met a lot of kids, but trust me when I say Kyle is amazing. And yes, they are one of *those* families. Kevin, Kayla, and Kyle. Kayla says that if she has a girl, her name will be Kendall.

It's all so sweet I could puke.

“Maybe he's military.” Another smile crests my mouth. Mainly because I know more than she knows I know, but I refuse to tell her as much. I already feel like a stalker watching him jog by my office window. If she knew I also watched him leave our apartment complex every morning, and that we ended up in line at the same Tim Hortons once, she'd do something horrible.

Like try to set me up with him.

“Military guys are punctual,” she agrees. “But I'm betting he's a nerdy type. An IT guy or something.”

“You're a webmaster. Are you projecting because it gives you hope that an IT guy might look like him?”

She ignores the jab and replies, “I've decided his name is Mark.”

“Why Mark?” My email box dings. It's a message from the president of the Brookdale Group, Wayne Wilson. I twist my lips and refocus on the conversation at hand.

“Because Mark is an approachable-sounding name,” Kayla says. “And you should approach him.”

Hell. No.

Not only is this dude an Adonis of the untouchable kind, but his name is *not* Mark. I don't know what his name is, but with the initials J.T. on his apartment mailbox, I'm sure neither of his names is Mark or has a Mark in it.

Plus, he doesn't look like a Mark.

"I know you think it's fun to live out my runner-guy fantasy with me, Kayla, but let's not have this cross into reality." Vince walks by my wide office window and I hold my breath, hoping he doesn't stop in for a leisurely chat. I normally have my door open but lately I've requested that, if my door is closed, no one interrupt without a knock. That new rule may or may not have coincided with the appearance of J.T. jogging by my window three weeks ago.

Don't judge me.

Vince is my friend and has been for the entirety of my time spent here at the Brookdale Group. When I started as a junior designer, he was married and completely unavailable. I was on the dating scene and totally would have upgraded to someone like Vince. Face it, the Internet matches I went out with were ones I grew to regret. As of one year ago, Vince was available, but I was no longer looking. Plus, he's one of my best friends. Since he's become a divorcé of the bitter variety, he and I have shared a lot of nights and beers. I listen to him complain about Leslie, and he buys me pizza. I am firmly Team Vince.

He gives me a flat-mouthed grimace and rolls his eyes. I smile on the outside but flinch on the inside, hoping he doesn't know I'm waiting for my runner to jog by again today.

Then he points outside and taps the face of his watch, and I know he knows. Thankfully, he bypasses my door without

knocking.

Whatever. He has his pastimes; I have mine.

“Whoever he is, I think you should talk to him,” Kayla continues in my ear. Funny, I almost forgot I was holding the phone.

I laugh, and it sounds fearful with a touch of desperation. “Just walk outside the building and strike up a conversation? About what? His average heart rate? How fast he can run a mile?”

“Why not?”

Because I’d die a thousand tiny deaths. Which makes me think of the way the French use a similar term for an orgasm. Which makes me remember how long it’s been since I’ve had one. Which in turn makes me think of having sex with the mysterious J.T., and that is not a bad thought at all.

Except for everything that would have to lead up to that point. Talking to him. Going on a date. The awkward first-date/front-door drop off. Me stripping off my clothes in my apartment or his and praying he isn’t into anything weird like bedroom acrobatics. I cringe.

Horrifying.

“Vince is coming in here,” Kayla whispers.

“Yeah, he bypassed me.”

“Lucky,” she whispers, and then I’m hung up on.

My smile fades and I drop my chin in my hand and sigh, watching out the window to see if the Runner makes his appearance today.

Just to clear a few things up: I'm not afraid of men, or of good-looking men. Vince is *great*-looking and I can't tell you how many evenings we've spent sacked out on his couch or mine over the past ten months or so. I'm also VP of a nice-sized marketing firm in downtown Columbus, Ohio, so I'm adept at speaking to men of every age, creed, and body type. I don't blush or get tongue-tied, and I can tell a dirty joke without embarrassing myself. But dating?

Yikes.

Ever since I reentered the dating scene after my divorce three years ago, I have been allergic to dating. And I've gone out enough to know exactly how it goes.

In between the awkward texts (or phone calls if he's an older guy) are awkward get-to-know-you discussions followed by awkward kisses that don't often send sparks into the air. The last guy I dated? Totally sparkless. Attractive, successful, nice suit. Not the worst kisser I've experienced, but definitely in the bottom ten. You know the sound a lit match makes when it's dropped into a cup of water? That fizzle pretty much sums up every date I had with him. Breaking it off was a mercy killing. Trust me on that one.

There's probably something wrong with J.T. the jogger, I think as I watch for him out the window. Why would such a beautiful specimen be single? I guess he's single. There's no ring on his finger glinting in the sun when he runs by, and when I noticed him at my complex after I saw him jogging on a Saturday, I also noticed there was no one else coming or going from his apartment, as far as I could tell.

Shut up—I am not stalking him. I happened to recognize the red shorts—the ones that mold to his thighs of steel and make a woman think ribald thoughts. When I saw him in my

complex, I was sure he was a mirage. My work-time fantasy following me home. But nope, it was him. His eyebrows closed in with effort, mouth open as he breathed, zero percent body fat, and all of him moving like a machine.

I don't stare out my apartment window on the weekends or anything.

I do have some boundaries.

But here, he's a guy who runs by a public building on a city sidewalk, and I have every right to turn my head at 11:45 A.M. to see if he's going to jog by or have a skip day. He had a skip day yesterday and I was notably disappointed.

Which was why Kayla's suggestion of talking to him horrified me.

Then I see a flash of red and oh, God, oh, yes. Yes. *Yes. Yes.*

Captivated, I stare out the window at his perfect form. Slightly longish golden-blond hair bouncing with every stride. Calf muscles straining. Thighs testing the limits of those red shorts. Shirtless, his glistening pecs on display. He's truly beautiful. A modern-day statue of David. He's not wearing sunglasses today and squints as he runs by, and what's this? He turns his head as if he's looking at me. He's not. The windows are reflective. But I imagine he is. I imagine that subtle glance, probably to check his form, is instead meant for me. A smile and a wink to me, his girlfriend, whom he pleasures four—no wait—*five* times a week...

I blink as he jogs out of sight. Then I'm off my chair, cheek pressed to the window to watch as he vanishes around the corner.

He's gone.

It's always over way too fast.

"Truly pathetic, Butler," I hear behind me. It's Vince, using my last name, as per his usual.

I swirl around and fix him with a look of pure fury. He's a VP too, by the way. Did I mention that? Last year when the vice president quit, two of us were promoted to handle the workload in tandem. I guess that was better than one of us leaving the other behind.

"What does the sign say?" I bark, pointing at my ajar office door.

Vince frowns, looks at it, then reads, `KNOCK IF THIS IS CLOSED`.

"And did you? Knock?" I fold my arms.

"Yes, actually." He sticks his fingers into the front pockets of his snug, well-fitting pair of jeans. He always wears dark jeans, a black belt, and a pair of leather shoes. Button-down and tie. He gets away with denim because our company president encourages free spirits and creativity...in the men who work here. Meanwhile, the women are expected to look the part of the professional, so I'll be over here in my silk shirt and pencil skirt and stilettos if you need me. Such is life as a human with XX chromosomes.

"You were too busy admiring Golden Boy to hear me."

"I don't know what you're talking about." I crane my chin, because nothing says "I'm not lying through my teeth" like a jutted chin.

Vince walks over to the window and points at a cheek-shaped smudge on the otherwise perfect glass. "What's this?"

"I...fell asleep. Long night."

He grins and a rare blush steals across my cheeks. Not because he's attractive—though he is. In a scamplike, puckish way. Since he was always off limits, it's easy to forget he might be someone I'd look at twice if circumstances were different. If he hadn't been so completely gone for his wife when I met him. A dart of pain shoots through the center of my chest at the thought. Leslie leaving shattered him. Whenever I think about those first six months, and how angry and hurt Vince was, I want to mail her an envelope full of glitter.

No, seriously. It's a thing. Have you ever tried to get glitter out of carpet? I have. I used to host craft night at my place. You find shiny little specks for months. *Months.*

"You fell asleep," Vince repeats flatly, giving me the slowest blink ever. "When are you going to admit you have a schoolgirl crush on that muscle-bound jerk?"

"Mark is not a jerk," I blurt.

"His name is Mark?" Vince winces. I backtrack.

"No. That's what Kayla calls him. His name is J.T."

"Do you know why guys use initials as their names?" He smirks, cocky.

I prop my hands on my hips and wait.

"One of two reasons." Vince holds up a finger. "One, he's either too lazy or stupid to spell it, or two, both names are embarrassing. Like"—he pauses, both fingers out like a peace sign as he studies the ceiling before finishing—"Judson Taylor."

I drop my arms. "You think his name is Judson Taylor?"

“Or”—another dramatic pause, only one finger elevated this time—“Jaundice Toe...jam.”

I can't help it. I burst out laughing, holding my stomach with one arm as I double over. When I recover and push my hair behind my ears, Vince is smiling, pleased with himself. This is why we're friends. He pulls me out of my why-so-serious, and I make him talk about his feelings. We're good for each other.

“Leave J.T. alone,” I say, swiping the moisture from my eyes.

“Jaundice.”

“His name could be Jerry.”

“Or it could be Jeremiah. *The Bullfrog*.”

“Vince!” I laugh his name this time and he gives me a reprieve.

“Okay, fine. But seeing you like this is killing me, Butler. You should be out there, living life to the fullest! Carpe diem and all that bullshit.” He gestures to the walls of my office, decorated with cliché motivational posters.

“Hey, shut up. They work.”

“You like that guy,” he says, serious now. “You should talk to him.”

“Not you too.” I deflate, sinking into my ergonomic office chair with the grace of a melting popsicle on a July day.

Vince comes to me, leans over my desk with one hand flat on the surface, and says, “What would Mel Gibson do?”

“Modern-day-drunkard Gibson or *Lethal Weapon* Gibson?”

He gives me a look that tells me that after our *Lethal Weapon* marathon last weekend I should know the answer to that question.

“He’d drink liquor and cry over his dead wife,” I answer.

“Butler.” Vince’s voice takes on a gentle quality. “You can do *anything*. The only reason you and I share VP is because Wayne Wilson is a chauvinist ass. I’m doing my best to get fired.” He gestures to his casual work clothes. “Want me to roll my sleeves so my tattoo shows at the meeting?”

He cuffs his shirt and starts rolling, revealing the ink on his forearm. I reach up and tug his shirtsleeve down. His tattoos are sexy in a disturbing way. I’m not allowed to find Vince sexy. Not the ink on his arms or the tumble of his dark hair over his forehead or the way his long-lashed eyelids shield his blue eyes when he smirks. We’re friends, and I refuse to allow a rogue wave of female hormones to wash that away. I like being his friend.

“Don’t get fired on my account,” I say, standing and grimacing at the shape of my cheek smearing the window. “I’d have to do all your monthly reports.”

I turn back to see him wink and smile. I can’t deny he’s attractive when he does his “aw, shucks” routine.

“Rats,” he says, his voice more gentle than before. “Foiled again.”

CHAPTER TWO

VINCE

No one does girl-next-door pretty quite like Jacqueline Butler. Her wavy brown hair drapes over her shoulders, her figure small but strong, her style of dress classy, never trendy.

Leslie wasn't like that.

And before you accuse me of pining over Butler because she's *not* like my ex-wife, I assure you, my attraction to Jackie has nothing to do with the fact that she *doesn't* wear nine-hundred-dollar shoes or have her nails done weekly.

Besides, I'm not pining. But lately I have started *noticing*. I can't help it. The more she came over to my house postdivorce, the more distracted I became by her simple sexiness. She is the kind of girl who eats a slice of pizza with gusto, and we often fight over the last slice—or *square*, if she makes me get one of those skinny excuses for pizza from the local joint. But after a few months of steady pity dating, where she came over to spend time with me to make sure I wasn't fashioning a noose, I started seeing Jackie, my friend, as Jackie, hot girl I'd like to spend more time with.

Notice I didn't say "fuck." I'd never fuck Jackie.

She's not the fucking type. She's the making-love type, and I've started wondering if Jackie might be a girl I'd like to make love to. However, that would require a date, and she is completely against dating. Plus, she sees me as a nonsexual object. Like a pen...or a shoehorn.

I know I can get her to see me as more, but first she has to agree to start dating. Who better to set her up with than the superhuman who runs by the office every day? I figure he's a douche (likely), and I also figure even if he isn't, I can convince her that he is. I'm persuasive, you know. I didn't become VP of marketing by possessing a set of balls alone.

My plan serves a purpose other than hurting my best friend's feelings. First, it'll get her over the "no dating ever" phase she's mired in, and second, she'll start seeing me as potential dating material.

She's not a rebound. I had a few of those. Okay, okay—*several*. Getting back into the game required a one-night stand or two, and I wasn't shy about it. I never told Jackie, and maybe it's because, though I wouldn't admit it then, I liked her the whole time. Some part of me must have known that I'd want her later, and I don't plan on telling her that those girls helped mend my heart as much as Jackie's lounging on my couch for the past several months.

If I'd gone there with Jackie after the divorce, it would have been disastrous. I couldn't sleep with the girl who saw me misting over while grieving my failed marriage. I needed to be confident and strong at a time when my insides were cracking. That's what those one-night girls were for. Band-Aids. They never called, and I never called, so the arrangement worked well. Or I guessed it did, anyway. My

best bud, Davis, says that things went well, and he's the expert.

I spend the next hour-long meeting jotting notes in the margin of a sales report. And doodling a guy running. I think about drawing him with a tiny penis, but in case our head of sales happens to see it, I resist. I don't want to have to explain myself to Todd over there.

He sends me a scathing glare. He wanted VP worse than I did, so when two people outranked him instead of just one, he was super pissed. I send him a smile and he looks away. *Whatever, prick.*

As far as plans go for winning Jackie, I'm not sure mine will take any awards. As I leave the meeting, promising Marcy I'll consider her idea to streamline the Bombay account, I have the first inkling of doubt. Not about Marcy's idea—it's a good one—but about my scheme. What if it backfires? What if Thick Neck is Mensa smart, fun, and an all-around nice guy who lives up to Jackie's every expectation?

After brief consideration, I shake my head.

Nah. No way is that guy anything other than an empty husk with a physique that's overkill.

I dismiss myself—that meeting marking the end of the workday—and grab my gym bag from under my desk. I went to the gym at lunch, hitting the weights rather than going out for wings with the rest of the sales department. Not because I'm suddenly challenged by Tiny Penis Running. I've always worked out. It clears my head and keeps me from wending down the dark and dangerous road and ending up as a middle-aged paunchy guy if I let myself go.

Fine. You got me.

The gym commitment may not have started at the divorce—I've always been a casual worker-outer—but it's definitely increased since then. Which is maybe why Running Guy sort of pisses me off? Not that I expect Jackie to stop and take notice of my toned abs or increased biceps, but...did she notice?

I'm not sure. That should have been an "I don't care," but therein lies the problem with liking your best friend.

I got the house in the divorce. A huge, hulking structure in the burbs that was too big for the two of us and way too big for just me. I considered adopting a pack of golden retrievers to keep me company, or to at least use the neglected bedrooms, but then I'd have a fur-covered family and chores, and what if one of the girls I brought home was allergic?

Now, though, my conquests on hold and my sights set on my co-vice president, I consider a dog. Jackie likes dogs. I know because she's always moaning to me about how she wanted one "so bad" but there's a "no dogs allowed" policy at her apartment complex.

The moment I pull into my driveway, I receive a text from Davis on my phone that's one word, no question mark: **Beer**. Because he's been my best friend for nearly the entirety of my life, I know this means he's at McGreevy's Pub. It's not an invitation or a status update. It's a call to arms. I text him with a number and part of a word: **15 min**.

I arrive thirteen minutes later, thanks to running that yellow light on Sixth and snagging a coveted parking spot at the curb. McGreevy's is downtown, next to a swanky coffee shop called Three O'Clock, an antiques-slash-bookstore, and a plethora of other boring businesses like banks, insurance companies, and a Realtor's office.

McGreevy's Pub isn't swanky or boring. The pub has a backdrop of warm wood and only a few television sets hung overhead. Inside, I spot Davis on a barstool, neck craned, watching CNN. Not sports but CNN. Despite the fact that he works from home as a stock analyst, he's in a suit—an expensive one—and his tie is still knotted at his neck. I'm wearing my jeans and button-down, but I busy myself rolling up my sleeves. It's too damn warm for a suit.

“Hey,” I greet him.

Davis, face pinched, doesn't look away from the TV's scrolling news. “Hey.”

I watch the numbers and letters, all foreign to me, for a silent minute. Finally Davis blinks out of his trance and turns his head to address me properly.

“The fuck are you doing?” he asks, the deep concentration wiped from his face like it was never there. “Where's your beer?”

“I walked in sixty seconds ago,” I inform him. “I haven't seen the bartender yet.”

“Grace!” Davis shouts. A bartender with bright red hair, a ton of black eyeliner, and at least one visible tattoo of roses and leaves on her shoulder and trickling down her arm gives him a smile. Her lips are painted a similar shade as her hair, and a tiny diamond winks from the side of one nostril.

She smiles at Davis for an extra beat before flicking bright green eyes over at me. “Saddle up, partner,” she says, gesturing to the barstool under my palm. I sit as she requests and she leans on the bar, arms spread, white bar towel in one hand. “What'll you have?”

I order a draft beer and she moves away from me to pour it.

“She’s new,” I tell Davis.

“Fucking hot,” he says with a reverent head shake. “I bet she’s a wild creature in bed.”

I have to chuckle, not because he’s wrong but more because she’s so the opposite of his type it’s not even funny. The last woman he dated wore an honest-to-God string of pearls over what was usually a pale pink shirt. Davis chose women who were professionals, not bartenders with piercings and ink.

He levels a look at me, a contemplative one, after Grace delivers my beer and heads to the opposite end of the bar. “She’s what I need after Clara.”

“Wait.” I hold out a hand to stop him even though he doesn’t look interested in saying more. “Things have ended with Clara?” They started dating two weeks ago.

He shrugs. “They’re all the same.”

The ones he dates, maybe. “Not true.”

I take a hearty drink of my beer, enjoying the first cold sip to celebrate the end of a very long day.

“The ones you date,” I amend. “*They’re* all the same.” Clara, Lillian, Bridget. Petite, waiflike blondes with expensive handbags and shoes. “They wear pastels like they took an oath to do so.”

“I like dainty women.” Davis’s eyes trek back to Grace, who throws her head back and lets out a bawdy laugh. “And yet that one...”

I can't deny Grace is gorgeous. Her white tank top is rimmed with lace, offset by the bright red, pink, and green of her tattoo. Her black shorts show off great legs. She's wearing flat tennis shoes, and in combo with the rest of her, I can't help thinking Davis is way out of his league.

"Ask her out," Davis says to me.

I nearly choke on my beer. After processing his bizarre request, I say, "You want me to ask out the girl you like?"

"Yes. Someone should. I can't."

"Why the hell not?"

He gestures at his suit like it's obvious. "She'd shoot me down. I've been coming in here a week and a half—without you, by the way."

"I had to work." And hang out with Jackie, but he doesn't need to know that.

"Every time I'm in here, she's painfully polite and then wanders off and rewards someone else with that laugh of hers." His face scrunches like it did earlier when he was watching CNN. "She thinks I'm a stiff."

"She probably doesn't think of you at all," I say with a touch of bitterness, my mind on my own object of obsession.

"Thanks, buddy." He grimaces at me and then tips his beer to his lips. We both study the TV, him seeing his life and livelihood, me seeing pixels, fonts, and a woman in an ill-fitting royal blue suit.

We drink our beers.

We don't talk anymore.

That's the way dudes do it.

CHAPTER THREE

JACQUELINE

“Not this again!” Vince drops his head back on his sofa like I just delivered the weight of the world to his lap.

“What? It’s a perfectly valid point.”

He rolls his head to the side and regards me, his mouth flinching above an angled jaw. The stubble is a new thing he’s trying. Not a bushy beard, mind you, but flecks of stubble that make his lips stand out. I swallow thickly and search for the thread of thought I lost when he fixed me with very blue eyes.

“I stand by my argument,” I say.

“Butler. In no civilized country in the world is it ‘trendy’ to *not* shave your legs.”

“Not true.” I hold up a finger. “French women don’t shave.” I frown in thought. “Or they didn’t used to, anyway.”

He eyes my legs, bare since I wore a dress tonight. It’s a perfectly harmless summer frock, but when his eyes coast along my body, I feel...weird. Self-conscious, I tug at the hemline cresting my knees.

“What are we watching?” he asks abruptly, pushing himself off the sofa like he has a bottle rocket in his ass. We’ve gone from opening beers to talking about work to discussing leg shaving, and now he’s back to our old MO.

“I’m tired of watching movies,” I whine, sinking deeper into his overstuffed love seat.

He pauses at the cabinet next to his TV where he keeps his profuse DVD collection. “Okay.” He crosses his arms. “What do you want to do?”

I shrug, feeling warm. I glance at my half glass of beer, not understanding the sudden onslaught of rampant hormones. Could be because of what happened this morning.

As I was leaving my apartment, head down, digging through my purse to see if I threw my phone in there, I heard a deep voice say, “Excuse me.”

I looked up to find *him*. The Runner. J.T., or whatever. He was breathing heavily and wearing a pair of black shorts, his chest bare and glistening with sweat. Then he smiled. I stood staring like an idiot, as stupefied as if I’d stumbled upon a unicorn.

He nodded and took a wide arc around me, and I stood rooted in place, gawping in his wake. And now, my pride bruised and my ego shattered, I’m apparently transferring my attraction onto Vince.

“Guess what happened to me today,” I blurt, almost desperately. The burn of my cheeks warns my brain not to go on with my tale of humiliation, but there’s no choice. Either I vanquish this demon or it lives in me, festering, while I develop misdirected hots for my best friend. Before Vince answers, I say, “I ran into the runner guy at my apartment

complex. Not literally. But he stopped in front of me and smiled and excused himself.”

Vince’s face scrunches. He sits on the couch again, resting his elbows on his knees. “You didn’t lead with the story about the guy you have a crazy-stalker crush on speaking to you?”

I shake my head. “I didn’t say anything back, so it didn’t seem relevant.”

Vince nods, but his look of confusion remains.

“Like, *nothing*,” I reiterate. “He spoke and I stood there, mute.”

“Smooth.” Vince reclaims his beer and takes a drink.

I sag further, hoping his loveseat will swallow me and deliver me to another world entirely, where I’m confident and attractive and not hunched over my purse digging for my phone when the man of my dreams jogs by.

“Wait. He was at your apartment complex?”

“He lives there. Didn’t you wonder how I knew his name was J.T.?” I ask with my “duh” face. “I spotted it on his apartment mailbox.”

“No. I was too alarmed by the fact that his name was two letters to ask.” Vince’s tone is angry instead of playful. “But this will make things easier.”

“Easier for what?” Now I’m sweating.

“For you to talk to him. He lives around the corner. Secure the date you’ve been dreaming of.” Vince, pleased with himself, leans an arm on the sofa and polishes off his beer.

“Shut up.”

“It’s your life, Butler,” he says, standing. “But you have to end this no-dating streak unless you’re planning on entering the nunnery.”

“You’re one to talk!” I shout behind him as he disappears into the kitchen. I hear the fridge door open, a bottle cap pop off and hit the tile. “You’ve been a monk since Leslie left!”

He pokes his head around the corner and hoists one dark eyebrow.

“If I have to do it, you have to do it,” I whine.

We share a mild standoff that ends with Vince swaggering into his living room. Finally he gives me a nod.

“Okay, Butler. You ask out Jaundice, and I’ll ask someone out too. Deal?”

VINCE

What the fuck are you doing?

Like I know? I panicked.

She mentioned that I was a monk, and I’d rather not let her know how untrue that statement was.

Plus, it’s not like I’ve spent the past three days hatching a plot like an evil dictator with a Persian cat in my lap. I doodled my idea, thought about it, and then...life happened. I got busy.

I drink half my beer in a few deep swallows before going back into my living room, where Jackie has become one with

my loveseat. Seriously, she resembles one of the gray cushions, except her gray dress has little yellow flowers on it.

Looking at her there, I wonder if I should correct her assumption that I've been monklike since Leslie left. Since she looks like a deflated balloon, I decide against it.

"Listen," I say, in boss mode. "It's not a big deal when you think about it. You've seen this guy, what, once in person? A hundred times through a tinted office window? What do you have to lose? If you say 'Hey, let's grab dinner,' and he says 'Sorry, I've got a girlfriend,' your life will return to normal. You can pine out the window, never talking to him, whether he's single or not."

Jackie sits up, tugging her dress again—why the obsession with hiding her kneecaps tonight is a mystery—and nods. Her back goes straight. Chin up. A look of fierce, sheer willpower alters her expression until she closely resembles a man-eater.

"You're right," she says, picking up her beer. "What do I have to lose?"

Even though I'm the one internally deflating now, I give her a nod of encouragement. "Atta girl."

"Except for five pounds."

"Butler," I growl in exasperation. She's tirelessly trying to lose the five pounds I couldn't point out if you held a gun to my head.

"He's an Adonis."

"He runs," I mutter, peeved.

"He's godlike."

And I'm going to puke.

“Go running with me,” she says, her eyes lighting with interest.

I feel my lips compress. She shouldn't have to change what she does or how she looks for anyone.

“I should probably get a tan.” She runs a palm up her bare arm.

No, she shouldn't. Jackie has beautiful skin. Soft skin. On the nights we have movie marathons, we inevitably end up on the same couch—the one I'm sitting on—migrating ever closer because the middle cushion is worn. By the fourth hour or so, we're usually shoulder to shoulder, shoes off, hands in the same popcorn bowl.

I think of her with this J.T. guy in a similar situation, nothing stopping him from leaning over and sampling her lips, and jealousy tears through me.

“Yes. Running. Tanning. Be your best you.” I frown. She can't pretend to be someone she's not forever, so if she snags this guy with fake her and then drops the pretense, he'll bail.

I'm being unfair, rooting against her like this, but I can't help it. I have a dog in the race—a cherished outcome. I want Jackie on my couch. I want her shoes on my floor. Her beer bottle on my coffee table. I want to be the guy who leans over and kisses her.

But timing is everything. She can't see past Hard Body yet, so my job for the time being is to push her toward him at the same time I'm working my wiles on her. It'll be a juggle, but I can do it.

“Okay.” She rubs her hands together like she does before our strategy meetings at work. “What about you? Who are you going to ask out?”

I temporarily forgot this part of the equation. “Uhh...”

“Your first foray into the dating world needs to be a girl who is nice. Who will listen.”

Wrong. Wrong, *wrong*. The first foray needs to be a shallow, slightly drunk girl whose name you can't remember in the morning. Except I remember names. One of them was Meghan. With an *h*, she'd told me. She was cute. Not forever material, but a nice reminder that I still had skills in the bedroom.

“I don't know, Butler. Sounds like a recipe for a rebound to me.” I drink from my beer bottle.

“Hmm.” Her brow crinkles as she thinks this over.

“Who was the first guy you dated after your divorce?” Jackie joined the club a few years before I did. She was fresh off her ex-husband when she started as a junior designer at the firm. We were friendly then, but not friends. I was infatuated with Leslie and my job in equal measures, though later my ex argued that the split was more seventy-thirty, with her bringing up the rear.

“Clark.”

“Clark?” I drink more beer as I digest this sad fact. “Like Clark Kent? Or Clark Griswold from *National Lampoon's Vacation*?”

“Like Clark Jeffries, sales guy at a mattress factory.”

“Oh-ho!” I can't help myself. I laugh.

“Stop! He was...nice.”

“I bet. Was he also fifty?”

“He was my age. He was a salesman. He took me for a drink at a cosmopolitan bar.”

“Bet you loved that.” Jackie likes beer. Or wine. Rarely liquor. She says it makes her do crazy things, which sounded intriguing the first time I heard it. A girl tells a guy she gets “crazy” after cocktails, he immediately fills his spank bank with dirty, naughty images involving riding crops and masks. Not so with Jackie. Once she got drunk on peach schnapps and toilet-papered her neighbor’s horse.

“I had *one* cosmo,” she says now, “well outside of the animal-decorating zone, and then I blubbered the rest of the evening. We were supposed to go to dinner and a movie following, but instead we stayed at the bar, kept drinking, and ate tiny little appetizers at twenty bucks a plate.”

“Let me guess.” I have this down. “He asked you to pay.”

“He didn’t!” she announces brightly. “He paid the entire bill, listened to my divorce woes, and drove me home. Then he dropped me at my front door and kissed me good night.” Her face takes on a wistful quality that I don’t like. “He never called me again, and I’m sure we were both relieved.”

The wistfulness turns to hurt, and if there is one emotion *I can’t even* on Jackie, it’s hurt. Seeing her hurt slices me open and makes me want to avenge her honor. Even with Clark the mattress salesman who treated her A-OK.

I stand and move to the loveseat to sit next to her. Hand on her knee, I give her a smile that she returns.

“He’s out there, Butler. He may be this running guy, or he may be someone else, but the guy who appreciates you for all you are, all I know you to be, is out there. And he’s dying to

treat you right and hear your problems and love you the way you deserve to be loved.”

Her searching brown eyes make me feel like I swallowed a cinder block. I silently ask myself if I could be that guy for her, and to be honest, I’m not sure. All I know is that the last time we were slouched in my living room watching *Lethal Weapon 4*, there was a moment where it seemed appropriate to kiss my only female friend.

It freaked me out as much as it excited me.

“Thanks, Vince.” She pats my hand in that “ol’ buddy, ol’ pal” way and says, “I’m going to find you a nice girl to ask out. I have friends who would like you.”

I don’t want to date her friends. I know about Girl Code. One of Leslie’s friends, Tricia, told me after the divorce that she’d liked me for years, but since she’d known Leslie since the sixth grade, I was off limits. I should mention there is no way, even in the face of a zombie apocalypse, that I would ever date Tricia, but her words resonated. Girlfriends stick together.

“No, don’t,” I tell Jackie.

“Why not? I know lots of nice girls.”

“I, uh...” Why not, indeed? “I need to do this.” I gesture to myself with a hand on my chest. “For me. You know? Because I am worthy of...um..”

God. This is such bullshit.

“*Earning* the woman I ask out,” I finish, proud of my ability to think on the spot. “The process is important. Trust the process.”

Jackie purses her lips in thought but then miraculously buys my bullshit. Thank God for her belief in those generic motivational posters. “All right. You go get ’em, tiger. Jogging, then? Tomorrow?”

“Sure. A Sunday jog. Sounds great.”

“In that case, I’m going to leave you the contents of my beer and go home.”

“What? Why?”

But she’s already up and angling her long-strapped bag over her torso. “Because I have to make a plan. A chart. A spreadsheet. Download an app. Find my workout clothes.”

“I didn’t agree to jog so we could lose our Saturday-night movie fest, Butler. I agreed because you are harebrained and slightly misguided, but as your friend I support your Bugs Bunny–like schemes.”

I’m one to talk. My own scheme more resembles Wile E. Coyote’s.

“So long, Doc,” she quotes Bugs, throwing a hand and opening my front door. Then she’s gone and I’m alone with my beer and the remainder of hers, wondering what I just agreed to.

CHAPTER FOUR

VINCE

Watching Jackie run is painful. Mostly for my erection. Do you know how uncomfortable it is to sport a boner while jogging? My only saving grace is that my shorts are baggy, unlike hers.

Hers are molded to her ass. Spandex, pink with a white stripe down each leg. And she's wearing a sports bra with a sliced tank top over it. I can see so much of her skin, I'm having trouble concentrating on anything but the part of me demanding to make himself known.

"I'm...awful...at...this," she pants, coming to a clumsy stop, her ponytail drooping to one side. She tugs the elastic free and pulls her fingers through her hair. "Dumb. Dumb idea."

I come to a stop too, nowhere near as out of breath as she is. I can run ten miles. We've only gone a few blocks from my house.

"I don't know why we didn't do this at your apartment," I argue. Again.

“Because! I don’t want him to see me like this!”

Her full lips are parted, breasts heaving as she sucks in another breath. Her cheeks have a pink hue and are slightly damp with perspiration. I agree with her. I don’t want him seeing her like this either. She looks like she just sweated it out between the sheets, and the very idea makes me wonder what sounds she makes during sex.

High, gaspy ones, or is she a screamer? I bite down on the edge of my lip as I imagine Jackie screaming my name in my ear as I ride her from—

“...give up, do you?” She has her fists on her hips like Wonder Woman and eyes me impatiently.

“Give up what?”

“I swear. Men never listen. There’s no sense in my asking J.T. out because he’ll just say ‘What? Were you talking?’”

“Your man voice needs work,” I say instead of the truth. That I wasn’t listening because I was having a sexual fantasy about her while we stand in front of Riley Mason’s house. Riley steps outside now, dressed in a short skirt and a top that is cut really, really low. Riley was one of Leslie’s wine-night friends, and she’s about fifteen years older than me.

“Vincent,” she calls, her voice dipping. “You have a friend.”

Jackie smiles at me knowingly.

“Jackie, Riley. Riley, Jackie,” I introduce. “Jackie and I work together.”

“Nice to meet you.” Riley sets down a watering can—empty by the sound of the hollow *clunk* when it hits the porch.

I wonder if her plants need watering or if she came out here because her nose was “bothering” her.

I’m betting the latter.

“You too,” Jackie says.

Riley’s glance flits from Jackie to me. “They say the couple that works out together stays together. Is it true?”

She’s fishing, and Jackie knows it. I may not have told Jackie about my string of one-nighters, but I did mention that after Leslie left, Riley asked me out repeatedly. She brought over casseroles topped with Doritos and once delivered a bottle of pink wine for us to share. I accepted the food but never the booze, and finally stopped answering the door. Riley did not adhere to Girl Code.

“Oh, no, we’re not dating.” Jackie flashes me a shit-eating grin. “He’s as free as a bird. We’re friends. Coworkers. He’s trying to help me get in shape for a date.”

“Really?” Interest blooms in Riley’s eyes.

“And I for mine,” I chime in before I’m forced to recite any number of polite refusals.

“Oh.” Riley’s smile vanishes. “Best of luck to you both.” She wanders inside, leaving the watering can behind. I have my answer about the plants.

Without discussing it, Jackie and I start back to my house, our pace settling into a stride.

“Why not her?” asks my insane coworker. “She’s gorgeous.”

“She’s overbearing. And too old for me.”

“That’s a sexist thing to say.” Hands on her hips again, Jackie scolds me. “If I wanted to date a man ten years my senior, I would.”

“First of all, she’s fifteen years my senior. Secondly, you would date a forty-year-old like Sergio?” I say of the production manager at work.

“*Not* Sergio.” She makes a face. “But a nice, *normal* guy of a certain age, sure.” She shrugs. It’s cute. “Why not?”

“Well, I would date an older woman too. I mean, if Riley were normal. Besides, I think she and Leslie are still in the same spinning class.” I hazard a glance over my shoulder to see Riley’s front room curtain twitch and then drop. Nuttier than a fruitcake, that one.

“That’s a definite ‘no,’ then. I didn’t realize she and Leslie were friends.”

“Yeah, hard to believe Leslie kept any of them after the shit she pulled.” *Yowch*. Been a while since bitter divorced guy crawled out to grumble about the state of the world.

Jackie loops her arm around mine and suddenly I’m not so sad I let that one out. Knowing what divorce feels like, she has always offered silent support. She didn’t tell me to get over it or to “get back out there.” She supported me and she listened. Like she does now.

“I don’t know why I said that,” I admit. “I’m not angry with her any longer.”

Jackie nods.

“It’s like you told me once. It’s a wound that never healed.” We walk a few more steps before I turn my attention to her. “Did you? Heal?”

She loops her other arm around mine and we slow our pace. “Lex hurt me pretty bad, so no. I don’t think I’m fully healed. But I believe it’s possible. Once I find the one who understands me, doesn’t judge me. Once I lose myself in someone else, I hope I can forgive him, if not forget about him.”

Lex cheated on her. Just once, with his personal assistant. He fell in love with another woman, ditched Jackie, and as soon as their marriage was dissolved, he married his PA. Leslie left me, but she didn’t cheat. Who knows what I’d be like if her betrayal had been that bad.

“Sorry, Butler.” I put my hand over both of hers.

We finish walking to my house in silence.

JACQUELINE

The first time I saw Vince, I was fresh-faced and, since Lex had left me so recently, uncharacteristically shy. Everything about me shrank after I learned why he left. He waited until I finished my college classes, which I guess was polite, but didn’t stick around to make sure I had a job before he bailed.

Vince was one of the first people to greet me at the firm. I felt an instant kinship with him. He had kind eyes, which Lex did *not* have, and confidence preceded him. In meetings, whenever he presented a marketing or design idea, Vince did it with humor and grace, never explaining or excusing himself if someone didn’t agree with him.

I was blown away at the idea you could own your life with such confidence. So I did. I dropped my shy side into the incinerator. Just when I found my mojo, Vince lost his. Leslie left and I watched him turn into the old me. He *shrank*.

We were friends by then, so it wasn't a stretch to offer to come over to his house with a bucket of fried chicken and a six-pack of beer. I'll never forget when he opened the door, saw my offerings, and laughed. "Isn't this supposed to be pints of ice cream and nail polish?"

He didn't pout or whine, but he didn't pretend he wasn't hurt. I liked that he confided in me. I knew he also confided in his best guy friend, Davis. Even though Davis is kind of an ass, he helped Vince through the get-drunk phase of his depression, while I helped him through the dispense-your-feelings part.

"Refill, Jacqueline?" Davis asks me now.

My wineglass is empty, and I promised myself before I arrived at McGreevy's I'd only have one before going home to work out.

"She's dieting." Vince sends me a pointed glance.

"I'm not. I want to look good."

"Check," Davis says, smiling as he swigs his beer. "You look good, honey."

"I mean without my clothes on." I give Davis a warning glare. He ignores it.

"I'd do you."

Vince backhands Davis in the arm and I smile, my gaze lingering a little too long on Vince's tattoos. We came straight from work, so Vince is in his button-down/jeans combo. He

rolled his sleeves up when we arrived. The tattoos start midforearm, where he's all sinew and tanned muscle. His ink is black, no color, a winding swirl of patterns. No animals or symbols of any kind. Just shapes. The ink is sexy, especially matched with Vince's dark, dark hair, blue eyes, and the smirk he's wearing now.

"I need to get tatted," Davis blurts. "If a girl looked at me like Jacqueline just looked at you, I'd be set."

Rather than deny I'd been checking out my best friend, I cover by refocusing my attention on Davis.

"You get asked out plenty," I tell him. "I've seen it. Girls come to you!"

Davis rolls his eyes. He's a looker. Ridiculously full lips. Messy, sandy-brown hair at odds with his clean-lined suit. Unlike Vince's careless wrinkle-free attire, Davis is a dry-clean-only kind of guy. I can't figure out why. He works from home yet dresses like he's in an office every day.

He flicks a glance over his shoulder at the bartender—his mouth turning down in disgust. "Whatever, Jacqueline."

Before I can question what his beef is with her, he shifts his attention to Vince. "So, who are you asking out?"

Vince shrugs and I find myself inexplicably uncomfortable. We've been jogging a few more times this week, and while I'm not any faster, I am improving. I don't feel like yakking when I'm done, so that's progress. I'm closer than ever to approaching J.T., but Vince hasn't mentioned his plans whatsoever.

"I only ask," Davis says after finishing his bottle of beer, "because since you told me about this idea, I'm intrigued to

see who you choose this time around. You've had a variety of — Ouch!"

The "ouch" is because Vince punched Davis in the arm. Not a backhand. A fist.

Davis rubs the spot on his pristine suit sleeve. "What? I saw one of your past conquests over there and she keeps looking at you. I didn't know if you'd be up for a second helping."

Vince's face is a placid mask. He holds my eyes a beat before his gaze goes over my shoulder. Then his eyelids sink closed and he takes a deep breath, exhaling on one word. "Shit."

"That's a no. Tell you what," Davis slaps Vince on the arm—a friendly slap—before he stands with his empty bottle. "I'm going to go hit on her so you don't have to do that dance. Jacqueline? Was that a no on the refill?"

"No refill." My lips are numb. My face too. If Davis means what I think he does...then Vince already took a dip in the dating pool.

One of your past conquests.

Several dips. I cringe.

"Okay, then. You two have a great night." Davis leans close to Vince. "Perchance do you remember her name?"

"Fuck off," Vince says.

Davis wanders to the other side of the bar while I sit here, feeling lied to and betrayed—not in the same way Lex betrayed me, so why does it feel similar? Because Vince already slept with a girl—multiple girls, if Davis can be believed—and didn't tell me? I'm his friend, his confidante. I

may not relish the idea of hearing about his sexual exploits, but his not sharing hurts.

“You didn’t tell me.” I’m not sure what else to say.

“I know.” Vince studies the ceiling and again I’m reminded of my ex, who, when we met for coffee to discuss our divorce, addressed the ceiling of Perks the entire time. Unlike Lex, Vince locks eyes with me. “I didn’t want you to, you know—to be disappointed in me. Men are assholes, Butler.”

“You’re not, though,” I say, trying to make sense of what he’s admitting.

He swallows and licks his lips. “I needed to get over her.”

“By sleeping with random women?” My voice is raised. I calm down and take a breath, not fully understanding my overreaction.

“They weren’t random.” He searches out Davis at the back of the bar, then tells me, “Her name is Polly. She’s an intern at a production studio. Or was. They probably hired her. She graduated her classes with honors.”

I suddenly wished Polly were random. But then again, I know Vince. Of course he wouldn’t have meaningless flings.

“Moving on helped,” he states.

Sitting up straight, I force a smile. “That’s good to know. J.T. might be the perfect person to help with my own moving on.”

“Right.” Not for the first time, I notice he doesn’t sound happy about my plan—*his* plan, if we’re being technical.

“Like you said. It’s time to get out there. You know what? I’m going to ask him out *tonight*.” I stand and Vince stands

with me.

“No.”

I blink at him, noticing a flash of...*something* in his eyes. Not jealousy, but a dab of the uncertainty I felt a few minutes ago when I found out he'd slept with Polly. A mental rug pull that left me wobbly.

“Why not?” I ask, indignant.

“You're not ready, Butler.” He eases into a smile, his confidence back in full force. “You have to learn how to approach a casual affair if that's what you want from this guy.”

“And the rules are different if that's the case?” I fold my arms, not buying it.

“Yes. Sit down. Order another glass of wine. You'll need it.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you're going to practice on me.”

