



Moon Shot

FIONA KEANE

Trunkline

Penal & Page

MOON SHOT

EMERALDS SERIES

FIONA KEANE



Paradise Page

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*For my sister,
Thank you for always believing in me.*

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ONE

June

Maybe I should've said something about the missing button on the back of Aubrey's dress. I look back and wonder if that's what jinxed me. It was junior year of college and I didn't tell her before she left our apartment on a date with Ethan where her pocket caught on a doorknob which caused her dress to pull apart, forcing Ethan to be a gentleman and offer her a safety pin from his apartment which, long and arduous story short, brought me to the moment she spoiled our senior year spring break in Mexico to tell me Ethan proposed.

It wasn't Ethan who ruined anything. I adored him. In fact, he was perfect, so it made absolutely no sense why his best friends were such pricks. Well, most were just idiots, and some were tolerable, but the biggest prick of them all was his best friend.

"Rowan!" Aubrey shrieked, piercing my ear as she leapt from my side. I rolled onto my stomach and flipped through the magazine Aubrey bought earlier at the airport convenience store. I was on the last question of the magazine's quiz to determine which cake best described my personality when I gagged on the cloud of cologne that hung heavily around us.

Reaching for my bottle of sunscreen, I flipped it open and sniffed while trying to ignore Aubrey fawning over Rowan Ellis. Between reading whether I was angel food or strawberry shortcake, the pages darkened with his shadow.

“Find your perfect celebrity boyfriend?” Rowan mocked, daring to tug on the end of my French braid. Rolling my eyes up to see him squat in front of me, I closed the magazine and moved to stand, grabbing my bag from the plastic chair and slipping my feet into my flip-flops.

“Close your legs, Ellis,” I spat. “Nobody wants to see that.”

As if being squished between half-naked people at the hotel pool with not enough drink in my hand wasn't already too much, Ethan and his posse of posers cut short girl time. The two guys who tagged along for their pre-wedding shenanigans had been in our lives since Aubrey and Ethan's second date. First impressions are important, and when their second date was a pregame party at the apartment those guys shared, where Aubrey and Ethan whispered sweet nothings to each other while I whispered into my red cup next to them, Rowan Ellis was the star of the hour. He wasn't even there, but he was all anyone talked about.

“Where are you going?” Aubrey whined, finally noticing me. Ethan approached in greeting, suffocating me against his massive bare chest. He handed me a gin and tonic, something he learned to use as a liquid apology.

“Don't leave, Mer. I promise,” he snickered, tousling my hair, “I told them to all leave you alone.”

Rolling my eyes, I returned his hug and peeled myself from his warmth. “I'm going to gamble, have a drink, and then meet my best friend for dinner.”

“Oh,” Aubrey chuckled, her cheeks blushing as she looked between Ethan and I. “About that.” I stared at her, following Aubrey's blue eyes as they darted to Rowan. He was climbing from the pool, his palms spread flat on the scalding cement, as he twisted his weight to sit on the ledge. I didn't want any of Aubrey's “about that” to deal with him. I hated when things were about him.

“It's not just the girls anymore,” I presumed, watching Aubrey bite her cheek. I couldn't be mad at her when we were

in Vegas to celebrate her and Ethan getting married, but I could get disappointed and petty.

“Fine. Still meeting at the casino at seven?” Addressing Aubrey through my clenched jaw, I noticed her demeanor shift as she eagerly nodded. She bounded over to me with an enormous hug, one that told me she knew it was a shitty thing to do but that she’d buy me drinks to make up for it and I should just accept her as she was, the smitten kitten. I did, but I didn’t have to accept Ethan’s friends. With Aubrey skipping to Ethan at the pool, I took one giant sip from the sympathy gin and tonic and carried it with me as I passed the corner where Rowan sat, stretching back and leaning his weight on his palms while women ogled him.

Hearing him flirt, I poured the rest of my drink on him as I passed and set my glass on a table on my way back through the hotel. It might’ve helped rather than annoy him as I’d hoped, because I could hear all the bikinis come to his rescue even as I opened the door back into the hotel. Maybe that seemed petty, but Rowan Ellis was someone I’d rather choke on a chicken bone than spend time with since I met him in college.

Free alcohol quickly made up for losing some money on the slot machines. If I sat long enough in each section, slipping in singles so it looked like I was playing big, the busty broads would shake their way over to me with a tray of goods. I was three Baileys and ice into the Roulette table when I won my money back, and then some. Calling it quits, I finished my last drink and carried my sun-kissed and tipsy self back to my room and got ready for dinner.

Vegas was an oven no matter the time of year, especially in June, limiting what I could wear out. Even makeup warranted special ingredients to keep it from sliding down my face.

I was slipping my heels on when someone knocked on my door. It was too early to be Aubrey, but I figured she was in a panic about something wedding-related. Peeking through the peephole, I wondered if my clicking shoes had made too much noise already or if I could escape. When Rowan knocked a second time, I knew he heard me.

Slowly taking in a breath and fixing my resting I-hate-Rowan-Ellis scowl, I opened the door. “What?”

His eyes widened, taking me in while he leaned against the door frame. “Wow, Meredith,” Rowan appraised.

“My eyes are up here, you slime ball,” I groaned, waving near my face as I rolled my eyes. “Why are you here?”

“Change of plans.” Rowan shrugged, finally looking at me and not at my legs. “Someone owed me a favor, and I set up Aubs and Ethan on a date.”

“But I planned our dinner tonight.” My skin tingled. And not in the way it did for so many idiots around Rowan.

Rowan reached for his phone and answered a text before responding, slipping the phone into his pocket. “My plan involved dinner and a show. They’ll love it.”

“It wasn’t even supposed to include you two,” I snapped. “Why do you always do this, Ellis? Someone makes a plan and you spoil it.”

“Name one time,” he rebuked, crossing his arms. His wristwatch reflected the light above us as his forearms tensed.

“Easy,” I claimed, repeating his body language and regretting it as soon as his gaze moved to my chest. “When I wanted to throw Aubrey an engagement party, but you took over and made it about getting a stupid suite for one of your games.”

“I remember you enjoying that,” he winked, “and I know I had to tell some players to step off. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“You’re welcome?” I groaned, uncrossing my arms and clenching my fists at my side, trying not to scream at him. “The last thing I need is you interfering with my love life.”

“How is it anyway?” Rowan flashed the same sparkling grin plastered on billboards throughout Portland, the same one that mocked me when I took the train across town. “You getting some, Meredith?”

Gaping at him, I had to will myself not to slap him.

“I’m teasing,” he tried to stop laughing, “so could you just loosen up?” Rowan slowly stepped toward me, resting his head on the doorframe, rolling it up to peer at me with his unblinking blue eyes. “Let me take you out.”

Eyeing him suspiciously, I had one question to ask. “Are you buying?”

I watched as Rowan lifted from the doorframe and turned from me, his low chuckle filling the hall. Huffing quietly, I turned back into my room for my purse and room key before joining him halfway down the hall.

Finally catching up with his long strides, I nudged his arm with my shoulder. “Can we sit far away from each other?”

“Whatever you want, Meredith.” Rowan pushed the elevator button with his shoe, his tanned ankle poking out from the cuff of his dark pants. He rubbed his jaw while we waited, looking over at me as I checked my reflection in the mirror. “I feel bad for the guys hitting on you tonight.”

“Bad?” I turned, catching the elevator door open. Rowan extended a hand to hold the door open for me, ushering me in.

“You’re tough. It’ll be broken jaws and broken hearts all over Vegas.” I didn’t know what he meant, and I didn’t even want to ask. The ride was potent enough, as I nearly suffocated on the delirious scent of his cologne. We didn’t make small talk, and I preferred that because talking meant breathing and I didn’t want to do that in that small space. There wasn’t an out until the doors opened and I could inhale the stagnant smell of cigarettes, perfume, alcohol, and heat.

TWO

When we stepped into the hotel lobby, there were people gaping at him like they always did, but nobody approached him. Thank goodness, too, because being with him was enough trouble already.

The evening heat warmed my bare legs as we stepped onto the strip.

“Where to?” I questioned, fixing the strap of my left heel while Rowan flipped through his phone again. “Is this going to be all night? Me competing with your phone?” He laughed at me, his smirk driving me mad while sending a text. “I knew better. I’m out.”

“Meredith,” he grabbed my wrist, a quick reflex that made him a star at first base, “it’s my coach. Just wait a minute and then I’m all yours.” His blue eyes pleaded with mine, but I wasn’t falling for his tricks. Waiting at his side, I declined three cards with busty babes and 1-800 numbers from men who passed us, and I watched two couples argue about whether dolphins lived in the Bellagio fountain.

“All night, hey?” Rowan acknowledged me, stuffing away his phone and playfully draping his left arm around me. “I never thought I’d see you, of all people, crumble.”

“Gross,” I snapped, brushing his arm off. “You never will see me, of all people, anywhere but with enough distance between us for a steadfast exit.” His grin was contagious, fighting the desert heat to see which would make someone faint first.

I said little on our walk along the Strip to the Bellagio, where Rowan led the way through the first floor to a restaurant with a line out the door. He flashed something on his phone screen to the bouncer who let us skip the entire line and enter through a different door.

“You’re not shy about flaunting yourself,” I muttered, following Rowan down the narrow hall to a small room that overlooked the fountain. He moved through the sparse crowd to the bar, nodding for me to join him.

“Two gin and tonics,” he ordered, slipping a fifty-dollar bill to the bartender. That meant top shelf, and I tried not to show my excitement. Rowan turned from the bar, his chest brushing against mine. “That was a cute trick with your drink before.”

“When can we eat?” I ignored Rowan, studying the wall of glass behind him. Spilling my drink on him at the pool earlier was entertaining so, yeah, I’d say it was a cute trick.

He leaned over the bar to whisper something to the bartender moments before a woman approached, her sleek black hair pulled into a high ponytail. Her dark makeup and bright red lips caught my attention first, but I was sure the washcloth of a dress would be the first thing Rowan noticed.

“Mr. Ellis?” she questioned as he turned from the bar, grinning widely at him. “I’m Desiree. I’ll be seating you and,” her eyes flicked to mine quickly, “your date.”

“Meredith?” Rowan placed his hand on my back, getting my attention as we followed Desiree. She turned around three times to say something to him, making sure he heard her giggle and her manicured hand was on him.

A man dressed in black greeted us at the doorway of a small room with floor to ceiling glass. It felt like we were in a fishbowl, especially when the windows facing inside became a looking glass for baseball fans.

“Champagne?” the man inquired, reaching for a chilled bottle on the table as Rowan pulled a chair out for me. “For you and your date, Mr. Ellis.”

Rowan's chuckle rumbled across the table, smacking my shrinking ego while he looked at me. His eyes sparkled as he tried to contain his grin.

"Oh, God. No. I'm not—"

Rowan waved the man away. "Thank you, but I can handle it. Could you just close the curtains on your way out?"

Crossing my legs, I leaned back in my chair and watched as crowds formed while the fountains began their dance. Appreciating Rowan blocking the gawkers, I hated to admit I felt a little intimidated when I looked at him and accepted we were alone.

Rowan spread his legs and held the champagne bottle between his knees as the cork popped and flew over the railing and splashed into the water.

"Where's Ezra? Maybe I should call him." I rambled, watching the bubbles in the champagne he poured. Surely Ethan's other friend was coming, so I wouldn't get stuck with the enemy.

"He's hungover and asleep. You can try, but I don't think he'll answer." Rowan handed me a glass of champagne, the most selfless thing I'd ever seen from him. "You worried about being alone with me?"

"Honestly," I took the glass, "I am. I was hoping to at least retire before killing someone."

Before I could say anything else, Desiree returned, holding two wooden boards with menus attached to them in her frail arms. She leaned over Rowan more than twice. It surprised me when his eyes never left the menu... and me.

"Do they all do that around you?" I grimaced once she left.

"Do what? Threaten to kill me over drinks? No." His grin had me speechless. "The being way too much in my bubble? Most of them, yes." I scoffed, disgusted by the casual tone of his voice. "Does it bother you?"

"Not me, but it bothers me you're breeding a gender stereotype and using your looks to get something from

people.” The champagne was going down easily, so I held my glass in the air and put on my brightest smile.

“It works for you, too,” Rowan mocked, refilling my glass. “My looks, hey?” He leaned back in his chair, looking over the fountains as he twirled the stem of his glass between his fingers. “I didn’t think you noticed.”

Something about Rowan’s tone, the darkness of his blue eyes as he stared ahead, left me wishing I’d stayed in my hotel room or that stupid Ezra wasn’t still in his. I couldn’t have been nervous around Rowan. I couldn’t stand him on most days, but after two more glasses of champagne that he paid for, I decided today wasn’t one of those days.

“Relax, Meredith. I’m not going to make a move on you.” Today was officially one of those days.

I wasn’t a beast to Rowan for the entire meal, especially not when he paid for it and walked me back to my hotel. Promising me he’d stay out of my hair in the morning, I gave in and thanked him for treating me.

“Listen, Meredith,” he put his hand on my doorknob, keeping it closed as I slid the card, “I owe you a thank you.”

“Uh...” I rolled my eyes up to his, definitely experiencing a new side of Rowan Ellis. “Gratitude looks good on you, but I’m not sure what it’s for.”

The corners of his mouth twisted up as he scratched his jaw, lifting his other hand from the doorknob. “Nobody bugged me when I was with you. It was... Nice. I could think for a minute and enjoy someone’s company.”

Tapping his nose, I laughed and opened my room door. “If you keep buying the good stuff, I’ll be your bodyguard.”

“Thanks,” he mocked, rolling his eyes. “What’s so funny?”

“I find it amusing that the,” I poked his chest, “big, beefy baseball guy needs me as his bodyguard. Wouldn’t you have one of those already now that you’re literally everywhere downtown?”

His fingers wrapped around mine as it accidentally lingered too long on his chest, Rowan giving a quick tug that made me fall into him. Looking up at him, my eyes blurring from the ceiling light and the champagne, I watched his lips twist into a grin as I couldn't help but inhale the scent of his cologne. Trapped between Rowan and my door, I blinked to make sure I was not in a nightmare, or a dream... a really, really weird dream. He lowered his face to mine, so close the sweet flavor of champagne was still on his breath, his smile consuming his chiseled face.

“Goodnight, Meredith,” he winked, letting go of me. As he walked away, I reached for my doorknob and watched him, telling myself it was Vegas, the drinks, the night, and not me, making me wonder more about just how close our mouths were.

Embarrassed and exhausted, I closed the curtains in my room so the flickering Eiffel Tower and spotlights wouldn't keep me up before I crashed into the bed, still wearing my dress and heels.

The next morning, I ordered dark coffee at breakfast while nursing a headache. Ezra woke from his hangover coma and met everyone. I kept to myself while they all battled each other to be the funniest, loudest, whateverest.

Aubrey and I escaped the dude fest for a trip to the salon after that. She was halfway through telling me about her night, the one Rowan stole from me, when she suddenly stopped.

Aubrey twirled her blond hair between her index and middle finger, something she did when over-caffeinated and excited.

“Stop doing that,” I grumbled, watching her next to me in the salon.

“It's just,” she whimpered, dropping her hands in her lap and looking at me, “I want to tell you all about last night, but you're mad about Rowan, and I don't want to make you mad at me.”

Rolling my eyes, I turned my gaze to the quiet woman pampering my feet. “Tell me about your night.” I tried my best to pretend I was excited about the date Rowan set up for them, the one that left me stranded with him.

It was “magical”, according to Aubrey. I could never afford the things Rowan was already gifting them with, but I tried not to let my jealousy show. Happily pampered, Aubrey and I went back to the pool while Ethan, Rowan, and Ezra went golfing. Knowing they would not be around until at least dinner meant I had my best friend to myself. For real this time.

Aubrey nestled into the lounge chair next to me once she finished spraying her legs with sunscreen. “Did I tell you some of my students are coming?”

“That’s adorable,” I agreed, turning from my stomach to sit on the chair. “Tell me it’s the kids I chaperoned on your trip to the Emeralds game, and not the students I had to pull from the toilet at the art museum.”

“When you put it like that,” she giggled, “I wonder how I still teach.”

“That poor boy got himself stuck in a toilet, Aubrey. That has nothing to do with your teaching. Besides, you do it because it’s your calling and you’re amazing.”

“Thank you.” Aubrey blushed. “It’s the students from the game,” she continued. “Which reminds me... Are you positive you don’t want me to ask Rowie about getting tickets for your fundraiser?”

I spat out my drink, rum and coke splattering my legs. “What did you just call him? No. I don’t want Rowie to get tickets for my fundraiser.”

“Can you put Halloween behind you, please? For the sake of my wedding?” Aubrey pouted, stirring up the past. “He wouldn’t even remember it was you he kissed. He was a mess.”

“That’s kind of the point,” I argued, rolling my eyes. “I don’t want to talk about this. Let’s just enjoy what time we have left in this heat before flying home.”

When Aubrey started talking more about a cousin's uncle's something who couldn't come to the wedding, I looked around the pool. All the pretty people and their drinks, pretty people to kiss. It made me miss the solitude of my cave in Portland, where I could wear clothes and didn't have to worry about watching Desiree, the hostess from last night, walk back and forth in heels and a bikini at the same pool Aubrey and I were at.

It was probably Aubrey stirring up that memory from college that made me even more grossed out by watching Desiree. Either way, I was hours from flying home and only having to deal with Rowan when his smiling face mocked me on billboards, and from the nosebleed seats on the third base line at Emeralds games where he was but a mere dot in a sea of green.

