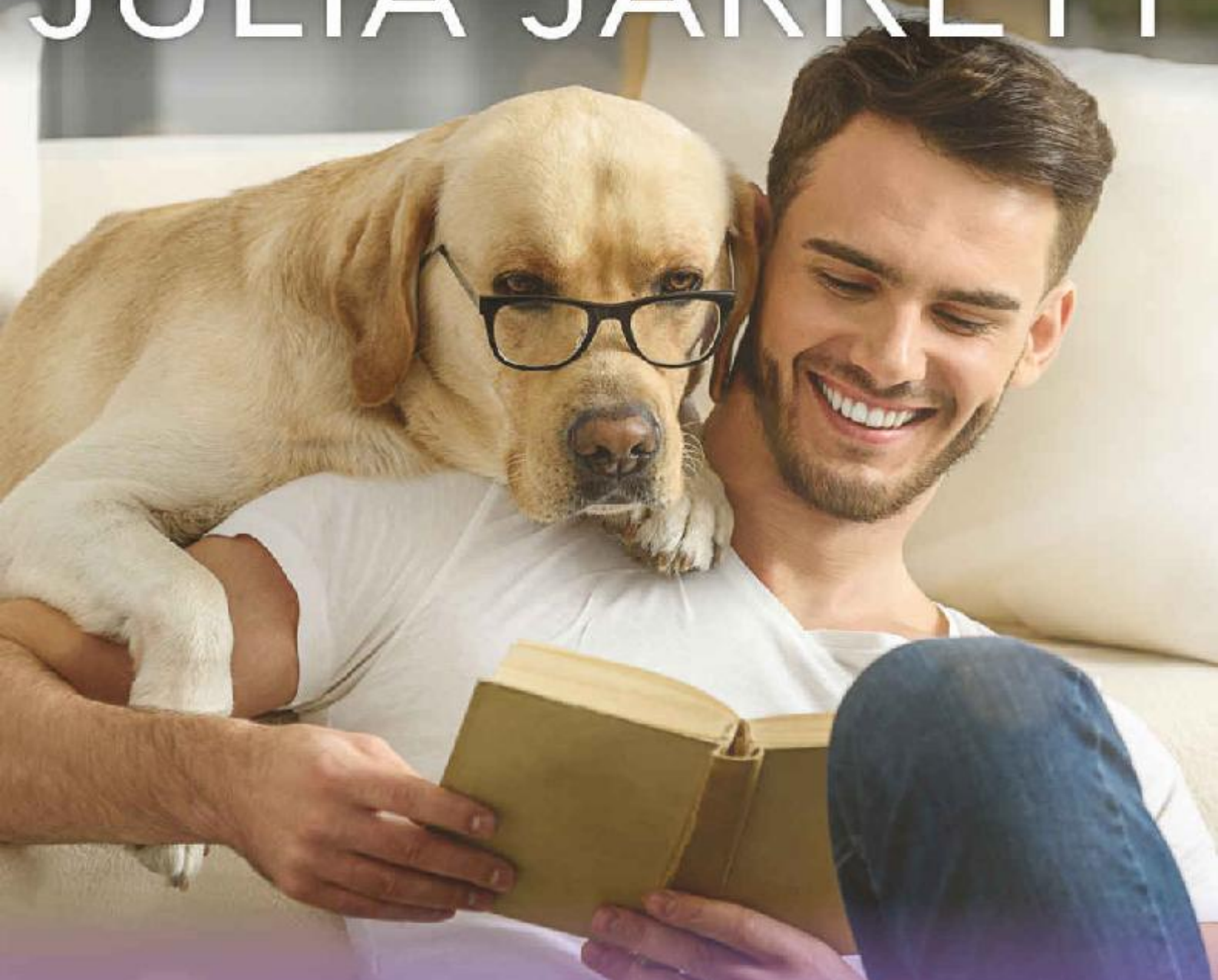


JULIA JARRETT



LOVE AND
Leashes



LOVE AND LEASHES

A DOGWOOD COVE NOVELLA

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PROLOGUE

Jensen

I'm so bored.

Yeah, I know, every junior in high school thinks that in English Lit class. The only good part about it is that Tatyana Wilson sits to the side and in front of me, the perfect angle for me to look at her when she doesn't know it. She's so pretty. Prettiest girl in school. Too bad every other dude in here thinks that as well. I don't have a chance, even if I am on the football team.

The bell finally rings and I toss my books into my bag. Biology is next, a class I hate even more than English Lit. The truth is, I like literature. I could even see myself teaching it someday. I'd sure as shit be more interesting than Mrs. Maltmore. Old Malty is the most boring teacher in the entire goddamn world. I swear, she could make watching paint dry seem interesting.

When I walk into the biology lab, the seat next to mine, which has been empty all semester, isn't empty anymore. And the person there makes my heart stop. Like, legit, I think I have a heart attack looking at her.

Long blonde hair falls down her back. She's sitting with her head tilted slightly to the side so I can see her face, and she's hot. Like, natural, girl next door hot. Damn.

Taking my seat gingerly to try and hide my body's annoying reaction to her, I give her a quick nod of my head in greeting.

"Hi, I'm Kelly. I'm new here. But that's obvious, isn't it? Shoot, I'm already being awkward. Sorry. Umm, can I start again? Hi, I'm Kelly."

My head bounces up at her rambling, my mouth falling slightly open at her voice. It's...it's freaking musical. And that's not how I've ever described anyone, ever, in my entire seventeen years of life. Weird.

"H-hey," I stammer, gulping quickly. Shit, get it together, man. "I'm Jensen."

Kelly smiles, and it blinds me. "Nice to meet you. I hate biology; hate to tell you, but you're stuck with a dud of a lab partner."

Her open honesty makes me relax. "S'okay, I hate it, too. But Mr. Welch is a cool teacher."

"That's good. So, what's fun to do around here?"



My friendship with Kelly was cemented in that biology class through whispered jokes, written notes, and easy smiles. My initial attraction to her never faded, but as soon as I learned she had a boyfriend back home where she moved from, I forced those thoughts aside. Besides, Kelly never gave any indication she thought of me as anything more than a friend. So, I was content, figuring we could be those cool people who can handle being friends and not letting it get weird. You know, like Joey and Dawson from that stupid show some of the girls in my class watch.

But everything almost changed one day in the spring. I found Kelly sitting in the bleachers during our study period, and she was crying.

“Kel? What’s wrong?” I jog up the few rows to where she sits as she wipes her sleeve across her eyes.

“Sorry. I know we were meant to meet in the library. I just, umm, I just needed some air.”

“That’s okay.” I fidget in my seat. I don’t know what the hell to do right now. Kelly’s never cried in front of me. Slowly, I put my hand over hers and squeeze. She gives me a watery smile, then lets her head fall to the side to land on my shoulder. I move my arm around her shoulders. “What’s going on?”

“Kyle broke up with me.”

My heart thumps loudly in my chest at those words. Kyle, the boyfriend from her old school. I met the guy once, he seemed okay, but he wasn't exactly a fan of us being friends.

“He said he didn't want to do long distance anymore. I tried to convince him it wasn't so bad, but he refused to listen. I think he's cheating on me.” Kelly sniffs loudly. “But you know what, good riddance. He was a bad kisser, anyway.”

A laugh escapes me. “Really? You dated him for like, a year, and he was a bad kisser?”

She lifts her head and I immediately miss the feel of her tucked against me. I've been careful not to get too close to her and always keep things on the side of friendship. But this changes things.

“Yeah, the worst. He was a total guppy, you know?” She opens her mouth widely and makes a stupid face, and we both start laughing. That's better. Kelly should always be happy. It's who she is.

She wipes at her face again, then turns on the bench to face me. “Thanks, J. You always make me feel better somehow.”

I just shrug. “My job as best friend is done. Can we study French now?” I need the distraction of conjugating verbs to stop myself from doing something I shouldn't. Like kiss my best friend.

Then again, maybe this is my shot. She's single. I'm single.

This is it.

I look up to see Kelly rummaging in her backpack.

“Kel,” I say, but her name comes out hoarse across my lips. She looks at me with that soft, perfect smile that’s just mine. I don’t think about it. I lean in, wrap my hand around the back of her neck, and press my lips to hers. I feel her gasp against my mouth, but then she melts into me, and everything around us ceases to exist.

But apparently, heaven can’t last forever because after a minute of pure bliss, Kelly pulls back. I know what she’s going to say before she even says it.

“Jensen, I... We... You’re my best friend. I kind of need just that for now. Okay?” She looks at me worriedly, and I know it’s on me to reassure her that the kiss didn’t mean anything. That our friendship is fine, even if a part of me is dying at the sense of rejection I’m feeling.

“Of course. We’re fine. I just figured you needed a good kiss after a year of duds, that’s all.” I nudge her with my shoulder and force a wide grin on my face. “Don’t read too much into it, we’re friends, I was doing you a favour.”

The relief on her face is another arrow to my heart. “A favour, huh? Yeah, sure.”

“C’mon. Study period’s almost over and I still don’t know the different tenses for conjugating *cache*.” The irony that the verb I’m stuck on is the French word meaning *to hide*, just like I’m hiding my feelings for Kelly, isn’t lost on me. But I’m an expert at ignoring those by now. If she needs a friend, then that’s what she’ll get.

Because Kelly is the kind of person who deserves anything and everything in life. And that's what I want to give her.

Even if I wish she wanted everything with me.

CHAPTER ONE

Kelly

“Toffee peanut butter chip and triple chocolate.”

My boss licks her lips. Literally, wiping away drool as I tell her the cookie flavours I plan on baking today.

“I was also thinking of experimenting next week with a play on German chocolate cake. Chocolate cookie with some sort of caramel coconut topping.” I smirk as Mila Monroe’s jaw drops open.

“Are you shitting me, Kelly? Is that... Can you... Seriously?”