CHAPTER FIVE

VINCE

Admittedly, giving Jackie advice on how to get a guy to sleep with her is not my best plan. Side note: I'm going to castrate Davis the second I get him alone for ratting me out about Polly over there. Though whatever charm he's working on her now seems effective. She's blond—his type.

“Okay, Butler,” I say, fully focused on Jackie now. “Let's hear it.”

She stops scribbling on the napkin in front of her, and I bite back a smile. Since I've given her a few tips, she has been frantically taking notes. She's a planner. I've always been more go-with-the-flow.

She reviews her notes, squinting in concentration, her lips moving as she reads. Then those golden brown eyes hit mine and she gives me a resolute nod. “I'm ready.”

Her tongue swipes pink lips, making them glisten and making me regret again the route I've chosen to take with her. Part of me concedes I could call it off and tell her what I really want, but I know her. She's barely convinced she can ask a

dude out, so her best guy friend throwing a date on the table would be an automatic no.

“Let’s see it,” I say, kind of excited to see what she’s come up with.

She takes Davis’s seat, sitting next to me and leaning heavily on an elbow, fist under her chin. “Hi. I’m Jackie.”

I blink several times in quick succession at the transformation from my scatterbrained best friend to a gorgeous woman giving me bedroom eyes. She’s pretending. I’d do well to remember that.

“Vince.”

She straightens in her chair and frowns. “Shouldn’t you pretend to be J.T.?”

“I’m not that good of an actor, Butler.” And I’m not pretending to be that jerk.

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes, then slides into seduction mode so swiftly I find myself impressed. She’s better at this than she’s let on. “Do you have a last name, Vince?”

“You know my last name, Butler.”

“Call me Jackie.” She gives me a slow bat of her lashes.

My smile is real, and when I lean closer, I don’t even do it on purpose. “Well, Jackie. Last names are irrelevant, don’t you think?”

Her chest lifts as she takes a breath, and I’m not shy about checking out her cleavage, exposed down the *V* of her shirt. Normally I wouldn’t look so obviously, but this is a game. Our game.

“That’s very assuming of you, Mr. No Last Name.” She quirks her lips in that way she has, and my smile broadens. “But let’s say”—she moves her half-full wineglass onto the cocktail napkin she wrote on—“for argument’s sake, you’re right, that last names are irrelevant.” She runs the tip of her finger along the rim of her glass like she’s doing it absentmindedly.

She’s doing it on purpose. I can tell.

Damn. She’s good.

“We should have a real date before making plans, don’t you think?” she asks, her eyes on mine.

“Yes.” *Hell, yes.* “Dinner, at the very least.”

“And then if dinner works out...” She lets that statement hang and my heart beats triple time as I wait for what comes next. “We can talk about dessert.”

“We can talk about dessert now.” I’m transfixed by her and the idea of exploring our new dynamic.

“*Ohmygod.*” Her eyes go wide. “Would he say that?”

I give myself a mental shake when I realize I was caught up in the conversation. It was one I wanted to be real, and she was thinking about Running Man.

“Probably,” I say, the spell broken. “Guys are assholes. Like I said.”

I lean back in my chair, find a TV, and stare blankly.

“But if that’s the case, I’ll have to have sex with him sooner than I planned.”

“No, you won’t, Jackie.” I hear the anger in my own voice. Because...“You don’t have to have sex with anyone. You

could go to drinks, dinner, and dessert with this guy—you could end the night with tonsil hockey on your front porch or his, and you can still say no.”

She purses her lips. I hate the idea of her kissing that jackass. No matter what kind of person he is—even if he’s a volunteer firefighter who raises orphaned squirrels that perform at the local senior center—I hate him.

“Tell me you know that,” I say.

“I know I don’t *have to*. That’s not what I meant. I don’t want to chicken out. I want to get the first one over with. Like you did.”

I tip my head back and groan aloud. I can’t help it. I’m the example for her return to the dating world? Much as I don’t want to admit it, fair is fair. I salved my wounds with girls like Polly, so why can’t Jackie do it with J.T.? Jackie’s my friend and I care about her. I can’t make a double standard now.

“Besides, he’s really hot,” she says, her face going glowy.

“Spare me.”

She grins. “Thanks for the help.”

“Anytime.”

She looks over her shoulder then back to me. “Does it bother you that Davis is hitting on Polly?”

I look at Jackie like she’s grown a third eyeball. “Why would it?”

“Because you and she once shared...” She gestures instead of explaining, and I’m glad. “Do those feelings come back when you look at her?”

I know what she's really asking, and it has nothing to do with Polly and me. I lean forward and break the act when I put my hand over hers. "You were married, Jackie. Lex vowed to be with you for the rest of his life, and then he broke those vows. I promise you, no matter what he says about how happy he is with his current wife, when he thinks about you, his heart hurts. Guilt follows him everywhere. He knows he blew it with the best girl in the world."

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears and she gives me a damp smile. Then she turns her palm up and holds my hand. Our fingers weave together like our hands were made for each other. Sappy, but no less true.

"I know Leslie thinks about you that same way. She never deserved you."

I nod my agreement, though I'm not sure it's true. Jackie and I hold hands for a few more seconds before she untangles her fingers from mine and swipes her eyes. Grabbing her purse, she thanks me again before promising to see me at work tomorrow.

Then she's gone.

I'm not sure how I feel about this. About any of it.

JACQUELINE

I watch out the window, heart hammering. Wondering if I'll be disappointed when I end up talking to J.T., or if he'll live up to

my fantasy. If we'll have a drink or dinner. If I'll ever kiss him...or more.

Which is why, instead of enjoying him running by wearing a pair of black shorts and a gray sweat-marked T-shirt, I watch feeling like there's a boulder in the pit of my stomach.

He vanishes around the corner, and Vince puts his ass next to mine on the desk and stares out the window with me. After a silent moment, I turn to him.

"You smell nice," I say.

"Thanks."

"What's with the scruff?" He's close, so I can see every whisker on his firm jawline. "Is this a new you?"

"I've grown it out before, Butler." He swipes a palm over his cheek, and the rasping sound of his whiskers against his hand sends shivers down my spine. Ever since we pretended to contemplate going home with each other at the bar, I've noticed a lot of little things about Vince I normally allow to roll off me.

Like the way he smiles with his whole face when he finds something funny. Or the habit he has of doodling in the margins of his notebook during meetings, yet follows whatever's being said. His solid, comforting presence is nothing new, and neither is his standing close to me, but today he's especially comforting. Especially solid. I don't like noticing all of these things. My sights are supposed to be set on my fantasy man—J.T. Who, yes, looked as gorgeous as ever today, but my heart isn't lodged in my throat now that I've seen him. Maybe it's because Vince is here, and I'm embarrassed.

That must be it.

When Vince scrubs his face again, I shudder. “Don’t do that. It’s like nails down a chalkboard.”

Totally untrue. But I have to find “normal” with Vince again before I ask out my dream guy. *Gulp*. Such a horrifying prospect.

“Some women like facial hair, you know.” He gestures out the window. “Unlike the hairless wonder out there.”

Defensive, I turn on him. “What are you talking about? J.T. has great hair.”

“He waxes his chest.” Vince’s dark eyebrows rise in the sincerest look of concern. “That’s not right.”

“So do swimmers. They wax *everything*. And cyclists! They wax!” I continue. “It helps with the wind resistance or something.” My eyes go to Vince’s buttoned-up shirt and I consider the fact that in all the time I’ve known him, I’ve never seen him without a shirt. He wears one when he jogs. “Do you have hair on your chest?”

He raises an eyebrow and a puckish and damn sexy expression crosses his face. “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours.”

I let out an exasperated sound—the one that every woman lets out when men are being men—and push off my desk. In truth, I’m a little warm at the thought. A little *too* warm.

“When are you going to talk to him?” Vince asks.

I shrug, but I’m relieved we’ve shifted focus. What I’m not relieved about is Vince pushing me.

“Butler.”

“What about you?” I ask instead of answering.

“What about me?” He shrugs, still leaning on my desk, arms folded all relaxed and casual.

“Who are you going to ask out?”

“You now know getting back on the horse postdivorce isn’t my particular issue. You, on the other hand... You’ve been benched too long.”

“How do you know?” My cheeks grow warm. I decide to talk my way through the uncharacteristic reaction. “Maybe I had a secret affair and you don’t know about it.”

He snorts. “You tell me everything. I know you had a few dates at the beginning and I also know you were unsatisfied with them.”

He’s right on all counts. I’m too transparent. I should have more secrets.

“Tomorrow morning,” he says. “You said he jogs at your apartment complex on Saturdays. Ask him out then. Bump into him and say hi.”

“And then what?” Fear coats me like a lozenge. “Tell him I’m the idiot who didn’t speak to him before?”

“Trust me, he knows who you are. And he doesn’t think you’re an idiot.” Vince gives me a gentle smile. “He thinks you’re the hot neighbor who won’t give him the time of day, and I’d bet my chest hair”—he rubs his shirt—“that he can’t figure out why.”

“Pfft,” I say, broadcasting my disbelief. But his face is scary serious.

“Don’t explain yourself,” Vince says. “Just *be* yourself.” He stands and walks to my office door. Before he leaves, he points at me. “Ask him out.”

CHAPTER SIX

VINCE

I lied and told Kayla I had a website question, so now I'm standing next to her desk, watching out her office window, my heart jackhammering.

Jackie ignored my advice and didn't talk to J.T. Saturday morning. Last night over beers and pizza, she sat on my sofa and promised she was going to do it "tomorrow."

So here we are. Monday, aka tomorrow.

"My God, she's doing it." Kayla sounds proud, and when I take in her beaming expression, I see she looks it too.

"Yeah," I mutter, one arm crossed over my chest and my other propped on it as I pinch my bottom lip. I'm trying to remember why I thought this was a good plan in the first place.

Outside, Jackie gestures, water bottle in hand, then smiles and offers it. J.T. smiles, nods, and accepts the water. But he doesn't jog on, no no. He cracks the top, takes a swig, then stands taller, pushing his chest out.

What a dick.

“Vince!” Kayla reprimands. I must’ve said that out loud.

“Well...” I point to the window but she shushes me. We continue watching, Kayla with rapt attention and me in abject horror.

Jackie wears a respectable black wrap dress and heeled sandals. Her long hair flows over her shoulders in waves. She gesticulates wildly now that she has nothing in her hands, and the action is so her, I wedge my molars together in frustration. She’s giving J.T. the real Jackie. The guy she’s supposed to be using and leaving.

I didn’t give the real me to the girls I jumped into bed with. Don’t get me wrong—I didn’t lie. But I wasn’t the me I was with Leslie. I was infinitely smoother, careful to hold back. I focused on them, asking questions and striking up conversations. Just like J.T. is doing with my best friend.

I can tell the moment Jackie gets nervous because she uses both hands to push her hair behind her ears. She shifts her weight from foot to foot, and J.T.’s smile fades into a look of mild concern.

Tell her no, tell her no, I chant silently.

He isn’t going to say no. Jackie looks beautiful today, and she could disarm a nuclear warhead with that smile. *Fuck.*

Predictably, J.T. nods, grins, and then offers a hand, which she shakes. He lifts the water bottle in a *Hey, thanks* and jogs away. Jackie turns toward the window and gives two very vigorous thumbs-up.

Groan.

“Yay! I knew she could do it.” Kayla turns and faces me. Her expression changes so subtly it’s like watching a question

mark form over her head. “You seem awfully invested in how this goes. What gives?”

“She’s my friend.” I sound defensive, which is no good. The last thing I need is for our coworker to suspect something is up. “Butler’s my friend. Guys are jerks.”

“Not all guys,” she tells me.

“No, Kayla. Not Kevin.” I mean it. Her husband is a hell of a guy. “You caught a good one.”

“Yeah.” Her smile turns wistful for a moment before she says, “The Runner might surprise you and be *The One* for Jacqueline.”

I nod, but I don’t trust myself to say anything nice, so I turn and exit Kayla’s office. Jackie steps back inside. I don’t wait for her to spot me. Instead I angle for my own office, and pick up the pace.

“I DON’T GET IT,” Davis says from his seat at my right elbow. We’re at McGreevy’s, at the bar per our usual, except he’s ignoring the TV for a change.

“Don’t get what?”

“If she doesn’t trust this guy, why did she go out with him?” He turns his attention to the mirror with a beer brand etched in the middle, eyeing our reflections.

“She trusts him, but it’s a first date and she needs backup.”

I look over my shoulder to where Jackie and J.T. sit, coincidentally at the table where Jackie and I sat the other day and practiced her asking him out. Except she’s in the seat I

was in, and J.T. is in the seat she was in. She asked me to hang out in the “background” while they have their drinks in case he’s a complete creep. I agreed, and Davis practically lives here, so I knew I wouldn’t be alone.

Jackie looks happy.

J.T. looks like a tool.

“Are you crazy?” Davis asks. I rip my glare away from the happy couple.

“On occasion. Like whenever I wonder why I’m friends with you.” I lift my beer and drink. Davis lets the insult glance off him.

He shakes his head. “You set up the girl you like with another guy.”

I sputter into my mug and do a good job of getting beer on the bar and on my shirtsleeve.

“Gracie Lou!” Davis shouts.

Grace gives him the stink eye.

“Bar towel, darlin’.” He snaps his fingers.

Grace flips him off.

I’m not sure what is going on with those two, but I’m not getting into it now. I have enough girl trouble of my own.

Grace delivers a towel and tells me, “Your friend is a horse’s ass.”

“She loves me,” Davis says when she walks away.

I dab the foam off my shirt and from the bar top. Thankfully I didn’t go full-on Old Faithful. No one other than Davis seems to have noticed.

“And you love Jackie-O.”

“The first lady?” Grace quips as she sweeps by.

Davis opens his mouth but I interrupt with, “Yes. She’s a classic.”

Grace winks like she knows more than she lets on. Given a woman’s superpower of always knowing what’s going on, I figure she does.

“Carson.” Davis says my last name with such low command, I give up and look him in the eye. “What’s going on with you, man?”

It’s rare to see him concerned, but he has that layer. When Leslie left me, he was more to me than “let’s get drunk” guy. He knows what heartache feels like. Right down to its ugly core. We didn’t have many heart-to-hearts, but there was a time or two when we talked about the suckage of being the dumpee.

I keep my voice down but answer his question truthfully. “Jackie doesn’t date. If I can help her over that hump with someone harmless, once it’s over, she’ll consider going out with me.”

“Or you could just ask.” His mouth twists with disappointment. But I’m right. He doesn’t know Jackie the way I do.

“I have one shot at this, Davis. She has to see me differently than a formerly married guy she works with.”

We both look over our shoulders at the horror unfolding. Jackie leans heavily on one fist, batting her lashes the way she did with me. Her focus is locked on J.T., and he hasn’t broken eye contact with her yet.

“You better formulate a plan to split them up soon.” Davis turns back to the television and lifts his beer. “Before your girl runs off and marries him.”

JACQUELINE

“Married?” J.T. asks.

“Once. We divorced three years ago,” I answer. “You?”

“Never.” He shakes his head.

“Engaged,” I guess.

J.T.’s smile turns schoolboy charming and he cocks his head. Some of his blond hair slides over his forehead and I take a moment to admire his ocean blue polo shirt and the way it *Vs* over what I know is a gorgeous chest. No hair, but that’s okay. Though I wonder what Vince’s chest looks like by comparison.

I blink a few times to reroute my brain. Where did that thought come from?

“How’d you know?” J.T. asks.

“Know what?”

His smile slips. “That I used to be engaged?”

“Oh! It was the way you said ‘never,’ like maybe you had a close call.”

He nods but offers no further intel. That’s okay. It’s the first date. There’s no reason to divulge all of our secrets.

Especially if we aren't going to last longer than a few encounters.

"Last question," I say. We've been peppering each other with the get-to-know-you stuff, and it's almost out of the way.

"Shoot."

"What's your name?"

He laughs a throaty, full, gentle laugh. It's nice.

"J.T. isn't good enough for you?" He licks his lips and fiddles with the cocktail napkin under his beer. "Guess."

Vince's voice tramples through my head. *Judson Taylor. Jaundice Toejam. Jeremiah the Bullfrog.*

"Jerry?" I say before I blurt out one of those options.

"No."

"Judson?"

My date shakes his head.

"Jeremiah?" I squeak.

"No." His laugh eases my nerves. "Jack. My middle name is Taylor."

"Oh, my God!" Vince was right about Taylor! At Jack's confused look, I cover with "I was totally going to guess Taylor." I lift my wineglass and take a gulp.

"I apologize for not giving you the opportunity to shine."

We hum to ourselves and the conversation goes limp. I tune in to my surroundings: the flashing TVs over the bar, the din of voices, and glassware clinking around us. Davis. And Vince—who sends me a wink and a casual thumbs-up.

J.T. notices. "Friend of yours?"

“Oh, yeah. Yes. He uh, he’s the vice president of the firm where I work.”

“I thought you were VP.”

“We both are. We share the title.”

“That’s weird.”

My defenses rise. “Not really.”

“The boss couldn’t choose, or didn’t trust you to handle it alone?”

“The position changed when the former VP left. The workload would have been too much for either of us to handle solo.”

J.T. shrugs. I’m being oversensitive.

“We work well together,” I mumble.

“That’s what matters.” His affable charm returns. I’m being too critical of him, of us. My expectations for this date have run the gamut. I’ve considered everything from his leaving directly after this drink to his leaning forward and saying something along the lines of “Let’s get outta here.” Both sound appealing for different reasons.

He drains his beer, and I glance over at the scant half inch of wine in my glass. This was the only commitment we made. One drink at McGreevy’s to see how things go. We’re at the end, and I’m still not sure how they went.

“Jacqueline Butler,” he says, smiling his white-toothed smile.

“Jack Taylor.” I smile back and wait. For what I don’t know.

“Would you like to have dinner with me Friday night?”

A zing of excitement ignites my veins right before I remember that Vince and I have plans that night. We're supposed to watch *Predator* and eat sushi. I can't decide if he'd be upset if I blew off our movie night to go on the date he prodded me to go on, but it seems rude to bail. He is my friend.

"I have plans with a friend, but I'd love to have dinner with you another night?" My tone slips into questioning, and I hope I don't appear too vulnerable—or worse, desperate.

"No can do." J.T. shakes his head, and my heart sinks. "I'm out of town this weekend and the building project I'm working on keeps me late most nights."

He's an architect designing a huge shopping center downtown.

"What about a late dinner that night? Any chance your plans will be over by nine o'clock?" J.T. asks.

I hadn't considered that option. I do a quick calculation. If we're off work by five, and Vince arrives at my place with sushi by six thirty, then we can watch the movie, eat, and wrap up by eight thirty. Which would give me thirty minutes to get ready for my date.

"Yes, they will." I brighten. It's going to work! And J.T. wants to see me again. It's nice to feel wanted. Even better, it's by a guy I want.

"Pick you up at your place. Which is fairly close to my place, so the commute will be easy enough."

"That's true." Today we met at McGreevy's after work rather than do the whole pickup thing. I wonder if J.T. has had some bad dates and has been forced to bail. I sure have. No way was I letting him pick me up for drinks, drive me home—

which is across the street from his place—and drop me off. Now, though, I’ve changed my mind. Him picking me up for dinner sounds lovely.

“I’ve never been here before.” J.T. leans in. “Do I pay the bartender or…?”

“It’s on me.”

I turn my head to see Vince, beer in hand. Unlike my date, who is wearing a polo and pressed khakis, Vince wears the stylish combo of a vest over an open-collar button-down, jeans, and lace-up boots. I flick my eyes down to the tassels on J.T.’s loafers and bite my lip in indecision.

“Vince Carson.” Vince shoots an arm out. “Butler and I work together.”

“Jack Taylor,” J.T. says, shaking hands with Vince.

Vince’s smile turns puckish as he considers claiming a victory for guessing the “Taylor” part. I give him a subtle head shake and, blessedly, he lets it go. I swear I’ll never hear the end of it.

“That’s nice of you to offer,” J.T. tells Vince, “but I prefer to pay.”

Vince shrugs. “Be my guest.”

Before J.T. goes to the bar, he rounds the table and leans to whisper in my ear. “See you soon, Jacqueline.”

A kiss feathers over my temple and my blood warms at the pleasantness and newness of that simple contact. J.T. is unfamiliar, which makes him exciting. I watch him strut to the bar and unknowingly stand close to Davis, who sizes him up but keeps his big mouth shut. Once my date is out the door, I

take a moment to admire his confident, broad-shouldered stride. He looks as good walking as running.

“Drinks only.” Vince clucks his tongue and collapses into the chair nearest me. “Better luck next time, Butler.”

“He asked me to dinner too.”

“When?” Vince’s face scrunches.

I don’t want him to know it’s Friday, our movie night, so I tell a little white lie. “We didn’t get into specifics.”

“That means it’s over, sweets.” Davis takes the chair next to me.

“Why do I keep finding myself flanked by you two?”

Davis opens his mouth to offer what is likely a sexual explanation, and I hold up a finger to shush him. He grins, charming and boyish with his ruffled hair and his supremely pressed suit. He’s a walking conundrum.

“I’ll bite, Jackie-O. How’d it go?” Davis leans his elbows on the table and eyes me sincerely.

“It went well. He was nice.”

Davis makes a face like he just tasted sour milk. “Well’ and ‘nice.’” He pegs Vince with a look. “Your girl didn’t seal the deal. Maybe she needs a new teacher.”

“You know what?” I stand and snatch up my purse. “I don’t have to explain my date to either of you knuckleheads. I had one, and I have another one. And you two are hopelessly single.”

On my parting zinger, I swivel on one stiletto and march out of McGreevy’s, head held high. I shake off their comments

on the trip to my car, and arrive feeling downright victorious. I have another date with my sexy fantasy man.

I freaking did it.

VINCE IS CHEERING on my sofa because Arnold just *Hasta la vista, baby*'d the Predator. The movie is finally, *finally* about to end and I'm on pins and needles for a few reasons. First, I never told Vince that Jack was picking me up here. I know, I know. Cowardly of me. Second, I failed at talking him into relocating our movie night to his place because he argued that the sushi joint was closer to mine. It is. That's fair. And third —

“That's how it's done. There are no real men anymore. Arnold is an original,” Vince says, sock-clad feet on my coffee table (no shoes per my request), before downing the contents of his beer bottle.

“What about Jason Momoa?” I cross the room to collect the remnants of our dinner. “He's a man's man.”

“He's a *caveman*. Hey, wait. You're not throwing out that dragon roll, are you?”

I offer the plastic container and he snags the last piece of sushi and pops it into his mouth. Then he frowns while chewing and licks his thumb as I scuttle to the kitchen.

“Butler.”

“Yeah?” I pause in the doorway.

Vince narrows his eyes at my wardrobe. “You weren't wearing that earlier.”

I wasn't. I changed from my work clothes—a skirt and blouse—into a pair of black pants, a sparkly top, and sandals. Wedge ones. Definitely not loungewear.

The clock by my front door reads 8:55. I texted J.T. to tell him I needed five extra minutes, but that doesn't give me much time to hustle. I should have told Vince before now.

“I—”

A knock comes at the door. Vince's eyebrows crash down as my head swivels to the front window. Through the sheer curtains, I can see my date standing on my stoop, flowers in hand.

Vince is off the couch and I chase after him, empty sushi container in hand. But not before the door pops open and my coworker and my date face each other over a bouquet of pink roses.

“Jack!” I say over Vince's shoulder. “Hi! You're a few minutes early. Give me a second.”

He frowns at me, frowns at Vince, and then frowns at his flowers. I hightail it to the kitchen, toss the container in the trash, and return to the living room.

“She doesn't like roses,” Vince is saying.

“Vince!” I snag my purse from the closet and give J.T. an apologetic smile. “He's kidding. They're beautiful.”

“Generic,” Vince mutters.

“Let me put these in some water. Vince was just leaving.”

“I have to put my shoes on,” he argues.

“Excuse us.” I grab Vince's arm and for a second he doesn't move. I widen my eyes and, finally, he allows me to

drag him to the kitchen. In hushed tones under the sound of the *Predator* DVD rebooting and playing the title-screen music again, I let my friend have it in the harshest whisper I can manage. “What is wrong with you?”

Vince crosses his arms like a petulant child. I thrust the roses at him. “Put these in a vase and lock up for me. I’ll see you Monday.”

He takes the flowers but utters a protesting “Jackie.”

“I mean it, Vince.” I don’t wait for his reply. I dart to the living room and greet Jack Taylor with a big smile. *Jack and Jackie*.

Hmm.

I didn’t realize how odd our names sound side by side until now.

“If you’re busy...” J.T. flicks a glance over my head, where I hope Vince isn’t making lewd gestures.

“I’ll explain at dinner.” I loop my arm in his and we leave, but not before I shoot daggers over my shoulder at Vince. He’s not making lewd gestures. He’s standing forlornly in my kitchen, shoulders sagging, a dozen pink roses in his hands.

CHAPTER SEVEN

VINCE

I don't leave right away. It isn't totally by choice. By the time I sit down to tie my shoes, *Predator* restarts. It feels wrong to leave before my favorite part, where Arnie says "If it bleeds, we can kill it."

So I linger. Get hungry again and raid Butler's fridge. By then it's after eleven, and I admit to myself I'm waiting around like a jealous boyfriend. I decide to leave and salvage what's left of my self-respect.

As luck would have it, the sky splits open the second I set foot outside Jackie's apartment. I hoof it to my Volvo across the parking lot, slide inside, and shake water from my hair like a dog. I start my car, flip on the wipers, and that's when I see J.T. and Jackie running for her front door. They must've pulled in shortly after I left.

They're dripping from the rain and lingering under her porch light. She smiles.

The rain-soaked windshield blots out my view. Aggravated, I hit the lever. When the rain is swiped away this

time, I watch as she inches up on her toes and presses her lips to his.

“Shit,” I mutter to the interior of my car. I can’t watch any more of this. The next time the wipers clean the windshield, J.T. hugs her lower back and pulls her close. I figure she’ll invite him in. Then he’ll be sitting on my spot on her sofa and I’ll officially be the biggest idiot alive. I should have confessed how I felt rather than drive her into the arms of another dude.

“Get it together, Carson,” I mumble, pulling out of the lot and not looking back. I’m being dramatic, which is unlike me, but it’s been a frustrating couple of days.

I turn the corner so I can’t glance in the rearview and watch her invite him in.

I hope she doesn’t invite him in.

MY SOUR MOOD from Friday hasn’t improved come Monday morning, mainly because I invited Jackie over to my place last night, and she shot me down. She texted me, saying, **Rain check! I’ll make it up to you.**

Which made me think of the rain and the kiss I’d need eye bleach to forget.

My guess is she threw me over for Jaundice, and yeah, that’s what I’m calling him in my head. Sue me. It’s sexist and immature and unfair to behave like I am, so by the time I’ve had a third cup of coffee and go to the break room for a fourth, I forcibly pull my head out of my ass.

Jackie's wearing a short red dress that shows off her legs. Her smile is bright and fresh. She looks happy. So damn happy. My heart crushes like an aluminum can, but I send her a casual smile anyway.

"Hey, Butler." I grab the coffeepot and glance at the clock. "Holy shit, it's almost lunchtime?"

"Yeah, you may want to hold off on the caffeine drip until after you eat." She rinses her mug and dries it with a paper towel.

"Why are you not in your office with your nose pressed to the glass?" It's 11:44, so Jaundice should be running by any second.

"Oh. I feel weird about it now."

"Why?" I snap.

Her slender brows meet over a pert nose. "Because I'm dating him. I don't have to ogle him from my office. I can ogle him from anywhere. Freely. While touching him."

"Sorry I asked." I leave the break room, aware of her calling my name as she chases after me.

"Vince. *Vince.*"

In my office she doesn't bother stopping at the threshold. Mine is bigger than hers—but it always has been, because Wilson moved me in here shortly after I started. When my VP title was secured, I simply stayed in the larger office and Jackie moved into the only one available. What I don't have is an outside window. Or an inside window. She has both, so it's fair, in a way.

"What is your problem?" she asks after shutting my door to give us some privacy. I saw a few heads turn, but they

quickly went back to their work. We didn't make that big of a commotion on our way in here.

Now, though, that I'm looking at those red lips and that red dress and remembering the way Jaundice had his hands on her Friday night—

“You bailed on me on Sunday,” I grumble.

“I know. My sister came into town at the last minute.”

Sure. Whatever. I tilt my head to one side in disbelief.

“I promised to make it up to you and I will. What's your schedule like this week?”

“What's yours like?” *Do you have another date or three with Jaundice the Hutt?*

“How about I treat you to lunch today?” she offers. Sweetly.

I shake my head. “Can't. I have a meeting with Wilson in a few.”

“Oh. Tomorrow night?”

“Busy,” I lie. I have nothing planned, but I could. She doesn't know that. “Taco Tuesday with Davis.”

“Taco Tuesday?” Her face scrunches. She knows I have a special brand of disdain for themed gatherings.

“It's my new thing.”

“Okay. What about drinks at McGreevy's?”

“I'll get back to you.” I reach for my door and open it, and the sad look on her face almost makes me apologize. *Almost.* If she hadn't bailed on me last night, I might feel more magnanimous. As things stand, she's going to have to accept my nonanswer.

TUESDAY NIGHT I'm scrolling through my phone regretting that I don't have more friends. When Leslie and I were married we did lots of couple things. That meant we went out with her girlfriends and their husbands. Out of her eight closest friends (our former bridesmaids), Martin was the husband I liked. Unfortunately, his wife is a ballbuster, so I lost him in the divorce. The other seven husbands completed the set of tools and I was glad to be rid of them, even if it did leave me with a deficit of guy friends.

Davis is busy tonight. He has a date. He didn't say it was Polly, but he didn't say it wasn't her. It's her. I can sense these things.

When a knock on my door interrupts my deep thoughts, I turn my head and scowl at it, hoping it's not Riley come to renew her Mrs. Robinson advances. Another knock, this one delicate, and my heart lodges in my throat.

I know that knock.

I pull open the door and there stands Jackie in a mouthwatering black dress, holding a bucket of KFC.

"Apology chicken," she announces, then holds up another bag. "And mashed potatoes, coleslaw, and green beans. Tonight we feast!"

I step aside and she carries the food to my gargantuan kitchen like she has a dozen times in the past. She turns around and clasps her hands together, pegging me with a look of complete and utter chagrin. Before she opens her mouth, I give her the apology I suspect is coming.

“I’m sorry, Jackie.” I slip my hands into my front pockets and walk toward her.

“No. It was rude of me to bail on you. Bethany wouldn’t have minded you joining us. We went to Chic Winehouse to sample wine and eat cake. It wasn’t a very manly atmosphere.”

So she was telling the truth about her sister being in town.

“I thought you were out with Jaundice,” I admit.

“I was not out with *Jack*,” she corrects, her lips twisting at my joke. Just when I start to feel better, she adds, “I saw him Friday *and* Saturday night. I don’t want him to think I’m crazy about him.”

“Are you?” I blurt, scowling at my best friend. I hope not. I haven’t made a single move to let her know I’m in the running. Regret covers me like mud on a nearly defeated Arnold Schwarzenegger at the end of *Predator*.

Her mouth opens and closes. Then I see it. The flicker of doubt in her eyes when she bites down on her bottom lip. “He’s...sweet.”

Sweet. I nearly cheer. That’s what women say about guys they like but don’t *like* like. I take another step in her direction and she backs up, her hip bumping my countertop.

“Did you invite him in Friday night?” I have to know.

“What?” She’s frowning up at me. “Not that it’s any of your business, but no.”

She’s offended enough that I believe her.

“Where did you go Saturday?” I ask.

“His house.”

“His *house*?” The volume of my voice rises and I pull myself together with both hands. “Did he cook for you or something?”

“Why does that matter?” Her eyes flit away from mine.

I can picture his clean and fancy minimalist apartment. He probably roasted a pheasant he went out and shot himself. Then he poured a glass of hundred-dollar wine and *then* they spent the evening admiring his first-edition book collection and making out on the settee.

“Vince, are you all right?”

I’m hovering over her, blood boiling, steam pouring out of my head like a kettle. No, I’m not all right.

I lean a hair’s breadth closer. “Did you screw him?”

“I beg your pardon!” Her eyebrows slam together in anger, but I press her further.

“Did you?”

“What if I did? You were the one who wanted me to *get back out there*. You said I deserve nice things. The best.”

I did say that.

“You do. And it’s not J.T.”

“Well, then who is it?” Her voice is small, and for the briefest moment her warm brown eyes flicker to my mouth.

“Answer my question first.” I put a palm on the counter, caging her in on one side. She doesn’t move away from me, which is a good sign.

“He cooked cedar-plank salmon and French green beans. He has a wine cellar, so we opened a bottle of Château Sedacca.”

Worse than I thought. That stuff is get-laid wine. I swallow a groan.

“He baked a homemade chocolate lava cake,” she says with a small smile. “And then we went into his living room and sat on the couch and kissed. A lot.” Her gaze softens when it hits mine. “But to answer your question, no. It didn’t go any further than that.”

“Why not?” My muscles coil as if that’ll help me absorb the blow if she delivers worse news. Like maybe she’s planning on doing him on the next date.

“You owe me an answer.” Her chin comes up. She’s digging in and I’m not surprised. Butler’s no pushover. “Who’s the one for me, Vince?”

The word “me” clogs my throat, so I don’t say it. Instead, I thread her brown wavy hair through my fingers and lay my lips on hers for a long, slow, polite kiss.

It doesn’t stay polite.

She tilts her head, and I tilt mine. My fingers flinch, cradling the back of her head as I guide her petal-soft lips. Her tongue strokes mine and I close any remaining gap between us, pressing my hardening body against her giving one.

I’m not letting her go. Not yet.

Her hands hit my shirt and grab fistfuls of fabric, but instead of shoving me back, she pulls me closer. I let her. We stand there for long minutes, enjoying the feverish pace of the kiss and the shared appreciation of each other’s mouths.

It’s new, and damn exciting.

She tugs away first. I loosen my hold but finish the kiss. I’m still cradling her head, only now I’m looking at her blown-

out, lust-filled pupils. A surge of pride rushes through me. I put that heat in her eyes. *Me.*

Watching her come out of a lusty haze is far from my favorite transformation. In the span of a single second, her expression goes from dazed to serious.

“I, um... I should go.”

“Don’t go.” My voice is gravelly, my vocal cords choked with the same want shadowed in her eyes. I just kissed my best friend. And hell, I don’t know if she wanted me to.

“I’m—I’ll see you later.” It’s all she says before walking out my front door and leaving behind a family-sized meal for me and me alone.

Alone. Again.

What did I do?

CHAPTER EIGHT

JACQUELINE

I'm here but I'm not mentally here. J.T. and I grabbed lunch halfway between our workplaces at a food truck famous for its gyros. We then walked to a small park, where we sat on a bench facing the tall buildings of downtown.

He's been pointing out various architectural details, but my mind is on last night. And the lengths I've gone to avoid Vince today at work. I arrived at the office thirty minutes early, shut my door, and sent a "do not disturb" email to everyone on our team saying I was in deep concentration on a project, but would answer my emails after lunch.

I saw him in passing on my way back from filling my coffee mug. We shared a lengthy gaze and I brushed by him, my nipples on alert and my cheeks warm.

I'm not used to reacting that way to him.

"I have my eye on it," J.T. is saying, and I realize I've been tuning him out for a while. His hand lands on my knee. "I take it you're unimpressed that I found a Tudor I want to renovate with my own design ideas."

“I’m sorry.”

He removes his hand. My leg feels the same with his hand on it or off it. No fluttering butterflies when he sits near or leans close. Nothing like my reaction to the kiss with Vince last night. My face heats.

“Long night?” J.T. asks, crumpling the paper after he polishes off the last bite of his gyro.

“No, why?” I snap. He chews, his eyes wide with surprise. I’m overreacting. Guilt makes me do that. “I mean, yes. Long night. I opened a bottle of wine”—*to forget that my best friend kissed me*—“and binge-watched *Hart of Dixie* on Netflix. I was so into it that I accidentally drank the entire bottle.”

“Ouch.”

“I don’t normally do that.”

“It’s okay, Jacqueline,” he says, his smile reassuring. “I wasn’t mentally arranging an intervention. Hey, have you seen that new thriller with Ben Affleck? I can’t remember the name of it...”

The rest of our lunch is polite and easy, like every date we’ve had. J.T. walks me back to work and gives me a kiss goodbye, but I make sure the kiss ends before we’re caught. Not that I’m doing anything wrong, I remind myself as I march down the corridor toward my office. Vince kissed *me*, not the other way around.

Though I did a good job of kissing him back. I chew on the side of my finger.

Oh, God. Am I in a love triangle? I think of the show I watched last night. I am. I’m in a George-Zoe-Wade love triangle. In my office I shut the door, turning to press my back against it in relief...until I spot Vince bent over my desk.

I let out a tiny shriek of surprise. “You scared me to death! What are you doing in here?”

He holds a Post-it in one hand and drops a pen into a cup. “I was leaving a note.”

“Is your email down?” I bark. Him being in my space is unnerving.

Vince sends me a crooked smile that didn’t used to be quite so tempting, then comes closer. My eyes flit from the outside window to my desk, wondering where I can hide if I have to. Nowhere, so I don’t move.

“You don’t have to avoid me, Jackie.”

“I’m not.” I totally am.

He cants one eyebrow in argument and my shoulders slump.

“Fine. I’m avoiding you. I don’t know what to do now.”

“As your coach, I have advice.”

“I’m sure you do,” I mumble.

“Go out with me.”

I blink, shocked. His simple request is tempting, and I can’t figure out why. It wasn’t poetic or orchestrated. It wasn’t even a question. But it was genuine—that’s Vince. He’s nothing if not genuine. He shifts, Post-it in hand, and I consider how good he looks in his clothes—how great he’d look out of them. He makes me feel ultrafeminine, which makes me feel sexy. Sexier than I felt with a perfectly nice dating prospect who treated me to gyros between his appointments.

“I’m dating J.T.” Honoring my commitment is the right thing to do.

“Date both of us,” Vince says with a shrug.

“I can’t do that to him.”

“How do you know he’s not doing it to you?” The first hint of anger slips into Vince’s expression. Tightness at the corners of his intense blue eyes. “Are you two exclusive?”

This part of the dating game remains a mystery to me. I’m not sure what J.T. is doing. I assume he’s dating only me, but assuming isn’t the same as knowing, now is it?

“Do you want to be exclusive?” Vince asks, his tone careful.

Exclusive. It sounds...scary. Big. Too big.

“I don’t know. It’s too soon.”

“Exactly.” Vince holds up a finger, the orange Post-it stuck to the end of it. His neat block print reads: **DOMAINE TOMORROW. 8 P.M.**

“Domaine?” Only one of the most expensive restaurants in town. Vince and I consider sushi a splurge.

“Take it.”

I peel the sticky note off his index finger and hold it to my chest. It’s as good as a yes. He smiles.

“Give me a chance to blow your mind, Butler.” He moves toward me and I smash flat against the door, fearing he’s coming in for another kiss I’m woefully unprepared for.

“Relax,” he says. “Just going for the doorknob.”

“Oh.” I slide away. He opens the door, slips out, and closes it behind him.

I stare down at the Post-it, realizing my “coach” didn’t give me any advice about whether I’m supposed to tell J.T. I’m seeing other people—or ask if he is.

What I need is a girlfriend’s advice. I think of Kayla down the hall and dismiss the idea. She’s my friend and gives great advice, but someone who doesn’t work with Vince would be preferable. Someone who hasn’t seen J.T. in all his shirtless, running glory. Someone neutral.

I pick up my cellphone and text my sister, Bethany.

You’re in town until tomorrow morning, right?

Yep, comes her response.

Drinks and apps on me at Chic, I text back. It’s an emergency.

CHIC WINEHOUSE IS my favorite establishment to frequent. They serve amazing food and delicious wine, and they encourage “more” as a way of life. More cheese, more chocolate, more wine. Just plain *more*.

Kind of appropriate for my current conundrum, when I think about it in those terms. I went from zero dates to *more*, and one of them with someone I thought was just my friend. Who still is my friend. With perks.

Bethany sits across from me, chardonnay in hand, eyes slitted in consideration. Her brown hair is dyed blond, and her roots show—stylishly so. She wears a high-end business suit and expensive heels and looks the part of a New Yorker. Right down to her Coach satchel resting on the chair beside my discount no-name handbag. I’m so proud of her, it hurts. She

wanted to be in advertising and live in a big, bustling city, and she succeeded.

“Vince Carson?” she asks.

“Correct.” I told her everything. My currently single-and-loving-it sister is practically speechless.

“And he kissed you?” She shakes her head, and to be honest, I’m not sure if she’s impressed or disapproving. It could be either one.

“Yes.”

“And now you’re dating both of them.” Bethany is two years older than me and as close to a mom as I have nearby. Our parents up and moved to Florida five years ago—something about Ohio being “too damned cold” and Dad wanting to improve his golf game.

“Have you done that before?” I ask. “Dated two guys at once?”

“Pfft!” she pffts. “So many times!”

I knew I could count on her. “Did you tell them?”

“Not always. Depends on the guy. Vince already knows about J.T. Do you want to tell J.T. about Vince?”

I thought about that for most of the day, so I have an answer ready. “I don’t want to tell J.T. about Vince because he’ll assume something was going on the night he came to pick me up for my date. And nothing happened...that night, anyway.”

She nods, narrowing her eyes again. They’re brown like mine but with a green tinge. “Good point. J.T. would assume you and Vince weren’t just hanging out. Plus”—she holds up a manicured nail to make her point—“J.T. thinks Vince is a safe

space, since you explained you're coworkers who hang sometimes. So he's not jealous and has no reason to be. Which means you can date Vince at the same time as J.T. and not worry about J.T. being weirdly possessive."

Also true.

"I can't have sex with either of them until I choose, though." I know myself. My heart has to be in the bedroom, or else nothing works. Which removes the possibility of having a little stringless fun with J.T.

Or Vince. *Oh, no.*

"You look nauseous. Was it the Gouda?" Bethany points to the cheese plate between us, empty save for a few grapes and a pile of untouched baby carrots.

"How can I date Vince? What if it doesn't work out? We work together. We'll see each other every day!" It would be a nightmare. "Plus, I'll lose my best friend."

"Hmm. Yeah, I've done that before."

That didn't sound very encouraging. "You have?"

"We weren't *best* friends," she continues, "but we worked together." She lifts her glass and swirls the remaining inch of golden liquid.

"What did you do when the two of you split?" I'm on the edge of my seat.

She raises her eyebrows and answers, "I quit."

I sink lower into my chair. Not the answer I was hoping for.

