



Matchmaking
A ROOMMATE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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Matchmaking a Roommate

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To all of you who are in the friend zone. Good luck.

Chapter One

Ivy

“I don’t need to do the New Year, New You thing,” I say.
“A new me is always just around the corner.”

Brittany gives me an *if you say so* look. She’s the chief bartender at this establishment, other than my sister Holly’s boyfriend, Cole, who owns Ziggy Brewery but is spending New Year’s elsewhere with Holly. Brittany is also one tough bitch. I don’t say this in a judgmental way—it’s why I like her.

“That’s bullshit,” she says.

See? I meant it about the tough bitch thing.

Tucking a lock of dark hair back into her tight ponytail, she waves to a man down the bar, signaling he’s been seen and will be served. Eventually. It’s New Year’s Eve at nine-thirty, and the place is packed full of people looking to get drunk. Dozens of them have flocked around the bar, while others are eating and drinking at tables in the tap room. It’s probably not the best time to chat, even though this particular party will be ending at eleven-thirty, before the ball drops in New York City, but I’m feeling in a reflective mood. Maybe Brittany is too, because she says, “People don’t change that easily, like slipping into an outfit. You’re the same person whether you’re working at a brewery”—with this she gives me a pointed look, as if to say that working at *her* brewery is no game—“or a zoo or a firehouse or whatever else you’ve done.”

“I really enjoyed working at the zoo,” I say conversationally. “There was this one animal handler who, I shit you not—”

“Why don’t you take the rest of the night off?” Brittany asks, popping a hand onto her hip. Her gaze shoots to the tasting room floor, where a few servers are running around with trays. It’s hard to balance those trays. I know this because I’ve dropped three in the past week. “You clearly don’t feel like working.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, feeling a sprinkle of contrition. “I’m just a talker.”

“Well, less talking, more pouring.”

For a while I do just that. I’m only working here to get a feel for the job, after all, and a big part of working at a brewery or bar is, inevitably, pouring alcohol. It’s also about picking up on the personalities gathered around you, which is something that comes naturally to me. Of course, I’m perfectly capable of making up stories if none present themselves. That’s what I do as a romance novelist. The man sitting in the corner, who has his phone propped in front of him and keeps glancing at the door, is about to realize he’s been stood up by an internet date. The woman whose chair is approximately seven inches away from her dude’s is angry with him because he ate the last of their Christmas candy without asking if she wanted any. (Okay, that’s definitely made up, but wouldn’t you be pissed?) The—

Brittany taps my arm as she passes me to grab someone a drink. “You’re spacing out,” she calls over her shoulder. “No one wants a beer that’s half foam.”

Shit, she’s right. I shrug and set it down, then refill another glass and bring it to the man who asked for it, who is old enough to be my dad.

My dad’s the whole reason I’m here in Highland Hills, but that doesn’t make me feel more kindly toward this guy when he leers at me and says, “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

“Why are your eyes sore?” I ask, tilting my head. “You spend too long on the computer? Because that always gives me eye strain. You might want to try those blue-light glasses. Target’s running a special on them.”

His mouth gapes a little, and I give his hand a friendly pat before moving on to another customer.

It goes on like that for another hour and a half, at which point we start trying to herd the mostly drunk people out the door. We pretend we're closing up shop, but that's not why they need to vacate the premises. My brother, Rowan, and his fiancée, Kennedy, are about to show up with a couple of cameramen in tow—along with the rest of my siblings.

Rowan and Kennedy's love story is fantastic, the kind of thing even I couldn't hope to make up. She was the lead contestant on a travesty of a dating show concocted by my wicked grandmother, and he was the on-set handyman trying to sabotage the production. But hijinks ensued, he got the girl, and my grandmother has (unwillingly) retired. Can I get a hallelujah?

Truthfully, I'd like to scrap my current kernel of a book idea and write about them, but despite the fact that he's well on his way to becoming reality TV famous, my brother hates attention. He would not be pleased if I wrote him into a book, and I *do* want to please him.

I'd rather not feel that way—it's much easier to only want to please yourself—but there you go. He doesn't want to serve as inspiration; I don't want to annoy him, and thus I'm here being a shitty bartender to research my character, who works at one. If Brittany's annoyed with me, she can lay the blame at his feet.

The other servers depart with the guests, and the last drunk patron, Mr. Blue Light Glasses himself, is pushed out by Cole's sex-on-a-stick brother, Logan, who showed up an hour or so ago but hasn't done much beyond standing around looking broody. Brittany takes out a bottle of whiskey from behind the bar and fills two glasses. Logan comes back from his bouncer duties and reaches for one of them, but she pushes it toward me. "That's for Ivy."

I grab it. "Don't mind if I do."

"Where's mine?" Logan asks, surprisingly sulky for such a big, bearded hunk of a man.

“In a shitty bottle in your apartment, I’m guessing,” she says, lifting her eyebrows. “You can’t stay here, Logan.”

“Cole’s going to be here in half an hour,” he complains. “He invited me to the afterparty.”

“So come back in half an hour if you want. *I* didn’t invite you.”

He gives her this seriously sexy glower that probably works wonders at disintegrating other women’s panties, but she just gives him her bad bitch glare, and *it works*. I can practically see the man’s dick withering. He nods at me, says, “Happy New Year, Ivy,” very pointedly not including Brittany in the sentiment, and then turns and leaves, the door almost smacking him on the ass.

Damn it. I’d been hoping to corner him for some fun at midnight.

Turning to Brittany, I hoist up the glass of whiskey and tap it to hers. “I’m impressed, Britt. Can I call you Britt?”

“No.” I shrug, and she starts laughing. “You call me that, and I’ll start calling you Little Bit like your brother Rowan does, because Britt’s what my daddy called me.”

“Fair enough.” I take a sip of the whiskey, then ask, “What gives? Why don’t you like Logan? I’m going to be frank with you, he’s one fine piece of ass.”

She laughs harder, pressing a hand to her chest. “And I thought your sister Holly was sassy.”

“If you don’t tell me the real story, I’m going to make one up in my head,” I warn.

“I don’t doubt you will.” She runs a finger around the rim of her whiskey glass. “There’s no story. He just reminds me of my ex-husband, always looking for trouble and finding it. I prefer not to be reminded of my ex-husband whenever possible.”

I hoist my glass in an air salute. “Say no more. I’m a child of multiple divorces. My mother’s been married four times, and my dad’s about to get his second one in the bag. Hell,

from the way the widows and divorcees of Highland Hills have been crowding around him over the last week or so, I'm guessing he'll get around to divorce number three in no time."

"So you can understand why I don't want to repeat old patterns."

"Hell, yes, I can." I'm all about avoiding patterns of any kind. Hence my habit of dipping into different jobs, even though most romance novelists do their research on Google like normal people. Hence my avoidance of Highland Hills like it's a plague.

People think it's cute when I tell them that my family used to run a matchmaking business. There are the usual requisite jokes because I'm a romance author from a family of matchmakers. Mayberry Matchmakers.

Truth is, matchmaking hasn't been good to this family. My grandmother is basically every fairytale stepmother combined, and my mother should have used birth control. I mean, there are five of us kids, from three different fathers. Admittedly, I'm personally grateful that she wasn't more careful, but her parenting skills are on par with those of a rabbit. Rabbits give birth and then immediately hop off, only to return for a few minutes every day with some food. Our mother would have pulled that off if she could. (I learned a lot about animal habits while writing my zoo romance; go figure.)

I've recently gotten another lesson in what a shitty mother she is. Apparently, my brother Rowan, whom I thought was my half-brother, the way my other siblings are, is actually my full brother. In other words, she had an affair with my dad before divorcing her second husband and making Dad her third. If you're confused, you can imagine how all of us feel.

"How's your dad, by the way?" Brittany asks, shooting me a sympathetic look.

"Shockingly good for someone who just had a heart attack and had to retire early," I say, trying to keep things light. I almost had a heart attack myself when I heard about his health emergency, and to be honest, it's just about the only thing that could have compelled me to stay in Highland Hills for more

than a few days. Except a little voice in my head, which insists on being honest with me, however much I'd prefer otherwise, reminds me that's not the only reason I'm here. "I imagine he's doing way better with early retirement than Nana Mayberry."

"I guess so if he's already got women lining up to be his third mistake."

I'd just taken a sip of whiskey, and I nearly sputter it out. "I like you, Badass Brittany."

She lifts a finger. "Now, *that* can be my nickname. Are you going to be on camera for the show?"

I make a face. "Nah. I'll leave the spotlight to Rowan. He'll hate it, of course, but that's what he gets for romancing the star of a reality TV show."

We drink our whiskey, and by the time Holly knocks on the locked door, which is a bit of pure impatience on her part because Cole obviously has a key, we're a bit tipsy, just the way anyone should be on New Year's Eve. "For God's sake, Holly," I hear him say as I throw open the door, but it's said fondly, and there's a delightful energy between them that's nothing short of inspirational.

"We didn't burn the place down!" I announce. "Behold"—I sweep a hand around the tap room—"it is only the usual amount of dirty."

"Good, because this town doesn't need any more fires to put out," Holly says, pulling me into a hug. They both hustle inside, and Holly brightens at the sight of the whiskey bottle on the counter. "Tell me you have more glasses, Brittany."

Brittany meets my eye, winks, and says, "I do," before taking out glasses for Cole and Holly. She doesn't say anything about sending his brother away without even a goodbye whiskey. Neither do I.

"We have an announcement to make," Holly says.

Brittany covers her face with her hands. "You're getting married?!"

Cole swears under his breath and rubs his beard. Holly bursts into laughter. “No,” she says. “I’m going to give him a test run first. If we move in together, and Jane and I don’t murder him, then maybe I’ll take pity on him.”

“You’re moving in together *upstairs?*” Brittany asks, surprised. It’s a valid question. Cole and his daughter Jane have lived upstairs, on the brewery’s second level, for years, I guess.

“We’ve found a house to rent,” Cole says, “but of course there’s five other people who want it too. If that doesn’t work out, we’ll find someplace else.”

My pregnant sister, Bryn, and her fiancé, Rory, arrive a few minutes later, followed by Rowan and Kennedy and the cameras.

Rowan seems a bit pissed by the presence of the cameramen, possibly even by the invention of the camera, which is extremely amusing, but Kennedy has an unreal ability to soothe his prickles. Rory and Bryn have a special connection, too, of course. I mean, the man is drinking sparkling apple juice with her so she doesn’t have to be the only one not getting crunked. That right there is love.

They’ve done all right for themselves, my siblings. Our other sister, Willow, lives in Asheville, about two hours away, but she’s engaged too. Which leaves me the last Mayberry standing. Or it would if I didn’t go by my father’s last name.

I’m happy for them. I’m amused by the filming for the show, even though I don’t want to be in it (my publicist would probably shove me in front of the cameras, but she lives in California, so she’s not in prime shoving position).

I’m also feeling a little off-kilter tonight. Maybe Brittany’s right, and we don’t get to constantly reinvent ourselves. Maybe I’m like a cat embarking on its ninth life, and it’s all finally starting to catch up to me.

Which is probably why I drink too much whiskey with Brittany, followed by too much champagne with my sisters after the cameramen insisted on filming our New Year’s

Countdown three times, something that would make anyone punchdrunk. The cameramen go home; we stay. Logan doesn't show up, not that I really expected him to after the sendoff Brittany gave him.

My sisters and I are laughing wildly about something, probably a dick joke, when Cole finally announces it's time for us all to clear out.

"I'm not saying you have to leave," he tells us, "but you have to leave."

"Then you're a liar," I say, "because you just told us to do what you said you weren't going to do." I get lost in the logic, or illogic, of my own sentence and start laughing again.

"I should have said that everyone except for Holly has to leave," he says, and Brittany snorts and starts grabbing the remaining glasses, including a full glass of champagne from Holly.

I figured my sister Bryn would have the unenviable task of driving us all home, given she's pregnant and didn't drink, but her rich fiancé arranged for each of us to get a car. Good going, rich fiancé. Good going, Bryn.

I say goodbye to everyone, throw a salute to Brittany and say, "See you soon, Badass Brittany," and stumble into my car.

The driver and I get into an argument about the correct spelling of the word *coitus*—don't ask—even though I'm obviously right, then he leaves me off outside the door of my dad's house. It's a pretty house, yellow with a cherry red door, because my dad asked me which colors we should paint it when I was eleven, and that was my color scheme for the week, but I don't want to go in.

It feels a bit like a trap.

It makes me want to gnaw my leg off and run.

But it *is* massively cold, so I'm soon rummaging through my bag for my key.

Oh, shit. I didn't bring my key. Now, I'm feeling less like a rat in a trap and more like a hairless cat caught in a snowbank.

I hop on my feet, willing myself to be warmer, and consider my options. I don't want to wake up my father. He just had a heart attack, and the last thing he needs to do is let me inside when I'm smelling of booze.

The answer is obvious. I could wake up his—*our*—roommate, the man who started staying with him just before Christmas.

My face slips into a scowl.

I don't want Lou to open the door for me either. Although I don't know the man well, I do know the following things: he is a literary agent for "real" authors (i.e. not me because I'm both independently published and a romance novelist); he lives in New York and has come to Highland Hills for reasons undisclosed; and he is friendly with my sister Willow's fiancé but hasn't even told either of them what the hell he is doing here. I also know that he is judgmental and condescending, because even though we've exchanged no more than a handful of remarks, most of them have annoyed me. If I asked him for a favor now, he'd probably give me a wry look and say something cutting about young people these days, even though he's just eight years older than me.

He'd probably—

"The window!" I say to myself, probably speaking louder than intended.

I hustle to the back of the house and try to open the trick window, the one that never locks.

Hell, yes, my father never fixed it, because I can feel it giving when I tug up. Maybe I should make him fix it, but for now I'm grateful for the oversight.

"Come on, baby," I say to myself, giving it a harder push. "Give it to me good." The windows in this house are so old they look like candy glass and would probably break as easily, but it would totally be worth it if I don't have to talk to Lou right now. The window gives without cracking, and I do a little dance on my feet before putting my head and arms in, like I'm really feeling the hokey pokey, and pulling myself up. Except

there's a shouted "oh, fuck" on the other side, and then someone's shoving my shoulders. It only lasts a fraction of a second, but I nearly tumble out on my ass. Then there's a breathed out sigh and the voice says, "Oh, it's you."

The hands that tried to push me out tug me in, and I tumble into a heap on the floor. Lou looks down at me like I'm a naughty child, caught sneaking out rather than sneaking in. He's wearing pants with a drawstring and a white T-shirt, the kind of clothes I didn't think he'd wear since he comes off as a stuffed shirt who'd go to bed in a button-down. His hair is mussed, and it strikes me for literally the first time that this fusty man who's moved in with my father—against my will, let the record show—is actually sort of cute.

Then he lifts an eyebrow and says, "Aren't you a little old for this sort of thing?"

See. Called it.

Chapter Two

Lou

My landlord's daughter is lying in a heap on the floor at my feet, in a near fetal position. Thank God she's not wearing one of those short skirts I've seen her in despite the weather, or the hem would likely be pulled up halfway up her ass. Instead, she has on jeans that look like they were custom made to cling to every curve, and a T-shirt that has hiked up, revealing several inches of skin on her side. I can see a light brown mole about an inch under the band of her bra.

Ivy Anders is a gorgeous woman, but she's made it clear she thinks I'm the equivalent of dog shit on the bottom of her shoe, and besides, I've given up on women, especially gorgeous ones.

With her head still on the floor, she looks up at me through her riotous mass of blond curls. "The day I'm—" She cuts herself off and pushes out a puff of air. The strands over her face flutter but don't move much, so she lifts a hand to erratically swipe them off her face, then says, "The day I'm too old to climb through a window is the day I eat carrots."

Propping my hands on my hips, I narrow my gaze on her. "You're speaking nonsense."

"*You're speaking nonsense,*" she retorts.

"I'm not the one lying on the floor after falling through a window."

"I didn't fall," she says. "Someone pushed me."

I nearly tell her I *pulled* her, but it's wasted breath. She's drunk off her ass. It would be an unfair argument that she won't even remember tomorrow, so totally not worth my time or energy.

Besides, technically, I did push her at first, so she's not entirely wrong.

I don't want to make this my problem, but I also can't leave her like this. Jay, my landlord, is recovering from a very recent heart attack, and I don't want him to have to deal with a drunk daughter. Thank God his room is on the other side of the house, so there's a slight chance I can get Ivy into her room without waking him.

"Can you get up?" I ask, trying to keep the irritation out of my voice, but I don't do a very good job of it.

"*Of course* I can get up," she retorts, still lying on the floor.

"Then why don't you try it?"

"Because I'm waiting for the room to stop spinning so I don't fall off the ceiling."

Willow, my best friend's fiancée, who also happens to be Ivy's half-sister, convinced me to pick a word to focus on for the new year, like a mantra. Willow's a little ball of sunshine and impossible to say no to, so I picked Acceptance.

Looks like I should have picked Patience.

"How about I help you up?"

Her lips purse, her hair still partially covering her face. "Then you'll fall off."

Heaving a sigh, I say dryly, "I'm wearing gravity boots. I won't fall off." But the gravity boot reference jabs at the festering wound in my heart and ego.

Fucking Evan Ethington claimed he was an astrophysicist.

Dammit. I'm barely an hour into the new year, and even though I very intentionally did not drink tonight, I'm already thinking about Evan Ethington and his smug-ass grin.

This was supposed to be a better year. Willow told me I could reframe the New Year, New You slogan to be New Year, New Lou.

“The past is behind you, Lou,” she’d said before she and Alex went back home to Asheville a few days ago. They’d tried to convince me to go with them, but I’d refused. A man needs to retain some dignity, although what dignity I’m hanging on to by living in a near-stranger’s house in a town I didn’t know existed a year ago is anyone’s guess. “The world is *full* of opportunity.”

She can be convincing. Really convincing, because I actually started to semi-believe her.

Ivy seems to be considering my offer of help. Whether she’s questioning the likelihood of me actually helping her or why I’d be wearing gravity boots at one a.m. on New Year’s Day, I can’t say, but she must decide to go for it, because she slightly lifts her arm, presumably as a sign that she accepts my offer.

I grab her hand, but she’s as limp as an overcooked noodle.

I squat next to her and wrinkle my nose at the strong smell of alcohol. “Did you swim in a vat of wine or just drink it?” I ask as I scoop an arm under her shoulders and pull her to a sitting position.

“I didn’t have any wine,” she says in a smug tone. She’s sitting now, but her eyes are half-closed in the way of drunks and insomniacs. I should know since I’m the latter, and I was around enough drunken fools in college to recognize the former. “I had whiskey and champagne.”

“That explains it,” I say, shoving my hands under her armpits and trying to reposition my center of gravity so I can pull her to her feet and not fall over in the process. “My nose isn’t discerning enough to distinguish between the wine regions in France.”

She looks up at me and, two seconds later, laughs. “You made a joke.”

I can't stop a wry grin from lifting the corners of my mouth. "Obviously not a very good one if it took you that long to get it. Come on. Up we go."

If only my parents could see me now. They warned me nothing good could come from running away from my problems, and look at what I'm doing.

I haul her to her feet, and her body presses against mine. She doesn't put much weight on her feet, so I have to wrap my arms around her to keep her upright.

"Where's your—" She lifts a hand and grabs the top of my T-shirt.

She reeks of alcohol and her curls are a beautiful mess. Her mascara has partially smeared, but her blue eyes are searching my face for something, even if her gaze is unfocused.

That's when I feel it, a stirring in my blood. To my horror, I realize I'm still physically attracted to this woman when she's a drunken mess. It's a given that I'm attracted to her the rest of the time.

This new year just keeps getting worse and worse.

My brow lifts. "My *what?*" I ask against my better judgment.

"Your stuffed shirt?" Then she giggles.

I roll my eyes. Fuck Acceptance.

"Come on," I mutter. "Let's get you to bed."

"I'm not going to sleep with you," she says, sounding disgusted by the thought. "Even if you did lose your stuffed shirt."

I don't want to sleep with her either, but I keep it to myself. Although I'm not surprised she's turned off by me, it's one more dig at my wounds.

I'm irritated enough that I nearly release her and let her fall to the floor, but then I think of Jay and remind myself he's not

allowed to lift more than ten pounds. Ivy doesn't weigh much, but she's definitely over the restricted amount.

Which must be why I bend at the knees, then drop her over my shoulder and start to carry her the short distance to her bedroom, which happens to be across the hall from mine.

To my surprise, she doesn't squeal or cry out, she just flops over my shoulder as I open her door and walk in. A bedside lamp is already on next to the bed.

I haven't seen Ivy's room before. The door's always been closed, and I'm not a snooper. I believe everyone is entitled to their privacy, maybe because I've become so attached to mine after the mess that imploded my life, but this isn't what I expected. This used to be Ivy's childhood bedroom, but it looks like a guest room. There's nothing personal on the walls or scattered around the room to suggest Ivy Anders lives here other than her pink phone charger cord on the nightstand. None of the usual childhood paraphernalia is present. Was this her evil stepmother's doing, or did Ivy clear out any traces of her life here herself?

My curiosity is piqued for half a second, but then it fades.

I've got enough of my own shit to figure out without dealing with someone else's.

Bending over, I pull back the white duvet on her full-size bed, then drop her onto it. I admit it isn't as gentle as I intended, but she's like a rag doll. Her body falls sideways onto the bed, with her head hanging off one side and her feet off the other.

"Ivy, can you wiggle your head onto your pillows?"

She lets out a soft snore.

Fuck me. I guess that's a no.

I scrub a hand over my face, knowing full well I have to remedy this situation. I can't leave her like this.

Now I'm wishing I hadn't drunk so much water before going to bed. Then I wouldn't have gotten up to go to the bathroom and found her crawling through the window.

But I *did* drink all that water, getting a jump start on my new healthy lifestyle, and I *did* find her in the window, so now I'm stuck in this.

Drawing in an exasperated breath, I tug her athletic shoes off her feet. She was working at Ziggy Brewery tonight, although she must have gone off the clock at some point, so she was presumably dressing for arch support. I toss the shoes to the floor in front of her closet door, wondering if I should remove her socks. Some people can't sleep with socks. Their feet get too hot under the covers, but as I stare down at Ivy now, I doubt she'll have any trouble.

The socks stay.

So will the jeans and shirt, because no way am I being accused of trying to molest her.

So why am I thinking about what's underneath her clothes?

Shit, now I'm a pervert.

I need to get her situated, then get the fuck out of here and go back to wallowing in my room.

Grabbing her ankles, I drag her legs toward the end of the bed, but her head's still hanging off the side. I shift so I can grab her shoulders and tug her toward the headboard. Her head barely lands on her pillow, but that will have to do. I grab the covers and pull them up to her shoulders.

Her eyes suddenly fly open like she's auditioning for a role in *The Exorcist*.

I let out a small shriek and stumble backward. "Jesus Christ!"

"I'm thirsty," she says, her unfocused gaze trained on me.

"I'll get you some water." I hurry out of her room and down the hall to the living room and then kitchen. I grab one of the plastic souvenir cups that Jay has stacked in a cabinet, fill it with tap water and start to head back to Ivy's room, then turn around. I grab a large plastic bowl—just in case—and then retrieve a bottle of ibuprofen from the bathroom.

Her eyes are closed again when I walk into her room, but they open when I kneel next to her bed.

“Here,” I say, holding out the cup and a couple of pills. “Take these.”

She sits up slightly, then takes the glass and sips. “This isn’t champagne.”

“You should be a tasting chef,” I say dryly. “Your skills are remarkable.”

Her nose scrunches as she looks up at me in confusion.

“Never mind, a bad attempt at humor,” I mutter. “Now, take this ibuprofen and maybe your head won’t hurt so badly in the morning.”

“Didn’t your mom ever teach you not to take pills from strangers?” she asks as she takes them from my hand, but her fingers skim along my palm as she fumbles to pick them up, sending a quake of awareness through me.

I need to get out of here.

“No,” I say as she finally picks them up and pops them into her mouth. “She told me not to go to bed without flossing or my teeth would fall out.”

Ivy swallows the tablets, then her head flops back onto the pillow, sloshing water from the cup still in her hand onto her T-shirt. “Well, at least she tried to teach you *something*. Mine was focused on finding her next husband, and Kerry was too busy adding salt and pepper shakers to her collection. Isn’t that a weird thing to collect for a woman who doesn’t use salt?”

Willow has told me that their mother is a piece of work, and from what little I know about Jay’s newest soon-to-be ex-wife, I’m not surprised. Supposedly, when she found out about Jay’s heart attack, she couldn’t be bothered to leave her California vacation or her new podiatrist boyfriend to come back to check on him.

Which is why Ivy’s moved back home for the time being.

I’m here to help Jay out with his mortgage, but why am I in Highland Hills, North Carolina and not ringing in the new

year from my apartment in New York City?

I haven't quite figured out that part.

All I know is that I lost my fiancée, my reputation as a literary agent, and my semi-famous fish in a matter of a week.

I think I'm in a midlife crisis at the ripe old age of thirty-four.

"My shirt's wet," Ivy moans, then starts clawing at the hem, struggling to pull it up while still holding the plastic cup.

I snatch the cup from her and set it on the nightstand, but now she's pulling her shirt over her head.

"Oh...shit..." The last thing I want is to be accused of taking advantage of her, so I dash for a drawer and pull it open, thankful to see a stack of T-shirts and not bras and panties. I pull one out and glance over my shoulder to see Ivy sitting up with her T-shirt partially over her head.

"I'm stuck," she says, her voice muffled by her shirt.

She's wearing a lacy black bra, and my brain screams at me to run, but I can't leave her like this either.

I remind myself there's nothing sexy about a drunk woman. In fact, I find it irritating that I'm caught in this situation. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

I walk over and pull the shirt the rest of the way off her head and toss it to the floor.

She blinks up at me in surprise. "You know you'd be kind of cute if you weren't such a..." Her eyes narrow as she struggles to come up with a word.

Lucky for her, words are my specialty. Then again, they are for her too. I know she's a *very* successful indie romance author, not that I read romance.

"Stuffed shirt?" I supply.

"No."

"Arrogant prick?"

"No."

“Erudite?”

Her face brightens, then falls. “No.”

I pull the dry shirt over the top of her head. She looks like a turtle. A sexy turtle. “Can you get your arms through your sleeves?”

“Of course I can get my sleeves through my arms,” she says, sounding offended, but then her arms flail around inside the shirt.

Releasing a put-upon sigh, I reach under her shirt and shove one of her arms through one sleeve and then the other. “There. Now go to sleep.”

She flops back down on her pillows, the back of her head barely missing the headboard. “I wish I weren’t back here,” she whispers, barely loud enough for me to hear it. Her eyes are closed.

Despite my urgency to escape, I sit on the edge of her bed, tugging the covers up to her chin. I understand the need to flee, and not just in this current situation. “Your dad’s doing really well,” I say, my tone softening. “I doubt you’ll need to stick around much longer. Then you can go back to Charleston.”

“I can’t go back there,” she says, her eyes still closed.

“Why can’t you go back?” I ask despite myself. Both Jay and Ivy’s brother, Rowan, told me that Ivy came back to help her father during his convalescence. Neither one mentioned her needing to leave her home in Charleston.

A tear escapes from the corner of her eye and trails down the side of her face.

I resist the strong urge to stop it.

She shakes her head and a forced smile twists her full lips. She doesn’t want to tell me, and I shouldn’t ask.

None of my business.

So why do I feel a prick of disappointment that she remains silent? Then again, it’s not like I’ve told her anything

about why *I'm* here.

I get to my feet. “There’s a bowl next to the bed if you feel the urge to barf and can’t make it to the toilet. The water’s next to your bed. I’m across the hall if you need anything.”

I walk over to the lamp to turn it off, but she says, “Leave it on.”

She’s drunk enough that I doubt it will bother her, plus it might not be a bad idea for her to have light if she wakes up suddenly needing to find the barf bowl.

I head over to the door, then turn back to look at her. Should I say goodnight? Should I just leave?

Her eyes fly open. “Asshole.”

I blink in surprise. “Excuse me?”

Her eyes close again. “You’d be cute if you weren’t such an asshole,” she says, her voice fading as she falls asleep.

Story of my life.

Chapter Three

Ivy

Oops. My head feels like the squished insides of a can of refried beans that some psychotic jerk is banging with a silver fork. If this is the New Year, New Me, I'm in for a serious pounding in the new year, and not in a good way. As my head starts to clear, or feel less like someone's rejected dinner, my eyes catch on the glass of water on the bedside table. I remember Lou bringing me in here, getting me water and ibuprofen. It didn't help, obviously, but it was sweet of him to try. And I vaguely remember thanking him by calling him an asshole.

Fuck, I'm going to have to apologize to him, aren't I? As a rule, I try not to do anything deserving of an apology because I hate the feeling of going to someone, hat in hand, but this is definitely bad enough to require one.

Heaving a sigh, I grab my cell phone. Normally, if I were away from home, I'd have messages from my five closest friends. We called ourselves the Fun Bunch. Yeah, it's lame as hell, but I didn't come up with it, and I try not to yuck other people's yums. Anyway, I'd normally have messages and photos from all of them, but there's crickets. Just Happy New Year messages from my editor, my publicist, a couple of author friends, my elderly friends the Three Fates, and my mother, although that message was sent from a different phone on account of I've had her number blocked for months.

Happy New Year, doll! This is your mother. Something tells me this year will be different for us. Let's talk soon. We have lots and lots to discuss.

If she's hoping I'll spontaneously want to talk to her, then it truly would be a different year.

The lack of Fun Bunch messages is no more than I expected, but it still stings. Because I'm feeling low and a little maudlin, I go *salt in wound* and look up their social media accounts (they've all unfollowed me). There's a photo of all five of them at our favorite bar, O'Malley's, and then one of Annabeth doing her usual New Year's shot—goldschlager and hot sauce. *Start the new year spicy*, the caption says.

We always downed them together, laughing so hard afterward the spice would get into our nasal passages, and *that* was a real bitch that somehow only made us laugh harder. I feel a pulse of longing, but righteous fury takes over, because in the next shot she's in Chase's lap, and fuck them both. Fuck them all.

Throwing my phone for dramatic purposes, but keeping the toss gentle enough not to break it, I sit up, down the rest of the water, and grab a change of clothes to bring to the bathroom. I'll take a shower while I'm in there. Sometimes the water pounding on my skin helps wake me up. I suppose you can judge me for having a strategy for dealing with hangovers, and that's your right. It'll make you a tool, but you have a right to be a tool too. Chase is, and it's a strategy that seems to be going a-okay for him.

Humming a happy song to make me forget my pounding head and the photos from O'Malley's, I make my way to the bathroom. The sight in the mirror is probably something that would give children nightmares, and because I'm perverse, I cackle at the thought of Lou pulling me out of the window looking like this. Maybe I gave *him* nightmares.

The shower feels divine, and I can already feel it stripping away some of the bad feelings, like they really can be washed off down the drain. I sing "Gonna Have a Good Day" under

my breath, although the good day I have in mind entails drinking coffee while I write in bed. I felt a little flutter of inspiration yesterday at the bar. I'm going to follow that flutter until I find the whole kaleidoscope of butterflies.

I'm still humming as I get out and dry off on a towel, then wrap the T-shirt I was wearing around my sopping hair. As a kid, I never knew how to take care of my hair, and it was always a huge mass of frizz, but thank the lord, my first roommate in Charleston was a hairdresser, and he taught me to control my curls rather than letting them control me. I start in on my makeup—I may only be staying in today, but a girl deserves some pizzazz, even if it's just for herself, when the door swings open, wafting cold air on me.

My lips form an O as I turn toward the door, one eye done, the other as naked as my body.

Mothertrucker, it's Lou, wearing the same clothes he had on last night. Or at least I think they're the same; my memory's blurred by champagne.

He stands there for a solid five seconds, his eyes taking me in, his expression shocked...and then his pupils dilate. I feel an unexpected hot flush despite the cold beading my nipples, because his dark gaze is deep and surprisingly sexy, and his hair, which he usually has combed to precision, is mussed.

Then I break the moment by saying, "Like what you see? I'd appreciate a five-star review."

"Fuck," he says loudly. "Sorry." Then "fuck" again. The door closes, wafting more air inside.

Well, at least now we can apologize to each other.

* * *

When I come out, dressed in yoga pants and a sweater so oversized it's like it swallowed me, Lou is pacing in the living room. The scent of fresh coffee wafts on the air, a siren's song. Lou looks severe but still ruffled, and I can see him as the grumpy, troubled hero from one of my books, trying to pace

out his problems when he'd do better to fuck them out. Not with me, obviously. The last thing I want is more strings tying me down, unless it's to a mattress, and Lou strikes me as the serious sort.

"Look at you, being all broody," I say. "Did you make coffee? And if so, can I have the whole pot?"

He stops in his tracks, giving me another of those serious looks. "Shit, Ivy. I'm really sorry. That was completely inappropriate." His face twists. "But you really should lock the door."

"Oh-ho," I say. "Already into victim blaming, are we? Little too early in the new year for that, wouldn't you say?"

He swears under his breath, then says, "I meant to apologize."

"I will accept your apology in the form of coffee. Do you cook? Because a greasy hangover breakfast would be the frosting on the cake. Don't give any to my dad, though, obviously. Boiled kale for him, all the way." I peek around for Dad, but his favorite checkered armchair, where he's spent the majority of his convalescence at home, is empty, and I don't hear him humming in the kitchen.

"He's gone," Lou says, and for half a second, my heart threatens to choke me in my throat, but obviously he didn't mean *gone-gone*. Not even Lou would deliver bad news so flatly. He meant that he's gone out. "Some woman picked him up," he continues.

I sigh dramatically and span the distance between me and my dad's overstuffed white couch so I can lean a hand against the back. Lou stays put, his pacing paused for the moment. "And so the courtship continues," I say. "You know, his divorce hasn't even gone through yet. I mean, can't blame them. There's like one single man over the age of fifty in this town. They want to lock. It. Down."

He gives me an odd look. "You're talking about your dad."

"Yes, I'm well aware. While most people would like to pretend that their parents are allergic to sex, I'm proud of him

for having a healthy libido. Didn't prevent his heart attack, obviously, but they say it helps people live longer."

"Ah," he says, smirking now. "Alex told me about your romance novels."

Yep, there it is. I've been waiting for this condescension about my career. Maybe I don't need to apologize to him after all. Maybe I can blow a bunch of glitter at him and claim it's a New Year's tradition. The thought makes me snicker a little inside, but my head still hurts, so it doesn't stick.

"Yeah," I tell him. "What of it? From what *I've* heard, you're a literary agent. And if you're a literary agent who knows anything about the industry, then you'll know that romance novels bring in—" I wave my hand, because I don't actually know the statistic off the top of my head, "—buttlloads of money a year."

"Buttlloads, huh?" he says, his tone very clearly telling me *Ivy, you're a child*. Then he lifts a hand. "Wasn't knocking it. Not my thing, but—"

"Yes, you're very serious and busy and important." I roll my eyes dramatically. "No time for love or romance for you."

His glower deepens, and I realize I've struck a nerve. *Interesting*. Something tells me Lou is unlucky in love, or that he was recently dumped. I can't help but wonder what she was like. My mind summons up an image of a glamorous knockout with glossy black hair down to the middle of her back and big tits. I'll bet that's his type. She probably wore gowns down to breakfast. Speaking of which...

"Now, how about that breakfast?" I ask.

"Has anyone ever told you you're exhausting?" he says.

"All the time."

"I don't cook," he says with a half-smile. "In New York it's easy enough to subsist on takeout. Not so much here. But I'm not an idiot. I know how to make toast."

"Toast would be totally inadequate this morning," I say. "Let's have the coffee, then we'll go to Christmas All Year

Coffee.”

“Would they really be open on New Year’s Day?” he asks with a frown.

“They’re like actual elves,” I tell him. “They love working. Are you ready?”

He looks down at his sweatpants and shirt. “No, obviously not. I wore this last night. I was going in there to take a shower.”

“You look fantastic, champ,” I say. “And, look, I’m buying. I shouldn’t have called you an asshole last night.”

There we go, perfect. I didn’t say he wasn’t an asshole—wherever possible, a person shouldn’t lie—and I offered to buy him breakfast. Maybe I’m secretly great at making apologies.

I expect him to object to wearing his sweats there. Like we’ve established, he’s the collared shirt kind of guy. Hell, I’m willing to bet he wears them all summer long, even if he gets sweat circles underneath his pits. Nah, he probably has a non-sweating superpower.

He doesn’t though. He just grunts something about having to brush his teeth, disappears into the bathroom for a minute, and when he comes out, he says he’s ready to go.

I’d be delighted if I didn’t think this was probably a sign that he’s depressed or going through some sort of inner turmoil. He might be a bit of a judgmental jerk about what I do for a living, but I don’t like seeing people struggle. There’s something deep inside of me that wants to fix it for them, to wrap up their wounds in pretty paper.

I fill a to-go cup with some coffee and then we put on coats and shoes and head out, Lou driving because he’s the one with a car, a rented Subaru that smells like new car, but probably only because they sprayed it with something at the rental place.

“This place sounds terrible,” he says.

“You haven’t been there yet?” I ask, giving my coffee a loving sip.

“I know where it is, but I’ve avoided it,” he confirms. “I’m quite content with Christmas being once a year.”

“Not this place,” I say cheerfully. “Get ready to be bombarded.”

He takes a turn, then glances at me in his peripheral vision. “Do you really want to get bombarded with bright lights and Christmas music when you have a hangover?”

I make a pantomime of being offended. “Me, hung over?”

He snorts. “If you’re not hung over after being that drunk, then you should have research scientists study your blood. You may be the secret to a hangover cure that would make billions of dollars.”

“Want to work on it together?” I ask. Then I wink at him, even though there’s only a marginal chance he’ll notice. “That’d make a pretty tight romance novel. Maybe I’ll get around to it after I finish *Beauty and the Bar*.”

We’re heading down Main Street now, and I feel the same weird sensation I always do—this is home, I hate it; I want to be here, I want to leave immediately and never come back. He pulls into the lot for Christmas All Year Coffee, parks, and then steals a glance at me. “Your dad told me that you always do your own research for the books you write. That’s unusual.”

“That’s me,” I say. “A rare, tropical bird.”

“Yeah,” he says, then surprises me by adding, “I’m starting to see that you are. What’s your book about?”

We both unbuckle and exit the car. It’s cold out, enough to send a shiver down my back, so I hustle toward the brightly lit entrance. The lot is about half full, many people still probably nestled in their beds, or puking into bowls somewhere.

“It’s about a beauty...who works in a bar.”

“So you don’t want to tell me,” he says with a smirk, opening the door and then wincing at the onslaught of “God

Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” “It’s too early in the year to already have this many regrets,” he mutters.

“It’s never too early,” I say, patting him on the back. We approach the counter, joining the small line snaking out from it. The guy in front of us works at the fire station with my brother, and I nod to him. Three people up is my English teacher from tenth grade. Mr. Healey told me the adjectives I use are too colorful, so he can go suck it. This is another thing to hate and love about small towns. You know most people, and the people you don’t know the people you do. “Besides,” I add to Lou, “I’m not refusing to tell you what it’s about, I just don’t know yet.”

“You haven’t started it?” he asks, clearly confused.

“Oh, I’ve started it, but it’s an organic thing. It’s going to change as I go on, as I keep working at the brewery. I can already feel it happening.”

His confusion deepens. “It’s a book, not a living thing. Don’t you have an outline?”

I laugh. “I don’t believe in outlines.” He goes to say something, probably about outlines being an essential part of the process, but I’ve heard it all before, dozens of times, to be frank, and I’d rather not listen to it again. So I say, “Yes, I’m aware they work very well for some people, but I am not one of those people. I like letting things develop as I go along. That’s what works for me.” I lift my brows archly. “And you can’t argue with success.” I say that last part a little more loudly in the hopes that Mr. Healey will hear it and get the implicit FU.

Lou looks like he’d like to try, but he just shrugs and looks at the menu board. “What the hell’s A Santa Surprise?” he asks with dismay.

“There’s one way to find out, bucko.”

To my surprise and delight, he smiles and says, “Want to bet it’s shaped like a dick?”

“You think it’s a big surprise or a little one?”

We move up, and he says, “I don’t think I’m interested in any more surprises. Most of the ones that have happened lately have been unpleasant.”

“Like walking in on me naked in the bathroom?” I say.

Rowan’s fireman pal, whose name I can’t remember, glances back with interest, and I grin at him. Lou looks frustrated and a little annoyed, and hold the presses, he’s kind of cute like this, all rumpled and cozy and grumpy. “Let’s not talk about that anymore.”

“Okay, so was the other unhappy surprise when you pulled me in through the window last night?”

Another glance from the fireman.

“You’re going to get me thrown out of town on my ear,” Lou says.

I laugh as we advance on the counter. Truthfully, the music is sort of making my head bang, but at least it’s banging to the tune of “Jingle Bells” now and not “God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen.” “That’s such an old man saying.”

“I feel like an old man,” he says, rumpling a hand through his hair. He doesn’t look like one. Maybe this could be a sort of side project I work on while I’m in town—making Lou feel young again. I’m not sure why I’m suddenly inclined to help this mostly stranger when only twenty-four hours ago, I was pretty intent on driving the “fuddy-duddy” out of my father’s house, but I’ve always been of the mind that if there’s one old saying that got it right it’s that a foolish consistency is a hobgoblin of little minds.

Hey, I’d bet Lou would like that one.

I make a pact with myself, then and there. I’m going to get Lou talking, and then I’m going to solve all of his problems for him. I mean, hell, if I can’t touch mine with a ten-foot pole, I might as well get moving on someone else’s, right?

Chapter Four

Lou

We order coffee—black for me, much to Ivy’s disappointment. A surprising number of the drinks on the menu have alcohol in them, and I’m not up to trying one today. Ivy must be a subscriber to the oft-debunked hair of the dog theory, because she gets a Santa’s Suitcase. Apparently, Santa carries around a mini bar. But because I wimped out on my coffee—Ivy’s words—she insists I try a breakfast sandwich called Rudolph’s Nuts. Since I’m already out in public in sweat pants and a T-shirt in a coffee shop that looks like Christmas vomited everywhere, I throw up my hands and say, “Why not?”

Based on Ivy’s smug grin, she’s pleased by this, and true to her word, she taps her phone to pay for our order.

“Let’s sit next to the train,” she says, leading the way.

I don’t answer this time; I just follow her over to the window. I don’t usually let people blindly lead me around, but there’s something cute about her enthusiasm, despite the fact she must have a raging hangover.

She takes a seat at a two-top, and I sit across from her, cradling my mug—a real one with Santa’s face on one side and his butt on the other.

Ivy’s studying me with her head tilted slightly to one side, and I feel like she’s a painter and I’m her naked model.

“What?” I ask suspiciously before I take a sip of my coffee—and nearly choke in shock. It’s damn good coffee. I’ll have

to get more information about the beans and see if I can purchase some.

“I’m just trying to figure you out,” she says, still appraising me. “You know, I don’t think I even know your last name. What is it?”

“Moralis.”

She snort-laughes.

“Something funny?”

“Moralis. You’re a goody two-shoes. It’s funny.”

“Never said I was a goody two-shoes.”

She studies me for a second. “You are, but there’s more to you than that.”

I hear a small engine behind me, and sure enough, an electric train whizzes by on a track that runs around the periphery of the cafe, just above our heads, pulling multiple cars—a flatbed filled with pine trees stacked on top of one another, followed by what looks like a cattle car with reindeer heads sticking out windows so small there’s no way the antlers would fit through the opening, but then the whole thing is made from molded plastic, so it doesn’t matter—

Oh, my God. Why am I assessing the realism of a plastic train?

“There’s nothing to figure out,” I say, lifting my cup. “I’m a boring, average man.”

“I thought so too,” Ivy says, still watching me like she’s studying a meerkat in the wild. “Now I’m not so sure.”

“Thanks?” I say sarcastically.

“So what’s your story? Why are you here?”

I set my cup on the table. I really don’t want to think about Victoria. Or Evan. Or Vonnegut the fish. Or even disappointing my parents for the first time in my life.

I shrug, trying to look nonchalant. “Just needed a change of scenery and a vacation.”

Her brow lifts. “A working vacation. I’ve seen you editing manuscripts. Hell, the first time I met you—”

“Yeah, I don’t need a reminder,” I say grumpily. She was waitressing at Ziggy’s and spilled beer on the manuscript I was working on, then tried to blame me for it. I reluctantly admit I wasn’t a fountain of graciousness...but only to myself. No need to feed Ivy’s ego.

Still, there’s no denying the encounter was distasteful on both sides. I walked away seeing her as an irritation, while she’s flat-out disliked me ever since. In fact, she was none too pleased to find out I’d rented her father’s spare room, so I’m a little thrown by the fact that we’re sitting here, drinking coffee in Santa mugs and waiting on our food.

I’m also thrown by the fact I agreed to *eat* Rudolph’s Nuts.

I stare back at her now, trying to forget that I saw her naked less than an hour ago. The images I conjured up of what might be beneath her clothes last night didn’t do the reality justice.

Stop thinking about her with her clothes off!

“You’re thinking about seeing me naked, aren’t you?” she asks with a sly grin.

I start to protest, but then someone behind the counter calls out our number.

Saved by Rudolph’s Nuts.

Jesus, that’s not something you can say every day.

“I’ll get it,” I say, getting up and walking over to the counter to pick up the tray, then carrying it back.

If I was hoping Ivy would let it go, I was sadly mistaken.

“Look,” she says, reaching over to grab her paper-wrapped breakfast sandwich. “There’s nothing for either of us to be ashamed of. I forgot to lock the bathroom door, and you’re not a person who believes in knocking. No harm done.”

“Who says I’m ashamed?”

She gives me an exasperated look, then takes a bite of her sandwich.

I unwrap mine and lift the top biscuit to get a better look at what's inside—turkey bacon, egg whites, and avocado, along with some kind of sauce.

“Why do they call this Rudolph's Nuts when there aren't any nuts?”

“Must everything be logical, professor?”

“Yes, Ivy. A logical world brings order.”

She winks. “And where's the fun in that?”

Order prevents chaos. My parents always stressed the point so much that Alex insisted on playing at his house when we were kids, where his dads were more lenient about messes and mayhem. But my life is in chaos, and everything was running along pretty logically until it all imploded, so maybe that's just a delusion.

“What's got you thinking so hard?” she asks, studying me again.

I feel like a butterfly pinned to a board.

Jesus, why does an image of me tied to a bed with a naked Ivy hovering over me come to mind?

I start to choke on a bite of my food.

A slow grin spreads across her face. “Are you single?”

I continue coughing, but she watches me patiently until I stop.

Would I like to start something with Ivy? She's sexy as hell, but starting a dalliance with my landlord's daughter would be something out of a romance novel, only I doubt there would be a happily-ever-after, not to mention, I'm very far from being over the shit show I left behind in New York.

I make a face and put down my sandwich. “Ivy, you're a gorgeous woman, but I don't think it's a good idea if we make a go of anything.”

She stares at me expressionless for several seconds, and I start to worry she's going to make a scene. I mean, for all I know, she doesn't take rejection well. Looking like she does, it can't possibly happen often enough for her to be used to it.

Then she *does* make a scene...just not how I expected.

She starts to laugh hysterically.

I give her several seconds to enjoy her amusement, starting to slightly worry about her when she laughs so hard she can't seem to catch her breath, but then she settles down, wiping tears from her cheeks.

"I don't want to date you," she says, then draws in a deep breath to calm down even more.

"You just made that *perfectly* obvious," I grumble, pushing my sandwich away.

Why the hell did I agree to this breakfast? My ego was already in shambles, and now this...

"It's just..." she turns serious, "you hadn't mentioned a girlfriend—" she grimaces, "—or boyfriend, if you swing that way."

"I'm straight," I say, my voice rigid, "and until last night we haven't exactly been chatty, have we?"

She considers my statement for a moment, then says, "You're right, Lou *Moralis*. We've definitely gotten off on the wrong foot." She brushes the crumbs off her hand onto the table with a napkin, then extends it for a shake. "I'm Ivy Anders, nice to meet you."

I stare at her hand with a dry look. "Are we pretending this is the first time we met?"

"Sure," she says airily. "Why not? Fresh start."

"So we're supposed to magically forget every encounter up until now?"

Her hand still hovers over the table, her palm held sideways. "I'm making an effort here."

She's right. Although her fit of laughter still burns, I decide to be the better person. I shake her hand, then quickly withdraw it. "Nice to meet you, Ivy Anders. I hear you write books for a living."

"And I'm pretty successful at it," she says with a wink. "I hear you're a New York dinosaur."

"You mean literary agent?"

"Same thing."

The shitty part is that she's partially right. Independent publishing changed the publishing world, and now it's harder for agents to make ends meet. But I'm lucky that my best friend Alex is both uber successful and my client. My other big client, Evan Ethington, was on the verge of becoming just as successful, maybe even more so.

Until the world discovered he was a fraud.

I push the intrusive thoughts away and quirk my brow at Ivy. "If we're trying to start over, seems like you could make a little more effort."

She grimaces. "I suppose you're right. Sometimes I come on a little strong." She places her hands on the table and gives me a sweet smile. "So you live in New York and represent authors who are going the traditional route. Tell me more about your life, Lou."

"I feel like anything I say can and will be used against me," I say dryly.

She grins and shrugs. "I can't promise it won't end up in a book, but I'll change the names and identifying information to protect the not-so-innocent."

"You know that gives me even less incentive to tell you."

"I feel it's only fair to warn you."

She's going to hound me until I give her something, so I decide to keep it to the basics. "I'm single. I live in a one-bedroom walk-up in Greenwich Village. I had a fish named Vonnegut, and I like to read." I pick up my sandwich, which

has some kind of aioli sauce that's actually really good. "Your turn."

She laughs. "I'm not surprised you named your fish Vonnegut. That's maybe the most pretentious thing I've ever heard."

"Complain to Alex. He's the one who named him. I fish-sat for him when he went to Asheville for the first time.

"And then you fish-napped him? Cold," she says, nodding, her curly hair bobbing with the movement. "I like it."

"He's dead," I say flatly. It should have been a small thing, losing a fish. But I loved that fish. I'd started an Instagram for him—photos of him photoshopped with hats and ties and briefcases—and then made a children's book out of it. Under a pseudonym, since I didn't need every client bringing it up at every lunch meeting. But if I told Ivy, she'd have a field day with that knowledge.

She lifts her hands. "That's between you and your toilet bowl."

"I didn't flush him down the toilet," I say, offended.

"So what'd you do, bury him in your compost bin?"

"I buried him in the park." I'm slightly embarrassed to admit it. She writes the kind of romance books with half-naked men on the cover, and from my—admittedly limited—understanding of such things, the male characters probably talk in monosyllables and have the emotional range of a can of generic beer. They're not the kind of men who'd care about a pet fish, certainly not to the extent of giving him a burial.

"Oh, Lou," she says, looking like she feels sorry for me, which I absolutely do not want.

"It's fine," I say. "He was just a fish. Tell me about yourself. It's your turn for a bio."

"I'm also single—I like to keep it that way, no strings to tie me down. I write smutty books, as you already know. My dad just had a heart attack, and my mother was the wicked witch of North Carolina before she moved to Florida a few years back

and gave that title to my grandmother. But enough about me... and you...and your fish.” She leans forward, her eyes gleaming. “Tell me why you’re single.”

“I’d rather not.”

“You know I can just call Willow and ask her. You might as well save me the trouble and tell me now.”

Willow doesn’t know all the facts. Neither does Alex. They only know I was engaged, and now I’m not. But she’s right—I might as well tell her that much. “I was engaged, and we broke it off last month.”

She grimaces. “Sorry, Lou. Truly. Who broke up with who?”

I think about finding Victoria in bed with Evan, and the sandwich in my gut churns. “It was mutual.”

“How long were you together?”

“Six months.” In hindsight, the whole thing moved quickly, and there were signs I’d ignored. The sad part is that I don’t miss her as much as I thought I would. I’m more hurt by the betrayal. By the immolation of the life I thought I had.

“Maybe you just need to get on with your rebound and get laid.”

I snort, pushing my plate of food away. “That is *not* what I need.”

Honestly, I’m not sure what I need. After everything went to shit, my boss gave me the green light to work remotely for a few weeks so I could “clear my head.” Translation: he wasn’t ready to outright fire me because I’m Alex’s agent, and Alex is the kind of client you want to keep, but he also doesn’t want me to be running around Manhattan, telling people I’m associated with his agency. I wasn’t going to argue. I wanted to leave my life behind...and I found myself thinking of this place. I’d never been to Highland Hills before last month, but Alex had told me about it. The small-town charm, the mountains, the feeling of being hidden away. It’s been relaxing, other than the storm-made-human who is Ivy, and I’m not even close to ready to go back home. Even if my

parents expect me to run off and join a commune at any given moment.

“Now, hear me out,” she says. “You can dip your toe into the Highland Hills waters with online dating. My sisters created the perfect app. It has an extremely high success rate.”