THREE

Three weeks after Vegas and Aubrey was texting me almost hourly about the wedding. As her maid of honor, I took her Bridezilla-with-a-halo with a grain of salt and did what I could. However, calling Ethan's mom and her mom to mediate their disagreement on whether to provide an open bar at the reception was not something I could manage while at work.

Like Ethan, his mom was perfect. I wanted her to be my mom, but then I'd be Ethan's sister. It'd be awkward, because I've always enjoyed looking at Ethan and I've heard too many things in our time as friends that it just wouldn't work. I was texting his mom when Maggie poked her head around my doorway.

"Did you watch the game last night? I think they're going to make it," she squealed, clenching her fists with excitement.

"I missed it," I admitted, not regretting the chick flick marathon I had by myself instead. Maggie was one of my favorite interns, especially when she'd start gushing about the center fielder. Before she could open her mouth to tell me about his grass stains and her early World Series prediction, my boss cleared his throat behind her.

"Meredith," he coughed. "Staff meeting in five minutes. My office. Maggie, could you please run downstairs for coffee? I'm sure we'll finish when you get back." Maggie eagerly agreed, leaving Harrison and me together.

"It can't be good news if you're not involving the interns," I speculated, hoping he'd correct me. He pursed his lips and

nodded, spinning around and making a path to his office. Flashing Maggie a sympathetic smile, I followed her out of my office after gathering my laptop and cell phone.

Harrison was opening the stale blinds in his office when I joined the four other staff members around the table. They looked as confused as me while we waited for Harrison to let us know why we were silently sitting around his conference table.

“You’d think with kids being home for summer that we’d be busier,” Harrison suggested, as he settled into a chair at the head of the table. “I’m going to cut to the chase. There was a budget shortfall and I want you to be preparing yourselves, if we can’t fix it.”

“What kind of shortfall?” Dane questioned at my side, his cologne suffocating me as he leaned closer to me in his chair.

“Does it matter, Dane?” Monica snapped. “It’s concerning enough for Harrison to tell us to find new jobs.”

Looking at the ceiling, I tried to add my expenses for the next six months and budget my bank account. I’d be okay until Christmas, but this wasn’t just work to me.

“It’s about two hundred thousand dollars,” Harrison interjected. He dropped his interwoven hands into his lap and shrugged, as if that was all of it. “We’re working to fundraise and talking to donors, but even if we could squeeze everyone who’s ever donated, we’re short.”

As they started brainstorming who knew someone more rich or famous, I flipped open my laptop and checked my calendar for the rest of the year.

“This weekend is the Trail Blazer’s game,” Harrison began, going through our upcoming agenda, as if telling us to job hunt was over and done, “and next weekend is the Emeralds game. Who’s going to those?”

As they finished assigning duties to everyone, I could email Ethan’s mom and get that out of the way. The next thing on my agenda was to find the closest happy hour, but something else thwarted my plans.

“Earth to Meredith,” Dane laughed, nudging me with his shoulder.

“Sorry.” I blushed. “Sign me up for whatever.” Maggie knocked on the door, tentatively stepping in with her arms filled with two trays of coffee. She memorized my order; huge, hot, and dark.

“Maggie,” Harrison prodded, “how do you feel about joining Meredith at the Emeralds game tonight? She’s going with a few students from Portland State.”

Relieved I could have a beer with my students, I felt more at ease about spending the night at the game.

“You girls get there early enough and you might have a chance at getting an autograph from Diego,” he continued, chuckling to himself. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one who knew about Maggie’s obsession with the center fielder.

Maggie popping into my office with questions about what to wear while squirming like a jitterbug throughout the day made it seem way too long. When we met outside the stadium later to wait for Becky and Lauren, Maggie was already bouncing with excitement.

I loved working with our interns and the students we supported, but my discussion about marketing and non-profit management flew over the girls’ heads like a fly ball once we made it to our seats.

The donated tickets were closer to the bullpen than the actual game, but that meant Maggie could watch Diego and lose her shit with the two students she’d persuaded into her lusty Diego daydreams. I didn’t let Rowan spoil the game for me, but it was strange to watch him warm up in the outfield and not think back to his goodbye outside my room in Vegas.

“Ugh,” Maggie groaned, squeezing my shoulder and pulling me out of the memory of his mouth so close to mine, and wondering why I thought about it again. “I could just grab him.”

“And Ellis,” Becky cried, causing me to gag a little. “Look at them!”

“Who wants a drink?” I stood up, not looking at Diego and Rowan. “I’m buying.” Maggie leaped up to help, offering to get drinks and food for everyone. She took Becky and Lauren with her, leaving me to stand and stretch before the game. Our section was overcrowded with kids trying to catch foul balls, no matter the team who hit one our way. Some little dude knocked into my legs as I leaned them against the railing, and I had to catch him before he fell onto the field.

“Baby, you’re on the screen!” A woman shrieked from behind me, knocking my cap off as she reached over me to shake her son’s shoulders. No manners. But sure as heck, there we were on the humongous screen. Me and the little guy with my hands latched onto his waist. What a catch! Rolled across the screen, mortifying me even more. Some players in the field cheered, turning to us once they realized where we were sitting.

Our faces were still plastered up there when Maggie came back. She was squeezing back through our aisle with an enormous beer and hot dog with my name on it just as the teams finished warming up. She took good care of me and I loved her for it.

“Think we’re close enough to get his attention?” Maggie freaked out, bumping into the kid in my lap and spilling the beer on my shirt. “Meredith, oh my god! I’m so sorry!”

“Hey, kid!” a deep voice shouted from the field.

“Why me?” I groaned, lowering onto my back as I squeezed beer from my white shirt. Maggie tried dabbing the beer with napkins, but I grabbed them from her and nudged her out of the way as someone on the field kept calling for the little stranger kid who thought my lap was his new home.

“He’s talking to me?” He asked me, slapping my knee. I nodded, smiling at how adorable and excited he was. His mom couldn’t make it around the aisle to him because the jerks blocking the end wouldn’t let her through, so I told her I’d help. His name was Micah, and he was nine, freaking out on my lap, getting his back wet from my saturated shirt, which his

mom brushed off because she was too busy hanging over the seats as the center fielder leaned over the railing.

“That was some catch,” he teased me, and I understood in that moment exactly why Maggie was paralyzed at my side. Diego Leon was a deity on the outside with huge brown eyes and perfect eyelashes, and his mouth... Oh, my god.

“Th—” I began, but his teammate bounded over, shaking his head with laughter.

“You need a glove?” Rowan asked, taking his glove off and waving it in the air.

“Why is Rowan Ellis, first baseman, one of Portland’s most eligible bachelors, offering you his glove?” Maggie murmured as she stood with me, grasping my arm.

Diego was giving Micah’s mom the flirt she begged for as I caught Rowan’s glove. He motioned for me to move closer, which made Maggie gasp.

“Why aren’t you on my side?” Rowan whispered into my ear as I leaned over the railing. “I could’ve gotten you a seat at home if you asked.”

“I’m here for work,” I motioned behind me. “The seats were donated. Look, could you do me a favor?”

“What are friends for?” He smiled, tugging on my braid. I could feel Maggie melt behind me, unable to hear anything Rowan and I were saying.

“Could you ask your center fielder to acknowledge my intern? She’s obsessed and I feel like I’m dating him because I know so much about him.” As I asked, Rowan was quiet, his chest heaving slightly from warming up, with his hands on his hips.

“What?” His question was between a scoff and a laugh. I put my palms together in prayer, willing him to give Maggie what she wanted so she’d get off my back. The clock ran out while they stood by us, so Rowan knocked Diego’s shoulder and whispered something to him.

I was gooey with humidity and the beer on my shirt, waiting for a chance to thank Rowan before going to a team store for a fresh shirt. Micah mirrored my posture as I leaned over the railing again, staring down at the dirt.

“Meredith!” I heard Rowan call out for me. I was too distracted by my shirt and watching Maggie turn red while producing single syllable sounds when Diego talked to her.

“Do you know him?” Micah shouted in my ear, bouncing up and down when Rowan was beneath us again.

“A little,” I mumbled, looking to Rowan. Our eyes met, the giggling from the girls around me deafening. “Yes?” I asked him.

“Here,” he said while taking off his team sweatshirt to reveal his jersey, tossing the dark green pile to me. “You look a little wet,” Rowan pointed to me. “Nice bra, by the way.” With a wink, he and Diego were jogging back to the dugout as Maggie and Micah climbed on top of me.

“Micah,” I picked up the invasive little guy and set him on the ground, “I have something for you.” His eyes were saucers when I handed him Rowan’s glove. He shrieked, bouncing up and down with his mom, who was still blushing over Diego.

I got it. He was a babe. I couldn’t hate Rowan for being even hotter, but I could not let it get to my head. Settled into his sweatshirt, I waved for a vendor to come to us with a beer, and waited for the game to begin. Although, as I watched players jog to their places with Diego waving back at us, I felt like some sort of game had already started.

FOUR

While we waited for the stands to clear, Lauren quizzed me on my job and told me more about herself. She and Becky were freshman and their home lives were full of adversity. That's half the reason their undergraduate program admitted them, the other half being their vision for working with or creating organizations to help kids like them.

"Can we include this," Becky joked, waving her empty cup in the air, "in our reflection essay?"

The last to leave our section, we were all laughing on our way out. Some families lingered around the restrooms and team shops while the concessions closed and the field lights dimmed.

"Or," Maggie squeezed my arm, "that?"

Baseball cap on backwards, raglan and jeans, with a duffel bag strap crossing his chest, Rowan and two other players were walking in our direction.

"Come on," I softly ushered, turning Maggie toward the door. "We have to work in the morning. Remember? Your internship is about more than gawking at baseball players."

"What's the rush?" Lauren beamed.

I looked at her, my mother hen resting no-nonsense face startling her. "The rush is trying to catch the train back so we're not stuck down here all night. Let's go."

"Ellis!" Becky shouted, shrugging at me when I groaned. Rowan turned around, looking for whoever called him.

“I’m going,” I told the girls. “Good night. Maggie, eight o’clock.” What am I doing? Becky and Lauren were under my care. I turned around, watching Maggie twirl her golden curls as Diego approached her.

Staring at the sky, I quietly groaned to the heavens and demanded God tell me why this kept happening to me. Maggie was my intern, and also my responsibility. This was just supposed to be one Emeralds game, nothing more. I couldn’t leave them alone.

“Let’s go,” I put my arm around Maggie and Becky. They seemed the most enchanted by the wall of muscle heading toward us. Lauren was blushing, but I thought maybe I could reason with her. “The next train is in five minutes. I need to get you three home.”

“I’ll tell you who I’d like to go home with,” Lauren told me, covering her mouth as she burst into laughter. Crossing Lauren off my list then.

“Hey.” I heard Rowan behind us, his voice unmistakable. Becky turned against my arm, facing backward as I tried shoving them out the doors.

“He’s touching you,” Becky gasped. She wasn’t wrong, but I already had too much to manage with those three flirts, so I couldn’t add Rowan to my list.

“Do you need help, Meredith?” I heard him drop his duffel near us as he stepped around Becky to look at me.

“Don’t tell anyone about this,” I grumbled, staring at him. “I just need to get them on the train, but they’re star struck. Could you take your face and muscles somewhere else, Ellis?”

We both turned when Maggie screamed. Far from hurt, she was embarrassing herself while swooning over Diego and his pretty eyelashes. Becky and Lauren wriggled free from me to join her, and I crossed my arms tightly, wondering at the level of force I could use to get them out of there.

“I love Aubs,” Rowan told me, nudging my shoulder with his, “but your other friends are strange.”

“She’s my intern,” I nodded to Maggie, “and those are the two students who won an essay contest about adversity and got to see the game tonight. They’re not supposed to be meeting Diego Leon. I told you just to tell him to say hi. Now look what you’ve done.”

“Me?” Rowan laughed, his right palm spreading against his heart. “I was going home. You’re the one lingering around. Were you waiting for someone, Meredith?” His eyes flicked to my mouth as his expression hardened, his blue eyes lifting to meet mine before his teammate approached.

“Hi there,” he greeted me, standing next to Rowan. “Ryan —”

“Marshall,” I interrupted him, easily recognizing their catcher up close. He was November in my baseball calendar at work. “Hi. I’m—”

“Meredith,” Rowan finished for me, rubbing his jaw. “Do you want me to call them a cab?”

“No,” I objected, feeling flustered by Ryan Marshall’s focused stare. “I just need to get them off of Diego, and we’ll be fine.”

“No way,” Ryan chuckled, placing his hand on my shoulder. I rolled my eyes down to it, letting my gaze travel the length of his enormous, flexed arm. “We’d love if you came out with us. A lady friend of Ellis’s is a friend of mine.”

“We’re not—,” Rowan and I both blurted, loud enough to get everyone’s attention. Ryan nodded to Diego and let him know I didn’t want to join them wherever they were going. It could’ve been a strip club for all I knew. And, no offense to dancers, but that just wasn’t what I had in mind for getting Becky, Lauren, and Maggie home.

Why, oh why, do these guys have to be so ridiculously attractive?

“Come on out,” Diego pleaded, his brown eyes even more irresistible without the railing between us. “One drink.”

“She’s working, Diego,” Rowan quickly replied. “Some other time. Goodnight, Meredith.”

Puzzled by his dismissal, I wondered if it was like he claimed from Aubrey's engagement party, where he said he had to tell his teammates to leave me alone, or if he was really just being a fickle jerk now.

Diego answered for me as his muscular arm curved around my shoulders. "One drink?"

"Please, Meredith? I'll be there way before eight tomorrow. I'll bring you coffee and a muffin." Maggie pleaded, grasping my left hand.

Rowan was picking up his duffel bag while I deliberated, catching the blue headlight on our train pulling up to the stadium's stop. I could get them out the door and on the train in ten seconds, and all the muscle and cologne would be a memory. Maggie squeezed my hand tighter as Rowan stood up, running his fingers through his hair before putting his cap back on.

"I can go," I finally agreed.

"Great," Diego cheered, slinking his arm around me, separating Maggie and I.

"I'll drive them," Rowan offered, clicking his key fob when we left the stadium. Diego objected, but Rowan put his foot down and I was thankful for that because I couldn't lose one of those girls to the backseat of Diego's car.

Before we climbed into Rowan's Audi, I had to lecture the girls like I was their mother, and I wasn't even ten years older than them. Don't leave with a baseball player. Don't give him your phone number. Definitely don't trust a player from out of town. Rowan is off limits. Why? Because he's Rowan. Why am I standing out here when they're already in the car?

"Are you okay?" Rowan asked as I climbed into the front seat. He took off his cap and stared at me while turning the ignition.

"Please don't let something happen to them," I begged, closing my eyes.

"I'm more worried about something happening to you," he muttered, pulling out of the stadium parking lot. "Aubrey

would never forgive me, and Ethan would probably try to beat me up. He'd never win, though. I exercise way more than he does."

Sneering, I couldn't believe I knew him. "You're so full of yourself. If you exploded, more of you would ooze out."

Rowan merged to take the bridge across the Willamette, grinning as he changed lanes while following Diego's BMW. "You want more of me?"

Maggie squeezed between us, almost veering Rowan's control of the car into another lane. "I warned you they'd be trouble," I told him, ignoring Maggie to look out the windshield.

She was rambling about work to Rowan as he drove, and I was quietly thankful he humored her. He was too polite. It tricked unsuspecting people when he should've walked around with a warning sign pinned to his muscular chest.

He pulled into the parking garage of a hotel downtown, handing his keys to the valet as others opened our doors. As the young men greeted Rowan like he was a regular, I pulled my three to the side with one more lecture.

"One drink," I warned. "And then I'm taking you three home." Telling them to stay put, I turned around to ask Rowan where we were going.

He leaned against the wall, watching me with his arms crossed. "What are you looking at?" I snapped, wondering if I missed a patch of ketchup on his sweatshirt or something.

"You need a husband and kids," he told me, "or maybe some sheep. Goslings, perhaps."

"This was a mistake," I grumbled, turning from him. Maggie had already corralled Becky and Lauren onto the sidewalk.

"Tell me about it." Rowan was at my side, draping his arm over my shoulder. "I tried to get you out of it, too. I guess you should've listened to me."

“Do you actually listen to yourself?” I rolled my eyes and walked with him to meet my girls. “Nothing good could come of it.”

“Hey, Meredith!” Ryan called from across the street, waving. Peering around, I still wasn’t sure he was talking to me.

“Why is he calling my name and not yours?” I muttered as Rowan pressed the walk button at the intersection.

“Honestly?” He took his arm from around me and pulled out his phone. “Because you look like you’re only wearing a sweatshirt and sandals, you have nice legs, and you’re next to me.”

“Always making it about you.” I shook my head, watching the corner of his mouth lift with a smile as he responded to a message. Glancing at my legs when we started crossing the street, I felt proud of them and resentful of Rowan for calling them out. It felt too cozy in his sweatshirt, even in the middle of summer, and I didn’t want to sit around everyone smelling like stale beer, so I kept it on. Besides, it smelled really nice. Like expensive cologne and baseballs.

Ryan and Diego were sitting at a table along the sidewalk when we got there, already chugging their beers. The three of them celebrated their win with a toast before going into details about their plays and the defeat of the other team.

“I’m going in for another round,” Diego announced, turning his brown eyes to mine. I would pay the big bucks I didn’t have to have eyelashes that beautiful. “What can I get you?”

“Me?” I felt everyone’s eyes on me. Except Rowan’s. He sat across from me, staring out at the street like a pensive, brooding friend of a friend who I shouldn’t have let bring me out with his teammates and my students.

“I’ll get the next round.” Rowan stood up, nodding to the doorway while looking at me. “Come on.”

Maggie gave me a thumbs up, which was as embarrassing as it was annoying. Following Rowan inside, I waited for two

women to finish ogling him before joining him at the bar.