"Look, you don't have to decide anything now. There are no decisions to make." Bethany polishes off her wine. An

efficient waiter sweeps by and refills her glass with the bottle on the table between us. He gives me a judgmental glare, since my glass is practically full.

“Unless one of them wants to do more than make out. Then I have to hold up the big red stop sign.”

“You don’t *have* to.” Bethany lifts her now-filled glass. “Live in the moment, Jacqueline. Go with your gut.”

“My gut doesn’t know what it’s doing.”

She takes a drink. “Well, you can’t trust your heart. Best to leave your heart out of this one.”

“Right.” Leave my heart out of the equation. Which I’ve always totally sucked at and she knows it.

“Try something new,” she adds with a teasing wink.

“Okay, but I’m going to call you if I get into trouble.” My sis agrees, and for the first time I think I can pull this off. I just have to live in the moment. Not dwell on the repercussions. I can do that.

I think.

CHAPTER NINE

VINCE

Davis studies me like there's a horn sprouting from the center of my forehead. I just told him about my proposition to Jackie. I'm guessing he doesn't approve.

"Are you out of your mind?" There's a bottle of water in his hand rather than a Sam Adams, so I'm tempted to ask him the same question. I lift my draft and take a drink, letting him continue. "You need to tell her to go out with you *instead*, not in addition to. Make her choose. Show her who's boss."

"Actually," I say after I swallow my beer, "we have equal billing in the boss department." I smile.

Davis continues frowning.

"How'd your date go with the blonde the other night?" I fish.

"She didn't throw her wine in his face." Grace drops my bill next to me. I told her I was only having one tonight. "I'd say that's as good as Davis can hope for."

I laugh and Davis smiles at Grace—a supremely sarcastic and tolerant smile. She blows him a kiss and returns to other

customers.

“You’re one to talk,” I tell him when she’s gone. “You want Gracie so bad, why don’t you—how’d you put it?—show her who’s boss?”

Davis’s top lip curls, and I consider for the first time that his healthy level of anger isn’t healthy any longer. My buddy’s been through the wringer, but I thought he’d healed. I thought he came to terms with losing Hanna. Not that he could ever heal completely from something like that, but he seems to have things under control. I mean, it’s been six years. That’s a lifetime.

“What’s with the water?” I ask, because that’s how guys open up.

He tilts the bottle and shrugs. “I worried I was drinking too often. Wanted to make sure I could stop.”

“Success?”

“Success. But it doesn’t taste as good.” He glances around the bar. “And no women have asked me out yet, so the beer might send a better signal.” He purses his lips in thought and snaps his fingers. “Gracie Lou! The usual.”

Grace nods but doesn’t hop to it. It’s a response Davis and I both respect.

“She’s no pushover,” I say. Like Jackie. Jackie’s not either.

“Let’s talk about you and Jackie-O,” Davis says, reading my thoughts. “Where is the date and why are you going on one?”

“What do you mean, *why* are we going on one?”

“You two have been dating since your divorce, Carson. It’s nothing new.”

“No we haven’t. We’re friends. We’ve never dated.” Even as I say this, I see his point. Meals, movies, snuggling on the couch. I meet my friend’s bland stare. “Okay, kind of—but we haven’t done any of the other things dating people do.”

Like make out or have hot, sweaty monkey sex on the furniture.

I remember the kiss in my kitchen, the feverish pace and heat building under my collar. The way her smaller hands felt grazing my ribs, her subtle curves molded to my body...

“Fine, go on a *date*,” he grumbles.

I snap out of the memory. “I’m taking her to Domaine. Figure we could have a nice—”

“Yikes,” Davis interjects.

“What? Domaine is classy.”

“Domaine is very classy,” Grace says approvingly.

“Thank you, Grace.” She smiles sweetly, delivers Davis’s beer, and then leans on the bar in front of us. I don’t miss Davis’s eyes going to the V-neck of her T-shirt, where her cleavage is tempting, even to me. I avoid looking directly.

“It’s a good choice, Vince. Don’t listen to your boneheaded friend whose idea of dating is a Sonic drive-in.”

“Chili cheese fries are two for a dollar this week. Interested?” Davis asks.

They share a not-at-all-unfriendly eye lock and I’m suddenly the third wheel. These two. I don’t get it. They circle each other but neither of them pounces.

“Sorry, Davis, not blond enough for you,” Grace finally answers. “Would it kill you to try a redhead? She might

surprise you.” She fluffs her hair and trots to the other side of the bar. Grace’s natural red hair is a far cry from that wild dyed color, but there’s no way her comment didn’t hit Davis’s one-and-only hot button.

Hanna was a redhead.

Nostrils flared, my friend stares blindly at his beer bottle.

“She didn’t know—” I start.

Davis doesn’t hear me. He slides off his barstool and yanks at his tie in frustration. Then he’s out the door. I let him go. He needs to cool down.

Grace glances at me. I give her a tight-lipped smile, hoping to communicate that his leaving wasn’t her fault. When her gaze follows Davis as he walks by the windows of McGreevy’s Pub, though, her eyes drip with concern. It’s clear from her expression she’s not going to spout a sharp retort.

“I’ll pay for his,” I offer.

“No. I’ve got it.” She pours his beer down the drain, her mouth pulled flat. It’s not her fault. There’s no way she knew that Davis had a fiancée with red hair who destroyed him.

No way at all.

SUIT PANTS ARE CONFINING and uncomfortable, but I wear them anyway. Hey, I’m trying to make a good impression.

It’s the next night and the victory of getting Butler to agree to dinner is diluted by my worry that our date won’t go well. Not because Jaundice is a threat—he’s not—but because while

Jackie and I do lots of things together, none of them involve fancy dinners with multiple courses.

I should have taken her somewhere more common. Like Chili's or Olive Garden.

Why didn't I? I want to impress her—to stand out. I want to be a different Vince than the one she's used to. She knows me, and that should make everything more comfortable. For whatever reason, it's made this harder. No, not harder...

Weirder.

She insisted that we leave straight from work, drive separately, and meet there. I declined. As a gentleman—in suit pants, no less—picking her up is a requirement.

I pull into her complex, park in the visitors' parking area. My heart is thundering, which makes me chuckle. I check my reflection in the rearview mirror, straighten my tie, and realize I haven't been nervous in a long while. I dated a little this past year, and yes, there was a smidgen of doubt when it came time to strip for a woman who wasn't Leslie. But most of those evenings were soaked in alcohol—the drinking kind, not the rubbing kind—and alcohol can go a long way toward masking nerves.

These nerves aren't the same. They remind me of the way I felt when I first laid eyes on Leslie. Before she left me because I was “unsuccessful.” That still stings in a deep, ugly place—the part of me that knew she was right. I was supposed to be an entrepreneurial success, but after my real estate business tanked, I fell back on my degree and returned to marketing. I like it better, but Leslie didn't see the draw of my being employed—mainly because she had to return to work as well, which didn't sit well in our household. She was willing to do

only so much for our marriage, she told me. Helping support her lifestyle by going to work wasn't one of the options.

“Better or worse” to her only meant “better.” When things got worse, she bailed.

My stomach twists. I'm mired in the worst pre-date thoughts a guy could have. This, also, is new. On prior dates, my goal was a quick fix to heal the loneliness.

Butler isn't a quick fix. If I'm lucky enough that this grows into more, I'll make sure there is no quick anything. She's different. Worth taking time for. I grab the handle and step out of the car, my thoughts on just how I'll take my time, when I nearly bump into a guy running toward me.

“Shit, sorry,” I mutter. Then I notice a familiar pair of running shorts and a particular guy who is allergic to dressing the upper half of his body. It isn't *that* warm today.

J.T. comes to a stop, barely out of breath, so he must have just jogged out of his apartment. I take a quick look around the complex and wonder how close his place is to Jackie's, feeling a spike of irritation that he lives nearby.

“Vince, right?” he asks.

“Right.” I nod and try not to let my thoughts show on my face. *Get lost, fuckwad.* Yeah, that one I'll keep to myself.

“You and Jacqueline working late tonight?” He nods at my suit and I'm tempted to say, *No, asshole, she's going out with me after I curled her toes with a kiss a few nights ago.* But Jackie's my friend, and I know she's uncomfortable with dating two guys at once, so I cover for her.

“Yeah. Business dinner for an account.” I lift and drop my hand in a what-can-you-do manner.

“Bummer. Tell her I’ll call her later.” He slaps me on the back. I make a fist and suck in a deep breath. He jogs around my car and up the sidewalk looping the complex.

“Douche,” I mutter to myself.

At Jackie’s door I hesitate before knocking. She answers before I’m done with the second knock, and my breath stalls in my chest. She’s wearing a sleek black dress that stops at her knees. The snug material hugs her hips and flat stomach and cradles her breasts. Two skinny straps sit on tanned shoulders, and her hair is down in silky waves. The kind of waves that beg a guy to run his fingers through them.

“When I asked you out, I didn’t know you were going to flatten me by looking this gorgeous,” I tell her.

She beams. I like that smile. “Charmer.”

“You know it.” I straighten my shoulders, my earlier worries falling to pieces around me. Jackie is coming out with me tonight. She’s *mine*. “Ready?”

“I am.” She palms a black square purse and shuts her front door behind her, locking the deadbolt and sliding the key into her bag. I offer my arm and she curls her hand around my biceps, which I subtly flex. I debate saying *Nice night*, but mostly I’m hoping J.T. has taken the long way around the complex because I really don’t want to run into him again. Jackie and I walk to the car in complete silence.

We drive to the restaurant in silence too, other than her remark about the weather and my confirmation that, yes, it is “cooler than the weatherman predicted.”

The pain doesn’t end there.

At Domaine we do an awkward dance around the host before I finally put my hand on Jackie’s back and we follow

him to our reserved table. The low candlelight and the soft music in the background serve as a boldfaced reminder that this isn't our usual pizza-and-a-movie Friday night.

I move my slightly damp palms down my stifling suit pants as the sommelier reviews his favorite vintages from the wine list.

"Lady's choice," I offer.

"Are you drinking wine?" She crinkles her nose, unsure. She's so cute. I overlooked just how datable Butler was this entire time. I wasn't ready before. Now, though, I am.

"I *do* drink wine, Butler." And because I've been challenged with a Bugs Bunny-like slap across the face with a glove, I order for us. A fancy French wine that I know how to pronounce because I've had it several times before. With Leslie, but Jackie doesn't need to know that.

Jackie's impressed. I can tell by the way her eyes twinkle over the rim of the glass when she takes a tentative sip, followed by an approving nod.

"Well done, Vince."

If I were a dog, my tail would be thumping the seat.

We look over the menu. Well, *she* looks over the menu. I'm too busy looking at her. At the way she twirls her hair around her finger and chews on her plush bottom lip while she studies the options. She mouths the word "wow."

"Something wrong?" I ask, but I can guess what it is.

"Oh. No! Not at all. It's just...expensive."

"No, it's not."

“Vince.” She smiles at me, fingers tapping the edge of the menu in an adorably nervous gesture. “We search online for pizza coupons before we order.”

“Butler.” I feel a frown mar my brow and wonder if she gave J.T. this much grief on their dates. I don’t ask. I don’t want to know, mostly because I suspect the answer is no.

The waiter shows up and recites the chef’s specialties. I order one of the specials and Jackie orders the other, getting what she wants instead of vacillating over price again. Talk about an uphill battle. Who knew pizza coupons would get me into this much trouble?

We eat with napkins in our laps and use the appropriate forks. We share the bottle of wine, and that’s our saving grace. After a painful, forced convo about work, I finally give us both the break we’re looking for.

“Grace, the bartender at McGreevy’s Pub, told Davis he should try dating a redhead for a change.”

Jackie groans. “Oh, no. Poor Davis.” She puts her elbow on the pressed white tablecloth, and it’s such a relaxed Jackie move I can’t keep from smiling. This moment is the first respite we have from a date that feels as constricting and stifling as my pants. Finally neither of us is trying to be someone we aren’t.

“Grace didn’t know.” I swipe the napkin over my mouth and drop it on the table, trading it for the wineglass. Better than Château Sedacca, if you ask me. “Davis stormed out of the bar.”

“Have you talked to him since?” Jackie leans closer, our shared concern for Davis another thing we have in common. She knows his backstory because I told her. Davis doesn’t care

who knows, but he isn't big on bringing it up himself. I can't blame him. If my ex humiliated me, it wouldn't be a story I trotted out at parties.

“He called this morning and asked if anything good was on Netflix because he was planning to binge.” He sounded groggy and heavy, and I wondered if he was asking from bed because he was planning on staying there all day.

“And of course you steered him toward *Orange Is the New Black*,” Jackie says, lifting her own wineglass.

“Uh, no. *Daredevil*. Duh.”

“Boys.” She rolls her eyes and the air between us lightens. We've been trying so hard tonight to be “couple on a date” that we forgot to be us.

We drain our wines, I pay, and I hold the door open for her when we leave. Without putting too much thought into it, I take her hand, weaving our fingers together, her soft, small palm at home in my larger one.

The night is warm, a gentle breeze blowing through the surrounding shops. I bring us to a stop in front of the passenger door of my car, but I don't open it. Not yet. Getting in feels too close to the evening ending. I give her fingers a light squeeze. She looks up at me, her lips parting gently. Her lipstick vanished somewhere between wine and dinner, and all I can think about is tasting her bare mouth.

“I know this is new.” I feel the need to point it out. “But we're still us, Butler.”

She tilts her head, either in curiosity or in invitation.

Nervous, I continue. “Hanging out doesn't have to be difficult. We're still friends.” I can't resist her long, dark hair falling gracefully to her shoulders, so I slide my fingers into it

like I've been imagining all evening. It's so soft. "Only now we can kiss in addition to the other stuff we do together."

"Lucky us," she says with a grin, and my heart gallops. It's as good as a yes.

I lower my lips to hers, and the moment her sweet tongue meets mine in a delicate dance, I'm gone. The city lights and people shuffling by evaporate. I forget about being smooth or impressing her. I just concentrate on kissing the hell out of her.

CHAPTER TEN

JACQUELINE

My nerves melt away the second Vince puts his lips on mine. The only melting I'm doing is into him. My hands around his biceps, I squeeze his impressive muscles. He ends the kiss and smiles down at me, and I recall the way that slight scratch of stubble felt against my lips.

Kissing Vince is thrilling.

Lately every part of me springs to high alert when he's near, whether it's to tease me or to talk to me at work, but oh, wow, when he kisses me...

"I had no idea you were this good of a kisser." I'm tipping my hand, but because it's Vince I don't care.

"Well, you never asked."

His response is casual, and so *him*, that I relax more. There's nothing to be afraid of or nervous about. I'm not in danger of being taken advantage of with him.

Except for work. Things could get choppy.

"Now what?"

“How about we take a walk?” He smiles, his eyes reflecting the streetlights.

“A walk?”

“Yeah. Get to know each other.” He nods down the street.

We’re in an artsy district where twinkle lights are strung outside various shops and restaurants—most of them with their doors propped open by sandwich board–style signage inviting passersby inside. Across the street is a huge fountain in the center of the square, beyond that the river and highway. It’s a gorgeous, warm-breezed, clear summer night—my favorite time of year to be downtown.

“I need to walk off that fattening duck dish I ate.” He pulls a hand over his taut stomach as we amble along the bike path to the fountain.

“We already know each other,” I say instead of addressing Vince’s waistline concerns—of which he has none. We share a lingering gaze and I look away, suddenly shy. The wind kicks my hair in front of my face. Before I can, Vince lifts a hand and sweeps it aside.

“I didn’t know how soft your hair was until I kissed you that first time,” he says. “And I didn’t know how cute you were when you eat filet mignon until tonight. We have plenty to learn about each other, Butler.”

I guess we do. He lets the serious moment drop and offers an impish grin. “Maybe later we can share dessert.”

My stomach flutters at the prospect of what Vince’s “dessert” might include. At the same time, guilt stabs me. I’m having “dessert” with two guys. True, it’s not sex, but dating them both is strange. Especially since I’ve barely managed to date one underwhelming prospect at a time in the past. It goes

against everything I thought I believed, but then, so does kissing the formerly untouchable Vince Carson.

He clasps my hand again, and my smile returns. I've touched him often, but it's never crossed the friend line until recently. It's kind of exciting. And, in the way exciting things often are, it's also kind of scary.

I'm going to take Bethany's advice and live in the now. Go with my gut. Right now my gut says to hold Vince's hand and stroll over to the fountain. Throw in a few pennies and make a wish. And then maybe find out what his version of dessert is like.

The hulking, square fountain is so big that several couples lounge on the ledge and are far enough away that we can't hear their hushed conversations. Or their face sucking. I blink in stunned silence. Two of them are going *at it*.

I clear my throat, suddenly conscious that Vince might want to do the same thing.

He cornered me about J.T. and I was honest—J.T. and I kissed a lot in his apartment. J.T. is a good kisser. Not too much tongue, just the right amount of touching. He didn't go right for the breasts or try to topple me over while we were on his sofa. I appreciated his polite advances as much as I appreciated his not pushing me for more.

When Vince kisses me, however, it's me who needs a lesson in being polite. His lips touch mine and I want to wrap my legs around his hips. That last brief meeting of our mouths had me imagining us on the couch and him on top, grinding into me while I clawed at his clothes.

“Why are you shivering? It's not cold out here at all.” Vince tsks, pulling me closer by our linked hands and rubbing

his other palm up and down one of my bare arms. I don't have the guts to tell him I'm not the least bit cold. That instead I was imagining all the ways he could turn me on...well, not *all* the ways. I'm sure he has tricks up his sleeve I can't imagine. I definitely can't tell him that.

See, that's what's not adding up. If you're dating two people, it's because you like them both, right? And I do...but this pact I've made with myself about not having sex with either of them until I decide is set up to fail. I have a feeling Vince, whom I've known for years, will have a better shot at breaking through that wall before J.T. does.

Sex.

It complicates everything.

"Okay, Butler. Let's hear it." Vince pulls me out of yet another deep thought.

"I have nothing to say." I shrug, an exaggerated motion I hope will make him forget that I'm dodging his question.

"Liar! Something is going on in that brain of yours. We're standing here under a full moon, twinkle lights everywhere, a fountain with coins in the bottom where at least two people are making out so hard they might fall in"—I laugh at that—"and you're not here with me. Talk to me. What's the deal?"

My mouth goes dry and then drier as I watch the water spout from the fountain and splash into the pool below. I can't tell Vince I'm sexually attracted to him and that he puts J.T. to shame in that department, so I bring up the only topic that will shut him up.

"Those girls you dated after your divorce," I start, and Vince's mouth slides into a frown. "Why didn't you tell me about them?"

He pulls in a deep breath, then studies the aforementioned full moon. He licks his lips, and unwanted images pop into my brain of who else kissed those lips before I did. Like the blonde from the bar that night—Polly. It's a petty, unfair, jealous thought, but it's exactly the distraction my hormones need. I'm no longer picturing him naked.

"We're friends. You could tell me something like that. Why didn't you?" I press.

Vince lets go of my hand and gestures for me to sit. I lower myself to the concrete ledge and he does the same.

He faces me. "Truth?"

I bite my lip, unsure. Do I want to know?

"It's dude logic," he warns. "It ain't pretty."

"So help me, if you say you have needs, I'll never forgive you." It's a clichéd excuse and a downright disgusting one, since that's the exact excuse Lex used when he told me he'd slept with his assistant.

"I would never say that because it's bullshit." Vince knows my damage with my ex, thanks to my sympathizing during the aftermath of his and Leslie's divorce.

"I thought you were healing before you started dating," I continue. Petulantly. The fact that he'd slept with girls I didn't know about shouldn't matter, but evidently it does. The idea of another woman in his bedroom the night before I came over to watch movies makes my skin crawl. "Did you bring any of them to your house?"

"Butler." He looks away, which means yes.

"Oh, God," I mutter, having an unwanted epiphany. "You didn't sleep with any of them on your couch, did you?" I

cringe, which is not a good look for me, but I can't help myself.

“Jackie.” Vince chuckles in that deep, comforting way he has.

“Now you're laughing at me?” And I'm whining. I shut my eyes and play with the ends of my hair in frustration. “You know what? I don't want to know. I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business. I have no reason to behave like a jealous —”

“I didn't tell you because I knew you'd lecture me and I didn't want to be talked out of it.”

“It”? Does he mean sex or dating? Are they interchangeable to him? I don't know how I feel about that.

“I care what you think of me, Butler.” He takes my hand, interrupting my hair twirling, and rubs his thumb over mine. “It mattered that you didn't look at me any differently.”

Isn't it amazing how men can separate sex from relationships?

Completely confounding.

Vince palms my cheek and I blink up at him. “I'm not Lex. I didn't cheat on my wife. I didn't cheat on anybody. I went on a few dates that didn't pan out. Now I'm on a date with you, and trust me when I tell you you're the only woman on my mind.”

A smile carves a path through the scruff on his jaw and then he's leaning in close. There, under the moonlight in the center of Columbus's Rogue Square, we kiss while sitting on the fountain as the people around us fade into the background.

VINCE

Neither of us was hungry for it, but we went for dessert. Reason being: The fountain kisses were edging into public indecency territory. I pulled away first, which was a testament to how much I respect Jackie. She's just this side of reserved. Super crazy PDA on a first date is well outside her comfort zone.

Me? I'd have happily kept kissing her until we wound up making out in the damn water. And that's not typical for me. Yes, a few past first dates ended up in bed—only one of them in my bed—Jackie sure as hell doesn't need to know that—but those dates were never more than one-night distractions. I learned quickly that as helpful as those hookups were at getting me over my pain-filled divorce, they were also unsatisfying. The awkward morning after was so strange I amended my sex rule to “her place, not mine,” and I morphed into one of those guys who favored leaving in the middle of the night.

I'm not like that anymore. And I'm not like that with Jackie. I'd never leave her in bed while I sneaked downstairs without my shoes. I haven't felt this way since I dated Leslie. That thought introduces the smallest kernel of doubt. I shove it aside and hang a left on Cross Street.

“Vince.”

“Yeah?”

Jackie glances to the side mirror. “You turned the wrong way on Cross.”

“Not true.” I flex my hand on the steering wheel, weirdly nervous. “This is the way to my house.”

“I know, but...”

Sigh.

“But you don’t want to go back to my house,” I finish for her.

“Well...”

“It’s Friday,” I say, as if that’s reason enough to take her home. “You come over almost every weekend for movie night.” Or she did, until she started dating Jaundice.

“That’s true, but...”

Another “but.” I can guess what comes next, so I stop acting like an ass and give her hand a squeeze. “But that was before we made out hot and heavy on our first date.”

She doesn’t respond and there’s no need. The kernel of doubt develops into a sprout. Everything between us has changed, even though I didn’t mean for it to. I wanted things to change. I wanted to add kissing to our friendship, not swap one for the other.

I pump the brakes—both literally and mentally—and turn into a random driveway, checking behind me for traffic so I can set the course for Jackie’s apartment.

“What are you doing?” she asks.

“Taking you home.” I see my opening, reverse out, and drive toward her place. A palpable hesitation from her reminds

me how complicated things have become. “It’s not a big deal. I should have asked.”

“But you normally wouldn’t have to ask,” she says matter-of-factly. She’s figured out our conundrum too.

“It’s okay,” I say, because if I keep saying it, hopefully it will be.

I weave around the main road in her complex. The guest parking spaces are full save for a few in the back, and I silently swear. Dropping her off in front of her porch means our kiss goodbye will be in the car. I’d prefer walking her up and pressing her back to the door. Since I don’t see any other cars...

“I’ll get your door.” I leave the keys in the ignition, the engine idling, and I’m out of the car before I hear what might be her protests. I suddenly don’t like sensible Jackie. She’s already outside the car when I reach her, a smile spreading the lips I want another taste of before I leave.

“How did you do it?” She beams up at me, her eyes so filled with naked approval, I pull my shoulders back.

“Do what?” I’m grinning too, and hoping her question is something along the lines of *How did you make me want to invite you in and kiss you until you’re ready to explode?*

Instead she says, “The flowers,” and starts for her stoop.

Huh?

I turn my head and realize that Jaundice has fucked me over, and I’ll bet he didn’t do it on purpose. There is a huge bouquet of daisies stuck in her mailbox by the door, note attached.

Leaving my idling car behind, I follow her to the door, because leaping into my car and peeling out of the parking lot would be rude. Before I can explain the daisies aren't from me, she shows me the card. I read it, anger throttling me.

BECAUSE ROSES ARE GENERIC. ~J.T.

“Daisies aren't much better,” I tell her. Like a jerk.

Jackie's eyes flit across the street toward the other apartments. I can't exactly tell which is J.T.'s, but I know that's why she's looking over there. She cradles the bouquet and licks her lips in a nervous gesture.

“Listen. Vince.” Her creased brow tells me all I need to know. She'd invite me in, but it's too soon—or hell, maybe too late. She'd kiss me goodbye on the stoop, but J.T. might be watching out the windows and she doesn't want to hurt his feelings.

Guess what? I don't care about J.T.'s feelings. Or his stupid show-Vince-up flowers.

“I had a nice time tonight,” she says, her smile returning. But it's a distant smile—bordering on flat. It's not hard to decipher that those words are a brush-off. They weren't original. I've heard them before. They just never hurt as much as they do right now.

“I noticed.” I step out of my space and into hers. So close I crinkle the cellophane of her bouquet between our bodies. I thumb her bottom lip and lean closer.

She stops me by wrapping a hand around my wrist.

“See you Monday.” Jackie lets go of me and produces a house key. She's addressing me from the interior of her apartment before I can blink. “Thanks again for dinner. We'll do this again.”

Her door shuts in my face and I stare at the panel, stupefied.

Did that really happen?

I turn and walk down the steps to my car, and it takes every ounce of resistance in my body not to glare in the direction of J.T.'s window—wherever the hell he is.

I sink into my driver's seat, head shaking at my awkward departure. And realizing belatedly that Jackie once again threw the "See you Monday" at me, which means she's not planning on seeing me again this weekend.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

VINCE

“Did you believe one date would seal the deal?” Davis asks me from the opposite side of the booth. “That’s lame even for you, Carson.”

We’re at a sports bar named For Puck’s Sake. It’s hockey themed. Columbus Blue Jackets jerseys and photos of the team are hung haphazardly between pucks and sticks and equipment on the walls.

We hate this place. We’ve always hated this place. Yet here we are.

“Did you believe eating here instead of McGreevy’s would make you forget how Gracie inadvertently insulted you?” I shoot back.

Davis pulls his eyes from the television to glare at me. “We’re talking about you being mad at Jackie-O for not sleeping with you on the first date, not Grace or McGreevy’s Pub.”

“I’m not mad that Jackie didn’t sleep with me, you asshole.” I told him the whole story, including the flowers

from Jaundice that put the kibosh on any further contact between my and Jackie's mouths that evening. "I'm not *mad* at all. I'm frustrated because we're no longer friends."

"Men and women can't be friends." Davis puts a fry into his mouth and watches the television again. It's a replay OSU football game, which is about as out of place as the waitresses, who wear referee shirts with the shortest skirts I've ever seen.

The Bucks score a touchdown and the entire place, including Davis and me, erupts with cheers even though the game happened five years ago. We Ohio State fans bleed scarlet and gray.

"You need to up your game." Davis takes a gulp from his tall, frosted mug. "Or else you're going to backslide into friends with her and that's all you'll have left. On the bright side, you'll be best man at her and Running Guy's wedding."

Is it pathetic that Davis's statement drills into my chest like a hollow-point bullet? I take a drink, then another, from my own frosted mug. "His name's Jaundice."

Davis lets out a light chuckle and it's the first one I've heard tonight—hell, in a while. He's not jovial on his best day, but lately he's been one grouchy son of a bitch. "I told you it was stupid to encourage her to go out with that guy. You're Mister Safe Zone."

Despite his earlier insults and unfortunate honesty, Davis is on my side. He has my back. I have his too, which is why I brought up Grace. If he continues avoiding her, I'll have to bring up Hanna by name, then risk him Hulking out on me. If he needs it, though, I won't hesitate. He did the same for me when I was sulking over Leslie.

“I’m listening,” I say, “but you have one minute to make your point before I start hitting below the belt.”

“That’s fair.” Davis swipes the napkin over his mouth and tosses it into his empty plastic food basket.

I lean in. I need advice and I’m desperate. Last night I drove home after leaving Jackie on her doorstep—*unkissed*, I might add. I watched *From Dusk Till Dawn* with blind eyes. I was staring through George and Quentin when I’m normally rapt. And whenever a vampire tore out someone’s throat, I mentally swapped the victim for J.T.

Immature, sure, but oh so satisfying.

“How’d you get Polly to sleep with you?” Davis asks.

“Why? Do you need pointers or something?” Shit. He did go out with Polly that night. Not that I care, but...yeah, okay, I care. It’s not that I want to date her, but since I know Davis isn’t interested in dating anyone long term, it seems unfair for him to sleep with her. And unfair to Grace, but that’s another can of night crawlers.

“No, dumbass. I want to know how you talked Polly into bed because that’s the same tactic you’re going to have to use with Jackie-O. Turn up the heat.”

“Polly and I didn’t do a lot of talking,” I mumble. I see what he’s getting at, though. I’m handling Jackie with kid gloves instead of pursuing her. I shake my head because using my wiles would never work on my coworker. “Jackie is nothing like Polly.”

“True. I bet Jackie is church-mouse quiet in bed, whereas Polly—”

“Geez, man, seriously?” I hold up a hand because cupping my palms over my ears would make me look like a ten-year-

old.

Davis lets out a hearty laugh. “I’m fucking with you, Carson. I didn’t take Polly to bed. God, man. I have rules.”

He does? I’ve heard rumors of the “Davis packages” but I mostly thought he was kidding. I frown in consideration, and maybe a little in admiration.

“You have mad game, Vince.”

“*Mad game?* Who says that?” But he ignores me.

“For some reason you’re reserving using said *mad game* for the right time with your coworker. Keep in mind this other guy is playing the game and playing it hard. He’s not keeping any of his game in reserves. He’s going for Jackie-O full out.”

I think of the Château Sedacca and the home-cooked meal. Davis is right.

“So, what, I’m supposed to seduce her away from him?” I hear the fear-edged anger in my voice.

“You told Jackie you’d coach her. So *coach her*. She wants to know how to get the guy, and you’re just the guy to show her.”

“You’re missing the point. I don’t want her anywhere near this guy.”

“No, but in showing her the how-tos, she’ll be with you.” Davis points at me. “This is a numbers game, bro. The more time you spend with Jackie, the less of it she has to spend with Jaundice.”

I smile because he used my pet name for J.T.

“You know Jackie better than I do,” Davis continues, “but I’m guessing if she’s hot and heavy with you, she’s going to

have a hard time getting hot and heavy with Blondie.”

Right. I nod, understanding his point. Actually, I’m excited by his suggestion—it’s a glimpse of possibility when I need it most. A vision of the cavalry riding over the hill when I’m neck deep in Middle Earth orcs.

“I showed my cards too early.” I snatched the kiss from her over delivered fast-food chicken rather than mounting a careful attack.

“Yep. Now she’s got you waiting in the wings for her to decide if this other dude has better game than you do. And by my count he’s flowers, two, to your flowers, zero.” Davis makes an “okay” symbol, then targets me through the circle made with his thumb and forefinger.

“Coach her,” I repeat.

“Until she’s screaming your name.” Davis lifts his mug, and I lift mine and tap “cheers.” We finish off our drinks and bang the glasses on the table, which is evidently the For Puck’s Sake Morse code for “Bring me the bill.” A waitress shows up, her hair in pigtails, socks to her knees, skirt showing a whole lot of thigh.

“Are you ready to cash out?” she asks Davis, smiling as she smacks her gum.

“God, yes. We hate this place.” He says it with a grin, which earns him a giggle from Pigtails. I shake my head in wonder at a man in his element. It’s hard to believe this is the same guy who was up to his eyeballs in forever at one point.

In less than sixty seconds, Davis hands Pigtails his credit card and she’s written her phone number on his hand.

I’m not surprised in the least.

She *is* a blonde.

JACQUELINE

I pace to Vince's office door for the third time before turning back toward my office and doing the loop one final time. No one's in the building but us because it's the ungodly hour of six A.M. Vince probably thinks he's here alone, and most of the time he is. For the past few months, he's been coming in early to enjoy the first quiet hour in the morning before the throngs bustle in chattering about the day's top headlines.

I'm never in this early. My brain is fuzzy and my eyes are grainy, as my first cup of coffee hasn't kicked in yet. I came in this early because I need to talk to him about this weekend—after I panicked like a complete ninny over a bouquet of flowers. I offered a generic send-off and shut the door on Vince's handsome face for one reason: I worried that J.T. was watching from his apartment across the street for me to pick up the flowers. Kissing Vince would have put me in the hot seat.

I'm a coward.

I called Bethany the next morning for advice. My older, more sophisticated sister answered in hushed tones from a guy's bathroom—a guy she'd picked up at a work mixer the night before.

“Are you going to see him again?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe. He’s really good in bed, but he snores.”

I’m torn between admiration and disgust for the way Bethany lives her life. We broached the topic of the flowers and Vince, and she reminded me of something very important.

“You don’t owe anyone an explanation, Jacqueline. You are doing nothing wrong. Kiss whoever you want to kiss. Befriend whoever you want to befriend. You’re waiting on the sex thing until you decide who to have it with, but there’s no rush. You’re in the driver’s seat, honey. I know that’s hard to accept after Lex locked you in the trunk.”

She was being metaphorical but it didn’t make her any less right. Bethany sat on her one- or two-night stand’s toilet lid and gave me the pep talk I needed. Lex made me believe I didn’t matter, further proving it when he didn’t adhere to the wedding vows that meant something—to me, at least.

But enough is enough. I need to let Vince know that I’m the one misbehaving and that he did everything right. He wanted to kiss me. I stopped that kiss from happening and regretted it all weekend. Vince deserves better. If he thinks I don’t care about him, he might call up one of those bimbos from his past. Unacceptable.

I knock on the door frame. Vince looks up, papers in both hands, glasses resting on the end of his nose. He tugs them off, his eyes glazed like he was mired in numbers or some other complicated data.

“Morning.”

“Morning,” he answers, setting the papers down and dropping the glasses onto the stack. Sexy with them on, sexy

with them off. Double threat. “What are you doing here so early?”

“I wanted to talk to you. About Friday.”

The intake of breath and the stoic nod tell me I brought up a topic he’d rather ignore. But I was in the wrong and I’m willing to admit it. He stands from his desk.

“You don’t have to get up. I won’t be long. I wanted to say I’m sorry about the way our date ended. It was unforgivably rude not to focus on you and you alone.”

He slides his hands in his jeans pockets and swaggers over, and for the life of me I try to stay on point rather than admire the sexy way he ambles closer.

“Um...” Like that, I lose my train of thought. I find my way back clumsily. “I was on a date with you and I enjoyed myself. I didn’t mean to let a bouquet of daisies derail everything we—”

“Relax, Butler.” Vince stands in front of me now, looking down at me and smelling—Lord, *heavenly*. “I crossed a line with you.”

I blink. “Pardon?”

“I promised to coach you with J.T., and then I confused coaching with winning and it wasn’t fair to you.”

“You wanted to win me?” I ask, my voice fragile.

“Nah, it’s a testosterone thing.” Vince’s mouth slides into a casual smile. “Won’t happen again.”

That comment is like a punch to the solar plexus. I fight to pull in my next breath. Finally it comes.

“It won’t?”

“I don’t know what got into me.” He offers a shrug. “One second I was cheering you on, the next I was playing the role of jealous boyfriend. You don’t have to worry because I’m putting on my coaching hat again. The only kissing you’ll be doing with me will be training for what you and J.T. have going on.”

“You think I need kissing training?” This is too weird. So is parroting everything Vince says, but I can’t think of anything original to say.

“Everyone needs practice. Sounds like you and J.T. have a lot of potential. I don’t want you to miss out because I’m distracting you.” He lifts his hand for a high five. “Team Butler.”

I raise my hand, still unsure, and he slaps my palm.

“Team Butler!” he shouts, briefly linking our fingers before he lets me go. “Anyway, I have to finish this month’s quarterly budget, so I should get to it.” Positioned over his desk, he unbuttons his sleeves and rolls them to his elbows. I watch the reveal of the tats on his left arm, my mouth going dry. “When’s your next date?”

“Huh?”

“Date, Butler. With J.T. What is it? Lunch, dinner?”

“Oh, um. Coffee. Tomorrow afternoon.”

“Afternoon coffee?” Vince winces. “You’re backtracking.”

“No, I’m not. He’s busy.” But that sounds like an excuse.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you turn coffee into dinner.”

“He can’t. He has to meet with a client at four.”

Vince slides his glasses on and sits at his desk again. He regards the papers but speaks to me. “He can and he will. I’m the coach; let me take care of the details.” He looks at me over the rims of his glasses, which is as erotic and distracting as the rest of him. “Deal?”

I want to say no, but I’m so thrown, I agree.

“Deal.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

VINCE

Jackie and I are at Three O’Clock, a hipster-styled coffee spot we both prefer. Yeah, they serve “flat whites,” but they also serve a mean cup of black coffee or, as Jackie prefers, one with a gallon of almond milk in it.

I’m on my second mug, legs kicked out and crossed at the ankles while Jackie grimaces at me over the first cup she’s nursing.

“This is dumb,” she states.

“What’s dumb?” *Me, at the moment*, I answer myself. Or at least, I’m playing it.

“I don’t want to practice having coffee with J.T.” She gestures, hands flared outward in exasperation. “I know how to have coffee.”

Despite her gesticulating, her voice is quiet.

“I don’t want to play games, Vince.”

Neither do I, but my being Mr. Available fast-tracked me to the friend zone. I can’t let that happen again. That’s why I’m behaving like an aloof coworker.

“I didn’t invite you here to frustrate you, Butler. I invited you here to help you. Do you want to advance beyond coffee and lunch dates with this guy or what?”

I won’t lie. Her hesitation tempts me to smile. She’s unsure about Jaundice and that’s some great fucking news.

“Yes. I mean, I want to spend more time with him.”

Ouch. But I keep my poker face. This is the play, and though I’m toying with fire running a game on Butler, I justify it by telling myself it’s for her own good.

“Okay.” I sit up and lean my forearms on the table. “Stand up, walk out of here, and we’ll start over.”

“Are you serious?” She gives me a bland blink. Too bad for her I’m as serious as Jim Carrey in *The Truman Show*.

“You’re twenty minutes late,” I instruct her, giving her a detail to work with. “You’re wearing a flowery dress with ruffles on it.”

“That’s specific.” She’s actually wearing black pants and a button-down shirt, but I need her to glide in here if this is going to work.

“The blue one.”

She holds my eyes, her lips parting at my comment. Hell, yeah, I was specific. She walks like she owns the world when she wears that dress. That’s what I want to see—confidence.

“Tell me you’re sorry you’re late and you want to make it up to me with dinner at Chez Chandon.”

“Why am I late?”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“It matters.”

Of course it does. Details are Jackie's bag. "Fine. You were held up at work. Tell him I made you help me with a report I couldn't figure out."

She laughs, which lights her eyes. I love that sound.

"So it's your fault. I can work with that." She stands and leaves the coffee shop. I watch her walk, her measured steps professional and thoughtful. Outside, she walks past the windows and out of sight. The next time I see her, it's a new Jackie.

Her chin is high, her arms swinging. She's wiggling her ass like she's working that blue dress we decided on. Inside, she pretends to look around and I play along, raising my hand to wave. The smile she wears when she approaches is staged and almost apologetic.

"I'm late. I know." She bends down and grazes the side of my mouth with her lips. The touch is too brief but enough to send my mind spinning. "Vince kept me late because he needed help with the quarterly reports. *Again.*" She adds an eye roll. "I don't know what he'd do without me."

I break character to grin before resuming my role. "You're forgiven. Have a seat. I still have ten minutes."

She sucks air through her teeth. "Actually, I don't. I have to go back. Tell you what, let me treat you to dinner at Chez Chandon tonight." She sighs, her shoulders pulling down with the breath. "Now what do I say? I know he has a four o'clock appointment."

"You say, 'Meet me there at six. I'll be the one in red.'"

"Why would that work?" She sits, giving up the act.

"It might not. But if he likes you enough to cut his meeting short, then you're one step closer to sealing the deal with

him.” She won’t, though. Not as long as I have anything to say about it.

“Chez Chandon at six.” She lifts her purse from the back of the chair she previously inhabited and lowers her voice to a sensual husk. “I’ll be the one in the short, tight, red dress. Don’t keep me waiting.”

I’m transfixed. Jackie has morphed before my eyes yet again.

“Six,” I repeat. “I’ll be there.”

She leans forward and I think she’s coming in for a kiss goodbye. Instead she whispers, “Now what?”

I snag her purse strap and pull her closer. “Now we go back to work, and I’ll see you tonight at six.” I release her without taking the kiss her eyes promised.

“What do you mean you’ll see me at six? Are you pretending to be J.T., or are you *you*?”

“Chez Chandon, Butler.” I stand and walk to the door, holding it open for her when she follows. “You invited me. I accept.”

A smile tickles the side of her lips. I like that look on her a lot, and if my calculations add up, I secured date number two.

Damn.

Davis was right.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACQUELINE

It worked.

I'm sitting across from J.T. at Chez Chandon. He's in slacks and a button-down dress shirt—no tie as per his usual. Vince was totally right. I almost didn't listen to him when it came time for the coffee date with J.T. but decided that yes, I would honor his hypothesis and arrive twenty minutes late.

I did the whole thing. The I-have-to-go-back-to-work thing, the let-me-treat-you-to-dinner thing. And here we are. At seven instead of six like Vince and I practiced last night, but I doubt an hour is going to make a difference in the outcome.

What *has* made a difference was the dinner with Vince last night. Well, not so much the dinner but the drop-off. Vince walked me to my stoop, stopping at the threshold of my apartment.

"I had a lovely evening, Jacqueline," Vince says, his voice syrupy. I can't help but smile. He's taking this whole coaching thing really seriously.

“So did I, Jack.”

Vince’s mouth twists. “You can’t actually believe things will work out between you two when you have virtually the same name as his.”

“Vince!”

“Okay, okay.” He closes his eyes and reopens them, and I can’t help but compare Jack and Vince. Especially with Vince looking at me in a heated way that I can’t tell is for show or not. “I’ll call you soon, Jacqueline,” he says. I recognize his play voice because when he’s pretending he’s very formal. When he’s himself, it’s “Butler this” and “Butler that,” paired with a cheeky grin that hints at something more sensual beneath.