Okay, so maybe I’m playing dirty. I happen to know German chocolate cake is Mila’s favourite, just the same way I know her boyfriend, Jackson — who happens to be every woman’s dream as the sexy town vet here in Dogwood Cove — is planning on using one of my cookies to propose to Mila next week.

“I can, and I will. Just need to sort out the topping. Anyway, back to today. How many dozen does the PTA need for their meeting tonight?”

Mila and I get to work figuring out the details for our work day. She’s such a freaking amazing boss; I couldn’t ask for anyone better. The fact that we’re friends? A total bonus. But I also know she needs me, not just as a manager for The Nutty Muffin bakery, but also as the only person she’ll allow to bake the cookies we serve here. The last time Mila tried to make a cookie, our teeth almost cracked on the first bite.

“Alright, spill. What’s new in the big city?” Mila folds her arms across her chest and leans against the freshly cleaned counter after we finally get the first batch of everything in the oven.

“Westport is hardly the big city,” I reply as I wash my hands.

“It’s bigger than Dogwood Cove, and you’re avoiding the question. Had any hot dates lately?”

I snort out a laugh at that. “Please. You know my life revolves around the bakery.”

Mila groans. “Noooo. You need a life, Kell!”

“Why? I learned from the master of all workaholics.” I give her a pointed glare. “Not all of us are lucky enough to fall in love with our dog’s veterinarian.”

“You don’t have a dog. Maybe that’s the problem, you need a dog!”

“I don’t need a dog.” The pout on her face is comical and has me rolling my eyes in return. Ever since Mila adopted Milo and decided to champion the crusade for Dogwood Cove to have its own animal shelter, she’s become obsessed with all of her friends needing pets. Dogs in particular. Because although she likes her boyfriend’s cat just fine, Mila is #teamdog all the way.

“Come on, boss. Back to work.”

“Fine. I’m just going to say one thing. A fabulous woman like yourself shouldn’t be spending every night alone at home. If you don’t want to date, fine, I get that. But maybe come back here sometimes for yoga? Or book club? Now that Paige has had her horizons broadened by Wyatt, her discussion questions are even more entertaining.” Mila waggles her eyebrows suggestively, which makes sense given her comment about her friend Paige. Paige is the super smart owner of the bookstore next door. And up until a few months ago, she was also pretty straightlaced. That changed when she fell in love with Wyatt, her hunky, tattooed boyfriend.

“I’ll think about it.”

Apparently that’s enough for Mila because she finally lets me get back to work. The rest of the morning flies by in a nonstop blur of baking, handling staffing issues, and ordering ingredients for next week. By the time I’m finished with my work day in the early afternoon, I’m exhausted. I never expected to be offered the position of manager at The Nutty Muffin, but when Mila opened Camille’s, the café she named

after her mom, she asked if I would be willing to step up. It meant slowing down my custom cookie business to almost nothing, but better benefits and a more steady income was worth the sacrifice.

The trade off, however, is a longer day before I can get a nap. Waking up at four o'clock in the morning to be at the bakery by five wasn't so bad when I was off before noon, and I could go home and nap before dealing with any custom orders. Now I'm here until at least two in the afternoon, sometimes later, depending on what's going on.

The days are long, but I love my job. And it's not like I have anything or anyone waiting for me at home.

My phone vibrates with an incoming text just as I'm making a coffee to take home. Mila teases me about my plain old coffee with cream, but I like the simplicity of it.

JENSEN: I know I arrive tomorrow and I'm totally gonna regret this if you actually say you don't want us... But are you SURE you're okay with me and Oliver crashing at your house for a while?

The message from Jensen Porter, my best friend since high school, shouldn't make my breath catch like it does. That's a dangerous path I can't go down, especially not with him soon to be living in my house for a month.

KELLY: If only you could see how far back I'm rolling my eyes right now...

KELLY: I wouldn't have offered if I didn't mean it.

JENSEN: Okay. Sorry. I really appreciate this Kell. I'm buying a giant bag of kettle corn for you on my way to the ferry tomorrow.

The man knows what I like, that's for sure. My mouth waters just thinking of the kettle corn you can only get on the mainland.

KELLY: Good. You won't be allowed in without it. Ollie can stay, but not you.

JENSEN: Nice to know I rate below my dog.

KELLY: I mean, duh.

“What's got you smiling so wide?”

I jump. “Jesus, Mila, you need freaking bells on or something.”

“Why, got something to hide, Ms. Erickson?” Mila arches one eyebrow at me. It's a little creepy how good she is at that.

“No,” I answer quickly, too quickly.

“Oh my God! Yes, you do. Who were you texting, Kelly?”

“Nobody,” I say defensively, crushing my phone to my chest. “Just my best friend who's coming to stay with me for a while.”

“Uh huh, do I get all weird and defensive when I text Summer? No, I do not. Try again.” Her eyes narrow, then widen. “Wait, is this high school guy? The one you kissed in high school and thought it was love at first sight, only for him to fall for the head cheerleader? I thought he was married!”

I wince. “I will never drink tequila around you again. It’s way too much of a truth serum.” Relaxing my death grip on my phone, I take in a deep breath. “Yes, it’s Jensen. No, I did *not* think it was love at first sight, I just said that I never felt that way after kissing someone. And no, he isn’t married anymore. That’s why he’s coming to stay, he’s moving to Westport to start teaching at the middle school.”

Mila squeals. Like, legit, squeals and claps her hands. It’s so ridiculous, and I need to set her straight.

“Would you calm down, crazy lady? Nothing is going to happen!”

But there’s no stopping her.

“I don’t believe that for a second. He’s heartbroken, and he needs his best friend to save him. It’s a freaking Hallmark movie come to life. I can see it now, in the middle of the night, you hear a scary noise, you run and jump into his arms — *Oh Jensen, save me!*

“You are out of your mind.” Rolling my eyes, I pick up my rapidly cooling coffee, my phone, and my keys, making my way to the back door of the bakery. “I’ll see you tomorrow, you nut job.”

“Serious question!” Mila yells after me and I stop and turn to her. “Does he have a dog?”



It's just now dawning on me that I need to keep Jensen away from Mila, and all of my Dogwood Cove friends, for as long as possible. Which actually should be pretty easy, since I'm assuming he'll be busy apartment hunting and getting ready for the school year that starts in just over a month. I'll make sure anything we do together is far away from the bakery, and far away from Mila's observant eyes. She'll see the truth the second she sees me around him.

The truth is, everyone *except* Jensen knows I've been in love with him forever. How he has stayed oblivious to my awkward feelings, I do not know. And the alternative? That he knows I wish we were more than friends, but doesn't feel the same way, so he ignores it? I can't consider that. Nope, I'll stay in my little bubble of denial where I have myself convinced he thinks I'm fine being just friends.

We met as teenagers when my parents moved me to his school in the small suburb of Vancouver where my mom's job was at the hospital. Paired up for biology, we hit it off instantly. At first, it really was just friendship. I was dating a guy from my old school, but that ended rapidly when we realized how difficult long distance was for two teenagers. Unfortunately, by the time I was single, our relationship was solidly in the friend zone. Then, in senior year, Jensen started dating Tatyana. She was not my biggest fan, and for a while we didn't get to hang out much because Jensen was obsessed with his new girlfriend, and she did *not* like him spending time with me.

But eventually she loosened up; I guess she saw there was no hope for anything romantic between us, given my status as resident tomboy athlete, and the fact that we were opposites in so many ways. Tatyana was the stereotypical cheerleader, I was the captain of the softball team and played basketball in the winter. She was petite, with dark hair and big brown eyes, and always had immaculate hair and makeup working for her. I was athletic and strong, with blonde hair that was always up in a ponytail, and makeup was a foreign concept to me. I've never had a problem with body image, but it was obvious we were different, just as it was obvious where Jensen's tastes lie.

When they broke up in university, my mom, who had always rooted for Jensen and I to date, tried to convince me it was my chance. But I had been seeing a really great guy from culinary school and didn't want to mess things up with him, especially given that Jensen had never *ever* even hinted at being interested in me.

No one in our town was surprised when Jensen and Tatyana got back together and married each other fresh out of university. Hell, I even went to their wedding, and no, I did *not* secretly wish it was me standing up there with him. Nope. Not even a little.

Okay, maybe just once or twice.

Fast forward a few years to when Jensen and Tatyana's marriage ended pretty spectacularly this past winter, when she announced she had fallen in love with her personal trainer and wanted a divorce.

I don't blame Jensen for wanting to get away from everything and everyone that reminds him of his marriage and the life he had. So when he came to Vancouver Island for a visit in the spring and told me he wanted to move to Westport, what else could I do but offer myself up as temporary roommate and relocation assistant?

We've never lived together, but it shouldn't be a problem. We get along great, and his dog, Oliver, is easily my favourite animal.

I just can't let Mila meet him.

Ever.

CHAPTER TWO

Jensen

“Not the front seat, Ollie, come on, man!” I reach in and grab his collar, tugging on it to encourage him to get out. After giving me what can only be described as a withering glare, my lab reluctantly hops out of the front seat of my truck and walks oh so slowly around to the open back door. “Take your time, bud, not like we have a ferry to catch or anything.” I close the door on him and make my way back to the driver’s side. “Man’s best friend? More like man’s biggest pain in the ass,” I mutter under my breath, but I don’t mean it, and Oliver knows it, the damn dog. Because as soon as I’m seated, he puts his nose down on the center console and pushes it against my elbow. “Yeah, yeah, good boy.” I pet his head affectionately. The truth is, without Oliver, life would be boring and quiet. For four years he’s been my sidekick — I even had him certified as a therapy dog so he could come to work with me at the middle school. It’s amazing how easily preteens will set

aside their issues, open up, and try new things when they've got a cuddly dog at their side.