“What’s your problem?” I hissed, glaring at Rowan. “That’s the second time you’ve tried speaking for me to him tonight. If you didn’t want us tagging along, you should’ve said so.”

Rowan slid the bartender some cash and shouted our order to him before turning back to me. Both of his hands combed through his hair before he slid them down his face and pulled on his jaw.

“He’s my teammate, not my brother,” he finally answered. “Don’t fall for those eyelashes.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I lied, looking away from him. I must’ve looked like an idiot wearing an Emeralds sweatshirt while talking to their prized first baseman. Little did those scowling babes behind him know I was wearing his sweatshirt and I’d seen him naked twice in college. It’s getting hot in here.

“Diego,” Rowan brought my attention back, and hopefully didn’t see my cheeks blush. “He doesn’t remember you,” he growled, “and that makes him an asshole.”

I thought of Halloween years ago when Rowan didn’t remember me either, making him an even bigger “asshole”. His words, not mine.

“What do you mean?”

Rowan’s lips pursed around the mouth of his beer bottle as he eyed me while swallowing. “Engagement party.” He swallowed. “He tried to hook up with you.”

“Why am I just hearing of this now?” I took the other bottles from the bartender as Rowan continued.

“I pushed him off.”

Scoffing, I knocked him in the chest. His way too hard, way too warm, chest. “That’s not up to you.”

“I don’t care who you’re with, but if I can keep you from being just a notch on his bedpost, then I will.” Rowan assured

me, his blue eyes cold. “He’s a serial one-night stand sort of guy.”

“Oh? And what are you?”

“Why?” Rowan laughed, taking another sip. Seeing him smile again, returning from strangely protective to the arrogant guy I usually couldn’t stand, was comforting. “Want to find out?”

“Gross.” I scowled, pushing him away. “I’m telling on you.”

“Go for it. Tell Ethan. He’d never believe you,” Rowan teased, his lips above my ear as we started walking back outside. “He doesn’t know I secretly love blue bras and beer-stained white shirts.” His snicker spread a shiver across my skin. “You’re fun, Meredith. We should hang out and hate each other more often. Now,” he reminded me, “one drink and I’m taking you four home.”

FIVE

Maggie called in sick two days after the game. That, and hiding my Emeralds calendar, helped me forget the ride home in Rowan's car where Maggie and Lauren tried to out sing the other and Becky puked from two beers.

It was my job to meet Aubrey with her mom and Ethan's mom at lunch the following Saturday, so I could be a buffer between them should wedding discussions turn hostile. I dressed in all black and wore pearls because it was some swanky hotel downtown.

"Honey," Aubrey's mom patted her shoulder, "your wedding is just a few months away. We need to resolve the issue of the guest book."

"Can't you just look at the RSVPs?" I asked, earning a scoff from both of their moms.

Aubrey turned to me. "I don't want a guest book."

"You're," Ethan's mom sniffled into her handkerchief, "going to want to remember everyone who came. You're going to want to see their signatures. And," she sobbed, "my mother isn't with us much longer."

The dying grandparent guilt trip. A classic move. Aubrey glanced between her mom and me, and I wished I could give her some of my balls to speak up so I didn't have to. The server brought our lunch, and it wouldn't have been proper to talk with our mouths full, so the guest book went away for a bit.

After lunch, it was one more fitting for our dresses and a tour of the wedding venue. We'd been maybe three times already, but seeing the place gave the moms more inspiration to overwhelm Aubrey with. They meant well, but I was sure glad they weren't my mom's and that my bed wasn't big enough to share with some husband.

Ethan met us at the condo he and Aubrey shared in a remodeled factory downtown. It was just me and their cat on the couch while they sorted through some paperwork from a caterer.

"How was lunch?" Ethan asked me, tousling my hair as he came to sit next to me.

"Nice." Leaning into him, I closed my eyes. "Why do you smell so good?"

"It's called cologne. It has this magic ability to mask me smelling like the copy machine in my office," he teased. "I'm going to the Blazers game tonight. I want to smell nice when I come home and not like all the beer I plan on drinking."

"Oh." I opened my eyes and rolled my head onto the back of the couch. "Hot date?"

Ethan glanced at his watch, nodding. "Any minute now. Do me a favor, Mer?"

"What?"

"Don't let me them overrule Aubrey on the wedding stuff." Ethan pleaded, his big blue eyes widening with exaggerated concern. "She's got it mapped out, and she's letting them say their piece, but I think they might be too much."

I laughed, thinking of how I spent part of my week at work diffusing disagreements about decorations with their mothers just because I was the maid of honor. Before I could tell him how little he knew about wedding planning, and their bossy moms, the room filled with coos and laughter.

"Ezra! Rowan!" Ethan's mom cried as they closed the door. "I haven't seen you two in," she turned toward the living room, "what, Ethan? A year?"

“Dad’s birthday party,” Ethan shouted above my head. He squeezed my shoulder before getting up to greet his friends, who were still being swarmed with affection from Ethan’s mom. I took their cat from my lap and plopped her onto the couch, where she nestled into the spot Ethan left.

I wasn’t sure if I felt embarrassed about Maggie and our students or if it still annoyed me that Rowan said he wouldn’t let Diego flirt with me. Either way, I had a hard time looking at him. It didn’t help that he was wearing a Blazers jersey that displayed his defined, tanned arms.

“Nobody wants to see that,” I groaned, waving at him when Aubrey joined me in the living room.

“It’s disgusting.” She agreed, pulling me to the table where they’d gone over wedding details. Aubrey was going through catering details with me when everyone else bothered us.

“Meredith!” Ezra cooed, opening his arms for me to run into. Why not? He was nice. He never teased me about the color of my bra after my intern poured beer on me. “I haven’t seen you since Vegas. Three weeks is too long. Want to get coffee tomorrow?”

“He had three beers before I picked him up,” Rowan acknowledged, hugging Aubrey tightly.

“He needs to be drunk to want to hang out with me?” I sneered, shaking my head at Rowan for being a dick. Before he could correct himself, blue eyes already rolling at me, I held my hand up and went into the kitchen.

“That’s not what I meant.” Rowan followed me, leaning against the counter when I closed the fridge. Clutching my heart, I had to catch my breath. I don’t like surprises.

I looked at him once before opening a bottle of sparkling water. “I did my best the other night. I corralled them, nobody hooked up with anyone, and we never have to talk about it again.”

“You’re fine, Meredith.” Even his reassurance sounded like he was mocking me as it came through his smiling mouth. “I think I owe you an apology, though.” I lifted my hand to my

forehead, checked my pulse on my neck, and looked up at him. “What are you doing?” Rowan stepped closer to me, his arms crossed, staring at me all types of smug. His biceps were killing me.

“I think I just heard you say something about an apology. I just wanted to make sure I hadn’t died waiting for one.” As I turned from him, I felt his foot on my butt.

“What’s going on?” Aubrey looked between Rowan and me, her eyes squinting suspiciously.

Rubbing my butt, I glared at him. “Nothing,” I told Aubrey. “Rowan’s just being a typical,” I deepened my most annoyed stare at him, “asshole.”

Heels clicked along the floor, the voice of Ethan’s mother getting louder as she approached. She was rambling on about something with Ezra. It could’ve been about whether to serve chocolate mousse or flan at the reception, surely something I’d be mediating for Aubrey.

“There you are!” She waved a finger at Rowan, sending him a motherly tsk. “Hiding in another room with the girls. This boy hasn’t changed,” she squeezed Rowan’s cheek like he was five, “one bit since high school.”

“I can’t imagine you in high school,” Aubrey added, leaning against me.

“He never left the weight room, the field, my kitchen, or the dating pool,” Ethan’s mom continued, her attempt to engage adorable and embarrassing at the same time. “How is Theresa anyway?”

Rowan coughed, reaching behind me to open the fridge. “We broke up,” he told her before swallowing from his water bottle, “a while ago.”

“Thank God,” Aubrey groaned, lifting from me and knocking Rowan in the abs as she passed by. It must’ve hurt, because she pouted and rubbed her knuckles on her way out of the kitchen.

Following her, I was happy to leave Rowan and Ethan’s mom in memory lane and settle in with Aubrey and her mom.

After a while of us talking about Aubrey's dress, her mom asked about my work. I told her about the staff meeting, how I needed to look for a new job, that maybe a miracle would happen and something would save the nonprofit.

"It's risky everywhere," she added, trying to soften my nerves. "Aubrey's dad had to let some people go over Memorial Day. It was awful."

"That's not helping, mom," Aubrey hummed.

Ethan walked around us on the sofa to kiss Aubrey before they left for the basketball game. When his mom joined us, she was still smiling.

"They're great, aren't they? Those three have been inseparable since I can remember."

"Those must be some awful memories," I muttered, unable to bite my tongue. Aubrey snickered, pulling her collar over her face. "Not of Ethan, of course."

"You know, honey," Ethan's mom leaned forward, "Ezra's quite a catch. Have you thought of asking him out?"

I turned to Aubrey's mom, pleading for a rescue, but she only pouted with an understanding of my embarrassment. "Let's focus on one wedding at a time," she joked.

Ethan's mom crossed her legs as she leaned back in the chair, peeking out the window. "You're not too far from the stadium here, Aubrey?"

"They're all across the river. It's just a ten-minute drive. That reminds me." Aubrey took her collar down and reached for her phone. "Rowan gave us tickets to take you two to his game on Monday night. I thought it would be great to do before you leave." She turned to me, her eyes cautious. "When's the last time you went to an Emeralds game? You should come with us."

The last time was days ago. I didn't want to go to another, especially not after spending two hours staring at Diego Leon's perfect brown eyes and his gorgeous face. And muscles. And that smile.

I guess it didn't surprise me that Rowan hadn't mentioned taking me and my gaggle out with his teammates. It wasn't news and, if he was anything like me, definitely heading toward high risk on the embarrassment scale.

I left them before dinner, catching the train back to my neighborhood in time to wait in line at my favorite food cart. I had a date with Thai noodles, my couch, and the Blazers game. Maybe that was the sport I should spend more time focusing on.

SIX

July

Maggie was waiting for me in my office when I got to work on Monday. It was already eighty-five degrees out, the train was late, and my heel broke. The last thing I needed was to listen to her try to get tickets out of me. But that latte and muffin she brought for me looks too good.

“You’re early,” I muttered, dropping my bag on my desk before falling into my chair.

“Rise and shine, right? You know what they say. You hit the best balls in the morning. Or, um, hit while the bat is hot?” I looked at her. Poor, hopeless, sweet, Maggie. “I’m sorry. I just really can’t stop thinking about Thursday night.”

“Well,” I reached for the latte, “you need to.”

“But you,” she looked around, lowering her voice to a whisper, “know those guys.”

“I really don’t. Thank you for the coffee, as sucking up to me gets you many things. However,” I sighed, “I’m not taking you to another Emeralds game for a long time.”

“Did I talk about being in the orchestra when I was in high school? Or my brother’s strange obsession with moss?” She tugged on her blonde curls, nervously twirling them while waiting for me to have an answer. I didn’t want to go through that again, but she wouldn’t believe me.

“You mentioned the moss, yes.” I offered a sympathetic smile as she pulled on her face, groaning with embarrassment. “But you also added a lot of helpful information about indoor plants, which I appreciated, considering I can’t keep a dandelion alive. I’m sure they enjoyed hearing about it, too.”

She dropped to the chair across from my desk. “I can’t believe, after one beer with those men, that I made such a fool of myself.”

“Maggie,” I reassured her, “let’s just remember it and move on. Did you check the mail today?”

“Yeah,” she groaned. Staring at her wasn’t helping her budge. Maggie’s eyebrows met with such concern you’d think her kitten had just died.

Closing my eyes, I bit my tongue while trying to find the politest way to tell her nothing would happen with the major league baseball players she shared a pity beer with. I was taking two middle schoolers and their dad to a game next weekend, and Maggie knew about it. It was just a matter of time before she wrapped herself around my ankle, begging me as I pulled her along wherever I went.

“Check if Dane needs anything. I think he went to the Trail Blazers game this weekend. He might need help to follow up with that,” I suggested, opening my eyes to catch her taking the hint and standing up.

By Wednesday, I had my Maggie back. Part of that might’ve been that the Emeralds series against the Mariners was only broadcast on cable and her television only got two channels, so she couldn’t refill her Diego inventory.

I was waiting for a conference call with the mayor when my cell buzzed with my favorite picture of Aubrey and me flashing across the screen. She was talking to Ethan in the background when I answered.

“I can’t talk long. I’m waiting to meet with the mayor,” I told her, hoping it wasn’t a wedding fire I’d need to put out.

“Mer,” Aubrey pleaded. I could tell by the way she raised the ending sound of my name that she was going to tell me

something she knew better than discussing. “We had to drive to Boise. Ethan’s grandma is in the hospital.”

“I’m so sorry.” She’d been sick as long as I knew Ethan, but leaving on a whim for an emergency wasn’t a good sign. “Do you need me to feed your cat?”

“Please.” I could hear her relief through the phone, but then her tone shifted to nervous. “And I was wondering if you could do just one more thing?”

“Name it.” I sipped my coffee, smiling at the intern who passed by waving at me.

“Rowan’s at an away game and we’re supposed to water his plants and feed his cat, but we can’t with this trip. Could you please, please, I’ll do anything, please go to his house for me?”

I choked on my coffee. “What?”

“It’s his birthday this weekend, and he’s working,” she whimpered.

“He’s a millionaire jackass,” I reminded her. “I’m sure he’s fine. Let his cat die and put it out of misery. Living with him must just be awful.”

“I can’t let his cat die!” Aubrey shrieked. I heard Ethan laugh in the background, glad this ridiculous request amused someone. “Mer, please! He asked me to do it until Sunday, so he won’t even be there. He doesn’t have to know it was you.”

My morning meeting filtered into the conference room, distracting me from whatever else Aubrey said.

“Why can’t Ezra do it?”

“He’s allergic,” she replied. “Ethan says he’ll buy you all the wine you want.”

“Fine,” I finally snapped. “Just text me how to get in and I’ll do it. Once. That cat better be an exotic animal worth saving, otherwise I’ll never forgive you.”

After they shouted how much they appreciated me, I grumbled a few words and hung up. Breaking into Rowan

Ellis's house to feed his cat was not what I wanted to think about before calling the mayor. What if his cat is one of those scary looking furless ones? Or what if it's as much of a jackass as he is?

"Meredith," Harrison stood at my door, "we're ready for you."

I grabbed my laptop from my desk and followed him into the conference room where Monica and her intern sat. I bet her intern wasn't obsessed with beautiful men who were tragically unattainable, and also creeps.

My plan after work was to dump the cat food bag on the floor and hope for the best, but I knew I'd have to come back again and handle its litter box. *I bet it's diamond encrusted and electric.*

Parking my car and walking along the sidewalk beneath towering, historic mansions, I wondered why Rowan lived there and not in some new condo downtown. He was out of town for half the year with baseball as it was.

Standing outside his house, with its charming dormer windows and flower boxes, clearly maintained by a professional, I looked around to make sure neighbors didn't think I was a criminal. Or a lady friend of the night. It's after six. I didn't want to be his lady of the early evening, either. In fact, I didn't want to be his *anything* seen *anywhere* near his house for fear of someone thinking I'm a deranged fan and calling the cops.

Going around back, thinking that looked any less suspicious, I entered the alarm code Aubrey sent me into the pad at Rowan's back door. The setting summer sun glowed behind me, its rosy fingers stretching along the mowed lawn, porch swing, and flower garden. If the security code hadn't worked, I wouldn't have believed any part of that was Rowan's house.

His cat was pacing at the door when I stepped inside, greeted by the familiar scent of his cologne, like he just stepped into another room.

“You’re not exotic,” I grumbled, squatting to pet the gray striped, normal-looking cat. Its whiskers tickled as it rubbed its head against my knuckles. Aubrey neglected to tell me where to find its food, diminishing my hope of a quick in and out as I scoured the first floor for any sign of cat food until the cat pawed at a closed door, meowing for me to open it.

The cat walked between my legs before rushing to its food dish in a corner. Its bag of food was in a plastic bin on top of the dryer, next to folded towels and clothes. My towels felt like sand paper compared to Rowan’s, and I wondered if he’d notice one missing.

I was buried in the bag of food when the doorbell rang twice. Please don’t be the police. Finishing my task of feeding the cat, feeling sort of guilty for not knowing its name, I slipped out of the laundry room and traced my steps to the back door. The ringing stopped. I flipped off the lights and froze as I reached the kitchen.

“Happy bi—”

“Uh...” I wasn’t sure where to look. Two enormously fake boobs were pouring out of the slinkiest piece of black fabric. “What’s going on?” I wasn’t even supposed to be there, but there I was with an intruder who, for all I knew, was Rowan’s special friend. Or a burglar.

“I’m Charity, and I’m here to give your husband his birthday present,” she replied, her voice low and raspy. “I thought the open door was an invitation.”

“Definitely not, Charity.” I glanced around, fidgeting with my phone. “You can just leave your balloons and I’ll tell him you stopped by.” At what point do I call the police?

“What the hell is going on?” A very groggy, very annoyed Rowan shouted from the kitchen doorway. His eyes passed between us, with Charity bouncing slightly as she realized who my husband was.

“Happy birthday to you,” she began singing, stepping toward him. “Happy birthday, dear Row—” He lifted her

hands from the bag strap running along his chest, gently guiding her away from him.

“I’m just going to... Um, the cat’s fed... So...” I bit my lip, slowly backing up toward the door to Rowan’s backyard. He looked around Charity at me, his face contorted with worry. He was home early. I did my job after just one shift.