He steps closer and cups my waist with one hand, leaning in. Before his lips press to mine, I rest my palm on his chest.

“I don’t need to practice this part with you,” I breathe, my heart hammering. If I have a prayer of focusing on J.T., it’d be best if I didn’t practice with Vince.

He doesn’t answer, only tugs me the rest of the way and kisses me, his mouth firm against mine.

I sigh and lean in for more. The pretense of our coaching date withers as I go up on my toes to get more of his mouth. He tastes amazing. I don’t want him to stop.

But he does.

Just shy of slipping his tongue into my mouth, he finishes us off with an audible smooch and I lower to my heels. Once he’s sure I’m steady, he backs away from me with a wink.

“Damn, Butler. You’re right. I don’t think you need the practice.”

That was it.

After the kiss, Vince left and I wandered to the bathroom to take out my contact lenses and brush my teeth on autopilot. The only thought in my head as I lay down to go to sleep was how sorry I was he hadn't kissed me longer, deeper...

"...and so I told the guy I'd be happy to put every window he wanted in the house, as long as he was sure he wanted full sun blaring into his bedroom each and every morning." J.T. is shaking his head and smiling in that cordial way he has. He's been talking about work for some time, and I'm spacing out to visit the memory of Vince kissing me.

"What did he decide?" I palm my wineglass and focus on what he's saying.

"After a lengthy discussion and review of my plans..."

Nope. It's no use. My mind is wandering already. The words are glancing off me, but I smile and nod, figuring it doesn't matter. A sneaky, unpleasant thought creeps in. *I was right*. I was right about how I shouldn't have met my fantasy man.

J.T. jogging by the window in all his perfection was one thing, but him in the flesh is another. He's not as interesting or comfortable as Vince. He's not as charming or as relaxed as Vince. He's...

Wait.

I can't keep comparing him to Vince. I'm not dating Vince. I was for a few hot seconds...sort of, until Vince pulled the rug from beneath my feet and claimed he never meant it. Claimed that he was swept up and jealous. This is a game to him, or maybe he's simply being a good friend—and here I sit with a

viable and attractive dating option in J.T. and I'm being a total bitch, not listening to him.

It's time to seize the day. J.T. deserves a fair shot.

"It'll cost him an extra five thou," he says now, "but to him, it's worth it." J.T. shakes his head and saws into his pork chop. "The customer is always right, right?"

I nod as he takes a bite. He has great manners. No elbows on the table; he keeps his mouth closed when he chews. I could do a lot worse. And that body. I bet he knows how to use it. My mind flits to Vince and I think of his body. Lean, muscular, and the way he held me against him made me feel safe.

I silently scold myself. If I'm going to compare them, I need to compare everything. With the memory of Vince's kiss so fresh in my mind, it'll be easy to tell if J.T. can one-up him.

"Would you like to come back to my place?" I blurt.

J.T. chews a little slower, then swallows, then grabs his napkin to swipe his mouth. After he licks his lips, he tilts his head and smiles. "I would."

"Great," I say before I lose my nerve. Then I refill my wineglass to ensure I don't.

WE DON'T RUSH out of there.

Nearly fifty minutes pass from my invitation to J.T. to his parking in his numbered space across the lot. I follow in my car. Since he met me at the restaurant, we drove separately. I park in my numbered space and watch as J.T.'s limber, long-

legged stride eats up the sidewalk as he makes his way to me. Not gonna lie, that's a nice visual.

I'm waiting on my stoop when he arrives, not the least bit out of breath. He smiles back at me as a soft summer breeze lifts the front of his blond hair. My heart kicks my chest in anticipation.

"Thanks for coming by," I joke. We live so close, it was no more than a walk across the street to my house.

He steps closer, his cologne strong but not in a bad way. He does that thing where he pushes his fingers into my hair and cups my jaw like I've seen in the movies, then he kisses me. It's warm. It's nice.

My anticipation fizzles into acute disappointment as J.T. goes one step further and slips his tongue into my mouth. I kiss him back but can't seem to shut off my brain. And my brain is reminding me that as nice as J.T.'s kiss is, it's nowhere near as satisfying as Vince's. My body is cadaver stiff. Standing here, making out with him feels almost...wrong.

What the hell?

He pulls back and regards me sweetly, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. "You are truly beautiful, Jacqueline Butler."

The compliment works. I smile easily as I lean my cheek into his hand. I'm being overly critical. I need to be more like Bethany. Seize the day! Do not overthink.

I open my mouth and, "Would you like to come in?" falls out.

His smile broadens into a toothy grin. I'm not sure my timing is right, but I am sure I need to kick my sex life into

high gear. Starting with this guy couldn't hurt no matter what happens.

“No.”

Since he's still smiling, his negative response throws me.

I frown and repeat, “No?”

“I remembered on the drive home that I have to work tonight. I shortened the meeting to come out with you, which means I'm behind.”

Geez. What a catch-22.

“That's okay.” I force a smile, unwilling to be deterred. “What about tomorrow or Sunday?”

He shakes his head. “No can do on either of those days, but I can take you to lunch on Tuesday.”

My heart falls. Lunch on a weekday. I blew it. Maybe Vince was wrong. I *do* need the practice.

“Good night, Jacqueline.”

“Good night, Jack.” I should also thank him for dinner—Vince was right about J.T. paying, even though I promised to—but I'm so thrown by how my charms worked up until the point he kissed me. Nothing makes a girl feel unsexy like being turned down, especially after a kiss that should have sealed that deal. Either J.T. has a tireless work ethic or I'm completely undesirable.

That last thought stings with the memory of when Lex left me. I felt about as attractive as one of those hairless cats at the end.

J.T. walks away and I watch, fiddling with my keys in indecision. He doesn't turn to wave or look over his shoulder,

but he does pick up the pace and run away from me.

After watching him run every day, I know his form. It's not as attractive when he's leaving me.

I go inside and shut the door, standing there for a moment with a frown on my face. I consider another glass of wine. Why not? Glass poured, I light a candle and search for a movie. A romantic comedy, I decide. Something that will boost my spirits and give me pleasant dreams.

I will not dwell. I will not dwell.

Hell, I'm not even going to change out of my dress. I feel pretty (oh so pretty) and I'm having a glass of wine and an elegant evening and...aha! *Sex and the City* reruns. Jackpot! I settle in and watch a string of them, three total before my eyes grow heavy. The candle I lit is burning low and the one glass of wine I poured helped the sleepy set in. I extinguish the tiny flame, flip the TV off, and walk my empty popcorn bag to the trash can.

It smells...not good. One of the downsides to being single: Lex always took out the trash. Then he dated her, but that's a joke for another time. Ha.

I slide my feet back into my heels and gather the kitchen bag. It's been a week of microwave meals and frozen pizza, so it's mostly packages and not that gross. I gather the bag and carry it to the dumpster, my mind returning to my date.

It didn't end the way I planned, but it wasn't like it was *bad*. J.T. has to work, and I can't fault him after I tricked him into cutting his meeting short to go out with me. I drop the lid of the bin and look toward his apartment, and then my optimism shatters into a million pieces.

From this side of the lot, I have a perfect view of J.T.'s third-floor balcony. Through the glass door I make out two figures. One of them is sliding her hands around his neck as their mouths mate. By the time he gathers her closer, bends and lifts her into his arms, and carries her away from the window, I can't feel my face.

I stare a few seconds longer, but my peep show is over. He and the blonde—the tall, lithe blonde—have disappeared into parts unknown in his apartment. Frantically my brain tries to concoct a reasonable scenario to explain what I saw, but that tongue dive pretty much ruled out that the blonde was his sister. Which means J.T. turned me down because he had another woman coming over.

I trudge back to my apartment. My high heels clack on the asphalt, a lonely sound in the quiet night. On my short walk my feelings shift from sad to angry.

Before I overthink my actions, I snatch the keys from the coffee table and grab my purse. I hazard one more glance at J.T.'s place before I climb into my car, but his window is dark.

My imagination ramps into high gear despite my attempts to silence it.

I drive to Vince's house, anger raging through my bloodstream. I need to talk to my coach. I need someone to tell me what to do now that I've been cheated on again. Sort of. Vince's comment about whether or not I was sure J.T. and I were exclusive echoes through my brain.

I wasn't sure. Now I am.

My anger fades and by the time I park in Vince's driveway, I'm embarrassed. I hesitate a full five seconds before

propelling myself out of the car. I have no one to talk to unless I make a phone call. I don't need a phone call. I need a hug.

God. I'm a mess.

At his front door I knock nonstop, my knuckles smarting from each *rap-rap-rap* against the wood. The longer I knock, the more my embarrassment transforms into rage.

Vince opens the door wearing cutoff sweats and a T-shirt. His eyebrows are down, his scruff in full force, his tattoos on display. Seeing him look this good without trying fuels my anger.

"Thanks a lot, *Coach*." I push past him and toss my purse onto his loveseat.

"Won't you come in?" He's being sarcastic since I'm already *in*.

"I did everything you said. I showed up late. I invited him to dinner. I invited him back to my place. I kissed him like we practiced." I tick off each item on my fingers while Vince stands at his ajar front door, his hand on the knob.

"Okay." Slowly, he closes the door.

"I thought I'd *carpe diem*! Seize the freaking day. Find my inner Bethany and have sex with a guy instead of myself for a change!" My voice escalates. Damn, it feels good to vent. So I go deeper. If a little truth feels good, then a lot will feel great, right? "I thought since I just kissed you, I'd have a fair comparison of a good kiss. But J.T.'s kiss wasn't as good as yours. Or maybe I wasn't as good. When I asked him to come in and have *sex with me*, he said no. When I asked him if he'd like to go out this weekend, he said no again. Then he ran away from me. He ran!

“He is a runner, though, so I guess that’s not surprising.” I laugh, the sound slightly hysterical. “You said if he was interested, all I had to do was offer and there was no way he would turn me down. Well, he did. Not only did he turn me down, I saw him kissing another woman tonight. In his townhouse.” I offer a bitter smile and force out the rest. “He told me he had to work, and then he called up his next date to have sex with her instead of me.”

“Butler.” Vince regards me like I’m this pitiful thing, which makes me angrier.

“Now I’m here, turned down, and I feel like shit.” My voice wavers, but I’m on a roll. “I feel the same way I did after I found out Lex cheated on me. I feel worthless and unattractive and clumsy...” I wave my hands, calling forth more words to describe the emotions bubbling up inside of me. Three years of tamping them down and they’ve returned with a vengeance. On a soft whine, I finish with “This is your fault, Vince.”

I sniffle and turn my eyes toward the ceiling, pissed that I’m about to cry. J.T. has been blowing me off for some time, and I was stupid enough to believe I could seduce him. In part because Vince assured me I could.

Vince walks to me and I take one angry step back. He reaches me easily, his palms wrapping around my upper arms. His blue eyes warm as he stops me with a sincere glare. “You’re none of those things. You’re valuable and you’re attractive and your clumsiness is charming.”

“Sure, make jokes!” I shake off his hold. “You don’t know what it’s like to be found unattractive. To be rejected. To be cheated on!” I turn and gesture at him in an accusatory manner. Yes, Leslie left him, but she didn’t cheat on him. It’s

different. “You’ve been out there more times than I want to know about, and I’ll bet you were never rejected.”

He opens his mouth, maybe to argue, but I karate chop the air to stop him.

“You know what? I don’t want to hear it. I want to know why you lied to me.”

His face contorts as confusion surfaces. “I never lied to you.”

I poke his chest with my finger. “You said I didn’t need practice kissing, and yet when I kissed J.T. he ran straight home and called someone else. Why didn’t you tell me I was so awful?”

“Because you’re not.” He leans into my finger and I curl my hand into a fist, overcome by his nearness as much as his sincerity. His voice is low and laced with gravel when he says, “If that asshole is sleeping with someone other than you, then clearly you were kissing the wrong guy.”

I hear what’s under those words—what he’s not saying. I draw in a thin breath. “And who’s the right one?”

He answers by straightening his shoulders. He doesn’t grab me up and kiss me. He doesn’t say, “Me.” Instead he asks a question. “Why were you comparing kissing me to kissing J.T.?”

I shrug, then lie. “I have no idea.”

The truth? Vince kissed a million times better than J.T.

“Not that it matters,” I tack on. “You’re not interested in me.”

His eyes narrow, his voice dipping low enough that my stomach flutters. “Are you interested in me?”

Unfair. That question is totally unfair. If I say yes, which is the answer, I risk being rejected again. I tell him the only truth I can bear. “Vince, I can’t take another no tonight.”

He goes blurry when my eyes fill with tears. I blink, holding them back by sheer force of will.

“Yeah, well, neither can I.” His jaw sets, a muscle flickering in his cheek.

The score for whatever movie he’s watching on TV climaxes, and violins and horns reach a crescendo. I don’t look away from Vince. His expression is deadly serious. He’s asking if I want J.T. back. He’s asking if I want J.T. at all. I don’t even have to think about it, but the answer is glued to the roof of my mouth.

At my hesitation, Vince’s shoulders round. He pinches the bridge of his nose. “You deserve better, Butler. I know you wanted things to work out but—”

“I didn’t want him,” I interrupt. “I was taking your advice.”

Vince watches me carefully. I can feel the change in the atmosphere, the literal shift of atoms between us. He takes my hands in his bigger, warmer ones, his eyes trained on mine. “Say the word, Butler.”

He’s daring me, but my boldness has shriveled into a tiny, shivering ball. I’m terrified to speak first.

I shake my head. I can’t do it.

“Say the word,” he repeats. Slowly. “And I guarantee you won’t go to bed alone tonight.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

VINCE

Neither of us is willing to put our ass on the line. My heart is thundering, my breathing shallow. I never dreamed Jackie would try to sleep with that jerk tonight. When she showed up angry and spouting all that stuff about how he rejected her, a very big part of me was relieved. I didn't know how relieved I'd be.

I squeeze her fingers gently and, damn it to hell, I'm going to have to be the one who goes first. She's vulnerable. As evidenced by her closed posture and the slight shake working down her arms.

"Lex is an asshole and Jaundice isn't much better," I state.

She doesn't pull away from me, so I keep talking.

"If he didn't want you after you invited him in, then he's a fucking idiot, because I wouldn't have to think about my answer if you invited me to your bed."

Her voice is small when she asks, "You wouldn't?"

"Try me."

My cards are on the table. I can't be any clearer. I wait, regret and anticipation and longing flooding my chest like a toxic mix of chemicals. The seconds of silence that hang in air threaten to choke me.

"Yes." Her voice is a whisper, her eyelids fluttering as a single tear streaks down her cheek. I'm so flummoxed, I'm positive I didn't hear her right. Lifting my hand to her cheek, I thumb away the teardrop.

"Say yes again, Butler, and I'll take you upstairs and thoroughly blow your mind."

Her mouth curves up at the corner and this time there's no mistaking the "yes" that rolls off her tongue.

I don't hesitate.

I slam my lips into hers, walking her toward the stairs as I palm her back with one hand and her head with the other. A needy sound escapes her throat and I'm erect instantly.

My plans this evening were to watch a survival movie, get drunk, and sleep on the sofa. Until just now. Now my plans are...well, they're unsortable in my head. Just flashes of my mouth on Jackie's, then my mouth on her body. Her flavor, her cries, the way she feels and moves and tastes.

We reach the stairs in a rush. Jackie's heel hits the back of the second step and she starts to fall backward. I go with her, earning a slight rug burn on my forearm when I move fast to keep her from bonking her head.

"Told you I was clumsy." She's laid out on the steps beneath me in an incredible dress I can't wait to peel off her.

I lower my body over hers and correct with "Charming."

She smiles. So do I. Then I'm kissing her again, suddenly uninterested in going to the bedroom. My hand runs the length of her calf and slips beneath her skirt to above her knee before venturing higher, to her thigh. She's making cute little panting noises, so I keep going.

"You look gorgeous, by the way," I say against her mouth, trailing my tongue down her neck. She mutters "Thanks" and arches her head back to grant me more access. I close my lips over her pulse point and suckle.

Her hands go to my hair, spearing upward and pulling a little.

I like it way too much. I'm vibrating with the need to strip her out of her clothes. Caged desire has built over the past several months—for her. I knew if I ever kissed her again it would be like this, a frantic race to get naked and find out just how good it felt to be inside her. I know she wants the same thing—I've won the contest between me and that jackass runner she thought she wanted. But there's another, more important race to win: making Jackie so satisfied she sees stars.

Mission. Accepted.

I brace one hand on the stairs and trail my other hand up her thigh to her panties. She's soft as silk and when I tuck my finger beneath the thin material, I find her slick and ready. I stroke her as she utters a plea. She doesn't have to beg. I'm willing to turn her on.

"Jaundice is an idiot." I stroke her again and her back bows beneath my touch. I kiss her collarbone and sit up enough to maneuver the side zipper on her dress. I didn't have the chance to admire her in it when she kamikazed me at the door, but now, I'm looking. And I like what I see. I like what I

hear too. Not only her muffled pleas but also her shoes tumbling down the steps and hitting my foyer floor with a pair of dull thuds. Red like her dress, the spike heels are tossed carelessly onto the floor.

Careless is okay for the shoes but it's the one thing I refuse to be with Jackie. She matters too much to me.

Her breaths tighten, quickening when I find her clit and stroke gently, then firmly, testing what she likes. Firm, as it turns out. Firm and *fast*. Her eyes squeeze close, her lips parted in ecstasy.

“Vince.”

“I've got you, Butler.”

“God, you feel so good.”

That's a win if I've ever heard one. I try not to smile in triumph but I can't help myself. Her eyes open halfway and she grabs my face and tugs me down, kissing me hard. Stroking my tongue as my fingers stroke her. I lose her mouth as she lets loose a cry of pure bliss. Her hips shift and pump as I slow my fingers, gentling her to the end of her orgasm. Her body relaxes, her cheeks are rosy, and a satisfied hum exits her throat.

This time when her eyes open, her pupils are lust-blown. Her smile is warm and lazy and oh so satisfied. When her hand goes between our bodies to grip my cock, the rest of me stiffens with it.

“You're much better than I am at that,” she murmurs as she gives me a gentle squeeze.

“What I wouldn't give to watch you do that and compare.”

She lifts her head and kisses me again, and soon we're tumbling into out-of-control territory. She's wrestling with my shorts, pushing them past my hips as I reach for her dress.

"Ass up," I tell her.

She obeys, lifting her ass off the stairs so I can move the dress up her body. My only regret at taking it off is that she has to let go of me to lift her arms. But the sight makes up for it. She's *glorious*. Her panties are next. She helps by lifting each leg and pointing her toes as I shimmy them off.

"Gorgeous," I praise, the word on a loop in my brain. I kick my shorts off and reach for my T-shirt. My head is buried in gray cotton for a split second, and she surprises me by gripping me again. Once I can see what she's doing, I watch. She's looking at me as she strokes.

"Vince, you're..."

"Huge?" I finish, a smirk on my face.

She quirks an eyebrow. "Enormous."

My dick gives a happy pulse against her palm. It's what every guy wants to hear.

I reach for her red lace bra and unhook it, sliding the straps down her arms. The moment I reveal her breasts, my brain short-circuits.

I'm a boob guy. Some guys like legs; others prefer asses. While I always notice a combination of those parts on a woman, it's the breasts that are make-or-break.

Jackie's are *perfect*.

I cup one, the perfect handful, and stroke my thumb over a dusky pink nipple. It pebbles beneath my touch, puckering in the cooler air. She strokes my cock and her lips come for mine.

I kiss her because she wants me to, but I have something better to do with my mouth.

I break contact and busy my lips on the breast I'm not holding, circling my tongue over and over until her grip weakens and falls away.

Yes.

Don't get me wrong, I want her to touch me, but I need a moment with two of the finest tits I've ever laid eyes on.

She whispers my name and her hands go to my head again, pushing my hair this way and that. I continue worshipping her B-bordering-on-C cups. They're round and perky, her nipples the perfect quarter-size diameter. They look good, taste better, and *bonus*—she's about to come simply because I'm suckling her.

So I don't stop. Naturally.

A few lovingly placed kisses later, she pulls my hair and her backside arches off the steps as she comes. *Damn.* She orgasmed from that alone. I'm rock hard and ready and practically shaking when my hips wedge between her legs.

Her eyes are dazed, her mouth forming a tired smile. "I want you."

"Trust me, Butler, you're getting me." Centimeters from burying myself in heaven, I pause, horrified that I didn't think about the next step. I blink, dazed. "I need to grab a condom."

She blinks too, clearly having forgotten that small, important detail as well. "Right. I mean, I'm on the pill, so no worries there. But you probably need one for STD purposes."

"Right." I back off, calculating the distance to the condoms in my bedroom nightstand or the medicine cabinet. I wonder

which location is closer and how fast I can jog up the stairs and back down. “I’m clean. I was tested a month or so ago and I haven’t...I haven’t...” I shake my head, feeling like an idiot teenager because I don’t know how to tell Jackie I haven’t slept with anyone during that time. I’m too scared it’ll remind her that I slept with a few *someones* before then.

“I haven’t slept with anyone since Lex, so I’m good too.” Her arms open, her hands beckoning me. “Come here.”

“You’re sure?” I’m already lowering over her, because having no barrier between my cock and her sweet pussy is my own personal heaven.

“I want to feel you, Vince.” She kisses me sweetly, softly on the center of my lips. “I want to feel all of you.”

I’m not strong-willed enough to argue. I cave. My tongue slides into her mouth and she embraces me. I use that natural moment to tilt my hips and brush her center with the head of my penis. Then I deepen the kiss and deepen everything else.

I’m *in*.

Her gasp is one of approval and my groan pairs with a silent prayer. *Please, God, don’t let me come too soon.* Her slick channel grips me like a glove. I’m seated deep, and moving in and out of her with long, slow glides is the best sensation ever.

Not only because sex without a condom is phenomenal—and something I haven’t experienced since I was married—but because sex with Jackie while she’s watching me with those big melted-chocolate eyes is mind-blowing. I can’t believe it’s her. That she’s here. That we’re draped over several steps in my house and her heels are digging into my ass. I can’t believe

she's smiling at me with her slightly crooked grin as her cheeks glow while I fuck her as reverently as possible.

"Nothing is as beautiful as you right now," I tell her, my fingers pushing her hair from her face.

Her smile widens. "Thank you."

"No, no," I pant, trying to be funny but failing since I'm about to come apart, "thank *you*."

"Ow."

I stop.

"Keep going, keep going," she urges. "It's the carpet. It's rubbing my back."

"We can move," I say, not wanting to move. Not wanting to pull out until we've both reached the finish line.

"No!" Her eyes grow fierce. "Don't you dare."

"Yes, ma'am." I rest my elbows on the stairs and slide deep before pulling away and sliding deep again. I watch her face, feel her squeeze me from within, and lose myself in the complete and utter perfection of being with her.

Minutes pass and I keep going despite a cramp creeping into my calf. I bite down on my bottom lip as Jackie cries out. A sharp, brief "Oh!" that confirms I've hit the jackpot.

Cramp be damned, I pick up the pace, gritting my teeth against my own building release. Finally she clutches, her body stiffening before her nails rake down my back.

I let go, coming so hard stars obliterate my vision for the few brief seconds when my brain shuts off like a switch. In that blissful blackness, there is only me, only Jackie. Only the

damp sweat sticking our bodies together and her ragged breaths in my ear.

I thought it couldn't get any better. I thought this was the highest of highs. Until she turns her head and utters three smart-ass, Jackie-worthy words into my ear.

“Nice work, Carson.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JACQUELINE

“He’s down at the creek. Walking on water,” I drawl in my best Doc Holliday impersonation. As usual, Vince and I are sacked out on his couch watching a movie. *Tombstone*. Unlike usual, my legs are draped over his, the popcorn is in my lap, and he hasn’t stopped touching me.

It’s fantastic.

After sex on the stairs, he helped me stand and we finished our trek to the upstairs master bathroom, where we showered and soaped each other, sexually satisfied grins on our faces. I praised his ability to maneuver expertly on the staircase and he assured me that was a first for him, which I found sweet. It was for me too.

We towed off and I slipped into one of his T-shirts and a pair of boxers and, without discussing it, we came back downstairs for popcorn and a movie. It’s like things haven’t changed, which is awkward... Sex should change everything.

Right?

Vince yawns and I follow suit, fatigue from the busy day walloping me all at once.

“I should go,” I say, stretching my legs.

His palm glides up my thigh and down again, beckoning goosebumps to the bared skin. “Nah. You should stay.”

I watch him for a few seconds, my mind fast-forwarding through sleeping in bed next to him to waking in the morning, brushing my teeth with toothpaste on my finger...

“Butler.” His eyebrows go up in that disarming way he has. “Don’t overthink it. Your hair is wet, you’re in my clothes, and if I’m being honest, I’d like the opportunity to do you again come morning.”

I feel my mouth drop open.

“What? You wouldn’t?” he challenges.

“I...um.” I dig through the popcorn for a piece that’s not a kernel. When I find one, I put it in my mouth and chew so I don’t have to answer. *Would I like that?*

Hell, yes. But there are implications.

He offers what looks like a sad smile before turning back to the movie. A few minutes later, I decide I am overthinking and that I would like to do it again. If I’m taking after my sister and not worrying about the future, it’d do me good *not to worry about the future*. I sure as heck don’t owe J.T. an explanation. I don’t owe anyone anything. I can do whatever I want.

I want Vince.

“Be forewarned,” I say, my eyes on Val Kilmer and Kurt Russell. “I’m a blanket hog.”

When I hazard a gaze at Vince, his grin is one for the books.

IT'S a morning like none other I've experienced. I wake up in Vince's bed and—

Hold on. Back up. Back *all* the way up.

I wake up in Vince Carson's bed. I curl my knees to my chest, wrap my arms around them and the thin comforter, and enjoy the sun streaming through his upstairs window. I can feel how wide my smile is and my host confirms it when he enters the room a moment later.

“That's a look I like to see.” Vince wears...almost nothing. A pair of fitted boxer briefs and a smile. He's carrying two steaming white mugs and hands one over. “Coffee.”

“Always.” My eyes dance along the tats on his arm. I have always liked them, but until just now wouldn't allow myself to openly admire them.

I accept the cup, careful not to spill my morning beverage on myself or his pristine bedding. It's hotel-like. White sheets, white duvet. Four white pillows.

“You know, your bedding reminds me of a luxury hotel.”

His smile isn't as wide as he sits on top of said bedding and sips his coffee. “I'm bad at picking colors. Leslie had all this red and gold foofy bullshit, and I knew I didn't want that. But I didn't know what I liked and I worried about matching things, so I went with all white.”

He's adorably male right now.

“You seem to do okay with your clothes.”

“I buy what’s on the mannequin.”

“What?” I laugh.

“It’s true. I buy either what’s on the mannequin at the store or what’s on the catalog page. Exactly that, in my size. It’s like having a personal stylist.”

“Vince! That’s ridiculous.”

“It may be, but I look good most of the time.”

Incorrect. He looks good *all* of the time. He looks pretty damn good right now—the best I’ve seen him look. The swirls and patterns on his tatted arm are no less attractive now than they were before. His disheveled hair is infinitely hotter because I know who tousled it in that pattern with her fingertips.

This girl!

“We’re spending the day together,” he announces. “So when you’re up and moving, you’ll have to grab clothes from your apartment. I’ll follow you, though, because I’m driving.”

He says this so casually, I’m speechless.

“Breakfast, some outdoor happening like a fair or a park, maybe.” He glances out the window at the gorgeous sunny day. A leaf-covered tree blows in the gentle summer breeze. “Do you like to hike?”

“We’re spending the day together?” I ask.

“You want your next lesson, don’t you?”

“My next lesson?” I laugh. “Vince, your coaching duties are over. I failed. Technically, *you* failed *me*. Lessons over.”

“Excuse me.” He sets his mug aside to lean over to me. I’m eye to eye with his flooring blues and my breath catches. The mug in my hand shimmies and I have to make a conscious effort not to spill it. His voice low and sensual, he continues. “You got laid, Butler. Twice. Not only did you not fail. You *won*.”

He sits up quickly and in the lust-thickened air I struggle to take in a breath.

“But it doesn’t mean you’re done learning.”

“It doesn’t?” I’m not sure what more there is to learn, since we already had sex.

“Given we’ve crossed a line, this is the perfect opportunity to continue what we started. No pressure. You learn, I teach, and each of us earns a much-needed reprieve from relationship land.”

“You mean you can take a break from sneaking out of the beds of underwhelming women in the middle of the night?” I tease.

“Yes. And you can avoid dealing with a guy who is two-timing you.”

“He never even one-timed me,” I grumble.

“Don’t sound so disappointed.” Vince’s eyes dash to my mouth, then away so quickly, I can’t discern what he’s thinking. He doesn’t seem to be interested in pushing the topic. “Finish your coffee, then we’ll head back to your place, and then we get your learnin’ on.”

“Get my learnin’ on?” I repeat with a giggle.

“Yeah.” His eyes wander over my face again, but he doesn’t sit forward to kiss me like I want. Instead he climbs

out of bed and starts pulling open drawers to search for his catalog-approved outfit of the day.

VINCE

Credit where credit is due: Jackie doesn't take long. When she steps out of her door wearing a short pair of pink shorts and a white tank top with pink lip prints on the front, she looks nothing less than amazing. Right down to her sensible leather sandals and pale pink toenails.

That polish drove me crazy last night. Watching her walk barefoot and naked to the bed, those pink flashes from her toes both feminine and soft.

Not that I can tell her I'm admiring her toenails, for God's sake. I'm trying not to epically tank everything now that Jaundice did a good job of ousting himself from the race. I came too close to losing Jackie to that crap-bag. I'm not going to risk it again.

I drive to a street fair off Bleaker Avenue. It sits between a funky brewery and boutiques and mom-and-pop-style restaurants. Because the area is way laid-back, the brewery has a license to sell you beer to go.

"To-go beer. This is utopia." I sip my ale and Jackie palms a pear cider. Way too sweet for me, but she insists it's "summery." I forgive her this once, though I argue with myself that I'd forgive her one hundred times over.

Paintings and wood carvings hang inside individual tents, hopeful artists sitting at tables and smiling cautiously at everyone who ambles by. Lots of people stop and admire the wares, but the real winners are the line of food trucks at the back.

“Funnel cakes,” Jackie moans, and her moan catapults me back to last night on the stairs. I know some of her more intimate sounds now and it’s taking everything in me to play it way cooler than I feel. The fire between us last night is a heat I want to stoke. The problem? Jackie was cautious before, and since J.T. proved to be a cheating bastard she’s even more cautious.

In bed this morning, I contemplated the best way to proceed now that we’d had some seriously fun naked time, and the only answer I came up with was to keep up the ruse. I was her coach, and as long as I continue coaching her, she’ll willingly overstep all sorts of boundary lines she’s drawn for herself.

I feel like I tapped into my inner Davis.

Jackie is a planner, an overthinker. She tries to do the right thing, and stepping out of the box isn’t a pastime for her like it is for me. Ergo, she needs to live in a bit of a fantasy land to be brave. It’s the nudge she needs and an excuse I’m happy to provide.

We come to a stop in front of a canvas that is probably seven feet tall and just as wide. The colors remind me of every sick day I’ve ever had. Pea green and shit brown, swirled with mustard yellow and little flecks of red. I read the information card dangling from the top of the tent expecting the title to be “Diarrhea,” but instead it says “Euphoria.” I was way off on that one.

“Jesus,” I mutter.

“Really?” Jackie shakes her head. “I don’t see Jesus. Looks like a swamp.”

I chuckle but she’s not joking.

“It looks like the result of not being vaccinated,” I say.

The clearing of a throat interrupts our comments. A woman steps from behind the canvas, another smaller painting in hand. She has spiky black hair and pursed red lips, and if her outfit was chosen off a mannequin, it was one dressed by a blind person. Flaming red and neon green and a mess of colors that are too bright in natural light.

“May I help you?” she clips.

“We were just admiring your work,” Jackie, the beautiful liar, says.

I smile, biting the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

“This one makes me happy,” the other woman says. She waves her hand in front of the canvas and describes euphoria in her terms. Things like “soft cheese” and “Sunday kisses” and “comfort in the masses,” whatever the hell that means. “It’s a bargain at seventeen hundred.”

“Pesos?” I ask, because surely she couldn’t mean dollars.

“Oh, we couldn’t fit this beauty into our tiny house.” Jackie grabs my hand and weaves our fingers together and I feel every digit sliding home in that comfortable way we have. “Three hundred square feet and nary a bit of wall space. Thank you, though. It’s truly...” She pauses and takes in the monstrosity before us one last time. “Unique.”

From there we edge along the other booths, more careful than before about engaging the artists, though I see lots of good work ranging from charcoal portraits to really cool metal yard displays bent into the shapes of animals.

“Badass,” I say, standing in front of a metal alligator, its jaws gaping.

From there we hit the food trucks—funnel cake for her, chili cheese fries for me. She steals several, of which I approve and tell her as much.

“Any guy you date, Butler, should share his food. If he’s selfish with a few fries, imagine what he’ll be like in two years.”

She nods, considering. “J.T. offered me a few bites of his food.”

“He also offered bites to another woman.” Maybe more than one woman, but I don’t want to talk about him.

“The last thing he said to me was that he wanted to have lunch on Tuesday.” She offers me the last bite of her funnel cake and I let her feed it to me, my heart tugging at the way she tenderly brushes the powdered sugar from my mouth. Because distance is a hard thing between us, I kiss her once, then twice before taking our empty plates and tossing them into the nearest bee-swarmed trash can.

“You dated more than one girl at a time,” she says. “How’d it work out?”

Groan. Raise your hand if you don’t want have this conversation.

“I didn’t date more than one girl at a time.”

“So you ended things with them? Or did they end it with you?”

Ah, Jackie. She really isn't like anyone else I know.

“Sometimes. Mostly we had that conversation up front.”

“And if you didn't have it up front?”

“We didn't have it at all.” I shrug.

“So...you blew them off?”

“No, I didn't blow them off. Usually they'd text or I would and it never went further.”

“What did the texts say?”

I sure as hell wasn't telling her that. Typically, they said things like *I had a great time. Call me if you want a repeat. Keep my number.* One was a blow-off, but she was cool about it. It read, *I don't make this a habit. You were great, but this can't go further.*

“It doesn't matter what they said,” I tell Jackie.

She's puzzling over what this means, and I have to stop that train of thought before she continues digging. I'm not fast enough.

“Well, J.T. and I didn't have that conversation before we started, so now it's up to me to tell him I saw him with another woman and I know he's not interested in seeing me any longer.”

“That you're not interested in seeing him any longer,” I correct firmly. We stop walking when Jackie turns her eyes up to mine.

“Right.”

“These dating lessons I’m offering don’t include you winning Jaundice back.”

“I don’t want him back.” She’s frowning. Good. I like her frowning when she thinks of him. “I just don’t know how to untangle what we have.”

“You don’t *have* anything.” I want to add *You have something with me*, but that’s not the truth either, is it? She and I are...I don’t know what. She’s confused and trying to cross her t’s and dot her i’s, and I’m playing the role of coach so that she doesn’t scurry away from me and regret last night forever.

My throat closes at that unpleasant thought.

I don’t regret last night. I’d like another shot at it, since this morning we didn’t get a repeat. Fail on my part, but I knew I needed a strategy.

Now who’s overthinking?

“Look.” She takes a step closer to me and lowers her voice. “You may be okay with the blow-off text message, but I need to have a real conversation. One where I’m looking right at him. I need to know if I didn’t measure up, or if what I was seeing through his balcony window was a mirage.”

I’m hit with a blast of jealousy so acute, it burns going down.

“Fine. Well. Go over and talk to him tomorrow.” That burns too. Big time.

She nods. Slowly. “Yeah. I’ll tell him what I saw and let him know that I would’ve appreciated him being honest. I can’t avoid him if he lives in my complex, so talking to him frankly is the smartest course of action.”

She has a point, which I hate, because I'd rather she never lay eyes on him again.

"Now, on with the lesson. Dating at the art fair." I take her hand because I can, and we start walking by booths again. I stop in front of one selling wind chimes. "If he buys one of these for his mother, run."

She giggles, and I like it way too much. Relaxed Jackie is better than tense Jackie.

The next booth features jewelry. "Beware the second-date jewelry guy."

Gold and silver chains hang from metal hooks and wink in the streaming sunlight. More expensive baubles, faux diamonds, and stones are secured in a glass case with a lock. I retreat a step when the woman running the booth greets us with a smile.

"Why? Jewelry is a nice gift," Jackie argues.

"Jewelry means the guy is serious about you."

"Not always." She pulls me closer to the booth and my arm goes taut between us before I trudge the reluctant steps to follow. She fingers a delicate necklace with a cross pendent. "Necklaces don't mean marriage."

"It all means marriage. Every piece of shining metal is synonymous with the biggie." I lower my voice and say "The ring" in as foreboding a tone as I can manage.

She laughs but allows me to tug her away from the tent of doom.

"That's stupid."

"Maybe," I admit, "but no less true." I bought Leslie earrings on our second date and look how that turned out. We

were doomed from the start. Even as I have the bitter thought, I question if that's true. Maybe things turned out exactly as they should have.

“Okay, okay. No jewelry.” Jackie waves her hands in front of her as she tells me she's not going to ask for a trinket from the vendor we just passed. But as we split the crowd, her hand again in mine, I realize there's a small part of me that would buy her any twinkly item from the table that she wanted.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JACQUELINE

Vince and I spend the day at the art fair drinking expensive beer in plastic cups and walking around the shops. He's as laid back and casual as he's ever been, and I am too, come to think of it. I'm not sure what he's teaching me about dating, because since we had sex on his stairs, shared a bed, and spent the day together, I'm pretty sure these fall under his "do not attempt" category.

It's a topic I bring up over a dinner of fish and chips at a local pub. I've switched to water because day drinking made me sleepy. Vince palms his beer bottle and answers me succinctly.

"That's the best part, Butler." He picks up a fry and points at me with it. "We don't have to have rules. We can fumble, fall down, and make mistakes."

"Because this is pretend?"

He eats the fry and watches me. "You want to know if this is pretend?"

We're at a small two-top table in the back of the restaurant. It's loud in here, but where we're sitting I can talk at a normal level and I don't have to shout. "I want to define this going in, because I didn't define things with J.T. and look where that got me."

Vince smiles and my heart thuds heavily against my breastbone. He lays his hand on mine. "I coach. You learn. Define it however you want."

"So tonight when you take me home..." I trail off just shy of asking him if he's going to push me up against the front door for a long, long make-out session, or if I should invite him in.

"You're ruining our dinner date. You're supposed to be mysterious and I'm supposed to be charming and then we're supposed to agonize over what happens next during the drive."

"I'm not going to be the only one wondering," I inform him. "You can try your moves, but I might not cave."

"A challenge, then." His eyes light as he welcomes that idea.

"Do you have what it takes?" I ask, playing it up, because seeing him like this makes me bold.

"I guess we'll soon find out."

"I guess so."

VINCE

Here we are. In front of Jackie's house after dinner. It reminds me of the first night I dropped her off, minus a generic bouquet in the mailbox. Last night she came to me, upset and hurting because Jaundice shot her down a few feet from where I'm standing. His loss is my gain, but the hurt in Jackie's eyes tells me she's still smarting from his rejection.

Lex the Ex left her for another woman, so it's a tender topic for my friend. I'm trying not to be a complete jerk and put my feelings before hers. But if I'm being honest? After the night we had and the day we had, I'm pissed she's thinking of that asshole runner at all.

My big plan when I woke this morning was to let this play out. Give her a safe space to do whatever she wants with me. I sure as hell didn't want her changing her mind after the sex on the stairs. Sex notwithstanding, the time we spent together was fantastic. Easy. Comfortable. *Fun*. Basically like every other day I've spent with Jackie, only now touching her was encouraged.

At the moment, however, I'm feeling the way she did last night: like I'll be rejected altogether.

I'm going to play through with confidence.

"We're at the scene of the refusal," I say. Her eyes snap to mine, then float over my shoulder toward J.T.'s window. *Still* he has her attention. That stings. My voice louder than before, I continue. "Next lesson. Overcoming rejection with the following date. Some guys don't get it, Butler. You have to pull yourself up by the proverbial bootstraps and try, try again in this messy world of coupledness."

"Whatever you say, Coach."

My plan is working in that she's not suspicious of my intentions. We can work this out in my role as coach and her role as *coachee*. "Let's practice this the way it should go. Invite me in."

"Just...what, ask you if you want to come in?"

"Put some effort into it." I cross my arms like I might tell her no. There's no way in hell I'll tell her no.

"Did the girls you dated always invite you in, Vince?" A spark of worry highlights her eyes.

"No. More importantly, I didn't always want to come in. Sometimes I left."

"Really?"

"Yes."

She chews on her bottom lip in thought.

"Butler." I decide to put her out of her misery and pitch her a softball. "What are your plans for this evening?"

She tips her head, her soft brown hair framing her face and her eventual smile. Watching it spread her lips could turn into one of my favorite hobbies. Jackie happy is a specific kind of drug. One I'm not immune to.

"I'm planning on going inside and slipping into something a lot less comfortable."

"Damn," I mutter. "You don't need to be coached. You need to be kissed."

I grasp her jaw and tip those inviting lips to mine, kissing her and relieving the desire thrumming in my bloodstream. She pushes up on her toes and the last glimpse I have of her is

her eyes closing as mine do the same. She ends the kiss by dropping to her heels.

“Would you like to come in?” she purrs up at me.

“Hell, yeah.” I follow her to the door, eager. Even though I don’t intend to, I peer over my shoulder at the building across the street, hoping J.T. saw every second of that kiss—and me walking through her door.

“How am I doing?” Jackie whispers as I close her front door behind me and flip the deadbolt. “Do you have any pointers now that I’ve successfully lured a man into my house?”

“Yes, but every one of them involves you stripping naked while I watch, which is probably less about my coaching and more about my boner.”

She tosses her head back and laughs. I grin. I was hoping to elicit that response. “I never knew you were so adorable.”

I’m not *adorable*. Puppies are adorable. But if that makes Jackie feel better about letting me in, I’ll allow it.

“Give me sixty seconds and then walk down the hall.” She trails her fingers along my T-shirt before she leaves me alone in her living room, my heart pounding to beat all.

Sixty seconds. Leslie would have asked for twenty minutes. Whatever Jackie has planned, I’m in. I count, inserting “Mississippi” between the numbers but then growing impatient and using “Ohio” instead. Somewhere around forty-two, I head down the hall toward the closed door at the end of it.

I rap lightly. “I’m early.”

“Good,” comes her slightly muffled response.

I open the door to find Jackie, arms overhead, wiggling around in a red lace...something. Sort of looks like a tangle of bungee cords.