“No,” I say emphatically, shaking my head to get the point across. “Absolutely not.”

“Look, I know what you’re thinking,” she says with undue confidence. “If you’re not looking for a long-term commitment, you just make it clear that you’re here for a short time. Boom. Suddenly, you’re honest *and* a limited time deal. Women dig that shit.”

“No, Ivy,” I say, some of the fight fading from my tone. “I’m not ready yet. Can we leave it at that?”

Her excitement fades. “Sorry, Lou. I was just trying to help.”

“By helping me hook up? Is this a romance author thing? You’re not happy unless everyone’s in love?”

She grins. “Not in love. More like in lust. Everyone deserves to feel good.” She lifts a hand and waves it. “I mean, look at my dad! He’s the toast of the town.” Her face scrunches. “Huh. You know, I should really talk to his heart doctor about what’ll happen if he gets busy too soon. There’s just no holding back the Anders libido.”

Christ. That’s the last thing I need to hear right now.

“Maybe some of us would rather just wallow,” I blurt. I regret the words as soon as they come out of my mouth. Who knows what she’ll do with this new information, but to my surprise, she looks sympathetic.

“Sure, Lou. We’ll leave it for now.”

Chapter Five

Ivy

Here's the thing about telling the truth: there are as many layers to it as an onion. Technically, I have *left it for now* with my getting Lou to act like he's not a geriatric boomer project, but that's only because I've been busy preparing for *later*.

One thing became very clear during our New Year's breakfast at Christmas All Year Coffee: he's a man crying out for help, and whether he wants it or not, he's gonna get it. By the time I'm done with him, people will realize he's not a Benjamin Button (the term my ex-friends and I coined for an old man who looks young in certain lighting) but an actual thirty-four-year-old. A thirty-four-year-old man who has *emotions*, which basically makes him a unicorn among men, whether he realizes it or not. When he was talking about his fish, I practically had tears in my eyes—I mean, like most people, I've never spared much of a thought for fish except to dread Fishstick Friday in high school, but it was touching, and it made me even more determined to have my way.

The dating app my sisters developed has an algorithm that requires the user to answer a hundred and fifty questions. That might sound like a lot, because it *is* a fucking lot. Seriously, you try asking your father's lodger a hundred and fifty personal questions without making it look like you're digging for information.

Still, I'm like a herding dog with an ankle in my mouth. I'm not going to give up on him, because I've decided he's not allowed to give up on himself. There's a sadness inside of him

that needs to be exorcised, and I'm certain my sisters' app will find him the perfect partner for fucking it out, or at least providing a meaningful distraction. So I've asked him about five to seven questions a day after New Year's, trying to work them into casual conversation.

In the beginning, I kept things simple so as not to tip him off, dropping questions like, *So Lou, what's your favorite color?* Or *Hey, look, there's a new documentary on Netflix. You totally like watching documentaries, don't you? You just strike me as that kind of a guy.* (The downside to that one was that I had to watch the documentary with him to avoid looking suspicious, and sweet Jesus, it was boring. I caught Lou yawning too, though, so at least I know he has a pulse.)

Lou and I didn't exchange best friends' necklaces and start hanging out 24-7 after our New Year's breakfast. He has his work; I have my hours at the brewery, a book to write and tons of others to market, my sisters and brother to catch up with, and my dad to take care of without acting like I'm taking care of him. But we *do* sometimes eat dinner with my dad and whichever lady friend has filled out his dance card that night. Normally, I'm a takeout-all-the-time type like Lou, but my dad has a stricter diet he has to follow post-heart attack. Luckily, Dad's romantic life is so robust that we're hardly ever lacking for healthy food. I've actually given paper handouts to all of his various callers, so their casseroles are all heart healthy.

But I digress. Getting the easy questions answered was a snap.

The more complicated questions have to be answered too, though, so after several days, I start asking him the hard hitters.

We're both on our laptops in the living room, my father already in bed, when I lower my laptop lid and ask, "Hey, Lou, I like to tell someone to their face when they're being stupid. Would you?"

His response is to give me a blank look, which is more of an answer than he probably thinks since "give them a withering look" is one of the responses on my sisters' list.

A few minutes later, I repeat the maneuver. “Lou, what would you do if someone you loved was in danger, and you could either save them or the world?”

That one catches him off guard.

“What, are you collecting answers for a book, or something?”

“Yes!” I say, inspired. “That’s exactly what’s happening. I’m asking lots of dudes and compiling their responses.” In reality, fictional men born beautifully in a woman’s brain are much better than fictional men based on real men, but I’d bet he’d roll his eyes and say something salty if I told him so. Besides, why throw away a perfect excuse?

“Huh, okay,” he says, rubbing his stubble. He always seems to have a five-o’clock shadow, no matter what time of day it is. It’s kind of cute, and I’ve already made sure to capture it in a photo. In it, he’s peering out the window, his hand on his scruff, his expression giving off a whole *hot man thinking deep thoughts* vibe. I’ve found myself looking at it a few times when he’s not around, trying to put myself in the place of whoever will see his profile. There’s something soulful about him. Something deep that makes you want to sink your teeth in. Or at least that’s what they’ll think when they see it. “Do you want to interview me?”

There’s something almost vulnerable in the way he asks it, his brown eyes reminding me of one of those beagle puppies who looks up at you with sad eyes that say *pick me, pick me*. I feel a little swell of fondness toward him. Then again, who hasn’t been drawn in by a pair of puppy dog eyes?

“Yes, Lou. That would be fantastic. Thank you so much for volunteering.” So I grab us a couple of beers from the kitchen, then interview him for the next half hour, asking him about his style of communication and his parents—nice, but if you ask me they put unnatural expectations on his shoulders, which probably contributed to the whole Benjamin Button thing he has going on. It doesn’t take long before he gets bored and makes up some obvious excuse about wanting to do

laundry. No one wants to do laundry. Laundry is a thing that must be done, eventually, never a source for enjoyment.

Unless it actually *is* a source for enjoyment for him, in which case I should probably find out so the app can match him to a woman who likes organizing her spice rack.

“Hey, Lou,” I shout, which makes him wince. “Do you actually enjoy doing your laundry?”

“Yes, Ivy,” he says flatly. “It’s what I do for a thrill.”

“So that’s a no.”

He shrugs. “There’s something satisfying in a job well done. My mom taught me the perfect way to fold a collared shirt, and—”

“Good talk, buddy. See ya later.”

It’s not until later, when I’m looking at my laptop again, adding the newest answers to BookMan69’s dating profile, that I realize we’re just over three weeks into the new year, and I’ve only added a dozen pages to my book despite having worked at the brewery for weeks. I guess this Lou project has taken more out of me than I expected.

I tell Brittany as much the next morning, a cold but sunny Tuesday, before we open for lunch service and the early drunks. (Like I said, I’m a talker, and I’ve told her all about my plan. She does not approve.)

“Ivy,” she says, planting a hand on her hip in that way that suggests I’m about to get a heaping helping of tough love. “Hasn’t it occurred to you that you’re not getting work done because your father nearly died from a heart attack? You had a shock. Let yourself work through it. Maybe you should take some time off.”

For a second, her words shake me. Fuck, she’s right, isn’t she? It’s not just Dad, either. There’s the Fun Bunch and those pictures and Chase...

But I swallow it down and laugh, slapping her with the drying towel I’ve been using for some glasses. “You just want to get rid of me because I suck at this job.”

I do, to be honest. I've gotten better, but I still dropped a full beer on someone's head last night, which required Cole to cover the man's whole bill. Oops.

She gives me a long look. "No, hon. But you can't kid a kidder. You need to let yourself work through that shit, or it's going to eat you up. Trust me."

I want to ask her what shit's been riding her, but I've gotten to know her well enough to know she'd tell me if she wanted to.

"I reluctantly admit you might have a point," I say, setting down the dry glass. "But I can't stop totally. If I'm not doing anything, I get antsy and start doing stupid shit."

She lifts her eyebrows, drawing my gaze to her hair, once again back in a tight ponytail. "Like making up a dating profile for a man who's told you he's not ready to move on? Why don't you take him at his word?"

"Because he needs someone to shake him out of his stupor," I say, as determined as that dog biting an ankle. "I've heard him on the phone with my sister and her fiancé, and good God, if I left things up to Willow, it would be ten years before he manages to pull himself up out of this funk. He needs a kick in the ass, not a pat on the head. I'm that ass-kicker. My plan goes into motion tonight." I grin at her. "I've already activated his profile, and he has a ninety percent match. She's hot as hell. He's going to want to listen to me."

She laughs and shakes her head simultaneously, a reaction I've gotten before. "Oh, Ivy. I shouldn't like you, but I do."

"Huh, that's what every single ex of mine has said." I grab another glass to dry it off and nearly butterfingers it when I see Logan approaching the front door. He hasn't come by since New Year's, and I'd nearly forgotten him. "Logan's here," I say, not bothering with an undertone. After all, he knows he's here.

Brittany flinches and then shrugs. "Door's locked until eleven."

My gaze lifts to the clock mounted above the door. 10:55.

“You’re going to make him wait outside in the cold for five minutes?” I ask, laughing. “What if Cole shows up?” Cole and my sister are having a lunch date, which seems awfully grown up of them.

One corner of her mouth lifts up. “They’re his rules. He can hardly get upset with me for following them.”

I’m starting to think this Brittany/Logan thing is a little more complicated than him reminding her of her ex-husband. I mean, sure, no one wants to get reminded of that shit. Old news is best left in the past, but she’s hating on him a little too much. There’s something personal involved. Interesting. I’m excited, but not because there’s a hot, boneable guy around; I’m interested because of this weird energy between Brittany and Logan.

She thinks she hates him, but the lady doth protest too much.

(Shit, I’ve been spending too much time around Lou, haven’t I? Soon I’ll start quoting those boring documentaries.)

Logan knocks, and Brittany turns and gives him a saucy wave before pointing to the watch on her wrist.

“Oh, come on,” I say. “Aren’t you the slightest bit curious about why he’s here?”

“No,” she says. “He used to come here all the time. The better question is why he hasn’t been here, but no doubt he’s been shackled up with some new woman. There’s always a new one.”

There’s a barb in her tone. Jealousy? My heart beats faster, and I feel a stirring inside of me, the characters in my stalled book getting a breath of life.

Enemies to lovers, *my favorite*.

“What’d he do to you, anyway?” I ask conversationally. “Does he piss all over the toilet whenever he’s here? Complain about foam in his beer?”

“There’s never foam in the beers *I* pour,” she says, giving me an arch look.

Fair.

“It seems to me that you’re avoiding the question.”

He knocks again, scowling, but being super hot while doing it.

She glances at him, sighs, and says, “My car broke down a few weeks ago. It’s shit in the snow, and I was worried I’d be caught out in the cold for hours. Logan runs the auto repair shop in town, and—”

Holy shit, I think. This is it. The story is unrolling before me like a beautiful tapestry that can only end in fucking. Definitely in my book, and hopefully also for Brittany and Logan. This happens to me all the time with my books—they’ll come to me in a trickle, and then suddenly inspiration strikes and it’s a gush of words.

She heaves another sigh. “I called him. He was in the middle of something, but he immediately picked me up in his tow truck and towed the car back to his shop.”

“So he rescued you, and now you’re treating him like he’s yellow snow?” I tap my chin dramatically, then give a little finger wave to Logan, who has leaned against the wall next to the door, clearly resigned to waiting the few minutes before opening. “Makes sense.”

She clutches the edge of the bar, leaning in a little. “I thanked him for coming, and then I found myself telling him about this tool I’d been dating, who’d told me I’d be real pretty if I tried harder to look feminine.”

“What a fucker,” I say, falling into the story. Sucking it down like it’s sustenance. “And then what happened?”

Her voice drops a little, but not as if she’s afraid to be overheard. It’s like she’s falling into the memory too, feeling its power.

I guess it’s ironic, loving love the way I do but having no desire to be tied down by it. But I’m all about being a wild card, a hypocrite riding the wave of endless flights of fancy.

“He said I was beautiful just the way I was, and that he wanted to hunt that asshole down and punch him.” She pauses, biting her lip, looking over her shoulder just enough to take in the profile of his face—his strong chin, his short beard, the intensity of his eyes as he stands on the outside looking in. “You know, he did that once...about a month and a half ago, before your brother and his fiancée started filming that dating show. A bunch of the contestants came in before they were locked up in that house, and this one guy wouldn’t leave me alone. You know the type. He kept making comments about my hair and my ass, and then, in case I’d missed the picture entirely, he said he wanted to get some town pussy before competing for Kennedy’s hand in marriage.”

“Asshole,” I hiss, feeling like her Greek Chorus and liking it.

“Exactly.” Another small glance. He’s tapping his foot impatiently now, making a study of looking at his watch. “Logan was there, and he punched him in the face.”

Yes, whispers the covetous voice inside of me. Yes, please.

“So?” I ask, not even bothering to pretend that my interest is casual.

Her cheeks flame. “I kissed him.”

“*Really?*” I ask, blown away. I’d figured it would be the other way around, the way she’s been acting. “I mean, he kissed you back, right?”

“At first, yeah,” she says, sliding a hand over her smooth hair.

“And it was phenomenal, wasn’t it? He looks like a man who knows how to use his mouth.”

She gives a chuckle that lacks any mirth. “He is. But then he pulled away. Said he valued my friendship too much to try anything with me.” Her expression slips.

He’d hurt her, badly. She’d said something about her ex-husband being like Logan, a ladies’ man. A cheater, probably. Logan doesn’t strike me as one, but he also doesn’t come off as the kind of man who’s desperate to settle down. Still, I can

see why she'd conflate the two in her mind—why she'd want to, even. It makes her feel better to think Logan wouldn't be an option anyway.

Maybe Badass Brittany needs a confidence boost, and if she does, I'm her gal.

“And now you don't want anything to do with him,” I comment.

Except I can tell that's not true. She *likes* him, and Logan, the dumbass, clearly likes her too.

“Oh, shit,” she says, tapping the edge of the bar. Her intense gaze is fixed on me. “I can see those wheels turning in your head, Ivy Anders. Don't you dare. No setting up dating profiles for me. Your sister Holly's already been on my case, and I don't need pressure from you. If and when I decide to revisit that shitshow, I will. On *my* terms.”

I lift my hands. “Wouldn't dream of it.”

No, I have different plans.

Sighing, she glances at the clock over the door—11:02—and goes over and unlocks it.

Logan gazes down at her, his eyes dark and brooding. A romance is unfolding before my eyes! I record it all in my brain. My book will be different of course. It's this tension I want to bottle, it's this feeling of the wind before a storm. It's *gold*.

“You opened two minutes late,” he says, his voice growly as he makes his way to the bar. The hair rises on my arms, my attention hyper-focused on them.

“You going to tattle to your big brother?” she asks, following him but not slipping behind the bar with me. I distantly register the door opening and closing again, but my attention is on her.

She's crossing her arms over her chest. I see it again. She's hurt, and he did the hurting. She's upset that he stayed away, because in her mind he was shackled up with some other woman he didn't reject.

I doubt it's true. Judging by the way he acts around her, that moment mattered as much to him as it did to her. He's just being an idiot about it, like men usually are about this sort of thing.

Oh, this is too good.

“What are you plotting?” a familiar voice asks me.

Chapter Six

Ivy

I t's not a *pleasant* familiar voice, to be clear. It's my grandmother, the once inimitable Maeve Mayberry, who used to scare the bejesus out of me. Yes, there is a person in existence who used to scare the bejesus out of me, and my mother constantly left us with her despite knowing there wasn't a maternal bone in her pinky. Her hair is exactly as lacquered as usual, not a strand out of place, and her posture makes her look like she has a stick constantly wedged up her ass. Lou would probably be jealous.

"I could pretend I'm happy to see you, but I think we're past pretenses," I say.

I mean, this woman is even more of a rotten apple than my mother, and that's saying something. Once, before I moved in permanently with my father, she made me stand out in the cold for two hours after I was sent home from school early for talking back. It was entirely deliberate, since she had to go to the trouble of picking me up before she put me in the fenced backyard like a dog. My mother was off doing God know what with God knew who, and we'd been left with "Nana" for the day.

When she finally let me in, my teeth chattering and my toes close to frostbite, she gave me a look as cold as my feet and said, "I presume you'll know better than to talk back next time."

I didn't. I told her I wanted to shove an icicle up her ass, and she locked me in one of the back bedrooms until my

brother and sisters got home. Yes, she had locks installed outside of the doors so she could keep us confined.

Time has not improved her like a fine wine. She tried to sabotage my big sister Bryn's relationship with Rory and, until she was unceremoniously ousted from her role, she ran *Matchmaking the Rich*, reality show that Rowan's fiancée was on. It turns out that while producers might overlook the small stuff, blackmailing contestants into giving you sexual favors is a big no-no.

"You're nothing but a bit of pretense wrapped up in pretty bows," she tells me with a constipated scowl.

"Great talk. Why are you here? Want to drown your sorrows because you got the boot from your show?"

She lifts her nose at me. "Intelligent people never lack for opportunities, Ivy."

"Oh, is this going to be a talk about how I'm stupid because I write smutty books? Fun."

I start pouring a beer, and she scowls at me. "I won't drink the swill from this place."

"Oh, it's for me," I say, finishing the pour. "You are quite literally driving me to drink."

"No drinking at work," Brittany calls to me from across the bar. I salute and take a sip. She puts a hand on her hip, her signature move, then gets a better look at my grandmother and says, "Carry on."

"I can see you haven't improved one bit," Nana says. "You were always a crude child."

"So why are you here? Clearly you want something from my crude self."

"I'm here to present you with an opportunity," she says, "and if you're even the slightest bit intelligent, you'll take it."

"Oh yeah?" I ask. "Sell it to me."

"You write books," she says primly, as if informing me of something I didn't know. "I have an idea for a bestseller."

This is surprising. I mean, I've had tons of people pitch book ideas to me, but never my grandmother. I'm interested in what she could possibly think would make a good book.

"It's about me."

Of course it is.

"Do go on," I say, leaning an elbow on the bar. She scowls at me. I grin at her.

Lifting her chin, she says, "It'll be a behind-the-scenes look at the production of *Matchmaking the Rich* and the insidious betrayal that led to my dismissal."

"Sounds like a downer," I say, taking a sip of the beer. I don't really want it, but I *do* want to piss her off.

"It's going to be a story of how I picked myself up by the bootstraps—again—and became an even bigger success. I'm going to make my own reality show and put it on the YouTubes. I don't need a camera or a network. All I need is myself. *I'm* the star. *I'm* the one they'll tune in for. I'm going to be the one the men come to court, not some rich little daddy's girl who wants to whine for the cameras."

My eyebrows lift to my hairline at that. "You want to get yourself a man, *Granny*?"

She scowls at the nickname she hates. "I'll choose whichever one will get me the farthest. Men are easy to control, Ivy. *You* know that." She's made it clear on any number of occasions that she thinks I'm my mother born over—the kind of woman who bewitches men and then leaves them broken. I wouldn't know since I've never stayed long enough to get to phase two. Call it a public service.

"I'm going to be great. I'm going to be bigger than anyone ever imagined," my grandmother says, her eyes gleaming. "And then they'll be sorry. They'll be knocking down my door asking to kiss my feet, and I won't let them. I'll slam it in their faces. I'll laugh while they prostrate themselves."

Um. This has gotten disturbing fast. "You into feet things? Not sure that'll go down in the book."

“So you’ll write it?”

“No. Actually, *hell*, no. Find someone else to pander to you, I’m all out of fucks to give.”

She gives me a look of disapproval so pointed it would cut—if I actually cared what she thinks. “You’ve always been a disappointing child. There’s something missing in you.”

It’s meant to hurt. And it meets its mark, somewhat.

“Takes one to know one, you old hag,” I say, taking another sip of the beer.

“You’re going to regret this. You’ll all regret it,” she seethes. “You Mayberry children are a bunch of—”

“I’ll stop you right there. My last name is Anders.”

“Is this woman bothering you?” someone asks, and shit, I’m really bad about watching the door. This time I’m happy to see the newcomer, though. It’s Lou. Actually, the relief I feel is outsized since I was just about to show my grandmother the door myself. He’s also much too nice to physically remove a little old lady—even if she has the soul of the devil.

“Yes, actually,” I tell him.

“I’m leaving,” she pronounces loudly. “The next time you see me, I’ll be the star, and you’ll be a nobody begging to write my story. But I won’t let you. I’ll ask Jackie Collins to write it.”

“Didn’t she pass away?” Lou asks, a crease between his eyebrows as he studies me and my grandmother. Understandable. He has no reason for knowing why I’m feuding with an old lady, although I’ll bet he’s not overly surprised.

“You’ll regret this!” she shrieks at the top of her lungs, surprising me. I’m used to her cool manipulation, her restraint, her withholding nature, but she never loses control. At least not like this. Did losing her big break scramble her mind?

She turns around to leave, banging into the door before managing to open it, which significantly undercuts her grand exit.

I lift the beer and take another sip.

“Are you drinking on the job?” he asks.

Brittany moseys over. “She’s allowed. That woman is a *nightmare*. Cole told me that she drugged some guy’s iced tea a couple of months ago.”

“Yeah, that’s not the half of it,” I mutter.

She pats me on the back. “You go on home if you want, Ivy.”

“Nah,” I say. “I’ll stay. Looks like we’re gonna get slammed.” There’s no more than three people in the place, but I honestly don’t want to go home and sit around. Sitting around is poison to the soul, much like Maeve Mayberry.

Besides, there is that little something that I really should tell Lou.

“Suit yourself,” she says, her expression telling me she was trying to give me a *get out of jail free* card so I wouldn’t have to deal with the Lou situation right away after my run-in with my grandmother. She stalks off, and I turn to look at Lou, feeling suddenly nervous.

It’s time to tell him that he’s BookMan69.

Maybe it was a mistake to go down this path—maybe I’m a terrible person like the Mayberry matriarchs before me, the kind of person who manipulates in the name of helping, but I’ve gone this far, and I have to own it. It’s what he deserves.

“Are you okay?” he asks. “That was—” His expression is confused, which makes sense, because he probably has no words for what he just witnessed, and he only walked in on the back end of it.

“Yeah,” I say slowly. “That was my grandmother, *the* Maeve Mayberry herself. Sorry for not making introductions. Say, Lou, there’s something I need to tell you.”

“Okay.” He glances back at the door, presumably under the impression this confidence I have to make has something to do with my grandmother.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with her,” I blurt. “I try not to think of her whenever humanly possible.”

I take a deep breath, trying to psyche myself up. I’ll be honest, there’s no scenario in which he’s going to thank me and tell me I did a good thing. No gold star for Ivy. He’s going to be pissed, which I don’t like, because no one enjoys infuriating their friends.

That’s what Lou and I have become, sort of. Friends.

Still, I have to admit he looks hot today. Maybe it’s because he showed up at exactly the right moment and helped drive my grandmother away like a good Prince Charming should. He’s also started to go for a more casual look, having correctly deduced that there’s no earthly reason to dress up for the people of Highland Hills. He has on a dark sweater and jeans, and his hair is a little too long in a sexy way. Between his dark hair and his warm puppy dog eyes, he definitely looks like the kind of guy someone would sprain their finger swiping right for.

Miss 90% is going to go gaga for him.

There’s a little twinge inside of me, but I know I’m doing the right thing for him. It’ll be healing for him to date her or someone else. A broken engagement is no small stumbling block, even if it *was* for the best, which my sister Willow adamantly insisted when I called to ask her about him.

“So, here’s the thing,” I say, going behind the bar to pour a beer for him too. He doesn’t drink much, but he’s going to need one this time. Sliding it in front of him, I say, “You’re going to be pissed, but...”

Chapter Seven

Lou

I didn't plan on being in town for so long. I'd figured it would be no more than a few weeks, like my boss, Roy, had said. Only...I'm no more ready to go back than I was on January first. I can tell Roy's losing patience, especially since I haven't found a single project I want to represent in the month I've been in Highland Hills. That's not to say I haven't been working—I have existing clients, after all, and I'm helping Alex get his next novel ready for his editor. But I haven't found anything that's going to bring in more money for the agency. It's not for a lack of trying; I haven't clicked with anything. The mysteries are too predictable, the literary novels too much like a thesaurus vomited on paper, and the works of serious non-fiction? Every time I read a proposal for one, I think about Evan, and how absolutely convincing he was in our first meeting. How I felt certain that I had something big on my hands.

Then there's Ivy. She's been...a surprise. On the one hand, she's a nuisance—asking private questions I don't want to answer under the guise of research, labeling my reading glasses and slippers as further evidence that I'm geriatric, and making messes—literal and figurative—she has no intention of cleaning up. Why, last week, her father had one of his female friends over for dinner, and Ivy kept up her usual habit of making fun of me for being “Old Man Lou,” not even noticing that every last thing she needled me about was also true of Jay's female guest woman. I had to smooth the situation over, and I'm not even sure Ivy noticed.

And yet, she's a force of nature. She's funny and *fun* and beautiful in a way I can't help but notice—in the morning, when her hair is a messy halo from sleeping on it and she groans loudly about getting a coffee IV; in the afternoon, when she's working at the brewery in her black getup, ignoring customers so she can pepper me with irrelevant questions; at night, when she wears her sweats and pulls her hair up into a top knot, sitting with her laptop while I sit with mine. Sometimes we even watch TV together. The other week, it was a documentary about micromachines I'd been wanting to check out, and she pretended to be interested in it for some ungodly reason, probably because she'd decided I needed company, and when Ivy decides something, she makes damn sure it happens.

The thing is, she usually gets her way. There's something about her that makes me want to go along with her crazy schemes or answer her intrusive questions. Why, when I walked into the brewery and saw that little old lady, her grandmother, I guess, going at her, there was a split second when I actually considered lifting the woman up and physically removing her. Ivy had this strange look on her face—almost like she'd disassociated and wasn't present in the bar. I didn't like that, or her grandmother, even before I knew who she was. What I'm saying is that I'm predisposed to give her what she wants.

Still, I can already tell I'm not going to like it. I draw in a sharp inhale and brace myself. "What'd you do this time?"

"This time?" she asks, trying to sound insulted and failing. Yep. She's up to something. "Why don't you go get set up at your usual table?" she continues as she finishes pouring the beer. Only she's been paying more attention to me than the glass, and it's developed an impressive head of foam.

It has to be close to three inches thick.

I feel sorry for the poor bastard she's pouring that for.

"You go sit down, Lou," Ivy says. "I'll bring your beer right over and tell you what this is all about."

Shit. *I'm* the poor bastard.

Brittany's keeping an eye on us from farther down the bar, and I lean over and catch her eye. "Can I go ahead and put in an order for a house salad with chicken?"

"Hey, I'm your waitress," Ivy protests.

"On it," Brittany says with an amused grin. She knows Ivy's not built for customer service.

I head over to my usual table. This place is never full for lunch during the week, especially this early, so I don't feel too bad about taking up space when I come to work here, especially since I always buy food and beverages.

But never beer at eleven in the morning...

Ivy pulls out the chair opposite me and sets the beer in front of me. She's brought hers over too, and the difference between them is stark.

"A little early to start drinking," I say dryly. "I didn't order that."

"On the house," she says sweetly. "I don't want to drink alone."

"Hey!" Brittany calls out.

"Take it out of my wages," Ivy says, still looking at me like I'm a mouse trapped in a corner.

"You work for free," Brittany says.

"Then take it out of what you would have paid me."

I'm still the mouse, but Ivy's batting at me, drawing out my imminent demise.

From the corner of my eye, I can see Brittany shaking her head and walking to the back.

"What am I going to be pissed about?" I give Ivy a piercing look, but it doesn't seem to faze her, not that I'm surprised. I've discovered not much ruffles Ivy Anders. It's one of the things I like about her. Which makes me even more curious about her grandmother and what transpired between them.

She clasps her hands in front of her on the table. “So I’ve been thinking about how you’re all alone—”

“I’m *not* all alone,” I say, dread already burrowing in my gut. “I live with two people. I come here to work. I’m around people all day.”

She lifts a hand and waves it. “Okay, wrong choice of words. I mean that...” She stops and seems to be considering what to say next.

I stare at her in surprise. She’s never at a loss for words.

She lifts her chin. “You need to find a woman who’ll help you get your mojo back.”

It’s a good thing I wasn’t drinking the foam on the beer in front of me, or I’d likely be choking right now. “Excuse me?”

“Yes, I’m assuming you had mojo at some point.” She lifts a hand. “Now, I can tell you’re about to tune me out, but you can’t. You’re in a funk and continuing to do the same thing over and over again isn’t going to get you out of it. That’ll only happen if you—”

“What? Fuck a stranger?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. Oh Jesus. On New Year’s Day, she made it perfectly clear she wasn’t interested in sleeping with me, so she’s not talking about herself. She’s back to pushing me to date. “That’s not happening, Ivy.”

“Haven’t you heard of the hair of the dog?”

“That applies to drinking, and it isn’t really a good idea then either. I thought you’d agreed to let me wallow.”

She shakes her head, her eyes bright. “No, *you* said you were going to wallow. I never agreed to that plan. What I said was I’d let it go *for now*. I had a plan of my own.”

I reach into my bag and pull out my laptop. “Well, keep it to yourself, because I’m not interested.”

“Come on, Lou,” she cajoles. “It won’t hurt to at least listen.”

“I’ve got work to do and so do you.”

“There’s no one here,” she says as she gestures to the empty dining room, then adds, “other than Logan over there, and Badass Brittany is taking care of him.”

“She’s doing a shitty job of it,” says the guy who’s sitting at the bar, close enough to have overheard everything. Fantastic. “She hasn’t even taken my order yet.”

“See?” I say. “If you really want to help someone, you should go help him. He looks hungry.” But he doesn’t look all that hungry, just kind of miserable, which makes me feel guilty for trying to sic Ivy on him.

She waves her hand, brushing my suggestion away. “She’ll get to him. Now back to you.”

“How about we pivot back to you,” I say. “What did your grandmother want?” Because the look on Ivy’s face when I walked in is eating at me. I don’t like the idea of someone stealing Ivy’s confidence. Even if the person who did it is family.

She pauses for a long second, then rolls her eyes. “Family drama. She’s a piece of work, just like my mother.” She folds her hands under her chin and grins. “So, as I said, back to *you*.”

I make a point of opening my laptop lid as I hold her gaze. “I’m busy. Working. Which is what *you* should be doing by taking that man’s order.”

She pushes out an exaggerated sigh. “Fine. If I take his order, will you listen to me then?”

I scrunch up my face. “Um...that’s not the way jobs are supposed to work.”

“Which is the other reason why I’ve had a lot of them,” she says, unfazed. “So will you?”

The guy at the bar leans back and turns to face us. “I’ve only got forty minutes for lunch, and I’ve already wasted ten of them. Help a guy out.”

“Fine,” I grudgingly agree, already regretting it. “I’ll *listen*, but I’m not agreeing to do anything.”

A triumphant smile spreads across her face, and her blue eyes twinkle with mischief. God help me, I'm slightly turned on by it.

If that doesn't confirm I'm not ready to go along with her scheme, I'm not sure what would.

She hurries over to the guy, whose name is apparently Logan, and takes his order. Brittany comes out while Ivy's talking to him and shoots her a glare. She must have wanted to let him stew a little bit.

I'm going through my emails when Ivy returns a few minutes later with my salad and a glass of water. She sets both on the table then takes a seat opposite me. "Okay. Now back to our previous conversation."

"I'm listening," I say, keeping my gaze on my screen. I really don't want to hear what she's cooked up, but I can tell she's put some effort into this, and I don't have it in me to completely shut her down. She pushes my laptop lid shut, and I barely have time to pull my fingers away before they're smashed. "Hey!"

"A deal's a deal," she says, looking smug.

I lift my chin and give her a defiant glare. "Fine. I'll give you three minutes."

"Okay, but we might not need that long." She pulls her phone out of her jeans pocket and starts tapping on the screen. "It's not healthy to wallow, Lou, and it's equally unhealthy for a thirty-four-year-old to act like he's about to head out to Shady Acres Nursing Home."

"I'm not—" I start to protest, but she holds up a hand and cuts me off.

"My sisters' app—"

"No."

I knew about the app even before Ivy told me about it on New Year's. Hell, I'd have to be a true hermit to not have heard of it in this town. It was created by Ivy's sisters with the help of Rory Byrne, a billionaire who's now engaged to one of

them with a baby on the way. The dating app, Matchmake Me, is based on a lengthy questionnaire that helps match you to eligible dating prospects. It hasn't been live all that long, but it's received a lot of buzz—both in Highland Hills and nationally—and is supposed to be a scarily accurate judge of whether two people are compatible.

“You don't know anything about it,” she protests.

“I know enough. I'm not doing online dating, Ivy. Not interested.” What I know better than to say, or even to think, is that if I wanted to date anyone, it would be Ivy. I'm surrounded by uptight professionals most of the time, and I was raised by no-nonsense parents, so part of my interest is probably because she's like a white tiger in a zoo—an oddity to be observed...from afar. It's much safer to stay in the friend zone, for a whole host of reasons.

“Then your chances of dying a stodgy old bachelor are quite high.”

I give a half-hearted shrug of disinterest.

I've obviously thrown her, a point in my court, but it only takes half a second before her smile returns. “Sometimes we need our friends to give us a little push.”

“Are we talking a push or a shove?”

“I signed you up for Matchmake Me.”

Irritation gnaws in my gut. “Not just a shove. You bulldozed me off a cliff.”

“Stop being so dramatic,” she says with an eye roll. “That's *my* job.”

“How the hell did you sign me up when there's supposedly a million and one personal questions?” And then it hits me like a piano dropped on my head. “All those questions you've been asking me. The interview...”

She makes a cute *I've been caught red-handed* face—the same expression she had a few nights ago when I asked if she'd finished the last of my ice cream. “Guilty as charged.”

I stare at her, aghast. Fury, astonishment at her audacity, and betrayal wash through me like a spin cycle in a washing machine, all fighting for supremacy, but betrayal wins out.

“You said you’d let this go, Ivy,” I repeat through gritted teeth.

“And I *did* let go,” she insists. “But only for a little while.”

“No means no.”

Her determination seems to waver as a couple walks through the door and takes a seat in a booth on the other side of the room.

She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. “I didn’t mean to hurt you, Lou. I genuinely want you to be happy. Dad does too. And Willow.”

“Maybe I’m already happy,” I retort.

She studies my face for a few seconds, then says softly, “I’ve been watching you for weeks. You’re nowhere close to happy. Let me try to help.”

Part of my anger fades, because despite her questionable methods, I think she really means it. But I’m not the only one who needs a push. I’ve been watching her too, and despite her bright shiny exterior, there’s an underlying sadness that slips out when she thinks no one is watching.

“Uh, Ivy,” Brittany calls across the bar. “You gonna do your job or sit there holding hands with the New York guy?”

Brittany knows my name but still loves to call me the New York guy.

“I appreciate your concern,” I tell Ivy, pulling my hand free. “But I’m not interested.”

“You know, it’s okay to wallow for little while, but at some point, you’ve got to climb out of the trench, Lou.”

“Agreed,” I say. “When are you going to climb out of yours?”

Shock fills her eyes, and then she releases a short laugh. “*I’m* fine. We’re talking about you here.”

“I can see you’re not fine, Ivy,” I say quietly. “You’re not just here for your father. You’re here for the same reason I am, licking your wounds.”

Panic fills her eyes, and she gets to her feet. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Maybe I don’t,” I say in a challenge. “But maybe I do.”

Her cheeks flush, and she bustles over to take the couple’s order. More people walk through the doors, and another server shows up to take care of my side of the room. I open my laptop and try to focus on the fifty emails in my inbox, but the words are swimming on the screen.

I feel like an ass.

Sure, Ivy’s blunt, but her bluntness comes across like that of the Energizer Bunny. Mine just came across as mean.

Frustrated with myself and with her for putting me in this position, I slide my salad next to my laptop and stab the lettuce with my fork.

“What’d that poor salad ever do to you?” Tiffanie, the other server, jokes as she walks past my table. She’s used to seeing me here by now.

“Sorry,” I say with a sheepish look. “Bad day.”

“I can see that,” she says, then smiles. “How long are you planning on staying in Highland Hills?”

“I don’t know yet.” I suppose I really should figure it out, but today’s not the day.

She shoots a glance over to Ivy, who’s behind the counter, then turns back toward me. “If you’re ever looking for some company, I’d be more than happy to show you the town.”

I stare at her in confusion. Is she asking me on a date? It’s flattering to think so. She’s an attractive blond, but I haven’t given her a second thought, to be honest—maybe because there’s another attractive blond in my life who tends to eclipse my—and everyone else’s—attention. Was that a mistake? Ivy’s not an option, so I need to stop noticing the way she brings both annoyance and sunshine with her wherever she

goes. Maybe I've let her become a substitute for a relationship without meaning to.

Then it hits me like a one-two punch—Tiffanie might have asked me out, but she glanced at Ivy before she did it.

Ivy put her up to it.

“Tell Ivy to let it go.”

Tiffanie's eyes narrow. “What?”

“I'm sorry she's roped you into her plot, but I'm not interested.”

Her eyes fly wide with shock, quickly followed by anger. “I have no idea what you're talking about, but if you don't want to go out with me, you don't have to be such an ass about it. There are dozens of men in this town, *dozens*, who would be grateful to be in your shoes.” Then she stomps behind the bar.

Good one, Lou. At least you're an equal opportunity asshole. Who can I insult next? Maybe steal a bottle from a baby or kick a puppy?

I'm not surprised when Ivy shows up next to my table, giving me an arch look. “What the hell are you doing, Lou?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” I say, not even pretending to defend myself.

“You hurt Tiffanie's feelings.”

I groan. “I know. I thought you put her up to it.” Before everything went to shit, Tiffanie's attention was...gratifying. Maybe Ivy isn't entirely wrong about the whole mojo thing, and I'm bound to notice her less if I'm dating someone else. Still, some perverse side of me insists that I shouldn't give her exactly what she wants since she backed me into this mess. Why should I suffer through online dating alone?

“Okay,” I say, looking up at her. “I'll use the app. On one condition.”

Excitement fills her eyes. “*Really?* Because you already have a match. She's smoking hot.”

I sputter, starting to protest, then collect myself. This is just Ivy being Ivy. “Well, isn’t that nice? But I’m not looking at her profile until you agree to my condition.”

She sits down next to me this time, despite the fact more people have settled into her section, and starts to pull out her phone. “Sure, okay. What is it?”

“You need to sign up for Matchmake Me too.”

Her face lifts and confusion fills her eyes as though I spoke in Swahili. “What?”

“You heard me.”

She starts to laugh. “I don’t need a dating app. I do just fine on my own.”

“Have you gone on a single date since you’ve come back to town?”

She makes a face. “It’s never a good idea to shit in your own backyard.”

“The only way I’ll agree is if you do it too,” I insist.

Her mouth twists into a scowl, and I can tell she’s trying to mentally calculate whether joining the app is worth forcing me out on a date. “Okay,” she finally says with an exaggerated sigh. “I’ll do it, but why do I think I’m going to regret this?”

“Because we both probably will. What’d you call me anyway? The username, I mean.”

“BookMan.”

“Huh,” I say, running a hand over my jaw. “That’s not that bad.”

“BookMan69.”

I repress a smile and give my head a small shake. “That’s more like the Ivy I know and tolerate.”

Chapter Eight

Ivy

“**W**hy am I not surprised?” Lou asks me later that night, rolling his eyes as he plugs in my latest answer to the questionnaire. But the corners of his mouth are tipped up ever-so-slightly. He’s not fooling me. I’ve gotten through to him. He’s feeling that ole Anders charm.

The thought gives me a warm glow that catches me by surprise. I’m not sure when I started to care what he thinks of me, and I’m not sure I like it, so I just grin at him and say, “Because you’re a reasonably intelligent man, and you’re practically old enough for a walker. They say wisdom comes with age. *Next.*”

For some ungodly reason, Lou insisted that because I “helped him with his profile”—my words—he needs to help me with mine. So we’re back at my dad’s house, eating snacks on the dining room table, because Lou is one of those people who insists the couch is for sitting, not for eating (eye roll), and trying to buzz our way through eleventy-billion questions. Really, I’m going to have to text Bryn and Holly and tell them that romance isn’t all that complicated. You either want to bone someone or you don’t.

See? Simple.

But even as I think it, I feel the warmth of Lou’s gaze on me, notice a slight devilishness to his smile, and realize that sometimes it *is* complicated. Sometimes you want your crotchety roommate to respect you. To *like* you. For reasons you can’t fully parse.

His gaze lingers on me, and I feel it pounding into my skin. “This next one is a big question.”

“Oh, come on, already,” I say. “Dramatic pauses are beneath you.”

“But not you?” he asks, quirking an eyebrow. I envy his ability to do so; mine refuse to move independently, however much I’ve tried. Actually, he has very nice eyebrows now that I think of it. Not the kind of thing I’d usually notice in a man, but they’re a dark, deep black, nicely arched above his brown eyes. Miss 90% will like that. I mean, maybe. I’ll bet some people have an eyebrow fetish.

“Obviously not,” I tell him, popping a rye chip into my mouth from the bowl of Chex Mix.

Lou looks pointedly at the plate he set out for me. I ignore him.

“How many dates before you’d consider sex?”

I snort. “Oh, is that all?”

“You didn’t ask me that one,” he says, lifting that eyebrow again.

“Yeah, I figured I couldn’t ask you outright, so I just guesstimated for you.”

“What’d you guesstimate?” he asks as he puts some Chex Mix onto his plate. Man, this guy doesn’t know how to snack properly.

“Five,” I say.

He looks up sharply. “Five?”

He sounds offended, which makes me snort-laugh.

He seems to smile in spite of himself. “Your laugh...” he says, trailing off.

“Yes, I snort like a pig, I’m well aware,” I tell him. “Too bad we can’t add that to the questionnaire.”

“Maybe there’s a question about it,” he says, glancing down the multiple choice list on his computer. Yes, his

computer. He told me he'd need reading glasses to manage it on his phone, which was both sort of endearing and a hilarious confirmation that he is a ninety-year-old living in a much younger man's body. His mouth twists to the side, and he sighs. "There seems to be one about damn near everything else."

"Nope, there's not. I have a very intimate understanding of the questions, having just completed them for a certain friend of mine."

He shakes his head slightly and taps the table. "So we're friends now?"

"Obviously," I say, throwing a Chex at him. It pings off his sweater and lands on the table. He gives it a look of consternation before picking it up and padding into the kitchen to throw it away in the trash, giving me a ping of fondness for him. When he comes back and settles into his chair, I say, "If I didn't like you, you'd know. And I definitely wouldn't spend this much time with you."

"Oh, I know I would. When we first met, you were not a fan."

"I wouldn't say that," I tell him, smirking. "My first thought when I saw you was that you were hot for a senior citizen."

It's true except for that last part.

Something flashes in his eyes, but he just says, "Mm-hm, very funny. Now, back to the sex question." He glances down at his laptop as he says it.

"One date's good for me. If I don't want to fuck someone on the first date, I don't want to fuck them. Done and done."

His eyes flick up at me, and there's something in them I struggle to interpret. "You've never changed your mind about someone?"

"Never. I take pride in my split-second judgment calls."

We continue this question and answer sesh for a long time. Seriously, a long time. We order a pizza—my idea—and grab

some beers from the fridge—also my idea.

At some point, my father comes home from his five thousandth date—that man is a beast! It’s a relief to see it, to be honest. Before he met Kerry, he was hung up on my mother, and I’d worried he’d mourn Kerry’s loss for just as long or, worse, start pining for my mother again.

Speaking of she-who-should-not-be-named, she’s sent me four or five texts from different phone numbers since New Year’s, which is basically a record for her and absolutely guarantees that she wants something from me. Something I’m determined not to give her, because she’s the kind of mother whom George R. R. Martin might consider too grotesque for *Game of Thrones*.

Dad’s blond hair is wind-ruffled, and there’s a brightness to him that I’m grateful to see, because when I first arrived, he did have a bit of Sad Dad vibe going on, kind of like a broken toy. Something that’s used to being joyful but can’t muster it.

Sometimes I feel a little like that.

I did earlier today when Lou accused me of living in the trenches with him. That’s why I agreed to his scheme, even though I don’t have any intention of developing a romantic attachment with anyone, especially if they live in Highland Hills.

My mood is all over the place when Dad joins us at the table, lowering into the chair next to mine and grabbing a few Chex from the bowl before I rap his hand and make him release them. No salty snacks for this man on my watch.

He’s all smiles when he says, “You two have been spending a lot of time together lately, huh?”

“Not as much time as you’ve been spending with the over-fifty female population of Highland Hills,” I say with a snort.

Lou, of course, gives me a look that says he noticed.

My dad laughs and pats me on the back. “Well, it certainly has been a nice boost for the old ego.”

I give Lou a pointed look—a *Dad's found the Fountain of Youth, and I can help you make a map* kind of look.

He acknowledges it with a firming of his lips. They're nice and full for a man—another ole check mark in his pros column.

Then I notice Lou noticing that I'm looking at his lips, and since I don't believe in backing down, I give him a wink.

To my shock, he blushes slightly.

“What are you two up to, anyway?” Dad asks curiously. “Are you helping Ivy with her book?”

My back straightens, and I look at him in bafflement. “Dad, you know that I don't let anyone read my drafts until I'm all the way finished.”

“Really?” Lou asks, his tone surprised.

It feels like he's twanging on my nerves. Because I'll bet he thought I write my books on a bunch of napkins I stuff into my bra and throw them down onto a table and go with whatever order they land in.

“She likes them to be perfect,” my dad says, chucking me on the chin. “I just thought you might have shared more with him because he's a literary agent.”

“Jesus Christ, Dad,” I say, annoyed now. “Did you invite Lou to live here because you're still on that quest to see me traditionally published? I'm no less of a writer because I prefer to do everything myself.”

At the same time, I can hear Lou muttering something along the lines of *you read her books?*

Yes, my father does.

However, I *do* mark the pages he shouldn't read—and then neglect to ask him whether he heeded my advice. It's better for both of us that way.

Lou's probably uncomfortable. This seems like the sort of conversation that would make him feel that way, but my attention's fixed on my dad.

“Now, now,” he says, turning in his chair, and I feel a stab of guilt. Shit. He just had a heart attack. I’m supposed to be love-bombing him and wrapping everything in the house in bubble wrap, not telling him how I really feel. “No one said that, Ivy. I only said I’d like to see your books in more stores. That’s all. And Lou came to me looking for a place to stay just when I was looking for someone to move in. It seemed like a sign. Especially when he said he worked with writers.”

That’s my dad, looking at everything in the best light always. Show him a pile of shit, and he’ll say, *Good for you for eating fiber*. I love him for it.

“I don’t have any experience in romance,” Lou says, sounding uncomfortable. I glance up. He looks like someone just stuffed his shirt full of cotton filling, and he’s once again Lou the Stuffed Shirt.

“Yeah, that’s why we’re doing this,” I deadpan.

“I meant the genre,” he says.

“We knew,” my dad tells him. I look at him, expecting a broad smile, but he seems a little...annoyed. “You’ve been here almost a month, son, and you’ve never read any of her books? My daughter’s a *USA Today* bestseller.”

“Dad,” I say. “You don’t need to go into your *Ivy’s awesome* spiel. Lou already knows I’m awesome. Right, Lou?”

But when I look at Lou, he’s not smiling. He’s staring at my dad and nodding. “You’re right. I’m an asshole. I should read one of them.”

“You don’t have to do that,” I say. “Seriously. I don’t want you to.”

Now he looks hurt, his face pinging so quickly from one emotion to another I’m surprised his face doesn’t get sprained. He just...he has these molten brown eyes that are so expressive you can get lost in them. “Why don’t you want me to?”

“Because I don’t. End of story. Now, Dad,” I say, turning to him. “I love you, but you need to get lost so Lou can finish

setting up my dating profile. Because he refuses to use the dating profile I set up for him without his permission until I let him set up one for me.”

My dad gets up and scratches his chin. “Wouldn’t it just be easier if y’all dated each other?”

“Bite your tongue!” I say, pretty dramatically if I do say so myself.

“Rather not, Shortcake. Miss Betsy already took a good effort at that a short while ago, and I’m still feeling the injury.”

I laugh, and laugh even harder when I glance at Lou and see his deer-in-the-headlights expression.

Then my dad pads off toward his bedroom, leaving us alone. I glance at Lou. “Okay, hit me. Next question.”

I half expect him to ask if my dad’s always an oversharer like I am—not about his emotions, but then again neither am I—but he surprises me by taking a different tack.

“I do want to read one of your books,” he says, as earnest as a dog in search of a pat or a treat. “Which one should I start with?”

“You should know this before your date, Lou,” I tell him. “When a woman says no, she means it.”

He scowls. “Of course I know that. You think I’d take advantage of a woman?”

Hurt knifes through me. There was another man I’d trusted, a man who’d let me down, but I still don’t need to hesitate an instant before I say, “No, Lou. I know you wouldn’t.”

He swallows, still looking at me, our gazes holding. “There are thirty more questions.”

“Shit, seriously?” I say, taking another swig of my beer. It feels like we’ve been sitting here all day, talking about my likes and dislikes, and while I love talking about myself as much as the average person, I’ve had just about enough.

We make our way through the questions, Lou smiling when he guesses my answers right, which is more often than I would have thought. Then again, I guess we've spent a decent amount of time together over the last few weeks, what with me trying to do his profile on the sly.

Finally, he gives me a mischievous look and says, "Last one. You ready to meet your prince charming?"

"How about you?" I ask. "You ready to meet Miss 90%?" Annoyingly, he's refused to even look at the sexy lady's photos until I make good on my end of the bargain. Then again, that's Lou for you—thorough in everything.

And if a little voice in my head wonders if he'd also be thorough in the bedroom, it's because the little voice in my head is a renowned pervert.

"Yes, can't wait," he says flatly. "I love it when I'm backed into dating a total stranger."

I rub two fingers together in a pantomime of a tiny violin.

He rolls his eyes and says, "Brace yourself. This one's a doozy."

I grab the edge of the table dramatically, and a small smile lifts his lips as he asks, "Are you a good tipper?"

Laughter rips out of me, so much of it I'm snorting again—loudly. "No," I say once I've recovered. "That's what they chose for their big finale? I'd forgotten. It's so bad, I'd blocked it out."

"So you're not a good tipper?" he asks, lifting both eyebrows this time.

"Of course I am!" I say in mock offense. "And I wouldn't date a bad tipper. I guess that's why they have that question in there. All tippers should match. Good tippers with good tippers, and bad tippers skipping along to hell together."

"Agreed, actually," he says, clicking through. His gaze lifts to me, his eyes assessing. "You excited?"

"No. I'm only doing this because you need someone to suffer with you."

He laughs a little, shaking his head, his eyes warm and large. “If you think it’s suffering, then why do you want to foist it on me?”

“Foist. That’s a fun word.”

“Ivy,” he says, tipping his head.

“Because I’m not the kind of woman who wants strings, Lou,” I say honestly. “And you’re a strings guy.” I lift a hand. “Not that I’m saying you should settle down and marry Miss 90%, God forbid. But having a little rebound will get you back on the track you’re supposed to be on.”

“You write romance novels,” he says, still studying me with that intent look of someone who has a nut they’d like to crack.

I laugh. “Yeah, and everyone who writes spy novels works for MIB.”

“I think you mean MI6.”

“No, I have a thing for aliens. But seriously. Just because I write about love and want it for other people doesn’t mean I’m on a one-woman mission to seek it out for myself. I know what I want...and I know what I don’t.”

He glances at the computer, then up at me again. “Maybe it’s just because you haven’t met the right person yet.” He pauses, staring at his computer again, squinting at something on the screen, and I feel another little tug of fondness because he clearly needs his reading glasses. Maybe I’ll get him one of those little strings so he can wear them around his neck. “Or maybe you have met him.”

He swings the screen around to face me, and it’s telling me that I’m a 91% match with BlueCollarLo.

It’s Logan.

Chapter Nine

Ivy

Well, crap. Who would've thought? On second thought, I guess Logan and I aren't all that different. We're both emotionally constipated and wary of commitment. I mean, you'd think that would make us a terrible match, but maybe this is like the bad tipper concept—why not stick the shitty commitment-phobics together to save everyone else the bother?

“You're surprised,” Lou says. He's still watching me with an expression I can't interpret. Maybe he's amused. Maybe he's constipated. Who knows?

“Sure,” I tell him. “Then again, I grew up in this godforsaken place. The odds of it being someone I've crossed paths with before were pretty high.”

His eyes widen. “You've crossed—”

“Not like that, Lou,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

Is it my imagination, or does he look relieved? I don't know why he'd dislike Logan. He doesn't know about the whole Brittany situation. Then again, I do form snap judgments of people, and maybe the same is true of him.

“Now, it's your turn,” I say, giving him a significant look. “Who's going to get your Rudolph's Balls?”

He gives me a strange look, and I shrug. “You know, if you chose to bring her to Christmas All Year Coffee for your date.”