Some of Rowan’s neighbors were peering over their fences at me when I ran across the backyard, thankful I was a nobody. The bass of music from a car parked across the street pulsed into the air, getting louder as the driver rolled down his window.

“Charity done?” A man called out to me as I reached my car. Um. I tried ignoring him, and thankfully it worked because Charity came walking out of the house. She smiled at me, and I’m pretty sure her enormous tatas did, too, as she slid into the backseat of the car.

Glancing back at Rowan’s house, I waited a second to see if I’d wake up from that nightmare.

I was almost free of this favor for Aubrey until Rowan called for me from his front door. As I turned around, I saw him waving at me. His palm was rigid and quick. Being the good person I am, I reluctantly walked up the path to his door.

“That was fun,” I grimaced. “Welcome home and happy birthday.”

“Shit.” Rowan seethed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What the hell are you going to do about this?”

“Me?” I cackled, my eyes wide. “You are the one with a woman at your door. I had absolutely nothing to do with this except help Aubrey feed your cat because she and Ethan are out of town. Cute cat, by the way.”

Ignoring me, and with a scowl, he tapped the screen of his phone. Tired and angry Rowan was actually sort of nice to look at, but maybe I was more amused with the whole situation happening to him.

“It was some idiots on my team,” he snarled through clenched teeth. His blue eyes met mine, dark and narrowed.

“For my birthday.”

“Some friends you have,” I mocked. “Your cat is alive, and I didn’t kill any plants. Welcome home.”

“Wait, Meredith.” Rowan grabbed my arm as I turned away. “You’re in marketing. You can fix this.”

My eyebrows reached my hairline. “Your teammates sent you a woman for your birthday, Rowan. That sounds a lot like your mess to manage, and not mine.” I was on the first step down from his front door when a swirling cloud of his cologne stopped me as Rowan flew by me, stopping me with his hands on my shoulders.

“I’ll pay you,” he begged. “I’ll do anything you want.”

“Thanks, but I don’t want your money.” Needing it was a different issue, but I could not accept a cent from him. “I really need to get home.”

“Meredith!” Rowan shouted, displaying a hilariously desperate side of him I never saw, and realized I enjoyed egging on. “I can’t have this be in the news. It’ll ruin my image. I’ll do anything if you’ll help me.”

“Why do you think I’m the only one who can help you? You’re hitting four hundred and twenty-five of every thousand balls coming your way. Surely there’s someone on your team’s payroll who can fix this.”

“You know my batting average?” He blinked, stupefied. It wasn’t a good look on him. It humanized him. Shoving my way past Rowan, I clicked my key fob and unlocked my car.

Don’t look back at him. Get in the car and go home. Call Aubrey and tell her she’s a horrible friend for going out of town and giving me the alarm code for Rowan’s house and neglecting her responsibilities. Just don’t look back at Rowan and his v-neck shirt and sweatpants that are just... dangling from his hips...

He knocked on my window, and I jumped, rolling down the glass. “What?”

Rowan looked to the sky, as if only God could give him strength to continue being a whiny, desperate baby. He reached into the back pocket of his sweatpants, and I hated how my chest tightened when the waistband moved down his hips. Kneeling at the side of my car, Rowan's fingers folded over the lowered window.

"Here," he used his other hand to wave something in my face. "It's blank. Put down whatever amount you want."

"Hmm," I taunted, biting my lip while pretending I was seriously considering his offer. I took a pen from the console that housed my crusty coffee mug from this morning and placed the blank check on my steering wheel. "Not that I don't appreciate you thinking I'm a stranger you can literally pay off, but let me think how much I want to hold over your head forever. One hundred thousand dollars," I mocked, filling out the check.

"You're worth far more than that, but fine." Rowan stepped back, pressing his palms into a prayer, his fingertips touching his chin as he nodded to me. "Can you come over in the morning?"

"No," I snickered. "We don't work together and," I paused as he crossed his arms, his massive chest and biceps threatening the threads of his shirt, "your charms don't work on me, Ellis," I warned. Rolling up my window, I tossed his joke of a check on the passenger seat and pulled out of his driveway.

Do not look back.

You looked back, you idiot.

Rowan's fingers intertwined, his palms pressing into the top of his head, his grin too wide for my comfort as he watched me drive away.

SEVEN

Aubrey called me in the middle of the night on Friday to tell me Ethan's grandmother passed away. They wouldn't be coming back for at least another two weeks, but she begged me to come to the funeral the following weekend. Seattle was only a three-hour drive, but I had to get through my week of work first. I signed up to take some high school students to the Nike headquarters and tour Providence Park. It'd be the first time in a long time Aubrey wasn't in town to swoon over soccer players with me. She always found a way to be coincidentally near the park if she knew I had a backstage pass with work.

It wasn't worth going back to the office on Thursday afternoon once my high schoolers finished touring the soccer stadium, but there was still a lot of work left to do so I headed closer toward home and landed at one of my favorite coffee shops between downtown and Willamette Stadium. Without an Emeralds game that night, the crowds weren't as big as usual.

I hadn't told Aubrey about what happened at Rowan's last week. And, honestly, I wasn't sure that even happened. Maybe I was too sleep-deprived, or had I inhaled too much exhaust fumes while sitting in traffic on the freeway? I remember he smelled nice, and the cat was cute... And the rest is fuzzy. Either way, I brushed that disaster under the rug and, while sipping a black coffee in the corner, I scrolled through my inbox.

The small bell above the door rang every few minutes, but after a while, I hardly noticed. I'd been replying to an email

from Monica and Dane, asking if I wanted to join them at a job fair next week, when the table jerked a little.

“You didn’t cash my check.” Rowan crashed into the chair across from me. I hated how small Portland was sometimes. Of all the coffee shops in this land of abundant coffee shops, why did he need to find me?

“Because it was a ridiculous joke,” I replied, hitting send on my email. “And actually, the more I think of it, it’s pretty insulting of you to think you can pay me off like one of your groupies.”

Rowan’s blue eyes widened as he leaned forward. “I don’t have groupies, Meredith!”

“Sh,” I teased, amused by how wild his eyes were. “I won’t tell anyone. In fact, I much prefer the outside world not know I even know you. That night will be our little secret.”

“Why would you keep our friendship hidden?” He feigned hurt, clutching his heart after combing his fingers through his dark waves.

“First, because I hate you.”

“No, you don’t. Nice try, Meredith, but I’ve seen you check me out.”

“Probably trying to find the best spot to place my knife,” I rebuked, rolling my eyes at him. “You know I only minored in marketing,” I confessed. “I can’t fix—” Blinding flashes of light burst against the window next to us, distracting me from finishing.

Rowan groaned, leaning back in his chair and staring at the ceiling. Something about his sarcastic laughter left me uneasy.

“Welcome to the big league,” he mocked, lifting his eyebrows at me when he rolled his head back down to face me. Three people came into the coffee shop, paying no mind to customers or me as they snooped around for a picture of Rowan. Leaning forward, he patted my fist as I clenched it around my coffee mug. “Want to get out of here?”

I was nodding my reply while stuffing my laptop into my bag. Turning between the flashing lights and my mug, Rowan told me he'd buy me another coffee, so I left it steaming on the table as he rushed me to the door.

"They're blocking my car," I whined. Rowan linked his arm with mine, fitting his cap on my head before pulling up the hood of my sweatshirt, winking at me.

"Now you can be my little secret," he taunted, tapping my nose. "We'll get your car later. Come on."

Rowan grabbed my hand, pulling me across the parking lot to his Audi. I struggled to keep up with his long strides, almost tumbling once before he opened the passenger door for me.

"They're still behind you," I mumbled while climbing in. "Why are you being followed?"

Grumbling something under his breath, Rowan ran around the front of his car and climbed in, peeling out of the parking lot so quickly I slammed back into my seat.

"Did you kill someone? Christ, Ellis," I snapped, rubbing my neck. He looked over at me twice, smiling the second time.

"Keep the cap," he told me. "It looks good on you." Fixing the rearview, Rowan drove through downtown before merging onto the highway. "Part of my contract requires I do a certain number of things for the media, and I'm one of four guys on my team who isn't in a relationship."

"Ouch," I laughed. "So, you're being stalked by the media for being single? God, that sounds like my life. Replace stalked with haunted. Anyway," I faced him, smiling, "tell me more."

"You don't really want to know about it. Do you?" I couldn't tell by his tone if Rowan was serious. He pulled off the highway and wound around to Burnside Avenue, taking us higher into the hills.

Being with him in the car differed from our dinner in Vegas. We really were alone. Something about his vulnerability made him human again. "You can tell me," I offered, lowering my defenses.

He pointed ahead at a coffee shop on the corner. “I’ll run in.”

Not sure what to do while he went into the coffee shop, I studied the meticulous interior. Leather seats, envelope in the center console, and a pack of mints in a cupholder. It was his key chain I found most interesting as it dangled from the ignition with three keys and a small metal baseball charm with chipped white paint.

His movement at the coffee shop door distracted me, feeling strangely guilty about even looking around me in his car. Carrying a cup in each hand, Rowan motioned with his finger for me to roll down his window.

“Black coffee,” he handed it to me. “I remembered that’s what you ordered at breakfast in Vegas.”

Taking the coffee, I also reached across the console to push open his door. “Thank you. I didn’t realize you knew I was there.”

“Is that,” he buckled himself in, “because you were so quiet that morning?”

The coffee burned my throat in the comforting way only a delicious dark brew can do. “This is amazing. Thank you. And sometimes I’m quiet. What’s it to you?”

“I just can’t ever imagine you being quiet. There’s always some spit you’re ready to fire at me, Meredith.” Rowan glanced at me before quickly setting his sight back on Burnside. He wove through the hills until pulling into the parking lot outside the Rose Garden.

Leaning onto the headrest, Rowan took out his key and rolled his head toward me with his left hand on the door handle. “Do you need to get to your car right away?”

“No.” I’d stopped looking at him for a second, taking in the rows of blooms lining the tennis courts. Rowan was at my door, holding it open with both of our coffees in his hands, when I looked away from the roses.

The garden was quiet except for some tourists with their cameras and parents with babies toddling along the brick

paths. When we descended the second set of stairs, Rowan motioned for me to follow him to the stone wall that looked over the downtown skyline. He climbed on top, settling in to lean against a column with his legs spread on each side of the wall.

“You know,” I began, taking my coffee from him, “I have things to say that aren’t spit.”

Rowan cocked his head, smiling at me. “I’m intrigued. Tell me.”

“I think you owe me the explanation first. You practically kidnapped me from my day job.” The way his lips spread in a grin around his coffee cup while he sipped, and I understood why he was in that stupid magazine. “I come here a lot during the week if there’s not much happening with work, and too much happening up here.” I pointed to my forehead, glancing away from Rowan and his mouth. “Finish your story about how lonely your love life is.”

“It’s not lonely.”

“I don’t need the details, just the story,” I urged, really not wanting to picture Rowan in any not-lonely-love-life situation. It distracted me from the way his fingers tapped the side of his coffee cup.

“One magazine my agent set me up with was doing some article about the city’s most,” he scoffed, adding air quotes, “eligible bachelors. So now, because I’m not married or whatever, I’m being stalked by the media. They’re all looking to see who I’m with.”

“That’s brutal,” I agreed. “You can’t even not get laid in this town without people chasing you down.”

“Stop it!” Rowan turned to me, his laugh genuine. “It sounds conceited, but it’s really miserable, Meredith.” His right hand dangled at his side, brushing the roses lining the wall.

“So, who was the woman at your house?” I sipped my coffee as I stared over the skyline. Clouds were moving in from the west, swollen poofs dangling over downtown. “Was

she who we thought? And, more importantly, what did you do with her balloons? It must've been a big job to blow all of those up, but I mean, she does that for a living, so I guess it's okay if you didn't keep them."

He rolled his eyes, shaking his head while fighting a smile. His resistance was contagious.

Rowan fidgeted with a rose petal. "Yeah," he quietly groaned. "I just wanted to play baseball, Meredith. Me and my dad, we'd play all the time, and it was all I ever dreamed about. The grass, the crowd, the feel of my mitt, the taste of the dirt from sliding into home."

"Oh," I wondered, "so you didn't think you'd have rich friends sending fancy entertainment as birthday presents and become famous and offer your friends one hundred thousand dollar checks to help you?"

"Did I just buy our friendship?" He turned to me, squinting.

"I wouldn't go that far," I teased, hopping down from the wall and nodding to the petal. "You could get in big trouble for that."

Rowan looked at the rose petal twirling between his index and middle fingers. "What do you think would happen?"

"Aside from the clearly labeled sign at the entrance," I rolled my eyes, "they might stick one of your single fans on you, or more photographers."

Rowan reached into his pocket for his phone as he slid from the wall, typing frantically while shaking his head. When his head rolled back and his eyes fixed on the gray clouds, I watched his chest move with his laughter.

"What's so funny, Ellis?"

Lowering his head to look at me, Rowan bit his bottom lip and I swear my stomach felt it. "My agent wants to know who my girlfriend is." Waving his phone in my face, I snatched it from him.

“Could they at least have used a more flattering picture of me?” He’d just pulled my sweatshirt over the cap he put on my head, tapping my nose, and it was all caught on camera.

“What?” He took the phone back, studying the picture of us. “You look gre—”

“No,” I interrupted. “My butt looks huge.”

“You and your butt look,” Rowan scratched his jaw, “great.”

Rolling my eyes, I wasn’t sure where to look. He complimented me. No—he complimented my butt. Rowan Ellis, the man I’ve disliked a great deal since college, was being... Nice? Nice-ish. And complimenting my butt. How did I respond to that? Forget the fact his agent thought we were dating. Wait, what?

My mouth was dry, but the rest of me felt grossly mushy when I finally caught Rowan’s gaze, all icy and blue and smoldering.

“I really... Um... Thank you for the coffee, and for trusting me with your story. I should really get back to work. Do you... Could you... My car?”

His hand wrapped around my wrist when I stepped away, his movement yanking me back toward him. “Did I offend you, Meredith?”

“Which time?”

Rowan licked his lips before they spread into a grin, hopefully distracted by my attempt at sarcasm. Lightning spread across the sky, crackling thunder splitting the surrounding forest. We never have thunderstorms in Portland. Of course, it happens when I’m stuck in the Rose Garden with Rowan Ellis. What the heck, universe?

Rain slammed into him, melting off his body while the sky opened above us. Rowan reached for the hem of his shirt as I stood there, thankful the brim of his cap covered my face when I looked down.

“Here!” He waved the fabric in front of my face, which I know just about melted in the rain when I looked up at him. “Put this on. You’re going to get soaked in that dress.”

“Me put something on? Hello, muscles, but Zeus is five minutes away from electrocuting you. Showing off your body is not our priority,” I told him, still taking the shirt from him.

“It’s cute that you noticed,” he smirked, “but I’m trying to be chivalrous, Meredith. Put it on and let’s get out of here before your friend Zeus kills us both. You’re adorable, but this is not how I want to die.”

“Excuse me,” I lifted a hand after putting his shirt on. “You think I’m adorable?”

He took my hand as the rain came in sheets as he yanked me from the roses. Waves of his cologne swirled up from his shirt as it dampened in the rain. I only slipped once, going up the stairs. No—running up the stairs with my shirtless... I guess we were friends now? This was all just too much.

Rowan unlocked the car, and we wasted no time getting in. In the dry, quiet car, I turned to him and burst into laughter. Rain rolled over his skin, trailing the curve of his muscles. Because he took off his shirt in a thunderstorm.

“You don’t want to be famous, but then you,” I gasped for air between laughs, “take off... Oh, my god... Your shirt! Here!”

Rowan crossed his arms, his biceps consuming my view. “It’s just skin.”

“Until your manager texts with even more questions about why you were running around a city park half naked with your,” I lifted my hands for air quotes, “girlfriend.” I rolled my eyes and buckled the seatbelt, jumping when a burst of thunder rumbled across the sky.

“See,” he mocked, unwinding his arms and starting the car, “you are adorable.” Before taking off, Rowan reached into the backseat and pulled a shirt from his gym bag. It was easier to focus when all the muscles were covered.

“A puppy is adorable. A baby is adorable. Me?” I waved my hand in front of me. “Nothing about being a grown woman is adorable.”

“Would you have preferred another adjective, Meredith? Crabby, sarcastic, temperamental?” Rowan pulled out of the parking lot, the wipers futile as he tried to drive through the park.

“I so hate you,” I groaned.

He rolled his head to face mine, the corner of his mouth twisting into a smirk. “Intelligent, hilarious, fun when drunk?”

“When can you tell your agent how we can’t stand each other?” I tried changing the subject.

“Generous,” Rowan continued, ignoring my words, but grinning as he drove, “sexy.”

“Okay, stop. You had me at intelligent.” What the hell was happening? Rowan was laughing until he pulled over and rolled down his window.

“I can’t see anything,” he told me, shaking off beads of water from his hair. They splattered my lap, and I watched them slowly spread while Rowan talked. It was his honesty at the garden, his part-time job as a thesaurus, and the fact we were spending time together that worried me the most. I couldn’t have fun with him. That would go against everything I’ve stood for over the last six years.

“Have you watched a thunderstorm from up here? They’re so rare. The view over the river is awesome.” Rowan’s deep voice was barely audible as he drove again. I waited a little before responding, trying to figure out a way to explain myself to Aubrey.

“No.”

We could barely see construction signs blocking major streets as Rowan slowly drove down hill, everything around us shielded by sheets of rain.

“You’re about to.”

EIGHT

I hated to admit I appreciated being wrapped up in another one of his sweatshirts while sitting with Rowan on his front porch. I didn't object to him offering to make pizza while we waited out the storm, so I took advantage of being warm and curled up on the porch swing.