She peeks through the material, which is looped over her nose and mouth. Her brown eyes are wide. “Help?”

I’m not going to laugh, because she’s in a fragile state. Her simple cotton panties are turning me on, despite her upper half being strangled by lace and Lycra.

I take the sides of the material in hand and spot her bra discarded on the floor, so what I’m about to uncover are those perfect breasts. I lift the garment, covering her face and trapping her arms overhead. I intended to free her from her siren wear, honest, but instead I’m towed in by two perfect nipples and the fact that she’s rendered helpless. Wrapping my arms around her back, I lower my lips to one breast and tease her with my tongue. I hear the moan, feel her relax against me. I move to the other breast, swirling circles and suckling, and Jackie’s next moan is louder.

Hell.

Yes.

I tug the lingerie from her arms and toss it aside. My girl has a major case of bedhead and hunger in her eyes. I’m not making either of us wait.

“Lesson number whatever-we’re-on,” I say, my voice tight with lust. “Lingerie is sexy, but you naked is sexier.” Fingers along the edge of her panties, I slip my hand inside and lower my mouth to her breast again. I’m slipping through her wet folds a second later, loving the way her hands rake through my hair—backward and up, sending chills down my arms and legs.

This woman.

“Vince.”

“I love when you say my name,” I growl, kissing her firmly as I wheel her onto the bed in the corner.

“Is that a good go-to, Coach?” she asks.

The question pulls me out of the moment, and for a split second I can't tell if she's sincerely asking for guidance or if we're now both aware that there's a game. It's a safe one, and it's fucking fun, so I play along.

“Always, Butler. Always say the guy's name. Especially when you come.”

“Do you prefer Carson? Or Vince?”

“I prefer ‘Don't ever stop, Vince’ as well as ‘I've never seen anything so massive in my life.’” That earns me another rich laugh. I kiss it off her lips before sliding my tongue along her throat to her collarbone. She's arching beneath me and clawing at my shirt. I let her tear it off me and throw it aside, but I don't let her inhibit my descent. I'm headed full speed ahead for the Promised Land.

Fists on either side of her panties, I roll them down partway and sense a moment of hesitation when I lay a kiss below her belly button. Her eyes hint at a question I'm not sure she'll ask. Going down on her is a deeper commitment than sex. My mouth on her most private and sensitive parts. Her trusting me to bring her to orgasm with only my tongue and undying devotion to her pleasure.

She knows. I know. And that palpable moment hangs in the balance.

What she doesn't know is that this is about more than getting her off so I can get off immediately following—though here's hoping it works out that way. For me this is about unwinding the coil in Jackie's spine and letting her liquefy beneath my tongue and hands. Tasting her unique flavor and bingeing on it until she vibrates beneath me.

The moment when she surrenders.

That's what I want more than anything.

"You're sure?" Her question is a breathy whisper. It cuts me to see her uncertain because I know this isn't stemming from her. This worry was gifted to her by another guy who did her wrong. Maybe Lex, maybe someone else. Or maybe no guy has ever revered her in a way that she deserves. Time for that to change.

"Honey, I'm dying to taste every inch of you."

Her smile is humbling and, without waiting for a response, I trail my tongue along the edge of her panties before sliding the material to one side and stealing a lick. She reacts like paper touched by a lit match. She gasps, her hips jutting greedily toward my lips. I'm going to need more room to maneuver. I prop myself on my elbows, roll her underwear down her legs, and throw them over my shoulder. She stiffens, her thighs closing slightly, but I can tell what she wants. I can *feel* what she wants.

And I know how to give it to her.

Nestled between her thighs, I open her to me and tenderly swipe my tongue along her folds. The writhing starts immediately—this isn't going to take long. Unless she's into multiples, in which case I'm settling in and counting. Like I noticed before in our shared shower, she's trimmed but not

shaved bare. I lave her, roughly then softly. Rough rewards me with a pinched moan, her fingers in my hair, so rough it is. Shortly thereafter, her breaths shorten into heated pants. I swirl the tip of my tongue and locate her clit. I know I've found it because the second I roll over her, she emits a sharp yip of approval.

“Next lesson,” I say, taking the briefest break from my work. “Don't you dare hold back.”

I dive in, knowing I've got her balanced on the edge. Her legs open, her heels hit my shoulders, and the sounds she's making now are starting to qualify as shouts. I grind my erection into the bedding as I reach up and give her nipples a tweak. I go for firm and fast, and a second later she's throwing her arms wide and tearing the sheets from the bed. I mentally pat myself on the back as her orgasm comes in waves that shake her legs, and then her entire body. I take her in—her scent, her shouts—gently guiding my tongue along her until her hands come up to push my face away.

“Vince, please. I can't. No more.”

Another shudder takes her and I decide not to stop. To prove to her she can take one more—and this one will be better than the last. Hands wrapped tightly around her thighs, I renew my efforts, and soon enough she's learning that there are more—*two more*—one riding a wave in followed by another. Her pleas are borderline incoherent and her grip on my hair is weak.

Just what I was going for.

Carefully climbing her body, I trail my mouth from her hip to her ribs. Unable to bypass her nipple without saying hello, I place a reverent kiss on the tip. Next is her mouth, and when I'm there, she's winding down from her intense release.

“Don’t move.”

“Don’t worry.” She grins, her eyelids opening lazily to take me in. “I don’t think I can.”

I ease off the bed, strip off my jeans—leaving them inside out because I’m impatient—and return to her in an instant. I maneuver my hips between her legs, propping myself on my elbows, my eyes on hers. One tilt and I’m sliding deep. No barrier, no fuss.

We glide.

Wet and warm and smooth. No hurry on her end, but her eyebrows pinch as another climax sneaks up on her. She’s going to sleep well tonight, and I’ll sleep well knowing her mind is freed from worry and wonder because I took her to the peak of pleasure.

We move together and then she’s bearing down, clutching me from within to give my cock the best hug on the planet. A few more deep pounds and I’m the one who’s about to black out with no worry or wonder. I kiss her, deep and frantic as I continue moving. Her legs wrap around my ass and draw me closer and when she clutches again—I’m gone.

A guttural, primal sound exits my throat as I bury my face in her neck and come hard. She’s there with me, her mewls of pleasure saturating the air and cloaking me.

Seconds pass. Or maybe minutes. I’m not sure.

Finally I raise my head to kiss her tenderly. Jackie either can’t or won’t open her eyes.

“Mmm.”

“I concur,” I say.

“You’re a good teacher.”

“You’re a good student.”

We smile at each other like idiots and then I’m facing what I’ve been ignoring the entire day—what I’ve been shutting out since this morning.

I’m going to have to go home.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JACQUELINE

Monday rolls around on the heels of an awkward Sunday. Awkward because when I woke to the sun pressing against my closed blinds, I did so alone. I was naked under the sheets and there was a note taped over my alarm clock. The numbers glowed blue against the paper, so I had to peel it off to read it.

NO LESSONS TODAY, BUTLER.

TAKE THE DAY OFF AND BASK.

~V

In the kitchen I found a box of cereal next to a bowl and spoon. Vince's way of making me breakfast. It was sweet. And confusing.

I walked into work this morning with my head held high, proud of myself for not seeking him out. Not a single needy text.

We have a Monday afternoon meeting each week (Vince calls it a "jam session" to be funny because it's easily the most boring and useless waste of time), so I'll see him then.

I've been busy digging through a mountain of emails and sorting spreadsheets in hopes of making sense of the numbers before the meeting this afternoon. I turn in my chair to stretch when a flash of movement outside my window catches my eye.

J.T. jogs by, no shirt, hair waving in the wind, and when he's passing my window he turns his head and smiles. When he includes a wave, I know that smile is meant for me. He can't see in—reflective glass and all that—so my returned wave isn't witnessed by anyone.

Or so I think.

“Afternoon.”

I turn to find Vince at my door. He leans on the jamb, eyes on the window, then on me. He's chewing gum and his expression is one of mild disdain.

“Hey! Hi!” I chirp too brightly. Then I remember that he's the one who walked out after the explosive sex on Saturday and remind myself I have nothing to feel guilty about. At the time I didn't feel jilted, but not hearing from him on Sunday was strange.

“What's up?” I ask coolly.

“He still on your to-do list?” Vince asks even more coolly. I don't pretend not to know what he's talking about.

“J.T. and I have a bit of a ‘hanging chad’ issue”—which is my way of saying unfinished business—“but it's only a matter of letting him know I'm done.”

Vince nods once—a simple tip of the chin.

“Do you have advice for how I should handle it?” I'm hoping he suggests I don't talk to J.T. at all, or recommends I

send a text stating that we're through.

After a pregnant pause Vince's frowning mouth opens for one word. "No."

"Hey, guys. I—oh. Am I interrupting something?" Kayla is holding a Post-it note and wearing a look of caution. I understand why—you can't miss the tension in the room.

"Jackie and I were going over a few final notes before the meeting," Vince says, not taking his eyes off me.

"I see." Kayla's eyes dash around the room before landing on me. It's obvious Vince and I were not discussing the meeting. "This can wait." She waves the Post-it note and leaves.

"Well, that's no good." I round to the front of my desk and watch out the doorway. Kayla heads for her office, stopping to peer over her shoulder at me. I wave. She waves. "Do you think she knows?"

Vince's fingers wrap around my arm and he pulls me back into my office and smoothly shuts the door. "What's going on, Jackie?"

Him using my first name is almost foreign in this environment.

"With what?"

"With Jaundice."

I jerk my arm out of Vince's grip. "Gimme a break. Nothing's going on. And anyway, how can you act jealous when you were the one who sneaked out of my house on Saturday night?"

"I didn't *sneak*." A pair of angry eyebrows crash together. "You didn't hear me leave because you sleep like the dead and

snore like a pair of chain saws.”

Offended, I drop my mouth open. “I do not.”

His smile finally emerges. I didn’t realize how relieved I’d be to see it. I sigh. Angry Vince is reserved for when we talk about Leslie. Vince being angry with me is... Well, it’s unacceptable, is what it is.

“You do,” he says. “It’s cute.”

I roll my eyes, which is probably why I don’t see him coming. Before I know it, his lips are on mine, his fingers in my hair, his other hand gripping my hip and holding on. I kiss him back. How could I not?

“Next lesson,” he says while I catch my breath. “Don’t kiss Jaundice unless you want him to know your secrets. You can fake a lot of things, Butler, but your kiss is incapable of dishonesty.”

Is Vince bluffing? Could he feel how badly I wanted that kiss—or how much I want him to do it again? That’d be disastrous.

“Got it?” he prompts.

“Got it.” My voice is little more than a tight croak of agreement. I back up as Vince grips the doorknob and lets himself out. “Great idea, Vince!” I call out for our coworkers’ benefits.

A few people scowl at my awkward interruption of their workdays.

Vince only chuckles.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

VINCE

L unchtime rolls around the next day and I've almost convinced myself that surreptitiously checking the windows for Jackie's runner isn't the most pathetic reaction ever. On another pass by Kayla's office—because Jackie's office would be too obvious—Kayla calls out to me.

“He's not running today.” Kayla smiles, takes her fingers from the keyboard, and puts them in her lap. Waiting. For me to confess, most likely.

I hesitate outside her office, cellphone in hand. I glance down at the game I was mindlessly playing before giving up and shoving my phone into my pocket. Kayla's no dummy. She had to suspect something was up yesterday because you could've sliced the tension in Jackie's office with a dull knife.

In front of Kayla's desk, I cross my arms and look down at her. “What do you know?”

“They have lunch today. Jackie left five minutes ago.” Kayla is smiling. “Why don't you ask her out, Vince? She might surprise you and say yes.”

Or she might surprise me, say yes, have sex with me, and then pursue the guy who cheated on her instead.

Since I'm not going to tell Kayla any of what has transpired, I go with "We work together. It would be unwise to start something." I nearly add "at this juncture" in my panic to make the statement sound official.

Close call.

"Anyway, thanks for the info. If you don't mind—"

"I won't tell her, Vince. You both mean too much to me to let gossip ruin what you have. Friendship is important."

"Yeah." The word tastes like acid on my tongue. Our friendship is important. All I can hope is that I haven't ruined what we have for a stab at what we could be.

Could have been, I mentally correct.

Because if she's trying to win Jaundice back, I'm out.

JACQUELINE

J.T. invited me to a sushi restaurant with crisp white tablecloths and clean lines and a million windows. I park and walk to the restaurant, spotting him at a table just past the hostess stand. He waves and I steel myself before walking over to him.

"You look pretty," he tells me. I try not to pick apart his words or let my memory of him with the blonde poison what could've been a sincere compliment.

“Thanks.” I sit and a waiter rushes over with a glass of water, then offers to give us time to review the menu. “No need. I won’t be staying.”

Watching the smile fall from J.T.’s face is priceless. I sort of wish I could take a picture, because Vince would get a kick out of it. Even though Vince was being decidedly weird today, I would show it to him.

“Have to return to work?” J.T. frowns.

“No.”

I thought of two ways to lay out what was going on. I could slap him in the face and add a finger-point and an “I SAW YOU!” or I could leisurely lean back in my chair and ask, “Who was at your place Friday night?” I land somewhere in the middle.

“I’m embarrassed to say I was under the impression we were exclusive.” I sip my water while J.T.’s expression turns understanding. “So I guess I’m confused as to why I’m here.”

Silence settles in the air, and to my surprise, J.T. speaks first.

“You’re here because you asked me out and this was the only day I was available.”

“Because you have other plans with other women? Or because you have to work?”

“Both at different times.” His shrug is too casual for my taste. “You don’t have to be embarrassed, Jackie.” His hand on mine feels foreign and wrong, but I don’t pull away. I’m not sure why. “We never defined things, and I didn’t realize we were that kind of couple.”

I didn’t realize there were definitions to make.

“How can we be a couple if you had sex with a blond woman the night you refused to come into my apartment?”
Oops. There went my cool. J.T. pulls his hand off mine and I hate myself for showing my cards.

“Tanya and I have an agreement.”

Hearing her name stings like a slap to the cheek. Like the first time Lex referred to his secretary in a possessive manner. *Ash and I are in love.*

Puke.

“She comes by every once in a while,” J.T. continues. “It’s sex and nothing more. She’s dating her ex-boyfriend again and it’s not working out the way she hoped. On occasion you have to relieve the stress of a tough week, you know?”

A laugh lacking humor exits my lips.

“I wouldn’t let her down when she needs me any more than I would let you down,” he says with a tight frown.

“But you *did* let me down. I was under the impression you and I were having a great night, and when I invited you in, I figured we could have a better night.” I’m not sure why I’m arguing. I don’t want anything to do with him after what he did to me—or didn’t do to me, as it turned out. J.T. is a lot less handsome now that I know what he’s hiding under his exterior of perfection. He’s a cheating, lying bastard. “At the very least you could have told me the truth.”

The only reason he would’ve lied is so he could have his proverbial cake and eat it too.

“Come on, Jackie.” He smiles in a condescending, smarmy way and suddenly I realize why I’ve had a distaste for J.T. since that ill-fated night. He’s behaving like Lex after I figured out he was cheating. After I conned him into admitting it.

“You wouldn’t have put out that night and you know it,” J.T. says. “You were going to invite me in and we would’ve made out and you might’ve taken off your shirt, but—”

“Shh!” I hiss, reminding him we are in public. He’s smiling and I’m coming unhinged. Nothing makes me angrier than my being upset while the person I’m upset with is completely unfazed.

“The point is both of us know you weren’t really inviting me *in*.”

Face hot, I reply, “Well, it would’ve been nice if *both of us* knew you were going home to screw another woman.”

Anger creeps into his expression. Finally! I stand, vindicated. “Goodbye, *Jaundice*.”

I pivot on my heel, head high, my summery dress billowing behind me as I pick up speed. I slip on my sunglasses and I don’t look over as I pass the window. At my parked car, I climb inside as old, ugly feelings of betrayal and reminders of my marriage ending in the worst possible way swamp me.

Tears well and I try to staunch them, but I’m too far gone to successfully hold back. Dampness streaks my face as I press the accelerator to the floor and speed past the Brookdale Group. I can’t go in there. I can’t face Vince. I can’t face anyone right now.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

VINCE

I'm at McGreevy's with Davis, but he insists on sitting at a table. Grace is behind the bar and side-eyes us as we walk by. Because I don't know what's going on (if anything), I wave and attempt congeniality.

Davis doesn't.

"Did you two have a fight I should know about?" It's an echo of a question I've asked before but never received an answer to.

Davis pulls out his chair and casts a look in Grace's direction. "No. Why?"

I let it go. He's not in the chatting mood, and besides, I'm the one with issues tonight. I texted him to see if he'd be here, and he said he didn't have plans to go out but would if I wanted him to.

I called in the cavalry because Jackie didn't come back to work. Sandy, the front-desk temp, said Jackie had called after lunch to say she wasn't feeling well. "She sounded bad," Sandy told me.

I don't know what to think, save for the obvious. Jackie went out with J.T. for lunch and didn't come back. By four o'clock I was certain she'd gone out with J.T. for lunch and he'd convinced her to go home with him.

I doubt that happened, but my imagination has been running amok all day.

Grace appears at our table with two beers we didn't order.

"Welcome back." She greets both of us—though her eyes are on Davis.

"What if I don't want a beer?" Davis sneers.

"Then give it to Vince." With that, she's off, strolling back to the bar. I study Davis only to find him studying Grace, but he doesn't look pissed. A hefty dose of longing seeps into his expression.

When he turns to me, he scowls. "You wanted me to come out tonight. Talk. What's going on?"

"Jackie went out with J.T. today and didn't come back to work after. I don't think they did anything together, though," I sort of lie. I follow up that sentence with a mini rant about how she never should've seen him again, since he banged some other woman after their date.

Davis sips his beer, then gives me a wholehearted "So?"

"So?" My eyebrows lift. "He's a dick."

"I knew that looking at him. You knew that looking at him. You told Jackie-O that he was an asshole. So my 'so' is to find out why you care that he screwed her over."

"Because she's my friend." Frowning, I lift my beer. It may be the first time I've pouted while drinking beer before. It's not easy.

Davis makes a “go on” motion. He isn’t going to accept half-assed explanations tonight.

“I upped my game,” I announce miserably. It didn’t do me much good.

“How many *times* did you up it?” Davis smirks. I like him cocky better than grumpy. Only one of us can be grumpy at a time or it throws off the balance of our friendship. Dudes don’t brood together. That’s a chick thing.

“Two times.”

“He shoots, he scores!” He offers me a genuine grin and raises a palm for a high five. I slap it without thinking, even though twice with Jackie is about one one hundred thousandth of how many times I want to sleep with her.

“She met him for lunch,” I repeat, unable to let go of my sour mood. “And I think it’s because I went home on Saturday instead of staying the night at her place.”

“Well, it isn’t like you could stay.” Davis sounds so reasonable, I want to hug him.

“Yes. That right there.” I point at him in triumph. See? I’m not crazy. “Besides, I already amended that rule once. She stayed at my house the first time.”

I miss my friend’s response since I glance up at the television as I take another swig of my draft. When I return my attention to him, he looks so horrified, I would swear he’s focused on someone behind me.

“What’d I miss?” A look over my shoulder shows an empty table.

“You let her stay at your house? And then you didn’t stay at hers?”

“She’s always at my house.” I’m starting to sweat. I missed something, all right.

“You set a precedent, then you walked out. You never should have let her stay.”

“Or I should have stayed Saturday,” I argue.

“Never would have been better.”

“Davis. This is Jackie. Someone I know, not someone I barely know or have only known a few hours. We know all of each other’s shit. We have talked about divorce in such depth, she could totally humiliate me if she started a blog.”

He stays silent.

“Point being, that D-bag should be out of the picture and I’m still competing with him.” God! It pisses me off saying it out loud as much as it chafes to hear myself whine about it.

“Clearly you’re not competing with him if you’re here with me.”

That observation settles in slowly.

“You’re right. I’m going over to her house. I’m going to find out what’s going on, and if I spot Jackie making out with him through his balcony window...” I blow out a breath and ask sincerely, “Will you bail me out of jail?”

Davis chuckles at my plight.

“I’m acting fifteen.” I rake my hands through my hair, unsure of how Butler tied me into knots this quickly.

“Call her, dipshit.” Davis palms his beer bottle and eyes the TV. “Call her and ask what the deal is. Don’t do this to her.”

“Excuse me. *To her?*”

Davis turns back to me. “Do you remember what you were like when Leslie first left you?”

Blood rushes to my face and I feel overly warm. Even under the A/C vent. “Remind me,” I bite out. I don’t want to relive it, but if his revelation gives me some measure of clarity, I’ll take it.

“You were borderline defeated.” I open my mouth to argue but he holds up a hand and says, “I’m not busting your balls. Hear me out.”

Because he’s a good friend, I hear him out.

“That feeling of not measuring up, of being overlooked by someone you love, of being left behind in favor of their grand new life...” Davis trails off, shaking his head. I know we’re not only talking about Leslie and me. He’s talking about himself and Hanna too. “Point is, that’s how Jackie is feeling now. Her ex cheated on her, right?”

I nod.

“And this J.T. guy did it and stirred up that old shit. Now she’s back at square one. In the game of Chutes and Ladders, she was closing in on Finish and took a very big slide down to Start.”

I’m getting impatient, because this is all stuff I know.

“And so are you.”

I blink as my brain registers the unexpected comment. *That* I didn’t know.

“She’s telling you that you’re not good enough, and you’re keeping your distance to stay safe. Quit doing it. You crossed a line with this one, Carson. If you want Jackie for real, and for

longer than a few rolls in the hay, you have to show up for her.”

I think of the kiss in her office today. That moment of grabbing what I wanted. I liked it. She liked it. And yet she went to see J.T. immediately after.

I’m letting my ego call the shots and it could cost me. I’m being a schmuck.

Heart hammering, I dig my phone out of my pocket and call Jackie. I’m expecting her voicemail. Instead, she answers on the second ring.

“Hello.” Her voice is thick with misery and laced with pain. Every petty, stupid argument I trotted out for Davis drifts away.

“Where are you? I’m coming to you, Butler.” I stand from the table, aware of Davis watching me with interest. I can’t give him the thumbs-up yet because I don’t know what happened.

“I’m at the rec room.” She sniffs. “Of our apartment complex.”

Our. As in hers and J.T.’s. I don’t want that to sting, but it does.

“Is he there?” I ask. Davis’s lip curls, reflecting my distaste.

“No. I’m in the game room. No one comes in here on Tuesdays. I came over here to... I don’t know.”

I’m already on my way out the door. I don’t explain to Davis and he doesn’t ask. Just like I know he’ll pay for my beer and I don’t have to worry about that either.

“You don’t have to know, Butler. I’ll be there in ten minutes. Then we can talk.”

She sniffs again and exhales into the phone. I feel that like a physical blow. That I can’t be near her. That I can’t console her. She was there for me whenever I needed her after the divorce, and there were some nights it got ugly.

“Okay?” I ask, climbing into my car parked along the curb.

“Okay,” she finally says.

“Don’t move.” I hang up the phone and floor it.

I’m there in seven minutes.

THE REC ROOM at Jackie’s apartment complex is like a really nice sports bar. I key in the four-digit code Jackie texted me and let myself in. The main offices are dark this time of night, the shadowed windows lit by a few safety lights. There is a business area up front with two desks outfitted with top-of-the-line iMac computers with enormous screens. An aquarium full of colorful saltwater fish stands between the front room and the rec area. I walk by a library packed with books, past a pool table, and through a stocked kitchen set up for any resident who wants a snack or coffee, before I finally make it to the game room.

Jackie is sitting at a chess table, the pieces set up for play, her feet on the seat of the chair and her arms wrapped around them. She looks small and lonely and my need to pound Jaundice’s face in takes the place of my desire to comfort her.

“Where is he?” I growl, fists balled at my sides.

“Who?” She scrunches her face for a second before her features soften. “J.T.?”

“Yeah.”

“I told him off at lunch. I don’t know.”

She told him off?

Nothing defuses my anger better than knowing she didn’t spend the day with him. I snag the chair from the other side of the table and pull it close to her. Once I sit, she lets her feet hit the floor and her eyes meet mine. Her mascara is smudged. Her nose is red. She’s a beautiful mess.

“He told me I wasn’t going to put out that night so he met up with a girl he sleeps with, no strings. I swear as long as I live I will never understand how men can compartmentalize sex.”

Rage fills my field of vision. Her hand on my arm calms me in an instant.

“I need you to be you,” she tells me.

I take a breath and close my eyes. I’m who she wants me to be. Her best friend, Vince. I allow a smile I don’t feel to slide across my face.

“Does it make you feel marginally better that he was dead wrong about you not putting out?” I ask. After all, she slept with me that night.

The side of her mouth tips and falls. “I tried things your way. I can’t do it.”

“What can’t you do?” My heart skips a necessary beat. If she says she can’t see me anymore, I’ll... I don’t know what. Beg her to reconsider?

Maybe.

“I can’t play the game,” she says. “Stay, don’t stay. Call, don’t call. I don’t know how you guys keep it straight.”

“First off, Butler, stop lumping me in with that asshole.” I’ll go apocalyptic if she keeps talking about us like we’re the same. “Second, you and I aren’t playing a game.”

“No?” She looks hopeful.

“No.”

“But the coaching...”

I swallow thickly before dispensing much more truth than I’m comfortable with.

“The coaching was an excuse to be closer to you without admitting I wanted to be closer to you.” There it is. Laid out.

She’s watching me but doesn’t know how to respond to my blast of honesty. I’m not sure I do either, but I follow it up with more.

“This is bringing up old wounds from when Lex left you, and to be honest, it’s bringing up the shit between Leslie and me.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t look so sad. I’m not accusing you of being like Leslie.”

“Good. I hate her.” Jackie’s weak smile goes a long way toward making me feel better.

“She’s not my favorite person either, which is weird because for a long time she was.” Jackie has since dominated the list of faves for me. How about that?

“I know what you mean,” she replies, looking cute and befuddled.

“Come on.” I stand and she stands with me. “I didn’t even tell you where we are going.”

“Doesn’t matter.” She wraps her arms around one of mine. “Anywhere is better than here.”

“Your couch or mine?” I tease. But her eyes are searching, the question in their depths deserving of an honest answer. “Let’s do this, Butler.”

I mean it. It’s scary and big, but I mean it.

“Do what?” she whispers.

“Us.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

JACQUELINE

Any girl who says she doesn't want to be chased and rescued is lying to herself.

That includes me.

I convinced myself after Lex left that I didn't need anyone. Dating after my divorce felt more like what I should do than what I wanted to do. After several lackluster dates, I chalked up relationships as that thing I'd never again have.

And yet here I am.

Where, you ask?

In a matching pajama set—shorts, gray with little pink hearts, tank top, gray ribbed. My hair is spun into a sloppy bun at the back of my head as I stir a pan of scrambled eggs at the stove.

Vince's stove.

Speaking of Vince, his lips lower to the space between my neck and shoulder as his hands grip my hips and pull my butt to his front. I giggle because I'm the slightest bit ticklish, but

that giggle fades into a hum when I encounter his hard, warm body.

“You’re going to make me burn the eggs.” I tilt my head to give him access to my bare skin.

“I have more eggs,” he murmurs, kissing behind my ear.

Last night we went back to my apartment, but when I told him I didn’t want to hang out there, he invited me over. “To stay,” he clarified.

When I argued that I couldn’t stay, he argued that I could.

“We’ll be late for work.” The wooden spoon in my hand stills again and Vince groans against my damp skin.

“I hate when you’re right, Butler.” When his hands leave my body, I miss his attention instantly. Vince is someone I’ve long been a big fan of, and now that we’ve crossed oh so many lines, you can bet your booty I’ve graduated to *superfan*.

“I’ll make toast,” he offers. “Then we’ll head into the office.”

“Together?” Eggs finished, I turn off the gas range. “Isn’t that a bad idea?”

He pushes the lever on the toaster and faces me. He’s all white T-shirt and slouchy gray pants and bare feet. His tattooed muscles flex when he crosses his arms.

“You’re making a lot of sense today, Butler.” He smirks. “I’ll drive you back to your place.”

My eyes stray to the clock. “We may have to eat our breakfast in the car.”

We rose early but not that early.

“We’ll make it. Don’t worry.” He puts another kiss on my shoulder and moves to pull the plates out of one of the tall white cabinets in his massive kitchen. It’s way too much kitchen for a bachelor, and the delicate white dishes with a raised pattern on the edges are definitely Leslie’s style. Vince is caught in between bachelorhood and divorce.

We make quick work of scrambled eggs and buttered toast before I hustle upstairs to get dressed. I brought a change of clothes for work, so I slip on the black pants and a pearl-button silver blouse before sliding my feet into a pair of tasteful heels. Then it’s ten-minute hair and makeup in the main bathroom while Vince changes in the bedroom. He’s done before me, so when I jog down the stairs and find him buttoning his shirtsleeve, it’s my first look at him.

I thought he looked good in his slouchy morning attire, but in his designer jeans and oxford shirt, a vest over it, and a shiny gold watch gleaming on his wrist, he looks good enough to eat.

“Ready?” he asks, grinning when I pause one step from the bottom. He wraps his arms around my waist and we linger there, kissing long enough that I’m tempted to drag him back upstairs.

“If we must.” Arms linked around his neck, I lean forward and steal one final kiss.

It’s going to be a long, long workday.

THAT AFTERNOON I’m glaring at my inbox, trying to decide how to respond to Maude in accounting without using the word “inept,” when a pair of legs carrying the biggest bouquet

of flowers I've ever seen appears in my doorway. Kayla peeks around them and grins, her face partially hidden by pink and cream and yellow and...nearly every color of the rainbow.

“Look what just came for you!” Kayla sings as she waddles into my office and plunks the crystal vase on an empty portion of my desk.

“Wow.” I don't know what to think.

“Read the card! Read the card!” Kayla is now clapping.

I reach for it and she's over my shoulder like a pet parrot as we read it together.

“Had a great time last night. Let's do it again.” I don't read the signature, but Kayla does.

“Jaundice?” She frowns at me in confusion. I feel my cheeks warm. I'll bet I'm pink approaching beet red.

“Jaundice?” a deep voice repeats. I peer over the pile of flowers at Vince to find him smiling conspicuously. “Is that from your runner?”

“*The* runner?” Kayla asks.

Vince shakes his head. “Odd choice for a pet name, but what you do in your spare time is none of my beeswax.”

“The runner!” Kayla's eyes go round and she grips my shoulder. “You had sex with the demigod that runs outside of this building?”

“Um... We just... We're...” I'm so flummoxed I can hardly speak. Obviously, the flowers are from Vince, and obviously (to him and me) he's the one I had sex with last night.

“Kayla, have some respect. Butler is a lady. She wouldn’t sleep with that thick-neck after only a few dates. She has scruples.” His eyes twinkle.

“Ignore him.” Kayla throws a hand and focuses on me. “The point is, a very attractive man who you like very, very much has sent you a beautiful bouquet of flowers because he wants to see you again. Bask in that. You deserve it.”

I can’t help smiling as Kayla mutters to Vince how he should “behave” on her way out.

Over the bouquet, I catch a wink from Vince before he’s gone too. My focus returns to the flowers—a whole bunch of pretty blossoms I couldn’t begin to know the names of—and my smile grows wider as I notice the two types notably missing.

No daisies.

No roses.

VINCE

Immature? I thought it was nice.

And yeah, a little bit me staking a claim.

Unfortunately, my bouquet of nongeneric flowers had a downside.

Everyone in the office thinks that Jackie is screwing the runner. And no one cares about the signature “Jaundice” as

much as they should. I mean, what kind of weirdo puts that on a bouquet of flowers?

Yes, *I* did, but it's because that's the only way to treat Jackie the way I want to treat her and keep the office chatter about us to a minimum.

The problem is the office chatter is alive and well and, much to my chagrin, focused on the wrong guy.

Whatever. Jackie is dating me. And Running Man is a jackass loser windbag.

It's Friday and Jackie and I are forgoing our typical pizza and movie night for a new kind of pizza and movie night. We're doing it ourselves. DIY in the kitchen isn't either of our specialties. She can scramble eggs and I can *not* burn toast, but beyond that we're pretty hopeless.

Case in point as we attempt to stretch sticky pizza dough into a pair of pie pans. My idea was individual pizzas we top with our choice of ingredients. Mine: pepperoni and mushrooms. Hers: pepperoni and mushrooms. We bought identical ingredients. Even the brand of shredded mozzarella is the same. But I'm committed to my idea, so we persist.

"This isn't working out the way I imagined," Jackie says, pressing the gluelike dough into her oiled pie pan. "Why didn't we make one big pizza, since we bought the same toppings?"

My kitchen is big enough that we can stand at the island together. I'm on one side; she's on the other. I'm sitting on a stool and she's in a wide stance so as to leverage her strength into smashing the dough into submission.

"This way you can have exactly the amount of cheese you want, and I can have three layers of pepperoni and only four

mushroom slices.”

She gives me a “come on” look that makes me want to kiss her. If we were standing closer, I would.

“Four mushroom slices,” she repeats.

“I can’t tolerate any more than that.” I point to myself with a dough-covered finger. “I’m sensitive to fungi.” Since I can’t help myself, I add, “Probably why I have such an aversion to Jaundice.”

She tries to flick dough at me but can’t. It sticks to her finger like setting cement.

I abandon my pie pan and go to her, and she backs up, hands up like a pair of sticky stop signs. “Don’t do whatever you’re thinking of doing,” she requests through a giggle.

I wrap my arms around her, careful to keep pizza dough out of her ponytail. Kissing her refreshes every part of me—like I was dying for a drink and only she could quench the thirst.

The kiss turns greedy and deep and she keeps her arms at her sides to avoid covering me in sticky goo.

Then the oven beeps, alerting us that it’s preheated, and shatters the moment. I pull back and drop my forehead onto hers. “What am I going to do with you, Butler?”

I’m asking both of us, because I’m not sure. Her answer makes me smile.

“I think you should clean me up first, and then you can do whatever you want.”

“Deal.” I’m still grinning.

“After we eat, I promise. I’m *starving*. We’ll make out on the couch or on the counter or something.”

Or something.

“Killing me,” I tell her. But it’s the sweetest way to die.

I spin and point her toward the sink, walking bowlegged behind her. When the water is warm and full blast, I plunge our hands into the stream and soap us up. I clean the mess off her hands and mine while nibbling on her earlobe.

She moans and hums her approval and soon a part of me is nudging her ass expectantly. When she whispers my name, it’s the permission I’m looking for. I snatch a dish towel and turn off the faucet, drying us in quick order. Then I scoop her up and carry her to the kitchen table.

“I’m starving,” she sort of protests.

“So am I,” I sort of lie. I’m mostly hungry for her. Kissing her neck brings those moans back full force, and I slip my hands beneath her top and pull down the cups of her bra. When I’m rolling her nipples gently, her mouth slams into mine and then I know—we’re totally going to have sex on my kitchen table.

That’s a first. Leslie wasn’t a sex-on-the-kitchen-table type. And any experiences I’ve had since Leslie have faded into a glob of fuzzy, unappetizing memories. Now that I have Jackie in my arms, her mouth devouring mine, no one else matters.

The thought electrocutes the back of my brain with a sharp *ZAP!* but the zap fades to a pleasant buzz when Jackie palms my insistent hard-on.

Clothes fly.

Shoes are kicked off.

The table is pushed, squeaking, across the floor in our hurry to prop her on it and me against it.

I fumble, shaking, too turned on to do anything but sink into her sweet warmth as she whispers my name.

“Vince.” Hot breath tickles my ear. She has one arm wrapped around my neck, the other bracing the tabletop. Whatever was on it—a stack of fast-food napkins and this week’s mail—has fluttered to the ground.

I support my weight on the table, clasping her back as I drive deep. That’s when my eyes hit hers. She watches me, her face contorted into pleats of pleasure, her breath truncated.

Her satisfaction is the goal, so I move and tilt until she cries out softly and her eyes close. My satisfaction is imminent. As soon as Jackie goes off, I’ll tumble directly behind her.

It doesn’t take long. A swell of pride on my part accompanies an orgasm on hers. As she’s writhing against me, I let go, coming hard. I squeeze my eyes closed and a kaleidoscope of colors blitzes across my lids.

Then I’m catching my breath and kissing her neck as a sated moment of bliss stretches out between us. There’s nothing like the bit between the moment of release and the relaxation aftermath. Especially with Jackie.

Her fingers ruffle my hair and I give her a lazy smile that matches hers. But when I lift my eyes to meet her caramel browns, they assault me.

Here, under the bright dining room light, the smell of pizza sauce in the air, I realize that the electric zap from before has returned, numbing my cortex.

Then I know.

I'm about to freak the fuck out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

JACQUELINE

Sex on the table. That's a new one. A *sexy* one. I can still feel the tickle of a sly smile on my mouth as I toss my paper plate into the trash. Vince's personal pizza was a lost cause. He forgot to oil the pan and we decided it'd be easier if he threw the entire thing away and bought a new pan.

"I've done that more than once," he confessed. We shared my pizza, which was enough for both of us, and he sucked down a beer while I stuck with water. I'm not staying tonight. First off, I have things to do at my apartment, and second, I think he might need some space.

"I'm going to take off," I announce.

Vince lowers his beer bottle and leans back in the kitchen chair. "Oh, yeah?"

He's more curious than argumentative, but I wasn't looking for him to argue. I picked up on that moment after the kitchen table where he was awkward but polite.

"Yes. Tomorrow is laundry day."

"You have a laundry *day*?"

“Several.” I stand and put my glass in the sink. “Specifically, Saturday is sheet day. I change my bedding.”

“Every week?”

“Yes, Neanderthal. Every week.” I lean, palms flat on the counter. His smile turns sad, or maybe he’s tired. It’s hard to say because sex has muddied things between us where it counts. Used to be I’d never worry about why he made the faces he made.

He stands and swaggers over to me, and despite the muddiness and the uncertainty, part of me warms at the sight of him coming toward me with purpose. I like it way too much. Vince has always been sexy, but I’ve never seen all that sex appeal focused on me. It’s daunting in the best way.

“Thank you for sharing your pizza with me, since I ruined mine,” he murmurs, lowering his lips. He kisses me and I stand on my toes to reach more of his mouth. The kiss is deep yet soft, his stubble scraping pleasantly along my lips.

“Give me a call,” I say. “Or I’ll see you on Monday.” I pat his cheek, determined not to be needy. To be fair, I don’t feel needy, just a little confused.

“Butler,” he says after I slide out from between him and the counter.

“Yeah?”

“Drive safe.”

“You bet,” I promise. Then I walk myself to the door.

VINCE

False alarm.

I *thought* I would freak out. I didn't freak out. I ate my pizza, we hung out and chatted, and everything was fine. The sex was intense and I'm not used to having intense sex. With Leslie the sex wasn't intense in the final decaying years of our marriage. It was fun and spontaneous when we first met, but "intense" wasn't how I would describe our interactions. Including her, no one has ever looked me in the eyes during sex and made me imagine an exploding cosmos.

No wonder I had a momentary lapse in sanity.

I let Jackie have her laundry day, but I did send a few noncommittal texts about whether or not the Governor still looks the same age now as he did in *Predator*. You know, deep stuff. She responded in kind and didn't ask what I was doing this weekend. I take that to mean that she's as okay as I am.

Sunday rolls around and I wake feeling more clearheaded. As I shower and trim my face, it dawns on me that Friday smacks of my past. Not with Leslie specifically—we never made personal pan pizzas and made love on the kitchen table—but the entire incident was familiar. A woman in my house. The sound of clattering dishes and a beeping oven. Opening the fridge and asking "Beer or wine?" like it's an everyday occurrence.

All of it reminded me of past me. The me that had no idea my wife was falling out of love with me and—worse—didn't respect me or my choices.

This is the kind of shit that holds people back. I think of Davis. He's on perpetual pause because of his past. I can't

allow that to happen to me. I'm not going to be a shell of who I was six years later because I couldn't face facts.

By three o'clock I'm in my car, cellphone to my ear. Jackie's voice answers, a sweet, slightly breathy "Hi."

"Hi." I smile. Big. "What are you up to today, Butler?"

"Cleaning."

"Oh, yeah? Wearing one of those cute little maid outfits?"

She chuckles. I'm semihard imagining her amazing breasts testing the seams of a black lace corset. *Damn.*

"You know, I quit wearing those. They're not comfortable for vacuuming."

I groan, because that visual makes me all the way hard. "Thought I'd pick you up for dinner later. You interested?"

"Oh." A pause. Not a good pause, either. One of those pauses that means she's trying to decide how to politely tell me no.

"No big deal if you're busy," I bumble out, trying to cram the words back into my mouth. "I was nearby—"

"My sister's coming over tonight."

My turn to pause.

"She's in town for business and I told her to swing by and we'd watch *Mean Girls* and order out. I'd invite you but..."

"But I don't have a vagina," I finish.

"Bethany would love to see you, though." I hear the smile in her voice, which soothes the wound from her rejection. "Why don't you swing by and have a beer?"

“It’s fine, really.” The words “I miss you” cling to my tongue. I figure it’s better not to admit it. “I’ll call Davis. I know he’ll be up for a dude night. He always is.”

“Well, tell him I say hello.”

“Will do, Butler.”

We hang up and the disappointment at not seeing her settles in the bottom of my gut. I pull to a stop at a curb and try to decide what to do with myself now that I’m not en route to the flower shop to buy nonroses for Jackie.

Davis answers before the phone even rings.

“Carson, what’s up?”

“Beers at McGreevy’s?”

“No, I have a thing.”

“It’s not polite to call your girlfriends ‘things,’” I remind him.

“My *thing* is poker with a few guys from work.”

“On a Sunday?” He works from home. What guys from work is he playing poker with on the weekend?

“Commerce never sleeps, my friend. We had a preweek meeting at an on-site office today and I invited the guys to my place for cards. They’re a mixed bag. Come over so I have someone normal to talk to.”

“I don’t know...” I haven’t played cards for money since Leslie and I used to have separate girls’ and guys’ nights.

“For your own good, Carson. I can’t bear the idea of you spending the evening alone.” He’s smiling. The asshole. “Jackie-O too busy to polish your knob tonight?”

I breathe a heavy sigh. Spending the evening alone is a nonoption now that I've been shot down by Jackie, and Davis knows it. "Your place?" I ask.

"Yep. Six o'clock."

"I'll bring the cigars."

DAVIS'S COWORKERS are dressed like normal human beings instead of corporate cyborgs. After years of witnessing Davis wear suits and ties almost exclusively, I'm surprised any of his friends wear casual attire. One guy is in flip-flops. And one guy isn't a guy at all.