The drive to the ferry terminal is traffic free, thank fuck, and we make it for our reservation. My ex-wife hated my deep-seated need to be early for everything, calling me a control freak and uptight more than once. That's not the case, I just have a healthy respect for schedules and appreciate it when others do, too. Our frustration over stupid things like that should have been a minor inconvenience, at most. But when it was layered on top of so many other issues, well, let's just say finding out she was in love with Ivan, her personal trainer, it was more of a relief than it should have been. I was just happy she didn't fight me on custody of Oliver in the divorce.

Yes, I offered a custody agreement to her, but she signed away her rights to him with nothing more than a roll of her eyes.

What can I say, I'm a dog dad through and through.

Once we're on the ferry, I let Oliver come up and sit in the front with me. Lifting the center console, he lays down on the bench seat with a huff and rests his head on my lap. I open up my phone and flip through the depressing news headlines quickly. God, when will this world get its shit together...just as I go to start a new round of Candy Crush, my phone rings with a FaceTime call from Kelly. Instantly my lips turn up in a smile.

"If you're calling to tell me you've changed your mind, it's too damn late. We're on the ferry," I say, half teasingly. The

other half of me can't stop worrying that I've asked too much of my friend. After all, what woman willingly puts up with her newly divorced friend and his dog for an undisclosed amount of time? Saint Kelly, that's who. When I determined I'd need a home base while I apartment hunt, she didn't hesitate to offer her spare bedroom. We've never lived together. Hell, we've never even spent the night in the same house before. So this could be interesting.

What if she's one of those annoying people that never shuts off the light when she leaves a room? Or leaves her dirty dishes in the sink for days? What if she can't stand the smell of my body wash, or if I forget to put the seat down on the toilet?

This could ruin our friendship forever. Or, I could be majorly overreacting. Yeah, it's probably the latter.

“Shut up, J, I have a very important question.”

I straighten in my seat, Ollie lifting his head in question. “What's up?”

“Does Oliver like beef or chicken treats better?” She holds up two bags with her other hand, and I clue in to the fact that she's at a pet store. As if the shelves behind her didn't give it away...

“Seriously, Kell?” I arch an eyebrow at her. “He's a dog, he likes food.”

“Jensen, come on! I want him to settle in and be comfortable at my house. You know what, forget it, I'll buy

both. Now, on to toys. Does he like to play tug of war or fetch better?”

“Uh,” I say, my gaze dropping down to my dog, who’s currently snoring on my lap, my mind blank. Something about the fact that Kelly is so concerned with my *dog’s* well-being hits me in a weird way. Tatyana liked Oliver well enough, but it was clear from the outset that he was my dog, not hers. Not even ours. “He likes both.”

“Okay, I’ll get both. Does he need a new bed?”

“No, he does not. Kelly, listen to me carefully.” I put on as serious a face as I can. “Buy the treats, fuck, buy a toy, if you insist. But then, walk out of the pet store. Ollie doesn’t need anything. He’s fine, I swear.”

Kelly pouts and I hide my smirk.

“Fine. But if Oliver isn’t happy at Auntie Kelly’s house, then it’s your fault.”

“Auntie Kelly?” My grin sneaks past my lips, and soon Kelly’s shaking her head and laughing as well.

“Yeah, yeah, okay, I’m a weirdo. I just want him to like staying at my house.”

“He’s a dog, Kelly, he’ll be fine as long as he’s fed,” I reassure her, pointing the phone down at Ollie, who’s still passed out on the seat beside me. “Now leave the pet store, go home, and enjoy your last few hours without dog fur everywhere.”

Her smile widens, and it lights up her whole face. *She's pretty.* I've always known this, but I guess I'm seeing her differently now. And that's dangerous.

We hang up and I go back to Candy Crush, but my head isn't in it. I'm on a trip down memory lane, remembering moments from mine and Kelly's past that I'd pushed away for years. After all, it isn't exactly appropriate to remember the one kiss you shared with your best friend during study period while you're still married to a woman who never liked her in the first place.



“Here we are, bud, now you be nice to Kelly, okay? Charm her the way you do everyone else.”

Ollie doesn't answer from the back seat as I pull in the driveway of Kelly's small house. It's cute, with white shutters around the windows, and a small porch that has a rocking chair on it. I park beside her bright red car and shut the engine off as the front door opens, and she steps out with a big smile.

I climb down from the truck, leaving Oliver inside, and close the distance between us before picking her up in a big hug.

“Put me down, I wanna see Ollie!” She laughs, swatting at my back.

“Nope, hug me first, then the dog,” I grumble. Fuck, she smells good. Like peaches. I try to be subtle as I turn my nose

to inhale again. This is bad. I put her down and take a step back to regain control. Shit. I can't go down this road with Kelly. I need her, and our friendship, too much. But there's no denying the shift in energy between us. We're adults, and we're both single at the same time.

But if Kelly feels anything she doesn't show it, walking quickly around me to open the back door of my truck.

"Hi, boy," she coos at my dog. "Oh, who's a handsome dog? You are! Yes, you are!"

Ollie eats up all of her affection, licking her hands and nuzzling into her touch. He's such a needy dog..

"Alright, alright. Let's go inside," I joke, reaching around her to clip his leash on. He's not one to run away, but he's also in an unfamiliar place, so better safe than sorry. "Can I let him off his leash in the backyard?"

"Yup, this way." Kelly leads us around the side of the house and opens a gate. I unclip Ollie's leash, and he takes off, sniffing all around. We watch him for a second and I'm all too aware of our proximity. Good grief, I should be able to control myself better than this. I'm chalking up my reaction to the fact that I haven't had sex in way too long. That's all this is. Hormones, pheromones, whatever you want to call it. My dick is thinking for my brain right now, and I just need to shut it down.

Should be easy enough. I've gone close to fifteen years without having a problem being nothing more than friends

with Kelly. There's absolutely no reason that has to change now.

But when I look over at her and see the delighted smile on her face as she watches my dog play in her backyard, I realize something. High school Jensen missed his shot with Kelly, but grown-up Jensen wants another chance.

Now the question is — what the hell do I do about it?

CHAPTER THREE

Kelly

“I was looking up rental properties in the area — do you know Mila and Ethan Monroe? I guess they’re the couple to talk to about renting apartments in Dogwood Cove. That’s where you work, right?”

I choke on the laugh that bursts out of me. Jensen stops walking, rubbing my back with a concerned expression. Eventually, I catch my breath and try to figure out how to respond. There are just so many things wrong with what he just said.

“Yes, I know Mila and Ethan. They’re brother and sister, though, not a couple.”

Jensen barks out a laugh. “Shit. Glad you told me that before I called them and put my foot in my mouth.”

“But do you really want to live in Dogwood Cove and commute to Westport every day?” I hurry on, although, in

actual fact, the plan makes sense. Rentals in Westport are few and far between, and the cost of rent is going up. I've considered moving to Dogwood Cove myself a few times over the past six months.

"I figure you do it in reverse every day, so it can't be that bad. Although, it would be nice to not commute," Jensen muses as we continue walking. We left my house earlier to take Oliver out to stretch his legs after the ferry ride over. I was already in love with Jensen's dog; he's pretty much the cutest thing I've ever met, and his personality is hilarious. But seeing him and Jensen today, without Tatyana putting a damper on everything, he's just a big bumbling ball of joyful fur. The facial expressions he makes are like nothing I've ever seen on an animal, and sometimes I swear it's like he understands perfectly what Jensen is saying. When I mentioned the word walk, he smiled. Seriously, the darn dog smiled! And it's a good thing I ignored Jensen and bought all the toys at the store earlier because after a game of tug-of-war, I'm pretty sure I cemented my role as Ollie's favourite person.

"What are your plans for the rest of the summer?" I ask as Ollie lifts his leg on yet another bush.

"Aside from finding a place to live so I don't have to crash with you forever?"

His response shouldn't bother me, but it kind of does. "I'm happy to have you stay as long as you need, Jensen."

He wraps his free arm around my shoulders. "I know, Kell, but I don't want to overstay my welcome. That's all."

The affectionate gesture feels just a little bit too comfortable. I huff and shrug off his arm, stealing the leash from his other hand, and take off jogging down the street. Ollie lopes along with an excited woof.

“You can’t steal my dog, Kelly,” Jensen yells after us. I ignore him and just keep running. It’s a straight path, so there’s no hope of Jensen getting lost, but I need a little distance from the bizarre feelings mixing around in my head right now. It’s not like being physically attracted to Jensen is new for me, he’s a good-looking guy, always has been. But watching him settle into my home and seeing Ollie curl up on his bed in the living room caused something to click in place inside of me.



“Pizza, sushi, or Chinese tonight?” I pull out the three different menus and drop them on the counter in front of Jensen later that evening.

“Pizza, but only if you act like a rational human being and don’t put mushrooms on it.” He visibly shudders and I roll my eyes.

“There’s nothing wrong with mushrooms.”

“They grow underground, covered in shit, and some of them look like dicks. Everything is wrong with mushrooms,” he deadpans.

“Just because you can’t appreciate the joy of mushrooms doesn’t make them wrong,” I reply as I take two beers out of

the fridge and hand him one. “But fine, tonight, because it’s your first night here, no mushrooms.”

“Thank you.”

We clink our beers together and drink. A part of me marvels at just how easy it is between us, despite not spending as much time together in recent years, thanks to his marriage. This feels similar to high school and college when we would study together with pizza — and back then, pop instead of beer. There was never any awkwardness between us, no sexual tension to navigate. This is so familiar, yet also different. There’s a crackle of energy in the air that has never been there before.

I quickly drink down my beer and avoid thinking about it.

A couple of hours later, my stomach is full of pizza, and my fridge is empty of beer. Jensen and I are sprawled out on my couch, our heads at opposite ends and our feet sort of tangled in the middle. He can’t stop laughing about my descriptions of Mila’s cookie baking disasters, which weren’t all that funny, but the alcohol running through our systems makes it hilarious.

“So when are you going to put yourself out there and try to meet someone? I’m sure the ladies of Westport are ready for you to dazzle them.” *Oh God.* Why did I just say that? I can feel my face flushing with embarrassment the second the words leave my mouth.