“Why would I want to make this worse?” he asks, in such a flat tone I can't help but giggle.

“Because you’re a secret masochist.” I draw up my phone and bring up Miss 90%’s photo, feeling a lurch in my stomach which is unlike me. I don’t lack confidence in myself or my looks. I’m not saying I’m the hottest piece of ass in the world, but my ass is plenty hot enough for me. Still, there’s something about this woman that makes me feel...

Anyway. Lou can’t see worth shit, so I make the photo larger before flashing my phone at him. “You know her?”

“No,” he says, tilting his head, “but I guess I’m going to... if you’re going to go out with Logan.”

I make a face, my mind whirring. No way in hell would I go out with Logan for real—he may be hot, but he’s Badass Brittany’s as surely as if she’d peed on him. And yet, this could be my opportunity to fish for information about how he really feels about her...and soak up more inspiration for my book.

“Yes!” I say, a little too loudly judging by Lou’s flinch. “I’ll do it.”

“You’re assuming he’ll say yes.”

“Well, obviously, he’s not an idiot.”

“I’m not so sure about my own chances,” he says.

He looks a little unsure of himself, and I hate that—he may be a fusty grump, but he’s also funny and occasionally sweet. Like the time when he told Ms. Anna from across the street that her casserole was delicious even though it tasted like roadkill she’d backed over because hitting it once wasn’t enough. He’s the kind of man a woman can trust—the kind who’d never, ever hurt you twice, let alone once. He’s the kind of man who should be valued and protected. Even a fuckup like me knows that.

“That hot woman would be damn lucky to rock your world,” I say, my jaw locked as if I’m pissed at her for an offense given to a man she doesn’t yet know the first thing about. “Besides, she already reached out when you got matched with her this morning, and she seemed totally into you. Not to brag, but I did take that fantastic photo of you.”

“You didn’t tell me this why?” he asks, rubbing his jaw.

“For what I would think are obvious reasons,” I say.

He gives his head a little shake, which thankfully seems amused. “Okay, Tiger. I’ll take it from here. You sign out of my account, and I’ll sign out of yours.”

It seems like we’re about to go our separate ways—we’ve each agreed to give it a shot, and now we’ll do so. Alone. Except I’m suddenly not so keen on the idea.

What if Miss 90% is a bitch to Lou and messes with his ego? Surely I should be there to supervise this whole thing.

I tap my phone with my fingernails. “How am I going to know you followed through with your end of the bargain?”

“You’re not going to take my word for it?” he asks, lifting those magnificent eyebrows.

“Nope,” I say. “Sorry. I think we need to go on a double date.”

He laughs loudly, then says, “How about we do it at Christmas All Year Coffee, to really rub the salt into the wound.”

“Fantastic idea! You ask Miss 90%, and I’ll ask Logan.”

“Ivy,” he says, his laughter drying up. “This is a terrible idea.”

“Lou,” I say. “This is your first date out in the land of the living after that woman ripped your heart out of your chest, chopped it, and flambeed it like it was your banana.”

He sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose. “Vivid. I didn’t even tell you what happened with Victoria.”

“That much is obvious.”

“Fine, but this is still a bad idea.”

“You need a friend. You just got done admitting that I’m your best friend.”

“*Alex* is my best friend,” he says, the corners of his mouth lifting slightly. His smiles always start that way, small but

catching.

I wave a hand dismissively. “Alex and Willow live in Asheville. They might as well live in outer space.”

“Asheville’s two hours away.”

“And I’m *here*,” I say. “Let me be your wing woman.”

“What about Logan?” he asks, studying me. “Are you interested in him?”

I don’t want to give up the gig too fast, so I nod appreciatively. “What’s not to like? He looks like sex on legs.”

His mouth firms as he glances at Logan’s photo on the computer screen. I’m sure he’s going to tell me I’m full of shit, and I can forget this whole inane plan, thank you very much, but he shocks me by saying, “This is crazy, but okay. Sure. What the hell. Let’s do it.”

“At Christmas All Year Coffee?!” I ask excitedly, practically jumping up and down in my chair. I’m not sure why I’m looking forward to this—he’s right; it’ll probably be a travesty—but suddenly I am.

I get another sigh. “Yeah,” he says, mussing that slightly too long, wavy black hair. “Yeah, let’s really drive this mistake all the way home.”

“This is going to be so much fun,” I say. Then, eyeing his computer, I say, “Why don’t we just switch devices for a sec? It’d be easier than dealing with signing in and out right now.”

He studies me. “You forgot the password you set for me, didn’t you?”

“Obviously. I’ll reset it later.”

We switch devices. I’m sorely tempted to look over his shoulder and see if he finds enough mojo to write back an interesting reply to Miss Fabulous, but I have to figure out what to say to Logan too.

“When are we asking them out?” I ask.

“You’re making it sound like a group activity,” he says, glancing up from my phone. “Like we’re a couple looking to

swap.”

An icy chill runs through me—one that has nothing to do with Lou. “Ha,” I say weakly. Then, getting the wind back in my sails, “Just a couple of besties shooting their shot.”

“Let’s see...it’s Tuesday now, and you’re working Friday night. How about Saturday?” he asks. “That’ll give us a few days. Say...seven o’clock.”

“Are we doing makeovers?” I ask. “I didn’t want to say anything, but you’re either wearing a sweatsuit or one of your stuffed shirts these days. I think we can find a middle ground.”

“No makeovers.”

I think about arguing the point, then decide I’ve already given him more than enough grief. Besides, he’s attractive. She’d probably be into him even if he wore his oldest pair of sweatpants with the slightly worn patch next to the knee that I’m expecting to become a hole any day now.

“No makeovers,” I agree. Then, not letting myself second-guess it, I text Logan on the app.

Hey, stranger. ;-) Looks like my sisters think we’re a match. Whaddya say we get some dinner, old buddy, old pal? Christmas All Year Coffee at 7 p.m. Saturday.

His answer is pretty immediate.

Holy shit, Ivy. I’d love to get dinner, it’s just...

Those three dots linger in the chat window for a long time, and I’m feeling pretty satisfied right now, because I know, I just *know*, that he’s thinking about Brittany.

There’s something I’ve been wanting to talk to you about. Unrelated to touching your genitals.

<laugh emoji>

This just gives us the excuse. Besides, we’ll be playing chaperone to Lou and his date.

I'm intrigued. By whatever you want to discuss with me, not the thing with your roommate. But I hope that poor bastard knows what he's in for.

No. I'm fairly sure he has no idea.

When I glance up, Lou's still glancing at the screen, a look of incredulity on his face. Or maybe he's just struggling to see my phone.

"She said yes," he tells me, a slow smile spreading across his face. I'm so happy to see his confidence seeping back in, to see him succeeding at something and letting himself be grateful for it, that I'm caught off-guard by a smaller feeling of dejection.

I stomp it down, because goddammit, I *will* be happy for him, and I reach across the table for a high five. We miss.

"Oh come on," I say, "that was just pathetic."

We try again, and this time our hands connect, sending a shockwave through me. It's satisfaction at having managed this whole thing so well, at having gotten what I wanted even though that kernel of sadness is still there.

"We're going to make waves, Lou," I say. "Mark my words."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

"Wait," I say, suddenly thinking of something. "What percentage are we with each other?" I wave a hand at him, dismissing an objection he hasn't made yet. "Just curious. I'm not trying to rip you from Miss Perfect."

"She's not Miss Perfect," he says. "She's Miss 90%." There's something a little nervous about the way he's picking at the table with his fingernail, or maybe he found an imperfection in the wood and it's nagging at him. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"Come on, don't you want to know? *I* want to know."

Only one corner of his mouth lifts this time. "I'm starting to think you want to know everything."

“You’re right. I do.”

He shrugs. “Okay. Let’s ask the app.”

The app is powered by artificial intelligence, and if that sounds like a lot of effort for a dating app, that’s because it is. But my future brother-in-law Rory is both a very rich genius and the kind of person who makes things happen. My sisters are the ones who made the AI, Judith, what she is though.

So I’m not surprised when Judith sends back a snappy reply to Lou’s question.

You sure you want to know that?

He glances at me, dumbfounded. “Is she...talking to me?”

“Yes,” I say. “Do the lady a solid and respond yes.”

He does.

24%

Something in me deflates, although it’s silly to react that way. This is Lou after all. Stuffed shirt, grumpy Lou, who probably hasn’t read a romance novel in his life and seems like he’s in no rush to try. Lou, who worries about things like imperfections in the grain of wood and worn-out paint on the siding of our house. (Seriously, I heard him trying to have a conversation with my dad about it. I put that one to bed by reminding him that my brother, Rowan, is a handyman and can take care of it whenever he’s done being reluctantly famous.)

“Huh,” Lou says, rubbing his chin. “Didn’t expect it to be so...”

“So high?” I bluster. “I know, right? Mind. Blown.”

“Yeah,” he says, thoughtful. Then he hands the phone back to me, and I quickly sign out of the app on his laptop before he reclaims it. Can’t have him seeing the Logan thing—he’d probably say something about how I’m following the letter of the law but not the spirit of it.

I’m about to head back to my room to do some writing and spend way too much time on social media, but he stops me

with a word. My name. I look back at him, taking in those puppy dog eyes. “Yeah?”

“What’s your favorite book you ever wrote?”

I smile at him, a little sad without knowing why. “It’s always the last one.” I pause, then ask, “And what’s your favorite book you ever sold?”

His smile is pained, and I can tell in that instant that whatever happened to him isn’t just about a woman, it involved his professional pride too—something that was maybe even more important to him. “Definitely not the last one I sold. I guess it would have to be Alex’s first book, because I knew I was helping my best friend make his dream come true.”

I smile back at him. “So you know why I want to make your dreams come true, Lou.”

“Good night, Ivy,” he says, and it hits me for the first time that he has a nice voice. Low and deep, musical without trying for it.

“Good night.”

* * *

“She said *what?*” Rowan asks me, his eyes wide.

I’d asked my Highland Hills siblings to grab lunch with me at my favorite new restaurant in town, Salt and Bone, to discuss the Nana Mayberry kerfuffle. They all agreed, because there’s nothing a person likes so much as gossip about a person they all mutually dislike, and also because this is a thing we’ve been doing since I came back to town. It’s...nice. Rowan is sitting next to me, and the twins, Holly and Bryn, are across from us.

“Yeah,” I say, popping a fry. “Sorry to break it to Kennedy, but Nana says she’s going to be a bigger star. She wants to make her own reality dating show where people compete for her affection—an age gap love story—and put it on *the YouTubes*.”

“I have few regrets in life,” Holly says, “but one of the greatest was that I wasn’t at the bar to see that.”

“Yeah, it was quite the scene,” I tell her. “It will live rent-free in my memory forever, even if I want to shove it out.”

“We can’t let her do it,” Rowan says, looking alarmingly pale under the tan he has somehow managed to hang on to even though it’s winter.

“Oh, why crush my fun?” Holly asks.

“I mean, it wouldn’t be great for our brand if our grandmother is running around acting like a crazy person,” Bryn offers, rubbing her pregnant belly with one hand. “Then again, we had our reasons for keeping our family name out of any of the marketing, so who cares?”

“*I care,*” Rowan objects. “I don’t want to go through life knowing this exists.”

“On the bright side, maybe she’ll really try to post it to ‘YouTubes.’ She might be so starstruck by herself that she won’t even realize she’s supposed to drop the ‘s.’”

“Life is strange,” Bryn says contemplatively. “To think, if Rory hadn’t come to town, I might still be working with her in that office.”

The office of Mayberry Matchmakers, our family business—or our family curse, depending on who you ask. Rowan is definitely on team curse. Nana closed the business after the app sold because she figured she was moving on to greener pastures with the dating show.

“Well, thank God for your younger and more intelligent twin,” Holly teases her, giving her shoulder a slight nudge. “I take full credit for selling him on the idea of our app.”

“But it was Bryn’s vag that really sealed the deal,” I joke, earning me a dirty look from my eldest sister, a laugh from Holly, and a beleaguered look from Rowan, who clearly regrets accepting my lunch invitation. “Speaking of which,” I say, that 24% flashing behind my eyes. I’ve been thinking about it more than I should, given that I am actively trying to

set Lou up with other people. “How accurate would you say the app is? Like, is it a gimmick?”

“Bite your tongue,” Holly says with a glower. “Those are fighting words.”

“What she means to say is that Judith is very accurate,” Bryn says, popping a French fry into her mouth. French fries with barbecue sauce is the very specific thing that she wants to eat at this phase of her pregnancy. I don’t know many people with kids, despite having written a surprise baby book or two, so I’ve been fascinated by the changes in her.

“Like, on a scale of one to ten, would it be a seven or an eight?”

“An eleven,” Holly says.

“Your knowledge of math never fails to amaze me,” Rowan says, smirking at her.

“Very funny,” she says to him. Then, turning back to me, she adds, “The app knew Cole and I were soulmates before we even did.”

“I don’t know,” I tell her. “I have a hard time believing a computer knows everything.”

“No,” Rowan says with a glint of amusement in his eyes. “You’d prefer to believe *you* do.” It’s the kind of thing Lou would say, and I find myself thinking again of that 24%. I mean, that can’t be true, can it? I was pushing the bestie thing a little hard as a joke, but Lou really is my best friend in town other than Badass Brittany. While I love my sisters and brother, and we get together regularly now that I’m in town, they all have their own lives, their own partners.

“So you’re saying that I should marry Logan?” I ask them confrontationally. “Because according to your super-smart app, he’s ninety-one percent my soulmate.”

“What?” Holly says, dropping her fork with a clink. “Holy shit,” she adds, getting excited. “You matched that high with Logan? Hell to the yes. I’m going to say something totally Bryn-like and point out that we could be both sisters-in-law and sisters!”

“I feel like I should be offended by this,” Bryn says with a flat affect, “but I can’t summon the energy.”

“Whoa!” I say, making a staying gesture at Holly. “Don’t go off and buy us matching wedding dresses just yet. I’m not interested in him. In fact, I’m pretty damn sure I know someone else who’s perfect for him. I’m getting dinner with him tomorrow to discuss it. Which is why the app doesn’t know more than people do.”

“Well, that’s a bummer,” Holly says before picking up on the *someone else* part of what I said. “Wait. Who is this other mystery person? Do I know her? Do I *like* her?” She pulls a face. “He has really bad taste in women. I mean, I try not to be critical, but he brought this woman over to the bar a while back, and she didn’t know the difference between a chicken and a goose.”

“How did that come up in conversation?” Rowan queries.

We ignore him.

“How long ago was this?” I ask, wondering if it was before or after his kiss with Brittany. If it happened afterward, then I’m disappointed in him. Yeah, yeah, I know that I am also a commitment-a-phobic, but I’ve never been in love. If someone did push me, unwillingly, into falling in love with him, I wouldn’t go around macking on people who didn’t know the difference between fowl.

“I don’t know,” she says with a shrug. “Couple weeks into December, maybe?”

Good.

“Anyway,” she continues. “Who is this person?”

“Not telling,” I say. “Shifting topics...your app said I had this absurdly low percentage match with someone I’m good friends with. That doesn’t make any sense either, right?”

“One of your friends from high school?” Bryn asks, studying me.

“Something like that,” I say, being evasive and knowing it. But I don’t want to tell them it was Lou for some reason.

“Well, romantic matches are different than friend matches, right?” Holly says, stealing a French fry from Bryn, who slaps her hand with uncharacteristic vehemence. (Noted: pregnant ladies do not like other people stealing their food.) Holly shakes out her hand without even looking at it, or Bryn. “I mean, if they weren’t, you’d want to bone all of your friends, wouldn’t you?”

“I mean, who hasn’t boned one of their friends?” I ask flippantly, but even as the words come out, I feel a stab. It’s too similar to an accusation that was leveled against me recently. I find myself thinking of what Lou said to me at the bar the other day. He knows I’m grappling with something painful too. No one else seems to have noticed.

Would a 24% have picked up on that?

“I’m becoming uncomfortable with this conversation,” Rowan says. “It was going along fine, but I could go a long time without discussing boning with my little sister. Forever, preferably.”

“How do you ever have a conversation with Dad, then?” I ask. “He’s dating, like, half of the single women above-fifty population of Highland Hills.”

Holly huffs. “What, so like twenty people?”

“You’d be surprised,” I say. “We have enough casseroles in the house to feed an army. Unfortunately, most of them aren’t very good.”

Rowan laughs. “She’s not lying. I’m thinking of buying him a deep freeze.”

“If you’re not interested in Logan, what about looking at your next highest match?” Bryn asks, as if the rest of the conversation was inconsequential. “Why not give it a try?” She smiles at me—a big sister smile if ever I’ve seen one. “You can call it research.”

I’m touched. Despite the fact that I’ve never been super close to Bryn, she knows me. And my siblings care enough to try to manipulate me into happiness, just like I’m doing for Lou.

“We’ll see,” I say. And we all know I mean no.

Chapter Ten

Lou

I'm nervous.

It's not just the date. Roy called me up earlier to report that he'd given my cell phone number to the editor who bought Evan's book at auction.

"It's time to put this mess behind us," he'd said gruffly. "You talk to him, then you come home. Maybe take a week or so to get your affairs in order, but stop screwing around. It's time, Lou."

He said it like he wasn't the very same salty bastard who'd sent me away in the first place.

"So when's he going to call?" I'd asked, not looking forward to it in the least.

"Whenever he goddamn feels like it. He said he'd call you over the weekend. Then you need to come home."

It threw me when he said that, and not just because it's pretty fucked up that the guy wants to ream me out over the weekend. No, what caught me off-guard is that I haven't been thinking of my little apartment in New York as home. I haven't felt homesick at all, other than when I had a late-night craving for shawarma and realized practically every restaurant in Highland Hills stops seating people at eight, or eight-thirty if you're lucky.

Then there's this date. I'm not excited about it like I should be. Maybe it's too soon after shit went down with Victoria and Evan.

Evan.

Just thinking about him sours my stomach.

He made me feel blindsided, stupid, and used—even more so than Victoria.

I've always known what I wanted to do, and who I wanted to be. When I was a kid, my mom asked me what I wanted to do, and I told her I wanted to make books. Once she got over the disappointment that I didn't have loftier goals, like attending med school, she asked, "Don't you mean you want to write them?" I told her no—I wanted to *make* them. Most kids change their mind about what they want to do every five minutes, but not me. I clutched to it like it was my life jacket. So it felt like my life was on track when I found a job with Roy's agency out of college, and each year I kept moving up in the ranks and in his esteem. I got made a full agent after I sold Alex's first book at auction, and I felt like I was on top of the world, living the life I was supposed to live and enjoying every bit of it.

Victoria and Evan Ethington destroyed that confidence, pulling it out from under me like Lucy pulls that stupid football when Charlie Brown tries to kick it in Peanuts cartoons.

I feel naked without it, like a huge part of me is missing. I came here hoping to get it back. And while I'm not all the way there yet, my Roy-imposed exile really has helped. If I'm completely honest with myself, that has a lot to do with Ivy.

She's like sandpaper, a bit abrasive but with a knack for smoothing out my rough spots. I was pretty rough when I moved into Jay's house, and now...well, now I'm getting ready to go out on this date just to please her, bad idea or not.

There's a knock at my bedroom door before it pushes open, and Ivy appears in the doorway.

"Ivy!" I protest. "I could have been naked!" As it is, I'm half-naked, dressed in underwear and jeans. I'm standing in front of my open closet, trying to figure out which shirt to wear.

She has on jeans that look like they were made for her ass and a white blouse tied into a knot above the button of her jeans. Her hair is in long loose blond curls, and her makeup is understated. While I'm sure she doesn't have to try very hard to impress a guy, somehow I'd thought she'd put more effort for a 91% guy. Though, in the end, I suppose it doesn't matter. Ivy is always gorgeous, just as she is.

For a second, I let myself imagine that we're going on this date together, just the two of us, but I quickly tamp down the thought. Ivy's made it perfectly clear she's not interested in me that way. At. All.

"If I saw you naked, we'd be square. We both remember you walking in on me."

Yes, I sure as hell do. I think about it more often than I'd like.

Her gaze lands on my chest for a second, but she quickly glances away.

My heart seizes. Why did she look away? Granted, I haven't been to the gym in over a month, but I've done some sit-ups and pushups on my bedroom floor. I haven't lost much muscle tone.

She pushes me to the side to take over scouring my clothing options, only looking for twenty seconds or so before she stops and turns to face me with a scowl. "Were you born dressing like an old man?"

And *that* is one of many reasons I'm in the friend zone. She sees me as an old geezer. Maybe, compared to her life choices, I am.

"Yes, Ivy," I say dryly, "my parents dressed me in bow ties and tweed vests when I was a baby."

She gives me a thoughtful look. "That does help explain things."

"I'll just wear my blue button-up."

A frown creases her forehead, but she finally shrugs and pulls it out and hands it to me. "I suppose it could be worse."

Just don't wear a tie. It's not a job interview."

Does she know I've been contemplating quitting my job? I doubt it, because while we talk a lot, we haven't delved into the details of what drove me here, just like we haven't discussed why Ivy is hiding out here.

I give her an anemic laugh as I take the shirt and slip the shirt off the hanger.

"Any other rules?" I ask as I slip it on, briefly wondering if I should put a T-shirt on underneath, but I suspect Ivy would lose her mind...and not in a good way.

Mind out of the gutter.

In all honesty, my mind's spent a lot of time in the gutter since I saw Ivy naked in the bathroom a few weeks ago, and reading her book hasn't helped.

I'm only a third of the way through it, but I like it...a lot. Hell, I can hardly plod my way through submissions lately, but I've been inhaling her book like it's a bag of Hint of Lime tortilla chips. The plot is good, the characters are well-developed, and the romance...well, the characters haven't had sex yet, but the tension is off the charts. It sure doesn't help that I keep imagining the woman in the book as Ivy.

I start by buttoning the second from the top button, and she watches me with an intense gaze as my hand moves down over my chest, fastening the next.

"Rules?" she asks absently, then looks up at me and grins. "Where's the fun in rules? You're supposed to have a good time."

"So you're telling me to be myself."

"Hell, no," she says with a laugh. "Don't spend the night glaring at her."

"I don't glare at people."

She rolls her eyes. "I'm surprised your resting bitch face isn't a permanent scowl."

"I can be quite charming when I want to be."

“I’m sure you can,” she says in a tone a mother would use on a toddler. She straightens my collar.

I push her hand away. “Is that a challenge?”

She studies me in confusion, then her eyes light up. “Are you saying you plan to be extra charming tonight?”

“I’ll be my usual amount of charming. But everyone other than you seems to find that more than adequate. She’ll be calling me Prince Charming by the end of the night.”

Her lips purse in amusement and she nods. “Okay.” A grin breaks out on her face. “Will you be placing your cloak over a water puddle in front of the door?”

I roll my eyes. “If I did, I’d be doing it for you since you’ve insisted we head over there together.”

She taps her finger on her chin. “And the effort would be completely wasted on me. I see your dilemma.”

“What about you?” I ask. “Are you going to pour on the charm?”

She laughs. “What are you talking about? I’m already charming as hell.”

* * *

Since Christmas All Year Coffee is only a few blocks away, Ivy decides we should walk. I still think going together is a bad idea.

“We’ll look like a brother and sister going on a double date.”

“Get over yourself,” she says as we head down the front walkway. “This way we can do the whole post game wrap-up on the way home.”

“You’re going to be critiquing *my game*?”

“Of course,” she scoffs. “Why else would I have insisted on a double date?”

“I’ve changed my mind. I’ll go on my own date.”

“Too late,” she says with a smug grin as she steps over a crack in the sidewalk. “We’ve already left the house; besides, we’ve helped protect the environment by not driving two cars.”

We continue in silence for a few minutes before it starts to eat at me, and I say, “So do you have a strategy on first dates?”

“Like a play book?” she asks incredulously as she turns to glance at me.

I curl my upper lip. “Not like a play book. Like criteria you use to judge the poor guy you’re with.”

She snorts. “You make me sound like a praying mantis, looking for my next dinner.”

“I just figure you have boxes that guys have to tick before you agree to see them again.”

Her mouth twists. “I suppose, but mostly I try to figure out if they like to have a good time.”

“You mean, like, party?”

She doesn’t respond, but I know she likes to party. She’s told me very vivid and overly detailed stories about wild nights in Miami to a party in New York City that lasted for three days. I also know she’s not looking for a permanent relationship.

More reasons why we’d never work. Maybe it’s the alleged old man in me—Ivy would certainly say it is—but I’ve always wanted to settle down with someone. I’m surprised by the melancholy that washes through me at the thought.

Stop thinking about anything more than friendship with Ivy Anders.

There’s nothing logical about wanting a woman who’s made it clear through words and deeds that she sees you as a project and not a romantic prospect, and I was raised on logic. Besides, I’m about to meet Miss 90%, although I really need to stop calling her that and use her name. Rosalie.

Rosalie is a lovely name, and it suits the profile photos she used on Matchmake Me. I owe it to her to give this a real shot, and if I'm lucky, she'll help me with this inappropriate fixation I'm fighting.

Downtown Highland Hills is so close that I don't have much time to devote to overthinking things—before I know it, we're approaching the café.

“Okay, Romeo,” Ivy says as she stops on the sidewalk outside of Christmas All Year Coffee. “Let's see you work your magic.”

It's starting to hit me that Ivy's going to be with me the entire night. This has the potential to be a disaster of epic proportions. Ivy has no filter, and I have no idea what she plans on telling Miss 90%, er, Rosalie.

And then there's the fact that while Ivy may consider herself a chaperone, she'll be on a date of her own. I'll have to sit there while she flirts and makes innuendos with Mountain Man Logan. Jealousy knifes into me, and to my surprise, it's stronger than when I walked in on my ex being railed by another man. That's not a good sign.

Maybe the four of us should have a single drink together and then go our separate ways.

As we approach the coffee shop, I pitch the idea to Ivy.

“Trying to ditch me already? That's not a very Prince Charming thing to do.” Her mouth twists to the side. “You're more of a Prince Buttons, actually. As in, someone needs to unbutton you.”

“You're not my date,” I point out, ignoring the heat her suggestion sends coursing through me.

“No,” she says, sounding more pensive than usual. “I guess I'm not a glass slipper sort of girl. I'm more of the scrappy side kick.”

Then, as if to prove her point, she rushes in front of me to open the door to Christmas All Year Coffee. Making a sweeping gesture with her hand, she ushers me in. “After you, my lord.”

“If I’m a prince, then I think it’s your highness.”

She grins. “A thousand pardons, *my lord*.”

I can’t help laughing, although I have no idea why. It’s just...Ivy. She can make me smile even when she’s annoying the shit out of me. I carry that good humor in with me as I walk in. Rosalie’s sitting at a table by the window, and Logan’s standing to the side by the counter.

“They’ve already split up,” I say. “Good time for us to part ways?”

“Can’t ditch me that easily,” she says with a grin. She walks over to Logan, and her grin widens. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“I was intrigued,” he says, his voice a low rumble that I’m sure drives women wild. Logan’s whole persona is rugged mountain man, which I hear is what a lot of women are into, so I’m not sure why he’s even on a dating app.

Another stab of jealousy rocks me.

Ivy’s made it clear she’s not interested in you like that, and even if she were, it’s not like anything would come from it.

Ivy gestures toward me. “You already know Lou.”

Logan extends his hand and shakes. I have a firm handshake, but this guy must use some kind of hand spring in his exercise regime.

He’s definitely a man’s man.

The kind of guy Ivy would be interested in.

“Lou,” Logan grunts.

“Logan,” I grunt back.

Ivy grins. “As I mentioned, we’re double dating with Lou and his date, Rosalie.”

“You said babysitting, if I remember right,” Logan says with a sly grin.

My brow shoots up.

Now I have both of them critiquing me.

No thanks.

“You two have a lovely evening,” I say, giving Ivy a pointed look. “I’ll take it from here.”

“But I’m your ride,” Ivy protests.

“We walked.”

“You might drink too much and get lost walking home.”

“I won’t get drunk, and if for some strange reason I do, I’ll get an Uber.”

“Or maybe he’ll go home with her,” Logan suggests.

“That won’t be happening,” I say as Ivy says, “Nope, I’m not giving up. I take my chaperoning duty *very* seriously.”

“Oh-kay...” Logan says, studying us both.

“Come on, Prince Buttons,” Ivy says, leading the way. “Let’s go meet Miss 90%.”

“Who?” Logan asks in confusion.

But I’m a step behind Ivy, trying to think of how to stop her without making a scene. I can only imagine how I’d react if I were waiting for a blind date and got blindsided by three people instead of one. Then again, she knows it’s supposed to be a double date, but I suspect she’s expecting an introduction from me before she meets my roommate.

It’s almost as if Ivy’s trying to sabotage my date before it even starts.

But she stops a few tables away and glances back at me with an encouraging grin, like a parent at their kid’s first swimming lesson. *Go on into the water, honey. It’s going to be fun.*

Something tells me the chances of it being fun are less than 50/50.

Chapter Eleven

Ivy

After we all exchange introductions, Lou pulls out Rosalie's chair like a good Prince Buttons, and the look he gives her as she sits down suggests he's just as into long, black hair and glorious tits as most men.

That's good. That's what I wanted—for Lou to get out and realize that his fiancée dumping him was the best thing that could have happened and there are dozens of pussies out there begging to be eaten by a guy who's the kind of hot that sneaks up on you. The kind of guy you might write off as a stuffed shirt, only to figure out he's stuffed with things you might like—knowledge and wit and a surprising ability to make popcorn on the stovetop.

It's just...I feel a weird tightening of my chest when I think about him with his head between her legs.

It's not a good feeling, in case that's unclear, but I'm not sure what my panties are in a bunch about, because *this is what I wanted*.

He's smiling. He's having fun. He's feeling confident. But even so....

I guess part of me likes having Lou's attention to myself, and if that's selfish—okay, it's definitely selfish...

“What's going on in your head right now?” Logan asks, bumping his shoulder against mine. We're still standing, lurking like a couple of weirdos. The shoulder he nudged me with is broad and sexy, attached to a burning hunk of mountain

man, but he doesn't light my fire. He hasn't, ever since I realized he's already got a fire burning in Brittany's hearth.

"I'm thinking about popcorn," I say, and I notice Lou's lips tip up ever so slightly. Probably remembering how excited I was when he rolled out that trick the other night. "I guess I'm hungry. Hey," I add. "Why don't we do our friends here a solid and go order food for everyone at the counter? My treat."

"Oh, I couldn't let you do that," says Rosalie. "That's a sweet offer, Evie, but—"

"Ivy," Lou corrects, then purses his lips. "Sorry, it's—"

She takes his hand, and I feel like someone just stabbed me in the kidney. Or I would if I knew where my kidneys were located in my midsection. Shit, something is definitely going on with me, and I don't like it.

"No," she says to him. "It was unforgivable for me to forget your roommate's name."

She's laying it on a little thick, if you ask me, given that I only just introduced myself fifty seconds ago, and most people forget people's names immediately upon hearing them, but whatever.

"It's not an offer," I say, "it's a done deal. So what will it be?" I glance at Lou, then playfully add, "Lou's favorite item on the menu is Rudolph's Balls, but I'm afraid they only offer those for brunch. You'll have to make do with Santa's Taint."

He looks so horrified that I burst out laughing. "Okay, I made that up. Fine. Caught me. Why don't you two pull up the menu on your phone and give it the old look-see, and you can text me your order?" I wave to the front of the restaurant, where there's suddenly a sizable line. Apparently, we're not the only people who're in the mood to be dosed with Christmas music and forced joy on a Saturday night. Then again, there are only so many places to go in Highland Hills if you're young and single. If you're above a certain age and a single woman, I think the only really hot hangout spot is my father's bedroom.

"Are you sure, Evi—"

I catch a slight tightening of Lou's jaw before Rosalie corrects herself, and I can't help but feel glad for it. There he is, acting the part of Prince Buttons for me, and I can't pretend I hate it. "Certain. It'll give us some solo time with our dates. I can tell you're just dying to hear Lou's story about that time he thought he'd lost his reading glasses and then realized he was actually wearing them." Then, because I don't want to embarrass him too much, I add, "Or that one about how he made his best friend a bestselling author. That's a good one too." I wink at her, avoiding Lou's gaze, and tug Logan toward the front.

"Oh, so I'm going too?" he asks.

"Obviously, lover," I tell him.

He's chuckling as we join the end of the line. No old teachers in line this time, but I do see two thirds of the Three Fates—the trio of older ladies whom I've been friendly with since high school. They also happen to be among Dad's lady suitors. Maybe they're bringing him dinner. I wave to them, and one of them blows me a kiss that I pretend to catch.

"So you wanted to talk to me about something," Logan says, giving me a sidelong look. "I'm guessing this is you shooting your shot."

"Oh, if I wanted to shoot my shot, you'd know it."

He sighs. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

But he doesn't look particularly sorry about it. He might enjoy flirting with everyone, just like I do, but his heart's not in it.

"So, Logan, I'm doing some research," I say. "When was the last time you got laid?"

He swears under his breath, then says, "What kind of research are you doing?"

"I thought I was being pretty straightforward. It's about sex."

He laughs again, shaking his head slightly, and combs a hand back through his hair, his eyes darting around to see if

anyone's listening. He must decide they're not, because he says, "I don't know. I'm kind of taking a break from all that. A couple of months, I guess."

I feel a flush of victory. Since before his kiss with Badass Brittany, which means he is as hung up as I was hoping.

"So," I say, my mind working on the problem. I'm not going to break Brittany's confidence, but if I'm lucky, I can get Logan to confide in me too. "Is there someone in particular on your mind? Because if you don't mind me saying so, you don't seem like the kind of guy who'd go a couple of months without any action."

"It doesn't matter," he says with a scowl. "It's stupid."

"Probably," I agree, stepping forward with the line. "Love is often stupid."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." He lifts his hands in defense. "I never said I was in love with her."

"In love with whom?" I ask, raising my eyebrows and feeling like a champ, because I just got him to admit there is a *her*.

"I'm not," he insists, this time crossing his arms over his chest. Goddamn, he's got some biceps on him. Lou's arms aren't like that. They're less bulky, but when I walked in on him shirtless, I felt a surprising tingling—the kind that means I've met someone who'd be good at ringing my bell.

Damn it, no. I have to get my shit together. Maybe I should for real hit on someone tonight—not Logan, obviously, and not Lou, but some random local who can clear my brain and reset my sex clock so I stop thinking thoughts I have no business thinking.

Because I care about Lou.

Because even if those feelings have grown stronger over the last few weeks, and I have to admit he looks very sexy even in his stuffed-shirt shirts, I care about him too much to subject him to Hurricane Ivy. He's already been through enough. I might not know details, but I know *him*, and I see the signs. He doesn't need another storm blowing in, and I

can't see any other outcome. He has his life, away from here, and I have mine, away from here—we've just been thrown together for this moment out of time. It hurts to think it'll end—that we'll go back to a time when we're nothing to each other, just a couple of people from that Gotye song, but it's true. He'll remember the crazy woman who forced him to online date against his will; I'll remember that guy who made me wish, in weak moments, that I were a different kind of person—the kind who knew how to stay.

Besides. I haven't forgotten that 24%, and I'm sure he hasn't either. He's nothing if not practical, my Lou.

No, not my Lou. My gaze darts to the table where he's sitting with Rosalie, and I watch as she leans forward and touches his arm, letting her hand linger there.

Goddamn, girl. Way to be aggressive. Several seconds pass, and she still hasn't moved it, and—

And I realize that the line has moved forward by several people, and the people behind me are grumbling, clearly anxious for their reindeer balls.

Logan gives me a look as we step forward together. “I thought you *wanted* to set him up with someone?”

I clear my throat. “I do.”

“Don't kid a kidder,” Logan says, studying me with those unfairly hot eyes of his. The ones that should be doing all kinds of things to me but aren't having much of an effect at all.

“I know who you're not in love with,” I tell him. “I've seen you and Brittany together often enough to know. Two people don't pretend to hate each other that much unless they're desperate to bone, and you honestly couldn't do better than that badass woman. That's why I wanted to talk to you. You strike me as a man who needs some sense slapped into you.”

The muscle in his jaw ticks, but he doesn't look as pissed as he probably should be. “I think she really does hate me.”

“Doesn't. But she'd like to. She's worried you're too much like her ex-husband.”

“I’m nothing like that dick,” he says, that muscle twitching some more.

“Why don’t you show her?” I ask. We’re only two people away from the counter, so I take out my phone to check it, and see a text from Lou with their orders. The names are ridiculous, of course, and he ends with:

I kind of hate you for making me say that—even in writing.

I snort-laugh, and Logan gives me a knowing look. “You might think you know something about me, but you should remember that we’re 91% compatible, Ivy. I figure I’m not so bad at reading you either. You *like* that guy. A lot.”

“You’re wrong about me,” I insist, but there’s a weird feeling in my chest. Lou’s become...special to me.

He inclines his head. “Ditto.”

Except I’m not wrong about him—I know I’m not.

So does that mean he’s right about me?

* * *

“Wait, why are we playing charades?” Lou asks, lifting his eyebrows. “Isn’t all of this enough for you?” He waves to the little train, chugging through the restaurant like a champ, and to the ever-present Christmas tree, which has accumulated a few more ornaments since our last visit. It’s weird, I guess, but I’ve started thinking of this as our place. Or at least it’s the place where we became *Ivy and Lou*.

“It’s a double date, you dip,” I tell him. “And we already finished our Christmas-themed food. Of course we need to do a group activity.”

The furrow on his brow totally makes the suggestion worthwhile.

Rosalie puts her hand on his upper thigh, something I have a very clear view of under the table, and I’m in the weird

position of being both proud of Lou for rolling out his game and unhappy that she's picking up what he's putting out.

It's just...I'm not sure she's in this for the right reasons. Dear God, I sort of hate myself for thinking that, but every time he tries to tell her about his work or his interests, she immediately changes the subject—to herself, to her cat Norman Rockwell, to her job reupholstering furniture, to the song she heard on the radio five minutes ago. I mean, I'm as self-involved as the next girl, but this is some next-level shit. She's obviously into him because he's attractive, not because he's Lou.

He's supposed to fuck his way out of this rut, Ivy, not marry his way out of it, I tell myself.

But I'd prefer it if it wasn't with her.

Logan is still in my head, because I can practically hear him pointing out, *Is it because you want it to be with you?*

I shoot Logan a dirty look, and he lifts his eyebrows, probably wondering what the hell he did to offend me in his last five minutes of silence. I smile at him. His eyebrows hike up higher.

“You'll be on my team, won't you, Lou?” Rosalie asks in a throaty voice.

“Sure,” he says, but he moves his chair a few inches away from her, maybe because her groping hand is reaching a little too close to his dick.

Does he need saving? Because hell yeah I'll offer him a life raft.

“Wouldn't it be more fun if we play against our dates?” I ask, raising my eyebrows. “We can even sweeten the pot to make things interesting.”

Lou gives me death eyes, and shit, he's right. I've just given her an excuse to grope him if he loses.

“What I meant is the losers will buy the winners a round of hilariously titled Christmas drinks,” I clarify.

“You really think this is a good idea, Twenty-Four?” Lou asks, his first direct reference to our low score on the dating app.

It stings a little, but it also tells me that he’s been thinking about it too. He’s not totally unaffected by me.

“Yes, Prince Buttons. A *fantastic* one. We think with but one mind.”

“Prince Buttons?” Rosalie says, laughing loudly. “There has to be a story there.” She leans in as she says it, crowding his space.

“Inside joke,” Lou says, moving his chair a little farther from her as she nudges hers toward him. Hell, at this rate they’ll be at another table by the time we get to the game.

“We could have more interesting odds,” Rosalie says. Turning toward Logan, she adds, “Don’t you think we could make things more interesting?”

“Nah, I’m good with the drinks thing.” Logan shrugs a shoulder. “I’d also be good with getting another drink and forgetting that there is such a thing as charades and some people like to play it.”

“Bite your tongue,” I say. “Now, let’s go find one of the servers and ask if they can spare some rejected Christmas cards or something so we can write our ideas down.”

“Your wish, my command, and all that,” Logan says, gamely enough, although maybe he wants an excuse to get away from the table. Rosalie just plucked a cherry out of Lou’s drink and is sucking it off the stem. The crestfallen look on his face suggests he was looking forward to eating it.

Shit. Should I stay? Except...despite the whole musical chairs thing they have going on, it’s possible that he likes her. She’s gorgeous, and for all I know, he really loves talking about her five interests. Maybe I need to give him a chance for some more bonding time with her.

“We’ll be back,” I say, grabbing Logan again. He gets up, and I point theatrically to a server across the café. She’s dressed in a Christmas sweater with Dwayne the Rock

Johnson on it, which says “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree,” so I already like her better than Rosalie.

“You’re throwing off some seriously mixed signals,” Logan murmurs to me as we walk over to her.

“Oh,” I say, turning to him in surprise. “I thought I was clear. I’m only interested in you for Brittany. For me, it’s a no. She’s my friend, and I’d never mess with that.” Emotion punches a hole in my chest, raw and dark, because I mean every last word, but the last time I told someone that I wasn’t believed. It’s a horrible thing, to not be believed by people you trust.

“That’s not what I meant,” he says, rolling his eyes. “You’re throwing off mixed signals to *Lou*. Do you want him with that woman, or what?”

I take another couple of steps toward the server before answering. “Well, no. But who knows? Maybe he has a thing for terrible women. If he does, he might as well go for her. She’s a hot ticket.”

He grabs my arm and turns me around, his gaze surprisingly earnest. “So are you, and he’s been looking at you all night.”

“I don’t know what’s going on,” I say to him honestly, swallowing a rush of emotion. “I’m feeling a little fucked up at the moment, to be honest with you.”

His lips twitch. “So you figured the best thing to do was play charades?”

“Do you have a better idea?” I ask, nodding toward the wall, because standing in the middle of a crowded café isn’t the best place to have a private conversation.

He walks with me, saying in an undertone, “Why don’t you ditch Rosalie and take Lou home?”

I give him a chiding look. “I sure hope you don’t think *you’re* going home with her.”

He scowls at me as I stop next to a giant candy cane nailed to the wall. “What? You want me to tell you you’re right about

me? I haven't been able to get Brittany to talk to me for weeks. Fuck. She wouldn't even let me into the brewery until opening time the other day—and on New Year's Eve she threw me out on my ass."

"What about a grand gesture?" I ask, getting excited, because there's nothing I love so much as plotting a grand gesture—there's usually one in each of my books.

He scoffs. "You think she'd like that?"

Okay, he has a point. "No, I guess not. What about trying to talk to her on her own...you know, when she's not working, and there's no one else around?"

He scratches the back of his neck. "I don't know what to say. I don't know what I have to offer. I've never..." He looks around, lowers his voice. "I've never dated anyone seriously before. I don't know how."

I give him a wry look. "And you think I do?"

"I think you know some stuff, sure," he says. "You write those books about other people knowing what to do."

"They're fictional," I say with a sigh. "Trust me when I say it's different."

Logan looks me in the eye, his gaze unflinching. "We're going to make ourselves a deal, Ivy Anders. If you want me to give it a shot with Brittany, you're going to give it a shot with Lou."

"He's only in town temporarily."

"So you'd better get busy."

My heart quickens as I glance back at the table. Lou is looking at me, his gaze a bit urgent, as if he's suddenly developed a real taste for charades. I feel a rush of warmth for him, and I let myself acknowledge the truth—I want him. I don't know what it means or what it should mean, but I do. Maybe I've wanted him all along.

"Are you saying you're going to throw this game of charades, Logan?" I ask him.

He grins. “We’ll see. I *am* competitive.”

Chapter Twelve

Lou

I'm pretty sure I've died and gone to hell.

First, Miss 90%, *dammit*, I mean Rosalie, is like a rabbit in heat. Just like every red-blooded man, I like a woman who can't keep her hands off me, but I'd prefer for it *not* to be within five minutes of meeting and also not in public.

Then there's the fact that she hasn't stopped talking about herself long enough to consider whether I'm an interesting person worth listening to.

If that weren't enough, she can't even remember a simple name like Ivy. I mean, even my betta fish Vonnegut learned that when my hand was at the top of the bowl, it was feeding time. If a fish with about five brain cells can learn that, surely a grown woman can remember someone's name. Obviously, that's a shitty thing to think, and I don't really mean it. I just don't want to be here, especially not with her.

If this is a 90% match, then I'm giving up internet dating and joining a monastery.

To make matters worse, Ivy roped me into playing charades, and just like always, I'm going along with her plan. I'm the one who has to go first—age before beauty, Ivy said with a smirk—and I pluck one of the papers from the disposable coffee cup. Each of us came up with five ideas to be acted out.

Irritated as hell, I read the phrase. A groan escapes me.

"That good, huh?" Ivy asks with a grin.

“I bet it’s mine!” Rosalie exclaims, her eyes bright with excitement. “I came up with some really fun ones.”

Logan is sitting back in his chair with an air of bemusement, his bulky arms crossed over his broad chest.

I read the words again, then roll my eyes as I draw in a breath.

“We have thirty seconds,” Ivy says, practically bouncing out of her seat. “Logan, can you time us?”

He lifts an eyebrow.

“I’ll do it,” Rosalie says. “I just got a new Apple watch, and it has the most up-to-date timer on the market. It was a limited edition. Very exclusive.”

“You don’t say?” Ivy says sweetly that has a slight tone of mockery that I’m sure Rosalie doesn’t pick up on.

Rosalie taps on her watch, then says, “Go!”

I read the words again. Based on the handwriting, I’m pretty sure Logan wrote this one, and I have no idea how to act it out.

“Statue,” Ivy says before I do anything.

I give her an exasperated look.

“Professor.”

What the hell? My eyes widen in disbelief.

“Owl!”

“Twenty seconds!” Rosalie exclaims.

I draw in another breath, then hold up two fingers.

“Peace,” Ivy practically shouts.

I shove the two fingers toward her in multiple jabs.

“Two words,” she says, looking relieved when I nod.

I tuck my hands under my arms and start to flap.

“Bird,” Ivy says. “Chicken, eagle, hawk, blue jay—”

I vigorously shake my head no, then put my hands in front of me and pretend I'm swimming a breast stroke.

"Swimming!" Ivy exclaims.

I nod, then motion for her to continue guessing.

"Simone Biles!" she shouts.

"What?" I ask in irritation. "She's a *gymnast*. I was swimming!"

"You're disqualified!" Rosalie says happily, then turns to me, putting a hand on my arm. "That was a good try, Louie."

"*Louie?*" Ivy grunts while Logan smirks.

Rosalie pinches my earlobe. "My little Louie."

What is wrong with this woman? But I don't dwell on it, because Ivy's staring a hole into my head. "What was the word?" she asks, sounding irritated.

"Fish bowl."

She gives me a hard stare. "What the hell was the flapping thing?" She reenacts it to make sure I know what she's talking about. "What was that?"

"A fish," I say, wondering why she's confused. "Its fins."

"That's a bird, Lou. Not a fish!"

"Then let's see you act out a fish!"

She puckers her lips and widens them slightly and lowers them multiple times. "That's how you act out a fish."

I shake my head. "You look more like a woman who just got too much lip filler."

Rosalie strokes my arm as she nods at Ivy. "Louie's right. My friend went to Charlotte and got lip injections from this site she found on Facebook, and her lips were like that for weeks."

Ivy stares at her for several seconds before opening her mouth to speak, but she doesn't get the chance. Logan drops his arms and sits up. "One point for us. I'll draw the next one."

He reaches into the cup, pulls a scrap out, and then looks at Ivy. “You timin’?”

Scowling, Ivy pulls out her phone and brings up the timer. “Go.”

Giving Rosalie his attention, Logan holds up a finger.

“One word,” she says, her face bright with excitement.

He nods, then moves his fist in a circle at his side.

“Movie!”

He nods again. Holding a flat palm close to his side, he leans over and moves his body from side to side as he opens his mouth wide and then chomps it closed.

“Jaws!” Rosalie shouts, drawing the attention of the people around us.

Logan sits back and grins. “And that, my friends, is how it’s done.”

I glare at him. Ivy doesn’t look much more thrilled, but she remains quiet as she reaches into the cup and pulls out a paper. She still doesn’t look happy when she reads it and puts it face down on the table.

“I’m ready!” Rosalie says, her hand on her watch.

Ivy holds up three fingers.

“Three words,” I say, surprised at the knot in my stomach. This is a stupid game, but I’m competitive as shit and hate to lose. Especially to burly mountain men and female gropers.

Ivy nods, then holds up one finger.

“First word.”

After another nod, she holds up three fingers.

Did she change her mind? “Third word.”

She vigorously shakes her hand, then starts tapping each finger.

What the hell?

Her eyes turn murderous as she taps them again as though counting.

Shit. “Three!”

She excitedly nods, then drops her hand and holds up three fingers again.

What the fuck? “I just said three!”

She shakes her head, then thrusts the fingers toward me. When I don’t get it, she taps her third finger aggressively.

Oh shit. “Third word.”

She nods vigorously.

“Time!” Rosalie shouts.

Ivy sinks back in her chair. “Three Little Pigs. You have got to be the worst charades player on the planet, Prince Buttons.”

“Maybe it’s a stupid game, Twenty-Four,” I grump.

I’m not sure why I called her that earlier, but I brought it back now because our incompatibility at this game is a sharp reminder that we were ranked a 24% match for a reason. The way we’re bickering proves we’d never work out.

No matter how many nights I’ve pictured her in my dreams, then woken up with a stiff dick that needs to be taken care of behind a locked door.

Then again, Rosalie is Miss 90%, and look how well that’s going.

“Okay...” Logan says with a chuckle. “Looks like someone’s taking this a little too seriously.” He gives Ivy a sharp stare, and a sheepish look crosses her face.

“What?” she asks, trying to sound innocent. “I hate losing.”

“Me too,” I grunt.

“Looks like you two have something in common after all,” Logan says with a laugh. “Your turn, Rosalie.”

This continues for another fifteen painful minutes, with Logan and Rosalie getting most of their words, and Ivy and me only getting a few. When the words are gone, it's obvious who the losers are without an official tally.

"I'll have a Santa's Little Helper," Rosalie says with a beaming smile.

"Let's take pity on them," Logan says as he gets to his feet. "They look pathetic enough without making them fork out money for drinks."

"Do we want to stay here?" Rosalie asks, stroking my cheek. "We can get a drink at my place, Louie, and it's free."

I do *not* want to go to her place. I glance down at my watch and wonder if I can get away with saying it's late and I need to get home.

It's only 8:30.

"Come on, Rosie," Logan says, gesturing for her to join him. "You know what? I'm feeling generous. I'm going to buy a round of drinks for everyone, even the losers."

"*Rosalie*," my date says in irritation. Still, she gets to her feet. It's obvious she would prefer to move forward with her plan, but maybe she senses my hesitation and thinks I'll be more open to the kind of fun she has to offer after another drink. She's wrong. She adds, "I don't care for nicknames."

"You don't say," he says with a chuckle as they head toward the counter.

"Have you ever played charades in your life?" Ivy demands once they're out of earshot.

"I have," I snap, "but not with words like CERN accelerator."

She rolls her eyes but doesn't respond.

"Remind me never to go on a double date with you again," I grumble, sitting back in my seat.

She bobs her head from side to side and says in a high-pitched voice, "*Louie, I can't hear what you're saying because*

my ears are filled with filler.”

I shake my head in disgust. “Her friend had lip injections, not her. And you’re the one who was gung-ho about this double date.”

“You’re right,” she says with a sigh. “That was mean. Are you going to keep letting her call you Louie?”

“I don’t plan on sticking around long enough to make it worth my time to ask her not to. Can we skip the drinks and just go home?”

“No way,” she says, sitting upright as though she’s getting a second wind. “We’re not turning down those free drinks. We’re getting them, and we’re going to enjoy them, by golly.”

I pin her with a dark gaze. “By golly? Is that a term you picked up from Mountain Man?”

She gives me a haughty look. “Maybe I did.”

By now, I’m not surprised by the jealousy courses through my blood, but I am caught off guard by its intensity. I remind myself that Ivy hasn’t been all that flirty with him, and he’s kept his arms crossed over his chest like he’s her bodyguard and not her date.

I start to make what I’m sure will be a witty retort when Rosalie plops back into her chair and scoots it closer to mine. “Logan says he’ll bring the drinks over.” Her hand wraps possessively around my upper arm, and her fingers squeeze slightly. “Oh, you’re so solid, Louie.”

“It’s Lou,” Ivy says in a flat tone that crosses the border of being rude. “Not Louie. He doesn’t care for nicknames either.”

That’s pretty ballsy, coming from her. Seems like she already has half a dozen of them for me.

Rosalie’s face falls. “Have I done something to upset you, Everly?”

Ivy starts to say something, but I interrupt. “Ivy had a long day at work and is a little cranky that we lost at charades.”

“I’m not usually that good at it,” Rosalie admits, “but Logan and I really seemed to be on fire tonight.”