Her name's Charmaine. She's twenty-seven and cute as a button. Blond, petite, and curvy. Davis hasn't looked twice at her, which tells me one of two things: She's married or they already slept together.

She's on my left, pursing her lips at her hand, which means she's about to bluff. I've been watching her take everyone's money, including mine, for the last hour. Simpson starts to call when she raises twenty bucks, but then chickens out. I folded a while back and so did Davis, as well as the two other guys who aren't sitting at the table any longer. I can't remember their names.

"Come on! Call her!" Davis chides.

"No way, man." Simpson flashes a smile at Charmaine and she smiles back. Damn, she's good. "I'm out."

He throws his cards facedown on the table and tips his chin at her. "Show 'em."

“Sorry, Simps. That would have cost you twenty bucks.” She lays her cards on top of his facedown and sweeps them into a pile before doing a quick shuffle and shoving them aside. Then she pockets the cash, and I’m grateful I only lost a five-spot in that stack.

“I need a beer,” Davis says, blowing out a breath. “Come on, Simps. I’ll buy you one.”

They amble into Davis’s kitchen, which is attached to the dining room. Davis lives in a fancy apartment building near downtown. He has the penthouse balcony suite with an impressive view of the skyline.

“How can you live with yourself, ripping off your coworkers like that?” I ask Charmaine with a smile.

“It’s easy.” She turns to face me, resting her elbow on the chair. “I work with a lot of men who get paid more than me, so technically I’m recouping some of my missing income.”

I chuckle. She has me there.

She covers her mouth as she yawns and pushes herself up. “It’s been a long day.”

“Yeah.” A long day of spending it without Jackie. Yesterday didn’t feel as long, but then I’d just seen her. How can I miss her already?

“Where are you headed, Vince?” Charmaine asks, her voice huskier than before.

“Home after this one.” I waggle my bottle to show her it’s nearly empty.

“Would you like some company?”

“Uh…” I stall because she’s caught me completely off guard.

She leans forward and reiterates, “I mean in your bed. You’re fun.”

A completely uncomfortable laugh leaves my throat and her smile fades. “I’m not laughing at you. I’ve just never been asked quite that way before. I’m going to have to politely decline. My—Jackie would kill me.”

“Ah. Girlfriend.” Charmaine blinks and her bedroom eyes are no more. I don’t feel an ounce of loss or curiosity about her or what she might be like in bed. There was a time I would’ve, though, which she deserves to know.

“Something like that.” I keep my voice low and add, “A few months ago, I couldn’t have said yes fast enough.”

“You’re sweet.” She kisses my cheek and I let her. “You’re a lucky guy to have found a woman worth putting adventure on hold.”

She swivels on one heel and gathers her purse. Once she’s in the kitchen saying goodbye to everyone, I notice Davis watching me, his mouth tight at the corners. Half an hour later, his buddies from work have finished their beers and one by one trickle out the door.

Then it’s Davis and me. I was going to leave after I finished this one, but I didn’t. There’s an inch of warm beer in the bottle and the label is missing. Once we’re clear of any of his compatriots, I speak up.

“It wasn’t what it looked like with Charmaine.”

“It wasn’t?” He sits across from me at his glass-topped kitchen table and folds his hands. “You didn’t turn down Char for sex?”

“Okay, I guess it was what it looked like. I didn’t want you to think I was flirting. What’s your story with her anyway?”

“No story.” He shakes his head with finality.

“Is she single?”

“Yes.”

“And she’s blond. Didn’t you date her?”

“No.” He looks at me like I’ve gone insane. Maybe I have and I’m having this conversation in an asylum with a fat guy named Tumbles, because in no way should my accusation come as a surprise.

“Davis. She’s *blond*. You date every blond you can get your hands on. My assumption isn’t that out of left field.”

“I don’t date women I work with.”

“Even when she asked you to bed, no strings? Still a no?”

Davis goes pale. “*That’s* what she offered you?”

“Yes, but in a tasteful way.” I point my bottle at him.

“Jackie-O,” he says as if it’s all the explanation needed.

The thing is, it is all the explanation needed. Or at least it’s the only one he’s going to get confirmation on.

“Jackie-O,” I agree.

Davis sits back in his high-backed black iron chair. I can’t be sure, but his smile appears to be one of approval.

“I’M DOING GOOD, YEAH?” I ask my sister, rather sloppily, I might add. We’re halfway into a second bottle of champagne and, like liquor, bubbly makes me feel way drunker than I really am. Or makes me way drunker than I should be.

“You’re doing great.” Bethany forgoes her slender flute and takes a swig directly from the bottle before wiping a hand across her mouth. Somehow she looks sophisticated doing it.

I flop back on the couch, to which I’ve dragged all the pillows from my bed and a light blanket. My sister has gotten comfortable. We bypassed *Mean Girls* for some old-school classics, per her request. We watched *Pretty in Pink* and then put on *Sixteen Candles*, but we didn’t really pay any attention to it. It’s in the background, infusing the room with Molly Ringwald, patron saint of the eighties—a decade I admire. The clothes were a riot.

“I want to continue having sex with him and not worry about all the things I was starting to worry about with J.T., you know?”

Bethany nods. “Totally.”

“I don’t want to put unnecessary weight on it. Like when should I call, or if it’s a big deal that we work together. I’m not going to make out in the break room with him or anything, but I’m also not going to hide.” I frown, because I’m making no sense. “Can I have some more of that?”

Bethany offers the bottle and I take a measured sip, carefully, because the last time I drank champagne from the bottle, I coughed and sputtered when the bubbles hit my throat. Lex was frustrated with me for not pouring it into a glass. The memory stings more than it should.

“I never saw what J.T. looks like.” Bethany wraps her arms around her knees. Then her eyes get big. “Hey! He lives here. Let’s go look at him!”

She’s smiling like a maniac.

“It’s eleven at night! He’s probably in bed.” *With another woman*, some snide, grouchy part of me adds. “Do you want some more popcorn?” We killed two bags, but I could go for a third.

“Sure.” She smiles sweetly and I test my ability to walk by pacing from my living room to the kitchen with fairly little wobbling. Impressive.

Popcorn popping in the microwave, I hum to myself and watch the numbers on the digital timer count down. Bethany says something, but it’s too quiet for me to hear. “Just a sec!” I call out. As I listen to the space grow between pops, I hear her clearly say, “Great. See you in a few.”

I snatch the bag and give it a shake as I head back into the living room. She’s placing her phone back on the coffee table facedown when I return.

“Who are you seeing in a few?” I tear the bag, careful to avoid the steam billowing out, and empty the contents into a big plastic bowl.

Before I can really get comfortable, she says, “J.T.”

Bag in midair, I gape at her. Then my eyes track slowly to the phone on the coffee table facedown. *My* phone. Not hers. That’s my sparkly red case.

“Bethany!”

I scramble for it and unlock the screen, scrolling through the recent calls. Sure enough, an outgoing one for J.T. sits in the queue like a bad omen.

“I was going to text him,” she says as she munches a few pieces of popcorn, “but in case he had a lady present, I didn’t want to interrupt.”

“So you *called* instead?” I gape at her.

She shrugs and eats another handful of popcorn.

“What did you tell him?” I screech.

“I told him I was your sister and that I wanted to look at the one who got away if he wasn’t too busy.”

“He didn’t get away,” I bite out.

“I know. But he wouldn’t come over if I told him I wanted to kick him in the balls for cheating on my sister.” She smiles sweetly. “Besides, he said he had something to return to you.”

My doorbell buzzes and I race to grab Bethany, but she’s faster than me. Or less drunk. I can’t tell. The door swings aside and I open my mouth to apologize to J.T. for the misunderstanding, but it’s too late. Bethany snatches a DVD from his hands, tosses it to me like a Frisbee, and kicks J.T. squarely in the nuts.

It happens so fast, I stand frozen, a DVD in hand, and my jaw on the ground. Bethany is a ninja. Who knew?

J.T. *oofs* and I gasp, and then the door is slammed closed, but not before Bethany shouts, “You’re a cheating sack of shit!”

Once he’s groaning behind the closed panel, my sister dusts her hands together and grins. “I always wanted to say that to Lex.”

I rush to the window and part the curtains to find J.T. looking miserable and furious at once. I don’t know if it’s the champagne or the divine retribution, but I start laughing and don’t stop until I tumble to the floor, Bethany collapsing at my side doing the same.

“He’s going to hate me now,” I say through tears.

“I know,” she barely manages between howling peals of laughter.

I join her, despite knowing things won't end well. Just this once I allow myself to enjoy the moment. And in this moment, life is *good*.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

VINCE

Seeing Jackie give a presentation is like watching a bird take flight or a fish return to the water. She's at home up there. She *shines*. I do well enough to get by, but not Jackie. No, she aces the training she's issuing to our coworkers.

The only way I'm comfortable instructing my peers is to make joke after joke and promise a happy hour afterward. Jackie takes the alternate route: She wows them because she's damn great at it.

First she hits them with knowledge—thorough research of her topic. Next the sucker punch of a clip from a movie instead of a boring PowerPoint presentation. The clip? From *Glengarry Glen Ross*. Jack Lemmon's character is right. You can't succeed in sales if you're only given shit leads.

Last, Jackie gives everyone homework in the form of a contest. The reward? Cold, hard cash.

When she asks if there are any questions, she's beaming. Of course there are no fucking questions. She outlined every possible question and answered it in a rat-a-tat-tat machine-gun rhythm while our coworkers scribbled fiercely into their

notebooks—which she handed out at the beginning, I might add.

Genius.

“To reward you for your patience and attentiveness,” Jackie says with a smile as I hit the lights, “I’ve ordered Papa Joe’s deep dish pizza, and it should be in the conference room”—she checks the clock on the wall behind me—“right about now. Enjoy your lunch, everyone.”

Of the dozen people who file out, several are excitedly chattering about how they’re going to win the contest.

“Kayla, can you and Joan and Robin stick around and eat in here with Vince and me? There are a few details we need to solidify with you.” She leans over the table and stage whispers, “I’ll order us Thai instead.”

“Absolutely,” they chime in agreement.

“Drinks on me,” I announce. It’s the least I can do. Jackie let me kick back and relax on this one. We do that—trade presentations and take turns based on our strengths.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic.” Robin is a fiftysomething manager in sales. Her voice is that of a former smoker, and her hugs are those of a grandma. There is nothing like sinking into that floral blouse for a good squeeze.

“Oh! Mimosa for me,” Joan says. She’s rail thin, unlike Robin, her features angular but pretty in her own unique way. Kayla joins in next.

“I’ll have a gin and tonic *and* a mimosa. It is Monday, after all.”

I fold my arms over my chest and blink at the women before me. I’m waiting for their real orders, which they figure

out without a word from me.

“*Fine.*” Kayla, predictably, is the first to cave. “Coke.”

“Diet,” Robin and Joan say at the same time.

“Butler?” I ask Jackie.

“I’m going to drink water, thanks.”

“Come on. I’m treating. How about a coffee?”

Jackie’s eyes brighten. “Like a caramel macchiato with extra whipped cream?”

“I change my order!” Kayla shoots her arm into the air like we’re in a classroom.

I sigh but give in, sliding into a chair at the table and opening my phone to peck everyone’s Starbucks orders into my app. “Don’t get too excited,” I say as I add a medium Pike Place for myself. “I’m sending a temp to gopher. Order me a shrimp pad thai, will you?” I ask Jackie.

“You got it.” She beams at me and I wonder if anyone else notices the rosy color in cheeks, or the extra second we hold each other’s gazes. I hope not.

I email the temp, Sandy, then swing by my desk and check my messages. There are several from people who think they’re having an emergency, but it’s nothing that can’t wait until after our Thai/Starbucks lunch meeting.

I swing back by the conference room as the fastest Thai food in the universe is delivered to the table.

“How long was I gone?” I ask after the deliveryman zooms by me to return to his time machine. “What year is this?”

Jackie flashes me a smile as she opens one of the bags and starts unloading our meals.

“Mr. Carson?” I turn to find Sandy holding a tray of Starbucks cups plus one extra in her hand. “Here are your coffees.”

“Thanks.” I take the tray, then lean in and say, “Seriously. Did you and the Thai guy use the same machine to zap you back?”

She frowns, not understanding, so I tell her to never mind. By the time I close the conference room door, a conversation has started without me.

“He’s gorgeous. Tall. Golden-blond hair.” Kayla is speaking and Robin and Joan are hanging on her every word. “He has a deliciously wide chest and round, sculpted shoulders.” She touches her own shoulders and rolls her eyes in apparent ecstasy. “When he runs by tomorrow, you have to check him out.”

I grimace.

“Hey,” I interrupt. Kayla’s mouth forms a small *O*. “You’re married.” That’s not what I wanted to say, but I can’t exactly gripe about J.T., can I? “Besides.” I pull my shoulders back. “I too have round, sculpted shoulders.” I set the drinks in front of them. “And I come bearing gifts.”

“Run by with your shirt off, honey, and we’ll talk.” Robin peeks over her glasses at me. I narrow my eyes at her, but I can’t hate her. Those damn hugs.

“Close your ears, Vince,” Kayla instructs. Without waiting, she looks at Jackie and says, “Spill it. How good is the sex with him?”

Jackie nearly drops my pad thai and I scoop up the container before I have to eat my lunch off the floor. Her widening eyes hit mine and I raise my eyebrows, trying to

communicate with my mind that Kayla is referring to the running douchebag, not me.

“What does that smooth, bare chest feel like?” Joan asks.

See? Not talking about me. I have a manly, hairy chest.

“I’m going to eat at my desk,” I announce, not that anyone is paying me any attention.

“Is he a good kisser?” Robin asks.

“Or eat my desk,” I mumble.

“Uh...” Jackie is fumbling but I’m not bailing her out. I snatch my Pike Place and salute the ladies with the cup. “Butler, fill me in on what I miss. I mean, about the project, not about whatever you’re doing with...whoever you’re doing it with.”

“J.T.,” Kayla answers.

“Oh! Right! J.T.” Jackie, late to the party, has finally figured it out. God love her. “Um.”

“Wait until I’m gone!” I call, but there’s a secret smile on my face as I slip out the conference room door and close it with a snick. Jackie is talking about sex, and even though the ladies from work are assuming it’s with someone else, Jackie is thinking of me as she describes it.

I hum as I stroll to my desk, coffee and Thai food in hand and confidence intact.

“YOU’RE RIGHT. This place is girly.” Jackie is standing beside me at the doorway of Chic Winehouse.

“It’s not that bad. It was girly the night Bethany and I came because you would have been outnumbered.”

“No,” I say as we follow a hostess to a table in the center of a packed house. “Today in the conference room I was outnumbered.”

The table is tiny and the chairs are spindly. Glad I don’t have a weight problem. I lower myself into the chair gingerly, half expecting it to collapse like a pile of matchsticks.

“Welcome to Chic Winehouse,” greets a neatly attired waitress. She delivers a plate with two miniature pink cakes the same shade as her shirt. “Here are your petits fours. They’re on the house tonight as an amuse-bouche.”

“They’re what? For the what?” I need an interpreter for at least two of the words she just used.

“Thank you,” Jackie says. “I’ve been here a million times, but he might need a minute.”

“No problem.” Our waitress, her long legs snipping like scissors, clips to another table with an air of efficiency.

“Oh, I love these,” Jackie says about the cakes. “They have a raspberry puree nestled in a crème—Vince!”

She’s barking at me because...well, I don’t know why.

“What?” I ask around a mouthful.

“You’re supposed to savor it.” She takes a bite I’d only be capable of if my mouth were wired shut.

“Uh-huh. No, thanks.” I lift my menu. Half of it is in French. I put it down and cross my arms over it, leaning over the postage stamp-sized table. “Tell me how the questioning went in the conference room after I left. Did you spill about the great sex you’ve been having lately?”

“You’d love to know, wouldn’t you?” She nibbles a corner from her tiny cake.

“You could eat it in one bite, you know.”

“I’m *savoring*.”

“You’re turning me on.”

Her cheeks color a darker shade of pink than the frosting, and now I want to take her home and make out long and slow.

“But we’re on a date,” I remind both of us—me and my burgeoning manhood—“so I’m going to be a gentleman.”

“I appreciate that. We can’t just”—she waves her hand—“*you know*...every time we feel like it.”

“Oh, that we could.” I pretend to read the menu. “I think the Brookdale Group would fire us for getting it on in the copy room.”

“Or one of us.” She points at herself.

“You’re an asset, Butler. They wouldn’t keep me over you.” It’s not a throwaway compliment. She’s wildly more qualified for VP than I am. I’m a displaced entrepreneur trying to make it work in a corporation and doing a fair to middling job.

“Yes, but you have a penis.” Her mouth freezes open when the arrival of the waitress coincides with the moment the word “penis” exits Jackie’s lips. And now that I have *that* word swirling around in my mind... What were we talking about?

We order a red blend and food—I’m assured what I ordered is the “most popular item on the menu,” though I think that might be what the restaurant tells all the guys, given it’s coincidentally the most expensive item on the menu. I don’t mind. I like treating Jackie.

Halfway through the wine, the food devoured, she's laughing at some half-witted joke I made.

"I like this wine," I say over her laughter. "It makes me funnier."

My phone bings and reflexively, I check it.

"Everything okay?" Jackie asks, probably because my face falls as I read the text.

"My parents," I announce glumly, "are coming to town on Friday."

Jackie claps and grins, not sharing my dread of their arrival. "That's great!"

"No. *Great* is when they ship Christmas presents instead of delivering them in person. *Great* is when they call me from Europe to say they're having the best anniversary of their lives. *Great* is when they're far enough away that I know they're okay but I don't have to share meals with them."

"You don't get along with your parents?" Her eyebrows bend with concern.

"It's not that." How do I explain? I take a drink of my wine, emptying the glass. "They're fantastic parents. They raised me well."

"I sense a 'but.'"

"But." I smile and she smiles back, and already, talking about my family is easier than it should be. "They didn't approve of the divorce."

Jackie wrinkles her nose. "Well, then they should take that up with Leslie, since she was the one who wanted it."

See that? That right there is why Jackie *rocks*.

“Did they not take your side?” she asks. “My parents took my side.”

Sure, because Lex is a cheating jerk. In my case Leslie backed away slowly until she vanished into the ether. The lines aren't as black and white.

“They think I could've tried harder. Worked harder to keep Leslie around.” There is such a distinct pause, I'm sure I've overshared.

“Could you have?” Jackie asks quietly.

Her question is like a punch to the gut, but Jackie is my friend first. She isn't trying to skewer me, though the question did feel similar to a shiv in the diaphragm.

“Before I came to work at Brookdale, I owned a real estate company.” My neck is hot and I rub my palm over the back of it. Much as I'd like to blame the wine, it's not the red blend's fault. “The ripple effect from the real estate bubble bursting consumed my would-be empire.”

I meet Jackie's eyes and find the sympathy there. I will myself to shut up, but instead tell her the ugly truth.

“I lost everything. Including my wife.”

JACQUELINE

Vince's mouth presses into a thin line and he ages ten years before my eyes. His posture shrinks, dark circles appear under his eyes, and he holds himself as taut as a bowstring.

“Anyway,” he continues as if he isn’t corroding inside, “I had a marketing degree to fall back on and a fair amount of sales experience. And here we are.”

“I had no idea.” Of all the things we’ve shared over the years, he never mentioned a company he owned. It’s a big detail to leave out.

“Bankruptcy is humiliating. Especially when your marriage falls apart as a result.”

I finger the stem of my wineglass in thought. I shouldn’t ask, but the question comes anyway. “Do you regret it?”

His forehead crinkles. “What? My business?”

“Yes. Knowing that everything would collapse in that financial climate, would you have made the decision not to start it?”

He blinks as if he’s never been asked the question before. As if he’s been so plagued by regret that he’s never once considered the positives that come from having a business and losing it.

“I would do the same thing,” he admits quietly. “How about that?”

The weight of the moment passes with one of his quick grins. He hovers the perilously low wine bottle over my half-full glass, but I shake my head. He empties the bottle into his own glass, filling it only an inch.

“That’s it for the wine,” he announces, but I sense his comment is more to fill the gap in conversation.

“I’ll go with you,” I blurt.

He sets the wine bottle down slowly, his eyelids narrowing.

“Dinner with your parents,” I clarify. “Take me. I’m the perfect buffer for uncomfortable conversations, assuming they have a modicum of social etiquette.” Ironically, I’m uncomfortable with *this* conversation, but I continue offering rather than take it back. “I’m great with parents. And if they think it’s weird that you’re bringing a date, you can blame work. Tell them our project ran late and I tagged along for fun.”

“You think hanging around with my ’rents is going to be fun?” His amused expression pairs with a low laugh that sweeps away the heaviness from before.

“Tell them whatever you want.” I wave a hand to halt my jabbering. “You’re good on your feet.”

Vince frowns down at the text and nods, eyes still on his phone. Why do I feel as if I’m teetering on a precipice?

“Yeah. Okay. Sure.” He nods again, this time at me, and I swallow nervously.

“Great.”

We finish our wine in silence and I hope I haven’t marched through a string of invisible DO NOT CROSS yellow tape. Where Vince and I are concerned, I’m not sure where our boundaries start or stop.

Like, at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

VINCE

My mother's eyebrows are raised so high they're practically on top of her head.

"It's not a big deal," I insist. "I have plenty of room."

We're surrounding their rental car in my driveway. They drove from Maryland, and thanks to a mix-up better known as my dad trying to navigate the Internet, they don't have hotel reservations at the Hilton like they prefer. Mom refuses to stay at the Holiday Inn Express, and my father is grumbling about how it's late and he doesn't want to "deal with the staff" until morning.

Being a good son, I offered them my spare room. It's upstairs, same as my room, but on the other side of the house. Essentially, if I took enough snacks and drinks up to my own bedroom, I could shut the door and not come out until morning. So it's really no big deal.

Did I say that already?

"We will not impose." Cathy Carson knows me well.

My dark features—hair and lashes—come from her, and my abysmal sense of style from my dad. Thank God Mom took the reins a few decades ago. Today he resembles a well-dressed storefront mannequin. He’s in a pair of faded jeans and a button-down shirt that fits his slim physique. No beer belly on my dad. He’s always endeavored to stay fit.

“Come on, Cat,” he says as he hefts their suitcases from the trunk. “I just want to sit down and drink a beer. Plus, Vince can fix the reservation snafu.”

“You mean the snafu of you booking a Hilton in Virginia instead of Ohio?” I take one of the suitcases from my dad’s hands.

“Yes.”

They settle in with relatively little fuss, which makes me think I’m overreacting to the whole parents-staying-with-me situation. Until Mom starts inspecting the house and offering her “advice” on every detail.

I don’t approve of these curtains, Vince. You have cobwebs over the dining room table. Why do you insist on such an unattractive cloth recliner when you know leather is a viable option? If it’s a price concern, they have fake leather now and you can scarcely tell the difference.

In the kitchen I pull another beer from the fridge as my dad ambles in for a refill.

“Leave him alone, Cat,” he calls. “Another wine, dear?” He winks at me when she says no. Appeasing her is well within his skill set, even if booking the correct hotel isn’t.

I hear a clicking sound followed by Josh Groban. Not only has my mother found my Bose speaker but she’s also hooked

up her Spotify account. She has no issues with technology. I must have inherited that from her.

Dad sits at the counter where Jackie and I made pizza last week. I sit on the opposite side, both hands wrapped around my beer.

“It was a long trip. Thanks for putting us up. Or should I say putting up with us?”

He smiles and I relax for the first time since I saw the maroon Buick in my driveway.

“It’s okay.” He pats my hand. “You’ve acclimated to bachelor life and here we are, cramping your style.” Dad’s an attractive fifty-five. His light brown hair is graying at the temples and his crow’s-feet give him a distinguished air.

Without admitting he’s right about them *cramping my style*—whatever the hell that means—I go with “It’s been a long week.”

He accepts the brush-off and drinks his beer. I do the same. “Any new women in your life?”

Unlike Mom, Dad doesn’t pry. If he asks, he’s genuinely curious.

“I’ll level with you if you promise to break it to Mom for me.”

He purses his lips in consideration.

“And,” I add, sweetening the pot, “I’ll handle booking your hotel reservations from now until the end of your long, long life.”

“Deal.” His smile turns wily.

“My friend from work is joining us at dinner tomorrow night. Her name is Jackie.”

“Office fling.” His tone is approving likely because he met my mother at his office. She was his secretary.

“Not exactly.” Jackie isn’t a fling, but my vague response could imply she and I aren’t burning up the sheets. “We’re good friends. I thought it’d be nice to have that fourth seat filled.”

Dad glances into the living room, where Mom is paging through an issue of *GQ*. I buy it for the fashion ads so I can dress myself—no lie. The articles on “Fifty Ways to Make Her Beg for More” and “How to Smart Carb” glance off me. I know when I’m being pandered to.

“A seat filler also means no hot seat from us,” Dad says. Accurately.

I shrug. Guiltily.

“Marriage is hard.” He spins the bottle on the countertop and I wait. What follows isn’t the usual tirade like the one I hear from my mother. As he gets deeper into it, I realize I haven’t heard from him on this. Not really. I lump him in with Mom, usually because she’s the one doing the talking. He mentions “bumpy roads” and that “it’s hard to see trouble coming when you’re busy,” and I find myself leaning closer, wanting to soak in his wisdom. Then he floors me with “I had a business once.”

At my gaping reaction, he nods sagely. “Handyman.”

My dad may not be able to figure out the World Wide Web, but he can repair anything leaking or squeaking.

“I built my clientele, quit my sales job, and printed business cards.” He shakes his head as if he’s remembering it

fondly. “Eight months later, I was ready to go back to work. I was always a better employee than an owner. I wanted the control—and the upper management where I work offers enough. At the end of the day, I can go home, open a beer, talk to your mom about her day.”

I feel a frown coming on. This isn’t going the direction I originally suspected.

“There’s no shame in failing. In business or your marriage.”

The comment sets fire to my temper and I feel my nostrils flare.

“Now you have a great job, something going with a girl. Enjoy it.”

I nod stiffly, not sure what, exactly, is bothering me.

A moment later I stand from my stool. “I’m going to bed. You guys make yourselves at home.”

“Will do.” Dad stands and walks with me to the living room, unaware of my prickly mood.

“The nearest Hilton?” I ask as I snag my laptop from the coffee table.

“Yes. We want a room with one king,” my mother looks up from the magazine to say.

“As opposed to two queens?”

“Don’t be a smart-ass.”

I lean down and kiss her on the temple. “Sorry, Mom.”

“Night, Vince.”

“Night.” Only when I’m in my room, completing the reservations for them online, do I realize why my dad’s

comments bothered me so much.

My father basically told me that I failed both as an entrepreneur and as a husband. The business was mine through and through—that fault I could accept. Was it painful? Yes. But Leslie...When it came to my running my business with our income, her opinion didn't count. I was in charge and I knew what I was doing.

Until I didn't.

That sharp pang in the center of my diaphragm returns, and it dawns on me that Leslie leaving me wasn't as one-sided as I convinced myself it was. She wasn't the villain any more than I was the hero. We failed because *I* failed.

That was a hell of an unplanned epiphany.

I fall asleep, my chest hollow, wishing I would've been more insistent on my parents going to the hotel tonight so I could have avoided the convo with Dad.

JACQUELINE

Vince seems nervous. Or something.

Dinner with his parents is tonight at seven, which gave us time to go home and change. I offered to drive to his house but he insisted on picking me up. I like how gentlemanly that sounds. I'm a self-assured modern-day woman, but being cared for takes lots of forms. Being chauffeured is among my favorites.

I tell him that as I pull down the visor and swipe lip gloss over my lips. It's the final touch on preparations that include a fresh manicure, curling my hair, and dressing to impress the parents.

I keep reminding myself I'm on this date as a buffer, but as the workday crept to its inevitable end, I grew more and more aware that I was meeting the parents of the guy I'm sleeping with for the first time. Where I'm from, it's no small gesture. Even though I invited myself along, the importance isn't lost on me.

Tonight is about Vince needing backup and me being there for him. It feels good to be there for him, and it's a familiar role. Maybe that was why I was so quick to offer.

"My mom is a talker, but she's polite. Sometimes she sounds overly critical, but it's not malicious. She's just—" He flexes his hands on the steering wheel as he considers the rest of his explanation. "Opinionated" is the word he finally settles on.

"I like her already." I close the mirror in the visor and smile over at him, but Vince regards me with a frown. Rather than chase this conversation the way I did when I was married to Lex (*What's wrong? Nothing. Just tell me. Nothing, dammit.*), I let it fall away and shift the topic. "What about your dad? What's he like?"

Vince blinks as his thoughts redirect. It feels good not to dig in and argue. I haven't had the opportunity to arrive at that crossroads since I was married.

"Dad's cool. He'll order a whiskey sour and ask you about your job a lot."

“No delving into my future plans with his only son, then?” I ask with a teasing elbow to Vince’s arm.

“Of course not.” He doesn’t crack a smile as he glowers out the windshield.

I sigh, incapable of avoiding the question I’m dying to ask. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” He offers a shrug that seems forced. “I’m sorry, Butler.” His hand closes over my knee and squeezes. I like it there, so I put my hand over his. “Everything’s good. I’m in deep thought about a hundred things. Which is not fair to you.”

Another gentle squeeze to my knee and he pulls his hand out from under mine.

“The restaurant we’re going to is new to me,” he says. “You been?”

I shake my head. “Not yet.”

“A first for both of us, then.” He reaches over again but this time takes my hand and links our fingers together, resting our hands on my leg. The move is comfortable and familiar. “You look beautiful tonight, Jackie.”

“Thank you.” *Swoon.*

“They’re going to love you. And you don’t have to pretend we’re anything that we’re not. Just be you.”

I’m inexplicably happy to hear that. My shoulders inch away from my ears. I don’t have to put on an act for the Carsons. I don’t have to pretend to be anything I’m not. I bite my lip in consideration as Vince exits the interstate and enters downtown. I’m not exactly sure what we are. Not boyfriend/girlfriend, but we’re definitely dating. Or “hooking

up,” as my friends are fond of calling it. I’m old-fashioned, I guess, because that term doesn’t sound the least bit appealing.

Rather than turn over questions that have no clear answers, I focus on Vince’s bigger, warmer hand resting on my lap. When I do that, it’s not hard to see what we are. We’re friends. We’re lovers. And we’re together.

What more do I need to know?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

JACQUELINE

The restaurant is cute.

No, really. That's the best word for it. Toile wallpaper, doilies, and antique brass lamps on side tables lend a homey feel to the space. The chairs and tables for guests are mahogany and several woven rugs cover an abused real wood floor. It's too classy to be considered rustic but a far cry from a suave city atmosphere.

Much like the eclectic decor, the menu boasts a range of options. Foie gras as well as traditional beef and egg noodles. We're off the map.

"I'm so excited to eat, I can't pick," I say as I turn the page on a menu. "How do you choose between ribeye and mushrooms or chicken and homemade dumplings?"

"You don't. You each get one and share." Cathy Carson smiles over at me, her eyes twinkling. For all my doubts that she'd accept a woman at Vince's side who wasn't Leslie, she seems to like me. I told Vince I was good with parents. I wasn't lying. I'm the girl you take home to Mom.

“Jackie would impale me with her steak knife if I tried to take food off her plate,” Vince says. He’s sitting to my right and winks at me.

It’s not true. We share food more often than we don’t share food. I take it he doesn’t want to do the intimate eating-off-each-other’s-plates dance in front of his parents, so I don’t argue. It goes against what Vince told me about not pretending to be anyone other than who we are, but I’m going to respect this particular boundary. Parents are dicey.

“I’m decisive,” I say. “I can commit.”

“A lovely quality for any woman dating our son,” Cathy says.

My smile freezes in place. A chill wafts off Vince even before he offers a verbal warning. “Mom. Please.”

She holds her hands up in front of her and Jon Carson takes hold of his whiskey sour. They served his drink in a proper rocks glass, even though ice water for the table was brought in glass Mason jars. The more details I notice, the more I like this place.

“Jacqueline, is it?” Jon asks.

“It is. But most people call me Jackie. Vince calls me Butler.”

“Vincent!” Cathy reprimands.

“No, it’s fine,” I pipe up. “I don’t mind. We’ve worked together much longer than we’ve, um, dated, so it feels natural and familiar to me.”

Vince slides me a look, probably because I stated in no uncertain terms that we’re dating. Obviously his parents

assumed this was a date, but now they *know*. He doesn't appear happy about it.

"Jacqueline, what is it that you do at Brookdale?" asks Jon, going with the work topic, as Vince predicted.

"I'm co-vice president. Vince and I share the title."

"Yet not your dinner plates," Cathy murmurs, pretending to study the menu. Vince lets that one go.

"Do you have aspirations for president someday?" Jon sips his drink and watches me over the rim. He looks like Vince—or rather Vince looks like him. Stylish, fit, and terribly attractive. A glance over at Cathy shows where Vince inherited his dark hair and cheekbones, but in speaking with both his parents I'm unsure where Vince's sense of humor and charm came from. Dad is hard to read and Mom is... Well, she's hard to read too.

"I wouldn't turn down the title, but I really like what I do," I answer smoothly.

"I imagine it'd be difficult to compete with your close friend, if you were offered the position and so was Vince."

Vince's dad's words smother my response for a full beat before I manage, "I'm sure if that were to happen, the best man or woman would win."

"And you could accept that?"

"Dad?" Vince's tone is more questioning than scolding. "What's with the third degree?"

"No third degree. Just being conversational." Jon smiles but his smile lacks warmth.

"How long have you worked at Brookdale?" Cathy asks, lifting her wineglass.

“Three years.”

“Three *years*,” she repeats, her slim brows rising. “So you knew Vince when he was married to Leslie.”

Uh-oh. I’ve stepped on a land mine, and now I’m afraid to lift my foot.

“Yes,” I admit. “But Vince and I didn’t become close until after he and Leslie split. That’s when I started spending more time with him, anyway.”

Cathy does not approve. She tips her head back and studies me down her nose.

“I’m divorced,” I blurt. “I knew what he was going through. It’s lonely at first.”

“She didn’t keep Leslie and me from reconciling,” Vince says, and Cathy fixes her frown on him.

“I never said that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Vince says. There’s a tense silence at the table where no one says anything. “We should go. Jackie has to get home.”

“Don’t upset your mother,” Jon warns as my skin prickles from adrenaline. I don’t love being in the middle of a family battle. My parents rarely argue, whereas Lex’s parents participated in an all-out war at every holiday meal. It always made me uncomfortable.

In this case, however, Vince is overreacting just a touch. I can stick it out.

“I don’t have to leave.” I put my hand on Vince’s arm as he wads his cloth napkin in one hand. “I don’t have to be home for a while.”

In an expression that resembles his father's, Vince purses his lips and watches me.

“So.” I release Vince's arm and send his mother a confident smile. “Tell me what you do for a living, Mrs. Carson.”

VINCE STEERS the car with a clenched fist attached to a locked elbow.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing and look out the window. It's a beautiful night. One I thought might end with espressos and desserts and walking around Bicentennial Park while Vince's parents told stories about Vince when he was younger.

No such luck.

We ordered dinner and discussed bland topics like home decor and restaurant trends like pork belly and Moscow mules. It wasn't tense so much as careful. Vince and his mother exchanged a number of silent glares, while Jon and I were more interested in carrying the conversation for the table. It was exhausting. I stifle a yawn as fatigue sets in.

“I'm sorry.”

Vince's voice startles me. I must've started dozing off as I watched the scenery. I'm not surprised. I drank an extra glass of wine to make up for the fact that I was uncomfortable. It made me sleepy.

“You don't have to be sorry.”

He pulls into my apartment complex and parks in an open guest spot. One hand on the wheel, he turns to face me. “I

shouldn't have brought you."

"I insisted."

"I should've said no."

I press my lips together against the sting of his words. No one likes to feel unwanted. I mutter "Okay" and open the car door, shutting it behind me as he calls my name. I dig my keys from my purse and hear his car door shut. He tries again.

"Jackie." It's not a shout. Just him saying my name. He catches up with me as I unlock my door.

"Thank you for dinner," I say, not inviting him in as I wedge my door open.

He's pushing on the door as I step in, making room for himself on the threshold. "You want me to leave?"

"I think that's best, don't you? I'm tired."

"You're lying."

This infuriates me. Maybe because I'm telling the truth about being tired and he was the one who lied at dinner.

"Good night, Vince."

I push on the door, but he doesn't let me close him out.

"Can I come in for two seconds?" he asks, halfway inside already.

"Whatever." I give up, leaving him to do what he wants. In the kitchen I toss my purse and keys on the table and open the refrigerator. There's half a bottle of chardonnay in there and I decide another glass is a good idea.

"Butler, I didn't mean I shouldn't have taken you because I didn't want you there."

“No, you just”—I grunt, wrestling with the cork I wedged in there a little too tightly—“want me to be the ‘myself’ you want me to be instead of just being myself.” Another futile tug and I’m shaking my hand out from cork burn, if that’s a thing.

Vince snatches the bottle from me and twists off the cork with almost no effort. Instead of handing the bottle back to me, he goes to my cabinet, extracts a wineglass, and pours my drink.

“I was trying to avoid making you feel uncomfortable. I know my parents, and I didn’t want them to hurt your feelings.” He puts the glass in front of me, the bottle next to it, but suddenly I’m not thirsty.

“Because they think I lured you away from Leslie? They think I’m ‘the other woman’?” Real hurt creeps into my voice.

“Yes.” Vince’s eyes warm, his innate tenderness shining through even during an argument. “I know it’s the last thing in the world you’d like to be accused of. My mom made an assumption, but she was wrong. You were offering friendship when I was in an awful, ugly place.”

He *was* in an awful, ugly place. Seeing him hurt like that wasn’t easy. I bite down on my lower lip, unable to tear my eyes off him. Sweet Vince.

“I was the one who started wanting you,” he says. “Right around the time you swore off men for good.”

I almost quip about his horrible timing, but I don’t want to lose the intensity of this moment. Increasing that intensity, he comes around the counter and looks down at me as I look up.

“Hi,” he says, his smile reassuring and gentle.

“Hi.”

I'm accepting a deliciously firm kiss a second later. My hand threads into his hair and my fingers graze the side of his neck when he pulls back.

"Do you think your mom's right?" I didn't mean to say that aloud, but there it is.

"About?" He's flirting with a grimace. I'm flirting with killing the mood, but I can't shut up.

"Would you and Leslie have worked things out if I wasn't in the way? Would you have called her or gone to see her?"

"Does it matter?" He takes a step away from me.

Definitely. I've killed the mood.

"Kind of."

He leans against the countertop and regards me. Waiting.

"You still loved her when she left. I loved Lex. It's hard to let go when you aren't the one doing the leaving. Especially since she didn't do anything she couldn't take back."

Leslie could have argued to Vince that she suffered a lapse in judgment. Conversely, Lex put his penis into another woman. There's no unringing that bell. I take a breath and say something I had no idea I believed until it's out of my mouth.

"What if I'm a rebound from your failed marriage?"

"Ha!" But Vince's spoken laugh holds no humor. "If anything, Butler, I'm your rebound from J.T. You were the one who came to me crying because he had a blonde in his apartment. Remember?"

"Don't change the subject."

"Don't put this on me." He stalks toward me and when he arrives, his hands clutch my upper arms. He holds me tight but

not too tight, his eyes zeroing in on mine so I have nowhere to go. “I don’t know how to make it any clearer that I want you.”

His words wash over me, warming every part they touch.

“You know that, right? You know I want you.” His voice has dropped to a seductive timbre. “That there’s nowhere I’d rather be than standing in front of you, listening to you spout some moronic theory about what you think I’m doing.”

“I’m—”

He shuts me up with a kiss, his hands letting go of my arms to encircle my waist. I’m off the floor a second later, my butt on the counter as Vince wedges his hips between my thighs. Thumbs on either side of my mouth, he finishes the kiss and pulls back to study me.

“Raise your hand if you believe Vince knows exactly what he’s doing.” He reaches for my wrist and hoists my arm into the air with his, then drapes both my arms around his neck. “Let me take you to bed tonight, Butler.”

“I’m so tired.” I pull my arms away but he reaches up to keep them around his neck.

“All you have to do is lay there.”

“Vince.” I laugh his name.

“The giggling is a good sign.”

He knows me well.

I tip my chin and kiss him. A few panting, hot minutes later our exes and his parents are the furthest thoughts from our minds.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

JACQUELINE

I burst into Kayla's office and shut her door behind me, a coffee in hand for each of us.

"Thought you could use a caffeine boost," I announce as I place the Starbucks cup on her desk.

"When can't I use a caffeine boost?" She accepts with a sip and a borderline orgasmic hum. "What *is* this?"

"It's a caramel mocha latte with one pump vanilla and two pumps cinnamon." I take a drink from my own cup and the sugar lights up my brain like a marquee. "It's one of my greatest inventions."

"I'll say." Kayla spins her chair to face me. "What gives? You never bring me coffee in the afternoon unless you want something."

"Not true!" I argue, offended. Mostly because she guessed exactly right. I do want something.

"Jackie." Her smile is that of a patient woman: wife and mother. And that's exactly who I need to speak to right now.

“Okay, fine, I want something.” I drag a lightweight plastic guest chair from the wall to the corner of her desk and lean close. “Does great sex fix problems? I mean, I thought my ex-husband and I were having great sex, but then recently I had some *actual* great sex and learned that Lex and I were, in fact, *not* having great sex.” I scrunch my nose as Kayla’s eyebrows arch in curiosity. “Anyway, you and Kevin seem to have cracked the code. You have challenges, right?”

“Babe. We have challenges.” Her mouth slants to one side, suggesting I should know better.

“Of course. Yes. You can’t avoid the ‘challenges’ thing no matter what.” I pause, thinking of her son and his challenges, and how that must affect her and her husband. Kayla never lets anyone see her sweat. It’s easy to forget she has a life outside of these four walls. “Lex and I had challenges and his solution was to sleep with someone else. What is the secret to maintaining a healthy relationship when challenges come up? Does great sex hold you two together? Is it enough?”

“Similar interests help,” she says, then adds, “And some battery-operated bedroom toys.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Jackie. I’m teasing you.” Kayla sets aside her cup and puts her coffee-warmed hand over mine. “What’s really going on? Are you falling for the hot, hunky runner guy and you don’t want to? Is that what’s happening?”

I frown in confusion when Kayla refers to J.T.

“I’m not falling for him.” I hear the slightest tremor in my voice. Because *I’m* referring to Vince, and falling for Vince would be...unwise.

“Well, then enjoy the great sex and move on when you’re ready,” she advises with a shrug.