Jensen scoffs, oblivious to my sudden discomfort. “I’m not. I don’t need to date. I just need to find an apartment, settle in

at work, and get my life back on track after hurricane Tatyana.”

“Nah, come on, you need to get out there and meet some new people.”

Stop! Abort! Why the hell am I pushing this? Sober Kelly wouldn't have pushed the whole dating thing, that's for sure, but drunk Kelly has less of a filter than the three-month-old Brita water pitcher in the back of my fridge. Apparently, I have an incessant need to poke at all the awkward things. Drunk Kelly is also a total masochist. I don't *want* Jensen to find a girlfriend, do I?

“Whatever. I have you and I have Oliver. If my best friend and my dog can't help me meet new people, then I'm destined to be alone,” Jensen says dramatically. He peers into the neck of his beer bottle. “My drink's empty. We need more.”

“Umm, there's no more beer, we drank it all.”

Jensen hops up from the couch. “Got any juice?”

“Not a clue,” is my cheerful reply. He just laughs and makes his way to the kitchen where I hear him rummaging around for a few minutes.

When he returns, his arms are full of two glasses with ice in them, a bottle of rum, and a bottle of tropical fruit juice I guess I had somewhere. My eyebrows lift. “Planning a party or something?”

“Yep, a party for two.”

“You know rum and juice is not a good combo for me...” I caution.

“The headache will be worth it, I promise.” Jensen turns what I call his puppy-dog eyes on me. Those eyes convinced me to go along with all kinds of stupid things when we were younger, from trying to sneak into a hockey game, to getting me to bake cookies for him way too often. “Nuh uh, no way, buddy. Not even that look is gonna get me to drink rum and juice.”

“Come on, Kell, please? I’ll let you...” His voice trails off, then his entire face twists into a grimace. “Fine, I’ll let you put up a profile for me on a singles site. Happy?”

Well, shit. No getting out of it now, I guess. I sit up and nod confidently. Or, at least, as confidently as I can. “Yes. Very. We’ll make you sound good, I promise.”

“I’m so gonna regret this,” he groans as I grab my laptop off the coffee table and open it up to one of the more popular dating sites.

“Here we go. This one, Left for Love, has a mobile app, so you can install it on your phone and look for women from anywhere.”

“Great,” comes his sarcastic reply.

I quickly set up his account, but keep the screen turned away when I upload a photo, despite his protests. I choose a recent one he sent me, one that I secretly drooled over — just

once, I swear — and then it's time to write his short description.

“Hmm. This is our time to be creative. Let's see. Oh, I know! *Dog Dad seeks human companion for long walks and cuddles on the couch. Must be comfortable with fur on clothing. Cat lovers need not apply.*”

“Are you serious right now?” Jensen shouts as I break out in laughter. Oliver comes sauntering in from somewhere and hops up on the couch between us, resting his head on my lap.

“Yep, totally serious. See? Look at how sad he is. Oliver needs a mommy.”

“He fucking does not,” Jensen groans. “He's got his crazy Auntie Kelly. That's good enough.”

“Too bad, I just posted it.” I close my laptop with a grin. “Now we can drink.”



My obnoxiously full bladder wakes me up sometime in the middle of the night, and at first, I'm confused by the obvious fact that I'm not in my bedroom. But when I come to consciousness, it's not the desperate need to pee that has me freezing in panic. It's the heavy arm draped over my body, and the wall of warmth pressed up behind me. It's the caress of Jensen's slow, steady breathing on my neck.

I carefully extricate myself from his arms. I don't even check to make sure he's still asleep, I just bolt for the safety of my bedroom.

After taking care of the reason I woke up in the first place, I lay in my bed, trying desperately to fall back asleep. But it's futile. Because now, I know just how good it feels to be wrapped up in Jensen's arms.

As dawn slowly crests, and my room fills with early morning light, courtesy of the blinds I didn't bother to close last night, I wrack my brain trying to figure out how to handle this. Will he remember that we fell asleep together? Did he notice me leave? Do we *talk about it*, or do we pretend it never happened?

Because I'm not sure I can do that.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jensen

There's an incessant noise, and I can't determine the source. I also can't ignore it because my head is pounding with the beat of a thousand drums, all marching totally off tempo, and that goddamn noise is making it worse.

Fuck. This is what I get for drinking way too much rum last night.

A cold nose nudges my hand and my eyes slowly blink open to see Ollie's head inches away from my own. Before I can even sit up, the noise starts again. It's my phone going wild with notifications of some sort. Somehow I find my glasses on the coffee table in front of me, and after giving Ollie a quick scratch, I force my hungover body into sitting and look around for my phone. Locating it isn't as easy as it should be, seeing as it somehow ended up underneath the couch. I dig it out, then stop to press my fingers to my temples. Damn — I need water, Tylenol, and coffee — in that order.

Speaking of the couch, why did I wake up pressed against the back of it, on my side, like I was spooning something? Why wasn't I in bed like a normal person would be...like Kelly obviously was.

There's something tickling at the edge of my brain, something I feel like I should remember. But I can't. Fucking alcohol.

I turn the sound off on my phone without looking at it. There's no way I want to try and focus on the tiny screen without caffeine in my system. Whatever it is, it can wait. Stumbling into the kitchen, I see Kelly with her back to me, over by the coffee pot.

"Please tell me that's full," I croak. She turns slowly with two mugs in her hands and passes one to me. "Thank you. You're the best."

"Mm-hmm," Kelly replies.

I sink down into a chair and sip at my coffee slowly. It's perfect; somehow Kelly always remembers how I drink it. Probably because it's the opposite of hers. She likes it with nothing more than a splash of cream, whereas I want all the sugar, but no cream.

"Damn, my neck is not happy with me sleeping on the couch," I say now that my brain is slowly switching on from the caffeine. "I don't even remember falling asleep."

"Yeah."

Kelly's non-answer has me looking up at her. Her eyes are shifting all around the room, anywhere but on me.

"Kell? Everything okay?"

"Yup, fine. Why?"

"Okay, now I know something's up. Your voice is doing that weird squeaky thing. You only do that when you've done something you probably shouldn't have, like that time you thought playing field hockey in your mom's living room was a good idea and broke that vase."

"Yeah, yeah, I get the point, thanks for the trip down memory lane," Kelly grumbles as she sits down in the chair across the table from me and finally drags her gaze up to meet mine. Her tongue darts out to lick her lips and for some reason, my eyes zero in on the motion.

"Do you remember anything from last night?" she asks cautiously.

"Not much, aside from too much fucking rum."

Kelly winces. "Has your...phone been doing anything?"

My eyes narrow. "Yes." Like a wrecking ball smashing into the side of a house, it all hits me. The dating app. Kelly writing a profile and not letting me read it. Then...

"Did you fall asleep on the couch with me?"

Kelly stands up abruptly and goes to the sink to rinse her mug. "Umm, yeah, I did. I got up later and moved to my room, but you were so deeply asleep I couldn't wake you. Sorry."

Well, that's one mystery solved. Although, now a part of me wonders what it would have been like to wake up at the same time as her, but I make myself dismiss that idea quickly. Besides, there are more important things to figure out. Standing up, I swallow down the last of my coffee before walking back to the couch and picking up my phone. Trepidation fills me as I stare at the notifications from Left for Love, the goddamn app she signed me up for last night. "Kelly. There's thirty-seven notifications. What the fuck?"

I go to the settings to try and delete the profile, but it needs a password. Turning the phone to face her, I say, "You need to take it down. Now."

"Oh, come on, Jensen, just go on a couple of dates. Meet some people. Where's the harm in that?"

I glare at her for several seconds, watching her squirm. But before I can put her out of her misery, Oliver does it for me, jumping up on the couch and stretching across her lap. Her hands instantly start to stroke along his back and he lets out a sigh of pleasure. *Lucky dog*. I'd have to be crazy, a monk, or blind, not to be attracted to Kelly. But the way she's pushing this dating app is making it pretty clear that any attraction I might have is one-sided.

"Fine. I'll go on one date. Then you're taking it down."

"Five."

"What? Fuck, no!" I look at her in horror. "Three. Final offer. Three dates, with three women that I choose from the

app, and when you see what a bad idea it was, you agree to take the profile down.”

“Fine.”

Jesus. What the hell have I gotten myself into...

CHAPTER FIVE

Kelly

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Yesterday, after we got dressed and took Oliver for a run, we drove around Westport looking at apartments. Jensen put his name on a couple of waiting lists, but nothing was that great. After we got back to my house, he sat down and started going through the profiles of the women — now up to forty-three — who had messaged him on that freaking dating site.

I'm not gonna lie, that was hard. Some of those women were downright crazy, but some of them were beautiful, with profiles that made them sound interesting and alluring even to me, a perfectly straight woman. Jensen settled on two that he reluctantly agreed to reach out to, and I thought that would be the end of it.

I was wrong. All freaking afternoon, he was messaging these women. Lola and Andi. Every now and then he'd laugh

and show me something they'd sent him, and every time the knot in my stomach grew a little bit bigger. What kind of idiot am I, pushing my best friend, who I'm finally admitting I might like as more than just a friend, into the arms of strangers?

This is why, on Monday morning, when I get to the bakery bright and early to open up and start baking, I'm in a foul mood. And my cookies are suffering because of it.

"Girl, I swear if you roll out that dough any thinner, we're going to be making paper cookies," Mila comments wryly as she pries the rolling pin out of my hands. "What's got you all pissy?"

I slump down on a stool and dust off my hands on my apron. "Nothing."

"Uh huh, and I'm a Disney princess. Tell me another lie."

My eyes roll upward before I can stop myself. Mila doesn't deserve my shitty attitude, but she's getting it. "Just because you're all happy and engaged doesn't mean everyone else has to be sunshine and roses all the time."