Ivy pinches her lips together and turns her head to the side, grimacing as though she’s literally biting her tongue.

“Do you have a headache?” Rosalie asks, reaching to the floor. “I have something in my purse you can take.”

“I think this will take the edge off,” Logan says as he places a tray of coffee cups on the table. The drinks look like a sugar headache in the making, with tall mountains of whipped cream, candy cane stirrers, and shiny glitter sprinkles, but I can smell the whiskey in them.

Still standing, he picks up two mugs and hands one to Ivy and me at the same time. “To the losers.”

“Gloating isn’t very sexy,” Ivy says as she takes a sip of hers.

“Never claimed I was going for sexy tonight,” he says with a laugh as he hands one of the other mugs to Rosalie, then takes his own and sits down.

“That makes one of us,” Rosalie says with a titter that sets my nerves on edge.

I take a sip of my drink. As kitschy as this place is, the drinks and the food are pretty good.

We’re all silent for several seconds, sipping our drinks, but I just want to be done, so I take several long gulps. It’s hot, but I’m desperate to leave.

“You must really be thirsty, Louie,” Rosalie says with a laugh.

“What about a game of Two Truths and a Lie?” Logan suggests.

“Yeah,” I say with a grimace. “That’s a no from me.”

“Come on, *Louie*,” Ivy says. “It’s too early to call it a night.”

“Is it?” I challenge, but I’m starting to feel more relaxed, so maybe it wouldn’t be too bad to stick around a while longer.

Ivy finishes off her drink and sets the cup on the table with a thud. “Why don’t we head over to Ziggy’s for another drink?”

“Um,” Logan says, scratching the back of his head. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“I think it’s a great idea,” she insists, giving him a significant look. “Come on, Louie. Bring Rosie and let’s go.”

I finish off my own drink. “I’m going to call it a night.”

Rosalie must think I’m going with her original plan to leave together, because she completely ignores Ivy’s nickname for her. “Good idea! I can’t wait for you to meet my cat.”

“No,” I say, getting to my feet. “You guys go have fun. I’ve got some work to do.”

“On a Saturday night?” Rosalie asks incredulously. “What do you do that makes you work on Saturday night?”

“You know, Rosie,” Ivy says, getting up too. “It’s really sad that you’ve been with him for over an hour, and this is the first time you’ve asked.”

I turn to my date. “Rosalie, it was nice meeting you, but I ended an engagement a month and a half ago, and I realize I’m not ready for a relationship. I wish you the best of luck.”

She stares at me like she can’t believe what she heard, but I don’t stick around for it to sink in.

“Logan,” I say with a nod.

“Louie,” he says with a smirk.

Rolling my eyes, I head for the door. I suspect I’m going to be stuck with that moniker for a while.

When I get out to the sidewalk, I drag a deep breath of cold air into my lungs.

“Why are you hurrying to get home?” Ivy asks from behind me. “You’re not really going to work, are you?”

I can’t tell Ivy that even if I were interested in Rosalie, I’m too hung up on her to give anyone else a fair shot.

God, I'm stupid.

This whole night has been about pleasing Ivy, about getting to spend time with her outside of the house. But we're never going to be a thing. Even if she were open to starting something with me, it would probably be so short term paint would dry faster. I'm not sure if my psyche is up to that.

Maybe it's time for me to go back to New York.

Maybe it was time weeks ago, like Roy has not so subtly been implying, but I was too drawn in by the illusion of a home with Ivy and her dad to get my ass in gear.

She moves next to me. "Cat got your tongue?"

"Not now, Ivy," I say sullenly.

Just then, Logan comes out of the shop. The lackadaisical expression he's worn all night has been replaced by a seriousness I'm not used to seeing on him.

"Logan, what's wrong?" Ivy asks, also picking up on his change of demeanor.

He starts to hurry past us, but Ivy grabs his arm.

He's practically vibrating with tension. "Cole called. There's trouble at Ziggy's, and he's about an hour away."

"Brittany's managing tonight," Ivy says, sounding worried.

"I know," Logan says as he pulls out of Ivy's grasp and starts running toward the sidewalk.

Ivy darts a look at me. "You head on home. I have to find out what's happening."

She takes off before I have a chance to answer.

There's no way I'm letting Ivy run into danger without me, so I race after her.

Chapter Thirteen

Ivy

I have to sprint to keep up with Logan as he hurries toward Ziggy's with purpose. It's so cold, our breath puffs out in little smoky clouds, but the exercise makes me feel warmer—and so does the adrenaline in my veins.

Lou easily keeps pace with us. "Ivy, you shouldn't be doing this," he shouts, for the second or third time. "Let us go."

Logan actually turns and looks at him, stopping in place. A few people weave around to pass him, one of them the English teacher who took such a dislike to my adjectives. I make sure to frown at him.

"He's right, Ivy," Logan says. "This might get ugly. You need to stay back."

"Hell to the no," I say, resuming my sprint and buzzing right past him. "Badass Brittany is my friend, and the bar is where I work. I'm not letting anyone mess with either of them."

"No offense," Logan says, starting to run again, "but what do you think you're going to do? You probably weigh no more than a buck twenty soaking wet."

"Excuse me?" I say as I shoot him the dirty look he deserves. "I have an automated rape whistle," I add, tapping it on the side of my purse. "I can stop these assholes faster and with less violence than you could ever hope to. All I have to do is trigger this bad boy. The way I see it, you *need* me."

“Why don’t you give us the whistle?” Lou says, eyeing it like he’s considering going in for a grab.

“Nope.” I pull it back. “Not giving you my hero moment.” It’s not that, really. I just...I *can’t* step back. It’s in my DNA, probably. I categorically can’t stand back if someone I care about is in danger—and also if there’s an interesting story to be had, because I can promise you that some variation of this night will be in my book.

Lou looks frustrated, but he also knows me pretty well by now, so he doesn’t attempt to argue. There’s no room for him to lock me in, like I’m a trouble-making child. No car, even. They can’t prevent me from going, however much they might object to my involvement.

Logan shakes his head in annoyance as he increases his pace again. We’re almost there, and I can hear yelling up ahead, see a crowd assembled outside on the street. The police will show up soon—nowhere in town is that far away, and it’s obvious this incident has created a stir—but they’re clearly not on the scene yet. Adrenaline gushes through my body as we get closer, and my steps get faster. We’re only feet away from the door when Lou grabs hold of my hand, both of us still walking. His touch jolts through me.

“Stay with me, Ivy,” he says, his gaze surprisingly intense as his eyes meet mine. “Stay with me in there.”

I expect him to release me, but he doesn’t. Neither do I. So we charge into the brewery like that, hand in hand, barreling after Logan.

There are two men fighting in the middle of the bar, staggering into tables as they hit and kick each other. Any guests who haven’t left are gathered up by the walls, and Brittany is standing behind the bar with a red mark on her forehead, her phone pressed to her ear.

“I’m on the phone with the police, you assholes!” she shouts. “You’re going to regret the day you were born.”

Logan takes one look at her, and his expression turns apoplectic. “Who the fuck did that to her?” he bellows,

charging toward the fighting dudes like he wants to be one of them.

Lou doesn't hesitate. He grabs the rape whistle off my bag with his free hand and triggers it—right next to Logan's ear.

Sure, Logan might not hear right for a while, but at least he won't get hauled downtown with the pair who're fighting. Logan gives Lou a look that would kill, but I grab hold of him and shout in his good ear. "Go to *her*, you dumbass, not the dudes. If you get arrested, it won't do shit to help her."

He's hot-headed, but his gaze shifts to Brittany. He must decide that I'm right—duh—and she needs him more than she needs to see him beat up those dumb guys, because after taking one last look at them, he makes his way to her, the whistle still screeching. Her eyes look huge and shocked as he slips behind the bar and picks her up—carrying her away.

Shit, he really doesn't understand women, does he? Something tells me she won't be happy to be taken away from the fight. This is her bar, her stand to make, and she's always struck me as the *I'll go down with the ship* kind of captain. But my attention is distracted from them because one of the brawlers throws another punch at his adversary. It connects, fist to head, and they're at it again, growling with ferocity, the air thick with the kind of testosterone that can choke you. Lou returns the pin to the whistle, ending the piercing sound, since it clearly isn't stopping them anymore. Then he turns to me, intent, and says, "If they flash a look at you, lift your phone into the air. If they come a single step toward you, run. Promise me, Ivy."

I'm not an idiot, so I agree. I have no intention of getting hit in the face by a beefy fist. Then Lou squeezes my hand and releases it, and I'm frozen in horror because he's going right up to them.

Shit. Someone's going to hit him hard, and he's going to go down like Million Dollar Baby, and it'll be my fault. I should've—

He yells something to the guys, and I shit you not, they both turn to look at me. I have no idea what's going on, but I

wave and wink as I lift my phone. A second passes, then two, and they step away from each other. They're bruised and bleeding with a couple of noticeable cuts each, and there was that mark on Brittany's head...

What the hell happened here? Why, other than the obvious explanation that drunk people with nothing better to do like to cause trouble?

Lou's standing between the brawlers like a referee, cool as a cucumber in that button-down shirt I made fun of him for, and something like awe unfolds inside of me. Damn it. I've been trying to ignore the signs, but he's one hell of a man. Fusty and particular, grumpy and aggrieved. Thoughtful and protective. Intelligent and funny. Willing to go along with my larks just because I want him to. And right now, seeing him like this, a selfish part of me wants him for myself, even though no good could come from it.

Several seconds later, the door flies open, announcing the arrival of the cops. I recognize one of them, although I'm not sure where from—that's just what happens when you grew up around the same several hundred kids. You can't seem to quit them, not entirely, because even if you leave home like I did, home will always draw you back in as long as there are people you love there.

As the cops step forward to make their arrests, Lou falls back and returns to my side.

I grab his hand and squeeze it, and there's a look that blooms in his eyes—one I can't totally read. "You were a badass," I tell him. "Brittany might need to relinquish her title."

"I'm good with sharing it." He doesn't release my hand; I don't release his. We're gripping each other like two people who know it can't last.

"Lou, you could have gotten hurt." My throat feels a little choked up as I say it. "You didn't need to—"

He squeezes my hand. "I did. They could have killed each other in a stupid bar brawl. They could have hurt someone

else.” He waves his free hand at the door. “One of them already hurt Brittany.”

“What’d you tell them? How’d you get them to stop?” I’m so acutely aware of our linked hands—as if we’re a pair of Victorians who can only flirt by touching. It feels like we’re doing something wrong, and also very, very right.

He grins at me, and I feel a shiver of awareness. Of need. “I told them you were a reporter filming the whole thing, and if they kept at it, the video would be posted all over the news and social media...and asked them if their fight was really so important they wanted to lose everything over it. You know, you really sold it with that wink.”

I smile at him. Then I lift his hand to my lips and kiss it, and his eyes dilate as he watches me. “Thank you. I rolled out my best wink for the occasion. Lou...let’s check in with Logan and then go home if the cops will let us. I want to go home.” I suck in a breath before adding, “With you. I want to hang out with you. Just you and me, no one else.”

“What about the Mountain Man?” he asks, glancing at the door.

I make a sound of disbelief and push his chest with my free hand. I like the way it feels there, his skin warm beneath his shirt, his muscles pleasingly firm. “Really, Lou? I get that you’re the literary type, really I do, but surely you’ve read enough romance in your life—even if it’s, like, *Great Expectations* or *Jane Eyre*—to know a great love when you see one. He’s hard up on Brittany. That’s why I asked him to hang out tonight. I wanted to give him a talking-to.”

“*Oh.*” He looks like a flat earther who just took his first trip to space.

“You really didn’t pick up on that?”

“I was too busy listening to Rosalie talk about her shoe collection. Did you know she has a hundred and ten pairs?” He tilts his head, his eyes shining, and he looks happy. He looks so damn happy, more so than he has all night. I want to think I’m a part of it, but I also don’t, because making someone

happy is a responsibility. If you make them happy, you can also make them unhappy. “Are you gonna be the one who breaks it to your sisters that their dating app sucks?”

“Are you sure Rosalie isn’t actually your soulmate?” I ask, laughing. “Like, maybe you secretly want a woman with too many shoes.”

He gives me a knowing look. “Something tells me you have too many.”

“I do,” I tell him, my heart suddenly thumping too fast in my chest. “Most of them are in Charleston.” I realize we’re still holding hands, but I don’t want to let go. Not yet. I want this moment to go on and on, to stretch like a piece of warm taffy. “Lou...do you think your score was so high with Rosalie and so low with me because I answered some of those questions wrong for you?”

He jolts a little, surprised, then laughs. “Yeah, Ivy. Maybe you did.”

“Let’s get out of here and make ourselves the biggest damn drinks a person ever gorged on, because I’d say we’ve earned it.”

“All right, Everly,” he says with a small smile. “If you say so.” And he puts his hand on the small of my back and leads me outside.

When we get there, Brittany’s talking to a police officer about what happened, Logan standing by her side like a sentinel. He doesn’t look happy, not that I’m surprised, and his gaze keeps straying to the wound on her temple.

“She needs to get to the hospital,” he blurts after a moment, interrupting them.

“I’m fine,” she snaps, but her fingers lift slightly to the wound, as if she can’t help herself. “I just got caught in the line of fire.”

“You said he didn’t throw the napkin dispenser at you on purpose, ma’am?” the police officer says.

Logan's mouth is pressed in a flat line as if he's preventing himself, barely, from objecting—or from charging out to the patrol car where the brawlers have been brought and pounding them into next week.

“No, he was throwing it at Tommy,” she says with a scowl. “Bill's a mean-ass drunk, always has been, and they had an argument about God only knows what. Tommy got pissed when it hit me, and that only made things worse.”

Huh, she knows those mofos.

“You sure *Tommy* didn't do that?” Logan says, his tone bitter.

She plants a hand on her hip. “I know what my ex-husband looks like, Logan. He's an asshole and a cheat, but he's never once laid hands on me.”

“They both belong in jail,” he says darkly.

“And that's where they're being taken, son,” the policeman says. This guy is older than the one I recognized inside the brewery, more my father's age. In fact, I'm fairly certain I've seen him hanging out with Dad before. “Now, if you'll let the woman speak.”

“Hallelujah,” Brittany says, giving Logan a sharp look.

“You okay, Brittany?” I ask, and she nods several times before shocking the hell out of all of us by bursting into tears and hugging me.

“I'm so sorry,” I tell her. “This sucks.”

“Thank you,” she says in a whisper. “If you and Lou hadn't come with him...if you didn't have that whistle...”

Oh. She knows Logan could have gotten his head caved in or his ass parked in jail. Part of why she's upset is because she was worried about him, but when I look over, he's walking off in a huff, looking like he's heading toward some bad decisions and a serious hangover.

“You two need to talk,” I tell her. “I've never seen a man run somewhere faster than he ran here when he heard about the fight.”

“Really?” she asks, her breath hitching. “Because I could have sworn he doesn’t give a shit.”

“He gives several shits,” I say. “A huge *mountain* of shit.”

She makes a face and smiles. “I wish we hadn’t carried on with that comparison.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” says the police officer, who looks like crying women are his kryptonite and he’d much prefer to just go home and do crossword puzzles by the fire. “Can you finish making your statement?”

“Do you need us?” I ask, glancing at Lou, who’s standing by my side, his expression supportive.

“I’ll need to talk to your friend here,” he says, nodding to Lou. “But you can go.”

Obviously, I wouldn’t leave Lou here, or Brittany... unless...

“Lou, Brittany...stay with Officer Crossword,” I say, my mind subbing in the word before I can catch up with my mouth. “I’ll be right back.”

“Officer Crossword?” the officer mouths, a look of disapproving confusion on his face, just as Lou says, “I don’t think we can go anywhere.”

Always a stickler for rules, my Lou.

I salute them and hurry off after Logan, because we *did* make a pact, after all.

Chapter Fourteen

Lou

Officer Crossword, otherwise known as Officer Smithson, takes my statement while a second officer finishes taking Brittany's. Since my part in the whole situation was short-lived, my interview doesn't take long. Ivy still isn't back by the time we're finished, and I start to wonder if she bailed on me.

Would she do that?

Maybe if things got too intense for her. While holding hands might not be a big deal for most people, I can see how it might send Ivy running.

Which is why I'm more than a little surprised when she appears a few minutes later, Logan trailing behind her, looking like he's about to be dragged in front of a firing squad.

The officer with Brittany moves away from her just as Ivy and Logan approach.

Ivy stuffs her hands into her front pockets as her gaze lands on me. "All finished?"

"Yep," Brittany says for both of us, her own gaze stuck on Logan.

"We need to talk," he says.

She heaves a weary sigh. "I'm not up for talking right now."

"Good thing I plan to be the one doing the talking." There's a look of fierce determination on his face as he adds, "On the way to the hospital."

“I’m not going to the hospital,” she says through gritted teeth.

“And that’s our cue to leave,” Ivy says, bolting toward me. She grabs my arm and starts to drag me toward the front parking lot.

Three police cars are parked there, their lights flashing, and a crowd has gathered in the lot and on the sidewalk.

“That’s him,” someone calls out. “The guy who stopped the fight.”

A woman is pointing her finger at me, and several people turn to look.

Grimacing, I start to walk faster. The only thought in my head is getting home.

Not home, I remind myself. Jay’s house.

I’m a fast walker, but Ivy has no problem keeping up. Her hand is still wrapped around my upper arm. I have the urge to take her hand, but things feel precarious between us at the moment. I worry that one wrong move could send her running. Maybe it’s the way her fingers are digging through my coat sleeve, pinching my skin, like that’s the only thing keeping her by my side.

So I do something stupid. I stop walking and reach my other hand up and layer it over hers.

She stumbles to a halt and looks up at me. “What are you doing? Why did you stop?”

“I think I need a minute.”

Concern fills her eyes as she studies my face, then glances back at the brewery, which is at least fifty feet behind us now.

“Of course,” she says, her brow furrowed. “Do you want to stop and get a drink somewhere?”

Do I? My nerves are on edge, but it doesn’t have anything to do with what just happened in the bar. In fact, the buzz from the stiff drinks at Christmas All Year Coffee has been burned off by adrenaline, leaving me with a yearning I’ve been

denying for weeks. Ivy must be feeling it too. She held my hand, for God's sake, and I know her well enough to know she's not a hand holder. But is she really interested in me? When this evening started, I could have sworn the answer was no, but now...I saw the way she was watching me tonight when she thought I wasn't looking. She's interested in me.

Part of me wants to take her back to Jay's, rip her clothes off, and fuck her until the sun comes up. I suspect she'd be open to that. From the colorful stories she's told about her life in Charleston, I know she doesn't usually shy away from random hookups.

But I'm not a random hookup kind of guy. Am I okay with agreeing to a no-strings-attached fling if it's the only way I can have her?

What does it say about me if I am? God, I'm a fool.

"Yeah, let's get a drink," I finally say. "But I think I want to skip Ziggy's for the rest of the night."

A grin spreads across her face. "That's fair. Good thing we have a few options." A soft breeze tousles her hair, and a curl breaks free and blows across her face.

I shove my hands in my pockets to resist brushing it back and tucking it behind her ear.

She studies me, not saying anything.

I give her a smug grin. "You plan on telling me the options or am I supposed to guess?"

She shivers for a half second, then pulls her hand off my arm and crosses her arms over her chest. "While I love a good guessing game even more than charades, I'll just list them out for you. We could always go back to Christmas All Year Coffee."

"Hard pass."

"Okay, that's fair." Her arms drop to her sides. "There's always Rifles and Roses." A grin spreads across her face. "My dad likes to hang out there. I hear the owner started a Ladies Over Fifty Night, and business has increased about 200%."

I pin her with a hard stare. “And watch your father get hit on by multiple women who are possibly carrying casseroles in their purses? Pass.”

“I knew you were smart, Prince Buttons.”

Something in my tightly wound heart loosens. “So what do you suggest, Everly?”

A playful grin lights up her eyes. “My father has a fully stocked liquor cabinet, and did I mention I’ve bartended in the past? I know how to make a mean Old Fashioned.”

“What makes you think I like Old Fashioneds?”

“Call it a hunch.”

I *do* like Old Fashioneds, but I don’t feel like admitting it. “So let’s head back to your dad’s,” I say. “Because I’ve had enough peopling tonight.”

“Also fair,” she says, falling in step with me as I resume walking. My hands are swinging at my sides, but she’s stuffed hers into her front pockets as if drawing a line.

We walk in complete silence for the ten minutes it takes to get back to Jay’s house. There’s a slight discomfort in the air around us. There are things I want to say, to ask, but I’m scared I’ll send her running. *Her* silence is more interesting. I’ve known her to babble about anything and everything. Sometimes I think she talks so she can control the conversation and not get trapped into revealing too much about herself, which seems counterintuitive, but if she’s spouting useless facts about beer brewing or asking questions so she can stealthily fill out matchmaking questionnaires for unsuspecting chumps, then no one is asking deep questions about her.

Troubled waters lie below her crystal blue eyes, but she does a good job of hiding that.

I see you, Ivy. I recognize pain.

I know she has a difficult relationship with her mother. From what she’s said, the woman’s a piece of work, and her example would warp anyone’s view of a healthy relationship.

It's not the first time I've wondered if Ivy's scared of commitment because of her mother, but somehow I think the pain she's feeling is more current.

When we walk up to the house, her hands start digging around her in pockets, then migrate to her back pockets. "I forgot my key."

I laugh. "Do you want to go through the hall window again? I can shove you from behind this time."

"It might be easier," she says, giving my arm a nudge. "And you'd get a chance to feel up my ass."

I have a split second to figure out how to play this, but even I'm surprised when I say, "You think I need to shove you through a window to do that?"

Her brows shoot up, then a grin spreads across her face. "You feeling a little spicy tonight, Prince Buttons? Did playing the hero make you bolder?"

"Is that what you think I was doing?" I ask, ignoring the latter part of her statement. "Playing the hero?"

"I'm not sure what else you'd call it."

I shrug, realizing she's right even if the title doesn't settle well on my shoulders.

"Tell me you have a key," she says, her grin faltering.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the house key on its snowman keychain.

"That's my responsible Lou," she says, snatching it from me and striding toward the front door.

I watch from the sidewalk as she unlocks the red door, confusion swirling in my head. There's only eight years between us, but sometimes she acts like it's decades. There's no doubt we're very different people. I like stability and she has wanderlust. I contribute to my 401K and do the *New York Times* Sunday crossword puzzle. Ivy has a shoe collection and probably spends her Sunday mornings with her friends at champagne brunches.

So, yes, we are different people at different places in our lives. If I were smart, I'd go in and pack my bags and fly back to New York tomorrow.

But I'm not ready. And not just because I'm not willing to let this thing between me and Ivy go.

She swings the door open and turns back to face me, giving me a perplexed look. "Do you plan on watching the house all night like a stalker, or are you coming inside?"

"Maybe I'm taking my hero status to heart," I say as I close the distance between us. "A vigilante like Batman."

"Only Batman has millions of dollars in toys and a serious mental health issue," she says as she flips on a switch and a living room lamp turns on.

"True," I admit. "I'm still workshopping it."

She laughs as she starts to slip her coat off, then hangs it on a hook by the door. "While I like Hero Lou, I also like Homebody Lou." She heads into the kitchen. "So an Old Fashioned?"

"No," I say, shrugging out of my coat and following her. "What kind of whiskey does your dad have?"

"Nothing great, I can promise you that," she says with another laugh as she opens a cabinet and starts rifling through bottles. "Fireball and Jameson. Pick your poison."

"Jameson."

"Smart man." She plucks out a bottle, then grabs two juice glasses from another cabinet, her fingers holding them together from the top, and brings them to the kitchen table. They clunk on the table, then she opens the bottle and gives both glasses a generous pour. "You strike me as a man who prefers his whiskey neat."

I pick up my glass and take a generous sip. "Why do I feel like that's a dig?"

"Why would it be a dig?" She takes her own sip. "Because you like everything else in your life to be neat and tidy?"

So I was right. I take another sip, melancholy washing over me. She feels this thing between us, but she's trying to dig a trench between us to keep us on our respective sides.

We nurse our drinks for a minute, but it feels like the ceramic chicken and rooster salt and pepper shakers nestled up to the white iron napkin holder are staring up at me. This is part of what Ivy is running from. The last thing she wants is a mortgage and a white picket fence, a house full of tchotchkes. I suspect kids are far, far off in the distance for her, if at all, and I know for a fact I want them. Maybe not tomorrow or even in a few years, but I want them. Which underscores that Ivy probably isn't part of my future.

Just like me to want something I can't have.

I've had enough disappointment to last a lifetime, and this is one too many. I pick up my drink and the bottle and leave the kitchen.

"Hey," she calls after me. "Where are you going?"

Where *am* I going?

What am I doing here in the first place—in a home that isn't mine, a town that I only came to after hearing about it from my friend?

And why can't I bring myself to go home?

I'm not over Victoria's betrayal, but I *am* over her. Getting over what happened with Evan is tougher, not just because he pretended to be my friend but was screwing my fiancée. Weirdly enough, I'm over those two things. It's the way he destroyed my reputation that's hard to move past. I've worked my entire adult life to gain my reputation as an ethical literary agent who finds hidden gems. Now I'm a joke.

Finding myself in my room, I sit on the side of the bed and kick off my shoes, my glass in one hand and the bottle in the other.

"No fair stealing the whiskey," Ivy says, standing in the doorway.

"You can always drink the Fireball."

“I have *some* taste,” she says, walking into the room and holding out her empty glass.

She gave us both a generous pour, so she’s already downed the equivalent of nearly two shots.

My own glass is nearly empty, so I finish it off and then set it on the nightstand to open the bottle. I give her one finger, then pour two into mine. She snatches the bottle from me, pours more into her glass, then moves to the other side of the bed and shoves the pillows up to the headboard. Sitting back against the pillow, she stretches her legs out.

“So your date kind of sucked,” she says, breaking the silence.

I laugh, the whiskey already working its magic, loosening the bands of anxiety around my chest. “You think?”

“There are more fish in the sea, Prince Buttons. You just have to recast your reel.”

“Rod,” I say, then sit back on the bed next to her, my own legs outstretched.

“*What?*” she asks, turning toward me, the amber liquid sloshing in her glass.

I take a sip and then lower the glass, resting it on my thigh. “Recast my rod. The reel is the part that reels in the line.”

She stares at me in disbelief and starts to laugh.

“Why are you laughing?”

“I thought you meant *your* rod,” she says in bursts of giggles while trying to keep her drink from spilling. When she sees my blank look, she adds, “Your dick.”

My mind jerks back to what prompted my correction, and then I start to laugh too.

“I will admit that casting your rod is a good idea,” she says between her laughter. “But maybe watch where you throw it. Although Miss 90% wouldn’t have minded your rod being thrown at her. In fact, you could be throwing it at her *right now*.”

I make a face. “Hard pass.”

“Why?” she asks, her laughter dying down. “Other than her complete narcissism, why? Why isn’t she your type?” She quickly adds, “For future reference. Was it that shoe collection?”

I settle back on the pillows and take another drink. “No. I can appreciate a fine pair of shoes.”

“You got a foot fetish?”

“Sorry to disappoint,” I say with a grin. “I’m more of an ass man.”

She rolls to her side, her upper body reclining on the pillows. “Is that so?” she asks mischievously. “Hence your comment outside.”

I shrug.

“Her boobs were more her superpower than her ass,” Ivy says thoughtfully. “But there weren’t any questions in the sign-up interview to help narrow down whether a guy’s into boobs or ass.” She hands me her glass and starts digging in her pocket.

“What are you doing?”

She pulls out her phone and starts tapping on the screen. “Texting my sisters to tell them their app is flawed.” She looks up at me with narrowed eyes. “Which part of a chicken correlates to an ass? A thigh?”

“What?”

“I’m a firm believer in being part of a solution. So if I have a complaint, I need to offer an alternative. Despite my belief that being straightforward is the way to handle all situations, I suspect flat-out asking if a guy’s a breast, ass, or foot guy would be considered rude, so they can ask what part of the chicken a guy prefers.” She looks up from her phone. “So thigh?”

“Sorry to disappoint,” I say, setting both of our glasses on the table next to me, then snatching the phone out of her hands. “I like a good chicken breast.”

“That’s my phone,” she cries out, reaching for it, but I lower it down next to the glasses.

Lying down on my side, facing her, I say, “Friends don’t let friends drunk text.”

“I wasn’t texting a guy. I was texting my sisters.”

“Which makes it even worse,” I say. “Guys come and go, but your sisters are here forever. You don’t want them bringing it up in the nursing home fifty years from now, do you? No drunk texting.”

“I’m not drunk,” she says with a scowl.

She did have two drinks at the coffee shop, but that was a while ago, and the generous glass of whiskey she downed once we got home shouldn’t have been enough to sauce her. So how could she be this tipsy?

Then it hits me.

“How much did you have to drink with Logan?”

“What?” she protests, but there’s an air of performance to it. “Why do you ask?”

“You two went off to talk about something, and he came back with his tail between his legs. Somehow I think alcohol was involved.”

“How rude. Maybe I’m just super persuasive.”

“You’re that too, but with a guy like Logan, especially how tightly wound he was after finding out the woman he likes got beamed in the head with a napkin dispenser—the only thing that’s going to take the edge off is alcohol. So how many drinks did you have?”

“They were shots. Along with a game of rock, paper, scissors.” She give me a smug look. “I won, by the way.”

I grin. “I wouldn’t have expected anything less, but how many shots did it take?”

“Only two.”

“Fuck,” I say with a groan.

“I’m only pleasantly buzzy. I have a high alcohol tolerance. My liver is a champ.”

“I’ll bet,” I say, noticing the stray piece of hair that’s strewn across her face, stuck to her bottom lip. This time I don’t resist. I slowly lift my hand to her cheek and let my fingers skim her soft skin as my thumb glides across her plump, bottom lip. A bolt of electricity shoots straight to my groin. I can think of a few other parts of my body besides my thumb that I’d like to be touching her lips, but she’s drunk, and even if she wasn’t, acting on this is emotional suicide.

Right?

So why don’t I drop my hand back to my side? I’d like to blame it on the alcohol coursing through my blood, making me act on impulses I have no business exploring, but I’d be lying to myself if I didn’t admit I’m tired of playing it safe. I played it safe with Victoria, popping the question just because she came along at the right time and claimed she wanted the same things I did, and look where that got me. Maybe I should stop thinking with my head and let my dick take the lead for once.

I already know a couple of hookups will never be enough, but it might be all I can get.

My thumb is still brushing her lip, so I gently sweep the hair off her face and behind her ear, letting my hand slide down her soft curls to her back.

Her eyes widen as she watches me. “Why did you do that?”

Because I’ve been dying to touch you for weeks... Because I wanted to see if your skin is as soft as it looks... Because I’ve been dreaming of kissing you, but I settled for this instead...

But I can’t say any of those things, so I say instead, “Because you had a hair stuck to your lip, and it was driving me crazy.”

She’s driving me crazy, but she’s tipsy, so there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.

Chapter Fifteen

Ivy

“**Y**ou know,” I say, sensing my voice is louder than it should be but deciding to roll with it, “I *had* decided to get you into bed tonight, but this isn’t how I was picturing it.”

Lou laughs under his breath, then reaches out and touches my cheek again, his fingers gliding across my skin softly, as if I’m something precious. It makes me want to draw away. It also makes me want to stay exactly where I am. “I don’t dare ask.”

“You sure?” I say. “Because I can paint a pretty good picture. I won a Smutty for the sex scene in my last book. The elevator wasn’t the only thing that went down.”

“I know.” His expression is wry and amused, his mouth invitingly wide, like it was made for kissing a woman all over.

I flinch and shake my head. “Nah, you weren’t at the Smutties. I would have noticed you. You’ve got this whole Lou thing going on.”

“Nah,” he says, leaning back into the pillows on the headboard, “I mean I’m reading your book. The elevator thing just happened.”

My eyes widen, and I’m truly becoming a softie, because I feel tears pricking behind them. Blame the alcohol. “You’re reading my book?”

“Yes, and I have a feeling I’m going to need to read all of them. I’m hooked.”

“And you own an ereader? When will the surprises cease? Who are you, Lou, and what have you done with my old man?”

He shakes his head slightly. “They say thirty-four is the new twenty-four.”

“Does that make me sixteen?” I muse. “Sometimes I feel like I’m sixteen. The Fun Bunch definitely act like they’re sixteen, those assholes.”

“The Fun Bunch?” he asks.

“Spoiler alert,” I say, reaching out to bop his nose. “They’re not fun.”

“Wouldn’t think so with a name like that.”

“I know, right?”

He takes my hand, then, his grip firm and intense, the pressure buzzing through me more than those shots I downed. I tell myself I did it for a good cause—and I did get Logan back from the bar, didn’t I?—but now I’m not prepared to shore my usual walls up with mortar. Tonight they’re patched with masking tape.

“What happened with the Fun Bunch, Ivy?” Lou asks, his eyes on mine.

“You make it sound so dramatic,” I say, rolling my eyes, but I feel those tears again, pricking at my eyes. “It’s no big deal, Lou. I mean...it’s all there in the name, right? They were just the kind of friends you have fun with. And it stopped being fun, so who cares, right?”

“You’ve been dying to know the specifics of what happened with my engagement,” he says, watching me, his hand still wrapped around mine. I don’t pull away, and neither does he. It occurs to me that this moment, lying in bed next to him, our hands wrapped around each other, is more intimate than any experience I’ve ever had with a man before. And what does that say about me?

A voice inside of me suggests that maybe I’ve been pursuing the wrong kind of men—intentionally—but it’s hard

for it to drown out the louder voice that says I'm nothing but a bit of fun. And fun only lasts for so long.

“Do you still want to know?” he presses.

“Duh. I have an insatiable curiosity about everything. It's a curse.”

He nudges me with his shoulder, our hands still linked. “It's charming.” He lifts an eyebrow. “Sometimes.”

“You know, I may be tipsy, but I see what you're doing. This sort of negotiation isn't very princely.”

He gives me a heated look that I feel everywhere at once, but especially between my legs, and says, “You're the one who said I was a prince. I don't like to lie.”

Well, shit, if that didn't send a different kind of shiver through me.

“We could just have sex instead of talking. I meant it. I really was hoping to seduce you tonight after my thing with the Mountain Man flopped.”

A corner of his mouth lifts. “You already admitted you only hung out with him because you wanted him to get with Brittany.”

“Your good memory will be the death of you.”

“You admitted to the Logan thing an hour ago.”

My pulse is pounding suddenly, because I know what he's saying—he'll tell me his truth if I'll tell him mine. “I haven't talked to anyone about what happened in Charleston,” I say. “I don't like thinking about it.”

“I haven't intentionally told anyone about my mess either,” Lou says wryly, “which isn't to say people don't know about it. Half of New York probably knows about it.”

“No fair,” I say. “Now you're trying to make me more curious.”

“I never said I play fair either.”

There's something darkly delicious about the way he says it, with those big brown eyes fixed on me, intense and seeing, and I realize the reason I've been teasing Lou so much is that if I look at him as a little boy lost, as a project, as a desexualized older man friend who can be my Eliza Doolittle, it helps me ignore the facts. He's hot. He's always been hot—in a dashing, dapper way—in fact, he's one of the few people in this world who'd probably look good with a top hat.

I want him for myself. I don't know how long that's been true, but it happened sometime during my endless interview of him, and it's been growing. This evening, watching him break up that fight without getting violent himself—I mean, I'm betting I wasn't the only woman in the brewery who instantly got wet. Lou's dangerous to me. But right now, with him looking at me like that, with the truth hammering at those masking-taped holes in my walls—I want to get closer to him, not farther away. I want to know him all the way.

“You first,” I say, my voice breathy.

“How do I know you'll make good on it?” he asks.

“If I don't, I'll suck your dick to make up for it. Bestie perks.”

His pupils dilate, and he probably doesn't even realize it, but his hand flexes around mine. “No.”

“No?” I ask, incredulous. “You don't want me to suck your dick?”

“I'd rather you kept your end of the bargain. In fact, why don't you go first? Tell me about the Fun Bunch.”

“They were my friends in Charleston,” I say. Then, because the best approach to telling the truth is to do it like pulling off a Band-Aid, I continue, “But Annabeth's husband, Chase, backed me into a bathroom at the bar we were in when he got really drunk at an early holiday party. He kept kissing me even though I tried to push him off, and he shoved down my top and started touching me, but I kned him in the balls, really hard, you'll be glad to know, and left.” His hand has

tightened around mine, suddenly vise-like, and I shake it. “Lou, that kind of hurts.”

He releases me instantly. “Shit. Shit, I’m sorry. I’m just... I’m really fucking pissed that happened to you. What an asshole. Did you tell—”

“I did tell her,” I say. “The next day. She said I was a lying slut, and that I’d thrown myself at him. They told their story to the rest of our ‘friends,’ and you can guess whose side they took. Should we trust Ivy, the smut-writing whore, or the steadfast married guy with a collection of fucking golf balls?”

“And the authorities?” he asks, his jaw tight.

“What were they going to do, Lou? You think they’d arrest a man for something like that? Think again. And even if they did, what then? You know what they’d all think.”

He gets up off the bed in a jerk of motion, like he wants to launch himself all the way to Charleston so he can kick Chase’s ass, and I’d bet he’d do it if he could. My prince. My hero. My heart swells a little for him, even though I know there’s not one thing in hell he could do.

Lou starts pacing the room, his hands flexing and releasing. “I’m sorry,” he says, pausing, looking at me. His chest is heaving up and down with big breaths, and it strikes me that he’s this upset *for me*. “I’m so fucking sorry that happened to you, Ivy. I shouldn’t have made you talk about it.”

I pat the bed. “I don’t bite. And despite what other people might think, I also don’t jump men who’d rather not be jumped.”

“We’ll talk about that when you’re sober,” he says, his eyes flashing. But he sits next to me and puts an arm around me. I sink into him like I belong there, which would be an alarming thought if my synapses weren’t already fried by our conversation, our night.

He’s quiet for a moment, thinking, I’m sure, and then he says, “If you want to go back to Charleston to talk to them, or to get your things, I’m going with you.”

“Okay, champ,” I say, patting his leg.

“I mean it.”

“I know you do,” I say, more quietly this time. I glance at him, soaking him in. “And I appreciate you.” Then I give his leg a little nudge. “But if you think you can get out of telling your story after I unloaded that shit on you, then you have another think coming. I won’t even let you off the hook if you eat me out.”

“You don’t need to resort to bribery for me to want to do that,” he says flatly, and I feel the look he’s giving me down to my toes. “But okay.” A corner of his mouth lifts. “I guess I’ll take your example and go the direct route. If you’re wondering what ended my engagement, it’s that I walked in on my fiancée fucking one of my clients.”

This time, I’m the one who squeezes his hand. I’d guessed this part—the fucking around part, I mean—although it’s hard for me to understand why anyone would mess around on Lou. The fact that it was a client must be a double whammy.

He swallows, then continues. “Not just a client, but a client who’d made a mockery of me because he completely fabricated his credentials. He said he was an astrophysicist, but it turns out he was, and I quote, self-taught. So here I was, going around town, selling this asshole’s book, thinking it was something special, when he might as well have read a bunch of copies of Stephen Hawking’s books and regurgitated them. And he was fucking my fiancée the whole time.”

“Shit,” I say, because even though I write romance, not science or pseudo-science, I know what a big scandal that would be in the book world. Hell, sometimes readers get so hung up on the logistics of sex scenes, you have to act it out with Barbie dolls to prove that, yes, it *is* possible. Or would be if Barbie had a realistic anatomy. “I’m sorry. Was your boss a hard-ass about it?”

He chuckles humorlessly. “He banished me here. You think that makes him a hard-ass?”

“Why here?” I ask, because that seems strangely specific. I can imagine a big guy laughing maniacally as he says, *Today, my place of punishment will be Highland Hills.*

“Not here specifically,” he says. “Here as in away from him and any potential to further embarrass him. He didn’t want to fire me because I have big clients, and he’s worried about losing them, but I’m wearing out his patience. He’s been getting on my case to come back.”

I perk up, something inside me wilting while something else blooms. If he’s leaving, maybe it would be okay for me to have him, for a while. But I also don’t want him to leave.

He sighs. “Actually, it’s worse than that. He also wants me to take a call with the editor who acquired the fiancée-fucker’s book. I’m guessing I’m supposed to offer up my liver on a platter.”

“Or your bicep,” I say, squeezing it. “It’s surprisingly substantial for a pencil pusher.”

“Thanks. I guess. Needless to say, I’m not looking forward to it.”

“I wouldn’t be either,” I say. “No one likes to get their ass chewed out for something that’s not my fault.”

“It *is* my fault,” he insists. “I should have known.”

“Believe it or not, you can’t know everything, Lou. You’re not all-seeing, or all-knowing, or if you are, you’ve really been holding out on me.”

“I know,” he says in the way of someone who doesn’t believe me.

“And your fiancée? You loved her?” I ask. “Because I’m going to level with you. I’m going on Etsy to find someone to make a voodoo doll of that bitch.”

He snorts. “I thought I did. But I guess I was just looking for someone, and she came around at the right time and said all the right things—”

“I’ll bet she’s hot as hell.”

“Maybe,” he says, giving me a sidelong look. “But she doesn’t have a thing on you.”

My heart is pounding almost painfully in my chest, because this is it, isn't it? The moment where we stop being friends. I want that—I really want that—but I also...don't.

Men have always thought I'm sexy. Even when I was a teenager, I'd get cat-called by older men driving by in trucks. Sometimes I love it. Sometimes I hate it. Sometimes it feels like it makes people take me less seriously—to think less of me, like the motherfucking Fun Bunch. Sometimes it feels like that's my worth to people: a sweet vagina with a pretty face attached. I don't want Lou to stop seeing me...but I also really, really want to know what his lips feel like against mine. I want to know what it's like when he thrusts inside me. I want to ride him until the sun comes up and the sky gets pink.

But he surprises me, something people rarely do these days—at least not for the better. “Why don't we rest?” he asks. “It's been a long day.”

“My room is literally right across the hall,” I say, smirking. “I don't feel all that drunk anymore. Talking about Chase sobered me up. I think I can make it.”

“I know you can. But I want you to stay here with me. If you want to.”

And I do. Oh, God forgive me how I do.

Chapter Sixteen

Lou

Ivy's breathing has been slow and even for several minutes, but I'm wide awake, my mind spinning.

It's torture having her snuggled up against me on my bed. I want to explore her body and memorize every part of her, but I would never touch her without her enthusiastic permission. Quiet rage simmers in my chest when I think about what that fucker tried to do to her. I have no doubt how it would have ended if Ivy hadn't kneed him in the balls. And of course he would have claimed she'd been begging for it. Those fuckers always do. And the fact that her friends took his side? I'm ready to burn the city down to make them pay.

I look down at her face, relaxed in sleep, surprised by how vulnerable she looks when there are no sarcastic looks or playful smiles. It makes me wonder if her over-the-top confidence is partly a front, and she's not as certain of everything as she wants the world to believe.

If the invincible Ivy Anders is a mere human like the rest of us.

I nearly scoff at my fancifulness.

Of course Ivy's human, but there's no doubt that commitment is a four-letter word to her. And why wouldn't it be? When I was her age, I was focused on a different kind of success, and my relationships came and went. I only started giving settling down serious thought after Alex ran off to Asheville to deal with his writer's block and fell in love with Willow. And sure, part of my change in attitude was because

my best friend was suddenly hundreds of miles away, but I also saw how happy he was.

I wanted that too—someone steady in my life. Someone who was eager to see me every night. A person to share the stupid, boring parts of my life with as well as the exciting parts.

In the beginning, Victoria had seemed perfect. Beautiful. Attentive. Intelligent. Sure, she'd been engaged before, and it had ended badly, but to hear her tell it, her fiancé had gone through a midlife crisis and run off to work with his siblings at a brewery, leaving her alone and broken-hearted.

I'd fallen for her sob story hook, line, and sinker.

She was the one who'd proposed. I should have been suspicious when she sprang it on me after a celebratory night on the town with Evan Ethington and his girlfriend. We'd just signed a seven-figure deal for his book on astrophysics, and it had the promise of being the first of many lucrative book deals.

I'd said yes, which was so unlike me, but I was missing Alex and admittedly lonely, and it was the kind of night where anything felt possible. Anything, including making a huge mistake with a woman I barely knew.

Honestly, I'd realized it wasn't working before I found Victoria on all fours in my bed with Evan pounding her from behind. I'd just been too shaken by all the other disasters in my life to admit it.

I've done a lot of self-reflection over the last month in Highland Hills. I know Victoria was wrong for me, but I'm still ready to make a commitment. I'm ready to share my life with someone.

I glance down at Ivy, and my heart sinks.

I might be ready to settle down, but the woman who's captivated me has made it very clear that she isn't. Besides, there's that 24% to consider.

I cast another glance to Ivy, then slip my phone out of my pocket and pull up the Matchmake Me app. This is completely

stupid, but Ivy *did* admit that she might have answered some of the questions wrong. I spend the next twenty minutes going through every question, analyzing the hell out of some of them like *do you squeeze your toothpaste tube from the bottom, the middle, or the top?* Is this an insight into someone's neuroses, or is it intended to help prevent future bathroom spats?

When I finish, I check my score with Ivy.

22%.

Jesus, how did it go *down*?

It's just a stupid quiz. It means nothing, and besides, I already know there's probably no future for us. I suppose it's a matter of whether I want a here and now.

Do I?

I turn off the bedside lamp. We're both lying on top of the covers, so I pull a blanket draped across the bottom of the bed over us, then burrow my head into the pillow. Ivy sighs and rolls toward me, her arm resting on my chest. Her head leans against my shoulder and I breathe in the scent of her shampoo and a lightness fills my chest. It's been so long it takes me a minute to recognize the feeling.

Happiness.

Ivy makes me happy. It might not be forever. It might not last more than a week, but sometimes you just have to live in the moment and take happiness wherever you can.

Here and now sounds pretty good.

* * *

I drift off to sleep, and when I wake, I realize I'm spooning Ivy, my morning wood pressed in the crack of her ass. My arm is wrapped around her side, and her arm is draped over mine, holding me in place.

She stirs slightly, putting pressure against my cock, and I involuntarily release a soft moan. She presses back again, and I know she's awake, intentionally torturing me.

“How are you feeling?” I ask softly.

“If you’re asking if I have a hangover, the answer is no. I told you, my liver is a champ.”

“Lucky you,” I say with a chuckle, my breath blowing her hair.

She turns over to face me. “I’m not drunk and I’m not hung over, Lou.”

“I know,” I say smugly. “You just told me. Hurray for efficient livers.”

Rolling her eyes, she says, “Are you always this dense first thing in the morning? Last night you rightfully pointed out nothing could happen because I’d had too much to drink. Now, I’m stone. Cold. Sober.”

Her statement catches me off guard. “Oh.”

A grin spreads across her face. “Yeah. Oh. Do you have any other reasons why I can’t kiss you? Are you going to require a field sobriety test?”

“No,” I say, lifting my hand to her cheek and brushing her hair away from her face.

“How about we do ourselves a favor first and eat the mints I stole from the bar last night?”

“You took mints from the bar after the fight?”

“I like mints, and I believe in being prepared.”

So she left the bar planning to kiss me—and now she’s in my bed. “Get the mints.”

Laughing, she reaches into her pocket for them. “My Lou’s losing patience. I like it.”

Damn right I am. Especially when she calls me that. She hands one to me, then unwraps her own, quickly crunching into it. I do the same, and before either of us has a second to give it any more thought, I close the small distance between us and capture her lips with mine.

She moans slightly as my tongue parts her lips. Her free hand grabs my ass, and she pulls her body more flush with mine, grinding her pelvis against my erection. I deepen the kiss, needing more of her. Needing to feel every bit of her that I've spent the last month committing to memory.

Her hand grabs the bottom of my shirt. She makes a feeble attempt to tug it up, but it's a button-down and it's not coming off without undoing buttons.

I pull back and study her face, even more turned on by her swollen lips and lust-filled eyes. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She sits upright. For a second, I think she's about to tell me she changed her mind, but she gives me a dry look and says, "Shut up and take off your shirt. Or better yet. Let me."

I sit up too, my legs outstretched, and she straddles them, smiling as she slowly starts to unbutton my shirt, starting at the top. "You have a very nice chest," she says as it starts to become revealed.

I grin. "So do you."

Her eyes dance with mischief. "That's right. You didn't have to pretend to barge in on me. You could have just asked nicely."

"Take off your shirt, Ivy," I say in a husky tone. "Please."

She finishes the last button of my shirt, her fingers gliding across my abdomen and up my chest, then pushing my sleeves over my shoulders so that it drops down my arms.

"Well, since you said please..." Keeping her gaze locked with mine, she reaches for the knot at her waist, slowly untying it. She starts to unbutton it next, starting at the bottom and working her way up, exposing her nude-colored bra underneath. She thrusts her shoulders back, and the blouse slips down her arms. "Happy now?"

"No," I say, resting my hands on her hips. "Not yet. Take off your bra."

“Greedy *and* bossy. I like this side of you.” She reaches behind her back and unhooks her bra, letting it fall onto my legs.

I toss it to the floor, then cup her breasts with both hands, my thumbs brushing over her nipples. She shivers, her mouth slightly parted.

Lowering my head, I capture a nipple with my mouth, flicking it with my tongue and then sucking. Her back arches, and she lifts off my legs. I move to the other breast, giving it even more attention and reveling in her soft sounds of pleasure.

Her hands reach for the button of my jeans, but I roll her over with her back on the bed, and straddle her legs, barely putting any weight on her. She looks up at me with surprised delight.

“I can be very greedy and bossy,” I say as I unfasten the button of her jeans and then lower the zipper.

Her breath comes in short pants. The sight of her nipples wet from my mouth and tongue sends a jolt of blood to my already hard cock. I want to bury myself in her, but not until I make other parts of her wet with my mouth.

Hooking the waistband of her jeans on either side, I tug them over her hips, then scoot back on the bed as I pull them off the rest of the way.

She’s lying on my bed in only her pink panties, staring up at me with lust and anticipation. “Are you going to fuck me now?” she asks saucily.

“No,” I say, kneeling on the floor. I grab her ankles and give her a hard tug until her hips are at the edge of the bed. “I’m not done using my mouth yet.”

She releases a loud gasp.

My lips skim the inside of her thigh as I press my hand on her lower abdomen, making my way to the center of her panties. “Are you wet for me, Ivy?”

“I could tell you, but where would be the fun of the surprise?” she asks breathlessly.

She’s right, so I slowly slide a finger under the edge of her panties and drag it down between her legs, the tip of my finger rubbing her clit. She’s so fucking wet, my cock shudders. “You’re dripping.”

“Because I want you to fuck me. I dreamed about it all night.”

“Not yet.” I tug her panties off and toss them to the floor before I run the tip of my tongue down her slit and back up again, toying with her clit. Her hips arch off the bed, but I put my hand on her stomach and hold her down. “I’m going to make you come with my mouth and then you’ll be so wet I can fuck you hard.”

“Yes,” she breathes out with a pant. “Yes. I want that. Please.”

The *please* makes my cock throb. I flick her clit with my tongue and then suck it, dragging a breathy moan out of her. I thrust a finger inside her and find her G-spot, rubbing as I work her clit.

“Oh, Jesus,” she moans, her hips lifting.

I press her stomach to hold her in place, then nip the inside of her thigh, looking up at her with a dark smile. “No. Just Lou.” Holding her gaze, I thrust a second finger into her, stroking her spot, as I run my tongue over her and then focus my attention on her clit.

“I knew you had a way with words,” she says, her voice low and sexy, “but who knew your tongue was so talented?”

I let my mouth do the talking. Her body begins to tense, and she starts to tighten around my fingers.

“Are you going to come for me?” I ask, sliding my hand down so that my fingers curl over her pubic bone as my thumb rubs her clit. I raise up to see her half-lidded eyes, her flushed cheeks, and I regret not taking off my jeans before I started this game, because my cock feels like it’s about to bust the zipper.

“Yes,” she says breathlessly, looking up at me.

I lean over and take her nipple in my mouth, flicking and sucking as my thumb works her clit. I add a third finger, getting her ready for my cock.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard, you’ll be thinking of me for weeks,” I say, as I release her breast and switch places with my hand. I pinch her nipple while I circle her clit with my tongue.

Her body stiffens as her climax builds. “Don’t you come yet,” I say before I continue working her. “Not until I say you can.”

“Lou,” she gasps.

“Not yet,” I growl. I may not be able to have her for long, but I want her remembering this long after she finishes with me.

I take her higher until she’s so tense, I know all it will take is a slight push over the edge.

“Come,” I grunt, then devour her.

She cries out, and I feel the waves overtake her, squeezing my fingers. When she stops, I give her slit one last lick, then get to my feet, standing up as I reach for the button of my jeans.

She gazes up at me, and for a moment I think she’s going to sit up and help me, but instead she stares up at me in wonder as I tug my jeans over my hips and let them drop to the floor.