“Even though I see him every day?” Not going to lie, the fact that Vince and I work closely together plagues me. Over the past year we’ve coexisted in a lot of the same spaces. Now that we’ve merged the personal time with hot and sweaty kissing time *and* nine-to-five time, one or both of our co-VP positions could be at risk.

“You can find something else to do for the thirty to sixty seconds when he jogs by your window, can’t you? Until then, enjoy the view.”

“You’re right.” I offer a wan smile. I can’t tell her I’m referring to Vince. “Thanks, Kayla.” I take my coffee and replace her chair, promising to bring coffee without agenda next time. As I open the door to leave, I’m blocked by a tall, lean man who smells like a pine forest and made me come so hard last night I literally saw stars.

“Girl meeting?” Vince sends a searing gander down my body and up again before gracing Kayla with a polite smile.

The air between his body and mine is warm, and beneath my dress my nipples harden. I take a deliberate step away from him.

“What’s this? You didn’t bring me one?” He takes my coffee cup, drinks, and makes a face. “Good God, Butler, did this come with an insulin shot?”

“Girls like sugar, Vince. It’s why we’re sweet,” Kayla says from behind me, but her tone is different. I consider how intimate Vince sipping from my cup must’ve looked. Did he give us away?

“I have a real work issue for you, if you and Butler are through gossiping,” Vince says to Kayla as he slides by me. I practically flatten my back to the open door so as not to touch him. He plops into the chair I just vacated. “Door open is fine. Kay and I aren’t going to share any secrets.”

“No?” The twinkle in Kayla’s eyes confirms she has picked up on the overly familiar interaction between Vince and me. “You’re not going to ask me if great sex can solve world peace?” she asks Vince.

“What?” Vince’s smile slips and I feel my face turning pink.

“Jackie and I were talking about really great sex and how it can overcome the biggest obstacles.”

Vince is frozen in place. He hasn’t looked over at me since Kayla said the word “sex.”

“Thanks for keeping that to yourself,” I tell Kayla flatly.

“Oh, it’s just Vince.” She throws a hand in dismissal. “He’s not going to tell the entire office about your sex-ploits with a hot, available man.” She tips her head, giving him a slow, knowing blink. “Are you, Vince?”

“Absolutely not.” His laugh is forced, but he recovers a millisecond later and fixes me with blue eyes that know way too much. Like the color of my underwear at this very moment. He commented about how black lace was his favorite when I slipped into them this morning. “You should keep doing what you’re doing with whomever you’re doing it, Butler. It’s working in your favor. You look incredible.”

Kayla’s grin matches his. I slink from the room and back to my own office.

VINCE

Miller Grove is in full bloom. Flowers in every color dot bushes along the trails leading to the woods, to the butterfly house, and back the way we came: to the visitors' center. A fat bumblebee hovers near Jackie for a second before she scares the shit out of it by swatting the air like a drugged break-dancer.

My chuckling stops short when she slaps me on the arm. "Ow!"

"I could have died!"

"They don't sting, Butler. He's probably sweating his way through a panic attack as we speak. You were the one who wanted to come out here. It's not my fault you don't like the great *out of doors*."

She may not have followed through with jogging, but she decided that she liked to walk. *Where prettier to walk than the park?* she asked me while naked and towel-drying her hair after our shared shower. She's been spending more time at my house than her own, and I don't mind. Or at least I didn't think I minded. Today when I walked into my master bath to flip off the light she'd left on, I picked up her wet towel off the floor.

I stood there for I don't know how long, wondering why my heart was hammering double time and my mind was blaring a warning siren that, if real, could've been heard for miles.

I didn't figure out what caused that blare until this very second. *Now* it hits me.

Jackie and I are starting to feel awfully couple-y. The wet towel on my floor, or her lecturing me to rinse my coffee cup while she did it for me this morning, weren't enough to make me nervous on their own, but combined with other couple-y things, they're making me twitch. Other things like, say, walking through Miller Grove en route to the butterfly house.

I stop short of entering the domed greenhouse where winged insects that *don't* scare Butler into spasms are housed.

"Kayla knows," I say aloud for the first time.

Jackie's wearing a T-shirt from a coffee shop and a pair of shorts that expose her long, tanned legs. Her ponytail shifts as she shakes her head. "I didn't mean for her to know. She assumed I was talking about J.T."

She walks to me, tipping her face to take me in. I assume, anyway. I take her in—all of her. How cute she looks squinting in the sunshine. The memory of those plush pink lips moaning my name as I drove deep this morning. The way she giggled when she dropped the soap and I gripped her hips with both hands and dared her to bend over.

I swipe my brow, suddenly hot and uncomfortable, and not from the summer day.

"She won't tell anyone," Jackie says, "if that's what you're worried about."

"I'm not worried," I snap.

"Then what's the problem?" She genuinely wants to know, but it doesn't stop my brain from thinking about how she just asked a *couple-y* question during our *couple-y* outing.

“Nothing. I don’t want to see the butterflies. You go on.”

Her lips pull into a frown. “I don’t have to see them.”

“Jackie, you can do whatever you want. We don’t have to do exactly the same things at the same time. You don’t have to pick up your wet towel and I don’t have to rinse my coffee mug.”

Shit. That was a bit of a tirade.

“You’re mad because I forgot to pick up my towel this morning?”

“I’m not mad.” It’s the truth. I’m not. If I’m being honest, I resent feeling mired. It’s too soon to feel mired. To feel like I have to run things by someone else before I do them. Like now. “I’m hungry. Let’s grab lunch.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“You pick.” I shake my head. You can’t get more couple-y than this conversation.

I start away from her, walking toward the visitors’ center by the parking lot. She catches up with me and we continue to have a conversation every couple on this planet has every damn day.

What sounds good?

It doesn’t matter. Just pick somewhere.

I picked last time. You pick this time.

Wherever is fine. Just tell me so I know where to go.

Go anywhere you like. I can eat anything.

Fine. We’ll have pizza.

We ate pizza last night.

“Dammit, Leslie!” It’s out of my mouth so quickly, I hear it at the same time Jackie does. I stomp on the brakes at a red light, the entire car jerking to a halt.

A thumping car full of teenagers pulls up next to us, laughing and whooping like their whole goddamn lives are in front of them.

“Just you wait!” I shout out the window. One of the guys, in a pair of cheap plastic sunglasses, tells me to fuck off before they floor it and squeal through the light as it turns green.

“Great. I’m my dad,” I grumble.

I’m aware of Jackie’s eyes on me as I swing into the nearest restaurant—a Dairy Queen. I shut off the engine, resting my head back on the seat, and wait for Jackie to lay into me. She’s silent so long, I begin to wonder if she’s still sitting there. I turn my head. Yup. Still there.

“*Hungry?*” she asks.

“A little.” My stomach has been a barren plain for about an hour. It’s not the only thing wrong, and I suspect she knows that. But she lets me off the hook, which is decidedly *not* couple-y. Could I have overreacted more?

“Let’s go in and order chicken baskets and Blizzards.” She unhooks her seatbelt and climbs out, leaning back in to say, “I’m not sharing my fries.”

AN HOUR later I deposit Jackie at her doorstep.

“Sorry, Butler. I was...” There’s no good excuse, so I don’t finish that sentence. The only truth I could offer would be to say that I was an asshole—as big of an asshole as any other

guy who gets in too deep too fast and can't deal with his emotions. We really are a bunch of apes sometimes.

“Thanks for lunch,” she says, her Reese’s Pieces Blizzard with peanut butter and chocolate swirls in hand.

“I’ll text you.”

I wait until she steps into her apartment to put my car in drive. As I pull away, I notice two things. One, J.T. is shuffling through a stack of mail in front of his apartment, and two, I didn’t kiss Jackie goodbye.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

JACQUELINE

Things are fine. And that's not just a mantra I'm repeating to myself so I can sleep at night. Things really are fine.

Since the day at the park over a week ago, Vince and I have been working together and seeing each other and eating lunch together. Granted, no one has spent the night at anyone's house lately. I made an excuse that I had to do laundry, and he let me leave without an argument.

Which is fine.

I think.

It should be. We're not a couple who has to spend every single second together. We're not a couple at all, technically. When he suggested we should try things out, it didn't include us having a label.

So. We're fine.

“And *then*”—Vince is practically shouting, nostrils flared as he stands over my desk—“the asshole claimed that the problem with his shitty marketing plan was our execution. You know as well as I do that he wouldn't budge when our design

team suggested he try a different tagline. ‘Joe’s Stables.’” he draws. “‘Ride ’er hard.’”

I can’t help tittering out a tiny laugh.

His eyebrows rise. “Bestiality funny to you?”

“No. It’s not. You, on the other hand...” I smile. “You’re funny to me.”

The anger whooshes out of him with his next exhale. Palms flat on my desk, a hint of a smile plays at the corner of his lips. “Is that so?”

I tip my head, encroaching on dangerous territory. Flirting at work could draw attention. Him being in here with the door shut, especially. But he doesn’t kiss me.

“I’ve been weird lately.” His voice is low, his eyes on mine.

“A little,” I admit.

“I don’t want to be weird with you, Butler. Normal weird, yes, but not *weird* weird. That doesn’t work for us.”

“Okay.” I’m not sure what we’re agreeing to, but anything to end the *weird* weird works for me.

“Think I could steal one kiss without getting caught?” he asks, leaning closer.

A sharp knock at my door, followed by the twisting of the knob, propels Vince into a ramrod-straight position. Kayla sweeps in, a stack of papers in hand. “For Joe’s Stables, as per your request,” she tells Vince. “His contract.”

“Thanks.” Vince takes the papers. “You could at least pretend not to know I’m in here.”

“I had to see Jackie about something. The spying is a bonus.” She grins.

“Fine. I’m going.” He sends me a heated look, then a cautionary one to Kayla.

I shake my head at her as we both watch him swagger away.

“I’ll hand it to you, Jackie,” she tells me, her voice quiet. “He has a great ass.”

VINCE

Kayla’s comment about my ass has me smiling all afternoon. I’m not above a compliment from a happily married woman. It’s fun that she knows about Jackie and me.

It’s not like I get off on keeping things a big secret, but neither do I want to rock the proverbial boat. Relationships at work seem inevitable, but the cavemen who own our company subscribe to the old view of things. Men are better. Don’t diddle the women. That kind of thing. It’s unfair, but I’m honoring the rules and keeping Jackie out of the hot seat.

Day done, I’m home with the refrigerator door open as I inventory the paltry offerings. A packet of processed cheese food slices wrapped in cellophane, mustard, beer, and what may have been a head of lettuce at some point. There’s a questionable plastic container in the back that contains... I’m not sure. Pasta? Soup? The souls of my enemies?

A knock on the door keeps me from finding out. I shut the fridge and open the front door. And freeze into a solid block of “oh, fuck.”

“Leslie.”

“Hey, Vince.” My ex-wife wears a smile and a dress and carries a box. “I found some of your old CDs and thought you might want them. I was going to ship them but that seemed immature. So I drove over.” Her eyes sweep past me. “You have a new couch.”

“Well, you took mine. It was either buy one or sit on the floor.”

She twists her lips. “You always were funny.”

So we’re doing this, I guess. I step aside. “Not as clean as you prefer, but you’re welcome to come in.”

She does, setting aside the box of CDs as she strolls into the living room and drops her purse on the arm of the sofa. Seeing her purse there, and her in the house we used to share, unbricks a part of me I worked damn hard to wall up.

“I was about to eat a slice of cheese for dinner and drink a six-pack. Can I offer you a slice of cheese?”

“No, thanks.” She’s still smiling. “I’ll take a beer, though.”

“Sorry.” I pull in air through my teeth and deliver the bad news. “I plan on drinking all six.”

“You haven’t changed much.” She quirks her lips.

Oh, but I have.

“You either. You look great, by the way.” She does. It niggles at me that she looks this damn good when she’s not with me, but in no way do I want her back.

“Thanks.” She wrings her hands and we stand awkwardly, both unsure if we should hug or not touch at all.

Well. Shit. I can't not be nice to her.

“I was kidding about the beer, Les. Do you really want one?”

“I would love one. Ray and I are meeting up with a couple from his work I've never met before, but not until eight.”

Ray. The guy she started dating shortly after our divorce. I wait for the surge of jealousy but nothing comes. Beers uncapped, I hand one over and invite her to sit on my new sofa. She sits, in Jackie's place, and the thought makes me smile. Jackie has a place.

“What's new with you?” Leslie asks. “Something's different. You look happier.”

“Happier than when you walked out on me? Go figure.” Her smile slips and I know I've overstepped a line. “Ignore me.”

“No. I deserve that.”

We drink in silence for a few seconds. I have an opportunity to do a bit of healing, so what the hell? May as well get closure or whatever. “I don't have an ax to grind, Les, but I would like to talk to you about something. I can order a pizza if you want to stick around.”

She nods hesitantly. “I'm going to let Ray know where I am. Not because he makes me,” she explains as she pecks a text into her phone, “but because I want to be honest and open about everything. You know?” Finished with the text, she glances up at me.

“Yeah, I know.” We both made mistakes. I grab my phone from the coffee table. “Papa Joe’s? Deep dish. Mushroom only.”

“That’s it.” She smiles. Some things don’t change at all. Order called in, I grab two more beers from the fridge and put them on the coffee table between us. She’ll drink two. I know she will.

“So what did you want to talk about?” she asks.

“Us,” I answer frankly. “Past tense.”

“I’m going to need that second beer.” She takes a hearty guzzle of the one in her hand.

“Yeah,” I agree, following suit. “So am I.”

JACQUELINE

I slow down as I approach Vince’s driveway. There’s a car parked in front of his garage that I don’t recognize. Then his front door opens and out steps...a woman I don’t recognize.

Vince isn’t expecting me and hasn’t noticed my car, so I drive up his street, turn around, and park along the curb behind a big blue Cadillac that perfectly hides my silver compact. Whoever just came out of his house has her back to me and Vince is smiling at her. She pushes a lock of her hair behind her ear and tosses her head back and laughs.

“He wouldn’t cheat on you,” I say aloud to my car. Although this isn’t similar to the way I found out Lex was

having sex with Ashleigh, I can't help but feel a stab of betrayal. "But why wouldn't he tell you?"

Tonight when I asked what he was up to, Vince said he was going to go home and finish a project he'd started last weekend. "Building shelves for the garage," he explained.

Now that I'm watching him with the leggy stranger, I'm starting to wonder if he knew she was coming. And what their relationship is.

And why he didn't tell me about her.

"That's his wife," comes a voice from my passenger-side window.

Startled, I jerk my head toward the open window to find Vince's neighbor Riley, cleavage spilling from her shirt, leaning on the frame.

"We used to be friends. Or, well, we used to be friendly," she says. "Her name's Leslie."

"I know his *ex*-wife's name."

Riley doesn't visibly react to my clipped tone. "I've seen lots of women at Vince's place since the divorce, but never once have I seen the woman he divorced," she says. "Wonder what she's doing there?"

You and me both.

My heart shrinks into a deep, dark part of my chest cavity. Vince kept a picture of Leslie on his desk when they were married, but she was wearing her wedding gown. It's no surprise I didn't recognize her.

"You're his current squeeze, right?" Riley asks. "The girl he was running with that afternoon."

I nod.

“Thought so. I’ve spotted you over at his house a lot more than I’ve seen any of the others.”

“For some reason that’s not very comforting right now.”

“I know.” She pats my car door. “Come in, sugar. I’ll get you a glass of iced tea.”

The inside of Riley’s house is like a greenhouse. It’s filled with plants of all kinds. Maybe she really was outside to water her outdoor blooms that day Vince and I went jogging by. The sunroom would be too warm but it’s tempered by an oscillating fan. I sit on a wicker couch with a clear view of the front of Vince’s house.

He leans forward and puts a kiss on Leslie’s cheek, then pulls her in for a hug. My fingers clutch the couch’s frame as I watch, horrified.

“You’re in my seat,” Riley announces, a Mason jar in one hand and two short glasses in the other. “I’m outta iced tea, so I brought moonshine.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t—”

“Your guy is kissing another woman in his driveway,” she tells me gently. “You *should*.” I offer to vacate her seat but she waves me off, pouring the red liquid into the glasses. “This one’s apple cinnamon. Tastes like a red hot, if a red hot could kick your ass and steal your wallet.” Riley lets out a husky chuckle. “She gone yet?”

Vince walks his ex-wife to her car, shoving his hands in his front pockets and squinting in my direction. I duck, but Riley tells me he can’t see anything through the tinted windows. He turns back to Leslie, lingering too long for my taste. A glass of

red apple-cinnamon moonshine lands in my hand and I take a sweet, spicy sip. *Yum.*

“Good, isn’t it?” Riley sits next to me. “It’s easy for men to go back to what they know.”

I beg her with pleading eyes to stop talking, but she’s not looking at me. She’s watching Vince and Leslie chat, or maybe not.... It’s like she’s seeing through them and remembering something that happened to her.

“Don’t worry. It won’t last. Those two are awful together.” She downs her drink in one swallow and gestures for me to do the same. I do, wincing from the burn as she pours me a refill. “She bitched about him nonstop. He wasn’t doing enough for her. Wasn’t doing enough *to* her.”

“Spare me.” I do *not* want to picture what Vince and Leslie used to do together.

“She wanted bigger, better things than Vincent Carson. I always thought he and I could’ve had some fun.” Riley shrugs, then changes the subject so fast I have whiplash. “There’s a casserole in the oven, sugar.” She bottoms out glass number two. “You may as well stick around for dinner. Get good ’n sauced and then head over there and hand him his ass.”

I sip my refill and smile. That doesn’t sound so unpleasant as I’m sinking into my moonshine buzz. I shoot the rest, and it doesn’t burn going down as much as the last one.

“What’s your story, Riley Mason?” I’m curious, and I have time to kill.

“You mean am I the local cougar hell-bent on stealing Vince away from his wife, my former friend, or do I have a deeper, less clichéd story to share?” She smiles, an attractive,

strong woman over a decade my senior who drinks moonshine, loves plants, and has a secret.

Leslie's car pulls out of the driveway and Vince waves, watches her drive away, then walks back inside. He's smiling when he turns around, and that cuts deep. I settle in with my drink and ask for a refill. I could use a third with whatever casserole Riley is baking in there.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

VINCE

After Leslie leaves, I venture out to see Davis for the first time in forever. I texted him and asked if I could buy him a beer. He responded with *Already here* and I was out the door in a flash.

Leslie showing up was unexpected, but after spending a few hours talking and sharing a pizza, I can admit it wasn't *bad*. Which is unexpected in and of itself.

Davis sits at the bar at McGreevy's Pub, wearing a suit, not unusual. What is unusual is that Grace is nowhere in sight. There's a blond behind the bar. A blond *guy*.

I slide onto the stool next to Davis. "What gives?"

Picking up on my meaning, Davis shrugs. "Dunno. His name is Lars."

"Liar." I snort.

"Swear." Davis makes a "scout's honor" signal and the guy—yep, Lars, the name tag says so—stops in front of me to take my order. I give in and ask Davis where Grace is tonight.

He ignores my question and asks, "What's up with you?"

Alrighty then, *not* discussing Grace.

“Leslie came by.”

“Damn. That’s a bomb. Couldn’t have given me the heads-up via text?” We watch TV, some commercial for a cheap plastic garden hose guaranteed to split in half after the third use.

“When is a wet towel more than a wet towel?” I ponder. Lars delivers my beer.

“When it’s being handed to the winner of a wet T-shirt contest?” Davis quips.

I lift my drink. “When it’s your ex-wife’s wet towel.”

“The fuck, Carson?” Davis sounds so pissed I snap my eyes to him. He’s scowling, his face reddening. His voice just above an accusatory whisper, he says, “You slept with Leslie?”

“No. Jesus. *No.*” I slice the air in front of me in a final manner. “No fucking way.”

Davis inhales and exhales a measured breath of relief. “I nearly seized. Don’t do that shit to me.”

“I was being metaphysical.”

“Don’t do that either.”

I tell him about how much time I’ve been spending with Jackie. About how she told me to rinse my coffee mug and I hung up the wet towel she tossed on the floor. The conversation-slash-argument about where to eat.

“That’s the *worst.*” Davis drops his head back on his neck so he can properly convey his dread.

“Then my ex-wife, who caused this heartache and retrospection, shows up on my porch with a box of my CDs.”

“Who has CDs?”

“Right? Who needs CDs?” I put the box on my computer chair to sort through later, but I expect the majority of them to go directly into a donation bin at the local Salvation Army. “She stayed for a beer, then two. I ordered her favorite pizza.”

“And you didn’t fuck her?” Davis asks, but his tone is more like I *better not have* fucked her.

“Nothing happened. Relax.” He does, some, but he’s still frowning at me. “Anyway, I was telling her about the towel-on-the-floor thing. About Jackie. About the way I’m starting to feel.”

Davis’s scowl slides off his face and he looks more than a little impressed. I was pretty impressed with the conversation myself. I didn’t pull any punches when I talked to Leslie about my dating Jackie. I knew Leslie could take it. She wasn’t the least bit hurt over leaving me. She was the leaver. The *leavee* is the one left licking his wounds.

“Couple-y?” Leslie asks. “You’re thinking of something permanent with this girl.”

“Is this weird to be sharing?” I ask. I’ve probably overstepped some weird ex-spouse boundary I’m not aware of.

“It would be if we were still married. Or if you and this girl were dating while we were married.” She lowers her chin and raises her eyebrows as if she’s asking.

“You know better.”

“I do.” She smiles and lifts another slice of pizza from the box to her plate. Our plates. Our wedding plates. So, yeah, this is weird no matter what.

“I developed more than a passing interest in her, but I didn’t expect to feel this deeply for...” I’m not sure how to finish. But Leslie knows exactly what I’m trying to say.

“For someone other than me.”

“She said that?” Davis asks after I relay the conversation.

“Yeah. She said she had the same thought when she and Ray were getting serious. We both convinced ourselves there was no one other than each other for years. That’s what you do when you’re married.”

“Sometimes that’s what you do when you’re engaged,” Davis mutters.

We share a silence that pays homage to Hanna.

“The wet towel, the coffee mug, the conversation about where to eat...I want to do it again, Davis.”

His brows bend in what might be sympathy. Can’t blame him. I feel sorry for myself too. Who knew I’d be ready to go back into the fold so soon?

“I want to do that, and more, with Jackie. Every day. That’s the conclusion I came to tonight when my ex-wife sat on my new sofa and ate pizza on our wedding dishes.”

“Heavy.”

“No shit.” I fall silent. What else is there to say?

Jackie has wiggled past my defenses. Either I disengage and move on because I can’t deal with my feelings, or I go with what’s behind Door Number Two: I hold on to her for good. I guess part of me always knew that was a possibility.

“Go figure. I’m a long-term guy.”

“You can have it, my friend.” Davis slaps me on the back, playing the role of carefree bachelor to the hilt. “Hey, Lars! Bring my friend another beer and make a round of buttery nipples for the girls in the corner, plus an extra for me.”

I turn and look behind me, wondering how long the three-top of giggling twentysomethings have been here. I was too into my own musings to notice. If that’s not proof Jackie owns my balls, I’m not sure what is. Lars is efficient, if short, but no one said you have to be tall to pour drinks. He sets the round of shots on a tray.

“I’ll deliver them.” Davis stands and takes the tray, and then turns to me. “You stay here, drink your second beer, and think about what you’re missing out on because you’ve decided to make Jackie-O more than your part-time lover.”

He says lover like “love-ahh,” which is stupid and he knows it and earns him a laugh from me. I shake my head as Davis delivers the drinks. He is invited to sit down in the vacant seat at the table. The three women lift their shots and say *cheers*. He holds up his shot as I hold up my beer. This is the last I’ll see of him tonight.

I may be Mr. Long Term sipping my beer of monogamy, but underneath that player veneer, Davis is like me.

He just doesn’t know it yet.

Poor guy.

JACQUELINE

All morning I've been wondering if my gray matter has split into two opposing sides, because what's occurring in my skull is nothing short of civil war. I drank too much moonshine at Riley's house—arguably any amount of moonshine is too much—and ate too much Tater Tot casserole (which I would have sworn I didn't like until I was drunk on moonshine), and then I fell asleep on her uncomfortable wicker couch.

I woke at three A.M., dying of thirst and, if the headache was anything to go by, sober. Sober enough to drive and sober enough to shut off my headlights when I slipped past Vince's house. I wasn't sure if he was inside or not. Shortly after Leslie left, so did he. I didn't notice if he came home. That introduced a litany of stomach-churning thoughts, like *What if he went to Leslie's to finish what they started inside?*

I dismissed the idea since that made my heart hurt as well as the rest of me, and I wasn't that cruel.

When I arrived at work this morning, I sneaked by his office and shut my door, hoping today's meetings would keep him too busy to come looking for me. I don't want to explain what I was doing last night: getting drunk with his nosy neighbor because I suffered a debilitating bout of jealousy over the fact that Vince once loved Leslie, or maybe still does.

It's nearing lunchtime, and after an extra doughnut from the break room and my second cup of coffee, I'm feeling semihuman. With my brain in working order, I begin to question my actions of late. Maybe I was being melodramatic. Or worse, I let Riley Mason into my subconscious and made assumptions I wouldn't have made without her.

Did I allow my old, unresolved feelings from my marriage to overtake my good sense?

I need to tell Vince. I need to confess before Riley tells him. I know her well enough to guess that she won't hesitate to gossip about my visit with her. I'm also fairly certain she'll chat up Leslie at their next spin class.

Ugh. How embarrassing.

But, as the saying goes, if you're going to eat crow, best to eat it while it's warm.

My office door opens and a bouquet of flowers with legs stands before me. *Déjà vu*.

Sandy, the temp, peeks over the blooms. "These came for you, Jackie."

It's not just Sandy at my door. Following behind her are four, five, *six* other staff members. All women, all tittering questions like "Who are they from?" and "What time does he come?"

"Are they from the runner?" someone asks.

"Doesn't he jog by right about now?" someone else says.

A gasp precedes the gaggle of high-heeled women shuffling to my wide window.

"There he is!" someone says, and silence precedes a collective sigh.

I take in the sight outside the window. A sight I enjoyed on plenty of previous occasions—and, not unlike my ovary-laden cohorts, with my face pressed against the glass. J.T. jogs by in his tanned, shirtless, blond splendor. He's gone from painfully attractive to achingly familiar to neutrally admirable. I can appreciate his masculine, athletic form, but only in the most distant of ways. He used to be my fantasy, but now there's only one man who claims that title.

“What’s going on?” Kayla, late to the party, wanders in and sends a look of distaste at the women clogging my office. Then at the flowers, which we both regard with confusion. “Daisies and roses?”

I open my mouth to agree it’s an odd arrangement, but my brain quickly provides the word “generic.” A *generic* arrangement of daisies and roses. The two types of bouquets I received on two different occasions from J.T.

I remember the moment midmoonshine when Riley pulled up a website on her laptop and asked me what flowers I’d like sent to my office in the morning.

I know how to make Vince jealous, Jackie.

“*Ohmygod,*” I cover my mouth with my hands as crooked pieces of the memory conjoin in my head.

Riley selecting the bespoke bouquet. Riley asking me what the card should read. Me handing her my credit card. Her verifying my work address.

“*Oh. My God,*” I repeat, my headache returning with a dull pulse.

“Well, that made my day,” one of my coworkers says. Show over, the women lining the back of my office leave. I receive a couple of congratulatory pats on the shoulder and a comment or two about the “beautiful flowers,” and I hear one girl whisper to another, “She’s so lucky.”

If they only knew.

“Whoa, what did I miss?” Vince pokes his head around the corner. His eyes go to the bouquet and he blinks. The second he calculates who the “generic” flowers might be from, his blue eyes slide to mine and narrow slightly. “Odd choice of flowers, Butler. Who sent you this disaster?”

Kayla, sensing a disturbance in the Force, wisely dismisses herself. “I’m going to lunch.” She slips past Vince, correctly assuming that the truly disastrous arrangement wasn’t from him.

What she doesn’t know is that it’s from me. Jury’s out on whether Vince has figured as much.

“I haven’t seen you all morning.” He leans a shoulder against the doorjamb and folds his arms over his chest. I search the office behind him for backup, but the coworkers who were in my office are one by one grabbing their purses and filing out the front door to lunch. “Are you sick?”

“No.”

“Busy?”

“Not particularly.” I decide to come clean. “I’m hungover.”

He chews on the inside of his cheek, his expression noncommittal.

“It was a long night.”

He snatches the note from the flowers. “This have anything to do with why?”

“Vince. Give me that. It’s not what you think.” I move to take it from him, but he reads it aloud before I can.

“I’ll never forget you, beautiful. I’m an ass. Love, J.T.”
Vince fixes me with a glare.

“I can explain.”

“No need.” He tosses the note on my desk. Then he’s... leaving? Vince starts down the corridor through our emptying building as I chase after him.

“Vince, wait. Hear me out.” I’m aware I sound desperate and that we’re not alone. I can hear a handful of coworkers diligently working away behind their cubicle walls. Vince is ignoring me, so I blurt, “I sent them to myself.”

At his office, he faces me.

“Give me a second and I can explain everything.” I hold my hand out in front of me, praying he won’t walk away until I’m through.

“Let me guess.”

I shake my head as if to say *You’ll never guess*, but he keeps talking.

“You drove by my house last night and spotted me walking Leslie to her car. Instead of stopping by to see me, which is, I’m assuming, why you were on my street in the first place, you instead confided in Riley Mason, my cuckoo neighbor who stares at me through her tinted greenhouse window.”

“You know about the window?” This story sounds so much worse coming from him.

“Riley asked you in, and you went, spying on me as you proceeded to get drunk and pass out at her house. But you left before she woke up. Sound about right?”

My mouth is frozen in a gape.

“What I didn’t know but am now puzzling out”—his expression morphs into thoughtful, even curious, which gives me a modicum of hope that maybe he’s not that angry with me after all—“is that you at some point ordered a bouquet of hideous flowers for yourself and signed them *Love, J.T.*” He leans a hair’s breadth closer and asks, “Why would you do that?”

Rather than defend myself, I allow my shoulders to sink and take a stab at how he came to know what transpired last night. “You talked to Riley.”

He straightens. “She showed up on my doorstep this morning with a cup of coffee and a tale about how my girlfriend—meaning you, I assume—saw me *canoodling* with my ex-wife and had to be *consoled*. Her words.” He glares down at me and a muscle in his jaw tics in frustration. This isn’t fun-loving, teasing Vince. It’s worse. It’s legitimately (and justifiably) angry Vince, and his anger is directed at me.

“It was Riley’s idea to send the flowers,” I squeak. “She used my credit card, though.” I wince. That doesn’t sound better.

“And that was a superior plan to talking to me yourself?” His voice escalates slightly. “Confiding in my nut-job neighbor?”

“You left right behind Leslie!” I exclaim quietly, feeling a dab of justification.

“To go see Davis at McGreevy’s,” he replies calmly.

“I didn’t know where you were going,” I mumble. “At the time I assumed it was to chase Leslie down to finish whatever conversation you were having in your driveway.”

Or worse, but I don’t admit that part.

“You assumed.” He laughs, but it’s a dangerous sound—devoid of his normal good humor. It sparks my own flickering anger into a full-blown fire.

“I’ve been in this position before, Vince. I’ve been the woman looking on while the man she...”

I trail off because I almost used the word “loves.” I loved Lex and he disappointed me, and I think I’m in love with Vince. Though “know” might be more accurate than “think,” given the fear that carved a path through my torso the second I saw him with Leslie.

“I’ve been cheated on before,” I finish lamely. “It’s not fun.”

“So now I’m cheating on you?” His severe expression communicates I’ve said exactly the wrong thing. “You know what, Butler? I’ve had it with being compared to Lex. And now you’re using J.T. to make me jealous? I’m starting to feel sorry for the guy, and I hate him.”

“I’m not comparing you!” I press my lips together as two guys with briefcases walk by. They send us sideways glances and I smile uncomfortably. After they pass, I tell Vince in a quieter voice, “We shouldn’t do this here.”

“I’m not convinced we should do this at all.”

“You’re right. It’s a stupid argument.” I sigh, resigned, and place my fingers against my temples, where my headache has returned.

“I’m not talking about the argument.” He sounds too serious for my taste. “I’m talking about us.”

The only sound I can manage from my tangled vocal cords is a weak croak. I clear my throat and try again. Finally, I push out the words “Don’t say that.”

“If you don’t trust me any more than this, Jackie, then one of us has made a grave error in judgment.” He takes a step backward into his office and mutters, “Namely, me.”

“Vince.”

“Go home. You’re not feeling well today and frankly, I don’t want you here. Take your flowers with you.”

He shuts the door in my face and I stare at the wood, jaw dropped, unable to accept how quickly things spiraled out of control.

“What’s up with you two?” That’s Sandy, the temp, whose timing is epically tragic. A wave of nausea sloshes in my gut. “You don’t look so good.”

“I’m, uh...not feeling well.” *Understatement.* “I’m taking the rest of the day off. Please let everyone know. I’ll return calls as soon as I’m available.”

She smiles tenderly. “Hope you feel better.”

I zombie-walk to my office, every step requiring monumental effort.

“Jackie?” Sandy calls.

“Yes?” I ask, gripping my doorframe for support.

“When can I tell everyone you’ll be available?”

I cast another glance at Vince’s closed door and shake my head. “I’m not sure.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

JACQUELINE

Since working from home isn't an option, I'm back in the office the next day. I thought long and hard about tendering my resignation, but unfortunately I have bills to pay. On a side note: The employee no-dating rule is really underemphasized. There should be a big sign in the boardroom that reads NO SCREWING EACH OTHER UNDER PENALTY OF DEATH.

That wouldn't stop it from happening either. Human beings are a lot like cats in heat sometimes.

After my first cup of coffee, I review the conversation that occurred yesterday between Vince and me. I left work thinking the end of the world was nigh. Perhaps I blew things out of proportion. I woke up this morning feeling worse, but what if that's just me?

A spark of hope glows warmly in my chest. I close my eyes and think of a motivational quote for this occasion. "Leadership is the ability to translate vision into reality," I say under my breath.

I can make my own reality. Better yet, so can Vince. What if I have this all wrong? What if Vince is in his office feeling as horrible about our argument as I do?

I walk toward his office and several heads swivel in my direction. I straighten my shoulders and add a spring to my step. I'm not lurching to his office today—I'm walking in, head high.

Vince's deep laugh trickles from his office and beckons me like a tractor beam. A residual smile is on his face as he hangs up his desk phone.

"Good morning." I'm going for casual, but my voice is tight.

"Butler." His smile erases and he focuses his attention on his computer screen. "What can I do you for?" he asks as he slides the mouse and does a good job of ignoring me.

I step into his office and run my fingers along the edge of the desk. "I took your advice and got rid of the flowers."

He still doesn't look at me.

"I went home like you asked, but I had to come back." I laugh uncomfortably. I'm trying to lighten the mood, but the weight of the air might as well be ten tons. "Because, you know, paycheck and all that jazz."

Did I just use the phrase "all that jazz"? I'm worse than I thought. And he's worse than I thought. His silence is making me edgy. Nervous.

"I guess you were right about Riley being crazy." I'm trying for camaraderie, but Vince hasn't looked at me yet. I hold out hope that putting us on the same page will be the key to ending our fight.

“Shut that door,” he instructs, his voice low and sexy. Unfortunately his blue eyes are icy and emotionless instead of heated with interest. I shut the door.

“I know you’re mad, Vince, but—”

“But what?” His eyebrows slide together. “Where do we go from you camping out on my crazy neighbor’s couch and ordering yourself flowers while the two of you spy on me from behind a tinted window?”

“I didn’t know what to think.”

“You could have talked to me.”

“You could have told me Leslie came over. You’re not blameless, Vince,” I can’t help pointing out.

“No?” Those thick eyebrows rise. “I’m sorry. I thought I was the one in my home and you were the one spying on me.”

“I wasn’t spying!” I close my mouth and suck in a breath through my nose. I’m not yelling in here, closed door or no. “I wasn’t *exactly* spying,” I amend at a reasonable volume. “I saw you nuzzling Leslie after she left your house, after you told me you had a project to work on that night. What was I supposed to think?”

“That I was blowing you off and fucking my ex-wife, apparently.”

Hearing the words makes it feel true. I hope it isn’t true. But the image is there. And he put it there.

“Is that what you want to hear, Butler?” he asks. “That Les and I rekindled our lost love on the sofa where you and I normally watch movies and share sushi? That she and I ate pizza and then stripped naked to have one last go for old times’ sake?”

“You shared pizza?” That news is like taking a skewer to the chest.

“And beers,” he adds, his tone challenging.

I take a step back, like I can escape his words and the images flashing in the frontal lobe of my brain like a horror film.

Vince waits; for what, I don’t know.

So I repeat, “You shared pizza and beers with Leslie on the couch...and that’s it?”

“That right there,” Vince states softly, pointing at me, “is what I would’ve answered for you if you would’ve knocked on my door instead of Riley’s.”

It’s like he’s slipping away before my eyes. I hate to ask, hate that my nose is stinging from pending tears, but I ask anyway. “And now?”

His eyes go to his hands, folded on the desk, and he shakes his head. “It’s too late, Jackie.”

“It’s not,” I manage, unwilling to accept defeat.

His eyes find mine, and in those blues I don’t see anger or frustration but stark acceptance, which is somehow worse. “You know me, Butler. Or at least I thought you did.”

His office phone purrs and I blink watery eyes from him to the handset, which he lifts and answers with a “Vince Carson.”

He settles back in his chair, eyes on the computer screen as he continues to pretend I’m not there. After a few seconds of being ignored, I make myself scarce.

I shut his door quietly behind me and beeline for my office, head down, teeth gritted. Safely ensconced inside, I

close my blinds on the inside window and flip the lock on the knob.

As I slump into my office chair, the tears start to fall.

THE NEXT DAY is better and simultaneously worse. Vince doesn't mention Leslie or that night to me, which is a relief, because I had no idea how mean he could be. He's not ignoring me, though, and that's the "worse" part I'm referring to. He's straightforward and calm. I would rather have a screaming fight to the finish. At least then I'd have closure.

Vince enters my office and drops a mailer on my desk. "This came for you, but Sandy gave it to me by mistake."

He turns to leave, but I stop him. "Vince. Please sit?"

"No time, Butler. I have to meet with Peter Vandalay in five minutes. I'm on my way out the door right now."

I recognize the name from the current account we're trying to win.

"Why don't you come with me?" Vince, his expression neutral, shrugs his shoulders. "He likes you. If anyone has a prayer of nailing him down, it's you."

I don't hesitate. If this is how to get back into Vince's good graces, so be it. I grab my purse and he offers to drive as we leave the building together. Just as I'm sinking into his passenger seat, hope flooding my chest, a voice calls out behind us.

"Sorry I'm late!"

Lindsey, from sales, is running/scuffling along the asphalt and pulling her purse onto her shoulder. Her presence instantly makes my presence at lunch with Peter Vandalay superfluous, and Vince's offer that I come along equally useless. Lindsey can close the deal as well as—if not better than—I can.

I step away from the car and lift the seat forward. She climbs in the back and chatters all the way to the restaurant, killing any opportunity for Vince and me to talk. Really talk.

The ride back to the office is exactly the same.

Vince is congenial and he even smiles a few times. I'm assuming he wouldn't have invited me along without a buffer, which does more than sting my ego. It cuts deep and leaves a gaping wound.

My resilient attitude insists this week will improve.

But it doesn't.

I'M LEANING over Kayla's computer studying our website. "I like the new menu. It's clean, easy to read."

"Thanks," she says, then regards me with real concern in her eyes. "Are you and Vince okay?"

I glance toward her open office door, but it's fifteen past five, and the office is mostly cleared out. Joe is back in the corner milking the clock as per his usual, but he isn't close enough to overhear. Anyway, he's always wearing a huge pair of white headphones blaring his garage band tunes.

Vince is in the office somewhere. I've become attuned to him over the past week or so, his every coming or going, watching him like a dog watches out the window for its owner

to return. I'm pathetic. Truly pathetic. Kayla has clearly picked up on it.

"Jackie." She tilts her head to the side. "You don't have to give me details, but don't keep me completely in the dark. My heart is splitting in two over this."

"You?" I grunt with a wan smile. I've been merely surviving each day; trying to appear as "okay" as possible while my heart suffers another fatal fissure. At least I assume it's fatal. It feels that way.

"He's okay and I'll be okay," I tell Kayla, keeping up the charade. My smile feels sickly. It must look that way too, because she stands and hugs me. I accept the embrace. My arms have been lonely, my heart hurting. I haven't called Bethany yet because I have a feeling she'll advise me to quit my job.

"I don't want to quit. I love my job," I tell Kayla.

"I know you do, honey," she says, not asking me why I'm protesting my own resignation. She drags the guest chair to her desk and I sit. "I don't want you to quit either. I don't think you have to. Vince is being an ass. He's a man and men are stupid."

I sniff. "Truer words."

"Want to talk about it?"

"I do, but...not here." I look over my shoulder but see no one. "Want to grab a coffee?"

"Yes." Kayla is off her chair like a shot. She doesn't even bother shutting her computer down. "Let's go."

Minutes later we're at For Puck's Sake.

"They have coffee here?" I shout over the blaring TVs.

“No!” she shouts back. “They have really good-looking bartenders here.”

Kayla bellies up to the bar and I slide onto a stool next to her. She orders us two Goalie Manhattans, whatever those are. I can’t do liquor. It makes me crazy. See: ordering flowers for myself and letting Riley Mason choose what to write on the card. When I tell Kayla I shouldn’t drink lest I further ruin my life, she waves me off. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll call an Uber to ferry you home safely. My treat.”

I tell Kayla about my seeing Leslie and about my confiding in Riley. About how I made a stupid mistake. About how Vince pulled away so suddenly, I’m beginning to accept that I should let him.

“He’s scaring me,” I say as I finish my Goalie drink. It’s really good. I order another from the very attractive bartender, Mike. Mike has a nice smile that I return. Then I look at Kayla and my smile falls. “I bet Mike’s a jerk too. They’re all jerks.”

“They aren’t *all* jerks,” she says through a laugh. “Tell me what you mean by Vince scaring you.”

“The way he can detach. That scares me. How can he look deeply into my eyes one day and then go completely blank the next?” I accept my fresh drink from Cute Mike Who Is Probably a Jerk and then turn back to my office friend. “Lex did that, you know. Turned off his feelings like a switch. I guess it’s a man thing.”

Kayla’s lips press together in sympathy. She’s never had anyone do this to her, I bet.

“Kevin has never broken up with you, I’m guessing? He’s been perfect?”