The measuring cup she was using hits the stainless steel counter with a clatter. I keep my gaze elsewhere. Mila's a great person until you tick her off. Which I might have just done. But then to my surprise, a still-warm cheddar cheese scone is slid in front of me. My favourite.

"Yes, I am happily engaged. Thanks, in part, to you, which we'll get to later. Right now, let's deal with the hangry, and

then you're gonna spill it, sister. Is it the new roommate? Does he leave the seat up? Walk around naked? Talk with food in his mouth? Poison you with his farts? Drink milk straight from the jug?"

Crumbs fall from my mouth because I'm laughing at her ridiculous suggestions, which is obviously her point. Because when I finally look at her, Mila's eyes are twinkling and a satisfied smirk is on her face. But her tone is soft and concerned when she reaches one hand over to the top of my leg. "Seriously, Kelly, I'm your friend, and I care about you. Which is why I'm really hoping you'll tell me what it is that obviously has you upset today."

"I-convinced-Jensen-to-try-internet-dating-and-now-he's-gonna-go-out-with-other-women-and-I-think-I-want-him-to-go-out-with-me," I blurt out super quickly, the words all running together.

"Wait. What?" Mila frowns. "All I got was something about Jensen and goats?"

"God, no!" I say, exasperated, but I repeat myself slower this time. "We got drunk the other night, and I stupidly convinced Jensen to try internet dating. I thought I had good intentions, but the thought of him dating other women makes me feel...not good. Because I think..." I pause and bite my lip. "I think I want to date him." I say the last part with my head in my hands.

"Well, no shit, Sherlock," Mila comments drily, causing me to lift my head in confusion.

“Wait. What?”

With a huff, Mila sits down on the stool beside me. “Girl, you’re not the most subtle individual. Every time you talk about Jensen, especially lately with him coming to stay, you get a little catch in your voice, and I swear, hearts dance in your eyes. Did you seriously only just realize you want that man?”

“Ummmm...” I stammer, wide-eyed, in a complete state of shock that Mila read through me so easily. “I guess, I mean, yes?” My voice squeaks at the end, making my insanely intuitive friend laugh. Apparently, Jensen isn’t the only one who knows that’s my tell.

“Oh, Kelly. You’ve got it bad for him. So why don’t you put yourself out of your misery, and *tell* him?”

I stand up and busy myself with putting away cookie ingredients before I answer. “Because we’ve known each other for so long, and he’s never thought of me that way.”

“How do you know?” Mila asks pointedly, folding her arms across her waist to look at me.

“Because...” I trail off. The truth is, I don’t know with complete certainty that he isn’t into me. There was that one kiss we shared, but then he turned around and married Tatyana. So, sure, there’s a slim chance that the only reason nothing ever happened between us was a simple case of timing. But then again, I don’t want to give myself any false hope. And thinking of Jensen’s ex-wife only solidifies my resolve that there never was, and never will be, anything

between him and me. “Because he married the head cheerleader while I was the one getting sweaty and bruised and dirty out on the field. He’s into the pretty girls, not the tomboys who don’t know how to apply eyeliner without stabbing themselves with it. And if you think I sound crazy, I’m not. I just, I don’t know how to explain it, I just know he doesn’t see me as anything more than a friend.”

Mila stares at me steadily for a minute before shaking her head gently from side to side. “There are so many things wrong with what you just said, I don’t even know where to start. No, wait — yes, I do. If you honestly think you’re not a beautiful, amazing, interesting, charismatic woman that *any* man would be lucky to be with, you’re nuts. Eyeliner is the work of the devil, so that point is completely ridiculous. And he may have married the cheerleader, but where is she now, hmm?”

She raises a good point. But still, I squash down the small ray of hope budding inside of me.

Then my friend, my boss, the ultimate meddler, claps her hands. The look of excitement and anticipation in her eyes makes me nervous, to say nothing of what she says next.

“I’ve got it. You need to bring him to the café. I’ve got a good sense about these things; I’ll figure out if he’s into you!”

“No way. Not happening.” I put my hands up in defense. “Sorry, but I don’t need or want you getting involved in anything. Just...forget I ever told you about this.”

Mila's smile turns into a pout. "Oh, come on, don't be a spoilsport, Kell! I'll be good, I swear. I just want to meet the guy who's got you all twisted up. You're so calm and chill most of the time."

I wince because she's not wrong. I'm definitely not acting myself right now, and Jensen is definitely the reason. "Can we drop it for now, please? I'm kind of freaking out here, and I need to figure out how to handle all of this without making it more complicated."

"But how would him meeting your friends make things complicated? If anything, I'd think he's expecting to meet us."

"He is. But you've proven how transparent I apparently am about my feelings, and I don't want him figuring it out until I've had a chance to, I don't know, get control of myself."

Thankfully, Mila must sense that I'm one step away from a panic attack because after a minute or two, she just nods. "Okay, fine. But could you just listen to me on one thing?"

I tilt my head in acquiescence.

"Don't sell yourself short. And if the chance comes to let Jensen know how you feel, promise me you'll take it."

I don't answer right away. And when I do, it probably isn't what Mila wants me to say, but it's the best I can do.

"I'll try."

CHAPTER SIX

Jensen

I'm in hell. Forget fire and brimstone, Satan himself prefers packed restaurants with poor acoustics, overpriced food, and a woman obsessed with yarn.

Yup, yarn.

“Then I decided to try a merino wool. Oh, my goodness gracious, you should see the colours I bought! I just couldn't help myself.” Gail titters. Yep, titters. That's the only word for the bizarre, artificial sounding laugh she just uttered. “But wouldn't you know it? My Chrishell pulled that sweater right off and shook it in between her teeth like it was a chew toy.” There's that obnoxious sound again, only this time she pats her lip delicately with her napkin before fluttering her eyelashes at me. “So, Jensen, tell me all about your Oliver. He is such a handsome boy, just like his owner.” Gail's voice dips low at the end. I guess she's trying to be suggestive, but it just makes me feel uncomfortable.

Goddamn Kelly and her dating bargain. I have no idea how to handle this, how to extricate myself politely from the situation — err, *date* — I find myself on.

“Yeah, ah, Ollie’s great,” I say lamely, my eyes darting everywhere except at Gail. Every time our eyes have met over dinner, she’s winked at me. I almost asked her if she had something in her eye before I caught on to the fact that she’s flirting. Or at least trying to, I think.

For the last hour, I have heard more about different types of yarn and wool than I ever thought possible. I’ve heard Gail go on and on about different needle gauges and yarn tension, patterns for clothes — for her dog, of course — and all of the different types of stitches. Rib stitch, garter stitch, cable stitch, seed stitch, moss stitch, seriously. Who knew there were so many? And whatever you do, don’t ask the difference between crochet and knitting. I made that mistake and had to sit through ten minutes of this woman going on about how knitting was superior in so many ways.

I’m not entirely sure if Gail honestly believes I am interested in the subject or if she just doesn’t have anything else to talk about. The fact is, I’ve barely managed to sneak a word in. Now, maybe that’s the way dating goes these days, a one-sided info dump, and if somehow the other person remains interested at the end of it, then you know it’s a match. How would I know? The last first date I went on was with my ex-wife in high school. We went to the movies and then to a local café for hot chocolate. Pretty sure we did nothing but

hold hands and stare at each other, both of us too nervous to make the first move.

There certainly wasn't much conversation, and when the date ended, Tatyana didn't fling herself at me like a fucking spider monkey and try to molest my face.

Gail, on the other hand, did just that. Apparently, she thought our date was wonderful, and she seemed genuinely shocked when I carefully stepped away and told her thanks, but no thanks.

When I get back home, I'm grumpy. And for good reason, if you ask me. Not only was the date a total disaster, I didn't even get to look at the dessert menu in my desperate attempt to end things. Thank fuck, I'm currently living with a pastry chef. Kelly's guaranteed to have something chocolate in the house somewhere.

I slam the door of Kelly's house shut, causing Oliver to lift his head from her lap with a woof. Kelly watches me, wide-eyed, as I stomp into the kitchen, open the fridge, and spy the item I am in desperate need of right now. I tromp back into the living room and drop down onto the couch beside her before opening the container of cookies, jamming one in my mouth without even bothering to see what flavour it is. A second cookie follows, with Kelly just blinking at me innocently, before I finally speak. "I just spent an hour listening to a woman drone on and on about her hobby of knitting small hats for her Chihuahua. Whose name was Chrishell, might I add. *You know, like the woman on Selling Sunset.*" I pitch my voice

as high and annoying as it can go for that last part. "I didn't even stay for dessert, and you know I think dessert is the most important part of a meal." I jab my finger at her face, where I can see she's not very successfully holding back a laugh. "This is all your fault."

"Why is it my fault?" my supposed best friend says in mock outrage.

"I wasn't ready to date again. And then you had to go and put some insane profile on a dating site and force me to go out with complete strangers. Crazy strangers at that! And I haven't dated in over a fucking decade. I don't know what the fuck I'm doing."

"You just need practice. And since I'm such a great friend —"

I interrupt with a wave of my third cookie. "And since this is all your fault —"

"Whatever." Her eyes roll back into her head. "Since I'm such a great friend, I'll help you. We'll go on a fake date and practice your wooing skills."

"I don't have any wooing skills."

She shoves me, not hard, but enough for me to narrow my eyes at her. "Pfft, I don't believe that for a second. Gimme a smoulder."

On purpose, I give her a look that is definitely not a smoulder.

"Huh. Okay. We'll work on that."

She's serious. For fuck's sake, she actually wants to work on my dating skills? Out of nowhere, I'm seized with a sudden desire to kiss her. But I don't know if I want to do it out of frustration, desire, or both.

Both. Definitely both.

"Fucking hell, Kelly, this is ridiculous," I groan, trying to forget the mental image of kissing her. It's not exactly a good time for that, seeing as she's trying to help me be a better date for *other women*.

"No, it isn't. You, me, tomorrow night, Insignia Steak House on the pier. You can wine and dine me."