My cock springs free, and I don’t want to wait another minute. Until I remember one important detail. “I need a condom.”

“Do you have any?” she asks.

“Bedside drawer.” I walk over and grab one, then open it as I move back to the end of the bed.

“You get those for me?” she asks, taking the wrapper from me and tearing it open.

“I plead the fifth.” I got them because Ivy was making me reenter the dating scene, but when I thought of using them, I’ll admit that Ivy was the one who popped into my mind.

“You’ve been holding out on me, Lou,” she says as she slides the condom over my hard dick.

I hiss.

“You’re so big.”

“The better to fuck you with.” I push her back on the bed, then roll her over and lift her up so her gorgeous ass is in the air. “So beautiful,” I grunt.

She looks back at me, her blond curls falling over her shoulder and her cheek. “Are you going to stare at me all day or do you plan on using that thing?”

I grab the base of my cock and line it up with her, then thrust in hard and deep.

She gasps.

I stop, concerned. “Too much?”

“God, no. Don’t stop now.”

I pull back and thrust again. Her pussy is so tight and wet, I’m not sure how long I’m going to last. “Jesus, you feel so good,” I grunt as I thrust again.

She responds by pushing back, taking me even deeper.

Reaching around her, I find her clit and my finger strokes her.

She buries her head into the blanket, her back rising and falling with her rapid breaths.

Holding one hip while my other hand rubs her clit, I pound into her harder and faster, desperate to get even deeper.

“Lou...” she moans. I’m surprised she seems so close to coming again, but thank fuck, because I’m not sure how much longer I’m going to last. Next time—if there is a next time—I’ll have to jack off an hour beforehand to make sure I last longer.

That doesn't change the fact that I'm teetering on the edge now, but there's no way I'm finishing until she comes again. I change my angle to make sure I'm hitting the sensitive spot inside her.

"Lou," she pleads as she lifts her ass higher.

"Come for me, baby," I grunt, thrusting deep. "Come."

She releases a loud moan, and I feel her tighten around my cock.

I grab her hips and pound into her, hard and fast as though it's my last act on earth and I'm going to make it count.

I come hard, seeing stars, as I thrust one last time and lean over her. She's breathing hard, but her hair's covering her face, so I reach over to sweep it off her cheek. She stares back at me, her face flushed, her eyes glazed with deeply sated satisfaction, and I revel in the fact that I gave her that.

She smiles. "That was *amazing*. Who would've known you'd be a prince in the streets and a freak in the sheets."

I grin back, still buried deep inside her. "Baby, we're just getting started."

Her eyes flash with lust, and she opens her mouth to say something, but there's a sharp knock at the door, and then it pushes open just as Jay is saying, "Lou, have you seen Ivy? I thought I heard her—" He stops in his tracks, his eyes wide. "Oh."

Chapter Seventeen

Ivy

Well, shit, that's a mood killer if ever there were one.

Lou pulls a blanket over us, much too late, and my dad keeps standing there in the doorway. For a second I'm worried I've given him another heart attack, and I'm going to have to tell this story at his wake, but then he reanimates. Nodding so many times he might as well be a bobble head, he says, "You know, it's very healthy to have a sexual appetite. Very healthy. Probably the best thing you can do for yourself."

Lou is so red beneath his olive-tone skin, he looks like a kid who got into someone's makeup. Of course, he's no kid, and no old man either. *Whew*. I'd enjoy the sight of him like this a little more if, you know, my father weren't standing in the door to the bedroom, trying to be cool with the situation.

"Then we're all on the path to wellness, Dad, but can you please close the door? I'll be out in a minute. Clothed."

"Yes, of course," he says, bobbing his head a few more times. "You enjoy yourself, kids." He chuckles. "Well, I guess you already did." Then, I shit you not, he salutes Lou before closing the door, fumbling with it before it finally clicks closed.

I turn to Lou, who's still bright red and looks like he's forgotten every word in the English language. "Oh, don't worry, champ," I say, leaning in to kiss him, because he's adorable like this, and I can't help myself. "Look at this way, at least he didn't come in two minutes ago."

Lou gives a full-body shudder, then pulls off the condom and disposes of it in the trashcan beneath the desk. Knowing him, he'll be swapping it out for a clean bag within the half-hour. I watch him move, taking in his strong back. I'm not going to lie. I'd really like to put some nail marks on it.

He grabs fresh clothes from the dresser and a pair of boxer-briefs.

"Hey, no fair," I say, grabbing for my panties and slipping them on. "I don't get new clothes."

"You seriously want me to put on last night's clothes to face your dad, after that?"

And I out laughing. It's really just too much. Lou thinking a fresh outfit will make this any less awful for him, my dad trying so desperately to come off as nonjudgmental...I mean, it's hilarious. To be honest, I'm also just a little giddy. I'm happy in only the way that a woman high off two orgasms can be.

"It's not funny," Lou says as he pulls on a T-shirt. But his shoulders are shaking, and delight unfurls in me.

"You're laughing!" I accuse as I fish for my bra over the side of the bed, then put it on. "You don't fool me, Lou Moralis. The shaking shoulders don't lie."

"I'm not laughing," he says, then sits on the side of the bed and bends over, cradling his head in his hands. Laughter spurts out of him, and it's the best thing I've ever heard—better even than Lou telling me to come like a goddamn boss.

I wrap my legs around him from behind and hug him, shaking with him as he laughs.

"Don't," he says, reaching back and running a hand over my thigh, sending an excited shiver straight to my vagina, which remembers some very good times. "You're going to give me a confused boner."

That makes *me* laugh, but it doesn't make me move, because even though we obviously can't go in for Round Two when my dad's waiting out there to salute our walk of shame, I'm exactly where I want to be right now. That thought should

scare me—and maybe part of me, hidden in the back of my brain, is scared—but right now I feel nothing but bubbling, effervescent joy.

“Come on, Ivy,” he says, looking back at me, his lips curved into a smile. “Let’s go have the most awkward conversation anyone’s ever had.”

“I don’t know,” I tell him, detangling myself and grabbing my shirt off the floor to pull it on. “There’ve been a lot of awkward conversations in history. What about when Marie Antoinette told the peasants to eat cake?” I ask while fixing the tie.

His lips twitch, and I watch him with interest while he pulls on a pair of jeans. Are those tailored? Of course they are. I don’t know if I’m turned on or aggravated.

“Never happened,” he says.

I reach over to give him a little push. He’s still pulling up one pant leg and almost falls over. “Killer of dreams.”

“What about Giver of Orgasms?” he says with a slight smile as he finishes his very sexy task. I grab my own pants up off the floor and tug them on without any ceremony. With some guys, I find it amusing to make everything a sexy task—pick that up, but do the classic bend and snap; put your clothes back on, but do it sensually without looking like you’re trying—but it would feel stupid to roll that shit out with Lou.

“I think I’ve restored too much of your confidence,” I tell him. “We might want to dial it down a few degrees before you develop a pesky ego problem. You’d be much less hot with an ego problem.”

“Even if you’re the one who gave it to me?”

“Especially then. I prefer to visit ruination on people and then shove them out into the cold.”

The look on his face tells me I’ve gone too far, that this is maybe what he was worried about, and it takes me aback to realize that it’s what *I’m* worried about too. I don’t want to hurt him. More than anything, I don’t want to hurt him. I also

don't want to lose this besties with benefits deal we have going on—I don't want to lose *him*.

Which means sleeping with him was probably a mistake, because sex changes a relationship. Especially sex that your father walked in on.

I grab Lou's hand. "I was kidding."

"I know," he says softly. But there's a thread of sadness, maybe even regret, in his voice, and I hate myself a little for putting it there.

"Man, between me and my father, we're really ruining your day," I say, toeing the rug on the floor for something to do with my feet.

He tips my head up, and I'm certain I'm in for some sort of Lou lecture, but he surprises me by lowering his head to mine and kissing me, softly, slowly, sweetly. When he pulls away, he's smiling at me. "You didn't ruin my day, Ivy. In fact, you made my year."

My heart thumps faster in my chest, like a scared rabbit, but I put on a grin. "That sounded a lot better until I remembered it's only the end of January."

"You got me," he says, doing that move where he makes an attempt to tuck my hair behind my ear. My hair's always had a mind of its own though, like me, and it springs back to exactly where it was before.

I lift up and give him another quick kiss, then open the door and leave first. It's the least I can do, really, though I hear him following behind me, his movements intentional.

It's morning, but when I come out into the living room-slash-dining room area, my dad's at the dining room table drinking a beer with his dry wheat toast. Fair.

"Ah, Ivy," he says, lifting the bottle as if to cheer me on for having a sex life. Admittedly, my father has a pretty thriving romantic life of his own, so maybe he only wants that same happiness for other people.

“Hey, Dad,” I say. “I hear you had something to discuss with me before I made your eyes bleed.”

He chuckles and rubs his nose. “Oh, nothing I haven’t seen before.”

“Um, Dad,” I say, approaching the dining room table and claiming the chair across from him. Lou emerges from the hallway, his ears pink, and sits in the seat next to me. “That is absolutely the first time you’ve walked in on me post-coitus. I know I’ve forgotten some childhood things, but that’s the kind of shit you remember until your grave.”

He gives an *Oh, Ivy* shake of his head, and then Lou decides it’s time for him to speak. I’m not surprised that he feels he has to say something, and I listen with grave fascination as he leans forward. “Jay, I’m so sorry for what happened this morning.”

“I’m not,” I mutter.

Lou clears his throat. “I want you to know that I have the utmost respect for you, and for Ivy, and if you feel it would be best for me to stay somewhere else, I will absolutely honor that.”

“Nonsense,” my dad says. “I like having you here—” he laughs nervously, “—and it would appear Ivy does too.”

“Stop helping, Dad.”

“I’m sorry,” Lou blurts again, almost frantic. “It won’t happen again.”

“Um, excuse me,” I say.

Flustered, Lou says, “What I mean to say is that this particular scenario won’t happen again.”

“Fair enough. I think we’re all on board with that. Can we talk about something else now? Like whatever had you barging into Lou’s room? We can start with that.”

“So,” Dad says, in the way of someone who is not, in fact, going to let this go. “You two kids, huh.” He takes another swig of his beer. “I was hoping something like this was going to happen.”

“You were hoping to walk in on me in bed with your lodger?”

“You know what I mean,” he says, and to be fair, I do. “You’re perfect for each other.”

“We’re a 24% match on the Matchmake Me app,” I blurt. I’m not sure why I say it, but there’s no denying it’s been on my mind. It’s just...I feel so comfortable with Lou, so happy. Would I feel that way if he were really a 24%? “But we’re going to reanswer the questions,” I add, “because I did Lou’s for him.”

“Um, I actually fixed my answers,” Lou says, darting me a look.

“And?” I ask, feeling a burst of excitement.

“It didn’t improve,” he says, the look on his face regretful.

Oh. *Oh.*

“I wouldn’t set much store by that,” says my dad. “Sure, the girls did a wonderful job on their app. Of course they did. But it’s supposed to predict who’ll get along. It doesn’t *make* them get along. And anyone who’s had their palm read by Rayna Smith down on Main knows that some predictions aren’t worth shit.”

Maybe it shouldn’t make me feel better. After all, my father does not have an august history of picking great partners, but it does. It has the advantage of being exactly what I’d like to hear.

“Anyway, what’s up, Dad? I’m going to convince Lou to go get a greasy breakfast with me.”

“Not at Christmas All Year Coffee,” he mutters.

“Location to be determined. Then I have to head over to the brewery for a shift.”

My father suddenly looks much more grave than he did when he walked in on Lou and me post-coitus. This does not bode well.

“Your mother is in town.”

I feel my face tightening. “So what?” I say coolly, feeling Lou’s gaze on me. “Don’t see what that has to do with me.”

“She’s getting another divorce,” he says.

I almost laugh, but I don’t like the implications of her telling him that. Maybe this is why she’s been blitzing me with messages from other people’s phones.

“*Dad*,” I say, “that doesn’t have a thing to do with you. Or me. In fact, I couldn’t tell you the last time I talked to her.”

“She said you blocked her number.”

“Because the last time I talked to her, she tried to guilt me into appearing on Nana Mayberry’s show with her. And the time before that, she showed up at my readers’ event and hijacked the whole thing to talk about those essential oils she’s peddling.”

His mouth firms. “She’s upset, Ivy, and it bothered her that none of you kids told her about my heart attack. She found out from your grandmother.”

That’s no shock. Nana has been surprisingly quiet since her visit to Ziggy Brewery, but I’m not at all surprised that she’s been low-key conniving from the shadows.

“I still don’t know what this has to do with me...or you. I’ll remind you that you have all the women in town clamoring for your attention. You certainly don’t need her.”

“I know,” he says, unconvincingly. He’s always had a soft spot for my mother. Always. Again, I love the man, but he does not have stellar romantic judgment.

I glance at Lou and find him watching me, concern on his face. I smile, but I’m pretty sure it looks as fake as it feels.

“Well...she’s coming over for dinner this evening,” my dad says.

“Then Lou and I will find somewhere else to be,” I say tightly, “and I’d suggest you do the same. Let her show up at an empty house with an empty table, and maybe she’ll realize what life was like for her children.”

That's what it was like, growing up. She'd forget she had kids, it felt like, which should have been pretty damn hard since there were five of us. Then again, she'd always cared more about falling into relationships than staying in them, and quitting a relationship with your child is harder—not impossible, mind you—than moving on to the next willing man.

I hate my mother.

I worry that I'm like my mother.

I don't like settling down either. I have itchy feet and a soul that longs for adventure and new experiences. But I won't ever, ever, let that cause the kind of fallout she left in her wake.

“People change, Ivy,” my dad says sadly.

He's wrong, though. They don't.

Chapter Eighteen

Lou

Ivy gets up from the table and turns her attention to me. “Give me ten minutes, and I’ll be ready to go.”

“Of course.”

She heads into the bathroom and the shower turns on within seconds.

“Will you talk to her?” Jay asks, sounding hesitant.

I swing back to face him. “With all due respect, from what little I know, I’m pretty sure Ivy’s mother did a number on her.” Ivy hasn’t said much, just a throwaway comment here or there—the kind of joke that’s not really a joke—but it’s painted a picture. “On all her kids,” I continue. “It’s not fair to ask her to have dinner with a woman she feels abandoned her.”

He runs his hand through his hair, then picks up the beer bottle and takes a long swig. When he sets it down, his thumb picks at the corner of the label. “I know. But she’s still her mother.”

“Respect is earned, Jay. Not a given. If Ivy doesn’t want to see her, that’s *her* choice.” Honestly, I’m surprised he’s being so bullheaded about this. He’s one of the most laid-back people I know, which is why I’ve enjoyed staying with him. But Ivy suggested her mother has a hold on him, and I know that some men—and women—have a weakness for people who are bad for them. Like someone addicted to meth. Or online shopping. They just can’t bring themselves to quit.

“It’s just that Peony realizes she screwed up.”

“Screwed up?” I ask in disbelief. “Screwing up is forgetting to take out the trash. Not forgetting you have kids when they’re inconvenient.”

He grimaces. “She had a terrible childhood of her own, and she—”

I hold up my hand and shake my head. “The only thing I need to know about Peony is what Ivy tells me. If you love your daughter, you’ll respect her decision, and if you respect *me*, you won’t push this.”

Belatedly, I realize that I’m asking a man who walked in on me with my dick buried in his daughter to respect me, but there’s no taking it back.

A forlorn look washes over his face, and I feel sorry for him. Either he’s still trapped in Peony’s web or he’s falling victim to the mentality that everyone needs to get along. Either way, it’s none of my concern.

Ivy’s my concern.

I go into my room and pack up my bag so I can find somewhere to work when Ivy clocks in at the brewery, although I’m snowing myself if I believe for one second that place won’t be the brewery. There’s a reason I’ve been working there, after all, and it’s not because a brewery is a natural place to get work done.

My bedroom door is open, so I see her when she emerges from the bathroom, her hair wrapped up in a towel and another towel cinched around her chest.

“Give me five more minutes,” she says, resting her hand on the door jamb and leaning into it.

“Take all the time you need.”

She glances at the freshly made bed. “You doing okay with...” She grimaces. “All of this? It’s a lot.”

I close the distance between us and lift her chin with my index finger until her eyes lock with mine. “Finish getting ready, and we’ll talk over breakfast.”

“That bad, huh?”

I press my lips to hers and give her a gentle kiss. When I pull back, something like hope is shining in her eyes. An answering feeling fills my chest. “You’ve got a lot to unpack, and I have a feeling it will be easier to do over bacon.”

“I knew you were a smart man, although I really don’t have anything to unpack. I refuse to die of shame because my father didn’t have the courtesy to wait until he was invited into your room, and my mother is a non-issue.”

“Great,” I say with a grin. “Then we can talk about what we’re going to order. But I worked up an appetite, so hurry.”

She playfully shakes her head. “There you go again with that ego. I really did create a monster.”

“Then we can unpack Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the many hidden allegories.”

She closes her eyes and pretends to snore before giving me a piercing look. “Pass. Don’t worry about pinning down a topic of conversation. It’ll come.”

She heads into her room, and I tidy up the room, realizing she’s right. Conversation between us has never been a problem. Even when we’re snippy with each other, we never lack for anything to say. But that’s not a resounding basis for a relationship, is it? The snippy part, that is.

I can hear Ivy in my head saying, *you’re overthinking it*, and Ivy in my head is probably right. Whatever Ivy and I have is tenuous at best. Better to enjoy every moment without giving much thought to the future because who knows how long this will last.

* * *

A half-hour later, we’re at Moonstruck Diner, both of us in fresh clothes—Ivy in a blue long-sleeve dress the same color as her eyes paired with black sheer stockings that keep drawing my eye, and me in jeans and a lightweight sweater. (I skipped the button-up I usually wear under it.) Jay sent us off, waving to us from the door and calling out, “You kids be safe!

I hear Walgreens has a sale on condoms.” The heavy smell of grease in the air makes my stomach churn a bit, even if the thought of pancakes and bacon sounds delicious.

Ivy and I seat ourselves in a booth, and an older waitress ambles over. “Can I get you two started with coffee?”

“Yes, please,” Ivy says with a desperate plea. “A gallon of it.”

The waitress—her name tag says Bea—chuckles. “We don’t typically serve it by the gallon, but I can bring you a carafe.”

“Yes, please,” Ivy says. “Stat.”

Bea’s still grinning as she walks off.

I look Ivy in the eye. “So are we going to talk about what happened?”

“Me ordering a vat of coffee?” she asks.

“This morning.”

She rolls her eyes. “Look, it was super embarrassing and my father made it worse by trying to be cool about it, but like I said, it could have been worse.”

“We’ve already covered that. I’m talking about your mother.”

Her smile fades. “I’m not talking about her.”

“You don’t strike me as the ignoring type,” I say, sitting back in my seat.

“I’m ignoring *her*. Not the situation.”

Bea returns with a carafe of coffee. She turns over the coffee cup in front of Ivy and starts to pour. “You two know what you want?”

I haven’t even opened one of the menus sitting at the end of the table, but these places always seem to have the same offerings.

“Pancakes and bacon with a fried egg on the side,” I say, flipping over my own coffee cup.

Bea fills my cup. “All righty. And you?” she asks as she turns to Ivy.

“Same.” She reaches for a couple of individually packaged cups of flavored cream, then rips off the top of one. “Thanks.”

“So I take it you don’t want to talk about your mother?” I ask as Bea walks away, leaving the carafe on the table.

“I’d rather talk about the mating habits of rabid raccoons,” she says as she gives her coffee her full attention.

“You don’t want to talk about the fact your father already seems to be jumping through hoops to make her happy?”

“No,” she says flatly. “Although the women of this town might just band together and take care of the problem for us.”

I reach over and cover her hand with my own. “I didn’t mean to pry, and you don’t have to talk, but if you want to, I’m all ears.” She nods, not looking up at me, and I’m surprised by the conflict on her face. I was expecting her to sweep my offer under the rug without a second thought. Maybe I should push harder, because while Ivy loves to talk, I’ve discovered she really hates talking about her emotions.

Ivy starts to stir her coffee, then glances at the entrance and grimaces. “Prepare to be ambushed.”

“What?” But even as the word leaves my mouth, I notice Rowan and Holly are heading toward us with grim expressions.

“How did you find me?” Ivy asks as they approach the table.

“Seriously?” Holly rolls her eyes as she sits on the edge of the seat on Ivy’s side and gives her a hip bump. Ivy slides over to let her in. I push over preemptively to give Rowan space, and he sits beside me, keeping as much distance between us as the small bench will allow.

“Rowan’s got his own telephone game thing going on with the people in the fire department,” Holly continues. She points to a table by the window. “Mina Hapstander knows Phil

Heaton, who happens to be a volunteer firefighter with our brother.” She shrugs with a smug look. “We can find anyone.”

“Why were you looking for me?” Ivy asks. “Is this about the bar? I figured they closed after Brittany went to the hospital.”

Holly snorts. “You on drugs? She didn’t go to the hospital. Actually, *she* should be on drugs. Cole yelled at her for not getting checked for a concussion, and she told him she was sick of getting yelled at by the Garrison brothers. You know anything about that?”

Ivy darts a look at me, and I shrug. I’d thought they’d end up at the hospital too.

“Maybe you should stop trying to set people up,” I tell her in a soft voice. “Might not be too good at it.” I’m joking around to make her feel better, but I can feel Rowan glaring at me. I haven’t had many interactions with him, but all of them have led me to believe he dislikes me. Probably because he’s caught me staring at Ivy’s ass. In which case...guilty as charged.

“Excuse you,” Holly says, giving me a mock-offended look. “We’re the *heirs* of Mayberry Matchmakers. We knock this shit out of the park without even trying.”

Ivy snorts. “Tell that to Rosalie and Brittany.”

“Wait...I have no clue who Rosalie is, nor do I care. But you were trying to set up Brittany and *Logan*? As in Logan, my boyfriend’s brother and your 91% match?” She leans forward, a look of rapt interest on her face.

Rowan clears his throat. “You can stop calling Cole your boyfriend, you know. We’re all aware that you’re dating him.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “You call Kennedy your fiancée.”

“That’s because I want to make it very clear to everyone that I have that locked down.” He cracks a grin, and Holly smiles at him. Ivy too. It’s a nice moment, until Rowan clears his throat again, presumably reminding Holly that they came

here for a reason...a reason that has nothing to do with what's being discussed.

"We have things to talk about," Holly says, angling her pointer finger at Ivy. "But we *will* be discussing this Logan and Brittany thing. At length. And I'm your co-conspirator if either of them needs a push in the right direction."

"I can live with that," Ivy says with a small smile. "Now what the hell are you crazy kids doing here at this obscenely early hour?"

I glance at the clock. It's ten, which isn't exactly *early*, but if I said so, I'd be classified as Old Man Lou.

"I think the answer is obvious," Rowan says flatly as he rests his forearms on the table. "Our mother." He's a big man with an even bigger presence, and even though he's tried to keep his space, we're struggling to fit in the booth together. Or, more accurately, I'm smashed into the wall.

"Maybe I should go," I say, partially to give them privacy but also because I want out of this booth.

Ivy turns fiery eyes on me. "You're not going anywhere. We were having a lovely breakfast before these two crashed it." She turns her fury on her brother. "I'm not talking about Peony. If you waste any bandwidth on her, you're giving her exactly what she wants."

"Why didn't you tell us she was coming back to town?" Holly demands, snatching Ivy's coffee cup and taking a sip. She makes a face, then promptly sets it down.

"What makes you think I even knew about it?" Ivy asks, sliding the cup out of her sister's reach.

"Because she's staying with your dad," Holly says.

Ivy's mouth drops for a half second. "Hold the fuck up," she says, holding up a hand. "What do you mean she's *staying* with Dad?"

"Well, considering she called Bryn, Rowan, Willow, and me up this morning, told us she was on her way to town, and

invited us to dinner at Jay's house tonight at seven, we only assumed..."

"Do you think I'd be calmly sitting here on a breakfast date if she were staying with us?" Ivy asks. "Dad only just told us about the dinner, nothing else. Where's Bryn?"

"She had a 3-D sonogram scheduled for the baby," Holly says.

"On a Sunday?" Ivy presses.

Holly shrugs. "They're rich."

Fair enough.

"The baby obviously trumps Mom's issues," Holly continues, "and Willow obviously lives two hours away and can't make it tonight. Leave it to Mom not to remember. Soooo, you two..."

She makes a schoolyard gesture, thrusting two fingers into her fist, and my gaze shoots to Rowan, who's staring at me in aggrieved disbelief. "This is a date?"

"A breakfast date," Ivy says, picking up her coffee mug and lifting it to her lips. "We didn't get much sleep, if you know what I mean." She takes a sip, giving him a devilish grin over the rim of her mug.

Rowan turns a menacing stare on me.

My face flushes. Great. Is he going to beat the crap out of me for defiling his sister? I mean, she's a grown woman, and I'm sure he hasn't gone to Charleston to threaten her ex-boyfriends there, but I'm conveniently sitting right next to him.

"Go, Ivy," Holly says with a laugh.

"Quit it with the death glares, Rowan," Ivy says. "I refuse to be ashamed of my sex life, even if my father walks in on it."

Now I want to crawl under the table.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Holly says, turning in her seat to study her sister. "Your father walked in on you having sex?"

“Well,” Ivy says with a shrug, “we’d just finished, but we were both naked and there was absolutely no doubt of what we’d been doing.”

“I can’t hear any more of this,” Rowan says, sliding out of the booth. “Fill me in later—the part about our mother, not Lou fucking my sister.”

I kind of want to leave too, but I don’t want to walk out with him, so I excuse myself to go to the restroom. Hopefully, Ivy and Holly will have moved on to another topic by the time I come back.

When I walk out a few minutes later, my breath catches when I see Rowan waiting in the hallway, his upper back leaning against the wall and his arms crossed over his chest.

Shit.

Rowan notices my hesitation, but he lifts a hand. “I’m not here to give you shit about sleeping with my sister. She’s a grown-ass woman who can make her own decisions. I just don’t like to think about her having sex.”

“Yeah,” I say tentatively. “I get that.”

“So I’m not here to talk about that.”

“Okay...”

“I’m here to ask you about Ivy and our mom.”

“She doesn’t know anything, Rowan,” I say. “The first she heard of it was this morning.” I cringe. “After your dad walked in on us. He said he had something to tell her, so we came out to talk to him. It was awkward as hell, and then it got even worse when he told her that her mom is coming for dinner tonight. Ivy said we wouldn’t be there and left.”

Pressing his lips together, he nods. “She hates our mother.”

“I gathered that. But I also gathered that Jay has a weakness for her. Still...he didn’t say anything about having her as a guest.”

His mouth hitches to the side. “So maybe the dinner invitation at his house is a case of her taking liberties, the way

she always does. Hopefully she's got somewhere else to stay. Still...I wouldn't put it past her to show up with a suitcase. Even if she doesn't, I'm worried about how Ivy's going to take this visit. Especially since I have a feeling it might be a long one."

"I suspect you're right," I say. "Sounds like she left her latest husband and might be after Jay again."

"I'm going to do my damndest to make sure he realizes it would be the mistake of the century." He glances back at the booth. "I'm sure Ivy's worried about him."

"Yeah," I say, scratching the back of my neck. "She refuses to talk about it."

He starts to say something but cuts himself off. He draws in a breath, then says, "I think she likes you."

"God, I'd hope so," I say with a laugh.

"No. I think she *really* likes you." He hesitates before continuing. "Ivy's always avoided relationships. No shade thrown, because I was the same way before I met Kennedy, but..." He hesitates again. "She's different with you. She never introduces the guys she's seeing to her family, but she had no problem with us knowing that you two...hooked up."

"She doesn't seem very shy about it," I admit.

"But more importantly, I've seen how she looks at you. She likes you, so now I want to know what you plan to do about it."

"Excuse me?" I ask in confusion.

"How long are you going to stick around in Highland Hills?"

"I...have no agenda," I stammer.

"But you *are* going back to New York," he prompts.

"I'll need to eventually."

"Don't hurt my sister," he says, poking a finger into my chest. "This is my only warning." Then he turns to leave.

I watch him walk away and nearly burst out laughing. Despite all the overthinking I've done, it never once occurred to me that I might have the power to hurt Ivy. I've always presumed she'd be the one to hurt *me*.

Chapter Nineteen

Ivy

To think, this day started with the best sex of my life. It's really taken a dumpster dive—and not into just any dumpster. This is like the dumpster outside of a fish restaurant on a hot July day.

I'm not going to let her have him.

I'm not going to let my mother reach into my father's chest and break the heart that almost gave out on him last month. Not again. It was bad enough watching him hurt over his most recent ex-wife's abandonment. It's been downright heartening to watch my dad get so much female attention, because I could almost see his ego piecing itself back together, and now Mother Dearest is back to tear into it again like it's one of the *good* casseroles people have been bringing over.

No. Not on my watch.

I'm going to talk to her, before she can poison anyone else. Maybe that's what she wanted all along—the private audience I've been withholding from her.

I can feel Lou watching me from his booth at Ziggy's, and even though I want to walk over, grab him by the lapels of his shirt, and dirty him up a bit, I look away. Because I feel like everything inside of me is a seething mess, and even though it doesn't feel so messy when we're together, I don't want to be the kind of person who unloads my problems onto other people. I know where that leads. Already, I've told him more than I meant to. These past several weeks of talking, of casually spending time together, that 24%—all of it have made

getting close to him seem safe. For him. For me. So does his boss's insistence that he come home soon.

I won't be bringing him with me on my *banish the she-devil* mission. But I will be banging it out with him tonight after I get rid of her.

"Who pissed in your cornflakes?" Brittany asks me, bumping me with her hip as she slips behind the bar. "You're not wearing the requisite black."

"Didn't feel like it. And maybe it was the same asshole who pissed in yours."

"Logan got you upset too?" she asks, trying for a scowl and not quite sticking the landing.

According to her, he tried to strong-arm her to the doctor last night. She refused, on account of she was tired as hell and Cole wasn't around yet to take over the bar. Instead of admitting that he was worried, the way I'd coaxed him to over our shots last night, he'd told her she was as stubborn as an old rooster. I guess she took that the wrong way—although seriously, Logan, what woman wouldn't?—and told him to move along because she was too tired to argue with him. But that wasn't the whole story—

"You told him you'd talk to him tonight," I say, giving her some side-eye.

She scowls as she grabs a towel and starts wiping the pristine bar. "After closing. We'll see if he hangs around that long. By then, he's usually trouncing off with some tourist."

I give her a wide-eyed look. "On a Sunday? Besides, I've heard from some other sources that he hasn't done that in a while."

She pivots her head to look at me, and I can tell she's doing some internal calculations. Something seems to brighten inside of her. "Huh. You don't say."

I take the towel from her. "What the hell are you doing cleaning now if that man told you he'd help out? Put him to work tonight."

She laughs, long and loud. “You’re something, Ivy. I’m going to miss you when you finish that book.”

I feel a surprising pang of unease, and when I look up, I see Lou’s eyes are on me again. I give him the same kind of salute my father gave him this morning, and his face splits into an instant grin.

Something loosens inside of me, just like that.

“Oh, so *that* finally happened,” Brittany says, and when I glance at her, she’s smirking.

“You could tell there was something between us, huh?” I ask, surprised. Maybe because I can still see that 24% in my head, I figured the bond Lou and I share wasn’t the kind other people would be able to see or understand.

“Uh, yeah. That dude’s been coming in here practically every day to work, and you can’t tell me there aren’t at least a dozen places better to get shit done in this town.”

She has a point.

“Besides, you always rush over to serve him, and God knows no one else in this place gets that kind of service from you.” She gestures down the bar to a sullen-looking man that I hadn’t even noticed. He’s attractive, but he didn’t even blip on my radar. When he sees us looking, he gives us the finger and stalks off.

Oops. The brewery is practically empty but for Lou, and I guess Lou’s naturally the focus of whatever attention isn’t pinging between this crisis with my mother, my plans for my book, and my worry about my father.

“Oh, don’t bother to apologize,” she says before I can open my mouth. “Sure, he was waiting for ten minutes, but I let it happen. He’s a dick.”

“Who is he?” I ask.

“He’s about to be the new owner of Christmas All Year Coffee.”

“What?” If I’d been carrying something, I would have dropped it. Christmas All Year Coffee has been cheerfully run

by Ron and Ethel Meadows for the last twenty-five years. They seemed like the kind of people who'd go into their graves working. "What?" I repeat.

"I know, right?" She glances around, then continues in an undertone, "I guess it happened quickly. The Meadowses have been hemming and hawing about retiring to Florida and becoming Disney adults."

"They *do* like Disney," I say sadly. It's their second favorite thing in the world, next to Christmas. Ethel is all about creating and enjoying spectacles. "Well, this fucking sucks," I say. "That guy looks dour as hell."

She pats my shoulder. "I don't think it's a done deal yet. He's their nephew, I've heard. From New York City. If we get lucky, he might decide he doesn't want to move here."

I laugh with delight, because Brittany really is a badass. "You let me ignore him because you want him to think we're rude and uninviting around here, didn't you?"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" she asks with a grin. Then, pausing, she says, "What did Logan say to you last night?"

I'm not going to tell her about our pact to support each other—that's private—but I can say this much: "He was legitimately worried about you, Brittany. I think you should hear him out. Like I said, he sprinted to the bar when he heard something was going on there."

"Why were you out with him in the first place?" she asks.

Well, shit.

"Long story," I deflect, "but we were basically babysitters for Lou on his first date since his fiancée left him."

Her eyebrows lift practically to her bangs. "And Lou went home with you? I guess I'm glad I don't have kids, because Logan sounds like a shit babysitter."

"He did help the man get laid," I say, tilting my head.

She grins, shaking her head, then grips the edge of the bar and leans into it. "I don't know if it's a good idea for me to talk to Logan alone tonight."

“So don’t talk,” I say, wiggling my eyebrows up and down. “I just told you that he helps people get laid. And, like I said, it would seem that he hasn’t been up to his usual ways... Maybe you both need some.”

“You’re terrible,” she says. “And amazing. But don’t let that get to your head, because you also missed that couple over there.” She nods her head to a couple seated a ways down at the bar.

Well, damn. What’s with everyone having silent footfalls?

I glance at the clock on the wall. It’s just past noon, and I’ve barely been here an hour. “Hey, Britt...”

“You know I don’t answer to that name.”

“Can I leave early? There’s something I need to do.”

She grins at me again. “Ivy, we both know you do jack-all here besides keep me company, not that I don’t appreciate it. Leave whenever you like.”

* * *

Before I go, I slide into Lou’s booth. He brightens instantly. I love that I can do this for him—and him for me. I love it a little too much. Because I’m both my mother and my father, which means that I don’t know how not to break his heart—and I also don’t know if I could survive it if he breaks mine.

“Hey,” I say, “I have a thing.”

“Am I correct in deducing that you need to do this thing alone?” he says, pushing his laptop away, but not before I notice that he’s not doing work. He’s reading on his ebook app.

My heart swells and drifts up into the vicinity of my throat. “You’re reading my book.”

“Sorry,” he says, drumming his fingers on the side of the table. “Is that weird? It’s just... It’s not my usual thing, but it’s really, really good.”

He pauses, as if trying to decide how much to say, and I'm greedy, so I squeeze his bicep. "Whatever you're thinking, spill. I want it all."

He smiles, his eyes warm with it. "It's made me excited about reading again. For the last couple of months, since the whole Evan fuckup, working has been hard. I haven't been able to turn off that voice in my head, you know? Every time I'm reading something, I keep on asking myself, *Is this person also a narcissistic liar with a thing for seducing his friends' fiancées?* That kind of thing."

"And with me you already know that I'm a narcissistic liar," I say as I nudge his shoulder.

"Not a liar, no," he says, though the glint in his eyes tells me he's teasing.

"Very funny. You like it that much?"

"There's this energy to it...it makes it more than just words on a page."

I'm glowing inside. I'd give a lantern a run for its money. "Well, look at you, knowing how to give a girl a compliment."

"I mean it."

"I know you do," I say, feeling something like wonder. "You wouldn't have said it if you didn't." And maybe that's why I do what I do next. "You ready to go on a little field trip? You'll only be able to come with me for part of it, but I wouldn't mind the company."

"Then you've got it," he says, not asking where we're going, as if it doesn't matter. As if he'd go anywhere with me, even to Charleston to throw bread rolls at Chase and Annabeth. I'd bet he'd do that too.

I swallow down the emotion, because that's what I've always done when it feels like too much. Because it almost *always* feels too much. For as long as I can remember, I've wanted to do all the things, be all the things, *try* all the things. When I'm excited, I'm too excited. When I'm bored, I'm too bored. And when I like someone...

Well, there's a reason I haven't dated men like Lou before.

Chapter Twenty

Ivy

“The Three Fates?” Lou asks, giving me a doubting look as he takes the turn I just indicated. He’s accepting a lot on faith, Lou, but I’m good with that, because his faith is, implausibly, in me.

“Would I make that up?”

“Yes, probably.”

“Thank you, because that would be an awesome thing to make up, but no. I assure you this is real. You’ve met them. They’re the three women who came over with the three-course dinner last Wednesday, and they wouldn’t leave until midnight even though my dad kept clearing his throat so much that Eleanor thought he had a cold.”

They’re all around the same age—early seventies—and they were widowed within a week of each other ten years back. Ever since, they’d done everything together—from retiring (also within the same week) to pursuing my significantly younger than them father. Maybe they figured he’d go for a package deal. Hell, I wish he would. He’d be a lot happier with the three of them than he would with my mother’s various personalities.

The Three Fates also happen to be the biggest busybodies in Highland Hills, which is saying something. If anyone knows where to find my mother, it’s them...which I just got done explaining to Lou.

“The name makes them sound cooler,” he says with a snort.

“Of course it does. I’m the one who came up with it. But they *are* pretty cool. I used to go visit them when I was in high school. They put a curse on Bobby Briggs for me.”

He snorts. “What did Bobby Briggs do?”

“He told everyone that I went down on him in a barn. Trust me when I say that only happened in his imagination.”

He swears under his breath. “Did it work?” he asks after a beat. “Because if it didn’t, we can go give him a talking-to.”

“I dunno,” I say, “but he went as bald as a bowling ball at eighteen. And yes, I did sneak into his house and put Nair in his shampoo, but his hair didn’t grow back. What I’m saying is that I wouldn’t bet against them.”

“I wouldn’t bet against *you*,” he says with a glance, but it’s very obvious he has more to say. He always has that same look when he’s holding something back. It’s as easy to predict as the weather once it’s already started raining.

Finally, he adds, “You know, Ivy, you could just unblock your mother’s phone number and ask her where she’s staying. If she’s been trying to get in touch with you, I’m sure she’ll tell you.”

I snort. “I don’t want her to see me coming. Besides, *Lou*, hasn’t it occurred to you that might be exactly what she wants?”

He’s kind enough to point out that *this* is probably exactly what she wants—all of us going to trouble because of her. It’s her dream to be wanted and needed—but not to want any of us in return.

Part of me understands that sentiment; it’s the part of me I hate.

Lou takes another sidelong look at me and abruptly pulls off the road.

“I think you missed the road,” I say.

“Nope—” he gestures, “—it’s right there.”

“So why are we no longer on it?”

He reaches for my chin and turns my head toward him. God help me, my lips part as if he pulled off to the side of the road for an *assignation*, and he might be about to present me with his tongue or his dick.

He doesn't, unfortunately.

"We could go somewhere else," he says. "We could go to New York for the week. Come back after she's gone."

Something stirs inside of me at his first words, dampens by the time he gets through the next sentence.

"I'd like that...maybe we can go after she leaves."

"You would?" he asks, seeming surprised.

"Why is that shocking?" I ask, lifting an eyebrow. "Did I or did I not tell you that you're good in bed?"

"Oh, so you're using me for sex," he says with a smirk.

"And your personality. You help keep me level." I meant it as a joke; it came out serious. He really does. "But don't let that go to your head. It's only because you act about ninety years older than your age."

"So, what, I act like a skeleton? Ash?"

I give a theatrical shiver. "Of course you took it there. Anyway, no, unfortunately we cannot play kick the can with this problem. We need to get her away from my dad. I don't trust anyone else to be ruthless enough."

"I don't know," he mutters, "your brother looks like he's the type who asks questions later."

I laugh. "He threatened you, didn't he? You can ignore him; he's always had this big brother thing going on with me, probably because he's a little brother for all of our other sisters. He said he was the one who used to follow me around and keep me from chomping on batteries and shit. I believe it, because he seems to have a pulse on when people are having dangerous fun."

Lou grabs the wheel and flexes his hand on it. When he glances at me, I can tell he's pissed. He looks almost...

dangerous in a way that makes me hot for him. “Let’s drive her out of town.”

“Hallelujah!” I say, throwing my hands up. He grabs the one closest to him and pulls me toward him, kissing me in an almost violent way that’s not making me less turned on. When he pulls back, he still has that intense look in his eyes.

“I don’t like that she did all of that to you. She should have been there to protect you. She should have been the one to put a curse on Bobby Briggs.”

“Agreed,” I say. There’s the temptation to make a joke, to pretend not to care, but instead I admit, “I don’t like it either.” Maybe I’m showing too much of myself to him, but it means something to me that he cares...that he’s beside himself on my behalf. It reminds me of last night, when I told him about Chase.

He starts driving back up the hill, and before long we pull up in front of the bright purple house with the yellow door. He throws me a look as he parks the car.

“What?” I say. “Don’t look at me like that, I’m not the one who painted it.”

“I’ll bet you like it,” he says, unbuckling his belt.

“Really, Lou. You’re getting on my case for liking things?”

He lifts his fabulous eyebrows. “You got on my case for liking that documentary about micromachines the other week.”

“I mean, it put me to sleep. If I’d been looking for a sleeping pill substitute, I would have loved it. If I remember correctly, you were yawning too.”

“Maybe.” He laughs softly, and I’m smiling as I get out of the car.

When we knock, it’s Eleanor who opens the door. She has hair that’s either blond or totally white depending on the lighting, and she tints the tips blue. It’s the most fantastical part of a woman who tends to prefer solid-color clothing and practical shoes.

“Ivy!” she says, immediately glancing behind me, biting her lip. “Is your father with you by any chance?”

“Nope,” I say. “I was hoping to talk to you and the other ladies about something of importance...if you could spare a minute.”

Her stiff posture settles, which is surprising. Normally, she’d *want* to see my father. She wrings her hands together, looking slightly nervous. “Dear heart, you know I always love seeing you, but it might not be the best time. We’re—”

“Come back,” someone bellows from the other room. “It’s time to add the St. John’s wort. If we add it too late, then it might be less effective.”

“Cooking something?” I ask, sniffing the air. It’s aromatic, with a slight hint of acid.

“Not exactly,” Eleanor says as she bites her lip some more. “It’s more of a...rite.”

Then it hits me, and delight unfurls inside of me like an animal stretching in the sun. Oh, this is good. “St. John’s wort. Nettle leaf. What are they supposed to do?”

“It would be best if you left, Ivy,” she says, glancing over her shoulder.

“Are you putting a curse on my mother?” I ask, excited. It’s not that I believe in curses, but hell, it can’t hurt, right? I mean, Bobby Briggs never got his hair back, did he?

Eleanor lifts her chin slightly and secures her grip on the knob of the yellow door. “Ivy...”

“Where’s she staying, Eleanor? I’m guessing you know if you’re putting a curse on her?”

She looks confused, which is valid. I probably should be the one who knows. Then again, she’s perfectly aware that my mother and I have never been close.

“You want her to go away too,” she says, not phrasing it as a question.

“Hell, yes, I do.”

She looks behind me to Lou, who puts an arm around my back, the sensation instantly settling me.

“And you?” she asks him. “What do you want, young man?”

“I want her to leave Ivy and Jay alone. Ivy’s brother and sisters too. And I would prefer it if you didn’t put a curse on me. I’m told my hair is my best feature.”

Laughter spills out of me, and I turn and lift a hand up to trace his eyebrows. “No, I think maybe these are. And your hound dog eyes.”

“You’re telling me I have a dog’s eyes?” he asks flatly, but he can’t fool me. I see the amusement in the fine lines around his eyes.

Eleanor’s laughing as I turn back around to face her. “What stories have you been telling him about us?” she says, nudging my arm, but she doesn’t seem all that put out. “And it’s not a curse—it’s a banishment spell.”

“Then make it extra strong,” I say. “Now, where’s she staying?”

She bites her lip again, worrying it. “From what we’ve heard, she’s at your grandmother’s.”

* * *

“This is bad,” I tell Lou for the fifth time on our way to Nana Mayberry’s house. “Really bad. They’re up to some shit.”

I’ve already texted a red alert to all of my siblings.

Rowan was the first one to text back—a very eloquent *oh shit*—followed by Holly’s response: *And the plot thickens*.

Bryn’s of a practical mind: she insists we’ll find out what’s going on tonight at the dinner, which—sigh—I guess we’re all going to attend after all.

Lou thinks I should wait to confront my mother and grandmother, but he hasn’t realized yet that I don’t know how

to wait for things. I responded that I don't need to wait because I have reinforcements: I have him.

The truth is, I can't go about my business without knowing what they're up to. My mother is a manipulative, selfish woman. My grandmother, even more so. I don't want to leave them to their resources, spinning webs like spiders. Is my mother planning on taking part in Nana Mayberry's travesty of a YouTube show? Have they plotted something even more disgusting and insidious together?

"What are we going to do when we get there?" Lou asks, glancing at me. "If you want me to beat up an elderly woman, I have to tell you that is firmly past my line. Even if it is your grandmother."

I laugh, but it has a nervous edge to it. "I figured we'd make it up as we go along."

"I'm getting the impression that's how you approach a lot of things in life," he says. Something tells me he's talking about us.

"Yes," I admit, because it's best to be truthful about things. "The vast majority of the time, I have no idea what I'm doing or why. Usually things come together in the moment."

"It helps to have a plan."

"Having a plan kills creativity."

"Maybe when you're writing a book," he says wryly, "but it could help when you're going into a confrontation with a couple of manipulative narcissists."

"I have a plan of sorts." I glance out the window, watching the familiar houses roll by. My grandmother lives in one of the oldest neighborhoods of town, where the homes are nearly all celebrating their centennial birthday. Many of them have been repainted into cheerful pops of color, but not hers. It's gray, with a gray door.

The color of her soul.

"And I take it you don't want to share your sort-of plan with me?" he asks.

“No,” I admit. “I don’t think you’d approve.”

His mouth purses. “That doesn’t make me feel any better about this.”

“I don’t imagine it would. But don’t worry, no matter how nicely my mother asks, I’m not joining any MLM schemes.”

He darts a glance at me. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

The house appears up ahead, as gaunt as a haunted house. Bigger. Then bigger. “It’s this one,” I say, feeling a chill down my back.

He pulls over and parks, then grabs my hand. “Don’t be a martyr, Ivy.”

I laugh. “You really think I’m a martyr?”

“Yeah,” he says, not looking away, “I think you might give it a try.”

The corners of my mouth lift even as my stomach sinks. “I like that you see me that way, Lou, but I can’t let you believe a lie. I’ve done nothing but run, soon as I turned eighteen.” One town to another, until I landed in Charleston with the Fun Bunch; one job to another so I could learn more to write about; then, when my writing took off, one book to another. Always moving like someone who doesn’t know how to stop.

“Which is why I think you’ve convinced yourself you have to make some sort of stand.”

I feel a prick of sudden intuition, the realization that holy shit, he’s sort of right. “Maybe it’s time. Maybe it’s past time.”

“I just want you to know that it was okay that you ran, Ivy. And it’s okay if you want to keep right on running. There’s nothing wrong with not wanting to stay in Highland Hills. It’s like I said, we can go to New York right now. Or wherever you want. You don’t have to get involved in this. You don’t owe your mother anything, and your dad’s old enough to take care of himself. And it seems like he has at least half the population of Highland Hills in his court. You don’t need to do anything.”

I think about what he said, because I've learned Lou is plenty wise, but the thing is, he's wrong. I *do* need this. I need to prove something to myself.

"I'm going in," I say, then pause, and surprise myself by adding, "Come with me."

He doesn't hesitate before unbuckling, and we head to the door together, hand in hand. When we reach it, I hammer on it with my fist.

Lou makes a face, and I roll my eyes. "You can't make an entrance if you don't do it loudly, Lou."

"If you say so."

My mother answers the door. There's surprise in her eyes, followed by something I don't like—the contented look of a cat who just bogarted all of the cream.

"Well, well," she says, "look at you, and you brought a *friend*."

She gives Lou her patented flirtatious look, complete with the pouty lips full of filler and the slightly lifted eyebrows. I look like my dad, mostly, but she has curly hair like me, eyes the same blue-green as my sister Willow.

I shove my way inside, hand still gripping Lou, who comes with me, surprisingly unapologetic for a man who's probably never barged his way into a stranger's house in his life. I'm taken aback at first, because my grandmother has always been fastidiously clean, and there are takeout containers sitting out and a sweater strewn over the back of a chair.

What the what? My grandmother not a fan of Peony—the name my mother gave herself two years ago after deciding it would be a delightful FU to Nana to reject the name she was given. I struggle to imagine her allowing this sort of tomfoolery (her word).

"What'd you do with the old lady?" I ask. "Shove her into the oven like Hansel and Gretel?"

"Well, hello to you, too."

“You’re not welcome here,” I say, turning on my mother. “I’m so sorry Phil, or was it Bill, didn’t work out. I really thought you crazy kids had a shot, but you’re going to leave my father alone.”

“Sure,” she says with a slight smirk. “But will he leave *me* alone?”

“I don’t know why he wouldn’t,” I say, putting my hand on my hip, leaving the other in Lou’s because I need to. “He’s got every single senior citizen lady on his doorstep, and let’s be honest, none of *them* have broken his heart multiple times.”

“You can’t tell me what to do, Ivy,” she says with those pouty lips, her eyes taking the measure of me. We haven’t seen each other in person for years. I’ve avoided it. She hasn’t really tried, other than those attempts to convince me to give her some of the life I’ve made for myself. “You’re a child.”

“I’m twenty-six,” I say, “and I’ve never been a child. Dad tried to give me that chance, but I think it was too late.” In some ways it’s true. It’s part of why I’ve always chased fun down to find the source, because I never got the chance to be a kid when I was a kid, and part of me needs that now. I pause, then say what I’m really thinking. “You’re here because you want something, and as attractive as Dad is for a man his age, I’m thinking it’s not his dick you’re after, so what do you want? Money? I’ll give it to you.”

Lou squeezes my hand, probably trying to silently convey that I’m doing exactly what I shouldn’t be, but he doesn’t totally understand. He didn’t have to watch his father silently crying at night, when he didn’t think anyone was awake to notice, because his wife was banging half a dozen people. He probably didn’t have to eat only instant pancakes, ramen, and cold beans from a can with toast because his older siblings were responsible for making dinner nine times out of ten and didn’t know how.

She’s poison, a beautiful plague, and my worst fear, the most insidious worm eating at my heart is that I’m just like her—the kind of woman who leads men to ruin. Isn’t that what Annabeth shouted at me the last time we spoke?

“You ruin everything, Ivy. You don’t even have to try.”

I mean, fuck Annabeth, obviously, but try having someone say that to you without feeling it down to the marrow in your bones.

“How much?” she asks, cocking her head. “How much money do you have?”

“Don’t answer that question,” Lou tells me, his tone forceful. He’s giving my mother a look that would wither a flower, but I can tell she’s basking in it, because attention is attention after all.

“More than you’ve ever had in your life,” I tell her, scathing. “Because I’ve worked for it. I don’t go husband shopping every time life gets hard.”

She snorts and lifts her chin at Lou. “And yet it seems you’ve caught a big fish. Good-looking, too.” Turning to Lou, she says, “You know, you don’t need to stoop to the diluted version. You seem like a man who’d appreciate a *real* woman.”

“I am,” he says, releasing my hand and wrapping both arms around me. “Lucky for me, I’ve got one. *Let’s go, Ivy.*”

“Not until she answers my question,” I say, feet rooted to the floor. “How much?”

“A million dollars,” she says, her expression an obvious challenge. “I’ll leave if you pay me a million.”

There’s a clawing sensation in my throat as I think of all the work I put in—all those hours, all those stories. All those pieces of myself. “Okay.”

And then she laughs in my face. “You really think I’d take so little? Your sister’s marrying a billionaire, Ivy. *A billionaire.* You’re nothing.”

That clawing sensation gets worse, but Lou tightens his arms around me. “No,” I say. “*You’re nothing.* And you’re a fool if you think Bryn’s fiancé is going to give you a single penny. It’s like this...you can shoot your shot with my dad, although I think you’ll find he has plenty of options now, and

do whatever inane plan you and Nana are plotting...or you can walk away with a million. Think about it.”