“Not perfect. No one is perfect. But no, he always claimed he was never going anywhere and he hasn’t.” She lifts and drops a shoulder like she has no idea how she got so lucky.

I ache with envy at how lovely that sounds.

“You know what really sucks?” I ask rhetorically, before answering myself. “I was benched. I was done dating. I was out there, and then I came back and resigned myself to singledom for a while. It was Vince who made me try again. He was the one who suggested I ask out J.T. And *then* I learned Vince did it because he wanted me to date *him* instead. What gives? Why go through the hoopla of forcing me out into the world when I didn’t want to go? If anything, he played games way before I did.”

“He’s a man,” she says simply. “He’s a jerk.”

“Hey, this sounds like a conversation not fit for me,” Mike interjects with a white-toothed grin. He winks and moves on to another patron and Kayla sighs.

“Too bad this isn’t one of those bars where the men take their shirts off.” Kayla purses her lips, then her eyes light with an idea. She reaches for her purse hooked on the back of her chair and waves a twenty-dollar bill. “Maybe it could be?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

VINCE

“How do you spell ‘eunuch’?” I ask Davis as he walks into my house. “Did you knock and I didn’t hear you?”

He eyes the crossword puzzle on my lap and then the television, which emits a ball-jarring explosion. Probably I didn’t hear him.

“How many times have you watched that?” he asks.

I lift my chin and see Bruce Willis’s badass receding hairline and wonder if I’ll look that cool if mine goes in that direction. “Not sure. It’s either my third or fourth viewing since yesterday.”

Davis mutters something that sounds like “It’s worse than I thought” before he sits next to me. “I’d rather you watch sappy, weepy movies than *Die Hard*. I feel like this is a cry for help.”

“This is a man’s movie.” I gesture to the television with the pen in my hand. “I’m fortifying myself for what’s to come.”

“You’re walling up and trying to grow a callus or two.”

Eyes back on my puzzle, I try spelling “eunuch” with a *K* in the margin. That still looks wrong.

“So what?” I say as I scribble through the word. “I could use a callus or two. I finally think I understand you.” I look at him. “Why you’re a serial dater. A fan of the one-night blonde.” Gripping his shoulder, I level with him. “It’s a superpower, my friend. I was shitty at the one-night thing, but you have it down.”

I give myself a pitying head shake, since I’ve mastered the art of feeling sorry for myself, and return to my margins and my spelling challenge. I wonder if it starts with a *Y*?

“They should make phonetic crossword puzzles,” I say, jotting down my new favorite made-up word: “younick.”

Davis snatches the newspaper from me and tosses it on the coffee table, knocking over the beer cans sitting there. He grumbles as he picks them up off the floor and walks them to the kitchen. He returns with a wad of paper towels and swipes the spilled beer—only a few drops—off the table before scolding me like my mother.

“They aren’t from this morning,” I say, thinking his concern stems from my day drinking. I planned on starting early, but not *this* early.

“I’m making you some coffee.”

Never mind, he reminds me more of Leslie. “Good, you can be my new ex-wife.”

Davis storms back into the living room, paper towels gone, something else notably missing.

“Hey, where’s my coffee?” I ask.

Then I'm zooming upward, a little too quickly, considering the beer cans from last night Davis just collected. My head is swimming from a few too many and not enough sleep. My best friend holds me by the scruff of the T-shirt.

"What is going on with you?" Davis asks through his teeth. "Stop being so goddamn flippant and talk to me."

"And tell you what?" I swipe his arms away, a surge of anger shooting down my limbs. I scrape my hand through my unwashed hair and stalk into the kitchen, simply because I can't stand still. "Tell you that Jackie underestimated, undermined, and underappreciated me?" I call out. "Tell you that I was going to tell her I was falling for her"—I open a cabinet and pull out the coffee can and a filter—"but no, she —"

I cut myself off when I realize I'm shouting and Davis is standing a few feet away from me. I continue at a normal volume as I scoop the coffee. "I thought she was different, that we had a shot at something real. I never believed she'd assume the worst about me."

My heart does that thing where it hurts so much I wonder if I need to call an ambulance. It's been happening every day since the morning I talked to Riley and found out Jackie had come to her own conclusions—albeit happily fueled by my troublemaking neighbor—about what transpired between Leslie and me.

"After Leslie left me," I tell Davis, "I swore I'd never think about permanence again. Jackie made me hope. Made me take back that vow and imagine a future with her." I gesture around the kitchen with the scoop. "Her here. Living here. Maybe more," I mumble, miserable about...well, just about everything, frankly.

I fill the pot with water and pour it into the machine. “I was wrong. Maybe she was right and she was my rebound. Maybe she’s better off with Jaundice.”

I punch the button and the brew starts. Only then do I realize that Davis is leaning on my kitchen table, hands gripping the edges, a look of uncertainty on his face.

“Jackie-O was a rebound,” he states flatly.

I shrug, my heart shredding, but it’s only been a few days. It’ll heal. I healed from Leslie and we were married for years. Jackie and I only had sex a few times.

“I’ll be over her soon,” I say, as if I can also erase the memory of her being my other best friend for the past few years.

“How you planning on getting over her?” he asks. “By turning into me? Reentering the singles scene, this time with your callused heart so you can continue sleeping with women who mean absolutely nothing to you? Forgetting their names? Forgetting yours? Just empty sex to fill the void because you’re too much of a coward to tell Jackie how you feel?”

“Sounds like you’re talking about you, bro. And to answer your question, yes,” I decide, because decision making gives the pretense of control when in reality my life is spinning out of it. “When the time is right, I may do that. I’m not a coward because I saw the end coming from a long way away. I didn’t see the end of Leslie and me until it was too late. I don’t care to repeat that disaster. And you’re one to talk,” I add. Angry *and* decisive feels so much better than unmoored and sad. “You didn’t see the end of you and Hanna until it was *really* too late.”

I half expect him to walk out of my house cursing my name as he goes, but instead he nods solemnly. “You’re right. I didn’t. Continue in your misery, Carson.”

He pushes off the kitchen table and ambles to the front door. I follow, feeling guilty that I sniped at him, because this wasn’t his fault at all. “Davis. Wait.”

He faces me, maybe because he expects an apology. He’s not getting one.

“You’ve had six years to work through this thing with Hanna, and I’ve been friends with you the entire time. I never walked out on you, and trust me, you’re a pro at wallowing.”

His jaw tightens along with his fists.

“Give me that same courtesy. Are you staying for coffee or not?”

He marches to the front door and slams it behind him.

“Not” it is.

Great. Now I’ve got no girl and no friend.

Good thing I have plenty of things to do.

“Siri!” I shout at my phone sitting on the coffee table. “How the fuck do you spell ‘eunuch’?”

JACQUELINE

I’ve been cleaning nonstop since eight this morning. I’m in cutoff sweats and an old T-shirt, and I haven’t showered. I ate a doughnut for breakfast and drank coffee for lunch, and I’m

considering eating a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos for dinner. I did brush my teeth today, which qualifies as a win.

I'm not expecting anyone, so when the knock comes at my closed front door, I semipanic. A figure stands on my doorstep. The FedEx guy has seen me in disarray before, but it's not a delivery guy. I part one curtain and blink in surprise. Davis?

He nods from his position on my stoop.

"Jackie-O," he greets me when I open the door. His hands are in the pockets of his suit pants. He's not wearing a tie or jacket today, but his ever-present button-down shirt is there, open at the collar. Davis is tall, a little taller than Vince, so I have to look way up at him.

"I wasn't expecting company." I self-consciously tug on my worn OSU T-shirt. There's nothing to be done about the hair. I don't even bother straightening the bandanna serving as a headband. "What are you doing here?"

It's not like him to show up unannounced—or announced, for that matter. Davis and I know each other through Vince, not personally. I'm not sure how he knows where I live. He steps toward me in a presumptive manner. Curiosity wins. I let him in.

"Know what's worse than being left behind?" he asks, strolling into my living room. He doesn't wait for me to guess. He turns around and states, "Nothing."

"You think I don't know that?" I ask with an incredulous snort.

"It messes with your equilibrium," Davis continues. "Makes you do dumb things. Makes you seek the next thing

and the next thing because the current thing has the potential to hurt you all over again.”

I can't tell if he's talking about me, Vince, or himself...or the three of us simultaneously. He stops pacing long enough to pick up a figurine on a nearby shelf. My sister bought it for me after the divorce. It's a unicorn, head thrust up proudly, one hoof in the air. The plaque attached reads BELIEVE IN YOURSELF.

It's cheesy, but after the divorce that was the exact sentiment I needed.

Davis puts the figurine down without comment. “I'm overstepping my boundaries by being here.” I'm opening my mouth to agree it's inappropriate to barge in on me when he says, “Vince is my best friend. I should be at his place getting drunk with him. *Again.*”

It might hurt to hear that Vince is hurting if I hadn't spent the past few days swimming in a bottle of wine myself. “Why aren't you?”

Davis fastens his gray stare on me. “Because he's lovesick and miserable and I hate seeing him like this. I can't fix it. But you can.” He takes a breath and says, “When he told me Leslie came over, I thought for sure a confession that he slept with her would follow. Like, in a fit of nostalgia or desperation or sparked by some memory of what they used to have together. I told him as much. Know what he said?”

“I hope he said no.”

“He said no. And he looked at me like I put a poisonous snake in his pants when I suggested it. He was *appalled*. And not because sleeping with Leslie is an appalling idea—she's hot.”

I grimace. “Thanks for that.”

“Keeping you honest,” he says. “He was appalled because you are the only one he wants to horizontal mambo with, honey. You.” He points and then walks his pointing finger to me. “He’s gone for you, sweets. It’s obvious. And yet you two are avoiding each other when you should be screwing each other’s brains out.”

Davis is a lot of things, but eloquent isn’t one of them.

“I appreciate you coming here, Davis, but you’re wrong. I made a mistake and Vince didn’t forgive me. One snag and he was done.” That’s on him. It doesn’t make being without him any easier, but at least it wasn’t me who gave up.

“I’m not wrong.” Davis casts a look around my house before sitting on the sofa and resting his elbows on his knees. The next words he says are spoken to his hands. “You know my story. How Hanna wrecked me.”

I do know it, because Vince told me about it, not because Davis talks about it. Yet here he is. Talking about it.

“You don’t recover from something like that.” He rubs his thumb on the palm of his other hand in a nervous gesture before he turns the tables and starts in on me. “You wrecked Vince. He let down his guard and was about to step toward you in a big, *big* way when you snatched away your trust. You compared him to Lex, who he hates, by the way.”

“He doesn’t hate him. He hates J.T.”

“He hates them both. Men always hate the exes of the women they love.” He lifts his brows. “Like you hate Leslie.”

Fair point. If I’m being one hundred percent honest, I do kind of hate her.

“He didn’t sleep with Leslie. They didn’t make out or talk about how they wished they still had each other. Yeah, they may have traipsed down memory lane, but only in relation to you. He was starting to have permanent feelings for you that were more than him just getting his rocks off.”

I let out a tiny laugh. “Did he put it that way?”

“Probably not. He’s better than me. He’s a better person than me. He has boundaries. Knows what’s right. But lately? He’s been reminding me a lot of me. I can’t have that. I can’t have him turning into Davis from six years ago and ending up like Davis right now. That’d be devastating for all of us.”

I don’t want that for Vince either, but I don’t know what Davis expects. So I ask.

“He’s the one who’s mad at me. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Swallow your pride and tell him how you feel,” he answers without hesitation.

“Shouldn’t he be the one coming to me?” I bark, because Davis’s suggestion is terrifying. It involves me creeping onto a very narrow ledge when the wind is starting to pick up speed.

“Do you love him?”

I press my lips together as my shoulders fold forward. I love Vince so much I’m having trouble staying upright.

“That’s what I thought.” Davis stands, but as he passes by, he squeezes my arm and lowers himself so that he can look into my eyes. “Don’t give up on him, Jackie. He’s hurting and it’s not your fault. It’s Leslie’s, Lex’s, and partially J.T.’s fault. Are you going to let the three of them come between you?”

He straightens and I turn around and ask the question I have to know the answer to before he goes. “Why didn’t you have this conversation with Vince? Shouldn’t he ride over here on a white steed and confess his feelings?”

“Yes. He should. But Vince is in drown-the-sorrow mode and he’s a few months out from that epiphany. Maybe longer. I didn’t want to wait, in case things really went south. Like maybe one of you decides to Band-Aid that pain by sleeping with someone else. Or rekindling what you had with the guy who runs by your office window every weekday.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” I mutter, my pride stinging as much as the blood rushing to my cheeks. “J.T. and I are...I wouldn’t do that.”

“Trust me, Jacqueline, you’d be surprised what the right kind of pain can make you do.” There’s a pregnant pause where neither of us says anything. “You want to be with Vince? Why not start now? One of you could be hit by a car later this year and die and you’ll have lost months of mind-blowing sex.”

“That’s macabre.”

Davis sends me a tight smile. “Think about what your pride’s worth, and then tell me I’m wrong.”

He salutes and steps off my stoop, and I do as he says.

I think about it.

It’s all I think about.

CHAPTER THIRTY

VINCE

In Kayla's office I stop speaking midsentence when movement outside her window snags my attention.

Remember that part from *Terminator 2* where Sarah Connor witnesses the apocalypse and is powerless to stop it? I feel kind of like that, only without the chain-link fence to hold on to while the world is annihilated before my eyes.

Jackie's outside with J.T. and, in a scenario scarily like the first time I was standing in here watching her tackle her fears, he stops to talk to her and she fiddles with the water bottle in her hand. My heart incinerates to ash.

Kayla silently watches with me.

Jackie waves and J.T. nods, but not before he smiles and runs off again. I can't bear to see the thumbs-up she might give, or her smile when she turns around, so I pretend to search for an email on my phone.

"She did it," I mumble.

Kayla sighs in resignation, and that sound doesn't give me much hope for my and Jackie's future together. Kayla and

Jackie were in here whispering last week. I don't know what was said, but they left together. It's not hard to guess that Kayla has chosen a side and it's not mine.

I can't blame her.

"I'm sorry, Vince" is all she says, and that feels like the felling blow.

"Yeah. So am I." I turn to leave, numb and wishing I'd brought a flask to work. I don't always pour whiskey into my coffee, but now seems like a prime opportunity to start.

"Vince?"

I turn, hoping Kayla has a brilliant idea of how I can reverse my assery and win back the woman I love. If she does, she doesn't tell me what it is.

"What did you need when you walked in here?"

"Oh. Um." I lift my phone, which I forgot I was holding, and scroll through the email that propelled me in here in the first place. "Just a question about the meeting later..." I settle into the chair next to her desk to discuss, but I don't hear a word I'm saying.

THE THREE O'CLOCK meeting comes and goes.

Jackie and I were exempt from running it. We sit silently at the boardroom table and jot notes on the pads in front of us. Or, well, she jots. I doodle on the edges of the paper.

I call this series Stick Figures and Their Various Demises. This one went in the obvious hangman scenario. This one, knife through the heart. The one I'm drawing now is about to

be run over by an oncoming car. He's resigned to his plight, as you can tell by the daisy he's clutching to his chest.

Stupid daisies.

Jaundice won Jackie. After my slotting him into the role of douchebag and my working hard to convince Jackie I was the one for her. None of it mattered. Hell, I don't know. Maybe in spite of him banging some other girl, he is the better man for her.

I liked being angry and sort of drunk guy better. This abject misery stuff is ugly.

The meeting adjourns and I stand with my pad and empty coffee mug and shuffle with the crowd, my mind light-years away from work.

"Going to McGreevy's?" Ronald asks me. He's on our sales force and a helluva nice guy.

"McGreevy's Pub?" I ask, wondering at the odd invite. We aren't buddies and never do anything socially together, so the request is strange.

"Yes." Jackie materializes at my left elbow. "When Faye wrapped the meeting, she dismissed us for the day. She invited everyone in this room out for a Friday-afternoon drink on the Brookdale Group." She glances at the pad of paper pressed against my chest. "You must have been busy writing your to-do list."

It's morbid to think of my stick-men deaths as my to-do list, but neither will I lie and say I don't envy them that their pain is finally over.

"Must have," I answer, my voice devoid of emotion.

“Ron, Vince and I have a few things to go over, but I promise to let him go ASAP. Save him a seat.” She smiles at him and Ronald waves and walks out. Just leaves me in here with her. Alone.

Some friend.

Before I can craft an excuse to escape the conference room, Jackie closes us inside and gestures to the wide table, a pair of chairs nearest us in particular.

“Sit for a second?” she invites. “I need to set some ground rules for us working together.”

A deep sigh works its way up from my gut. She’s probably right. Avoiding each other during our breakup hasn’t resulted in a well-oiled working relationship.

I lower myself into my previously vacated chair and put my pad facedown next to my coffee mug. I consider flipping it over and adding a stick-man death by electric chair. Maybe later.

Jackie sits across from me rather than beside me and opens her pad folio. Flipping a page, she reviews a tidy bullet list. She’s overthought this and I’m not surprised. I’m the one who doesn’t overthink. Hell, I don’t *think*.

Maybe we were doomed from the start.

“Item number one,” she begins. “If we’re going to continue sharing VP—and I’m not planning on stepping down. Are you?”

I shake my head and dredge up a hint of the humor that has helped me survive many a terrible situation. “I’m planning on advancing to president, though, so we’ll only have to deal with one another as equals until my inevitable promotion.”

Her smile is tolerant.

“Right.” Her eyes go back to her list. “I thought we’d split the meetings so we aren’t attending them together all the time.”

Ouch. That burning feeling in my chest is less likely from the hot wings I ate on autopilot for lunch and more likely because Jackie just cracked open my chest cavity. I can’t let the torture continue. It’s inhumane. So I blurt out what I’m thinking.

“Because you and J.T. are back together, and it’s not kosher for you and me to see each other too much.” Makes sense. Relationships have no prayer of making it when outside parties are involved. I can’t help adding a petulant “I still think you can do better.”

“Well, probably.” She draws a line through the item and looks up at me. “But you’re the one I’m in love with, so I guess I’ll have to make it work.”

Brown eyes seek mine and I hold on to that gaze with such desperation, I forget to inhale.

“I don’t think we should do too many meetings together because it’s obvious how much we love each other,” she tells me. “To avoid everyone being grossed out all the time, we should keep our desires reserved for before nine and after five.”

I’m staring in disbelief, like if I blink she’ll vanish in a puff of smoke and I’ll realize I hallucinated everything. She stands and walks to my chair. I’m peering up at her shining eyes, my mind mush.

“I saw you outside with J.T.,” I say, my voice hollow.

“Yes, you did. And like when I saw you with Leslie, you have no idea what I said to him. Do you?”

I guess I don't.

Jackie lowers herself onto my lap and my arms wrap her slim waist before I can warn them not to. *God*. I've missed her too much for words. It's taking everything to keep from crushing her against me and putting my lips on her neck. Burying my nose in her hair and inhaling deeply.

Her arms loop my neck as she regards me like she's sad that I'm not very bright. “I asked him if he'd run a different route.”

I must not be very bright because her statement makes no sense.

“J.T.,” she clarifies. “When I was outside, I apologized for Bethany kicking him in the nuts, and I asked him for a favor.”

My lips twitch with a budding smile. “Bethany kicked him in the nuts?”

Remind me to buy Bethany something nice. Like a car.

“She did. Anyway, I told J.T. I was in love with you—and that I have been since you kissed me—and that he needed to choose a different route to run because I don't want to remember how stupid I was every day when he jogs by.”

“Are you sure it's not because you can't trust yourself not to go out and fling yourself at him?” I tease.

“You know me, Vince.”

I do know her. My brain is wading through days of light beer, trying its hardest to absorb this new info. “Did he agree?”

“Ha. Not exactly. He said it’s a free country and he can run wherever he chooses. But he did amend that if I can’t stomach seeing him without feeling waves of regret, he’d do me the service of running elsewhere.”

My arms tighten around her. “I see him run by here again, I’ll make it so he’s physically incapable of running at all.”

She puts her hand on my jaw and my anger with Jaundice recedes like Bruce Willis’s badass hairline. “I made a mistake when I went out with him. I made a mistake when I assumed you and Leslie did more than talk. What’d you talk about, Vince? I heard a rumor you talked about me.”

My eyebrows climb my forehead in surprise.

“Davis came by and told me you were in love with me, but only after I told him I was in love with you.”

I hear a click and figure it’s my brain turning on the lightbulb over my head.

She loves me.

“Say that again, Butler. Slower.” I tip my chin to take her in. All of her. From her long brown hair to the sexy black wrap dress. She’s tempting me—and she’s not even trying.

On a whisper, she leans in and repeats in a seductive tone, “I talked to Davis.”

Smart-ass.

“Not that part.”

Then she grins, knowing what I need, and finally, *finally* gives it to me. “I’m in love with you, Vince Carson. Only you. I love your penchant for old movies, and the way you always burn the popcorn, and how you can’t decide where to eat when you’re *hangry*.”

I smile.

“And the way you make love to me on the stairs,” she whispers.

My smile turns gooey right along with my heart.

Her lips lower to mine and I’m lost. Fingers in her hair, I kiss her as deeply and fully as I’ve wanted to for three lonely weeks. I’m starving for her, and it takes me a moment to remember we aren’t somewhere I can strip her out of her fantastic dress and make her shout my name on a cry of pleasure.

My fingers halt on the knot of the fabric belt keeping her dress closed. “Hell of a place to break this to me. Not a bed in sight.”

“It was either tell you here or follow you home like a stalker.”

“You’re the pro,” I joke. “I still want you to follow me home, though. Maybe stay there for the weekend.”

Or forever, my mind adds, but I’m trying to keep my cool.

“The weekend at least.” She kisses me sweetly. “Longer is preferable.”

Ah, hell, I love that she’s no cooler than I am.

“Longer as in the following week? Or longer as in”—I squeeze her waist with my arm—“forever?” She smiles but I don’t let her answer. “Now that I have you in my arms admitting how wrong you were about letting me go, I’m thinking you’re a keeper.”

“You were thinking that way before I screwed up. Remember? Back when your brilliant plan was to set me up with J.T. and then swoop in when he inevitably hurt me?”

Chagrined, I cringe. “We bumbled our way here, didn’t we, Butler?”

“‘Once upon a time’ always starts with bumbling, if you think about it.”

I consider the fairy tales I’ve heard and decide she’s right.

“That’s what makes the ‘happily ever after’ so worth it.” She ruffles my hair. “Want to go to McGreevy’s Pub for a celebratory cocktail?”

“If by McGreevy’s Pub you mean *my house*, and by cocktail you mean *sweaty, hot makeup sex*”—I stand, scooping her into my arms as she yips a happy laugh—“then yes, I’d love to.”

“As usual, Vince, you read my mind.”

I open the door to leave, and walk into a crowd of coworkers who are standing just outside the door. Kayla looks the guiltiest—but in her defense, also the happiest with that giant smile on her face. I put Jackie down and she skims a hand over her dress and straightens her skirt.

There’s a moment of silence before Ron starts a slow-clap, reminding me of any one of the rom-coms Jackie and I have watched on my sofa over the past year. *My sofa*, I think, as she curtsies for the cheering crowd, then beams up at me.

Jackie’s the only girl who belongs on it.

DEDICATION

Once upon a time...or, well, in June of 2016...my husband and I were on a Tennessee vacation with a group of close friends. We'd just bellied up to the bar and ordered drinks when a man jogged by the huge glass windows. My husband pointed him out, watching me as I watched the runner—in his gorgeous, splendid, shirtless glory—dash by outside and disappear out of sight. My beloved wore a smirk when my eyes came back to his. Then he said, “You’re welcome,” because he knew he’d gifted me the mother of all plot bunnies.

John Lemmon, this book wouldn't exist without you. Thanks, babe.

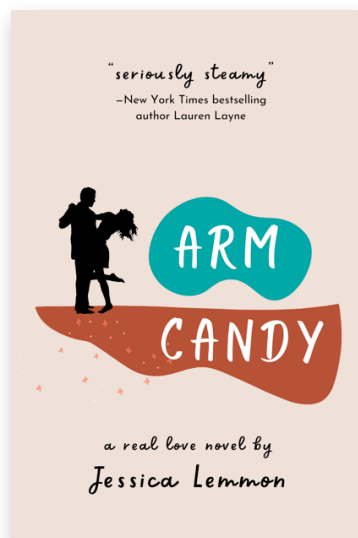
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you, nameless, shirtless jogging guy who ran by the Whiskey Kitchen that sweltering June day, for making me ask the question “What if...?”

Thanks to my agent, Nicole, and author besties, Lauren Layne and Shannon Richard, for your support and friendship.

And of course, thanks to you, dear reader, for loving my books and continuing to read them. I wouldn't be here without you!

ARM CANDY - EXCERPT



GRACE

I collect the two-dollar tip on the bar, sticky from sitting in a ring of spilled beer, and notice a phone number jotted on the back of one of the bills. I know it's fresh because next to the number is the name "Gregg," and the guy who sat here and drank three Bud Light drafts was named Gregg.

Question: Do guys *really* think that works? Like, can you find one and ask him for me? I can't imagine a bartender—or beer mistress, as I like to call myself—who would be wooed

by a sopping- wet single covered in blurred ink from “Gregg,” or any other guy angling to get a date.

Let’s say I call him. Let’s just imagine that scenario for a minute. Let’s pretend I bite my lip, shivering in anticipation. Let’s set aside the likelihood that Gregg leaves his number for every other bartender in this city. The man spent over twenty dollars *and* left me a crappy tip, and wants to take me out. Little old me! I’m overjoyed! I call. He answers. I introduce myself as the redhead from McGreevy’s Pub who received his phone number on my tip. He remembers me. In our fantasy world, let’s imagine a best-case scenario: Gregg asks me out to a restaurant, actually pays (except you know I’m going to have to slide extra money into the black book for a tip), and then tries to get into my pants all night long.

I’m not opposed to sex on a first date, but Gregg, who occupied my bar seat for the last two hours, most certainly didn’t leave an impression on me. He was average-looking and dressed casually. I remember that. But his facial features? A blur of attributes on an otherwise blah face.

Do I sound bitchy?

I don’t mean to. And anyway, I prefer “jaded.” No! How about “experienced”? *Worldly*. I understand a cold, hard truth most women refuse to believe.

There is no such thing as Mr. Right.

Hell, sometimes there’s not even a Mr. Right *Now*.

If you thought otherwise, I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news. If you’re with a guy currently who seems perfect, I don’t begrudge you your happiness. Enjoy it for as long as it lasts, but know this: Every relationship has an expiration date. We’re not Twinkies. We’re more like Bibb lettuce. A

relationship's shelf life is short, and I operate like the end is nigh because, well, it is.

I could blame my divorce-lawyer parents (who themselves are divorced), but that's another can of worms. Let's get back to me.

I've been beer mistress at McGreevy's Pub downtown since the beginning of summer—a handful of months now—but my experience behind a bar is extensive. So much so, that I can predict, with a scary level of accuracy, what a couple on a date will order to drink. Most often the girls have the sweet pear cider on draft, and their male counterparts order the bitter IPA. There's a lesson in there about coupledness in general, but I digress.

Bob over there always has a shot of bourbon and a light beer. Shawn orders two Budweisers and takes both of them to the dartboard, where half his throws end up in the plaster. And then there's Davis Price.

Davis, who comes in here damn near every day. Davis, who requests the television be set on CNN rather than sports. Since he's the most common of our regulars (he has a seat at the bar he claims is "his"), one of our three TVs is always tuned just for him. He orders a bottle of Sam Adams and keeps his eyes glued to the television in between trading barbs with me.

I can handle him. It's his version of dipping my pigtailed into the ink to get my attention. But here's the kicker.

Lately he has more of my attention than I'd like him to have.

Remember when I described Gregg and couldn't quite put the pieces of his face together? Davis Price is another beast.

You could blindfold me and I could describe him to one of those artists who draw criminals, and it'd be like looking at a photo of Davis when he was done.

See? Too much attention.

The coping mechanism I've chosen is *antagonism*.

"Another?" I sweep by him, clean glasses in hand, and set them upside down on a shelf behind the bar. The key is to pretend that a shiver of awareness didn't just shock the air between us when I swept by.

"Yeah," he answers, eyes on the TV. Despite his fine visage being burned in my memory, I take advantage of his averted attention to check him out while I uncap his beverage.

He wears his standard attire: a pressed, expensive suit. He's tall yet fills out the jacket with a set of deceptively strong shoulders. I've seen them for myself on the rare occasion when he slips that jacket off—the way his rounded muscles press against a crisp oxford shirt. I've never considered myself a "shoulder girl," but laying eyes on his physique has a way of making me wonder what he might look like *not* wearing pressed cotton.

Not wearing anything.

Davis's hair is in sandy brown disarray like someone just ran her fingers through it in every direction. Given that he's not shy about taking a woman home from McGreevy's, that's not surprising. But I'd like to think he did it himself, while hunkered over his office desk, working hard to crunch the numbers as a...whatever he does with stocks. I glance at the television and the scrolling numbers.

Gibberish to me.

I plunk the beer bottle down in front of him. I don't ask him if there'll be anything else, because if there is, he'll yell. I've made it halfway to the sink when I hear him do just that.

“Gracie Lou!”

That's not *exactly* my name. Grace is my name. He added the flair. Gracie Lou has a cute dinerish sound to it, doesn't it? The nickname has the added bonus of reminding me why I don't see Davis as even a Mr. Right Now. The expiration date with us has already passed. At least that's what I'm telling myself.

I turn to look over my shoulder and find his full lips pulled into a frown. His thick, dark brows center over smoky gray eyes. This grouchy expression does little to dampen his attractiveness.

When he doesn't say more, I sigh and pace back to him. That's new. I never go to him unless it's on my time.

Or maybe I'm overanalyzing.

“Your hair's different.” He's still frowning.

“So?” It takes everything in me not to reach up and touch the ringlet I can see out of the corner of my eye. I don't need Davis's approval just because I bought a new curling iron and soft-hold hairspray I wanted to try out.

“So?” He tilts his head and his frown deepens. “You have a date or something?” Ah, this will be fun. I give him a slow, devil-may-care blink and smirk. “Maybe.”

I don't have a date unless I give Two-Dollar Gregg a call. I go on dates every once in a while. The men I date stick around at least twice as long as Davis's flavor of the week, but he's got me lapped in frequency.

Davis nods, sips his beer, and rakes a glance down my rhinestone T-shirt and tight black jeans. The rhinestones match the glinting diamond stud in my right nostril. Oh, and there are a few tasteful, usually hidden tattoos.

Even if Davis and I had more than a passing curiosity about each other, I know for a fact that Suit & Tie prefers his women in pearls, not rhinestones. Loose pastels, not skintight black skinny jeans; and without ornamental piercings or ink.

Oh well. At least Gregg liked me.

DAVIS

Excitement is overrated. Wait. Hear me out.

Excitement has a way of hiding in sheep's clothing. It manifests itself as a charge of recognition in the air, revving your pulse. Tingling your balls. Promising a damn good time. But underneath that damn good time there's danger.

Which is exactly what makes excitement so exciting. Grace Buchanan *excites* me.

I don't like that Grace Buchanan excites me.

Let's say I've had a brush with that type of danger. I'm not looking to get burned again. It's like the one time you try to light the grill using too much kerosene. The reward for your stupidity is no eyebrows. So, if you're smart, you don't go there again.

I'm smart.

I date. A lot. The women I date are...not exciting. This is a recent epiphany, so bear with me. When I first started dating for sport, there was excitement. Then the challenge fizzled out, and what was left was predictability. Predictability is a lot of things—I'm a big fan—but predictability could never be mistaken for excitement.

The women I date are blond. They're sophisticated and fun. They have goals and dreams and wishes and desires. But our handful of nights spent together aren't about scratching the surface of what makes them tick. The women I date want an itch scratched, just not that one. It's the naked, horizontal kind of itch.

I don't get to know them and they don't get to know me, and most of the time things end amicably—oftentimes before they get started. That's the way it's been for several years and it's completely fine.

Or I should say it *was* completely fine.

Along came Grace and suddenly “fine” is starting to look a lot like “routine.” Routine, like predictability, isn't negative. Routine is how I measure and live my life on a day-to-day basis. *Routine* I understand. *Routine* I can control.

I shake my head as the redheaded bartender pulls a beer tap and throws a casual glance toward the door, purposely looking past me. There's nothing controlled or routine or predictable about that one.

Her hair is always red, but sometimes it's auburn, other times Crayola red, other times carrot. Her clothes vary from rock-and-roll to retro to casual jeans and tee. I take that back. There are a few things about Grace that do not change. The diamond in her nose that's too tiny to notice until it catches the light just right, and the tattoo I've spotted on the back of her

right shoulder, trickling down her biceps on her right arm. Roses. Pink and red intermixed with a symphony of green leaves.

She's wearing a shirt that covers every inch of the ink—
Wait.

She shifts and the corner of a leaf makes itself known. If there are more tattoos hidden under her clothes, I've yet to catch a glimpse of them. Unless they're in spots inappropriate to share in public.

Fuck, that's a nice thought.

I've tried convincing myself that Grace is nothing but a collection of perfect physical attributes. From shapely thighs to a mouthwatering pair of breasts to the feisty glint in her eye. Mark my words: She's a girl who chews men up and spits them out for fun.

Grace is hot in such a way that a man could be blind in both eyes and still notice her. It's impossible to ignore the way she carries herself. Confidence straightens her back as her gaze finds my eyes, challenging me to a staring contest she knows I'll refuse to lose. Nothing's as attractive as the way her voice dips to a husky alto when she's serious or lilts into laughter when she's not. Like when she's giving me shit for an offside remark I lob at her.

To cope with the obvious sexual tension, we've devolved. She's not interested in a stiff suit who watches CNN, and I can't take her home. That means we can't pound out the tension brewing between us in a marathon of sweaty, no-holds-barred sex, so instead we pick at each other like competing fowl.

Why can't I take her home for a sex marathon, you ask?
The short answer: self-preservation.

The shallow answer: I don't date redheads. I did once and decided never to go there again. DO NOT ATTEMPT may as well be tattooed across Grace's smooth lower back. It's not. I checked.

I'm not one of those guys who has a "type." I understand that hair color does not the woman make. Let's call it a preference. A component of the routine. It's worked well for me, so why break stride?

As I think this, my eyes venture back to Grace. I never thought of myself as a superstitious guy, but for this "black cat" I'll make an exception.

As fun as it would be to let her devour me like a praying mantis postcoitus, her brand of fiery excitement and unpredictability could disturb the smooth surface of my carefully maintained Zen. That I can't allow. I play by my own set of rules and have for some time.

Call it a precaution that I only date blondes.

I'll settle for skipping over the fun part of my and Grace's relationship (sex) and bantering with her like a couple who are sick to death of each other. The problem is the banter is starting to feel a lot like foreplay, and her brand of seduction has the other girls I date paling in comparison. The last girl who shared my bed? Boring. *Bo-ring*.

Grace strikes me as a woman who couldn't be boring if she tried—even if she were doing her taxes while attending a talk about investment logic for sustainability.

On second thought, I love numbers. I might find that kinky.

She struts by me again—she has to since my seat is in the dead middle of her bar—and I continue where I left off. “Where is your date taking you? Tell me it isn’t that jerk-off who wrote his phone number on the dollar bill.”

She flicks me a glance beneath a slick of black eyeliner that makes her irises appear an explosive shade of green. Or maybe it’s me who brings out that particular shade. I smile at the thought.

“Do you really think I’d date that guy?”

I don’t. She deserves better and we both know it. “So. Where is your mystery date taking you?”

“Guess.” The catlike curve of her lips tells me she wants to play. I’m the mouse in this scenario, but what the hell? I’ll give chase.

“Domaine.” It’s the fanciest restaurant I can think of.

“Nope.” She pops her *P* and I watch her red mouth with a hint of jealousy for whatever louse she’s going out with tonight. I bet Gracie can *kiss*.

“So not a classy guy, then.” I take a drink of my Sam Adams and glance at the TV.

“If by ‘classy’ you mean uptight, no.” She surveys my suit and tie with a sneer. “Definitely not the business type.”

I smirk, plotting my comeback.

“You’re more a fan of the guy living in Mom’s basement, then? Is he taking you to a free concert at Bicentennial Park? Do you have to pay for your own drinks?”

A super slow blink precedes her comment: “Wrong again.”

She shakes her head, sending a rogue curl brushing one round, delicate cheek. I *really* like this look on her. Typically she wears her hair in big waves that brush her shoulders, but her curls are more pronounced today. And the way they move when she moves suggests they feel like silk.

Don't go there.

“He lives alone,” she helpfully clarifies.

I narrow my eyes, trying to think of where to guess next. There are several options, but one stands out the most, and I don't like it. At all.

“His house?” I grumble.

“Bingo!” She grins. “There's nothing quite like a man who can cook, is there? I mean, unless it's a man who knows what he's doing”—she winks, black lashes hiding one clover green iris— “in the bedroom.” She wiggles away in a pair of black jeans hugging her ass. I grind my back teeth together. I bet every inch of her creamy, smooth skin tastes like cotton candy.

“I can cook,” I mumble as a surge of competitiveness rolls through me. I was the one who built a wall between Grace and me in the first place. It wasn't too long ago that my buddy Vince and I were sitting here at this very bar and he told me to ask her out. Of course he had to know I wouldn't. He assumed the obvious: redhead. But Grace's hair color is an excuse.

It's the rest of her that's a risk.

Risk isn't something I shy away from in business. My livelihood is the volatile vocation of stock analyst. I frown at my competing thoughts.

I watch Grace walk, the rhythmic sway of her hips and the gentle curve of her small shoulders producing infinite images of what she looks like out of her clothes and, say, on my lap.

She isn't a *safe* risk. Something tells me if I took a shot with her, I'd ride her all the way down until I was hollow inside.

Been there. Done that. Don't need a repeat.

"Be careful out there, Gracie Lou," I call, but I keep my eyes on the screen overhead as the stocks scroll across the bottom. "Men are predators."

"Aw, that's sweet, Davis." I like the way she says my name—in a familiar, warm way. There is something about her that suggests she's fragile beneath her "I am woman" exterior.

She continues stacking glasses upside down on the shelf at the back of the bar, her voice going hard. "You should know better than anyone that I can handle myself."

I do know that. I've seen her thwart many an advance. She's good at it, and typically the bonehead trying to take her home doesn't realize he's getting a professional brush-off. Sometimes she uses the boyfriend excuse; other times she changes the subject so swiftly the dolt doesn't know what hit him.

One hour later, I'm wondering which blow-off she'll deliver to the braying jackass a foot from my right elbow.

"Gracie Lou," I interrupt, wagging my empty bottle.

She's leaning on the bar, cleavage between two perfect C-cups on display. She slides me a glance before returning her attention to the blocky guy standing in front of her. I don't care that she's flirting, but I don't like being second place to a man of such low caliber.

"Gracie Lou. That's a pretty name," the jackass tells her, his hands resting on the bar.

“Just Grace.”

“Okay, *Just* Grace. I’m *Just* Tim.”

Of course he is. What a fucking moron. My hand tightens around the empty bottle.

“I have a bet with my pals over there”—he gestures to the dartboards, where three chinos-and-button-downs stand with their fancy IPAs in hand—“that you can tie a cherry stem into a knot with your tongue.”

“You don’t say.” Grace’s eyes flash the subtlest warning, but Tim doesn’t pick up on it.

“I say you can, and they say you can’t. If you can, and you show me right now, I’ll go over there, collect my winnings, and split them with you fifty-fifty.”

Another glance at his buddies tells me he’s lying. They’re not watching him at all, which means there’s no such bet and Tim is an asshole. Grace tilts her head as if she’s considering, but her eyes flick back to his pals. She’s figured out the same thing I have. I smother a smile with the mouth of my beer bottle and turn my attention to the TV.

Tim leans in and drops his voice, which I assume is an effort to increase his sex appeal. “There’s an even bigger tip in it for you if you do it nice and slow.”

All right. That’s it.

I’m off my barstool so fast, Tim doesn’t see me coming. He rocks in place, leaning away from my height, though he’s got me in width.

“How about she ties your dick into a knot and I’ll double whatever you’re offering?” I say, unable to take his jackassery any longer.

Tim holds both hands in front of him as a shaky smile finds his mouth. “Hey, buddy, I didn’t know she was your girl.”

I don’t confirm or deny, but I do lean closer, hovering over him until he gets my point.

“Grace, my apologies.” Tim clears his throat and tries to ignore me, which he finds challenging since I’m invading his personal space. “Just the drinks, then.”

She uncaps two bottles and he hands her a twenty-dollar bill, which Grace stuffs into the cash register, coming out with eight dollars in change. She puts the cash on the bar in front of him. Tim shifts away as he takes his beers and wisely mutters, “Keep it,” before hustling back to his friends.

I earn a smile from Grace for my bravery. We lock eyes for a lingering moment, which makes every second of that interaction worth it. When she blinks, I return to my seat. “*Now* can I have my beer?”

“I didn’t know I was *your* girl either.” Grace chuckles and serves me another Sam Adams. “I could’ve handled him.”

“The sooner he went away, the sooner I could get a refill,” I explain as I tip the bottle to my lips.

Her coy smile suggests she knows my refill wasn’t the only thing on my mind. Part of me has started to think of Grace as mine—at least in a superficial sense.

I fix my eyes on the TV, not giving her confirmation that she’s figured me out. “Thanks, Davis.” I hear the smile in her voice.

I wait until she walks to the other end of the bar to reply. “You’re welcome, Gracie.”

Buy Arm Candy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Lemmon is a former job-hopper who resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dogs. She holds a degree in graphic design currently gathering dust in an impressive frame. When she's not writing emotionally-charged stories, she spends her time drawing, drinking coffee, and laughing with friends. Her motto is *Read for fun*, and she believes we should all do more of what makes us happy.

Jessica Lemmon's romance novels have been praised as "purely delicious fun" and "lavish, indulgence-fueled romance" by *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as "wonderfully entertaining" and "a whole lot of fun!" by RT Book Reviews. She is the bestselling author of over forty books that have been translated into a dozen languages and sold in over 30 different countries worldwide, with her debut novel releasing in January of 2013.

Her work has been honored with awards such as a *Library Journal* starred review, an RT Top Pick!, Apple Books Best Book of the Month, and Amazon Best Book of the Month. She has been recommended by *USA Today* and *NPR.com*, and has achieved the rank of #1 bestseller on Nook as well as earned a seal of excellence nomination from RT Book Reviews.

Through witty banter and fun, realistic situations and characters you'll want to "sit down and have a drink with," Jessica tackles tough relationship issues and

complicated human emotions while delivering a deep, satisfying experience for readers.



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