"But no sixty-nine, I'm guessing." The teasing words escape my mouth before my brain can even catch up to the fact that I'm flirting with her. With Kelly. My best friend, the woman I've wanted since high school but never been able to have.

I fully expect her to smack me, or roll her eyes, or get up and walk away, but she doesn't. She blushes.

And the sight of her cheeks going pink for me? Well, that just makes me feel all kinds of crazy things I probably shouldn't be feeling for a woman who clearly thinks of me as nothing more than a friend.

"Yeah, no. None of that." Her voice wavers.

She's so close, I could touch her easily. A hand resting on her bare leg, an innocent foot massage, a hug goodnight. All within perfectly acceptable boundaries of friendship, and all

things I've done in the past without a second thought, even with my unrequited attraction to her.

So, why now does it feel so scandalous, yet so fucking alluring, to think about doing those things to her?

“Right. Okay, so then I guess, tomorrow.” The words come out hoarse and halting, and I clear my throat. “Tomorrow we'll go out.”

“On a practice date.”

“Yeah. A practice...date.”

Fucking hell, I'm so screwed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kelly

Let me let you in on a secret. Attempting to sleep is impossible after your best friend, whom you've recently discovered you're very attracted to, makes a joking comment about sixty-nine. I lost count of how many times I flipped over, flipped my pillow over, or untangled my sheets from all the damn flipping over.

It's a good thing Jensen's room is at the end of the hall, and there's a bathroom between us, because there was no way I was getting any rest without taking care of things. God bless quiet sex toys. But the real danger came the moment I, well, came, and my mouth started to say his name. Thankfully, I grabbed the pillow beside me to smother my face in time. A quiet vibe he might not hear, but me calling out his name in the throes of release...yeah, I don't feel like risking that.

Luckily, he was still asleep when I left for work today. I didn't even hear Oliver snuffle at his bedroom door to be let out, so like a total coward, I crept out silently and escaped to

the sanctity of the bakery. Yes, I realize he could easily find me here, but I don't think he will.

God, I hope he doesn't. If there was ever a terrible day for him to meet Mila, it's the day after whatever last night was. I could have sworn Jensen was going to do something, say something, after his ridiculous sixty-nine comment, but he didn't. Not really. Still, there was something in the air between us that I had never noticed before. But just in case I was being a sentimental, emotional weirdo, I pretended to be oblivious to it and to the energy crackling between us, and made my excuses to head to bed shortly after. I heard him get up, let Ollie out, and then go to bed himself. When his footsteps hesitated outside my bedroom door, I won't lie. I held my breath until he carried on down the hall.

At the bakery, I'm a machine, cranking out batch after batch of cookies. Pouring all of my restless, insecure energy into baking.

"Uh, Kelly?" Sebastian, our head barista and my frequent early morning co-worker, sticks his head in the kitchen door. "Are we running a sale on cookies this morning?"

I dart my gaze up at him, huffing out some air to get the piece of hair that's fallen over my eyes out of the way. "No, why?"

He fidgets in the doorway, glancing between the racks of cooling cookies in front of me and the front counter.

"Spit it out, Bast," I say sharply.

“It’s just that you’ve filled all the trays out front and taken over three scone trays. Customers are wondering if there will be anything *other* than cookies today.”

My head falls forward. “Shit. I forgot to put the muffins in the oven. I’m so sorry, Sebastian. Yeah, let’s run a two-for-one on cookies, and I’ll put this dough in the fridge and get straight to work on muffins.” I quickly start to scrape the dough into a container, mentally berating myself for being so distracted. Somehow, I didn’t clue in to the fact that with Mila taking a rare morning off, I was responsible for more than just the cookies. Some manager I’m turning out to be if all it takes is one awkward sort of flirt and I’m reduced to a fumbling disaster.



Mila’s arrival at the bakery was just late enough that I managed to catch up on other baking so our customers had their usual variety. But I should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

“Care to explain why we’re suddenly running a two-for-one sale on cookies? Pretty sure I don’t remember setting that up when we mapped out promotions for the quarter.” Mila arches her brow at me, but judging by the smile she’s trying to hide, she isn’t *too* upset.

“Sorry. I got a little carried away with cookie batches, and I figured a flash sale was a good way to clear out the extras. I

hope that's alright?"

I'm dismissed with a wave of her hand. "Of course it is, babe, I trust you. That's why you're in charge. I'm just giving you a hard time."

I give her a wan smile in return.

"I do have one question."

"Which is?" I ask cautiously.

"Is there a good reason for your distraction? And by good, I mean..." Mila wiggles her eyebrows at me suggestively.

My hands come up to cover my flaming cheeks.

"I knew it! Oh my God, what happened? Did you make your move?" Mila's vibrating in place. I almost hate to disappoint her.

"Nothing happened. He went on a date, it apparently sucked, he complained about it, and then I offered to help him."

"Help him how?" Her eyes narrow at me.

It's my turn to start fidgeting under the intensity of her scrutiny. "By...offering to...go on a practice date with him tonight."

"Yeah, girl!" Mila holds out her fist for me to bump, like some sort of teenage skater kid. I ignore it. But one thing about Mila, she's like a dog with a bone. She doesn't give up, so it comes as no surprise when she picks up my hand and

forces the bump she's looking for. "Okay so what's the plan? Where are you guys going?"

"Insignia."

"Ooooh, the fancy new steak place in Westport? Nice choice! What are you going to wear?"

"I don't know, Mila, clothes? It's not like it's a real date, so why does it matter!" I throw my hands up in exasperation and turn away. But Mila just walks over and wraps her arms around my midsection, resting her head on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be pushy."

"It's okay," I reply quietly. "I'm nervous, Mila."

She turns me around slowly. "Then we need to make sure you're looking and feeling every bit as irresistible as you are."

"What exactly does that mean?" I ask, and a look of mischief comes over her face.

"It means we're going shopping. You're gonna look so good, it'll be a slap in his face when he realizes just how hot you are. You might have planned this as a practice date —" Mila rubs her hands together "— but by the end of tonight, there won't be any doubt that you're the woman Jensen should be with."

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jensen

“What d’you think, bud? Blue or grey?” I hold up two shirts. Oliver keeps on snoring. “You’re so helpful.” I drop the blue shirt on the bed. “Or maybe I’m just the idiot who’s asking his dog for fashion advice.”

“Hey, J? Can you, uh, help me with something?” Kelly’s voice is muffled by the door, but Oliver still lifts his head and looks toward it.

“Oh. Sure. *Her* you listen to,” I mutter, leaving my shirt half-buttoned as I go to open the door. “Of course, what’s —”

Holy. Shit.

I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen Kelly dressed in anything other than leggings, jeans, or shorts. I’ve *definitely* never seen her in a dress that is hitting her curves in all the right places. It does some weird twisty-knot-wrap thing in the front, accentuating her body perfectly. But the part that

is really getting to me is where the folds of fabric part over her legs, letting just enough of her thigh peek through.

Now all I can think of is pinning her against the wall and sliding my hand underneath that dark green silky fabric to see what's beneath it.

“Jensen?” Her hesitant voice jolts me out of the fog of lust swirling in my head.

“Right. Sorry. Umm.” I lick my suddenly dry lips. “What did you need me to do?” Fucking hell, why is my voice cracking like a highschooler going through puberty?

“The zipper, J, I already said so. Are you feeling okay?”

Great, now Kelly's looking at me like I'm crazy, which maybe I am for having these thoughts about her. I shake my head.

“Yeah, of course.”

She turns around, and I try to control the tremor in my hands as I slide the zipper up the line of her back. Jesus Christ. Her skin is right there, looking soft, tanned, and inviting. When my fingers brush against her neck, she visibly shivers. And my dick takes notice.

But then something bumps into the two of us, and Kelly lets out a little shriek, breaking the spell. “Jesus, Ollie, your nose is cold!”

I take a step back into my room and turn slightly to try and hide the situation in my pants. “Okay. So I'll be ready in a few. Could you let Ollie outside?” I close my bedroom door before

she can answer and lean my forehead against it with a mental groan. This visceral reaction to Kelly is nothing new, but it's unexpected at the moment, and I'm definitely not sure how to handle it. Especially when I have no clue where she stands on things.

Things being, us.

The mature course of action would be to have a reasonable, rational, adult conversation about it. But that scares the shit out of me. I've recently had my marriage fall apart, and I'm not super keen on having my best friendship also fall apart because I try to push us into something that she doesn't want. And I'm not exactly looking for another dose of rejection. Divorce was bad enough, thank you kindly.

Just like that, my mood sours. Thoughts of my ex and the cold, loveless relationship we had at the end always does this to me. And that's definitely not the energy I want to have tonight. Kelly deserves better.

"This is just dinner between friends," I mutter to myself as I do one final check in the mirror. Grey shirt was a good choice. Good to go, I grab my keys off the dresser and head to the kitchen to find Kelly. She's just feeding Oliver when I get there, and I shamelessly watch her as she stands, only downgrading my look from an outright ogle to just a friendly glance when she turns to face me.

"Ready to go?" she asks brightly. Any awkwardness I thought might be there after the zipper situation is gone.

“Yup, all set.” I stuff my hands in my pockets, unable to stop staring. “You look beautiful, Kell.”

A blush steals across her cheeks as her pink-tinted lips curl up. “Thanks. You clean up pretty nice yourself.”

After a minute of just standing there, smiling at each other like fools, we lock up and walk to my car, where I go to her side and open the door.

“You’ve never done that before,” Kelly comments, an impressed look on her face.

“I’ve never taken you on a pretend date before.”

Her throaty chuckle as she slides into the car hits me hard. I quickly make my way to the driver’s side, and soon we’re driving the short distance to Insignia, the steakhouse she suggested.

“I found a couple of apartments over on the south side of town I wanted to check out. Interested in coming with me?” I ask after a few minutes of easy silence.

“Well, duh, who else is going to make sure you don’t end up in some disgusting pit of an apartment?”