Then I squeeze Lou’s arm, look back into his beautiful eyes, filled with worry about me and rage toward my mother, and I say, “Let’s get out of here, Lou. This is a place that sucks the life out of you.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Lou

We head back out to the car, anger rolling off Ivy as she stomps over to it. She drops my hand and heads to the passenger side. I feel a strong urge to open the door for her, but I know how important her independence is to her, and I suspect that's especially true now. So I head to the driver's side and start the car. I pull away from the curb, no destination in mind.

Ivy sends another text update to her siblings, but there's nothing to be done right now. Her sister Bryn's right—we have to wait for more information to come to light over dinner.

I'm not sure what Ivy wants to until then. I don't think *she* knows what she wants to do until then.

“Where are we going?” she asks when I turn a corner.

“Anywhere you want.”

She hesitates for a moment, then a mischievous look fills her eyes. “Anywhere?”

I can't help laughing. “I have to draw the line at committing a felony, so keep that in mind if you want to go to the nearest Home Depot to purchase supplies to murder your mother.”

“That's not what I had in mind, but I like where your mind is going.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Do you trust me?” she asks, excitement dancing in her eyes.

“Does it sound like I trust you if I had to preface my agreement with the no felony rule?” I ask dryly.

She laughs. “I think that means yes, so just go where I tell you.”

“Wouldn’t it be helpful if I knew where we’re going?”

“No. Sometimes you just need to enjoy the ride without knowing the destination, Lou.”

A good sentiment, maybe. In reality, knowing the destination helps you plan and—hopefully—avoid pitfalls. I can tell this unspecified misadventure will make her happy, though, and I’m surprised by how much I want that.

“Okay, captain,” I say. “Tell me where to go.” She directs me, and as we head out of town and drive up windy mountain roads, I say, “I’m fairly serious about the felony objection.”

“Only fairly serious? That would be considered dubious consent in romance, you know.” When I start to protest, a huge smile lights up her face. “Stop worrying. No felonies will be committed today.” Then she adds, “Or at least no premeditated ones.”

“I guess I can live with that,” I say with a shrug.

After several moments of silence, I add, “Would you really have paid your mother a million dollars to go away?”

“Not only yes, but hell yes.” She shoots a smirk in my direction. “Are you surprised I have a million dollars?”

“No,” I say carefully. “I know you’ve been really successful. That’s not why I brought it up.”

“You think it would be wrong to pay off my mother?”

“No, it’s clear every one of you would be better off without her in their lives, but people like her are cockroaches, Ivy. Paying them off might work in the short run, but they always come back for more.”

Her guard is up full force. “You know this from personal experience, Lou?”

“Not directly,” I say, reaching across the console and snagging her hand. I’m surprised when she doesn’t pull away. “But Alex’s biological mother is a piece of work—a user—and I saw what she put him through. I’ve seen other friends go through similar situations. Granted, I don’t know anyone who’s made such a big payoff. It’s usually five thousand here or there, but they always return, asking for more.”

She’s quiet for a moment. “Yeah, you’re probably right. But I need her to go away, Lou.” She pushes out a breath, then turns to me with a dazzling smile. “Are you ready to reconsider that felony?”

I laugh. “Not yet, but let’s leave our options open.”

Five minutes later, we find ourselves turning onto a road with a sign that announces *Big Jump Mountain Parking*.

“Big Jump Mountain?” I say with a laugh. “Is there hidden context there?”

“You really want me to tell you and spoil the surprise?” she asks. My expression must tell her that, yes, I’d very much like for her to spoil the surprise, because she shakes her head, still smiling, and says, “Nah, you’ll just have to find out for yourself.”

I pull into the mostly empty parking lot and take in the cables with gondola cars going up the side of the mountain to a group of buildings. “What is this place?”

“It’s fun. Now let’s go.” She opens the door, leaving me to follow.

I get out and lock the car, then join her as she walks toward the base of the gondolas. “What if I told you I was afraid of heights?”

She keeps walking. “It’s totally enclosed. You’ll be fine.” She casts me an incredulous look. “How can you live in New York City and be scared of heights? It’s like tall buildings everywhere.”

I flash her a big smile. “I never said I was afraid of heights. I just asked what you’d do if I were.”

She holds up a hand. “You didn’t ask what I’d do. You phrased it very poorly, actually.”

We bicker all the way to the ticket stand.

I pull out my wallet, but she raps my hand and takes out hers, slipping out a credit card. “No. I’m the one with the big bucks burning a hole in my checkbook, remember?”

I worry that she’s still upset over our conversation, but she winks at me as the worker, who looks understandably dissatisfied to be dressed in a uniform with epaulettes, swipes her card to pay for the gondola ride up. We’re ushered through an empty serpentine line and wait for the next gondola to open up.

“Why isn’t anyone here?” I ask as we climb into the car.

“It’s mostly a summer tourist attraction,” Ivy says as the door closes behind us and the gondola lifts into the air. “But it stays open all year round. Even the amusement park.”

“Amusement park?” I shake my head. “Is that where we’re going?”

Her smile broadens.

“We’re not teenagers, Ivy.”

“Last time I noticed, old folks like us are still allowed in and can ride the rides.”

“Oh, no,” I say. “I’m not riding any roller coasters.”

“The rides are all tame,” she says, pressing her chest to mine and staring up into my eyes. “No going upside down. But I’ll hold your hand if you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared,” I bluster. “It’s just that it’s so...”

“Juvenile?” she supplies. “That’s kind of the point. Adulthood is boring and dreary. We need to grab fun where we can find it.”

“On a roller coaster?” I ask dryly.

“On a roller coaster,” she says. “On the teacups. On the beach holding hands.” She reaches down and links our fingers.

“Singing karaoke, getting drunk. Sometimes we need to let loose and just have fun, Lou.”

I think about the last time I had pure unadulterated fun, and if I go back further than this morning, I have to go *way* back. The last thing I did just for the fun of it was start that Instagram account for my fish. Writing the book was fun too. Even though I’ve barely made any money off it, I enjoyed working on it more than almost anything else in my professional or private life. Maybe Ivy’s right. Maybe I need to have more fun.

“I draw the line at drunken karaoke,” I finally say.

“Drunken karaoke is the only way to do it,” she insists, but before I can protest, she kisses me so thoroughly that the next thing I’m aware of is the attendant at the top of the mountain clearing his throat loudly as he stands at the open door.

“Shit,” I mutter, pulling away, but Ivy just giggles and tugs me out of the cable car.

“Are you hungry?” I ask when I notice a restaurant close to the gondola. It offers outdoor seating with heat lamps to ward off the chill. The view probably makes it worth the slight discomfort.

“Starving,” she says, dragging me past the restaurant, a souvenir shop, a candy shop, and a cupcake store.

“I take it you have someplace in mind.”

She glances back at me. “You’re going to *love it*.”

Now I know for certain that I won’t. Still, I *am* enjoying myself.

She marches us up to the entrance of the amusement park and insists on paying both of our entrance fees. Once we’re inside, she heads straight for a concession stand.

“You passed up a perfectly good restaurant with a view for corndogs and hamburgers?” I say, gesturing to the sign above the window.

“I need you to trust me,” she says with such earnestness it steals my breath. “Okay?”

This day is for her, because even though she's acting like a good-time gal, I know she's hurting. This is what she's told me she needs. This is something I can give her. "I trust you, Ivy," I say solemnly.

Surprise fills her eyes. Did she expect me to put up an argument, or was it the intensity of my agreement that caught her off guard?

She quickly recovers then plants a quick kiss on my lips. "Good. I'll order for you. You won't regret it."

"I already do," I say, even though I don't mean it.

She laughs, then orders enough food to feed a family of six. They hand us the food in the cardboard bottom for a twenty-four pack of pop, and she picks it up, instructing me to grab the drinks.

"Follow me."

I do so obediently, blindly, eagerly. She's so excited about our adventure, I find it enchanting, not a word I ever expected to use in regard to myself. Being with her, I've realized that I've been so serious and driven most of my life that I haven't stopped much to enjoy it.

She leads me to a bench at the edge of the park and sets the carton of food in the middle. "The view here is much better."

I didn't stop to take in the view from the restaurant, but we're a bit higher, and the gondola is behind us, so the view is likely more unobstructed. The small valley is full of trees with a few scattered houses at the base. The smell of the greasy food hits my nose, making my stomach growl, and I smile because, for the first time in a very long time, I'm happy in an uncomplicated way.

I sit on one side of the food, and she sits on the other.

"So what will it be?" she asks. "Hamburger? Corndog? Nachos? Pretzel?"

"Some of everything," I say, beaming at her.

"Why are you grinning like that?" she asks suspiciously. "You look kind of deranged."

I laugh. Leave it to me to make happy look deranged.

“My secret’s out,” I say, tearing a piece of the pretzel off and dipping it in the container of fake cheese sauce. “I’m deranged.”

“Good thing I don’t like normal,” she says, picking up the corndog and taking a huge bite.

God help me, but I watch her, wondering what it would be like to watch her take my cock in her mouth.

My dick starts to twitch.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to eat all of this food and then go on a roller coaster or the teacup ride?” I ask.

“Isn’t vomiting on rides part of the amusement park experience?” she asks, then laughs when she sees my horror. “Joking. I have something else in mind for when we finish.” She glances down at my crotch, then back up at my face. “Not that, although I might be persuaded.”

There’s no way we can finish all the food, so we treat it like a sampler, eating a little bit of everything and slurping it down with a Coke and a frozen lemonade.

“Did you come here when you were a kid?” I ask.

She hesitates, then says, “I did a few times. Once on a school field trip for kids who got straight As that year. But the other times were with my dad.” She pushes out a sigh. “I was really lucky that I had my dad. He was always there for me. My other siblings weren’t so lucky.” She’s quiet for a moment, and I watch the breeze play with her hair as she studies the view. “Sometimes I think they resent me for it. Especially Rowan. You know, my dad’s his father too, only we just found out. It turns out my mom was getting it on with him when she was married to another dude.”

“Shit.”

“You’re telling me.”

“I don’t think Rowan resents you,” I say softly. “He basically told me he’d kick my ass if I broke your heart. I believe him.”

Her lips tip up, as if the thought of me getting my ass kicked amuses her. “Thanks for telling me that. But I won’t require his services.”

Some of that simple happiness fades, but then she adds, “Because if you break my heart, I’ll kick your ass myself. I’m scrappy.”

“You are,” I agree.

“Well, maybe they don’t even know they resent me,” she says, still watching the landscape. “When my dad realized how bad things were—like her leaving us alone every night—he asked for full custody, and she gave it to him.” Her eyes turn glassy. “But my brother and sisters were stuck in a shit situation. First with her and then with my grandmother.”

She’s quiet for a second, but I can tell she’s not done, and I don’t want to say anything to stop her from letting this off her chest.

“Honestly, someone should have called CPS. People knew she was a shitty mother, but no one ever did.”

“I’m sorry,” I blurt, needing to say at least that.

Her back stiffens. “Don’t feel sorry for me. I got out. A get-out-of-jail-free pass. And hell, Rowan should have had one too.” A tear streaks down her cheek. “But she kept that from him.” She releases a bitter laugh. “Not that he would have left Willow. They were like twins, only born fifteen months apart.”

“Your siblings blame *your mother*,” I say quietly. “As they should. This is on *her*, not *you*.” But it helps me understand why she’s so hellbent on driving her mother out of town. It’s not just about saving her father. She’s trying to save her brother and sisters too. I suspect there wasn’t much she could have done when she was younger, but she’s older and wealthier now, and she wants to make things right.

“You’re a good sister, Ivy. Your siblings are lucky to have you, Especially since you’ve been back.”

“I haven’t been there for them. Part of the reason is that I feel guilty, I guess. I left them with our grandmother.”

Her admission catches me by surprise. “You really didn’t have a choice. Besides, I’ll bet they were all glad that you got to move in with your dad. Think about it. You’re the youngest by a few years. After they all grew up and left, you’d have been left alone with your grandmother. I can assure you that none of them wanted that.”

She considers my words for a moment, then tilts her head. “No, maybe not. Still, I need to protect them, Lou. I left them to their mercy before, and I refuse to do it this time.”

Part of me wants to tell her that none of them expect her to do anything single-handedly, but I can see that she believes she has to be the driving force, and I don’t want to take that from her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket, reminding me of my time-unspecified phone meeting with Evan’s editor. The responsible thing to do would be to answer, but Ivy and I are in a very uncertain place. She needs me more than Evan’s editor needs me to kiss his ass. So I ignore it, grateful when the vibrations stop. I’ll deal with Roy’s wrath later.

I give her my full attention. “Tell me how I can help.”

A slow smile spreads across her face. “How about that felony?”

I grin back. “Don’t felonies have levels? Maybe we can keep it an entry-level felony.”

“I think we can arrange that.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ivy

Lou's carrying around the giant flamingo I won him from knocking down bottles, and it might be the cutest thing I've ever seen in my life. Okay, it *definitely* is. This is what I needed. I feel lighter, almost as if I could lift up into the sky and look down at Big Jump Mountain. "Hey, Lou, when's the last time you had a moment like this? When you let yourself just float?"

"I may be carrying a giant flamingo, but I'll have you know my feet are firmly planted on the ground."

"Oh, you know what I mean, you ole fuddy-duddy," I say, knocking my shoulder against him just because I want to.

He smiles at me, and oh, boy, when this man smiles there should be a parade. We keep ambling along with the flamingo, not really paying attention to anything but each other and the moment. After a minute, he answers, "I guess when my parents brought Alex and me ice-skating at Rockefeller Center every time I got all As. It's magical for an ice-skating rink like that to exist in the middle of the city." His mouth twists to the side. "Maybe that's a dumb word for it."

"There's not a single thing dumb about finding magic where you can. The world needs more of it. If you ask me, the whole ice-skating thing does sound pretty sweet. Were your parents always on your ass about your grades?"

He smirks. "Sure, maybe. Let me guess, if you got a bad grade, Jay would just pat you on the head and say better luck next time, Pumpkin."

“He’s never once called me Pumpkin. But...yeah, pretty much. What’d your folks do?”

“What didn’t they do? They were pretty focused on me succeeding. They’d wanted more kids, and they only got me, so I had to go the distance, you know? Especially since I had zero interest in becoming a doctor.”

I snort. “Doctor Moralis. It would have had a nice ring to it, but the book world needs more hot men. We’ll gladly take you.”

“Why, thank you,” he says, delighting me by sweeping into a bow, flamingo in hand.

“I’m sorry they gave you a tough time.” I try to get a mental image of young Lou, already serious, I bet. “I hope they at least got you hot chocolate when you went ice skating.”

“They did,” he says with a small smile.

“You close to them?”

“When they don’t disapprove of every single life choice I’m making.”

I feel a twinge of annoyance toward these high-and-mighty Moralises. “Let me guess, they are absolutely, over-the-moon thrilled that you called off your engagement to a puff pastry and temporarily relocated to a shitty small town in North Carolina to bang a woman eight years younger than you who writes smut for a living.”

“Something like that,” he says, his smile widening.

“You know, you shouldn’t have had to go eleventy-hundred years without having this kind of fun. I guess you’re pretty lucky to have me around.”

He cocks his brow. “Yeah, I guess maybe I am.”

What goes unstated is that it’s a for-now kind of thing. He’ll be going back soon to reclaim his job and his life, and I’ll be a sweet memory. It’ll be better that way than if we tried to be something more. I want him to think of me with a smile, a fond laugh, maybe a *What’s that crazy lady up to, anyway?*

I don't know yet what kind of memory he'll be for me, other than I know it'll make me sad. I don't want to be sad right now, though—I'd like to be the very opposite.

Then I catch sight of the water game, the prize for which is a disaffected fish floating around in a bag. There's only two of them, probably because the staff knew they weren't going to be getting a big crowd today.

"C'mon," I say, nudging Lou's shoulder as I pull him closer. "Let's get you a new fish."

"Vonnegut was a betta fish. These are goldfish."

"Seriously? Are you fishist? I'm guessing those fish are going to get flushed down the toilet tonight if someone doesn't win them."

"They wouldn't do that," Lou says.

The attendant, who's sucking on some gnarly chewing tobacco, lifts one shoulder in a shrug and gives a small nod.

It's like someone lit a fire under Lou's ass, because suddenly he's handing the guy a few dollars, giving me the flamingo, and picking up the water gun. He misses three of the targets, sighs, and then hands the gun over to me before forking over more cash so I can take a turn.

I get it in one try.

The attendant whistles. "You got a live wire on your hands, friend. Make sure you don't fuck around, or I have a feeling you're going to find out."

"I'll keep that in mind." Lou has a bit of a Mona Lisa smile going on as he watches me.

"Thanks, Bill," I say, reading the name on his name tag. "Now let's get Vonnegut the Sequel a pal."

Lou's giving me this warm look, and I want to bask in it. I give it another go, get them all again, and now we're going home with two fish I have no idea what to do with. A problem for later.

"Can we pick them up on our way out, Bill?" I ask.

He gives another of those *I hate my job* shrugs, and says, “They got about four to five hours before they run out of oxygen, so you take your time. But I’ll be honest, they cost less than a buck at the pet store, and it’s gonna run you fifty bucks at least to pick up a tank and supplies. You ask my advice, let ’em meet their maker.”

“We’ll be back for Vonnegut the Sequel and Twenty-Two,” Lou says, taking my hand with the arm he’s not currently using to cradle the flamingo.

“Your credit card’s the one that’s gonna feel the burn,” Bill says.

“That’s between me and my credit card,” I reply with a wink.

“Suit yourself.” He’s grinning, though, and I have to admit I find him incredibly amusing.

Lou, who looks less than amused, steers me away. “Twenty-Two, huh?” I ask. Delight burns in my chest because I’m pretty sure he’s leading me straight toward the teacups. I want to ride them until we’re dizzy.

“I’ve become pretty partial to that number,” he says.

“Are you going to tell me why?”

A smile plays at his lips. “Because that’s what we got downgraded to on the app.”

“Oh.” There’s a sinking feeling inside me, but it only lasts for half a second, because I’m determined to enjoy this moment, dammit. It’s like I told him earlier—it’s the journey that matters. We may only have this moment in time with each other, and I’m not going to waste it by feeling like shit about a couple of percentage points.

“Don’t you think you’re the kind of woman who defies the odds?” he says, giving me a sidelong look as he squeezes my hand. The jolt of it travels through me, warming my whole body. I like that he sees me that way. Maybe he’s right. Maybe we can’t be defined by that 22% any more than we can be by the questions we answered. Questions aren’t a person. It’s like

my dad said—they're a predictor. And some things are too magical to be predicted by logic. Like this day...

"Yeah," I tell him. "I think maybe I am." And I pull him to me for a quick kiss before grinning like the Cheshire Cat. "So what about you, Lou? Are you the kind of man who defies the odds? Because it looks to me like we're about to go on the teacups after eating a junk food feast."

"Very funny," he says, wrapping his arm around my waist and tugging me closer. The fun of this moment, of being with him, wraps around me like a warm hug. A hug I needed today.

An attendant runs over from a different ride—when it's off-season they only hire a few people to run all the rides—and we climb into a purple teacup. Lou looks wary, and it makes me laugh, especially since he's still hugging that ridiculous flamingo to his chest.

"Look at it this way, gravity is going to push us together. You'll have an excuse to be plastered to my body."

He lifts his magnificent eyebrows. "Do I need an excuse?"

"Okay, fair point, you do not. But, this ride will not allow us to *not* exercise PDA. We will be forced to touch. That flamingo is totally going to get felt up too."

"Fifi gives her consent," he says with flat affect, making me laugh again. Man, after leaving my mother's house, I felt like all my laughter had dried up, but it was waiting inside me. Thank God it was.

Before the ride starts, I look him in the eyes and say, "Tell me something about yourself. Something not a lot of people know."

"While we're spinning around in this infernal teacup?" he asks as the tinny music starts to spout from the speaker mounted next to us.

"Yes, you're going to want to distract me. Otherwise I'm going to get overzealous with turning the wheel. It always happens."

“Here we go,” he says as our cup starts turning. I give a little squeal of pleasure and press my side to his since gravity’s going to get us there anyway—and, let’s be honest, I want to.

“One thing!” I tell him, reaching toward the wheel as if making a threat.

Laughing, he captures my hands.

“Oh, so you like restraining me. Good to know. I’m into that too.”

He swears under his breath, his gaze heating as the cup turns us round and round, pressing us together.

“One thing, Lou,” I repeat, this time as a whisper.

“I ran an Instagram account for Vonnegut. It had sixty thousand followers.”

“You didn’t,” I say in delight as the ride keeps spinning us, making me dizzy and happy.

“Did so.”

“Was it just pictures of him?”

The ride speeds up, but my gaze is fixed on Lou, and I haven’t even felt any of the normal compulsion to go for the wheel.

“With photoshopped outfits and coffee cups. That sort of thing.”

“Oh. My. God. That is incredible.”

His mouth twists to the side. “And I wrote a children’s book about him.”

“You didn’t,” I gasp out. The ride slows, but I call out to the attendant, asking him for a Round Two, and he gives me a thumbs up and cranks up the cups again. “Tell me more,” I say to Lou, probably looking like a kid asking Santa for presents, because that’s what I feel like. Lou’s the gift that keeps on giving. I immediately want to buy dozens of copies of the book—for myself, for every child I know (admittedly there aren’t a lot) and for free libraries across North and South Carolina.

“It’s called *Fishing for Compliments*.”

“Oh my God, I want to fuck you so bad right now,” I say, grabbing his hand and hiking it up onto my upper thigh.

His eyes heat, but his mouth only lifts in one corner. “Because I wrote a book about my fish?”

“Because you wrote *that* book about your fish, and because you’re surprising. I like being surprised, whenever possible.”

“This is probably the only time I’m likely to surprise you,” he says with a slight smile. “You’re the more surprising one.”

“But you’re the *stealthy* surprise. There’s nothing as good as a stealthy surprise—as long as it’s a pleasant one. You’re a pleasant one, Lou.”

I hike his hand a little higher, because the heat of him through my stockings is doing all kinds of things to me.

“It’s probably not going to happen in this teacup,” he says mournfully.

“More’s the pity. Tell me you’re one of those guys who carries a condom in his wallet.”

“Not usually,” he says, “but I happen to have one today.”

“Were you hoping we’d bang at the breakfast place?” I ask excitedly.

“More like I wanted to convince you to stay at the bed and breakfast tonight.”

The ride starts winding down again, not stopping yet, just whirling around slower. But I’m plenty wound up, and I have no intention of waiting for the bed and breakfast.

Lou swears under his breath. “I have a bit of a situation here.”

“Do you *ever*,” I say, rubbing my hand over said situation, which makes him hiss and grab my hand again, and oh, no, I have absolutely no intention of waiting so long for what I want. “You think I won you that flamingo for nothing?” I ask

in an undertone, not because I care about who hears, but because I'm pretty sure he does. "Put Fifi to good use."

"You're killing me." But he lifts my wrist up to his mouth and presses a kiss to it, his eyes peering up at me, and I'm not going to lie, I'm about two seconds away from saying fuck it and jumping him in the teacup. It whirls one last whirl, though, and it's time to get off.

"Are we going now?" he asks in an uncomfortable undertone as we leave the ride, the lucky flamingo clutched in front of his hard cock.

"No way," I say. "We've got tons left to do. The Ferris wheel, the merry-go-round."

"Ivy," he says, pulling me to a stop with his free hand. "I can't wait that long. I need to be inside of you." His gaze is intent, and his words are the whipped cream and sprinkles on this outing.

"Good. I was hoping you'd say that. This way, please." And I start marching off toward my destination, Lou's free hand clutched in mine.

When we reach it, he gives the small booth next to me a dubious look. "You want to take photos right now?"

"No," I say, pulling him forward by the collar of his coat. "Not what I had in mind." I nod toward the booth. "It's only a misdemeanor, I've heard, but it's close enough to a felony, and I really, really want to do it."

"Shit," he says, eyeing the booth. "Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"If you think I'm saying that I want to fuck you inside of this remote photo booth, where it's unlikely but not impossible that we'll be discovered, and then take photos of us while you're still inside of me, then yes, that's absolutely what I'm saying."

He tosses poor Fifi aside, and I burst out laughing when he picks me up and opens the door to the photo booth, depositing me on the bench inside. There's barely room for both of us to sit, let alone mess around, but I'm nothing if not resilient. "Put

your jacket down, Lou,” I say, standing again. “Then pull down your pants.”

“You want to take charge, huh?” he says, his voice husky.

“I let you have your way with me this morning. Maybe this time I want to have my way with you.”

“Fuck, Ivy.”

“Yeah,” I say, running my hand over the tented front of his pants. I lean in and kiss him hard. “That’s the idea.”

I don’t have to tell him twice. He sets his jacket down, then unfastens his belt, which is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. I’m impatient, so I’m the one who pulls down his pants and underwear, and I give his big cock a couple of strokes with my hand. “You have a beautiful cock, Lou. And it’s mine.”

“It’s yours,” he says, his pupils dilated as he reaches between my legs and rubs, then grabs for the top of my stocking like a starved man. I lean down to take off my shoes so I can get them off, and once I’m done, he has his fingers curled inside of me in half a second. “You’re so wet for me.” He says it almost in a whisper as he lifts his finger to his mouth and tastes me, making a guttural noise that instantly makes me wetter.

“Yeah, you’d better do something about that,” I say, abandoning his cock for half a second, but only to pull his wallet out of his pocket and get the condom. I have to lean down to get it, so I’m right here, with that big cock next to me, and on impulse, I capture the head in my mouth, playing my tongue over it. Looking up so I can watch his reaction. I saw him earlier, noticing while I took a bite of that corndog.

“Oh, God,” he says, his hand reaching into my hair, gripping it slightly—not hard enough to hurt, but the perfect amount to light up my nerve endings. “That feels so damn good. You look gorgeous with my cock in your mouth.”

His dirty mouth has been a pleasant surprise. I like that he’s my freak in the sheets, not that we have any, just his coat to protect us from the elements. It should be cold in here, like

it is outside, but it's practically balmy from the heat we're making. I take him in deeper before retreating, then grab his firm butt and take him deeper still, to the back of my throat this time. His hand flexes in my hair, and I look up again, loving the sight of how I'm affecting him. It's not about power, this time, the way it's been when I've done this for people in the past. It's about doing something for Lou, because he's done more for me than he probably realizes.

He tugs my hair slightly, signaling that I should stop, even as his body makes a slight unconscious thrust forward. "I need to come inside you," he says through his teeth. "I want to feel you clench around me again."

Well, he doesn't have to tell me twice. I give him one more pass with my mouth before putting the condom on him. He sits, and I climb onto his lap and rock against his cock while I kiss him. He reaches under my dress, holding my hips and helping my rhythm, as he kisses me back hard, his lips almost bruising in their attempt to get closer and take more, and I'm desperate to give it to him.

I break our kiss and bite the lobe of his ear softly. "I'm going to fuck you now," I tell him in an undertone. I lift up and position him, then lower down onto him hard, the sudden fullness a burst of sensation that rocks through me—hotter because we're here, semi in public, hotter because this is Lou, and he's doing this with me even though I know it's well out of his comfort zone. I rock against him and capture his lips, his hands cradling my hips and then my ass as I ride him.

Then he surprises me by grabbing my wrists, holding them behind my back while I ride his cock.

"You said you like to be restrained," he tells me in that husky voice, and I know this isn't going to last nearly as long as I'd like it to, because I've never been so turned on in my life. This man makes me want to push him to his limits—and in doing so I've pushed my own limits, because I feel closer to him than to any other man I've been involved with.

He shifts so he's holding my wrists with one hand, freeing the other to reach under my dress and touch my clit. The

feeling of him moving inside me, his hand working me right above where his cock's driving in deep, his other hand holding my wrists—so strong and commanding—undoes me. I feel my control unweaving, and I relish in it as pleasure uncoils, slowly at first, a pleasant burn through my nerves and veins, and then in a gush that has me moaning Lou's name as he pumps into me. That's all it takes to send him over too, and he buries his face in my neck as he comes inside me.

“Ivy,” he whispers in my ear. “That was...”

But I'm already reaching into his wallet for a dollar and feeding it into the machine.

“Say cheese,” I say. “I'm going to give you something to remember me by.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Lou

We ride the Ferris wheel and the Octopus before I glance at my phone to check the time, and realize a couple of things: one, if we don't leave soon, we'll be late for dinner, and two, not only did I miss two calls from Evan's former editor, spaced one hour apart, but I also missed two calls and five texts from Roy. I set my phone to Do Not Disturb after lunch, and now I'm going to have to face the consequences of that decision.

I know I should be panicking. I don't even have to read the texts to know Roy's furious, and there's a very real chance I'll lose my job, but I can't find it in myself to care. If it happens, it will have been worth it because I got to have this afternoon with Ivy.

I've never been a sexter or into taking racy photos, but I currently have the photo strip from the booth folded and tucked into my wallet.

I'll definitely be pulling that out later.

Still, I can't completely shirk my responsibilities, right? I've been nothing but dependable my entire adult life and my adolescence too. There's no denying all that responsibility has begun to chafe, but—

Wait, is that Ivy's influence?

Is it a *good* thing?

"Is everything okay?" she asks with a worried look, and I realize I'm still staring at my phone screen, Fifi the Flamingo tucked under my other arm. Oh, if Roy could see me now.

I shove the phone back into my coat pocket. “Everything is fine,” I lie. “But if you’re planning to be at your parents’ dinner, we should probably head out.”

She makes a face. “Please never say parents plural in regard to my mother and father again. It makes them sound like they’re connected, and as far as I’m concerned, that connection was severed years ago and will remain that way.”

“Deal,” I say, then take her hand in mine. “Then let’s go.”

“Not until we retrieve Vonnegut the Sequel and Twenty-Two,” she says in mock horror.

“I’d never leave my children. I figured we’d stop on the way.”

She gives me a sidelong look as we head over to the tent. “You’re going to be a good dad someday. I can already feel you making dad jokes in your head.”

“How about you?” I ask, feeling the jangling of my nerves. “Do you want kids someday?”

She kicks at a stone on the ground. “You know, my grandmother’s always told me I’m basically my mother born over. She might be right. There’s one key difference: I won’t be the reason for someone’s therapy bills.”

I tug her to a stop. “You’re nothing like that woman,” I insist. “If you don’t want to have kids, that’s your choice, one hundred percent. But you shouldn’t make that choice based off that reasoning. You care about people, Ivy. You can hardly help yourself. Last night you charged toward that bar because you couldn’t bear to stay back, even though you knew Logan was helping Brittany. You needed to help too. And for me...if it weren’t for you, I’d probably have gone back to New York weeks ago.”

“Should you have, Lou?” she asks, biting her lip. “Are you holding yourself back for me? Because I don’t want to be the anchor that ties you down. No one should be an anchor.”

Does she think I’m one for her?

“Ships need anchors.”

“Speaking of which,” she says as she nods to the tent ahead of us. The guy who’s running it, Bill, I guess, looks like he was five seconds away from throwing our fish off Big Jump Mountain, so it’s probably for the best that she cut our conversation short.

“How about you hold the flamingo and I hold the fish?” I ask with a quirk of my brow.

“Uh-huh, I see right through you, Lou Moralis. You don’t think carrying Fifi is masculine. Well, I’ll have you know that carrying an enormous pink stuffed animal is the most masculine thing a man can do.”

Bill gives me a pointed look, as if to remind me of his warning earlier. *Fuck around and find out*. Too bad I don’t have the first idea what I’m doing. I want to be with Ivy, but it would be ridiculous of me to tank my career for a woman who hates anchors, especially since she just heavily implied I should go back to New York.

As we head back to the gondola, Ivy whisper-shouts to the fish I’m holding, “We rescued you from Bill’s toilet bowl. We expect gratitude and a willingness to wear CGI hats.”

I can’t help but smile, and I find myself thinking about Vonnegut’s account. Maybe I should revive it. Hell, maybe I could even write another book about them. I feel my synapses firing with ideas, and it occurs to me again that bringing home these fish and reading Ivy’s book are more interesting to me than the last five books I sold.

“We need to get them a tank,” I say, throwing off the thought.

“I’m pretty sure there’s one in the garage,” she says. “Peony went through a fish phase, but she couldn’t keep them alive. Dad’s kind of a packrat, in case you haven’t noticed, so he stored it out in the garage in case somebody needed it someday. Lo and behold, someone does.”

“Thanks.” But I’m already wondering how I’m going to get them back to New York. Will I even have a job in New York? Do I want one? Roy hasn’t exactly had my back through

this whole thing. At the same time, my name isn't golden in the publishing community right now, and if I quit, I'm sure he'll retaliate by telling everyone I had a nervous breakdown.

Despite everything, book publishing is what I love. I'm not suited for anything else.

Which means I'm probably going to be stuck playing kiss ass with Roy *and* the editor.

I'm distracted on the ride down the mountain, but Ivy is, too, so she doesn't seem to notice. That's a good thing in this instance because I really don't want to talk about my job situation right now. Once we're in the car headed back, she calls her dad on speakerphone to see if her mother's canceled the dinner.

"Oh, no," Jay says. "But she did call to make sure I knew she was still coming. She says she'll bring dessert. I'm glad you've decided to come, honey. It sounds like Rowan, Holly, and Bryn are all coming too."

"What about Kennedy, Cole, and Rory?" she asks pointedly. I recognize a couple of the names—they're her brother and sisters' partners.

"I'm not sure, but we'll put extra chairs out just in case."

"Don't you find all of this strange?"

He chuckles. "Honey, I find a lot of things women do strange. But I don't ask the questions here."

"You should, Dad. It's your house, and she invited herself and three other people over and expects you to cook for them."

"She *is* bringing dessert."

Ivy hangs up and gives me a dark look. "What do you want to bet it's poisoned?"

"While she seems like a vile person, I suspect even she draws the line at poisoning her ex-husband and children. Besides, wouldn't that defeat the purpose if she's trying to seduce him?"

Her face scrunches up. “Ewww. You’re also forbidden from mentioning seducing and my mother and father in the same sentence.”

“That’s a lot of rules for a nonconformist,” I tease.

She doesn’t answer, just frowns.

Jay is bustling around the kitchen when we get home. After Ivy and I check in with him and ask if he needs help.

“Looks like *you* might need help,” he says with a grin, looking at the fish I’m still holding.

“No, I remember where the tanks are,” Ivy says. “But, hey, if those chickens don’t work out, we can always go for fish.”

“Very funny,” I say, giving her shoulder a bump.

Her smile is fake and strained, but I don’t call her on it.

The tank is easy to find, and we wash it and set it up on my before filling it up with water and adding the dechlorination drops, which miraculously haven’t expired. Now we have to wait for the water to reach room temperature before we can add the fish.

“Let’s go help Dad,” Ivy says, reaching for my hand. “He says he doesn’t need help, but I want to get a feel for what his expectations are.”

“Okay,” I say, “I’ll be out in a minute. I have to make a work call.”

She blinks in surprise. “Oh. Okay.”

I can understand why she’s caught off guard. All she sees me do is work on my laptop or on paper manuscripts. I haven’t made many calls while I’ve been here. Also, it’s Sunday night, not exactly a time when most people are dialing into the office.

“It won’t take long,” I say.

“Sure.” She reaches up and gives me a kiss, softer and sweeter than I expected, and something in my heart warms—then immediately chills. Ivy makes me happy, but after this phone call, I’ll likely be headed back to New York sooner

rather than later. She mentioned earlier that she'd be willing to visit New York, but she made it sound like something we'd do together—before coming back here. Knowing her, she might decide it's time to turn the page the second I return to my life in the city.

She walks out and shuts the door behind her as I pull my phone out of my pocket and check the texts. Roy's first text informed me the editor had called and would be calling back at three. In the three follow-up texts, he (1) demanded to know why I hadn't taken the call, (2) insulted me colorfully for not answering his own calls or texts, and (3) suggested perhaps I didn't want my job anymore.

Drawing in a breath, I place the call to Roy.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he demands as soon as he answers. "You better be in the hospital with two broken hands and just come out of a coma."

"No," I say, sitting on the bed. "Nothing that dramatic."

"Well?" Roy shouts. "What excuse do you have for not taking the goddamned calls?!" He's shouting so loudly I pull the phone away from my ear. I feel my patience fray. There's no call for talking to another person this way.

"I have no excuse other than that it's the weekend," I say tightly. "At least nothing that will appease you, so let's leave it at that."

My answer must have surprised him because when he speaks again, his voice is several orders of magnitude lower. "What's your plan here, Lou?"

"What do you mean?"

"Sure, I sent you away, but you don't seem all that eager to come back."

I'm not, but saying so doesn't seem conducive to keeping my job. "I've been working while I'm here," I say. "You were right about a change of scenery doing me good."

"Be that as it may, I'm going to need you back on Tuesday. We have a group meeting with the editorial staff of Birch

Street Books, and everyone is expected to attend. *Everyone.*”

My chest tightens. That’s only two days from now. Less, actually. I’m not ready to go so soon. “Okay.”

“But if you don’t call Thomas Matthews back and grovel, don’t bother showing.”

He hangs up, and I continue to sit on the bed staring at the fish tank.

What the hell am I going to do about Vonnegut the Sequel and Twenty-Two?

I know I have bigger things to worry about, like talking to that asshole editor, telling Ivy I’m leaving, and even sitting through the dinner disaster with the Mayberrys and Anderses, but for some reason, my mind chooses to dwell on them.

I sit here for several minutes before I realize this is an unproductive use of my time and energy. I stand, shove my cell phone into my pocket, and head out to the kitchen.

I can look up flights and check out the airlines’ pet policies before I go to bed.

Ivy has a potato masher and is going to town on a large pot of boiled potatoes as she gives her father what must be her form of a pep talk, reminding him of the many ways her mother has hurt him and all of her children. His head is bobbing as he pulls a couple of roasted chickens out of the oven.

“How can I help?” I ask, forcing a smile.

Ivy glances over at me, her brow furrowed as though she can tell that I’ve just received bad news.

Jay gives me a grateful look. “You can finish assembling the salad.” He nods toward the bowl of lettuce and a cutting board covered with chopped vegetables. A glass container filled with vinaigrette waits next to it.

I wash my hands, then get to work, adding the vegetables.

“Do you know how wrong this is?” Ivy asks as she carries the bowl of mashed potatoes to the table. “Women all over the

county are showing up to your doorstep with food, yet *you're* cooking for *her*. I mean, the Three Fates would totally be up for a plural relationship with you, and while they *are* older than you, Lou's really changed my thoughts on the whole age gap thing."

"We're not getting back together," Jay says for what has to be the fourth or fifth time in the past several minutes. I'm starting to wonder who he's really trying to convince—Ivy or himself. "Your mother says she has something to talk to us about, that's all."

I stand at the kitchen counter, tossing the dressing into the salad and keeping my mouth shut. This is their family drama, and I need to stay out of it, no matter how I feel about the matter.

"What if what she wants to talk about is getting back into your bed?" Ivy says, dropping the bowl on the table so hard I'm surprised none of the preset dishes haven't broken.

"Isn't the fact that she invited your siblings proof that she's not interested in a reconciliation?" Jay asks.

"You're obviously forgotten what she's really like," Ivy says. "Which is a huge problem."

"She won't be seducing me during dinner," Jay says with a chuckle. "You and Lou and your siblings will be chaperones."

"You think that's going to stop her?" Ivy asks.

Jay gives her an exasperated look. "Just try to be nice."

Ivy's brow lifts as she stares hard at him.

"Okay, you're right," he concedes. "Nice is too much. Shoot for civil."

"No promises," Ivy says, then resumes setting the table.

The doorbell rings, and Ivy's entire body stiffens as though she's a cyborg that's been called by the mother ship.

Oops. Bad analogy.

"It's probably Rowan or Holly and Bryn," Ivy says. "Peony doesn't believe in arriving until at least ten minutes

late.”

We all stare at each other for about two seconds before Jay heads for the living room. “I’ll get it.” A few seconds later, we hear him say, “Peony! You’re early.”

Oh shit.

I hold Ivy’s gaze. “Remember what I said.”

Her eyes turn stormy. “You’ve said a lot of things, and I have to admit I’ve tuned a lot of them out over the past hour.”

My gaze narrows. “I’m talking about the multiple times I told you not to let her get to you.”

“No wonder I tuned that out.”

I roll my eyes. “I realize it’s easier said than done, but she obviously wants to goad a reaction out of you. Don’t give her what she wants.”

“It’s like you know her,” she says with a wicked grin. “And me.”

Jay and Peony are still in the living room, talking low enough I can’t make out the words.

“I know people like her,” I say as I walk over to the table with the salad bowl, pausing to place a soft kiss on her lips. “You, I’m starting to understand.”

Something flashes in her eyes—surprise? Alarm?—but her gaze shifts to Jay as he walks in with Peony, who isn’t carrying a dessert.

“Figures,” Ivy mutters under her breath when she sees her mother is empty-handed.

“Ivy,” Peony says in a syrupy sweet tone that feels forced. “You’re here. How nice.”

“I’m staying here, *Peony*,” Ivy says with a leer.

Peony forces a smile. “Aren’t you a little old to be living with your father?”

A fiery look flashes in Ivy’s eyes, but before she has a chance to respond, I say, “Aren’t you staying with *your*

mother?”

Peony shoots me a dark look, and if she didn't like me before, she really doesn't now. I consider that a win. Especially when Ivy graces me with a wide smile. I realize I'm still holding the salad bowl, so I set it in the middle of the table.

Jay releases a nervous laugh. “The other kids should be here any minute. I'm sure you're eager to see them, Peony.”

“You have no idea,” she says.

The doorbell rings, so I grab Ivy's hand and drag her out of the room to answer the door.

“What are you doing?” she whisper-hisses. “I need to chaperone my dad.”

“I seriously doubt your mother will have time to brainwash him in the thirty seconds we'll be gone. Besides, unless she invited your grandmother, one of your siblings is at the door. You need a chance to join forces.”

Her eyes fly wide. “Oh my God. What if she *did* invite Nana?”

“Only one way to find out,” I say as we reach the front door. “Open it.”

She steels her back, then opens the door, but Rowan is standing on the porch with Holly and Cole.

“If you get to have Lou with you, then I get Cole,” Holly says, as she pushes past Rowan and walks in, dragging Cole along. He looks a little bewildered, like he's still unsure of his role in this mess. I'm in the same boat.

“Bryn and Rory are on their way,” Holly says. “Willow, of course, can't make it, but Rowan has agreed to fill her in.”

Rowan gives Ivy a grim look, obviously not taking this responsibility lightly. “Kennedy's in Chicago for the weekend, but even if she were in town, I don't want her anywhere near ground zero.”

“Fair enough,” Ivy offers.

“We need to come up with a plan before Mom arrives,” Holly says, grim faced.

“Too late,” Ivy says. “She’s already here.”

“She was early?” Holly asks with what seems to be genuine horror. “Has hell frozen over? She’s definitely up to some shit.”

“Agreed, sadly,” Ivy says. “I can’t remember the last time she was on time for anything other than a date.”

Holly’s mouth firms. “Let’s go.” She takes the lead, leaving everyone else to follow her, but Cole hangs back with me as the siblings march into the dining room.

“Tell me they have beer,” he says in an undertone. “I think I’m going to need a few beers to get through this.”

“I hear you.”

I start to shut the front door, but a pregnant woman is walking up with a man I recognize from magazine covers and news articles—Rory Byrne. I hold the door open for them. The woman, obviously Holly’s twin sister Bryn, stops at the door. “You must be Lou.”

“Guilty as charged. Everyone’s already in the dining room.”

Cole and I follow them into the dining room, where everyone’s already grabbed a seat, leaving spaces for the rest of us to fill in. Jay is in the process of cutting a couple of roast chickens he’s set out on a platter on the table.

“You kids are just in time,” he says with an uneasy smile that suggests he’s not exactly enjoying himself. That’s a good sign, I think. Actually, he doesn’t seem to be mooning over Peony as much as I’d worried he would, so maybe Ivy’s been reading this wrong, and he agreed to this just to be nice, a peace keeper. “Take a seat.”

We do as we’re instructed, shoving our legs under the table designed to hold six people max, not nine. I sure hope Ivy’s grandmother isn’t waiting to make a dramatic entrance. We’d have to set up a kids’ table in the corner.

“This looks delicious, Jay,” Rory says as he picks up the salad and starts to serve some to Bryn.

“It was nothing really,” Jay says with a self-effacing grin. “Dig in.”

Everyone starts passing around bowls and scooping food onto their plates—everyone except for Peony, who is watching as though she’s an anthropologist, studying human behavior.

Suddenly, before anyone has even had a chance to take their first bite, she announces, “You must be wondering why I’ve asked you all here this evening.”

“Yeah,” Ivy mutters with a snort. “The thought had crossed our minds.”

Peony glares at her. “You’re here because I have some very important news to share.” She graces us with a dramatic pause, and I’m alarmed to see tears shining in her eyes. They don’t look natural though. Something tells me this is a talent she’s practiced and honed—like some people look in mirrors to hone their camera-ready smile. “Your dear grandmother is dead.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ivy

“Did you kill her?” I blurt, my fork falling onto my plate with a clatter.

Everyone looks gobsmacked, like Hurricane Peony just made landfall—and credit where it’s due, I guess, none of us were expecting *this*. I’m not even altogether sure I believe her. Nana Mayberry was always larger than life—in a bad way, to be clear—and it seemed like she’d hang on to life forever, that she’d be celebrating triple-digit birthdays when the rest of us marched off to meet our maker.

“No, Ivy,” Peony scoffs. “I didn’t *kill* her. How *dare* you ask such a thing?”

“It’s a valid question,” Rowan says, his expression defensive. Of *me*. “You show up in town, unannounced, and suddenly she’s dead? Ivy just saw her last week, and she was very much alive.”

“Yes, she was her usual self,” I say as shock roils through me. I didn’t love my grandmother. I didn’t *like* my grandmother. Hatred would be a better word for what I felt. But it’s still hard to believe. She wasn’t a large woman, but she was absolutely larger than life, with a personality that gave zero fucks about anyone else. If there was anything to admire in her, it was that. Then my own words hit me. *Her usual self*. She was, and she wasn’t. She’d come off as almost unhinged the other day. Out of control.

I can feel Lou looking at me, probably worried about how I’m taking this, and he reaches over and puts a hand on my

leg, his touch bleeding warmth through me and helping to dissipate the shock.

Peony gives a sniff that's as believable as a toddler's attempts to fake cry. "My mother is dead," she wails. "How *dare* you."

My dad gives us a *c'mon kids* look and gets up and hugs Peony, who clings to him like a limpet, her hands straying all over his back like she's considering going in for an ass grab but isn't sure she can play it off.

"Dad," I say, pushing my chair back. "I really need some comfort too. Can you give me a hug?"

He clearly knows my game, but he's not going to deny me, so he releases her, leaving her glowering at me, and gives me a hug. Once he pulls away, he glances at the rest of the table and, obviously feeling the need to spread the love or at least the comfort, proceeds to hug each of us Mayberrys.

"I wanted us to mourn together," Peony says. "This should bring us *together*. Why, I've never met your young man, Bryn." Her gaze is nothing but calculating as it lands on Rory. "Such a *handsome* man."

Rory must be uncomfortable, but he just gives her a shallow nod. "A pleasure," he lies before turning back to Bryn, who looks the closest to an actual mourner of anyone at the table. He maneuvers their chairs so he can put an arm around her. I feel a rush of sympathy for her—of any of us, she's the one who dealt the most with Nana. For years, they ran Mayberry Matchmakers together, along with Holly, who took the whole thing much less seriously.

"What about me?" Cole asks with a glint of humor.

"You're dog shit," Holly says. "Mom only likes rich people." Her gaze darts to Lou. "Unless you have some big fortune we don't know about, you're on the unimportant list too, Lou. Welcome, the water's warm on this side."

"Probably because somebody peed in it," I feel compelled to say.

My dad, who's just reached Holly in the hug line, whispers something in her ear, and she sighs and says, "Sorry, Mom. Why don't you tell us the whole story? I think we'd all like to know what happened." She holds back the *you're clearly dying to give us the scoop*, but we can all tell it's true. This is her big moment. Her time to shine and dazzle—to *surprise*.

Dad returns to his seat, and Peony pushes her chair closer to his. I wish I'd thought to nail it into place before she showed.

"Well, it's not a pleasant story, kids," she says with a sigh. "It might put you off your dinners."

Holly takes a big bite of roast chicken. Everyone looks at her, then Peony, with slightly less wind in her sails, says, "As you probably knew, your grandmother was planning her comeback with a revolutionary TV show."

Rowan coughs, probably because he was part of said TV show, but then our egg donor continues.

"It was one of her great disappointments in life that the network show didn't work out." Here she gives Rowan a pointed glance as if to say he's at fault for falling in love with Kennedy and destroying Nana's dreams of TV greatness. "But she had a comeback plan. She wanted to film a show of her own, with herself as the star. You know, there really aren't enough dating shows starring older women."

She's not wrong, but Nana wasn't setting out to be a trendsetter or make a statement about later-in-life dating. Nana wanted to be the person everyone was talking about. Now, in a weird way, she's getting what she wanted and she's not here to see it. There's something sad about that, although I wouldn't call it tragic.

"She died doing what she loved," she says with another fake-sounding sob. "She'd rented a house near Blowing Rock. There were six contestants." Her gaze darts back to Rowan again. "I guess they were young men who'd auditioned to be on that awful show of yours. Really, what those producers did to my poor mother is shocking."

In addition to blackmailing one of the male contestants into giving her, ahem, favors in exchange for screen time, she'd tried to sabotage the other host multiple times, from giving him a lotion she knew he'd be allergic to dosing his sweet tea with alcohol. Yup, she really got hosed.

"It's not *my* show," Rowan says flatly. "I had the misfortune of being on the end of it, but only because my fiancée asked me to."

"He's not bullshitting you," Holly agrees. "He did his damndest to get that thing shut down before he fell in love with Kennedy. None of us were pleased about *Matchmaking the Rich*, but it might actually end up being a good thing."

"They're changing the name," Rowan tell us. "Kennedy asked them to. It's going to be *Matchmaking Small Town America*. I guess they're going to do other seasons in other places." His mouth hitches to the side. "I kind of wish they'd keep it here, because Harry's still the host, and he and Oliver are going to have to go wherever they're filming. I guess they're looking forward to it, though."

"Who's are Harry and Oliver?" Peony asks, looking put out.

"Oliver's been my best friend since childhood," Rowan says flatly. "Harry's his boyfriend."

Peony waves a hand as if he's digressing too far from the central point—which, presumably, is her. "None of that matters," she says, her voice rising. "Can't you see? It doesn't matter."

"What happened next?" Lou asks, surprising me. His hand is still on my leg—a silent show of support that feels fantastic. I think of that call he had before dinner, the one he didn't really tell me about. Did his boss ask him to come back? Is he leaving?

Earlier, up on Big Jump Mountain, I tried to tell myself it was okay that we were making memories, but the thought of him leaving imminently or at all fills me with...

Fear.

I don't want him to go, which might scare me even more than the fear of losing him. Still, I let myself clutch the hand on my leg like it's the lifeboat it feels like.

"She'd also hired a couple of cameramen online," Peony says with a sniff. "I'd explained how she could use Craigslist."

This prompts a few incredulous looks between me and my siblings. Nana using Craigslist? The true shocker is that she never asked any of us how to manage it, but I guess Rowan's the person she was accustomed to going to for help after her falling-out with Bryn, and she probably wasn't feeling any too fond of him after he "ruined" her show.

"Oh, my dears," Peony says, clutching her napkin and lifting it to her dry eyes. "This is too much. I guess they were filming an episode of the show, and...well, from what they were able to gather your grandmother had added a little something to a few of the drinks. You know her, she was always trying to keep life interesting, and she must have wanted very badly for this show to be a hit. Well, she added enough to affect a large man, and she really should have marked the cups, the poor dear, because she drank it herself."

There's silence for several seconds, maybe even a few minutes, while we all struggle to absorb this. "Are you saying she tried to drug a man so she could...do things to him, and instead she killed herself?" Rowan asks flatly.

Peony scowls. "That's a very judgmental way to put it, Rowan. We don't know what really happened. We can only go on the testimony of the people who were left behind...and her credit card history...and the fact that the remainder of the drug was in her suitcase. Besides, you have to keep in mind that everyone drinks on those shows. She wasn't doing anything very different from anyone else."

"There's a difference between choosing to have a drink and getting your drink spiked..." Lou says slowly. The guys at the table are exchanging incredulous looks. Are they planning on bolting from this family while they still can?

I give Rory a look. "You can't leave us. You've locked it down."

He gives me a small smile. “Never dreamed of it.”

“My mother wasn’t perfect,” Peony begins.

Someone snorts.

“She wasn’t perfect,” she repeats, “but she was a pillar of respectability in this town for decades—”

Holly opens her mouth to say something but apparently fails to find words.

“We’re going to give her the send-off she deserves. The celebration of life will be on Monday at noon, at the old office for Mayberry Matchmakers. All the arrangements were previously made.”

“She pre-organized her funeral?” Bryn asks quietly.

“All of the details were handled.” There’s a firming of Peony’s face. “I guess she didn’t trust any of you to make them to her liking.”