"Why do you live in this big house all by yourself?" I asked, clinging to the throw pillow in my lap.

"I hope to fill it with a family someday." I watched Rowan's eyes fix on the garden. "It was my grandparents'. They're why I was so desperate to get on the Emeralds. When my mom left, I spent every summer out here with them."

"You grew up here?" I smiled at the thought of a little Rowan running around covered in mud, carrying his baseball mitt with him throughout the house.

"I did," he nodded, "and I wanted to come back for them. I'd just made the team when they passed so, thankfully, they got to see that, but now... Yeah, it's just me in this big house. I can't let go of it. I think sometimes about getting a condo downtown, but then this place would be empty. A house needs a family."

"Does anyone know about your house guest last week?" I inquired, remembering Charity's pal ask me if she was done. Done with what? Rowan? Ew.

"Just my teammates who I threatened to kill," he groaned. I turned from staring over the soaked front yard to see him rubbing his face.

“Then you’re fine. Nothing to fix. I’m off the hook.” He was in such a panic that night, but the desperation wasn’t there anymore, so I believed myself.

Rowan nodded to the house next door, behind where I swung on the porch. “They asked about you, though.”

“Nosy assholes.”

“They love Aubrey because she takes them baked goods whenever she stops by because they’re ancient and their family is across the country.” Rowan stood up and leaned against the railing, crossing his arms and staring at the rain. “I remember one time there was a tornado warning when my dad and I were at a Cubs game.”

“They played the Brewers. I was there.” My mom made me leave my enormous bag of cotton candy behind when we ran out of the stadium. It was an awful day.

He turned to face me, his gaze curious. “How can you and I have so much in common, but we can’t be friends?”

“Obviously our home team baseball rivalry,” I joked, not sure how serious he was. Rowan smiled, biting his bottom lip when he looked away.

“And the fact you have a crush on Ryan Marshall,” Rowan added, shaking his head before walking back inside to deal with the beeping oven.

“I do not!” I called after him, standing from the swing and following him inside.

“Good,” he told me as he lifted a pizza from his oven. “Because he’s a serial cheater.”

Three slices later, the lightning gone, and my head swirling with questions, I felt I’d overstayed my welcome.

“I’m going to have a parking ticket,” I murmured, pulling his sweatshirt off. My dress was dry and my hair was frizzy from the rain, or something else was wrong because Rowan was watching me from across the table.

I helped him clean up, only giving him a little crap about what I remembered from the kitchen last week. With the storm

over, Rowan and I were back in his car.

“I’ll remember baked goods the next time I’m filling in for Aubrey.” I smiled, pointing to his neighbor’s house as we pulled away.

“I won’t be home much this weekend,” he added, “with the series Friday through Sunday. You know the code now. You can always bring baked goods and play with my cat.”

An open invitation from him was not anything I’d expect from the guy who was the Emerald’s five-tool player. Shouldn’t he have people over, parties, babes, boobs, beer?

The streets were empty around the coffee shop, and my car looked lonely all by itself. Thinking back to our rush to leave earlier, there was something I needed to say.

“You know,” I opened my door and leaned against it, giving a buffer between Rowan and me, “I doubt Ryan Marshall would’ve gotten me out of such a weird situation as fast. Thanks, Ellis.”

Rolling his eyes, he scoffed at me mentioning his teammate. “There’s a lot I can do that he can’t,” Rowan declared, rubbing his jaw while smiling at me.

“I’m not sure what to think of that,” I blinked, “but thank you for the coffee and pizza, and the park.”

I froze when he reached up, twisting a loose strand of my hair from face. His eyes flicked between mine, sending me back to the moment outside my hotel room in Vegas, leaving the same uncertain feeling. His lips parted, the mint from his stick of gum fanning my mouth, before he leaned closer to me. Rowan lifted the parking ticket from beneath my windshield wiper and stuffed it in his back pocket, promising to pay it for me.

“Good luck tomorrow,” I blurted, distracted by the tingle in my neck when he smiled at me. Rowan nodded and waved goodbye as I slipped into my car and thought of what a strange afternoon I had. Aubrey was the first person I called, but I couldn’t get out Rowan’s name when I tried talking to her. Something about it felt too intimate, so I told her about work

and let her tell me about the wedding planning when she took a break from being with Ethan's family.

We checked in a few times over the weekend, which I spent eating takeout and browsing the internet for jobs, should Harrison's prediction come true. I loved my job. I worked with an organization that granted dreams for students affected by adversity, and to see the organization disappear was heartbreaking.

Stepping into work on Monday held just the first surprise of the week. Dane was waiting for me in my office, picking lint off of his pants as he relaxed in the chair across from my desk.

"Good morning." I tossed my purse into a drawer and opened the curtain and window, letting the cool morning air in before the scorching day began. "Why are you sitting there?"

"Becky Young applied for an internship opening that doesn't exist," Dane informed, watching me move around the room. "I did some digging, and you worked with her last week. Emerald's game. Remember?"

Unfortunately. "Yeah," I smiled, "she was great."

"Maggie told her we'd make room for her," he continued, looking at me like I could read his mind and get to his point quicker.

"What's the harm in helping her if she feels she connected with us? Isn't that our mission, Dane? We're here to help find hope, hope that the rainy days won't last forever, that their sun will soon rise."

"You memorized that?" He laughed, breaking his hard expression. "I'm going to miss working with you, Mer."

"No luck with fundraising, huh?" I read between his lines, dreading the truth. Dane told me it was slim picking, and we'd be lucky to get anywhere near Harrison's estimate of our need. We ran what we could of the numbers and tried to come up with our own plan to save things, but we were hitting fouts.

"Can I buy you a drink?" Dane asked, poking his head into my office just as I closed my laptop. "I know it's Monday and

all, but Monica took Maggie up on an offer to go somewhere downtown. Apparently,” he rolled his eyes, “it’s where all the hot guys are.”

“Do you want to invite your wife? The three of us can sit in the corner and judge everyone,” I suggested, offering a sympathetic smile.

“She’s working third shift at the hospital tonight, so it’ll just be you and I in the corner if that’s okay.”

“Come on!” Monica ordered, her shrill voice filling the empty office. Dane looked at me helplessly, so I followed him out with Monica and we took the train a few stops away to meet Maggie.

Her curls bounced around her face when she saw the three of us approaching, and I suddenly felt really old. And aware. Maggie wore turtle necks in winter and cardigans in the office, but the girl had a figure and it was on fire tonight.

“Who is this?” Monica called, hugging Maggie when we reached the corner where she waited. “Margaret, you need to dress like this more often.”

Dane and I glanced at each other, maybe both wishing we’d gone home instead because Maggie looked ready to party and, like I said, I felt old.

“Come on,” she urged, taking Monica’s arm and pulling her into the bar.

“Do we get an invitation?” Dane joked, holding the door open for me.

“No,” I laughed, “because you’re married and I told Maggie I was celibate. Monica’s her best friend now.”

After two drinks, I could tolerate Maggie and Monica a little more. I just couldn’t relax, and I think it was the last week adding up. From the game I took Maggie to, to Charity and her charitable cleavage, to the coffee shop, to how simple it seemed to wait for frozen pizza on Rowan’s porch.

I wondered if she was hoping for a repeat performance, being so close to where we went out with Rowan, Diego, and

Ryan after their game, and I hoped it was my imagination getting carried away.

“Want another?” Dane picked up my empty glass and waved it around.

“I’ll go,” I offered, feeling Maggie’s feet knot with mine as we both climbed from our stools at the outside table.

“I’ll come with you!”

I was about to ask her about Becky while we waited for the bartender to notice us, but fate had other plans.

“I think we’ve met before,” a man spoke behind me.

“You have,” Maggie squealed. I turned around to see who had her twirling her hair. “You most definitely have. This is Meredith.” And he was Ryan Marshall. All six foot three of him. And his muscles. Blinking hard, I smiled politely when opening my eyes.

“Nice to see you again,” I greeted him. “Great game yesterday.” The bartender leaned over, getting my attention, so I ordered drinks for our table. Remembering what Rowan told me about Ryan being a serial one-night stand sort of guy made me feel protective of Maggie and her innocent obsession with baseball players.

I took advantage of two women approaching Ryan and pulled Maggie close to me.

“Okay, Maggie, we’re not living in some baseball romance fantasy,” I scolded her, not at all feeling guilty when she pouted. “We work together and we have to be professional here. The Emeralds donate a lot of seats throughout the year to us, and we can’t look bad because some of us can’t stop obsessing over the physical attributes of some players.” I sounded like my mom. Her bottom lip quivered as she nodded, crushed by what I said, even though it was responsible and true. Her mouth hung, eyes wide as she watched whatever unraveled behind me.

The surrounding air was heavy. Maybe it was the tequila. Maybe it was Diego Leon crossing the bar to Ryan, entwined with a gaggle next to us.

“You stalker,” I muttered, shaking my head at Maggie. She shrugged sheepishly, taking the drink I ordered for her from the bar. “Take these outside,” I guided the drinks toward her. Her red lips fell open once more, as if me directing her away from a possible harassment and stalking charge was some sort of punishment. In my periphery, I was busted by a tipsy Diego and Ryan, who both faced me.

It might’ve been the first time in my life, but two incredibly hot men were staring at me and I was not interested in it at all. I was thinking about calling Ezra for a ride home when Diego nudged my arm.

“Hey, it’s,” he squinted at me, “Mary!”

“Meredith,” Ryan corrected, smacking Diego against his chest. It sounded like two boulders smashing into each other.

“Hello,” I replied, gulping down the tequila shot the bartender passed my way before turning to Ryan and Diego, “and goodnight.”

Maggie was so red when I got to the table that I couldn’t distinguish her lipstick from her cheeks. Monica eyed me over the rim of her beer glass, waiting for me to break the tension.

“I’m going out of town next weekend,” I told them. “There was a death in the family. So,” I raised the glass Dane hadn’t yet consumed, “cheers to life!”

Maggie squeezed my arm. Following her wide eyes to the intersection, I felt my stomach knot. Quietly reprimanding myself for feeling anything about watching Rowan cross the street... Until a woman caught up with him and linked her arm with his.

“Isn’t that—” Dane questioned, looking between us and the sidewalk.

“Rowan Ellis!” Maggie blurted in reply, getting Rowan’s attention as he was about to step into the bar. Looking everywhere but at him, I didn’t know why I felt something, and I couldn’t define it either. Whatever the nag in my stomach was, I didn’t like it, so I avoided him and sipped from Dane’s glass.

His descriptions of me from the car ride slipped into my thoughts. He called me intelligent... And sexy. Who says that? I pictured him giving me his shirt in the rose garden and driving us to his house in the thunderstorm, and how he told me there was a lot he could do that Ryan Marshall couldn't... Why am I even thinking this? I hated Rowan Ellis. I had since he forgot he kissed me in college and was a pain in my ass for the rest of my life. Then Aubrey popped into my head, asking me with her perfect voice to let it go for the sake of their wedding.

I could be professional in public and bite my tongue until their winter nuptials because I was always better than Rowan Ellis.

Monica and Maggie paid their tab and started walking back to the train stop when Dane offered to walk me home.

"I'll be fine," I assured him. "I'm just a few blocks that way."

"Call me if you need help," he told me, hugging me goodbye before he left me outside of the bar. The streets were lit and full of cars, so I felt safe walking home alone. I think the only reason I questioned myself was the last tequila shot and my wobbly stomach acting all sorts of ridiculous with my memory flashing back to last week.

"Meredith," I turned when someone called me, "are you leaving?" Ryan ignored people approaching him for an autograph as he jogged over to me.

Looking around to make sure I was the only Meredith he was talking to, I remembered he was a coworker of Rowan's, who was best friend to my best friend's fiancée, and I had to play nice.

"Yeah," I replied, smiling at him. "I have a meeting in the morning. And you're playing in Tampa tomorrow night, so you should head back, too."

"I like a woman with an excellent memory," he noted, winking at me. Uh. Shouldn't Ryan Marshall cornering me

outside on a hot summer night, remembering my name, and winking at me, have done something magical to my nerves?

“Do you think,” the brazen bastard reached for my hand and I froze, “you’d want to meet up when we’re back in town?” We moved against the wall as people filtered out from the bar, distracting our conversation.

“As much as I appreciate you expecting me to wait for you,” I smirked, “I’ll be out of town for a while.” He was gorgeous. Why wasn’t that sparking something? Lifting my gaze up to his, I wondered if this was his routine for his one-nighters, especially after Ryan thought he was romantically cradling my face in his rough palms.

I reached up to take his hands down, but an arm came flying next to my face and knocked Ryan away from me.

“Marshall!” Rowan barked, shoving his teammate. Ryan was holding his jaw as he stood up, his pretty face scowling at Rowan.

“What the hell?”

Rowan glared at him, waving his arms around as he spoke. “Step off! Go back inside and leave her alone.”

They yelled at each other until a small crowd formed, both quickly aware of the audience before Ryan grumbled something to both of us as he stormed off.

“You’re ridiculous!” I shouted, taking Rowan’s hand in mine. Rowan’s skin was warm, heating my hands as I anchored his fist in my grasp. “Stop acting like an idiot and go home!”

“I’m ridiculous? Am I the one hitting on you in a bar, Meredith?”

“No. You’re just the one hitting other people.”

“He knows you’re off limits,” Rowan growled, his blue eyes like ice as he glared at me.

I stepped back, repeating his words to myself. Off limits? “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He combed his fingers through his hair as soon as I let go of his hand. Rowan looked at the sky and closed his eyes. “You’re off limits. Let it go and you go home.”

“Absolutely not,” I rebuked, stubbornly digging my heels in. Rowan was ignoring me like a total jerk, so I smacked his chest. I may have broken a finger against his abs, but it was worth it because the mix of shock and awe in his expression was priceless.

“Go home, Meredith. I’ll see you in Seattle,” he told me, shaking his head as he walked away.

What the hell just happened? I asked myself that until I fell asleep, wondering how my Monday went from blah to even worse in a matter of hours. There was no answer to what the hell “off limits” meant, or why anyone but myself staked that claim.

NINE

Aubrey picked me up at the train station on Saturday morning, dressed in black and quieter than usual.

“I’ve been like a mouse all week,” she told me. “I just never know what to say or what to do. I don’t want to offend anyone or step on toes.”

“Are they not grieving well?”

“I think it’s actually the opposite. They’ve already started clearing out rooms in her house, so I’m sorry if the one they place you in is a mess. There’s just so much crap. Her closets are stuffed with decades full of... I don’t even know. I mean,” she laughed, a relieving sound, “you name it, it’s in there.”

As Aubrey pulled onto the I-5, she told me more about the week I’d missed with her and Ethan up there. She asked how Rowan’s cat was and told me about his neighbors, the same ones he told me she baked for. I kept Charity to myself because, as much as I was desperate to shame him with Aubrey, I felt bad for the guy. Well, he punched Ryan Marshall and told me I’m off limits.

“Would you tell Ezra I was off limits?”

“Um. Say what now?” Aubrey glanced at me as she switched lanes.

“If he hit on me, or his friend hit on me, would you tell him I’m off limits?”

“Ezra hit on you?” She gasped, cackling in the seat next to me.

“Is that so hard to believe?”

Aubrey was quiet as she turned onto a gravel driveway lined with evergreens. “No. I think you and Ezra would make a really cute couple, but he’s seeing someone.”

“Okay.” I threw my hands up. “I’m not interested in Ezra, and he didn’t hit on me, but I’m asking hypothetically. Why would I be off limits?”

She parked next to a row of cars outside the stone house. It looked cold even in the summer heat, washed by elements and covered with twisting vines. Some of Ethan’s family members moved around the property, waving at Aubrey when she climbed from the car.

I met her at the trunk, where she peered around to see that we were alone before she spoke again. “Ethan told them you’re off limits. All of them. I’d like to think they follow through, but now you’ve got me worried about Ezra.”

“He was just an example. Forget I said his name,” I grumbled, annoyed she wasn’t really listening to me. “Can’t I decide my limits?”

“Well, of course, but he’s just trying to protect—wait. Is there someone you want to be with? Is it Ezra? Oh, my god, it’s Rowan.”

Gaping at her, I couldn’t believe her words. “Where’s the bathroom? I’m going to be sick. Look, forget I said anything.”

“I will, but you’ve got me worried now.” Aubrey took my suitcase from the trunk and squeezed my arms. “Did you hear what even happened with Rowan last week? I bet he’s going to be a disaster when he gets here.”

I froze, worried about what she meant. The old me, me before Rowan displayed humanity a week ago, would’ve not cared at all. But now, after feeling the air move around me when he knocked Ryan away, I was curious.

Following Aubrey inside, she introduced me to some of Ethan’s family as they were preparing for the wake to follow his grandmother’s funeral. His dad took my suitcase and

carried it upstairs somewhere as Ethan came to find us from moving furniture with his cousin.

His hug felt so good. It was like falling into familiar, into normalcy. Although, I thought back to Aubrey telling me he made me off limits, but I'd pick that fight with him on a day we weren't in black and preparing to attend a funeral.

Ethan's grandmother was religious, popular, and wealthy. That meant the church service was enormous, filled with bagpipers and actual white orchids. I sat near the front with Aubrey, who sobbed the entire time. I didn't blame her. I met Ethan's grandmother a few times, and she was amazing. A spitfire with such sass, even when she was ill. Once her casket lowered, Aubrey gave me her car keys, and I drove us back to the museum of a house.

Waves gently lapped the shore along Elliott Bay as I stood in the yard, watching the early evening light glisten on the water. Kids ran around without a clue of what the day really meant. Adults laughed, cried, and gorged themselves. I did the same, having no shame in my emotional eating.