“I do have standards, Kell,” I reply drily.

“I know you do.” She shrugs and my eyes catch the delicate slope of her shoulders. Goddamn, that dress should be illegal. “But a second opinion is never a bad thing.”

“No, it’s not. But come on, your opinion is gonna be less of a suggestion, and more of a command.”

She turns an impish smile my way. “Someone’s gotta keep you and Oliver in line.”

“Yeah, yeah, my dog already likes you more than he does me,” I grumble under my breath, but her peal of laughter is exactly what I was hoping for. God, I missed her all these years.



Dinner was, as predicted, delicious. And fun. I forgot about Kelly’s habit of making up background stories for strangers around her, but over dinner, she had me laughing nonstop as she adopted various voices and created imaginary histories for the other diners. We shared a dessert of chocolate crème brulee that had Kelly making noises that made me wonder if I could get her to make those sounds in the bedroom, too. Because somewhere over our second glass of wine, I realized that’s how I wanted this night to end. With Kelly in my bed. Ideally, naked and underneath me.

But only if she wants that, too. And I’m still not certain she does.

Which is why I keep things light and friendly the entire drive home, only stealing the odd touch when I not so accidentally brush my hand against her leg, or let my fingers linger on her shoulder when I stretch my arm across the back of her seat as I reverse out of the parking spot. I’m pretty

damn sure I didn't imagine the way she leaned into my touch, or the twitch of her lips, but I'm moving slow. Glacial, in fact.

When we get back to her house, I quickly jog around to Kelly's car door and hold it open for her.

"Such a gentleman," she murmurs, giving me a soft smile as I close the door behind her. My hand finds the small of her back as we walk up to the front door. Once inside, our coats hung up and shoes kicked off, I deal with Oliver while she puts the kettle on for her usual evening routine of a cup of herbal tea.

"Chamomile tea?" She holds up two packets. "Or peppermint?"

"Chamomile, please." I walk over to her and place my hands on the counter, framing her in. "You know, there's one more part of a date we haven't practiced yet." My breath catches in my throat. This is it.

Kelly slowly turns in my arms. "Oh yeah? What's that?" she asks, but the coy look in her eyes belies the innocence of her words.

"The kiss goodnight." Those three words come out gravelly with desire, and I know she hears it. Thank fuck, I see an answering desire written all over her face.

"You're right, we should make sure you know how to do that right."

"Trust me, I know how."

Our lips crash together, fitting like they were meant for this. Kelly melts into my arms, her hands sliding into the back pocket of my jeans and cupping my ass. *Damn*. My restraint is slipping as I push one leg between both of hers, hearing her moan as my thigh comes into contact with the apex of her thighs. She starts to grind against me, and I growl her name against her lips.

I don't want to stop. I want her to lose herself in this kiss, forget any reason or hesitation she might have about us, but I know Kelly. And I know she's going to need to retreat and think about things for a while, so I force myself to step back.

And when I see the confusion warring with lust in her eyes, I know the right thing to do is to say goodnight and walk away.

But later, lying in bed with Oliver snoring at my feet, I let myself imagine the night ending a little differently.

And fucking hell, do I ever want to make *that* happen. Soon.

CHAPTER NINE

Kelly

That kiss was a mistake. Because for the last half hour I've been lying in bed, unable to sleep, desperately wondering if Jensen is as good at...other things...as he is at kissing.

I'm willing to bet the answer is yes.

"This is stupid," I grumble under my breath as I punch my pillow for the tenth time. It's not like there's any doubt in my mind that Jensen wanted to take things further tonight. I felt the evidence of that myself.

But he's still my *best friend* and I know that if we do this, if we cross this line, things between us will never be the same. Maybe, just maybe, they'll be better.

Which is what has me throwing off the covers, cupping my hands over my mouth to do a quick breath check, and then making my way down the hall.

Oliver lifts his head with a huff from the foot of the bed. I snap my fingers, and he slowly uncurls himself, hops off the bed, and ambles over to me. I gently nudge him out of the room and close the door as a gravelly, sleep-filled voice comes from the bed.

“Kelly? What are you doing?”

I take one last deep breath of courage before pivoting on my feet and lifting my tank top up and over my head, revealing all of me except the little boy short style panties I sleep in.

“Come here.” Any trace of sleep is gone from his voice and my body immediately responds to the command. But the room is dark, and I don’t see the shoe on the floor until I stumble and flail toward the bed. Strong arms catch me, and the next second I’m on my back, on pillows that smell like Jensen, and his bare torso is hovering over me, his corded biceps framing my head.

“Jensen, I...” I start to say something, but I have no idea what because his lips cover mine, and I’m a goner.

“If you’re here to tell me you don’t want this, then speak up. Otherwise, be quiet and let me show you all the dirty ways I’ve wanted to have you over the last ten years.”

My entire body vibrates with the sensual power in his voice. But I do as I’m told and don’t say another word. Instead, my hands wrap around his waist, and I pull until he lowers himself, letting his entire body come into contact with mine. The weight of him, the heat between us, sends a delicious

spark through my body. I draw my short nails up and down his back as our tongues tangle together, exploring each other.

I lose track of everything except the feel of his lips on my skin as he trails a path down my neck, lightly nipping at my collar bone, making me gasp. As soon as the sound leaves my mouth, Jensen lifts himself up, and the pure alpha-male, satisfied smirk he flashes me brings a throaty chuckle. But that laugh turns into a moan when he leans down and latches on to one of my breasts, biting down gently before swirling his tongue around, teasing my nipple into a stiff nub.

Even without any words between us, Jensen knows me, knows my body. Call it instinct, or familiarity, or a soul-deep connection that defies explanation. Whatever it is, he uses it, bringing me to the edge of oblivion. With his attention only on my breasts.

What in the good God kind of sorcery is this...

“Jensen, please,” I moan. I need more. And yet, I don’t ever want him to stop what he’s doing.

“I’ve got you, Kell.”

Light, tickling strokes run down the sides of my torso and over the crease of my pelvis. Only then, when his thumbs are intoxicatingly close to where I want him, does his grip tighten. His fingers dig into my hips and his head lowers.

“You have no idea how many times I’ve fantasized about doing this,” he murmurs, his brown eyes locked on mine.

A thousand questions run through my head. But before I have time to voice any of them, he's pulling down my underwear and his tongue is on me, drawing a path of fire up the length of my slit.

"Oh God," I cry, my hands tugging his hair, pulling him in tighter.

"Not God. Just Jensen."

I had no freaking clue my best friend had a dirty streak a mile wide, but I am loving it. And when he takes the bundle of nerves into his mouth and sucks, I scream his name over and over, chanting it like a prayer.

His mouth stays on me through every wave of my release. When I finally come floating back to reality, Jensen is stretched out beside me, his hand drawing lazy circles over my stomach. I blink up at him, taking in his smile, the crinkle at the corner of his eyes, and the small dimple on his left cheek with new eyes. Eyes that view more than friendship, eyes that view the possibility of love.

"You are spectacularly beautiful when you come," he says in a low voice dripping with desire.

I push him gently onto his back before swinging my legs over to straddle him. "Thank you. Now I want to see what *you* look like when you come." My hands go to his boxers, and he lifts his hips to help me push them off his legs.

His gaze darkens. I lift myself up, wrap my hand around his rigid cock, and line it up with my entrance. Our eyes are

locked on each other as I slide myself down every inch of him until our bodies are connected as deeply as possible.

“Fucking hell, Kelly,” he rasps. “You feel better than I ever imagined.”

“Mmm...” is my only response as my hips start to rock against him. But suddenly I’m stilled by a firm grip on my hips.

“Wait. Protection. Shit, I’m sorry, I forgot!” Jensen sounds panicked, but when I look down at him there’s one thing I’m certain of. I don’t want anything between us.

“It’s okay. I have an IUD.” And I trust him implicitly. His eyes widen in understanding, then soften with something that looks a lot like...love.

His hold on my hip changes, and Jensen starts moving me back and forth, sliding me along his length in a way that brings his cock in perfect contact with my G-spot.

“Holy fucking shit!” I scream out, drawing a bark of laughter from Jensen.

“You like that, huh?”

All I can muster as a response is a low keening moan. But he gets the message, and keeps doing exactly what I need him to do.

I’ve never, and I do mean never, managed to reach an orgasm from penetration alone. I’ve always needed clit stimulation at the same time. But I guess miracles really do

happen because the telltale heat is thrumming through my body, and my muscles are starting to tense up.

“Jesus Christ, Kelly,” Jensen grinds out, and I smirk down at him. Obviously I’m not the only one who realizes I’m getting close. I squeeze my inner pelvic wall muscles even tighter around him and his back arches underneath me. “Fuck!”

“I thought we already were?” I tease, grinding down on him, mercilessly chasing my orgasm. When it comes, I’m completely unprepared for the intensity of emotions that come on the heels of my physical release. Only the sound of Jensen grunting out my name seconds later keeps me tethered and not spiraling out of control with how overwhelming this all is.

I just had sex with my best friend.

Really, really, *really* amazing sex.

Jensen maneuvers us so that we’re on our sides, then curls around me with a satisfied sigh. Somehow cuddling with him feels even more intimate than what we just did. Yet still, I slowly feel my heart rate return to normal, and a deep feeling of comfort and rightness fills me. Enough to give me a reassuring sense that I haven’t lost my best friend, I’ve just gained something even better.

“Jeez, I think you almost killed me. Death by orgasm.” I keep my tone light and teasing, in line with the happiness I’m feeling.

I feel his upturned lips press against my shoulder. “Eh, what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

I flip over and lift up on an elbow to look down at him. “Jensen Porter. Did you just quote the queen Kelly Clarkson herself to me?”

He just rolls his eyes. “Well, you do make me listen to her a hell of a lot.”

I bat my eyelashes at him. “Well, my life would suck without you.” My hand reaches down and wraps around his dick. “And you.”