Well, that certainly sounds like Nana.

“I’ve already spoken with the lawyers,” she adds, and I wonder if she realizes her mouth is creeping up into a smile. “There were sealed letters for all of us, but the house and Mayberry Matchmakers have been left to me.”

Holly and Bryn dart a quick look at each other. “The business has been closed down for months,” Bryn says slowly.

“I want to carry on my mother’s legacy,” Peony says primly.

“You’ve never been interested in matchmaking for anyone but yourself,” Holly says. “You’ve said so *many* times.”

“Consider it a new leaf.” Her gaze finds Rory. “I figure we can all work together. You have the app. I’ll have the brick-and-mortar business. Everyone will know that the Mayberrys are working together, again. Unless...”

Here goes. She’s about to unveil some big plan. What’ll it be this time?

“I was thinking that I *could* reopen it as an events management business, but I’d want to launch some serious events right out of the gate. Weddings, you know. I think it would honor your grandmother while still letting me add my own special flair. You know, that might really work out nicely, especially with a wedding coming up in the family.”

“Well, you’ve certainly had enough weddings to have practice,” Holly says with a snort, “but what makes you think that Bryn and Rory haven’t already made arrangements?”

Peony’s face stiffens. “I haven’t received an invitation.”

Because Bryn was on the fence about inviting her, but it’s true they haven’t sent them out to anyone yet. With the stress of the app launching, she hasn’t had time. But when they do marry, I have a feeling it’s not going to be the huge event our mother is envisioning.

“Besides...” Peony eyes Bryn with pinched lips. “You don’t want to be a whale on your wedding day. There’ll be photos everywhere, and everyone will wonder why the billionaire bachelor decided to marry *you*.”

“Stop,” Rory says, his tone brooking no argument. His arm flexes around Bryn. “You’ve had a shock, but I won’t allow you to speak to my future wife that way.”

“Hallelujah,” Holly says, reaching for the wine bottle in the middle of the table and pouring herself a glass filled to the brim. “I’d say that calls for a toast.” And then she takes a gulp that drains a third of it. “By the way, I’m not going to let you make the arrangements for my wedding either. If we ever decide to get married.”

“Ever?” Cole mutters, lifting his eyebrows. “You don’t want to make an honest man out of me?”

She shrugs. “I figured we’d do it on a whim someday, or I’d let Jane take the reins. She’d enjoy setting things up.” Her gaze shoots to my mother. “Yes. I would prefer Cole’s eight-year-old daughter make the arrangements for my wedding than to hand them over to you.”

“I’m an excellent event planner,” she says stiffly. “I hardly need *you* to help me. I have something much more spectacular in mind.”

“This argument can take place on another day,” I say. “Why doesn’t anyone in town know Nana’s dead? How do we know any of this is true? Like I said earlier, maybe you shoved her in the oven. You certainly seemed comfortable in her house.”

“*My* house,” she clips out. “And no one knows because the authorities contacted me, her emergency contact, first. The pre-written notice will be in the paper tomorrow. I guess none of you were her preferred contacts. She mustn’t have fully trusted you.” She says this last phrase with a sniff. “Why, she told me just last week that you’d all abandoned her. I was the only one who supported her in filming her new show. *I* was the one who helped her find the rental house. *I* was the one who helped her choose the contestants.”

This is something of a shock. Like I said, Nana never liked Peony much, but I guess she was used to having Rowan and Bryn as her minions, and she’d needed someone to take their place.

To my surprise, it’s Bryn who asks, “And did you ask for something in return, *Mom*?”

Peony’s cheeks flush. “How dare you?”

But I can tell it’s true. This is how she convinced her to leave her the house, the business. I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine—for generations, it was the Mayberry family motto.

“Did you find her the date drugs too?” I ask.

“You’re a crude little girl,” she says, her face morphing. “Always have been.”

“And you’re in her house right now,” Lou says, his hand flexing on my leg. “You should remember that.”

“That was beneath you, Peony,” Jay agrees, even though that’s obviously not true.

She gives an aggrieved sniff. “I’m emotionally distraught. She may just be your grandmother, but she *raised* me.”

Holly snorts. “She practically raised all of us, more’s the pity. We still turned out mostly all right.”

“Well, maybe some of you did,” Cole says, nudging her shoulder. They’re always teasing each other, bickering. The look she gives him says she’s grateful to him for restoring that little bit of normality.

Lifting her chin, Peony says, “Like I said, the death notice will be in the local paper tomorrow, and the doves will be released at nine a.m. The sky writing will be later in the day.”

“Sky writing?” Lou repeats.

“How many doves are we talking?” Holly asks.

Peony looks like someone fed her a fresh soul. “The arrangements I helped her make will be talked about in Highland Hills for years. It’ll be a true event, something this town talks about for centuries.”

I’ll bet.

“This is going to be a circus, isn’t it?” I ask tightly. “What about legal trouble? Are any of the guys from her fake show going to press charges?”

“I sent them all gift baskets,” Peony says with a sniff.

“That would have to be one hell of a gift basket,” Lou mutters, and I start laughing.

“Can we start eating yet?” I ask. “I’m pretty hungry, and Dad made one hell of a meal. Nana wouldn’t want us to starve.”

“Oh, she absolutely would,” Holly says through a mouthful of potatoes. She passes around the wine, but it doesn’t make it around the table before it’s empty.

“I’ll go get some more,” I say. “And maybe some harder stuff.”

I’m not surprised when Lou follows me to the kitchen, just relieved.

He wraps his arms around me from behind as soon as we round the corner, and I lean back into him.

“Do unexpected things always happen around you?” he asks into my ear. I turn to face him, and lift up to kiss him.

“You better believe it.”

“Are you okay?”

“You know, I am,” I say, surprised by how much I mean it. “In a weird way, I think this is going to bring the rest of us closer together. Nana.... she always tried to tear us apart. Use us against each other. Our mother is kind of like that, too, but we’re different now. We’re older. I don’t think the others are going to let that happen.”

“You, Ivy,” he says, tucking a short curl behind my ear. “You’re a force of nature, and I can tell *you’re* not going to let that happen.”

I feel choked up suddenly. Not because of Nana, who surely got what was coming to her if she poisoned herself while trying to poison a man into making bad decisions. No. I’m choked up because Lou believes in me. Maybe he shouldn’t, but he does, and it’s not the kind of mistake I’m going to tell him to fix.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Lou

Peony doesn't stay long after making her announcement.

"I'm just so busy," she says, fluttering her hands next to her head. I suspect she's trying to make herself look important. Instead, she looks like she's making a face at a baby. Not that I think she likes babies. She doesn't seem to give a shit about Bryn's pregnancy. Only planning her wedding.

"Are you sure?" Jay asks. "You haven't eaten a bite."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"I have plenty of Tupperware for you to take some food home."

"From all the women who make *him* food," Ivy says with a dark look.

Peony places a hand on his arm. "That's sweet of you, Jay, but I'm so upset about Mother I can barely stand the thought of food."

From the takeout containers I noticed in her mother's house, it looks like her appetite's just fine, but she seems like the kind of woman who likes to drop a bomb, revel in the damage, then move on to the next conquest.

She stands, then bends down to kiss Jay on the cheek. "If there are leftovers, give them to Bryn. She's expecting the baby, so she can get away with gaining a little extra weight." She casts Bryn a glance and makes a face. "Or a lot, it looks like."

Bryn's and Holly's mouths fall open as Peony makes her departure, pausing only to grab one of the full bottles of wine from the cabinet to the side of the dining room. Ivy looks like she's about to jump out of her seat and tackle her.

I put my hand back on her leg, and some of the tension drains out of her.

The room is so quiet I can hear the humming of the old refrigerator in the kitchen, and then all hell breaks loose—the siblings all expressing their shock and anger at once.

Cole lets out a wolf whistle, and everyone shuts up. Turning to Holly, he asks, “Want to take the floor first?”

She picks up a rooster saltshaker from the table. “Whoever holds the cock gets to talk.”

“What kind of kumbaya shit is that?” Rowan grumbles.

“You know us. We all want to be the loudest. Now who wants to go first?”

Ivy, Bryn, and Rowan all reach for the rooster.

“This is gonna be fun,” Cole mutters.

They spend the next half hour discussing the bombshell their mother just dropped as well as what she might be up to. Rowan also FaceTimes Willow and Alex, and they say they'll head to Highland Hills first thing in the morning. They plan on staying in Holly's old room in the house she used to share with Rowan and Harry.

After everyone is talked out, we clear off the table. Jay tells us he's got the cleanup under control, and the siblings decide to head to Ziggy's to commiserate over beer—and water for Bryn—but I hang back and tell Ivy that I think I should stay home.

“Why?” she asks in surprise.

“I feel like you guys need some family time.”

“But you're part of this too.”

“Am I, though?” Call me crazy, but part of me really wishes I were. Still, the fact remains that I need to be in New

York by nine a.m. on Tuesday morning, and I have every suspicion Ivy's going to call the time of death on this relationship as soon as she finds out. Spending more time with her and her family will only make it more painful to leave. I'll have to talk to her about all of that, obviously, but it can wait for tomorrow.

I give her a soft kiss. "Go. I'll be fine. I'll help your dad clean up the kitchen, and we'll talk later."

"Okay," she reluctantly agrees, and then she and her siblings head to the brewery, leaving me and Jay in the now strangely quiet house.

"Didn't want to go with them?" Jay asks when I walk in and pick up a pot in the drying rack and start drying with a dish towel.

I release a nervous chuckle. "I think they have it covered."

"They can all be a bit..." He makes a face as though searching for the word. "I guess a bit much," he finally says, then hands me the platter that held the chicken. No one really ate other than Holly, who claimed the situation hadn't affected her appetite one bit. Ivy couldn't have had more than two bites. She had a glass of wine at the table, and now she's going to drink who knows how much beer. I hope she gets fries or something to help absorb the alcohol, or she's going to feel like shit tomorrow.

The thought puts a sick feeling in my stomach. This is why she calls me an old man. Because I think of the practical, boring issues, and she's a live-in-the-moment, consequences-be-damned kind of woman. Only that's not really fair. Sure, she's impulsive, but she's also responsible. She takes care of people without seeming to. She feels things deeply.

Maybe it's a good thing I'm leaving before I get any more attached. I'm already in so deep I can't see the surface.

"What's on your mind, son?" Jay asks, giving me a worried fatherly look.

"I just got word that I have to go home soon. I haven't told Ivy yet."

“Oh.”

“Yeah, oh.”

We continue washing dishes in silence for several more minutes before Jay says, “You’re a good influence on her.”

I release a nervous laugh. “That sounds a touch condescending.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” he says, thankfully not offended. “Ivy...she’s always been a free spirit, even as a girl. She wanted to see everything and do everything, and frankly, I think she’s been scared that if she gets too serious about anyone or anything she’ll end up feeling trapped.”

I nod, because he hasn’t said anything I didn’t already suspect. She’s worried she’s too much like her mother, so she avoids getting close to people to make sure she doesn’t leave wreckage in her wake.

“But she’s different with you,” he says softly. “She seems to feel more grounded.”

“Maybe so,” I say with a slight shrug, “but we’ve only just...uh...”

“Been sleeping together?” he says with a wide grin.

I make a face.

“I’ve noticed it since New Year’s.”

“But we weren’t together,” I protest.

“You were friends. I think that’s the thing Ivy hasn’t learned yet. That a hot guy who’s good in bed isn’t the only thing she needs.” His mouth shifts to the side. “Although I’m sure it doesn’t hurt.”

My mouth drops open, and I’m not sure how to respond to that. Thankfully, he doesn’t seem to expect me to.

“She needs to learn that friendship is a part of a good relationship. Hot sex becomes less hot over time, so you need something more to hang onto.”

“With all due respect, I don’t think she’s been looking for a relationship.”

He gives me a sad smile. “See? That’s where you’re wrong. She’s been looking—she just didn’t realize it.”

I’d like to believe him, but it’s possible he’s just projecting. Then again, I doubt it’s possible to be friends with someone like Peony.

He laughs. “I know you’re thinking about my relationship with Ivy’s mother.”

“Guilty as charged,” I say with a grimace.

He waves a hand in dismissal. “I can’t blame you for that. You know, I didn’t express myself very well this morning. I’m not interested in getting involved with Peony again. That’s a mistake I’ve already made twice. The reason I wanted Ivy to see her is because I know she has unfinished business where her mother’s concerned. I figured maybe it would help her realize that she’s not like her mother...but also that her mom’s not some evil mastermind, just small-minded.”

Well, shit. I feel like an ass for having essentially told him off about that. It’s not like me to have a kneejerk reaction without hearing someone out, but Ivy brings out my protective side.

“You were right,” I say, “although Peony kind of threw a wrench in that plan.”

He laughs again and claps me on the back. “Well, for the record, I’m rooting for you crazy kids.”

I grin at him, because I can’t help it. I haven’t been called a kid in years, and it’s certainly never happened in this house.

I say goodnight and head to my room, where I search for flights back to New York. I want to stay for the celebration of life on Monday, and the latest flight out of Charlotte is at nine o’clock Monday night. It’s a direct flight, but it’s a two-hour-plus drive to the airport, which means I’ll need to leave Highland Hills by five or five-thirty at the latest.

I go through all the motions to purchase the ticket, but when it comes to pulling the trigger, I close out the tab, shut my laptop, and turn off the light.

Rationally, I know I have to be on that flight. Still, I'm not ready to completely admit it to myself yet.

* * *

I wake up in the middle of the night when Ivy climbs into bed with me, pressing her chest and stomach to my back and draping an arm over my side. She's wearing a shirt, but her legs are bare. She smells like beer and grease. I try not to read too much into the fact that she crawled into my bed instead of getting in her own.

I start to roll over to face her, but her hold on me tightens. "Just let me hold you," she whispers, her words sounding a little slurred.

Is she drunk? Maybe, but no judgment from me. She got a hell of a shock. I'd probably be drunk too.

She falls asleep almost immediately, but I stay awake, listening to the even sound of her breathing and feeling the way she's wrapped around me. It's a fanciful thought, but she seems to belong there. But does she see the possibility of a long-term relationship with me? If not, I might be saying goodbye forever on tomorrow.

I can imagine her looking at me in that final moment, smiling sadly, and saying, *All good things come to an end, Lou.*

Maybe so, but I stay awake for as long as I can, because in this moment she's mine, and I want it to last as long as possible.

* * *

We both sleep late—me because I spent so long lying awake, and Ivy because she did indeed drink too much. After I get up

and get her a glass of water and ibuprofen, I find her propped up in bed, squinting from the light sneaking past the edges of the blinds.

I silently hand her the pills and the water.

“You’re like my guardian angel,” she says after she downs the pills.

“Did you and your siblings make plans for today?”

She looks up at me with one eye closed, the other squinted a crack. “We’re prepared to take in all the events. We definitely can’t miss the sky writing. I bet them a hundred dollars that it says, *I’ll haunt all of you.*”

I grin. “I can’t believe she hired a sky writer.”

She takes a sip of her water and gives me a sassy look, then grunts in pain. “Welcome to the Mayberry family.”

I tell myself she doesn’t mean anything by it, but my heart still soars a little. “Do you want to talk about your grandmother or your mother’s announcement?”

She makes a face and gets out of bed in her oversized T-shirt and panties. “What’s there to talk about?”

“I know you didn’t care for your grandmother, but it must have been a shock. You just talked to her a week ago.”

She shrugs. “Honestly, it sounds like she brought it on herself.” She pulls a face. “I guess we’re supposed to show up at her lawyer’s office this morning to pick up the notes she wrote for all of us. I’m guessing mine says something shitty.”

“Probably,” I admit, because I can’t imagine the woman I’ve heard so much about would have had anything nice to say. “But she doesn’t get to tell you who you are, even though there’s something dramatic about doing it from the grave. Maybe you should just shred it.”

She harrumphs. “And lose the chance to be involved in something so dramatic? Never.”

“Is Willow planning on driving over with you? I talked to Alex an hour or so ago, and he said they’re coming by before

they drop off their stuff to Rowan's."

"Probably," she says. "I should check my phone. It sounds like there's even a note for my dad."

"Thorough."

She snorts as she heads to the door, pausing with her hand on the edge to pop a sultry pose that instantly has my mind in the gutter. "I'd give you a good morning kiss, but we're out of mints." She cocks her brow. "Join me in the shower?"

"I'm tempted," I admit, "but your father is in the kitchen sipping coffee and reading the paper." When alarm fills her eyes, I hold up a hand. "Decaf. I checked."

Her shoulders relax slightly, but she asks, "Was Nana's death notice in there?"

"Yeah." Jay had chuckled lightly while he was reading it, then pushed it over for me to look at. The headline was 'Feminist hero Maeve Mayberry passes away, taking a bright light from our world.' I hadn't felt the compulsion to read any more.

I tell Ivy as much, and she scowls.

"Now, I really need a distraction. We can lock the door to keep him from walking in."

I want her. I always want her. But I don't want it to be because she needs a distraction.

"The second worst thing I can think of next to him walking in is him hearing us through the thin walls." I tilt my head. "Maybe we should stay at the bed and breakfast tonight."

She shakes her head. "Let's hold off until tomorrow night. I'm not sure what's going on with everyone else."

"Of course," I say, because obviously, her family comes first in a situation like this, but there won't be a tomorrow night. Right? I can't give up my job for a relationship that has barely just begun, especially since she's made it clear she doesn't believe in "anchors."

I need to tell her—the sooner, the better.

She starts to walk out the door, and I call out, “Ivy, there’s something I need to tell you.”

She waves her hand at me as she crosses the hall. “Tell me after my shower. I need to rejoin the land of the living.”

But by the time she enters the kitchen, showered and dressed, searching for a coffee cup, the doorbell rings. Jay hops up to answer it, and I say, “Ivy, I need to tell you about —”

“Ivy?” Willow calls from the living room, and Ivy gives me an apologetic look.

“Can we talk about it after the whole lawyer shebang?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Sure.” Except I’m not sure when that will happen, because the day will be consumed with her brother and sisters. Again, that’s as it should be, but it would be absurd to tell her I’m leaving on the way to the airport.

I wander out to the living room, overcome with emotion when I see Alex. I haven’t seen him since Christmas, and before he moved to Asheville, we saw each other at least once a week.

We embrace with the stereotypical man hug, giving each other brusque pats on the back.

“I’ve missed you,” Alex says with a gleam in his eyes.

“I’ve missed you too, man,” I say, more relieved to see him than I expected. But Alex and I have been through just about everything together, and not having him with me in New York after the Evan and Victoria fallout was pretty damn hard.

Willow gives me a big hug, then Ivy. There’s something vulnerable about Ivy, unsure, and I remember what she told me on top of Big Jump Mountain. That her grandmother told her she was exactly like her mother. That she gaslit her into thinking poorly of herself.

“Shred it,” I say in an undertone. “Better yet, bring it back here and we’ll have a bonfire.”

“I like the way you think,” she says, pinching my cheek. But I can tell from the way she’s holding herself that she has

no intention of doing as I suggested. She's going to read every last word. I only hope that Maeve Mayberry decided to be a decent human being in the end, but I wouldn't bet on it.

They leave, and Alex and I head out to Jay's back deck and settle on the outdoor furniture.

He gives me a searching look. "Something's wrong. You're not upset over Nana Mayberry's death, are you? Because that woman was a piece of work."

"No," I say, gazing out into the neatly manicured yard. "Roy's finally lost his patience with me. If I'm not back in the office on Tuesday morning, I'm out of a job."

Alex looks me dead in the eye. "So get another job."

I groan. "Be serious. I'm a pariah in the publishing world. I'm lucky Roy's taking me back at all."

"Bullshit," Alex says. "He's damn lucky to have you. Did you fuck up with E-asshole-squared? Sure, I guess. But you can't bear all the blame. Matthews bought the book, and they didn't thoroughly vet him either. Seems like they should be getting the load of the blame if you ask me. You're not a lawyer."

"Maybe." I find myself thinking of Roy's call, of his demand that I call Matthews back. I haven't done that yet. I don't want to. We're both grown men who made the same mistake. Why should I have to prostrate myself?

"Bullshit," he says, sounding pissed. "Do you want to go back to work?"

That's a damn good question that I haven't really let myself consider. Up until the Evan mess, I loved my job. But I don't like the side of Roy's personality this has revealed—he's always been a hard-ass, but up until now, I thought he had my back. Now, I've got to wonder if it just felt that way because I was doing everything he wanted me to do.

"I love books," I finally say. "And I love publishing. I'm not ready to give that up, but no, I don't really want to go back to Roy's agency. He's been kind of a dick, and I have a feeling he won't be taking many chances on me or my projects."

What's the fun if you can't take chances? But the fact is, I'm unlikely to find another job. At least until there's been another scandal or two to make everyone forget about mine. I'm stuck."

"You don't have to work in New York to work in publishing," Alex says earnestly, leaning forward and resting his forearms on his thighs. "Look at Ivy. She doesn't even have a publisher, and she makes the *Wall Street Journal* with every release."

"But she's an author. Not an agent."

"Doesn't matter. The publishing world is a lot bigger than it used to be," he says. "There are plenty of people who work remotely. Hell, you can shift gears and become a consultant, maybe help people like Ivy who are publishing independently. Or start your own agency. You'd have me, obviously, and I'll bet Ivy would let you represent her too. If you did that, you could stay here. With her."

I stiffen like a raccoon caught with its hand in the cookie jar. I haven't told him about Ivy and me. "What? Why would I care if Ivy's here?"

"The Mayberry siblings love to gossip," he says with a knowing smirk. "Although I wish I'd heard it from you."

"Yeah," I say with a grimace. "There hasn't been much of a chance to tell you. Up until this weekend, we were just friends."

"But you like her. You had a slightly panicked look in your eyes whenever you talked about Victoria."

"And, let me guess, I look relaxed right now?" I ask, amused.

"Nah," he says with a grin. "You look scared shitless, but not of her, and not of Roy. I think you're scared of losing her. Does she know you're possibly leaving?"

"There's no possibly about it," I say. "I *am* leaving. But no, she doesn't know yet. I only found out about the meeting last night, right before Peony popped in to drop her bombshell."

“When are you going to tell her?”

“I’ve tried twice this morning and got interrupted both times.” I hold his gaze. “It doesn’t matter, Alex. She’s made it crystal clear that there’s an end date for us. It just came sooner than I was hoping.”

“I don’t know,” Alex says, giving me a searching look. “Rowan says he’s never seen her like this with a guy.”

I give a snort that would make Ivy proud. “Sure, but according to her, she never brings guys home, so he doesn’t have much basis for comparison.”

“She brought you home.”

“I was already here.” I sigh. “Trust me, I’d love to see where this goes, but I need to be a realist. It’s going nowhere.” My voice breaks. “As hard as that is to admit. Part of me thinks she’s the one, you know?” I hold his gaze. “I know I’ve known her for less than two months, but—”

“Hey,” he interrupts, reaching over to pat my knee. “You don’t have to explain anything to me. I felt the same way about Willow when it was way too early to be thinking such a thing, and now we’re getting married.”

“I know, and I’m so happy for you, man,” I say, and mean it. Willow’s perfect for him. I just wish she could be perfect for him in New York if I’m going back there.

“I want you to be happy too, Lou. Don’t give up on Ivy because it seems complicated or hard. You owe it to yourself and her to at least give it a shot.”

I let his words sink in. He’s right. I’ve unilaterally decided this is the end, and that’s not fair to Ivy. There’s a very strong chance she’ll want to end it, but I at least owe her the chance to know where my mind’s at and decide for herself.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Ivy

“Are you okay?” Willow asks me in an undertone.

Dad just drove us to the lawyer’s office and parked at a metered space beside it. I can see Rowan, Holly, and Bryn waiting outside. Peony is with them, wearing a dress that can only be called a statement piece, with angular, wire-framed shoulders and splashes of neon pink and yellow on a black background. She’s holding an enormous bird cage full of white doves that Rowan is eyeing with apprehension. She lifts a black handkerchief to her dry eyes.

Ah, so the freeing of the doves is supposed to happen after we’re delivered our final takedowns. Makes sense that my mother—and my grandmother—would want to celebrate that.

I suspect Rory and Cole wanted to come, and Kennedy is flying back from Chicago early to be with Rowan tomorrow, but Peony told us last night that we should come alone to the lawyer’s office. Apparently there was some provision in the will that said we weren’t allowed to have any “supportive partners” in there with us. Just like Nana to throw us in the deep end. But I’ll be honest, that’s not what’s on my mind right now.

I saw the look on Lou’s face before we left. And earlier too, when I ran for the shower. He might think he’s got this stoic thing going on, and to be sure, I used to think he had as many facial expressions as a rock, but I’ve learned to read him—his annoyed look: eyes slightly narrowed, the tips of his mouth lifted a couple of millimeters; his amused look: one side of his mouth lifted slightly higher than the other; his *I*

need more coffee if I'm supposed to deal with Ivy look: eyebrows lifted a few millimeters, eyes squinted; and his *I'm doing something that's going to upset someone* look. That's what he was rocking today. Mouth slanted down, the tiniest of furrows in his brow.

He's leaving me.

I knew he was going to leave. I figured that was why it felt safe, diving into these waters. But it feels different, knowing the time is coming—more like I'm looking off the edge of a cliff.

“You want me to keep driving, cupcake?” my dad asks, glancing back at me. I rode in back because I said I was used to it—youngest of five kids and all. Truthfully, I wanted some time to myself. “You can go get your brother and the twins, and we'll make a run for it. Get some ice cream instead and leave Peony to deal with her doves. I'll bet no one told her they shit everywhere.”

“Dad!” I say, impressed. “I thought she'd ensorcelled you again.”

“It's like I told you, Ivy. Your mother and I are never getting back together.”

“Well, thank God for small favors,” I mutter.

I'm tempted to take him up on the offer, but I ran from trouble this morning. I ran from trouble in Charleston. I've been the kind of woman who runs from trouble for a long time—all while pretending to embrace it. Maybe it's time to grow up. I mean, I'm obviously not going to stop chasing down a good time, but I want to start trusting myself. I want to believe there's more to me than the half of my DNA that's standing in front of the lawyer's office. I mean, my dad's a part of me, and poor choices aside, he's the very best of men.

I sigh and glance forward at Willow.

“Let's do this.”

“Don't forget me,” my dad says with a half smile. “Maeve had something to say to me too. I can't wait to hear exactly what that woman thought of me.”

Willow smiles sunshine at him, then me. “She was pretty free with what she thought in life. I don’t think there are going to be any surprises.”

“Why, Willow,” I say, lifting a hand to my chest in feigned shock. “That’s probably the most negative thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

What I don’t tell her is that I disagree. Maeve Mayberry was exactly the sort of person who’d keep secrets to the grave just to have the pleasure of upsetting people one last time.

We get out of the car and head up to the steps together.

“Thank God,” Rowan says, stepping forward to hug Willow. “Let’s get through this as quickly as we can. Those birds are giving me the creeps.”

Peony sniffs. “They’re doves. They symbolize peace and life and—” One of them pecks her finger and she shrieks, dropping the cage, which leads to a flurry of squawking and loose feathers drifting into the air.

“You can’t just leave them there,” I say when Peony seems inclined to do just that. No one else moves to pick up the cage, so I do, sighing. “Let’s release them now.”

“No!” Peony says. “Your grandmother was very specific about the order of things.” I lift my eyebrows and offer her the cage, but her lips tighten and she says, “You’re right. The sun’s out, so we might as well do it now. Nana, bless her heart, will never know we had to change the order. Rowan, take a video. I’m going to set it to ‘The Wind Beneath My Wings’ and put it up on TikTok.”

Something tells me she’s hoping to use it to promote her new business, but Rowan’s in enough of a hurry to get through this visit that he does as requested. I open the door to the cage, but the doves seem in no hurry to leave.

“Go,” I tell them. “Fly off whence you came.”

Nothing.

“Peony, where did you get these birds? Are they stoned?”

“They’re from a pet store,” she says, rearranging the metal shoulder of her dress.

I set the open cage down, and one of the birds stumbles out, looking drunk. Then another. Instead of flying off, they flutter up a couple of steps and move toward Peony, acting like she’s a dry husk of corn they can feed off. It’s pretty entertaining, actually, and Rowan’s filming every second.

But all good things must come to an end. When Peony runs through the front door and slams it behind her, they finally take off into the air, and in a weird way, that’s beautiful too. I’m not really feeling the whole Nana Mayberry is at peace symbolism, but it makes me feel like I’m at peace with where I am in my life. With myself.

The rest of us exchange looks, then Rowan claps his hands and says, “Who’s ready to get their ass handed to them one last time?”

We all start laughing, but there’s a bit of uneasiness about us too, like I’m not the only one who suspects our grandmother might have had a few last trick cards up her sleeve. Like maybe we hated her, but we’re all sort of mourning her too. Or, if not her, then the end of something.

We gather the now-empty bird cage and enter the building together.

“Doves, huh?” asks the receptionist, who’s clearly seen things. “You can leave that by the shoe rack.”

So we do.

Peony is sitting in a chair by the front desk, having abandoned yet more dependent creatures for someone else to take care of.

“Delete that video,” she hisses at Rowan.

“What video?” he asks innocently.

The receptionist ushers us into a conference room, and once we’re all seated around the table, offers us water. No one accepts. Then a nervous-looking man walks in with a toupee that’s glued on a good inch above where his hairline starts.

He's holding a folder filled with what do indeed look like sealed envelopes.

"Good morning," he says.

We grumble back the appropriate wishes.

He swallows air and then says, "Now, am I to understand that your mother has already shared with you that she is the sole inheritor of the deceased's estate?"

We all offer our accessions, and he says, "Your grandmother did, however, ask that a private note be delivered to each of you after I read a pre-prepared statement. I'd urge you to keep in mind that *she* was the one who wrote these remarks."

"That good, huh?" I say.

He gulps more air, then slips out a sheet of paper. He clears his throat, grimaces, then says, "*If that infernal bald man—*" He reaches up to touch his toupee, and I almost burst out laughing, because it's obvious the toupee was a recent acquisition. He clears his throat. "*If that infernal bald man is reading this to you, then I'm dead. It's your fault, in all likelihood. With my genes and healthy manner of living, I should have lived to be at least one hundred. You may be wondering why I chose to leave everything to Peony.*" He darts a glance at her, clears his throat again, then says, "*who is in every regard a foolish, stupid woman with no value beyond her appearance.*" Another throat clearing. "*And that, she is already losing.*"

Peony presses her lips together in a firm line, obviously trying to keep silent, but she loses the battle and blurts, "But she left everything to me. That *means* something."

"*It means nothing that I left everything to her,*" the man continues. "*Merely that she's the least objectionable of all of you, and I would prefer for my legacy to stay in the family line. I have written a note for the self-betterment of each of you, including you, Jay Anders, because you are an uncommonly silly man and need all the help you can get.*"

Dad gives an uncaring shrug, and a half laugh escapes me. The lawyer or legal assistant or whomever looks like he's about to keel over. Leave it to Nana Mayberry to kill someone from beyond the grave.

"Okay," Peony hisses. "You did your duty. Give them their notes."

"There's one for each of you," he says pointedly, handing her an envelope first. She gives a world-weary sigh, then takes it. Rowan's next, then my dad, then Holly, Willow, and Bryn. It feels like it means something that I get mine last. By the time it's handed to me, Peony is already ripping hers in half and stuffing it into the trash muttering something about getting the last laugh. Holly tosses hers without reading it, and the rest of my siblings and my father tuck theirs away to be read on some future occasion.

"Who wants ice cream?" Dad asks merrily. "I was talking about it before we came in, and now I can't get it out of my head."

"Dad, you can't eat ice cream," I mutter.

"Sorbet then," he says easily.

"What about the sky writing?" Peony all but shrieks. "We're supposed to gather in the park and watch the message form together! We need to release the balloons the instant the whole thing has been written."

"Yeah, that's terrible for the environment," Rowan says, getting to his feet and stuffing his hands in his pockets. "I'm not doing that. In fact, I'm not so sure I want to go to the celebration of life tomorrow either."

"But it's my first event for Mayberry Merriment!"

"You're calling it that, and your first event is a funeral?" Holly asks, getting up and waiting for Bryn to do the same. Rowan is already at the door. "Big mistake. Huge."

Peony considers this for a second, then the lawyer-or-legal assistant clears his throat. "Actually, can you *all* leave? I'm so sorry, but I have another appointment in ten minutes."

“Well, *I’m* going to the sky writing. And the funeral,” I announce. “And I’m bringing Lou. Because this is the kind of shit you really can’t make up.”

“Vulgar, Ivy,” Peony tells me with a completely straight face in that hideous metal-shouldered dress.

I grab the folded note out of my pocket and shake it. “Pretty sure that’s what this says. Now, when is the sky writing going to take place?”

She clears her throat. “3:31, because her birthday was...”

“March thirty-first,” Bryn says.

“Cute,” Holly adds. “*Some* of us will probably be there, but we’re only going because Ivy’s right. This will be one hell of a circus.”

And with that, we leave. In the car on the way back to the house, we’re in the same formation as before, Willow in the front seat with Dad, me in the back. Willow convinced him to head home so we can check in with Alex and Lou prior to the ill-advised February ice cream outing. I mean, really, Dad.

In the back seat, I turn the letter back and forth in my hands. Lou told me not to open it, and he was right. I know he was right. But I’m not the type of person who can just walk away from Pandora’s box. Put that sucker in front of me, and it’s getting opened all the way.

Still. I wish he were here, sitting beside me while I do it.

He’s going to leave, I tell myself. Maybe he’s even packing up now, Alex beside him.

The thought puts a lump in my throat, but I finally rip the note open.

“She’s doing it,” Dad says, catching the sound. “Steel yourself, cupcake.”

I glance upfront. “Have you read yours, Willow?”

“I think I’m going to wait until after the funeral,” she says, biting her lip. “I don’t want to think poorly of her before her funeral.”

I have no such compunction.

Glancing down, I read.

You should never have been born.

I snort, then continue reading, because I have to hand it to Nana, it's a hell of a start.

Maybe you think I'm exaggerating or being cruel, but sometimes the truth is cruel. Your mother didn't want you. Your father had to sabotage his career to raise you. Did he ever tell you that he was offered a park ranger position before you were born? It was his dream, and he'd undergone a long application process. Your parents were on the verge of divorcing because your mother already wanted to move down to Florida, not to the middle of nowhere. But then "Peony" got pregnant with you, and your father dropped everything. He never went anywhere, never did anything.

Maybe you're wondering why I'm telling you this, other than to be cruel. I believe in being honest, Ivy, and the honest truth is that the most important person in your life gave up everything to be there for you. And then you left him. You left him, and you left your brother and you left your sisters, and you left me and your family legacy without a backward glance. You've barely visited, rarely called. Maybe you speak to your dad, but I know for a fact you avoid your brother and sisters. Even more so your mother. What kind of person does something like that?

I've told you before that you remind me of your mother, that you're like her in looks, manner, and mind. And here's the evidence. You're a user, a taker. You're not a young woman who deserves any part of the legacy I've created—and you'll get none of it.

I let it fall into my lap, feeling like I've turned to stone inside.

I didn't want to let her affect me.

I didn't want it to matter, but she possessed an uncommon ability to hit people where it hurt. How she would have loved to know that her little note has made me feel like I'm raw and bleeding.

"Dad," I say softly. "Did you turn down a park ranger job because of me?"

"What?" he asks, glancing over his shoulder so abruptly Willow gasps and darts a hand toward the wheel. He recovers quickly, though, looking straight forward as he talks to me. "That was years ago. Why, before you were even born."

"Was it your dream, Dad?"

"Once upon a time, sure, but dreams change. What'd your grandmother say to you?"

What didn't she say?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Lou

Ivy's been acting strange all day. Part manic, part intensely quiet, like her mind is spinning out of control. I know she got that letter from her grandmother, and while Holly threw hers away, unread, Willow told me that Ivy read hers in the car. I asked her about it, of course, but she blew off the question. And the multiple follow-up questions. She's also refused to talk about my phone call, insisting now isn't the time, and to be fair, the afternoon is full of activities. There's the sky writing event, which draws the attention of the entire town and stops traffic, causing three fender benders on Main Street. Turns out all the guesses about the message are wrong—it says "*See you all in hell*"—which means Bryn wins because she refused to guess at all. There's a minor disagreement over that, but they all decide to sort it out at Ziggy's over beer.

I go with them, partially because I'm hoping I'll get a chance to pull Ivy aside, and partially because I might not have much time left with her. I need to take every moment I can get. Plus, Alex, Cole, and Rory all go too. So does Kennedy, Rowan's fiancée, who's back from Chicago. Brittany's not working, which is a surprise, since she seems to work pretty much 24-7, but Tiffanie makes sure to scowl at me—a scowl that deepens when she sees me holding Ivy's hand.

I hope she doesn't spit in my drink, but I am sitting with the owner of the establishment, so hopefully that will save me. And it doesn't take me long to forget about her probably grudge, because Ivy's family is amazing. Even Rory, who's the richest person I've ever met, is down to earth. The Mayberrys

are a rowdy bunch, but they care deeply about each other and the people their siblings care about. My family's never been like this: loud and big and loving. My parents always made me feel valued, but they were expectations attached to their love, and my cousins all live far away—too far for big family get-togethers to be a common occurrence. I had Alex, of course, but he was an only child too. I suspect both of us are a bit drawn to the chaos because of it, even though he's still a definite introvert.

We stay at Ziggy's for dinner, everyone exchanging Nana Mayberry stories, including Kennedy (who worked with her on *Matchmaking the Rich*), Rory (who dealt with her when purchasing rights for the Matchmake Me app), and Cole (from growing up in the same town). Even Alex has a couple of stories to share. I have none, but no one makes me feel excluded. In fact, there's a sense of belonging big enough to engulf all of us. It's a nice feeling, like the hot drinks from Christmas All Year Coffee, and I'm surprised to realize I'm going to miss that damn place too.

But I'm starting to get anxious. It no longer matters whether Ivy's ready to discuss Roy's ultimatum—the clock is running out. I haven't even purchased my plane ticket yet, which is only adding to my anxiety.

I'm also craving her. It's been agony having her next to me all day and not being able to touch her the way I want. I'm eager to get her alone so we can talk, but also because I want her. I try to tell myself the urgency I feel isn't because I think it might be the last time—but it might.

"Ivy," I whisper into her ear around nine o'clock. We've been here for hours, and the conversation is winding down. "I really need to talk to you. Tonight."

She turns to look at me, worry in her eyes.

I expect her to put me off again, but she surprises me. "Okay."

I lean over and kiss her, hoping that look in her eyes means she's not ready for this to end either.

“Lou and I are going to take off,” she says, reaching for her purse.

“Do you all want to get breakfast before we go to the celebration of life?” Willow asks.

“I’m down for breakfast,” Rowan says, “but I’m sure as fuck not going to celebrate her life.”

Willow frowns at him. “You’ll be going to both.”

“Only if we can plot how to run Peony out of town afterward,” Holly says.

“I can get on board with that,” Rowan agrees.

Alex’s face twitches with a barely held back smirk, and everyone looks at Willow, who obviously got all the sweet genes in the family.

“Agreed,” she says. “She needs to leave.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” Holly says, and Rowan actually begins clapping, making everyone laugh.

When it’s quiet enough for our hearing to be restored, Alex nods to me. “We’ll see you tomorrow, man.”

“You crazy kids have fun,” Ivy says, waving to her family.

I toss a couple of twenties on the table as I stand.

Cole sits up straighter in his chair. “Your money’s no good here, Lou.”

“You’re not running a charity,” I say. “Let me pay. I haven’t had this good of an afternoon and evening in ages.”

“Hey,” Ivy and Alex protest at the same time.

“With a group,” I say with a laugh, then let my gaze scan Ivy’s family, a knot forming in my stomach. This might well be the last time I hang out with them since I’ll likely be leaving soon after the funeral. “Thank you.”

“Enough sap,” Ivy says, linking her arm with mine. “Let’s go.” She leads me out of the brewery to the parking lot. The weather has turned cold, so we hurry to my rental car. I’ve

been drinking water for most of the time we've been there, so I'm safe to drive.

After we get in, I switch on the engine to warm up the car, then turn to her. "So, back to your dad's?"

"The house is empty. Dad's on a hot date, and he texted to say he'll probably be home pretty late." She flutters her eyelashes at me in a playful tease. "We can be as noisy as we want."

I throw the car into reverse, back out of the parking space and speed back to the house.

When we get home, we're barely out of the car before I take her in my arms and kiss the hell out of her. I'm desperate for her, and she kisses me back with an equal amount of desperation. We stumble our way to the front door, breaking apart only for long enough for me to unlock the door. We blindly make our way to my room, still kissing, and start stripping our clothes off before the door's even shut.

We fall onto my bed, eager and desperate. This might be the last time I get to touch her like this, to be inside her, and I know I should take it slow and commit every moment of it to memory, but I can't hold back. I take her fast and hard, and she's with me every step of the way. I can't get deep enough, I can't kiss her hard enough. She grabs my ass and pushed me in deeper, calling out my name as she comes. I'm right behind her, grunting her name.

We collapse together, lying side by side, facing each other. I'm still inside her, and I need to clean up, but I'm scared to lose this moment, this connection. I lift my hand to swipe the hair stuck to her damp cheek, and it takes me a moment to realize it's not sweat that's plastered it there. A trail of tears has leaked down the side of her face.

I pull my hand back in alarm. "Oh my God. Did I hurt you?"

"What?" she asks in annoyance as she pulls away from me, swiping her fingertips across her cheeks. She sits up. "No. Why would you ask that?"

This doesn't bode well for our discussion.

I sit up too, then get up and grab a tissue box to clean up. I throw everything in the trash can, tug on my underwear, then sit on the end of the bed. There's no putting it off any longer—we need to talk now.

I stare at the fish who are swimming happily in their tank. I still haven't figured out what happens to *Vonnegut the Sequel* and *Twenty-Two*. “Ivy, where do you see this going?”

“What are you talking about?” she asks behind me.

I'm handling this all wrong. I turn so I can face her.

Her eyes are filled with fear. Not the look you want to see on the face of the woman you're falling for when you're about to share your feelings. Still, I can't stop now. I'm committed, one way or the other. The question is, is she?

“I really like you,” I say.

She grins, but it doesn't reach her eyes. “I like you too.” She gives my shoulder a shove. “I think I just proved that.”

“I want to see where this goes.”

“And that's what we've been doing,” she says, crossing her legs and pulling the sheet up to her lap, leaving her breasts exposed. “One day at a time.”

“I don't have any more time, Ivy,” I say.

“I know,” she whispers. “That phone call...”

“This doesn't have to be the end,” I insist. “You can visit me. I can visit you.”

She doesn't answer. Instead, she grabs a handful of the sheet, keeping her gaze down. This is so unlike the woman I know, it scares me a little.

“I knew you'd have to leave eventually,” she finally says in a small voice. “We both did.”

I swallow the lump of fear lodged in my throat. “My boss hates me, and I haven't loved working for him lately. I could...” My heart is racing, and I pause to catch my breath.

“Alex pointed out that I can work from anywhere. I could stay here...maybe open my own agency.” My heart beats faster still. “We could even work together. I have some ideas for how we could market your books. I *want* to stay.” It’s probably a crazy thing to say, but hell, crazy or not, staying here in Highland Hills, at least for now, feels like the right decision. I’m not ready to leave the person I’m becoming here. I’m sure as hell not ready to leave her.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide with disbelief and a touch of wonder. “You’d quit your job and move here? For me? Upend your whole career to work on silly, frivolous romance books?”

I grab her hand, squeeze it. “They’re not silly. I’ve never said that. In fact, reading your books has reminded me of why I love doing what I do.” I swallow, then add, “My boss says I have to be back in New York for a meeting on Tuesday morning, or I’ll lose my job.”

She blinks, but her face is otherwise blank. “Oh. I wondered if it was something like that.” She pulls her hand away. “You have to go.” Giving a purposeful nod, she says again, “You have to go. I don’t even know where I’m going to be, Lou, or what I’m doing to do. Remember what we said about anchors.”

“What *you* said,” I tell her. I hate seeing her like this—I hate watching her detach from me as if it’s nothing, as if this past month has been meaningless. A diversion.

“I won’t be your anchor...” She looks up at me, something flashing in her eyes. “And I won’t let you be mine either. We always knew this was a short-term thing. A fling.”

“That’s what this has been to you?”

“Trust me when I say it’s better that way. I’m not the kind of person you want to rely on, Lou. I’ve never done relationships.” She glances into the distance again. “You went through a rough spot here.” When she looks back at me, her eyes are glassy. “But that’s coming to an end, too, just like I knew it would. You’re going to be fine.”

“What about you?”

“Oh,” she says, waving a hand carelessly through the air. “I’m always fine.”

“You’re not.”

Her gaze meets mine, turning slightly fierce. “I’m not yours to fix.”

My dismay shifts to anger. An anger I have no right to, because it’s not like she didn’t warn me. Repeatedly. “You’re telling me this hasn’t meant anything to you?”

“Of course it means something,” she says. “But you have your life, and I have mine.” I see pain flicker through her eyes, but there’s a hard set to her jaw. “I don’t need you, Lou. And you don’t need me either. Don’t let yourself think otherwise.”

Her words aren’t unexpected—I tried to prepare myself for this—but they still rip my heart out. And I know I can’t spend another moment here, not like this.

I walk to the closet and pull out my suitcase.

“What are you doing?” she asks, sounding alarmed.

“I’m packing.”

“But you don’t need to leave until tomorrow. You said you were going to the celebration of life.”

I turn around to face her. “Tell me you need me there with you, Ivy, and I’ll stay. Hell, I’ll tell my boss to fuck off, and I’ll figure out a new life plan. We’ll do it together.”

Raw emotion flashes across her face, but she doesn’t let it stick, “I won’t let you sabotage your life for me,” she says. “You’re going back.”

“You’re willing to say goodbye and end this right now?” I ask, my voice firm. “Because if that’s the call you’re making, I’m leaving tonight.”

“Don’t be an asshole, Lou,” she blurts. “Stay tomorrow. There’s no need to end things on a bad note. Let’s make a few more memories.”

I shake my head, my heart breaking. “I can’t do that. Someday, I hope you realize there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be with someone, Ivy, and even needing them from time to time.”

“I don’t know how to do that,” she counters angrily. “And I never will.”

“That’s bullshit, and we both know it,” I say. “You’re scared, and it’s a good excuse.” I toss the suitcase on the end of the bed and open it.

“It’s late,” she entreats. “You can leave in the morning.”

“No,” I say. “If it’s over, then it’s over. I’m going now. Better to have a clean break.”

There’s a look of devastation on her face for a split second, a reflection of what I feel inside. Then she gets to her feet and grabs a shirt off the floor and pulls it over her head, and I realize with something like wonder that I’ve been having this entire conversation in my underwear.

She heads for the door, her expression shut down, but I have to take care of a practical matter. “The fish.”

“I’ll take care of them.”

“I want to bring them, but I don’t think I can take them on the plane.”

“I said I’ll take care of them.”

“What happens to them when you leave?”

The confident look in her eyes wavers, but she says, “Don’t worry. I won’t flush them down the toilet. We didn’t protect them from Bill for nothing.”

“Thanks,” I say, meaning it.

“And thanks for a good time,” she says with a half grin. It slips. Her voice is full of sadness when she adds, “I’ll always remember it, Lou.” Then she gives me a salute and walks out the door.

I hear her bedroom door close a few seconds later, and I start to pack. Still, there’s a part of me, a hopeful part that Ivy

awakened that's praying she'll come back and tell me she's changed her mind.

But she doesn't, and I finish packing, telling myself that it's okay. That at least I got a few days—no, weeks—with her. If anything, I'm worried about her, because I know this is hurting her too. Still, I can't force her to do anything she's not ready for. She needs to come to that decision on her own.

After I close my suitcase, I set it on the floor, then strip the bed and carry the sheets to the laundry room and start the washing machine. Ivy will get the last laugh. Responsible Lou, washing his sheets so her dad won't find evidence that we had sex on his guest bed.

I head back to my room to grab my suitcase and computer bag. As I leave my room, I take a long look at Ivy's door, wondering if I should knock, but we've said everything we need to say. No sense dragging it out anymore.

With a heavy heart, I head to the living room and see Jay sitting in his recliner. Apparently his hot date ended early. I should probably be embarrassed, because he probably heard any number of things he shouldn't have, but I don't have the bandwidth.

"Leaving?" he asks, sounding sad.

"Yeah," I say. "I've got to get back to work, but to be honest, I'm thinking of leaving my job."

"Oh? What would you do?"

"I might start my own agency."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Who am I kidding, though? I'll get on a plane tomorrow and go back to New York and show up for that meeting at 9:30 on Tuesday morning, because I'm Lou Moralis, and I play it safe. Hell, safe might as well be my middle name.

I glance back at the hall that leads to Ivy's room. She thinks she's playing life free and loose, but in reality, she's playing it safe too. She just won't admit it.

“Thanks for everything, Jay,” I say, turning back to him.
“You’re the best landlord I’ve ever had.”

“You’re welcome back anytime,” he says, getting to his feet.

I offer him my hand, but he pulls me into a hug. “I wish things had worked out differently.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Me too.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ivy

My first thought when I wake up is that something is missing. It's that same creeping sensation that makes you check the stove even though you know you turned it off. Then I realize what is.

He's gone.

He's gone, and I sent him away.

Better that than to let him give up everything for you.

He was supposed to leave, I tell myself. He was always going to leave. This is just things returning to their natural order. But the fish, whom I moved into my room in the middle of the night, seem to be giving me accusatory looks. I wasn't aware a fish could do such a thing, but there you go.

I should probably get up. The celebration of life isn't for hours, but Dad will be upset too—he was fond of Lou—and Willow's in town, and...

And Alex is undoubtedly still here with her. Is he going to shoot me accusatory looks like the fish?

Sighing, I grab my phone. My eyebrows hike up to my hairline, because there's a text from Logan.

Sorry about your grandmother. Meet me at Ziggy's. I know you're not supposed to work today, but you barely work anyway. Come hang out.

Um. It's nine a.m. I've heard it's too early for alcohol.

Let's pretend I'm part Irish.

The brewery doesn't open until eleven.

Let's just say I have an in. ;-)

Five minutes ago, I didn't think I could get excited about anything, other than knowing Maeve Mayberry can't possibly write me any more shitty notes, but I feel my heart beating faster, my blood traveling less sluggishly through my veins. Brittany wasn't at the brewery yesterday, so I didn't get the chance to interrogate her about her meeting with Logan. But surely she must be Logan's "in." I mean, it could be Cole, on account of he's Logan's brother, but that wouldn't warrant a wink.

I text Brittany:

DID YOU BANG LOGAN?

Then a follow-up question:

WAS IT GOOD? ACTUALLY, DON'T TELL ME IF IT WASN'T. IT'LL JUST MAKE ME FEEL WORSE.

I don't really expect her to respond, so I start getting dressed. Well, sort of. I leave on the *I feel sorry for myself* sweats I put on last night, then pull on a slightly better sweater before braiding my hair. That'll have to do. It's not every day a woman buries her shitty grandmother after sending off the only man she's ever—

My phone buzzes, and I grab it up. It's Badass Brittany.

No gabbing. Just come.

Yup, she totally banged him. I feel a glow inside, but it's dampened when I walk out of the door and see Lou's closed door. No, not Lou's door. The spare bedroom.

He almost certainly wouldn't care that my scheme worked out, or that life is imitating art—because *Beauty and the Bar* has been flowing through me and into my laptop in every spare minute I've had since I found out about Brittany and Logan's thing for each other. But he'd listen. He'd give me that tolerant Lou look, and say something wry like, "Yes, Ivy, they never would have figured it out if not for you. Maybe they'll name your first child after you."

My heart feels raw and hurting, like someone took a cheese grater to it.

My dad's sitting at the table in the kitchen, with a paper in front of him and a cup of decaf, but he doesn't seem to be reading it. His face has a far-off look.

"Hey, Dad," I say, and he jolts, nearly spilling the coffee.

"Pumpkin," he says, and I feel another pang, because Lou used that nickname when he was pretending to be my dad the other day. I'd told him it was something Dad would never say. I can see him giving me a knowing look.

No. I can't see him, because he's gone.

"Did Lou talk to you before he left last night?" I ask, holding the back of the chair across from him.

"A little." He frowns at me, something unusual for him. "Sit down for a spell. I'd like to talk."

"I have to go to Ziggy."

"Cole's got you working today?" he asks with disapproval.

"No. I'm going to meet Logan and Brittany there. I think my matchmaking scheme may have worked, so yay me. I guess that old Mayberry blood is a powerful force."

"Sit down," he says more forcefully than I would have expected. I'm so surprised I can't help but comply.

"I'm sorry to see *my* matchmaking scheme didn't work," he tells me somberly, giving me a searching look.

My throat suddenly hurts, like it's too swollen to swallow even spit. "So you *did* ask him to move in here because he was

a literary agent.”