Closing my eyes, I let the warmth cocoon me while listening to the kids and waves. Familiar cologne swirled around as footsteps tapped along the tile walk behind me.

"Hi," Rowan whispered at my side. His arm brushed against mine, engulfing my skin with a buzz of awareness. I peeked through one eye, smiling to myself when I closed it again.

"You don't look like a disaster."

"Am I supposed to?" His laugh was deep, and I hated how I felt it in my stomach.

I opened my eyes and watched his mouth part. "Aubrey said you'd be a disaster after whatever happened to you this week."

Rowan rubbed his jaw, looking at the waves while he spoke. "They suspended me for two games. It doesn't look good on my record, but it was worth it."

"Because..."

“I promised Ethan I wouldn’t let the baseball players break your heart,” he shrugged, “and stopping a sleaze from messing with you was a good start.”

“Wait.” I grabbed his arm. “You were suspended because I’m off limits?”

Rowan grinned, licking his lips without further reply. I didn’t know if I should feel respected or violated, but either way, it was really hard not to look at his mouth, so then I just felt infuriated with myself for looking in the first place.

“My agent wants to meet you,” Rowan told me. I thought his uniform was one thing, the messy and tired another, but Rowan Ellis in a black suit was about as deadly as it came. No pun intended, being at a funeral and all.

“Why? Does he have one hundred thousand for me, too? Is it because I’m the only woman who’s never been charmed by you? I’m an enigma to him, aren’t I?”

“More or less,” Rowan agreed. Some of Ethan’s relatives gathered in the back, most in tears, so I retreated and walked by them toward the back of the house.

“Mer,” Ezra greeted me as he stepped onto the back porch, squeezing my shoulder. It could’ve been the loneliness of death surrounding us, but I fell into Ezra’s hug.

“I don’t like funerals,” I admitted. “It’s nice of you to come. It’ll mean a lot to Ethan.”

“Hey, Row.” Ezra and Rowan hugged, two pillars of handsome black suit-wearing pieces of man-meat standing on each side of me. “He looks awful,” Ezra mumbled, eyeing Ethan as he stood with Aubrey just inside the house. “Why are you two hiding out here?”

Rowan shrugged, looking down at me from the corner of his eye. “Just being here, I guess.”

“Nice of you to take off,” Ezra told Rowan, patting his shoulder. “What excuse did you use this time?”

“This time?” I mocked, eyeing Rowan.

“I was honest,” he fought a small smile, looking at me, “this time. There was a death in the family and I had to leave town.” The way his fingers fiddled with the knot in his tie as he straightened his back and looked toward Ethan distracted me.

Rowan gave us a tight nod and went inside to join Ethan and Aubrey. Ezra and I waited on the porch, catching up on everything in his life since we were in Vegas. He met a girl; she has a house, he’s not ready to settle down, and she’s obsessed with Diego Leon, so Ezra scratched her from the list. He met another girl; she reminds him of Aubrey because she’s a teacher, she has a cute laugh, and they were meeting again the following week.

Listening to Ezra’s love life wasn’t threatening, or repulsive, or clouded with my preconceived ideas of what a sleaze he could’ve been, like my thoughts were with Rowan.

After a small eulogy and prayer at the wake, Ethan’s family invited everyone inside for a more formal meal. Ethan and his siblings disappeared with Aubrey shortly after we went in, so I made a cocktail for his great aunt Etta and listened to her stories about her sister.

“She was a looker,” Etta described, “no matter what she wore. They didn’t know,” she looked around, lowering her voice as she leaned closer to me on the couch, “the trouble she got into before she met her husband. Ha! I don’t even think Ethan’s dad knows how his grandparents even met.”

“Oh, Etta,” Rowan smiled at her fondly, his expression soft and caring, as his head poked between ours. “You have to tell us now.”

“Go away,” I told him, hiding the shiver across my skin when his wrist grazed my shoulder as he held another drink out for Etta.

Etta reached for his cheek, lightly patting the jaw darkened by stubble. “You’re a good boy, Ezra. I always did like you more than that cheeky one.”

I couldn't help but laugh at her confusing Rowan and Ezra. "He *is* the cheeky one," I told her, pointing to the table full of food near the doorway where Ezra stood talking with Ethan's sister. "*That's* the good one."

After some more confusion, I went to get Ezra for Etta, but he disappeared. Not gone was the rest of the cake and, well, a girl's got to eat.

"I can't believe she doesn't like me." I turned to see Rowan stand next to me, his arms crossed.

"You're not that memorable, Ellis. I guess the truth comes out when Etta drinks." Smiling at him, I took a bite of my cake. He reached around me for a napkin and slowly shook his head at me while lifting his middle finger to swipe across my mouth.

"Frosting," he told me, wiping it on the napkin. I stared at him, my lips tingling and brain foggy. "Now that I have your attention," he mused, "maybe I can talk to you about my agent."

"Not this again," I groaned, coming back to reality and eating more of my cake.

"It's about a stupid contest," Rowan sighed, "and apparently, we're cute."

"Well," I adjusted his tie, smiling at him, "I know I am, but I wouldn't go as far as saying that about you."

"True." Rowan rolled his eyes, placing his hand on top of mine. "Those pictures from the coffee shop are everywhere, and my agent and manager want you to be part of the contest for sweetest's day."

I choked on my cake, covering my mouth as I turned to look at him. "Oh, no." I knew the contest. It was a chance for teams to win money for charity by being grossly in love and... Ew.

"Yeah." Rowan bit his lip. "It could be a good thing, though."

“You said no. Right? Rowan,” I urged, putting down my plate.

He looked around the room and then at me, tugging on the ends of my hair. “Not exactly.”

Feeling my skin redden, I glared at him. “I’m being nice because you were nice to me once and we’re at Ethan’s grandmother’s funeral, but I will not date you.”

Rowan’s face contorted. “Of course not. Look, Meredith,” he put his hands on my shoulders, guiding us away from the table of food, “I’d say we’re friends now, eh?”

“Meh,” I grunted, crossing my arms.

“Meh,” he mocked, smiling at me, “is enough for me. So be my friend and just pretend to be more than that so we can win this contest and fix my image.”

I watched Rowan, waiting for him to tell me he wasn’t serious or that he was at least half pretending to not consider me in any of his idiotic plan. Nope. Just blue eyes, muscles, and that stupidly handsome face.

“You’re really that arrogant.” I didn’t have the energy to give him my classic rolled eyes, so I took my plate of cake and walked away from him.

It was easy to get lost in that old house, but after a few wrong turns, I found Aubrey helping Ethan’s mom and aunt in the kitchen. When I offered to help, Ethan’s mom gave me a hug and told me not to fuss. Apparently, his grandma wouldn’t have wanted a guest to lift a finger, but I helped anyway between bites of cake.

Guests who weren’t family or traveling from out of town filtered out by sunset, leaving a small group of us in the enormous house. Aubrey and I were on the back porch overlooking the Puget Sound, watching Ethan’s young cousins who fell asleep an hour prior. She pushed the porch swing with her toe every few minutes to keep them asleep.

“Thank you again for coming,” she whispered to me, rolling her head onto my shoulder.

“I love you two.”

“You know,” she whispered, “on the topic of love, Ethan about died when he saw that headline about you and Rowan.”

“I’m still slowly dying,” I grumbled, annoyed this was her topic. “I told you it was one picture. You made me take care of his cat, and now the universe is screwing me for it.”

Aubrey giggled, covering her mouth. “If you gave in to fate, you could have more than the universe screwing you.”

“Shut up!” I shrieked, flying up when she suggested that. “I can’t believe you, Aubrey.”

She shrugged, still smiling at me. “His ex spent too many tequila bottles telling me every detail. Sounds like you’ll be just fine.”

I sealed my eyes as I tried not to gag. “I think,” I uncovered my mouth and shook my head at Aubrey, “I want a divorce from you. This is not friendship. It’s treason. I’m going to bed.” A throw pillow hit me as I left the porch with Aubrey’s giggling wish for sweet dreams following.

“Oh, Meredith.” Ethan’s mom crossed the hallway as I stepped inside. “Thank you again for coming. It’s wonderful to see Ethan’s other family love him so much.”

“He’s hard not to love,” I agreed, smiling at her. “I’m off to bed, though. Aubrey’s still out there.” She turned from me to address someone who hugged her before going onto the porch.

“Etta,” she called behind me. I turned to see Ethan’s great aunt carrying a folded quilt in her arms, her wrinkled mouth still painted with bright red lipstick. “Are you heading upstairs?” When great aunt Etta nodded, Ethan’s mom pulled me in for a hug and a quick kiss on the forehead. “Could you take Meredith upstairs? It’s a maze up there.”

The two women refused to believe I could navigate by myself. Etta even marveled at knowing I lived and worked in a city.

“I’ll show you,” great aunt Etta offered, smiling at me. Her slippers squeaked against the hardwood floor as we reached the staircase. “Hold the railing, dear,” she advised, “it’s a bit wobbly on the landing.”

“When I was your age,” she told me as we mounted the third flight of stairs, “I worked in an office, too. Won my first car by suing the pants off that bastard boss of mine.”

“What?”

“Oh, yes.” She patted my arm, returning my gaping smile. “My sister, bless her soul, told me to do it. Get him where it hurts and then tell his wife about it. That’s what she said.”

Etta stopped outside of a closed door and I reached for her bony shoulder. “I’m so sorry she’s gone,” I whispered. She patted my hand in return, winking at me with her red lips quivering.

She opened the door for me, and I’d stepped into another world. It was a beautiful room, what remained of it at least. Along one wall was a pile of boxes overflowing with clothes. Two wooden doors opposite the bed were closed. They softened the enormous bed with down blankets, but Etta handed me the quilt she carried upstairs.

“It gets chilly, even though it’s summer. She’d tell me to take it just in case.”

I started to reply when a door inside swung open. Screaming, I covered my eyes as I turned around. Etta was red as a tomato, her skin rivaling her own lipstick, while she fumbled with the doorknob.

“Heaven on earth,” she muttered, flustered. I was as desperate to get out, but I couldn’t exactly knock great aunt Etta out of the way.

“What are you doing in here?” I shouted, keeping my back turned and my eyes on Etta, willing her bony fingers to turn the doorknob. I could not get the image of Rowan’s entire naked backside out of my mind. He came out holding a towel in front of him, but when I screamed and he turned, all I saw

was a butt. Rowan's butt. His really toned, squeezable... Why me?

TEN

“This is where they told me to sleep,” he calmly replied. “Hi, Etta. Sorry about the show.”

“I haven’t seen cheeks like that since my honeymoon.” Her wrinkled eyes were like saucers.

“No,” I objected, squeezing my eyes shut. “This is where they told me to sleep. Put some clothes on and get out of here. Please?”

Etta opened the door as Ethan panted into the room. “What’s going on?” His face was full of concern as he looked to his great aunt, then me, and his half-naked friend.

“Maybe they’re fighting?” Etta mused, stepping into Ethan’s hug.

“They always fight, aunt Etta,” Ethan replied, shaking his head. “They hate each other. It’s kind of their thing.”

“Oh? I thought this,” she pointed at me, “was the one he’s dating.”

“No, Etta.” Rowan was quick to squash that horrible assumption.

“She’s not the one from the television show?”

“No, Etta,” Ethan answered.

“The model?”

“No, Etta,” I finally replied. “I’m Ethan’s friend. Aubrey’s best friend.” We’d grown so close on our walk upstairs, I thought she might remember who I was.

Ethan looked between Rowan and I. “There aren’t other rooms. They’ve all started sorting through grandma’s stuff in the other bedrooms, and this was the only bed left. Let me get her out and I’ll kick someone off the couch.” Ethan ushered Etta out, his arm wrapped around her shoulder.

“You could’ve fooled me, kiddo,” Etta told Ethan in the hallway, “because the way those two look at each other, they’re probably going to screw each other like your grandma and the governor in sixty—” Thank God the door closed. Or, as I watched Rowan’s smug face from across the room, maybe I wanted it open again.

“You need to sleep somewhere else,” I pleaded, sitting on the bed.

“There is nowhere else to sleep.” Rowan went back into the bathroom, tossing the fluffy white towel into the bedroom. That meant he was all sorts of naked, just feet away from me. Maggie would’ve died.

Grumbling under my breath about how perfectly awful it was to be expected to share a room with him, that he would even think it was okay to ask me to help him without thinking of my own image, I fell onto my back and kicked the mattress a few times.

“Spit it out, Meredith,” I heard him order from the bathroom.

“You’re repulsive, Rowan. I can’t believe you use someone’s funeral to ask me to be your fake girlfriend just to fix your image when you don’t even care to ask if I want to play along. And for what? What am I supposed to get out of this, but a failed pretend relationship with you before I’m a washed-up has-been just like any other girl you’ve dated? And,” I scoffed, “hello? You were with someone at the bar last week.”

“As you like to remind me with your thoughts on me being a philanderer,” he held the doorway as he peeked out at me, “I’ve been with a few people. But I can assure you, fake girlfriend, I’m not with anyone right now.”

“Ugh! You’re still just thinking of you. What happens when it’s November and the contest is over?”

Rowan came out of the bathroom, shaking water from his hair. The drops rolled over his shoulders and down every ridge of his chest and abs, just like at the rose garden.

“I hadn’t thought that far,” he confessed. “You’re right, Meredith. I’m being selfish and,” he reached for my hand, his touch distracting me, “I’m sorry.”

“You should be. Now,” I leaned onto elbows and tried not to look at his muscles, “what do we do about this?”

“It’s... Fine,” he lied. Rowan pulled down the covers on one side and climbed in, wiggling his feet beneath my head.

“There’s one bed.”

“And two of us.” Rowan’s chuckle was dangerous, a beautiful sound that made me fear for the night. “Go to sleep, Meredith.” He pulled a pillow over his face as I rolled over to face him, watching the covers slowly rise and fall with his breaths.

I couldn’t share a bed with Rowan Ellis. I hate him, not the way he looks. That doesn’t mean I should cozy up to him out of convenience. When he stopped moving, I assumed he was asleep and my restless mind caught up with my body while I tossed and turned at the foot of the bed.

Lying in the dark, my entire body aware of Rowan being just inches from me, I found myself hopeless as I thought about his stupid proposition. The sweetest day contest was a love song, and those were too catchy, too happy. The team and their pretty wives or girlfriends competed to be perfect, and whoever the city loved more won a boatload of money to donate.

Money. I hated how ideal this could be. We wouldn’t ask for a loan, beg for donations. We’d just have to be the best actors we could be, and I’d have the money I needed to save my job. But it’s Rowan... And his stupid, almost scandalously perfect idea.

Crawling up to him in the bed, I took the pillow from his face and smacked it across his stomach. Rowan grunted awake, peering through his messy hair at me with one eye closed.

“What the hell, Meredith?”

“Tell me why I should do it,” I breathed, hating how nervous I felt.

He slowly sat up to be next to me, his mouth falling into a pout. “Aubrey told me about your work. You love what you do.”

“How do you know?” I squinted at him, watching him cautiously.

“I listen.” He winked, tugging on my hair before falling back onto the mattress. “So, you’re interested?” I felt his hand on my thigh while I waited to reply. “It’s just pretend. You can still think I’m a troll when we’re alone.”

“You’re not a troll,” I chuckled, “but... Fine.”

Rowan shot up, his grin practically sparkling across from me. “You will?”

Before I could answer him, Rowan’s arms tangled around me, pulling my face against his warm, hard chest. Listening to his heart pound, I melted a little.

He smelled incredible, like the candy that melts in your mouth before you realize you’ve eaten it. It’s pretend. He’s still a troll. Until his fingers were knotting in my hair and his fist lifted my chin so I couldn’t break away from his darkening stare.

“This doesn’t mean we’re friends,” I uttered, staring at his mouth.

“Of course not,” he softly replied, his grin widening. “But we should,” his thumb tugged on my bottom lip and I swear my heart stopped, “probably practice,” he took in a shaky breath, “kissing.”

“Kissing.”

The noise of everyone left downstairs muffled as our room fell silent. I could pretend to like him if it saved my job, right? I mean... He wasn't a horrible human, and he loved his friends... He also respected me. It was Rowan, though. Rowan Ellis, the guy who forgot he kissed me once upon a drunken Halloween years ago, whose ego was the size of the sun, and who I was starting to sort of like. As a friend.

"Yeah." His eyes smiled into mine, sparkling blue and so very confusing. "If we're going to be doing it a lot for pretend."

"I can't kiss you," I objected, shaking my head. "It's you and me, and we don't..."

His lips twitched, fighting a smile as his gaze traveled my face. Goosebumps spread across my skin as Rowan lifted his right hand to hold my cheek as he nodded.

"I know," he agreed. "It's weird as hell to touch you, but I don't hate it," he snickered, grinning. Rowan's touch was lethal. The softest caress left my folded knees wobbling. It had to have been the moment and my nerves. I couldn't enjoy how warm his hands were as his fingertips grazed my throat before his palms spread over my shoulders.

"Can I kiss you, Meredith?"

"I guess." I smiled, shrugging as I looked elsewhere. Rowan took my chin and lifted my gaze to his, his brows furrowed over worried blue eyes.

"That's not a yes. You can say no and it'll be fine. We can be a fake perfect couple without kissing," he tried to assure me. "I already respect you. Maybe that's why I never thought about how it might feel to hold you or kiss you."

Staring at his mouth, I licked my lips. "We have two months to make Portland believe we're in love and the sweetest couple," I murmured. "We should practice our chemistry," I nodded, smiling at him, "so you should probably just kiss me now so I can see what all the fuss is about."