Jensen lets out a growl and flips the covers back, baring us both. He reaches over me and grabs his water bottle from the bedside table.

“Hydrate. We’re going again.”

CHAPTER TEN

Jensen

A low whine combined with scratching on the bedroom door forces me out of the incredible dream I was having. Kelly and I finally had sex, and she fell asleep in my arms.

Wait.

My eyes blink open, and my body slowly wakes up enough to realize the *naked* warm body pressed up against me, the leg thrown over mine, the light puff of air in and out against the side of my neck, that's no dream.

Kelly is in bed with me.

I had sex — no, I made love to her last night.

And now I'm waking up to her in my arms. I'm not dreaming.

Ollie's whine intensifies, reminding me I have a dog that is probably desperate for breakfast and a visit outside. Carefully,

I untangle myself from Kelly, hoping that she's still as deep of a sleeper as she used to be.

She is, and I give one last longing glance back at the warm bed and the naked woman who's still tangled up in the blankets. Oliver's nose bumps my leg. "Okay, buddy. I'm coming," I whisper, giving my dog a pat on the head. Snatching up a pair of sweatpants and pulling them on commando, I make my way to the kitchen, let Ollie out, and fill his food bowl. Then I get to work on the one thing guaranteed to wake Kelly up faster than anything else.

Dog fed, coffee in hand, I go back down the hall to the bedroom. Sure enough, Kelly is still asleep. I set her mug down on the bedside table beside her, then lean down to feather kisses over her hair. She mumbles something in her sleep and burrows deeper into the blankets.

"Come on, beautiful, I have coffee," I say in a low voice, chuckling when the blanket slowly inches down to reveal her sleepy face.

"Coffee?" she mumbles, and I nod, lifting the mug into her line of sight.

She makes her way to sitting, and the sheet covering her slides down. But before it can reveal her perfect breasts, Kelly snatches it up and looks around, her eyes suddenly wide in shock.

"Umm, Jensen? Why am I in your bed, naked?" she asks.

In response, I lean in and kiss her lips. The way she eagerly meets me and kisses me back makes it clear she remembers everything. I guess I'm not the only one who was just a little surprised that last night wasn't a dream.

"You're in my bed because you were meant to be in my bed. I'm pretty sure you always were."

She melts underneath me, her arms circling my neck to pull me back down for another kiss. "You say the sweetest things."

"And I bring coffee."

"My hero."



An hour later, I pull into a parking spot just down the street from the town square. A gazebo is currently being painted by what looks like a group of high school kids. We let Oliver out and I take Kelly's hand, threading our fingers together.

"Am I still sleeping? Because this place looks like I just stepped onto the set of a Hallmark movie."

Her laughter is everything, and for a few perfect minutes we just wander around the adorable town of Dogwood Cove. I can see why she loves it here. Eventually, we stop in front of The Nutty Muffin bakery.

"I finally get to meet Mila."

"Yup, you do. And I'm just going to say right now, I'm sorry if she's a little..." Kelly bites her lip.

“A little what?” I ask, curious as to what it could possibly be.

“A little excited.”

“About meeting me?”

Kelly nods. “Yeah, and that we’re, you know, obviously not *just* friends anymore.”

I pull her into my body and wrap my free arm around her waist before lowering my head and kissing her lightly. “Not just friends, huh? What are we, then?”

“Oh my God, yes!” A loud female voice pierces between us and Kelly pulls back with an apologetic look on her face.

A brunette woman grabs her and cups her head, turning it from side to side. “Yep, you had sex last night.”

“Mila, come on.” Kelly sounds embarrassed, so I pull her back into my side and kiss her head.

“What? She’s right,” I say, then stick my hand out toward the woman who clearly is Mila. “Nice to meet you, I’m Jensen. Kelly’s boyfriend.”

“Thank God you two finally got your shit figured out. I thought I was going to have to find a new cookie baker. Or —” Mila stops dramatically “— try to bake them myself.”

“God, no. Never.” Kelly shudders.

“Was she really that hung up over me?” I can’t resist asking, and when Kelly elbows me in the stomach, I know I deserve it.

“Worse,” Mila confides, coming to my other side. “Come inside for a muffin and some coffee, and I’ll tell you all about how she was pining over you.”

“I did not pine!”

Mila leans in front of me and pats Kelly on the arm. “Oh sweetie, you pined. Or have you forgotten the day you made so many damn cookies we couldn’t even give them away.”

A little while later, after introducing me to a couple of Kelly’s friends and Mila’s fiancée, Jackson, we’re sitting down at a table near the front window. Mila insisted I try her apple nut muffin, but Kelly has one of the cookies her assistant Barb made — for quality control, she claims.

“So. Do you think you could take down that damn dating site profile now?” I ask, folding my arms across my chest and smirking at Kelly, who has her cookie halfway up to her mouth. She slowly finishes taking a bite before giving me a devious smile.

“That depends, *dog dad*, are you willing to discuss me being more than just Oliver’s fun Aunt Kelly?”

I lift up out of my chair, lean over, and kiss her hard. “If I have it my way, pretty soon you’re gonna be a *dog mom*.”

The surprise on Kelly’s face quickly morphs into joy. “That sounds good to me.” She takes another bite of her cookie before one upping me, yet again. “But that means no apartment hunting.”

“Why?” I ask, even though I think I know the answer.

“Because I will not share custody of our fur baby. It’s all or nothing. You and Oliver move into my house, or he stays and you go.”

“Ouch. You’d pick our dog over me?”

Kelly looks me in the eye, a dead serious expression on her face but a twinkle in her eye that gives it away. “Absolutely.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Fine, final offer. You and Oliver both move into my house, or I move into wherever you decide to live.”

“Deal.” I take out my phone. “I’m cancelling the apartment tours now.”

The smile Kelly gives me is blinding. Impulsively, I grab her hand. “I love you, Kelly.”

She tilts her head to the side. “I know. I love you, too.”

No, she doesn’t know.

“I mean I’m *in love* with you. That kind of love. The kind that makes me want to be with you, like this, forever.”

Her mouth falls open, and I reach over to gently push her chin up to close it. Her eyes blink rapidly, and her tongue darts out to moisten her lips.

“I’m in love with you, too, Jensen. I think...I think I always have been.”

I take her hand in mine and raise it up so I can press my lips to the back of it. “It might have taken us a while to get here,

but I'm so damn happy. You're the best part of my past, and all of my future."

This time, Kelly initiates the kiss. But you best believe I won't let it end for a long time. A lifetime, if I have my way.

EPILOGUE

Kelly

I hold my breath as I slowly lower the tower of cupcakes to the table as gingerly as possible. Somehow, luck is on my side, and I manage to put it down without a single one tipping over.

“Nicely done, babe.”

I turn at Jensen’s voice and crouch down to love up on Ollie.

“Excuse me. Why, exactly, is the dog getting attention before me?”

I look up with a sunny smile. “Simple. I love him more.”

Jensen clutches his chest. “Ouch.”

I stand up and press a kiss to his cheek. “Sorry, but yes. Dog trumps boyfriend.”

“Hmph.”

“Wow, Kelly, this is incredible.”

I turn around to find Dogwood Cove's mayor, Ethan Monroe, and his fiancée, Summer, standing in front of me. "Thanks, guys."

"Please tell me you'll do something similar for our barbecue reception next month?" Summer takes my hand and gives me a pleading look.

"Of course I will. Is everything ready for your wedding? Where is it again?"

"The Cayman Islands," Summer says, clapping her hands. "I'm so dang excited. I wish you could come with us." Her smile starts to turn down, so I jump in.

"Nah, someone's got to run the bakery and the café! Besides, I think it's amazing that you're keeping it so small and intimate."

Ethan gives me a grateful smile. He's one hell of a handsome man, with his lumbersnack vibes and take-charge personality. He's also a great mayor, and completely dedicated to Summer. If I weren't so madly in love with Jensen, I'd be jealous of her. Hell, I *was* jealous. Of her and Ethan, Mila and Jackson, Finn and Ashley, all of the amazing couples in this town. But not anymore because now, just under a year after Jensen moved to Westport, I am one of those couples. And tonight, we're all at Oceanside Resort, the place Summer inherited from her dad, for a bonfire birthday party for Mila.

"You're the best, Kelly." Summer hugs my shoulders. She's such a sweetheart, it's easy to see how she and Mila were best

friends for so long. You know those people who just have a good heart? Summer is one of those people.

Jensen pulls me into his side as Summer and Ethan are called over to a group that includes Ethan's friend, Finn, and his fiancée, Ashley.

"Babe. She's right, you are the best," he mumbles against my hair before pressing his lips in a kiss. "As much as I enjoy your friends, how much longer do you need to be here?"

I look up at him confused. "Why?"

"Because you left the extra frosting at home, didn't you?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I was thinking it could make for an interesting art project."

It takes a minute for my brain to catch up to what kind of art project he's talking about. But when he slips a finger under the hem of my shirt and drags it back and forth, I get it. Heat instantly floods my body. "Oh. *Oh.*"

Jensen quirks a grin and nods slowly.

"I'll just go and say goodbye to Mila and Jackson. Why don't you load Oliver in the car and I'll meet you there?"

"Five minutes, babe. I really, *really* want that frosting."



“Fuck, you’re delicious,” Jensen rumbles, licking a drop of frosting off my right nipple.

“That’s the frosting,” I gasp as he tugs the peak in between his teeth.

He continues, using his finger to spread frosting in lines all over my chest, following with his tongue. He takes his time in all of my favourite spots, the places he knows will send me higher than ever. And when we finally abandon the frosting and he slides into me, I don’t care about the sticky sweet mess that covers me and the bedsheets.

All I care about is the man in front of me, the man who knows me better than anyone — the man who is my best friend, my lover, and my soul mate. My past and my future.



Thank you so much for reading Love and Leashes! I would be so grateful if you would leave a review.

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http://mybook.to/DogTags_KC

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