“No, I asked him to move in here because he’s a kind, *good* man, interested in books, and because I have a beautiful, vivacious daughter who I thought might do him some good. And vice versa. And for a time, it would seem I was right. What happened?”

“He had to go, Dad,” I choke out. “He was always going to have to go.”

“He said he’d leave New York. He suggested working with you on your books. Seems to me you could have made something like that work, and it could have been good for both of you.”

“Did he tell you that?” I ask, shocked.

“No, the walls in this house are like paper. I heard part of your conversation.”

Goddamn, I guess it’s a good thing we nixed the shower sex the other morning—a thought that’s only funny for a couple of seconds before it’s sad. Because we should have risked it anyway. Because now I will have to go through the rest of my life without having had shower sex with Lou. I only got to have him three times. It wasn’t anywhere near enough.

“Dad,” I say, picking at the edge of the table. “I couldn’t let him give up everything for me. You’ve already done that.”

“Here you go again,” he says, “acting like you’re not worth it. Acting like any single supposed sacrifice I had to make for you wasn’t my absolute pleasure, since being your father is the very best thing that’s ever happened to me. You think I give a good goddamn about that job I thought about taking? You think that if I’d’ve taken it, it ever would have given me the pleasure and pride that you do?”

Surprised tears fill my eyes. “Dad,” I say, a plea. I can’t cry. I *don’t* cry. I like to spread enjoyment and fun. I don’t want to be this person I’m becoming, who’s a roiling mess of emotions, of highs and lows.

“You talk about the Mayberry blood as if it’s a curse. But your brother’s a Mayberry and an Anders, just like you. Your

sisters are all half Mayberry. Are *they* a curse?”

“No,” I whisper, those stupid tears tracking down my cheeks. He reaches across the table with a napkin and wipes them away.

“Now, I don’t know what that old bitch—”

I gasp, honestly shocked. I’ve never heard my father call anyone that before.

“Yes, I said it.” He pushes back his mop of whitish blond hair. “And I’ll say it again. I don’t know what that old bitch said to you, but you don’t know what she said to anyone else either. She told me that I was the worst mistake her worthless daughter ever made—a spineless, whinging man who never came to anything and never would. A disgrace. Now, is that how you see your father?”

“No,” I say, this time gripping the edge of the table so hard it hurts. “That *bitch*.”

He chuckles. “Precisely. You don’t like what she said to me, and I don’t much like whatever it is she said to you. Do you think she had any kinder words for your brother and sisters? Do you think any of us need to take those cruel, spiteful words with anything but a sea’s worth of salt? Your grandmother was an unhappy woman who drove away the people around her. Who made damn sure she didn’t have anyone to genuinely mourn her passing. If you’re going to learn anything from what happened to her, Ivy, learn that you shouldn’t push away the people who love you. Not because you owe them anything, but because it’s okay to let people love you. To love every single bit of you. If you think I don’t have flaws, or your brother, or Lou, you’re thinking the wrong way.”

I’m shaken. I’m overcome. I’m...

“Dad, he’s gone,” I say, my voice jagged. A stranger’s voice. “I sent him away. It’s too late.”

“If it’s right, then it’s not too late.”

“I’m too fucked up,” I admit. “There’s so much I haven’t dealt with. I’ve just let it all build up into this toxic cloud of

shit I've been carrying around. I can't saddle him with that."

"So deal with it," he says, lifting his coffee cup for a sip. "But if you think it's just going to go away, then you have another think coming. Because we all have a pet cloud."

"Damn," I say, "is it the brush with death that made you this wise or your fifty or so girlfriends?"

He grins at me. "Both, sugar. Both."

* * *

When I get to the bar, Logan's the one who answers the door. It's kind of a funny switcheroo, since not that long ago, he was pacing outside a few minutes before opening, waiting for someone to take pity on him.

"*What happened?*" I ask him in an undertone, while he takes in my getup of mismatching sweats. "I need details."

"Who are you and what did you do to Ivy?"

I thwack him. "I'm in mourning, you neanderthal."

"And I'm pouring you a breakfast beer," Brittany says from behind the bar. I glance over at her, taking her in, and other than the bruise left by that napkin dispenser the other day, she looks banging. As in, she looks like she's recently been banged by a certain Mountain Man.

My mind already on the upswing, I nod and head toward the bar, Logan following me. "Why, yes, don't mind if I do. Especially if you'll both drink with me."

Brittany pours one for each of us, then we do a cheers. I expect them to say something about my grandmother, but they surprise me by saying, "To Ivy."

I feel warmth in my eyes again, and I question whether my tear ducts are broken, because this is clearly excessive.

We all take a sip of the beer, but to be honest, I don't really want mine, and I push it a couple of inches away.

"I heard Lou left," Logan says, giving me a pointed look.

“Jesus, who’d you hear that from?” I ask, because as far as I know, my father and I are the only people aware of the whole situation.

“From my brother.”

This earns a snicker from Brittany. “Sorry,” she says, lifting a hand to cover her mouth. “It’s just that he’s gotten so much more gossipy now that he’s with Holly. He never would have gotten involved in something like this before.”

Logan gives a one-shoulder shrug that says he agrees. “He heard it from your sister, who apparently heard it from your father. I guess your dad sent a text to everyone first thing this morning.”

“Well, shit. And I’ve gone all these years thinking he’s laid back. He has no chill.”

Except I find myself thinking of what he said earlier. That it’s okay to let people in. Maybe it’s not just the Mayberry side of me that’s interfering. Maybe it’s also an Anders trait—shove people into doing what’s best for them. I mean, that’s what I did with these two crazy kids, isn’t it?

“I refuse to talk about Lou unless you confirm you’re banging,” I insist.

“You were right. I’m in love with Brittany,” Logan says, and the openness of it, the lack of artifice is so staggering that I nearly faint on the spot. Then there’s the way she’s looking at *him*—her eyes full of warmth and hope. Goddamn. I’ve always enjoyed love stories—the way they sweep you away into a world of possibilities, where people are capable of such acts of beauty and depravity—but it’s different now. It’s like I understand it on a deeper level than before, *feel it* on a deeper level.

Because you love him, a voice whispers.

Not him, Logan, obviously. I love *Lou*. It snuck up on me over the past month or so. It started on January 1st, the day he walked in on my very memorable assets, but it took root at Christmas All Year Coffee, and every day since it’s grown. Before we became involved romantically, we watched movies

and boring documentaries together, fought over the last cup of coffee, used each other's toothpaste. We've fallen asleep on the couch with our heads bowed together. I became used to him. I took his presence for granted even as it slid under my skin and made me want more. Always more.

I *love* him.

And that's why I thought I had to let him go. More of that Anders family tendency to push people toward what we think is right.

"Can I applaud?" I ask thinly, though my voice gains confidence as I soak in the way they're looking at each other. Brittany reaches across the bar to take his hand, and when he lifts it to his mouth, I'm done for. "Just stahp," I say, "this is too adorable. I might get sick. I'm going to dedicate my book to you, because really, this one has been writing itself."

Logan swivels his gaze at me. "We made a bargain, Ivy Anders, and you broke it."

It takes me a hot second to remember what he's talking about. The double date. He said he'd promise to try making a go of it with Brittany if I did the same with Lou.

"I didn't break it on purpose," I say through numb lips. "I thought...he was supposed to go back for his job. He loves his job."

Except that's not exactly true. He *used* to love his job.

"Did he want to go back?" he asks, giving me a searching look.

"I...I don't know," I admit. "I thought so, in the beginning."

Logan watches me as he takes a slow sip of his beer. "Our deal stands, Ivy. Your end is unfinished. You don't seem like the kind of woman who reneges."

"She's not," Brittany says. "She's a badass. Indomitable Ivy."

"You guys, I'm not..." Tears are in my eyes again, and I feel like the exact opposite of an indomitable badass. I feel

small. I feel like a little girl. I—

The door creaks open, which catches me off-guard because I thought the place was still closed. It's Holly opening it, and Bryn, Willow, and Rowan are behind her. There's no sign of any of their partners.

* * *

I shoot an accusatory look at Logan, then Brittany. "You set me up."

"Basically," Logan admits without any glimmer of apology in his tone. "You needed someone to take charge of the situation, and you're not the only person who's good at shamelessly manipulating other people." He winks, and Brittany laughs. It's a joyful sound—the laughter of a woman happy and in love.

I have the glancing thought that I would like to be happy and in love, rather than miserable and in love, and by then Rowan and the others have reached us.

"Come on, Little Bit," my brother says, taking my hand. I grab the beer, because something tells me I'll absolutely be needing that, and go with him.

He leads me over to a booth, and I laugh a little because he orchestrates the seating arrangements so he's on one side of me, Holly on the other. Willow and Bryn are across from us. This is almost certainly because Rowan and Holly are the scrappier pair. Willow's too nice—and Bryn too pregnant—to body-slam me.

"This your way of trapping me?" I ask.

"Damn straight," Rowan says. He runs a hand across his short beard.

"Where's Cole? Alex? Kennedy?"

My brother grins at me. "Having breakfast with your dad."

Of course they are.

“Dad said Nana’s note threw you for a loop. I figured you might want to know what she said to everyone else.”

“No,” I say with a sigh. “He told me what his note said this morning. It was enough for me to realize I was being stupid.”

Willow gives me a pointed look and says, “You’re being stupid about *Lou*.”

Well, damn, Willow, way to grow some balls!

“Maybe,” I admit.

“Alex says he’s never seen him like this with anyone.”

Salt meet wound.

“It’s just...” I tell them about what I said to my dad earlier. About my cloud of chaos and unresolved emotions, and by the time I’m finished, Rowan is staring me down.

“Something happened to you before you left Charleston. Something that pulled all of this shit out of you.”

I take a deep sigh, heave it out. Drink more of the beer.

“Yes,” I admit. And then I find themselves telling them the whole thing—the story spilling out like it’s something vile I’ve been carrying around, festering. It’s only then, with all of them listening, with Rowan looking like he wants to legitimately murder Chase, that I realize how much this has been bothering me. It’s not just that my supposed friends turned on me without giving me the benefit of the doubt. It’s that they did it because their understanding of me was so twisted—they looked at me and saw Ivy, writer of smut, haver of fun, seducer of men, and they saw no deeper than a pretty puddle of a person. It made me wonder if there wasn’t anything deeper.

“I want to kill him,” Rowan says predictably.

“So does Lou,” I say with a throb in my chest. “But neither of you are going to.”

“Why?” asks Willow, surprisingly fierce for the nice one in the family.

“Because I’m going to deal with them myself.”

I need to.

Because I *do* want to shrink my little cloud of chaos—and the way to do that is to stop running from the situations that make me feel difficult emotions. And, yes, to see a therapist, or maybe even a crew of them, but that will have to wait.

“So it’s Charleston before New York?” Bryn asks calmly. “Should I ask Rory to use the private jet, or are we going to drive?”

“Oh, we’re most definitely taking the private jet,” I say. My brow scrunches as I look at the mounted clock on the wall. “I guess we’ll go after the celebration of life?”

“Let’s leave the celebration for the people who want to celebrate her,” Rowan says, his voice as good as a growl.

“So it’ll just be Mom then, right?” Holly asks, a slight smile on her face. “I wanted to see what she had in store for the ceremony after the mess with the doves and the sky writing, but I’m much more interested in watching Ivy kick some ass.”

“We’re coming too,” Brittany says, reaching up her keys and jangling them. “I just texted Cole, and he said we can close the brewery tomorrow.”

“This is the best way to honor Nana Mayberry,” Bryn says with a small smile, glancing at each of us in turn, her hand rubbing her belly. “By being not a goddamn thing like her.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Ivy

I text the Fun Bunch from the private jet, which is such an awesome line, I let it run through my mind a couple of times just because.

O'Malley's. Five p.m. I need to talk to you. If you don't come, I'll release the photos.

“What photos?” my sister Holly asks, leaning over my shoulder, because that’s Holly for you. She has no more cool than I do. We all have glasses of champagne and, no joke, warm cookies with fancy M&Ms *and* chocolate chips in them. This is about a thousand times better than any Mayberry Merriment party or—ahem—celebration of life ever could be. I’m sitting next to Rowan, with Willow and Bryn facing us. Holly’s technically sitting in the grouping of seats with Logan and Brittany, since we decided they’re our Ziggy Brewery faction, but she instantly leapt out of her seat when I announced I’d sent the text.

Although Rory made all of these arrangements, the prince, he said this was something we should do alone—with the addition of Logan and Brittany, obviously—so he didn’t come. Kennedy agreed with him. Cole stayed home too, because he needs to be with his daughter, and Alex said his quota for social events was filled up last night. Maybe he’s trying to keep himself available in case Lou calls...and I hope Lou does. I don’t like thinking of him all alone in his apartment, and hopefully, if I’m lucky, he won’t be for long.

“The photos?” Holly prompts.

“I don’t have any,” I admit. “But I’ve seen all of them drunk off their asses. They might think I got something from that. Or that I have one of Chase—”

“Trying to molest you?” Rowan asks darkly.

“Well, yeah. Either way, they’ll show. Then we can grab my stuff from my apartment.”

And, just like that, the Charleston period of my life will be wrapped up. It’s sad, really, that you can live somewhere for years and have so little to show for it. Then again, I *did* birth so many of my book babies there. Truthfully, it was always more of a stopping place for me—between book research trips, between vacations. I don’t have any sadness about closing the book, but I’m glad that I *am* closing it. That’s growth, isn’t it?

I want to tell Lou. I want him to be here, on this plane with me.

I want him, period.

“So where did we fall on me hitting this Chase guy?” Rowan asks.

“No need,” I say. “I’m going to speak my mind, and then we’ll go on our way. In fact, you can all wait at my apartment.” I grin at them. “You can pack for me. That would be doing me a real solid.”

“Not a chance,” Rowan says.

Yeah, I didn’t think I’d get off that easy.

“How about you stand in the background and look menacing?”

“That’s more his speed,” Holly says supportively. “But Bryn is very good at packing.”

“I’m not,” Logan offers from behind us. “But I’m very good at throwing things into trash bags, so if you’re into that, I’ve got you covered.”

“Yes, by all means,” I say.

It’s weird to think of the apartment I left behind, sitting there, gathering dust, all while I’ve been in Highland Hills

with Dad and Lou. It doesn't feel like home. Now, don't get it twisted—I'm not suddenly going to want to grow old in Highland Hills without traveling anywhere, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad to have a home spot there. If Lou wanted, we could have one in New York too, and maybe—

There I go, getting ahead of myself. It's very possible Lou's done with my bullshit, a thought that makes me much shakier than the prospect of facing thirty variations of the Fun Bunch.

“What's your plan for getting Lou back?” Brittany asks, jolting me from my thoughts.

Good question. I don't want to just prostrate myself on his doorstep. I'm a romance author, after all. I need to show I've put some thought into it—some pizzazz.

My mind whirrs, and an image surfaces. Rockefeller Center. The ice-skating rink. The one place Lou remembered feeling light and happy as a child.

But dragging him there doesn't feel like enough, and I'm not altogether sure he'll want to go. I want...I want to do something special for him, something that shows him that I know him and love him the way only a bestie can.

“I'm gonna need a little time to plan it out,” I say in an undertone.

“So we're going on another trip next weekend?” Logan says, sounding completely laid back about it for someone who runs his own small business. Then again, he does have his arm around Brittany.

“If you want to.”

“Anything for my 91% match.”

Brittany hits him, as she should.

“If you need us, we'll be there,” she says. “Or we'll run the brewery if Cole wants to go.”

“So, Bryn,” Holly says, snagging another warm cookie from one of the plates of goodies the flight attendant brought out for us, “whaddya say, are you going to hire Mayberry

Merriment for your wedding arrangements? How about you, Willow?”

They’re still talking when an unexpected text pops up on my phone. From my mother.

Your father came, at least, and Allen—

Allen? She can only mean Alex, which makes me snort before I continue reading.

—and Kennedy. But none of you could be bothered. There was a three-tier cake, and a life-sized portrait of Nana, and no one there to see it except for a few of your father’s lady friends. Very strange women. They call themselves the Three Fates. They looked surprised to see me in town, as if I weren’t born here like everyone else. To make matters worse, that tea shop next door was bustling. Someone came in at one point. I thought maybe it was a friend of your grandmother’s, but he’d only gotten lost. He was a rude man. Said he was buying Christmas All Year Coffee, God forbid.

A pause, then:

I’ll take the money, Ivy.

My blood pulsing in my ears, I write back:

Offer’s off the table.

Because Lou’s right—she’s the kind of person who will never learn, the kind who always comes back for more.

But her next text startles me...and makes me think.

I’ll sell you the shop. Or your sisters. Whoever wants it.

Because that gives me an idea.

* * *

Rowan and I walk side by side into O'Malley's, and I can't deny I'm glad to have him with me. It feels good to lean on someone, and I'd like to learn to do more of it. We left the others behind at my apartment, which Bryn says smelled like pickled feet. It was a fair assessment since I'd left dirty laundry and an open pickle jar in the sink that I'd presumably planned on recycling and forgotten about.

I should probably feel guilty about letting them deal with my mess, but again: I'm learning to lean, and I already put in an order for food delivery from my favorite Mexican place in town, so we can leave the apartment smelling better than we came to it.

The door to the bar is so familiar, down to the places where the metal handle has been rubbed a different color from overuse. "So I know we said I couldn't hit the guy," Rowan starts, "but what about if he's walking by me, and I stick out my foot. That would technically be an accident."

I give him a one-armed hug before opening the door. "I love you, you big dope."

His look is solemn as the door cracks open, letting out the smell of hops and whiskey. This place was once a home away from home for me. It's where I'd originally planned on doing my research for *Beauty and the Bar*.

"I love you too," my big brother says, and for a man who's never been free with his emotions either, he's really coming along. I guess maybe all of us are.

"This place is a dump," he scoffs.

It's not true, actually. The wood and metal are always freshly shined, and the booths have velvet backs that look neither tacky nor dirty, a real miracle.

The bartender, Mack, whistles when he sees me. "As I live and breathe. We've missed you around here, Ivy."

My throat feels strangled again, because I didn't really imagine that anyone would be on my side. Of course, he probably doesn't even know about the mess with Chase, but it occurs to me that he also likely wouldn't care.

He circles around the bar and pulls me into a tight hug. “Good to see you, kid. They’re round the corner in that booth of yours. Give ’em hell.”

So he *does* know something, and he’s on my side. My throat cinches a little more as Mack pulls back and nods to Rowan, who’s eyeing him with a distrust he seems to hold for everyone in my life here. Fair. Mack’s not at all threatening—a man of medium height with a receding hairline, a slight paunch, and kind brown eyes, but he’s also peripherally associated with the people who did me wrong. That’s enough for my brother.

It would be enough for Lou, an inner voice whispers.

“This your man?” Mack asks.

Rowan loses color. “Her brother,” he corrects.

“Jeez,” I say, bumping him with my shoulder. “You don’t need to act like it’s the most disgusting thing you’ve ever heard in your life.”

Mack chuckles. “You ever write that book you were planning?”

“Working on it now,” I say with a slight smile. “I’ve met some interesting people.”

Then, because I’m done with the whole avoidance tactic, I lead the way to the infamous Fun Bunch booth.

When we round the corner, I see them. Annabeth practically in Chase’s lap—of course he wanted to come; he needs to maintain control of the narrative. The rest of them are gathered around like worshipers around an idol, all of them with colorful drinks.

Annabeth’s eyes widen when she sees me, and Chase looks like he’s about to shit his pants when he looks over my shoulder. I suspect Rowan’s giving him that *I’ll kill you if you so much as glance in my sister’s direction* look he perfected sometime in high school. God bless him. The others look... intrigued, I guess. But I don’t really give a fuck what they think or whether they’re interested in what I have to say.

Annabeth clears her throat as I approach. “Hi, Ivy,” she says. “Look, I feel like things got a little out of hand before you left.” She glances at Chase, then adds, “You were a little drunk, and one thing led to another, and...” Her mouth purses as her gaze shifts to me. “No hard feelings.”

I know something then. She never disbelieved my version of the story—she just decided to go with his—and the rest of them fell into line.

My gaze moves over them. They’re dressed up for a Sunday night, but then again, I guess this was just another kind of event for them to prepare for.

Chase clears his throat. “Yes, no hard feelings.”

“Well, that’s too damn bad,” I say, propping a hand on my hip. “Because I have plenty of hard feelings.”

“So do I,” says Rowan, clearly unwilling or maybe even unable to keep quiet.

“Yep.” I wave a hand between us. “Plenty of hard feelings to go around here. This is my brother, ladies.” I nod to Chase. “*Asshole.*” He flinches and seems to sink into his seat. He probably wishes it would suck him in so he could avoid this unpleasantness of his own creation.

“You groped me,” I say to Chase. “Let’s not get into who was drunk and how drunk and what that means, because you’re married to her—” I nod to Annabeth, “—and you groped me against my will and wouldn’t stop until I kneed you so hard in the ’nads that you must have been hurting for days. How about it, Annabeth? Did you have to buy him a bag of ice?”

Her lips firm, but her chin is wobbling slightly. A tell. I shift my gaze around the table, taking in all of them. Maya, Lexie, and Rachel. “And I’m guessing you all knew that I was the one who was telling the truth, and you decided to side with him anyway, because God forbid anyone tell Annabeth that her husband’s a piece of shit or that her banana bread tastes like Satan’s taint.”

Rachel starts to say something, but I lift a hand. “No, Rachel, you’re right. I’ve never tasted Satan’s taint, but Chase *did* shove his tongue in my mouth, so I have some idea of what it would be like.”

Annabeth edges away from Chase a little, but the fury in her eyes is directed at me. “You can’t just march in here, and —”

“But look,” I say, “I did. And I’m going to march right back out, because I don’t want a single thing to do with any of you again. Nothing. But I wanted you to know that I know what you did, and I see you for the people you are...and the people you’re not. And you’re going to have to go through the rest of your lives being you. So, really, I’m sorry. Enjoy your drinks.”

Rowan, who’s been pretty well-behaved, gets in a final sneer at Chase, “You’re lucky she told me I couldn’t kick your ass, because I would have, and you’d need a hell of a lot more than a bag of ice.”

I pat him on the back and say, “Let’s go, Rowan.”

We’ve almost made it out, having delivered a final nod to Mack, who salutes me, when someone grabs my shoulder from behind. For a second, I’m sure it’s Annabeth, aiming to get in the last word—she’s always *loved* getting the last word—or even Chase, having collected enough of his balls to actually risk a fist in the face from my much-bigger-than-him brother. But it’s Rachel, the smallest and quietest of the Fun Bunch.

“I’m sorry, Ivy,” she says. “You’re right. We all...Chase is an asshole. But I’ve known Annabeth since I was in first grade, and—”

I squeeze her shoulder, feeling something like peace settle over me. “It’s okay. It really is okay. Thank you, Rachel. I get it.”

And then we leave, and you know what? That cloud hanging over my head is a little smaller.

“Have you got a plan for New York?” Rowan asks.

“Yeah,” I say, grinning up at him—glad that he’s a part of this, and also that our friends and relatives are back at my apartment, helping. Doing something I’ve dreaded. “It’s going to take a little time to work it out, but I think maybe I do. Lou’s got a thing for plans, so it only feels appropriate. You think Rory will let us borrow the jet again?”

He laughs under his breath. “Ivy, if Bryn asks, I’m pretty sure he’d do just about anything.”

Chapter Thirty

Lou

I've only been back in New York for five days, but weirdly, it feels like I was in Highland Hills both yesterday and a lifetime ago. I miss Ivy so much it physically hurts. I'd hoped she'd change her mind after I left, but it's been five days, and I haven't heard a word from her.

I think I've lost her forever.

I probably fucked up. I pressured her into making a choice on the spot. It wasn't fair, but I wasn't asking for the moon. I only wanted her to agree to give us a chance.

But that's not the only thing I fucked up. When I showed up at the office on Tuesday morning, Roy was furious that I still hadn't called Thomas Matthews, but he kept it bottled up during our meeting with the staff of Birch Street Books. Afterward, he reamed me out in front of everyone in our open office space, while I sat at my desk and listened. Part of me was furious, but most of me was just done. Even if I swallowed my pride and called Matthews, there was no way I could continue working for Roy. Not only did I not respect him, but I also didn't like him.

So I let him shout and yell, his face turning red and spittle spewing out of his mouth. When he stopped, I calmly looked up at him and asked, "Are you finished?"

He inhaled deeply, winding himself up for another go at me, but I got to my feet and held up my hand. "Let me save you the trouble. I quit."

Roy's eyes got huge, and he sputtered for a few seconds before saying, "Now, let's not be too hasty."

"This has nothing to do with being hasty. I refuse to work for someone who treats me so disrespectfully."

"You can't do this!" he demanded.

"Oh, but I can." I grabbed my coat and walked past the stunned staff, then out the door.

I turned off my phone and went on a long walk, trying to figure out what the future of my professional life might look like. I couldn't help thinking that I should have stayed in Highland Hills, but the fact was, I'd needed this—I'd needed to prove to myself that there was no salvaging what had been broken, and that there shouldn't be.

By the time I got back to my apartment, the sun had set. I had nearly a dozen missed calls, but I only returned one of them.

I called Alex.

"I was getting worried," he said when he answered.

"I'm sorry I left Highland Hills without saying goodbye," I said. "I just needed to..." I didn't finish the thought.

"We'll talk about that next. I heard about you quitting the agency."

"How did you already find out about that?" I asked, but I put the pieces together before I even finished my sentence. "Roy called you."

"That man knows how to kiss ass," Alex said with a bitter laugh. "I feel like I have a hickey on my ass cheek from all the sucking up he tried to do. Like he actually thought he had a shot at keeping me as a client."

"I'm not exactly the most beloved agent in town," I said. "You might be better off sticking with Roy if you want to keep advancing your career."

"There's no way I'm staying with that asshole. I'll take my chances with you. And I'm not the only one who feels that

way. After Roy called me, I spent the afternoon calling some of your other authors. Wherever you end up—on your own or with another agency, they're with you too. Well...except for Tim Moore, but he's an asshole too, so you're better off without him anyway."

Tears stung my eyes, and I swallowed a lump in my throat. "You convinced them?"

"It didn't take much convincing. Lou. They know you've got their backs, and they trust you. They don't trust Roy. And, like I said, Tim Moore—"

"Is definitely an asshole," I said with a laugh. "He and Roy deserve each other."

"You know what this means, right?"

"That I've got a shit ton of work to do to get my own agency set up?"

"That too," he says, "But that's not what I'm thinking." He paused. "You can come back to Highland Hills."

My heart leapt into my throat. "I haven't figured out what I'm going to do." Even if I went back, there was no guarantee Ivy would be there, let alone that she'd want me to stay. No, it made sense to stay in New York, but that didn't mean I needed in-person employees. Hell, I didn't even need a physical office.

Employees. It felt nuts to consider hiring people with what meager savings I had. It would be cheaper to move out of the city, but I wasn't ready to permanently quit the city that never sleeps. I really liked the energy of it. Ivy told me she loved it too.

I reminded myself that Ivy wasn't a factor. The sooner I accepted that, the better off I'd be.

I spent the next three days making calls and meeting with editors at publishing houses. But today is Saturday, and the publishing houses are closed for the weekend, which means I finally have a moment to catch my breath.

I'm sitting in my living room, drinking a cup of coffee, trying not to think about Ivy, but it's pretty damn hard now that everything's so quiet. Vonnegut's empty tank is still on a table against the wall, and even that reminds me of the two fish I left behind. When Victoria spent time over here, my apartment felt too small, but now it feels too big. Like something is missing. Or someone. I miss the sight of Ivy's sleep-mussed curls. I even miss the stupid wet rings she used to leave on the coffee table because she always overfills her coffee.

I'm wallowing in self-pity when a knock at the door catches me by surprise. My parents are out of town on a cruise, and Alex is in North Carolina. I'm not expecting any deliveries, and my neighbors aren't all that friendly. I have other friends, obviously, but none who'd pop by early on a Saturday morning without any warning.

I walk to the door and peer out the peephole, shocked to see Alex standing in the hall. I jerk the door open.

"Alex!" I throw my arms around him and pull him into a hug. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to see you. How are you?"

I usher him into the apartment and shut the door. "I'm okay. This whole setting up my own agency thing is going easier than I expected. Turns out a lot of people hate Roy."

He laughs. "I could have told you that."

I gesture to the sofa, still shocked that he's here. "Have a seat. Do you want coffee?"

He glances at the sofa, then back at me. "I can't stay for long, and neither can you."

I squint at him. "What are you talking about?"

Gesturing to my sweatpants and coffee-stained T-shirt, he says, "I think you should change first."

"What's going on?" I ask suspiciously.

He reaches into his coat and pulls out an ivory envelope and hands it to me.

I open it up and find a plain ivory card with a handwritten note.

Lou,

My grandmother had so much fun with her notes that she inspired me to use her powers of evil for good. (Ha, take that, Nana!) Ready for the second of (hopefully) many more adventures? Go to the subway stop at Canal Street for your next envelope.

XO

My heart begins to race, and my gaze lifts to Alex.

He shrugs. “She’s a romance author. What do you expect? She believes in grand gestures. The question is: is this what you want?”

I don’t even have to give it a moment of consideration. I bolt to my room and change into dress pants and a button-up shirt. I consider putting on a tie, but that would be overkill. I do a quick brush of my teeth, then put on my shoes and grab my double-breasted dark gray wool coat.

Alex is still waiting for me in the living room, standing next to Vonnegut’s empty tank, but he glances up at me and grins.

“Okay,” I say, feeling as excited as a kid who got a golden ticket to Wonka’s factory. Then again, that’s how Ivy affects me. “Let’s go.”

He shakes his head. “Nope. I can’t go with you. You’re doing this on your own.”

My eyes widen in surprise. “How will I know what to do once I get to the subway station?”

His grin spreads. “Trust me. You’ll know.”

He follows me out the door and waits while I lock up.

“I’m happy for you, Lou,” he says as we head for the staircase. “You deserve everything good. Seems to me you’re well on your way toward getting it.”

My throat burns. “Thanks, man.”

We head down the stairs, and once we’re on the sidewalk, he claps my upper arm. “I’ll see you later. Have fun.”

He heads in the opposite direction as I make my way to the subway stop. I’m nervous that I’ll miss my clue, but I should have known that Ivy believes in going big.

Bryn and Rory are standing at the entrance waiting for me, both of them grinning from ear to ear. Bryn is holding an ivory envelope.

“Good to see you, Lou,” Rory says, reaching out a hand.

We shake hands, and I notice people stopping and staring at him and his fiancée.

“I take it you have a clue for me?” I ask.

Bryn hands me the envelope. “I’m glad you didn’t blow her off for screwing up.”

“I’m just relieved she changed her mind.”

She pulls me into a hug. “Welcome to our crazy family.”

That makes me smile.

I open the envelope and read the note.

Glad you're still with me. Whew, I was worried there for a moment. Our first date had a train, even if we didn't ride on it. Think of Christmas All Year Coffee while you take the subway to the Central Park Zoo.

XO

Central Park Zoo? What is she up to?

Doesn't matter. I'm here for it.

I get on the subway and take it to the stop for the zoo. I get off and head that way, and when I reach the entrance, I see Holly and Cole waiting there with Cole's daughter, Jane, who's holding a stuffed flamingo I recognize all too well.

Jane looks slightly annoyed, but then again, she's been waiting in the cold. She'd probably prefer to see the zoo.

"You came," Holly says. "I knew you would." She glances down at Jane. "You owe me five bucks."

"You bet my daughter actual money?" Cole asks in disbelief.

"I'm not sure why that surprises you," Holly says.

"Are you sure you want to keep doing this?" Jane asks as she thrusts the flamingo at me. "Ivy's a shit waitress."

"That five dollars goes straight into the swear jar," Cole says with a satisfied grin.

"Hey," Holly protests. "She's the one who swore."

"And you're the one who encouraged gambling."

I laugh. "I'm not interested in Ivy for her waitressing skills." I notice the envelope tied to the flamingo's foot, and I detach it.

"Well," Jane says, "I hope you have a good job because Ivy's never gonna be able to support you with her tips."

I laugh again as I open the envelope. "I think we'll be okay." I pull out the card and read it.

I bet you think you're going to the zoo, and that was my original plan, but can you believe they don't have reindeer? They don't even have any type of deer. And Central Park doesn't have deer at all, not even a deer statue. Fifi here (like her name?) will have to do, and you can just pretend you saw a reindeer, because

*you should be thinking about Rudolph's Balls
as you drink your coffee.*

*Head to the Central Park pond for your next
clue. There's symbolism in bridges, don't you
think?*

XO

Coffee?

I glance up at Holly and realize she's holding a coffee cup.

She shrugs as she hands it to me. "I swear I didn't drink any."

I take a sip and laugh when I realize it's spiked. Of course it's spiked.

"Will someone take Fifi for me?"

"Holly can hold it," Jane says. "I'm too big for stuffed toys."

Holly snorts and takes the flamingo.

"Good luck," Cole calls out as I head toward the pond. "I think you're gonna need it."

I stroll through the park, wishing Ivy were with me to enjoy it. But she's the pot of gold at the end of this scavenger hunt. She's the prize.

It's February in Central Park, so the wind is frigid as hell, but the coffee warms me up, and I'm enjoying the anticipation of what comes next.

Willow is waiting for me on the famous stone bridge. Families and couples are strolling past her, but she's staring out at the pond with a dreamy look and doesn't notice me as I approach her

I toss the empty coffee cup in the trash. "Hey, Willow."

She smiles as she turns to face me. Alex called her pure sunshine once, and he's not wrong. And although Ivy sees

herself as the mischievous sister, the troublemaker, she's got plenty of sunshine in her too.

"Hey, Lou." She hands me the envelope. "Thanks for playing along. She really, really likes you."

"I'd agree to this and a whole lot more for her." I grin. "But maybe don't tell her that. She'd take it as a challenge."

She laughs. "I think you're right."

"And, for the record, I really, *really* like her too."

"Hey," she says. "If you two get married, you and Alex will be brothers-in-law."

It seems super early to be thinking about marriage, but there's no doubt that a life with Ivy would never be boring.

I open the envelope and read the note.

I picked the pond as your next spot because Vonnegut the Sequel and Twenty-Two miss you. And I might miss you a little bit too.

You're almost to the big finale. Go to Rockefeller Center.

XO

I stuff the card back in the envelope, then into my coat pocket with the other cards.

"Be patient with her, Lou," Willow says. "Putting herself out there isn't easy for her."

"I'll be as patient as she needs me to be. She's worth the wait."

Willow grabs my arm and kisses my cheek. "I think she's been waiting for you her whole life."

My chest warms. "I think I've been waiting for her too."

* * *

Rockefeller Center is about a mile away, but I know from experience that walking is quicker than taking a car, so I book it, all but running. When I get there, I search the crowd for Ivy.

Instead, I see Rowan and Kennedy.

I walk over to them, searching their hands for an ivory envelope and not seeing one. Rowan wears a deep frown, and now I'm worried that Ivy might have chickened out. Is this the end of the line?

I am surprisingly okay with that. I meant what I said to Willow. As long as there's hope, I'm willing to wait.

"Rowan," I say solemnly as I approach, preparing myself for bad news.

"Lou," he answers back, his voice deep and gruff.

"Good to see you again, Lou," Kennedy says, giving me a warm smile.

"No envelope?" I ask.

"No," Kennedy says. "You've reached your reward."

Rowan's scowl deepens. "My sister's no one's reward."

"Not your sister, Rowan," Kennedy says, rolling her eyes at him. "The activity."

"Oh." He clears his throat. "She likes you, and—thank God, for your sake—you seem to really like her too."

"Rowan," Kennedy says with a sigh.

He looks at her, and his face softens. Then he turns to me and holds out his hand. "Don't hurt her."

I shake his hand. "I don't plan to."

He squeezes my hand just to prove which one of us is stronger, then releases it. "She's at the skating rink waiting for you." He gestures toward to the rink entrance with his thumb.

"Let's go ice skating," Kennedy says as I walk away.

“No,” he replies with a grunt.

“Come on, Rowan,” she pleads.

I’ve seen the two of them together. Rowan is incapable of refusing her anything. They’ll be on the ice soon.

Ivy is waiting for me next to the entrance gate with two pairs of ice skates slung over her shoulders. She’s wearing jeans, a thick lavender turtleneck sweater that brings out the blue in her eyes, and a black overcoat. Her blond hair is a mass of curls tucked under a black knit cap.

She’s the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen.

“Hi,” I say as I approach, surprised I managed to get the single word out. The sight of her has stolen all coherent thoughts out of my head. I start to instinctively reach for her, desperate to hold her, touch her, but the blades on her chest stop me from taking her into my arms. I can’t help but think that’s strategic. She needs to set the pace, and I plan to let her.

“I see you got my notes,” she says, her brow raised.

“I did. Very creative.”

“Not really,” she says with an exaggerated frown. “I don’t know the city well enough to set up a scavenger hunt, so I had to make do with a more direct approach. Alex tried to help me, but his mind isn’t geared for romance. Poor Willow.”

I laugh. “I think he does okay with Willow. It’s others he doesn’t have a romantic bone in his body for.”

She gives me a sly look. “You know, I could make a really crude comment right now. You walked right into it.”

“So why don’t you?”

“*I’m* trying to be romantic.”

“Can I kiss you yet?”

She takes a step back. “We need to put our skates on.”

“Okay,” I say, not put off by her statement. We walk over to a bench and put on the skates. It’s so crowded, we can barely get a few square inches for ourselves, but we manage it.

I smile to myself when I see Rowan and Kennedy in line to get skates.

We put our skates on and stuff our shoes in a locker, then maneuver out onto the ice.

“I see you wore a stuffed shirt,” she says.

“I did it just for you.”

She smiles, her first genuine smile since we’ve seen each other. I can tell she’s scared, and I don’t want that—but I also won’t tell her how to feel. All I can do is show her that I’m here, exactly where I want to be. *With her*. So I reach for her hand, linking our fingers together.

Ivy and I may both make a living with words, but it’s actions that are going to convince her I love her.

Love her?

Maybe it’s madness to fall in love with someone this quickly, a little more each day, but I realize it’s true. I love Ivy Anders. Only I’m not sure she’s ready to hear it yet.

We make our way out onto the ice, our hands still linked. We both wobble as we make our way around the rink, but at least she doesn’t let go.

“Who knew ice skating was so hard?” Ivy says after we complete one lap.

“I think it has something to do with weak ankles.”

She scoffs. “There’s not a single part of my body that’s weak. Speak for yourself.”

“Sorry,” I say with a grin. “Obviously, not *your* ankles. I might have come here a lot as a kid, but I never said I was any good at it.”

Rowan and Kennedy are on the ice, and of course, they’re both pretty decent skaters. Figures.

We make it around twice more before Ivy notices them and frowns.

“Come on,” she says, giving my hand a tug and trying to go faster. But my feet could barely manage the speed we were going, let alone anything faster. The tip of my blade catches on the ice, and I fall forward, breaking my fall with my braced arms. Pain shoots through my wrist, so I rear back and end up on my ass with my legs extended.

She stands above me, giving me a look that’s half amused and half exasperated, then stretches out a hand to help me up.

There’s no way she can pull me up, but I decide to let her try anyway. I clasp her hand with my good one. She gives me a hard pull and then topples over, landing my lap.

“If you wanted a lap dance, all you had to do was ask,” she teases.

“Ivy,” I say, sounding breathless, because I *am* breathless. She makes me breathless.

“This isn’t going as planned,” she says, disappointment filling her eyes. “It’s so crowded I can barely see the ice, and we suck at this.”

“How was it supposed to go?”

“You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Try me.”

“I dunno, I guess I like those movies where couples ice skate together in moves that aren’t supposed to be choreographed but are totally choreographed.”

“I suppose that’s how it would go in one of your books? We’d both be perfect at it?”

“Don’t make fun,” she protests.

“Trust me, I’m not.” I hate that she went to all this trouble, only to be disappointed. “Maybe we can take skating lessons so we can make your dream come true.”

“Why would you do that?” she asks, then as though to clarify, she adds, “Take skating lessons.”

“Don’t you get it, Ivy?” I ask, tucking a stray hair under her knit hat. “I’d do anything to make your dreams come true.”

She starts to say something, then stops, her face turning serious. “How do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Say the perfect thing?”

I laugh. “In case you remember from when I showed up here, I don’t always say the right thing.”

She cocks a brow. “That was the right thing to say to make me laugh.”

I told myself I was waiting for her, but she’s staring at me with a look of wonder, and her lips are too inviting. I close the distance and kiss her, right there in the middle of the ice rink with her cradled in my lap.

She starts to kiss me back, both of us getting lost in it, our hands in each other’s hair, her hat falling off, our mouths locked together.

“Don’t look,” I hear someone say, and my world is so full of Ivy it takes me a second to realize it’s Kennedy’s voice, and she’s talking to Rowan. But I don’t pull away. I can’t. Her lips are so soft and sweet, and she tastes like peppermint and second chances. And then a long, loud whistle blows.

“I hear bells,” she whispers against my lips. Her grin tells me she’s teasing. “It’s like we’re in Christmas All Year Coffee again, only this one sounds annoying.”

And that’s how we get kicked out of the Rockefeller Skating Rink.

But Ivy’s laughing as we change out of our skates, and I’m laughing too. Two months ago, I would have been horrified, but now I see it as one more experience I could only have had with her.

I want more of them. A lot more. Maybe a lifetime’s worth.

“I get the significance of all the other places on your scavenger hunt,” I say after we’ve swapped the skates for our shoes and quickly put them on, a security guard glowering at

us as if we're juvenile delinquents. "Even if some were a stretch."

"Hey!" she protests.

"But I don't get this place. Why skating?"

She stops and looks up at me. "You said your parents took you here when you were a kid, and you remembered it as a happy time." She pauses, licks her bottom lip, then says, "I haven't been the easiest person to be around, Lou. I wanted to give you something happy."

I shake my head in astonishment. "Don't you get it, Ivy? *You* make me happy. As long as I have you, everything else is pure bonus."

"Hey," she says, giving my arm a shove. "Quit rolling out all of those good lines. I'm the romance author in this couple. Your job is to sell my books."

My jaw drops. "You're going to let me represent you?"

"Of course," she scoffs. "It would be weird if I didn't let my literary agent boyfriend sell my books."

"Boyfriend?"

"I know you're an old man," she teases, "but I didn't realize you were already going deaf."

I laugh. "I plan to show you just how young and virile I actually am."

"Promises, promises," she teases.

I lift her chin with my finger, waiting until I have her full attention. "When I make you a promise, I plan to keep it, Ivy. It's important you know you can trust me."

"I know," she whispers. "If I didn't trust you, neither one of us would be here. Now shut up and kiss me."

I'm nothing if not smart. So I do.

Epilogue

Ivy

June

Lou comes around the corner, panting in the heat, holding an enormous flamingo and four green and red envelopes.

“Seriously, Ivy?” he asks, sounding half-pissed, half-amused. “If you wanted to meet me here, couldn’t you have just asked me to meet you here?”

Where would the fun be in that? He must agree because he grabs me around the waist and reels me in for a kiss.

“You’re sweaty,” I say, pulling away slightly.

“The tax you pay for sending me on another scavenger hunt.”

“It’s our anniversary.”

A grin splits his face. “Generally those aren’t celebrated on a monthly schedule.”

“But I’m *extra* happy I have you,” I say, grabbing him by the collar and pulling him down for another quick kiss. “So it has to be a monthly celebration. Besides, the green and red envelopes were a total giveaway. If anything, this one was too obvious.”

He glowers at me and shakes the flamingo. “You made me go to the top of Big Jump Mountain to search for this flamingo. Do you know how crowded it is this time of year?”

“Yeah, there’s a reason I prefer the off-season. But you like Fifi the Sequel, right?”

The original Fifi was destroyed by the Rhodesian Ridgeback mix puppy my dad adopted a few months ago, god rest her furry soul. We weren’t there when it happened because I’ve managed to partially convert Lou to my nomadic ways. We spend about a third of our time here, with Lou and me working out of the office that used to belong to Mayberry Matchmakers. He’s running his own agency—including handling all of the shit I didn’t want to handle with my books

—and my last book climbed higher on the *Wall Street Journal* bestseller list thanks to him. Well, him and Brittany and Logan, who very much influenced *Beauty and the Bar*, and are still going strong. Whenever they argue, they make up by going at it on the bar—literally—after closing, which is what happened the night he came in to meet with her.

When we're here we also hang out with my dad, my siblings, and my adorable little niece, Lulu. And, yes, we absolutely live in Dad's house with him, but we've set very strict rules about when he can and can't enter our half of the house, and I paid for sound-proofing to be put in. The second third of our time is spent in Lou's New York apartment, and the final third is spent doing whatever the hell we please. It's blissful. It's adventurous, and it doesn't feel the slightest bit like a trap.

Perhaps you're worried about the goldfish. Don't be. We're not monsters. In the two-thirds of our time when we're *not* in Highland Hills, they stay with my dad and are spoiled rotten. If you wonder how a goldfish could possibly be spoiled than you haven't spent enough time on Google—and you don't know Jay Anders.

Lou nods to the door of Christmas All Year Coffee. "Shall we?"

"We shall," I say, grinning as he stuffs Fifi the Sequel into my arms. We haven't been to Christmas All Year Coffee for at least two months. The last time we came in was for a launch party for Rowan and Kennedy's show, *Matchmaking Small Town America*. He agreed to it on Kennedy's insistence, but we tried to make it fun for him with a drinking game—a gulp of the hard stuff every time Nana showed up on camera. I guess it was our way of memorializing her, one she probably would have appreciated more than the doves in the end, since all she ever wanted was to be famous. Needless to say, no one stumbled out sober, and after you get drunk on Santa's secret sauce, it's hard to work up an appetite for second helpings. But now, it's prime time—Christmas in summer—and—

There's something wrong.

I glance at Lou, who lifts his magnificent eyebrows. I run a finger over them because I can.

“Stop messing with my eyebrows.”

“Never. Also, what the hell happened here?”

We’ve just joined the end of the line snaking from the counter, and the person in front of us turns around, revealing herself as Eleanor, one third of the Three Fates.

“Hello, dears,” she says with a grin that takes in both of us. If she finds the flamingo odd, she doesn’t say so. Then again, she and her friends are convinced it was their banishing spell that sent my mother back to Florida. I’m more inclined to think it was her realization that Mayberry and “merriment” aren’t two words that naturally go together in the public sentiment here in Highland Hills, and also that operating a business isn’t all for funzies. She did come back up for Bryn’s wedding, but she was invited as a guest, not the planner. There were obviously many repetitions of the “I would have done it this way...” kind of remark, but Holly finally shut her up by playing the video of those doves attacking her on her phone.

“Different, isn’t it?” Eleanor asks, drawing me back to the moment.

She’s not wrong. The menu has been completely stripped of charm, the names of all the drinks and dishes changed to reflect what’s actually in them.

“Seems like a positive improvement,” Lou says.

I think he really means it, the so-and-so, but there’s a handsome smirk on his lips that says he’s also saying it just to get my goat. Well, goat gotten.

“It’s a travesty!” I say. “A subversion of justice!”

Eleanor clucks her tongue. “My niece agrees with you, dear. Lacey’s worked here for five years. Says the new owner’s making all kinds of changes. I hear they’re taking the train down.”

“Not our train!” I say to Lou, who has the grace to look upset by this piece of news.

“Want me to lie across the tracks?” he asks. “Or put my finger across them?”

“Yes,” I say emphatically.

“Have you met Nick?” Eleanor asks. “The owner, I mean. He just took over last month.”

“Yes,” I say, my mind summoning an image of the guy Brittany had pointed out at the brewery. “He’s a big fan of mine. Not so much vice versa.”

Lou puts his arm around me as we walk up a couple of paces. “What she’s saying is that he gave her the finger for refusing to wait on him, but she wasn’t refusing. She was just a terrible waitress.”

“Yes,” I agree, “that’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you two so happy together,” she says, beaming at us. “I just knew it was going to work out.”

“Did a spirit wind whisper it to you?” I ask, winking at her.

“Something like that.” Her lips twist to the side. “I’m only sorry we couldn’t work things out with Jay.”

Yes, my father, in his infinite wisdom, refused to let the Three Fates be his harem and is instead dating an artist from a nearby town. He met her on Matchmake Me, and to the infinite amusement of both Lou and myself—but not my sisters—they were also only a 22% match.

Holly is baffled that there could be two such unicorn couples, 22-percenters who actually like each other (most of the time), and for a while she made some noise about changing the algorithm, but ultimately she and Bryn decided that there’s no accounting for taste, sometimes, and that their system is merely a predictor of who will get along. It doesn’t decide it.

Eleanor blows us a kiss as she goes up to make her order. I pout at Lou. “I wanted to order a Santa’s Little Helper.”

“Looks like you want a boozy peppermint mocha.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“The boozy part, I imagine,” he says, giving me a hip check.

“I love you,” I tell him. Because it’s true, and when you love someone, you really ought to shower them with it.

“I love you too, Santa’s Little Helper.”

When we get to the front and make our order, I can’t help but ask, “Is there a petition to bring the old drink and food names back, because come on...what’s the fun in life if I can’t ask for punny Christmas drinks and food in the middle of summer?”

The server, a college-age kid, shrugs and says, “Actually, yeah. One of the servers started a petition on Change.org.”

“Do you think it’s going to make a difference?” I ask, giving Lou a sidelong glance.

The guy chuckles and scratches his sandy brown hair, making it snow. “Nope. Nick only told her to do it to shut her up.”

“Just who is this Nick character? I hear he’s from New York.”

I hear Lou sigh. “I’m from New York.”

But I won’t be denied. I’m laser-focused.

“He’s related to the old owners,” the kid says. Brittany already told me that, of course, but I feel a renewed sense of outrage that such a dour man could be related to the Meadowses. They’re so damn cheery!

“Do you want fries with your club sandwich?” he presses, clearly done with us.

“Did you hear that, Lou?” I ask. “He wanted to know if you wanted fries. Fries! Where’s magical hay when you need it?”

He scratches his scruff. “That’s one’s always been a stretch.”

We finish our order and sit down, Fifi cradled on my lap, Lou’s hand on my leg. The cheery little train puffs past us.

“I’m going to sign that pointless petition,” I say.

He grins at me and lazily reaches across to tuck a curl behind my ear. “I know you will.”

“And I’m going to write a very pointed online review.”

“I’ll edit it for you.”

“Good. You know how I feel about semicolons.” He’s been my first-round editor for my books lately, starting with *Beauty and the Bar*.

“I do.” He grins at me, the kind of grin I want to kiss right off his stupidly handsome face. “How are your New Year’s resolutions coming along?”

“Well, the main one was to find you somebody to bone, and I think we did pretty okay with that one.”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I think maybe I need my memory refreshed after I finish my *club sandwich and fries*.”

I give a dramatic shudder at the extremely boring name, then grin back at him. “I think that can be arranged. What’s next on our Fuck-et List?”

Our name for the places we’d like to bone and haven’t yet.

“We could go see if they’ve kept the Christmas decorations in the bathroom?” he says, his grin widening.

“Bite your tongue,” I say, but I already feel a little flutter between my legs that says I’m all about this plan. “But yes, we really should investigate. If they took them away, I’m going to have to smuggle them back in. *After* we defile it.”

His smile is indulgent. “I’ll help you.”

I know he will. “You always do. It’s because I made you feel young again. I *told* you sex was the answer.”

This time he laughs, as merry as this place used to be. “And, as always, you were right.”

See? I knew he was perfect.

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Want more of Ivy and Lou? [Sign up for our newsletter](#). We'll be sending out a bonus scene!

If you were intrigued by the changes in Christmas All Year Coffee (really, the audacity of that man!), you won't want to miss our next book, *The Christmas Trap*, about Lacey and Nick!

It's Book One of our new series, Highland Hills Holiday, and it'll be releasing in November. For more updates, make sure to [subscribe to our newsletter](#).

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About the Author

ANGELA CASELLA is a romcom fanatic. Writing them, reading them, watching them—she’s greedy, and she does it all. She writes the Fairy Godmother Agency series solo, and she’s lucky enough to collaborate with Denise Grover Swank on multiple series.

She lives in Asheville, NC. Her hobbies include herding her daughter toward less dangerous activities, the aforementioned romcom addiction, and dreaming of having someone else clean her house.

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About the Author

DENISE GROVER SWANK was born in Kansas City, Missouri and lived in the area until she was nineteen. Then she became a nomad, living in five cities, four states and ten houses over the course of ten years before she moved back to her roots. She speaks English and smattering of Spanish and Chinese, which she learned through an intensive Nick Jr. immersion period. Her hobbies include witty Facebook comments (in own her mind) and dancing in her kitchen with her children (quite badly if you believe her offspring). Hidden talents include the gift of justification and the ability to drink massive amounts of caffeine and still fall asleep within two minutes. Her lack of the sense of smell allows her to perform many unspeakable tasks. She has six children and hasn't lost her sanity. Or so she leads you to believe.

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