"The fuss?" Rowan was laughing as he lowered his mouth to mine, gently kissing my bottom lip. His lips were soft, the

pressure of his kiss enough to make me forget it was fake for just a second.

“You could use some more practice,” I teased when he pulled away.

Rowan fell back onto the pillow, his laughter humming around us as he lifted his arms behind his head and smiled at me. “You always were my favorite of Aubrey’s friends.”

“I guess now,” I touched my lips, still feeling the spreading tickle from his mouth, “we have to be friends.”

“And now,” Rowan added, patting the pillow next to him, “we need to sleep.” Sleeping next to him? I could do that. It was one scripted kiss, a chemistry test, and nothing more. If we slept back to back, it’d be even easier. But that didn’t happen. I woke in the middle of the night sweating. When I opened my eyes, the sheets had gone from pastel yellow to warm muscle. Warm, tanned, hard muscle that rose and fell with every breath of his deep sleep.

Rowan’s left arm snaked around me, holding me against him as he slept. I whispered his name, slowly moving away when he didn’t answer me, but his hold tightened. Rowan was gone when I woke again and the morning sun poured into the room. Maybe it was a dream. A really weird, messed up dream.

I hesitantly got out of bed and showered, having slept in my dress from the funeral. The sounds and smells of breakfast wafted up the stairs as I started walking down, but Aubrey grabbed my arm before I made it to the last step.

“Ethan’s mom showed me his grandma’s veil, and she wants me to wear it. I don’t know if I want to, but I don’t know how to say no.”

“You just say no.”

“You’re not helping me,” she whined, stomping her feet playfully. “They’re taking advantage of me and all the funeral stuff and guilting me into this. Come here and see it.” She tugged on my arm and dragged me with her across the hall to

the back porch. Blinded by the glistening bay, I had to blink my irises back to see the lace veil hanging from the wall.

“Vintage.” I shrugged, offering my most sympathetic smile. “It’s beautiful, and it’d look great on you, but if you don’t want a veil, then tell them.”

“I’ll ask them.” Aubrey nodded behind me toward the backyard. I turned to see Rowan walking up from the water, laughing with Ezra. When they got closer to the house and noticed Aubrey waving them down, they both ran over, asking what happened, how they could help. Typical charismatic, protective knights of Queen Aubrey.

“What,” she placed the veil on her head and continued, “do you think?”

“I don’t,” Ezra froze, looking at Rowan and me, “um, what does Mer think?”

“Hey,” Ethan called from inside, just about to open the door to the porch as Rowan leaped to close it and block him.

“Just a minute,” he told Ethan, laughing while Ezra, Aubrey and I frantically and carefully packed away the antique lace.

“I’ve got breakfast,” Ethan told us, his back against the door, “so let me in or I’m eating it all.”

I fixed Aubrey’s hair and hugged her as Rowan opened the door so Ethan could join us on the porch. Ezra dropped his arm around my shoulders as we walked to the small dining table overlooking the backyard. Rowan and Aubrey sat across from us, with Ethan at the head of the table.

“How did you sleep?” Ethan asked, passing the tray of cinnamon rolls to Rowan.

“Like a log,” Ezra replied, unfolding his napkin.

“Best sleep I’ve had in years,” Rowan winked at me, popping a grape into his mouth.

I hoped I had two months left at work, so the fact he was about to consume part of my life with be worth it.

ELEVEN

August

The Emeralds had a three-game series in Minnesota after we came home from the funeral. I worked every day on a new project with Dane, hoping to connect more students with community leaders. It consumed my days until Wednesday afternoon when Maggie burst into my office.

“You have a visitor,” she mouthed, words somehow failing her. “It’s,” Maggie shook her hands, “Rowan Ellis.”

“Great,” I replied, finishing an email. “Send him in.” I guess we were officially fake-official then.

“Mmm,” Maggie squealed in a high pitch hum when she returned, standing behind Rowan.

“Thanks, Maggie,” he told her, flashing the billboard smile that caused her to stammer and fumble with the doorway as she left us.

“Close the door,” I told him, rolling my eyes at Maggie’s departure. “That was an incredible game last night. The eighth inning? You owned it,” I complimented him, rewarded with a new bashful Rowan who fought a smile.

“Thank you,” he told me, settling into the chair across from my desk. “I’m sorry to come by without calling beforehand, but I realized I don’t have your phone number.”

“Right. You’ll need that for your pretend booty calls,” I teased.

“And when I want to ask you out for a proper dinner,” he added, “as pretend.”

“Pretend,” I agreed, giving him my number. “Is that all?”

Rowan looked at his watch and then at me. “It’s five. Let’s go. I made a reservation. It’s very public, but not invasive. It’ll be a good start. Maybe some hand holding?”

Maggie’s mouth nearly touched the floor as she watched Rowan and I leave, his hand pressed against the small of my back while guiding me from the office.

It was the same once we were inside the restaurant, with people recognizing him and staff mopping up their drool.

“If this is going to work, we need some expectations. How often, what it looks like, what we do,” I rambled.

“You want, like,” Rowan laughed, holding my hand across the table, “a kiss quota?”

“It’s not that. I just want to know our limits. How many times per week do I need to,” I couldn’t help but watch the way Rowan bit his bottom lip, remembering what happened in bed after the funeral, “kiss you.”

“How about we agree to kiss when there is a camera on us?”

“Okay. Kiss when there’s a camera. Touching?”

Rowan traced his index finger on the inside of my wrist, unmoving when the server placed two wine glasses filled with red between us. “This counts. Touching when we’re being watched?”

“I really can’t believe I agreed to do this.” I looked at him, watching the gentle smile form on his mouth, a reassuring expression void of his arrogance and full of empathy.

“Keep your eyes on the prize, babe.” Rowan winked, raising his glass.

The prize was my job. I could focus on that. We agreed on our plan to make it work, to have everyone fall in love with us so we’d earn my money and fix his mess from punching Ryan.

I still had so many questions about that, but I figured I'd wait until our fake fourth date. By then, we would've fake slept together and fake expressed our vulnerabilities so I could for real ask him why did that.

Each time he smiled at me, or touched me, I reminded myself it was fake and that helped me overcome the knot in my stomach for giving in to my nemesis.

"We have to tell Ethan, Ezra, and Aubrey." I reached into my purse for my lip gloss, gliding it over my lips once we finished eating. "Especially Aubrey."

Rowan's eyes were on my lips, his hands folded in front of his mouth. "What's there to tell?"

"That we're not really dating? That we still can't stand each other." Rowan rolled his eyes at me. "Fine. That we can tolerate each other now."

His laugh resonated around the emptying room before he stood up and placed his wallet in his back pocket. I joined him leaving the restaurant, clutching my purse as his arm slipped around my shoulders. When Rowan lowered his mouth to my ear, the crackle of his voice sent a shiver across my skin.

"You snored on my chest in Seattle, Meredith. We can do more than tolerate each other."

He opened the car door for me, taking my hand to help me in.

"I'm sorry. This is just," I waved between us, "weird. I need the money, you need the wholesome image. We can do this. So," I bit my lip, "what do we tell our friends?"

Settled into his seat, Rowan's hands clenched the steering wheel before he turned to look at me, his eyes hopeful. "Everyone has to believe it."

"Well, I should probably tell you I don't believe in sweetest day," I confessed, earning his grin in response. "It still doesn't feel right to lie to our best friends. And when it's all over, it'll be the wedding, and won't it be awkward?"

"We can have a fake breakup."

“Won’t your team want their money back? We can’t be together for two months and then split. Nobody will believe it,” I argued.

“Everyone has to believe it,” he repeated. When I asked again about what our fake breakup would look like, Rowan and I discussed how it’d be a mutual decision and we’d tell everyone we were friends, blah blah blah. It wouldn’t distract from the wedding. Aubrey wouldn’t hate me forever.

“What’s our cute story? How did we get together?” I pressed, thinking of all the times we were this close that something could’ve happened had we not disliked each other equally.

“I’ll let you decide. You’re more creative and romantic than I am,” he chuckled, turning onto my street.

“You’ll need to practice your romance then, because I think we’ll need a lot of it to woo your team.”

“Thank you, Meredith,” Rowan uttered. It was warm and quiet in his car, too relaxing that I could’ve easily drifted off before we got to my apartment. “For doing this.”

“What are friends for?” I grinned, going all in and feeling hopeful about saving my job. It was the part about the public love for Rowan I’d have to work on. I’d mastered private disdain, but I was up for a challenge.

We’d sorted through a list of what would make us look the most believable. He almost fooled me at dinner but, when he dropped me off at home and he tousled my hair as a goodbye, it was easy to remember every touch and endearment was a story.

Aubrey’s pounding on my door the following morning wasn’t the way I wanted to wake up on my day off. I only climbed from my bed to let her in, so my neighbors didn’t call the landlord.

“What is this?” Aubrey cried, shoving her phone in my face.

“Proof that being nice is always a mistake,” I grumbled. Waving her phone away, I pulled my feet onto the chair. “I was

doing work at the coffee shop. Your friend wouldn't leave me alone, and the media won't leave him alone, apparently."

"First Basemen Found His Princess," Aubrey read the headline, her eyes wide and sparkling. "You hate Rowan, but maybe you've been lying to me all along."

"You're right, Aubrey." I rolled my eyes up to meet hers. "I hate Rowan and now you."

"But look at you two," she shoved the phone toward me again. "He's touching you, Mer. You're alone, like, without Ethan or I. That's happened maybe twice in the last six years. What were you two even doing alone? I don't believe you."

"Are you finished?" I groaned, dropping my head onto the cushion. I let Aubrey huff and puff a little about what she, just like the magazine, thought was true rather than believe her best friend of twenty years.

"Fine. I'm done, for now."

I opened my eyes and turned my head to look at her. "I was at a coffee shop and he was too. It's bound to happen when we live in the same city. I've seen him at the grocery store before. I always go the other way," I laughed to myself, catching Aubrey shake her head.

"No," she told me, standing and waving her phone around. "You're not running through your usual anti-Rowan script. You need to tell me what happened. Right now."

"Or else you'll tell my dad?" I feigned fear, pretending to bite my nails and laughing at Aubrey's worried expression. "Aubrey, drop it."

"Ethan told me about Etta putting you together in Seattle. Did something happen there?"

Her big, hopeful eyes were killing me. How could I lie to her? There I was, telling her I still hated Rowan when it was day two and I needed to make it believable. I could answer her honestly, at least about Seattle.

"Sort of," I breathed, leaving the couch to make coffee in the kitchen. Aubrey was on my tail, her eyes wide and

demanding as she sat on my counter, eagerly awaiting my story.

“It was really sweet,” I began, starting our make-believe romance and hating myself for lying to my best friend. “And unexpected.” That was at least true. Aubrey covered her mouth, nodding for me to continue as a tear fell from her eye. “Whoa,” I laughed. “Why are you crying?”

“It’s just,” she rolled her lips inward. “It’s you two, and you’re so... It was only a matter of time.”

I caught myself before my glare turned deadly, remembering Rowan’s words. Everyone has to believe it. To know she felt that way this entire time was infuriating, but I couldn’t let that take over. Urging me to tell her the rest of our story, I did as I remembered whatever I could from romance novels and chick flicks.

“We were up all night talking, and he sort of just asked me why we hated each other,” I paused, sorting through my inventory of romance, “and I couldn’t really remember.”

“You didn’t tell him about Halloween?” Aubrey was on the edge of her seat, gnawing at her thumb, wiggling her knee, falling into our fake relationship.

“I’ll never tell him that. It’s too embarrassing now. But that’s really it. And then we kissed.”

Aubrey moaned, rolling her eyes. “Tell me everything. He has the most perfect lips. How did you not tell me this? Holy shit, Meredith! You and Rowan!”

“Me and Rowan.” I clicked my tongue, trying not to bite it. What are we getting into?

“This is perfect!” Aubrey bounced from the counter, her consuming hug causing me to stumble backward. She rambled for a bit about the wedding and how great it was that the maid of honor and best man were now together. I hadn’t thought that far. Our plan was to be fake over before the wedding. This thing was only going to get us through October. We’d be free birds come Halloween, which was perfect because that seemed to be my unlucky holiday with Rowan.

“We have a box for the game tomorrow,” Aubrey told me, gnawing her thumb nail. “Do you want to come with us? Ezra is bringing some girl.”

“I think she’s more than some girl,” I added. “He told me about her in Seattle.”

“So, you’ll come? Maybe your boyfriend can meet us after.”

“Yes. No. Wait.” I stepped out of her hug and busied myself with the coffee. Aubrey reached for two mugs from my cupboard, leaning against the counter at my side.

“This is the best wedding present,” she told me, tugging on some of my hair. The weight of our fake relationship had now doubled. I wondered if we could’ve told Aubrey the truth because I know she would’ve played along if she knew why we were doing it. But now, I was thigh deep in Rowan and there wasn’t an escape.

I hated to call in sick after a day off, but I wasn’t ready to face my people after they’d seen the same news as Aubrey. First Basemen Found His Princess. I think I was more like a queen, but I couldn’t be critical when it wasn’t really a relationship.

Pacing the sidewalk outside of my building, I was worrying about the game. Could I look at Rowan and pretend to be someone else around our friends? My nerves were squirming by the time Ethan’s car pulled along the curb. It’s because of the lie.

Holding my breath, I reached for the back door and opened it, expecting their flood of chatter.

“Well,” Ezra grinned at me, moving his arm he had slung over the back of the seat to pat the space next to him, “we have a whole hell of a lot to catch up with.”

“Where’s your lady friend?” I replied, buckling in.

“You look nice, Mer,” Ethan called, glancing at me from the rearview mirror. “Seeing someone special?”

“You guys!” Aubrey smacked Ethan as he drove, but she wasn’t innocent. She erupted into a fit of giggles just as Ethan and Ezra continued to tease me.

“Actually, I’m coming because Aubrey made me. She wanted someone to judge Ezra’s new girlfriend with, and that’s my job. Judging people. Just like,” I glared at all of them, “I’m doing with you jerks.”

Rowan gave Ethan a special pass that allowed him to park near the stadium and breeze through security. Once we were inside the stadium, the sound of cheering fans and the smell of concessions turned my senses into overload. My friends walked around how they normally would, and I would usually be right with them, excited about the game, but the unease from before Ethan picked me up came back. It was heightened this time, growing even more once we got into the box.

“Are you okay?” Aubrey asked me, taking my hand. “Your cheeks are red.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. But she spoke girl. She knew fine wasn’t fine.

“Hey!” Ezra called to us, his fingers intertwining with those of a woman who looked around the box in awe. “This is Heather, everyone.”

“It’s a night for new relationships,” Ethan teased, wrapping his arms around my shoulder from behind. I took his hands and humored him, laughing a little because, in my head, it was absolutely ridiculous.

“Is there,” a woman stepped into the room, reading from a piece of paper, “a Meredith West in this suite?”

“This one,” Ethan replied, unwrapping me. Her heels clicked along the tile floor, making us a little self-conscious of her entire outfit.

“Your party is requested at new seats along the first base line. Please come with me.” We followed her direction, all a little confused, but knowing Rowan had something to do with it. It was his base, after all. And why wouldn’t he make this night more uncomfortable for me?

Aubrey leaned over the railing when we got down to our seats, ogling the players as they warmed up and went in and out of the dugout.

“You better marry her quickly,” I teased Ethan, “or she might run away with one of them.”

“I thought I didn’t have to worry about either of you doing that.” He grinned at me, biting into his hot dog.

Heather was on my other side, sandwiched between Ethan and I. She was polite and cute, so I approved so far. The real tell would be how she reacted to the eyelashes, uniforms, and muscles.

“Rowie!” Aubrey’s shriek twisted my stomach, the new feeling unnerving. Telling myself to chill out, I tried to meditate for a second with my eyes closed. My happy place wasn’t coming to me. It was all baseball, the noisy stadium, shirtless Rowan in Seattle, and the warm beer held between my knees.

When I opened my eyes, there he was, standing with his glove stuffed against his side and left hand combing through his hair before sliding on his green cap. He lifted a finger and pointed to me, waiting until I stopped ignoring him out of panic to motion for me to come closer.

“Wow,” Ezra added to my unsettled nerves as I walked to the railing. Leaning over, I couldn’t help but smile at Rowan.

“Good luck kiss?” He asked, reaching his left hand up to me. I pressed my fingers to my lips, unraveling a little with his perfect grin, and passed my kiss to his outstretched hand.

“Win it for me.” I meant more than just the game.

TWELVE

Bottom of the ninth. Bases loaded. The Emeralds were in the lead, with Rowan batting four home runs and Diego Leon batting two. The score board was a mockery of the other team, with it remaining a steady zero. It was their chance to score, to try for more men on base to overturn the victory Rowan was leading.

We were on the edge of our seats, holding our breath and squeezing our fists as their fourth batter mounted the plate. I kept my eyes on Rowan, watching him steady his stance at first base, the weight of the game on his shoulders.

When the bat cracked, the ball flew down the first base line and the player at third ran. I never saw Rowan move as fast as he did to throw the ball home after he caught it at first, winning the game for his team. Emeralds poured from the dugout, surrounding Rowan and lifting him into the air.

Ethan turned between Aubrey and me, lifting us both up to spin around as we celebrated. When he set me down, I caught Ezra and Heather kissing. Sandwiched between my friends and their celebratory make out sessions, I looked to the field.

“Should we beat the traffic?” Aubrey shouted at us, but none of us answered. We were stuck in our aisle, anyway. “Meredith!”

I spun around to her, taking my eyes off the pudgy kid stuffing the last bit of cotton candy into his swollen mouth at the end of our aisle. Before I could ask Aubrey why she was screaming my name, Ethan turned me to face the dugout.

People around us screamed and reached out for Rowan, but, as he climbed the dugout roof and ran toward me, his eyes were on mine. Ethan nudged me and I stood on the railing, falling into Rowan's open arms as he held me against him while I asphyxiated on his scent. Dirt, baseball, and Rowan. He spun me around on the dugout, the surrounding crowd cheering him on.

"What are you doing?" I whispered to him, laughing against his chest. When I pulled back to look at him, Rowan's grin was wide and playful.

"I wanted to see my girl," Rowan told me, startling me when his nose nuzzled my neck. "You're being photographed, so maybe pretend you like the way I smell or something. You smell nice."

The blush spreading across my cheeks wasn't fake. It warmed my skin as Rowan held me tighter and spun me around once more, keeping his face close to mine. Some of his teammates joined the rooftop, nabbing him from our embrace. Rowan's arm grasped my hip, keeping me at his side while his teammates hugged and high-fived him for the win. When I turned to see our friends, they were talking to each other without a second glance at us. It seemed normal.

"She's your good luck charm," a familiar voice called from the dugout.

Rowan glanced down at me, winking once before kissing the top of my head and releasing me back to our wolves. Ethan eyed me first, shaking his head playfully while Ezra stood to help me off the roof. It was Diego who called out to Rowan, his sparkling smile directed at me before another player distracted him. Maggie is going to kill me. I had to prepare myself emotionally for Monday. Can I go to work with booze in my coffee?

It was moments before a picture of Rowan and I flashed across the screen in a collage of other players and their partners, the announcement of the team's sweetest day competition headlining the photographs.

I heard Rowan call for me as we were standing to leave. He was pulling out his shirt from his uniform pants, adorably disheveled. “Wait up for me,” he commanded.

“Do not get married before me,” Aubrey warned, her tone playful as she shoved me forward to get out of the aisle. Looking back once more at the field while we left our seats, I saw the players run into their dugouts and leave the dirt with memories of the incredible game.

“Me?” I mocked, pointing to Ezra and Heather as they clung to each other on our way out.

Thankfully, they didn’t give me too much crap on the car ride home. Until Rowan called me and I ignored it. Twice. I was still thinking of Diego Leon’s flirty eyelashes and how delicious Rowan smelled after that win. I couldn’t talk to anyone in that moment except my dirty, troubled self-conscious. When Ethan’s phone rang, my efforts were futile.

“Yeah,” he chuckled, glancing at me in the rearview as he cupped the receiver to his ear. “She’s here. Behind me. Hold on.” He reached around the seat to hand me his phone. “Lover boy wants you.”

Heather was falling asleep against Ezra next to me, Aubrey and Ethan both stared at me from the front as impatient as a kid waiting for cookies to bake. Groaning a little, I took Ethan’s phone from his hand.

“Hi.”

“They’re freaking out about us!” Rowan’s excitement claimed his voice. “The dugout stunt, Meredith. I don’t know what I was thinking. But my agent is obsessed with you.”

“Tell him to get in line,” I laughed, feeling a little more at ease hearing his voice, “behind your center fielder.”

“Not funny. Hey, do you want to come over?”

“What?” They couldn’t hear our conversation, but I looked up at our friends and felt the guilt of our lie pour onto my lap. “For Charity or—” The others wouldn’t know what I meant, that I was referring to the woman in his kitchen, but mocking

Rowan was also all I knew how to do. Especially now, when his voice felt as secretive to me as our fake relationship.

“You’re horrible, Meredith. I’m really going to enjoy being in a relationship with you. I’ll have fun showing you how to be human again,” Rowan teased, his laugh tickling my ear.

“A fake one,” I quietly added, feeling too comfortable with him on the phone, reminding myself and him.

“Tell Ethan to take you home and I’ll meet you there.”

“You’re pushy.”

“Fake boyfriends are. Aren’t they? Would you rather meet me for coffee in the morning? My front porch, eight in the morning. Bring your pajamas?”

“My pajamas?”

“In case you want to stay. I’ll see you then. Goodnight!”

I stared at Ethan’s phone in my hands, the dark screen making me wonder if our conversation even happened. I leaned between the front seats and dropped it into a cupholder. Ethan stirred from a buzzed snooze and turned to me.

“Don’t start,” I told him.

Ethan lifted his hand to my face, fighting a grin. “You’re so pretty, Mer.”

“Ditto, drunk Ethan.” I booped his nose and settled back into my seat, waiting in an awkward silence as Aubrey turned onto my street. Was I supposed to go to Rowan’s in the morning? And no, I wasn’t staying long enough to need my pajamas. It wasn’t even week one, and I was already confused by our boundaries.

I was overthinking. Clearly. That didn’t stop me from doing it until I finally fell asleep after midnight.

I assumed it was Aubrey pounding on my door, likely full of more questions about Rowan and I. Not bothering to change out of my pajamas for her, I reluctantly peeled myself from bed and went to answer the door. Sleep hit me in all the right spots last night, and I just wasn’t ready to deal with reality.

Bracing myself for the impact, I held my breath as I opened the door.

“You didn’t come over.” Rowan leaned against my doorframe, two paper cups in his hands.

“Good morning.” I rubbed my eyes, making sure I wasn’t dreaming. “Why are you here?”

“We had plans.”

“I didn’t know you were serious. You were talking about pajamas.” I stepped away from the door and waved for him to come inside. “I keep my pajamas here, in my house, in my dresser.”

“Can I see?” Rowan’s boisterous laughter at my frozen expression was almost humiliating. “I’m kidding! I don’t need to see your bedroom. Unless you want me to. You’re too easy to mess with.”

“I’ll take the coffee and,” I took both cups from his hands and moved my knee toward the door, “see you never.”

“Wait.” He grabbed my lifted ankle as I tried to stand on one wobbling foot while holding two hot cups of coffee. “Before you kick me out, I need to talk to you about doing something next weekend.”

“This is going to be a weekly thing, then? Okay,” I grappled with the idea, “so what’s on the schedule?” Lowering my leg, Rowan closed the door and followed me into the living room. I curled up in one corner of the couch while he sat at the other end, his left arm spread along the back.

“Come with me to the mayor’s park clean up on Saturday. It’s all day and, to make up for using your entire Saturday, I promise to feed you. And you get to pick the park.”

Of all the parks in the entire city, I could pick one to flaunt my fake relationship. “Washington. It’ll be full of people to see you being so,” I batted my eyelashes, teasing him, “in love with me.”

Rowan poked my thigh with his foot. “Maybe you’re just hoping for another thunderstorm so we can spend more time

together.”

“Ha!” I burned my throat as I choked on my coffee. “Or maybe it’s convenient. Besides, we didn’t get to finish hanging out in the rose garden.”

Settling the details, Rowan stuck around for another two hours. I made pancakes, and he told me about his game schedule for the rest of the weekend, how he was going to practice early, and that I could come if I wanted.

I stretched my arms, the collar of my shirt slipping off my shoulder.

“That looks familiar,” Rowan snickered, looping one finger under my blue bra strap. Swatting him away, I laughed at the mess of a memory that night had been. Spilled beer, his Emeralds sweatshirt, and drinks with my team and his. “I’ll plan on you coming over next weekend, but you can always... Call me or... Whatever, if you want to meet up. Or something.”

“Rowan Ellis,” I teased, “are you asking me to spend time with you as a friend? Is this a,” I looked around, whispering to make his smile last even longer, “friendship? Are we officially friends?”

“Yes,” he squeezed my nose, “we are, you dork.” I swatted at him, rubbing my nose.

“Thank you for the coffee. Listen,” I added, “tell Diego I say hi. Ask him if he likes the color blue.” I snapped my bra strap, laughing at the serious expression on Rowan’s face. He scowled, rolling his eyes at me before he left, and I couldn’t stop smiling.

I watched the two-game series that weekend at home, preparing myself for work on Monday, when I was bombarded with questions about my new boyfriend.

When Harrison pulled us into a meeting after lunch, I felt strangely validated in our plan. Harrison warned us again about funding, but I was so close to getting what we’d need.

“What’s got you smiling so big?” Monica probed, taking me from a daydream. I couldn’t admit it was thinking of

Rowan coming over on the weekend, how it felt so easy to laugh with him now, or that I looked forward to seeing him. Because that wasn't true, was it? I wasn't waiting for Saturday for more reasons than the day off?

THIRTEEN

It was quarter after eight by the time I found a parking spot, and another mile hiking around the curving elevation before I found the spattering of dark green shirts among a sea of people.

“Your man’s over there,” Diego shouted to me as he approached, pointing behind him toward a group of kids and their enthusiastic moms. “How are you, princess?”

His brown eyes scanned my body like I was going through airport security. “My eyes are up here,” I told him, crossing my arms, “and my man is over there.”

Diego nodded, rubbing his jaw as I busted his ego, and changed his tune. He was introducing me to another player when Rowan joined us, picking me up and spinning me around until I was dizzy.

“I’m going to kill you,” I whispered against his neck, “or puke on you.”

“There are three news stations here,” he replied, slowly lowering me to my feet. That was code for “turn on the fake”. I thought of Aubrey coming over to interrogate me last week and the kind people I met who thought I was really this first baseman’s princess.

When his teammates gathered around the mayor’s podium, Rowan draped his arms around me from behind, letting me lean against his stomach.

“Welcome to the annual park clean up,” the mayor spoke. “We’re honored to share the day with some Emeralds,” he

motioned to Rowan and his teammates, clapping with excitement as the crowd cheered, “and great people of our city, in our effort to make it whole again one park at a time.”

Turning to the side while the mayor spoke, I caught someone watching me. Her glossy black hair shined in the sun, her bright green eyes punitive as they stared. The longer I felt her eyes on me in my periphery, as they traveled from Rowan to me, I knew her gaze wasn't curiosity.

“Do you want litter, planting, or cleaning the playground equipment?”

“What? I'm sorry.”

Rowan rolled his eyes. “What do you want to do? I'll sign us up.” Planting sounded the best so I could keep to the shade and follow around the cute old ladies with their baskets of marigolds and pansies.

After two hours of working, my plan for the shade failed because I'd been pulled into conversations with people about Rowan. How wonderful he was, what a great player he was, a prodigy, an upstanding citizen. Et cetera. He grabbed two bottles of water and waved at me to join him on a picnic table for a break.

“Thank you,” I told him after guzzling half the bottle. Rowan squeezed the bottle, splashing his face with water before hanging his head to shake it off. “You're getting me wet!”

Cocking his head, Rowan licked his lips, a bashful smile spreading when he looked away from me. Even the water dripping from his hair onto his shoulders was desperate to cling to him. It was pathetic. I'm pathetic for even watching.

“You must be Meredith,” a tall man wearing a suit in the middle of summer spoke to me, extending a hand. Looking to Rowan for my next steps, he already draped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me against him. My cheek clung to his damp shirt as his grip tightened.

“This is Anthony, my agent.” Rowan explained.

“The one responsible for putting Rowan in a magazine about the city’s most eligible bachelors,” I remembered. “Looks like that went to print too fast. I’m sorry.”

“About that,” he mused, eyeing me. “I brought someone from Stumptown Magazine and they want to meet with both of you. You can give them a few words while you’re taking a break.” Anthony looked around, clearly not attending to help clean the park. He stepped away to schmooze the mayor and Rowan took that moment to sit back on the table with me, still holding his arm around me.

“I didn’t know we’d be in print,” I mumbled, letting out a nervous breath. “If you didn’t have that cute cat, none of this would happen.”

“He’s been giving me grief since he was a kitten.” Rowan teased, playfully tugging on my ponytail. “Do you want me to tell Anthony you’re off limits, too?”

I didn’t respond to him but, as I closed my eyes, I was wondering what was with my friends and putting limits on me. Rowan greeting someone who passed by caught my attention.

Opening my eyes, I looked over his shoulder. “Why is that woman staring at me?”

Rowan followed my gaze to the trash cans where some people gathered, tying stuffed bags and preparing new ones. “Black hair?”

“Yeah.”

“Looks like she could suck out your soul?”

Swatting at him, I tried to stifle my laugh. “Yes. Who is she?”

“Your competition.”

Over his shoulder, I watched her stare at us. “It’s more than that. Tell me why she’s trying to kill me from across the park.”

Rowan groaned, letting go of me and standing up. He bent forward to stretch his back, muttering something under his

breath as he came up. “I have a game tomorrow. I don’t have time for stories.”

“We’re here now, and I’m intrigued,” I told him, crossing my arms. “Tell me or I’m going home before Stumptown gets here to learn just how much I love my boyfriend.” Rowan laughed when I rolled my eyes, probably agreeing the idea of love between us was revolting.

“Her name is Erica,” he held my shoulders, “and she’s engaged to Levi Reynolds. However, she’s been trying to get on this for two years. She still hasn’t stopped.”

“Doesn’t Levi care about that? That’s awful.”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t talk about his personal life whenever we’re out. He spends half the game in the bullpen, and I think Erica’s hungry for someone on the field. She’s obsessed with Diego and I. So, like I said, your competition.”

My job was on the line. I could play that game. Taking Rowan’s hands in mine, I walked backward to the picnic table and sat on top, pulling him against me. Spreading my palms over his chest, he started shaking his head at me with his beautiful grin inches from my mouth as I pulled the collar of his shirt closer to me.

“Game on,” I told him before pressing our lips together, quickly kissing Rowan and letting go of him.

Rowan combed his fingers through his hair, looking at the blue sky before lifting one hand to the back of his neck. “If we liked each other, Meredith, I’d tell you how hot you are when you get competitive.”

“You can still tell me that.” Winking at him, I slid from the table as Anthony approached with two women behind him.

“Here they are,” Anthony announced, waving to Rowan and I. “Portland’s most loved couple.”

Rowan and I exchanged a quick glance, his shrug and smile almost adorable. The women introduced themselves as journalists for the magazine and asked us a few questions. I felt guilty not finishing my gardening duties, but that wasn’t my only job that day.

“How does it happen that you’re both from the same region and you met out here?” One journalist asked, taking notes on everything we said. Everyone knew Rowan grew up in Chicago and moved to Portland when he was a teenager, but it sounded juicier when questioned by a journalist.

“Chicago and Milwaukee aren’t too far apart,” I interjected, watching Rowan bite his lip. Trying to cover for his awkward silence, I kept going. “And many people from the Midwest have moved out here. I came for college. That’s actually where we met.”

“I just keep wondering if I ran into her at a Cubs game,” he finally added, squeezing my hand. “If we’d known each other before meeting out here.”

“Brewers game,” I corrected, lightly knocking him in the arm.

“You’re meant to be,” the other reported gushed. Rowan answered the rest of their questions, responding politely and with charm when they tried flirting with him through the interview. They couldn’t help it, and part of me didn’t blame them because it wasn’t a secret how hot he was. Even I couldn’t deny that.

We finished the day in the early afternoon, once the mayor celebrated everyone’s efforts and allowed time for the players to meet with everyone. Watching Rowan play with kids melted even the coldest heart. He was happy out there, charming everyone like the extrovert he was. When we were driving back to his house for the dinner he promised as part of signing me up to spend all day in the park, I felt relaxed for the first time in weeks.

“Thank you again for coming today.”

“Easiest contest I’ve been part of.” I smiled, rolling down my window to twist the warm summer air between my fingers.

“I know our relationship is fake,” Rowan told me as he pulled into his garage, waiting until we climbed out of the car before continuing, “but our friendship doesn’t have to be.”

“I know,” I replied, considering how random that comment was. “Are you trying to tell me you like spending time with me, Rowan?”

“Whatever, Meredith.” Rowan chuckled as he let us inside. His cat quickly ran to the door, rubbing against our ankles as we headed toward the kitchen. “How do you feel about steak?”

“Your attempts to fake woo me are winning.” I smiled, leaning against the kitchen island, chuckling to myself about standing in there with Charity the night I fed the cat. That seemed to be our turning point. A favor turned into an even bigger one.

As Rowan took ingredients from the fridge and started prepping dinner, he told me about the upcoming schedule for his games and how he’d be away until after the following weekend. Of course, like the good fake girlfriend I am, I offered to feed the cat again as long as he promised nobody would drop by unannounced.

I sorted through a cabinet, looking for a cutting board, curiously studying the copper pots and pans. “Are these all yours? You have enough to bake for an army.”

“No. Most of that is my grandma’s.” He carried a tray out to the backyard, where he turned on the grill. I joined after I’d sliced some fruit, sitting on one of the plush chairs on his patio.

“Was everything okay when the journalist asked about where we grew up?”

“Why?”

“You just seemed sort of tense. I would’ve shut that woman down if I knew something was off limits.”

Rowan closed the grill and turned to me, his mouth a flat line. “It’s personal.”

“I’m one of your persons.” I looked around. “I don’t see any other friends pretending to be in love with you to save your career.”

“We all have limits.” He gruffly responded, cracking open a beer. The arrogant, icy exterior was painful to watch. Thankfully, I didn’t need to stick around for it. I tried to help, but he turned to stone.

“I guess you just divvy them out for others rather than sharing your own so others can help you,” I scoffed, standing up and walking closer to him. “I’m not trying to push you—”

“Then don’t!” Rowan barked, tossing his beer can and storming back into the kitchen.

“Rowan, what the hell?” I followed him, barely keep up with his long strides as he climbed his stairs. He came down a moment later, pulling an Emeralds sweatshirt on when he stopped in the middle of the stairs, towering over me.

“You don’t get to know every painful detail. You’re not my girlfriend, Meredith!”

“Thank god for that,” I rebuked, sneering with disgust at his attitude. I grabbed my purse from the table in his front hallway, sifting through for some cash as I tried to figure out just how his words made me feel. Angry? Hurt? Ashamed? I tossed the bills I could find on the table and looked back at him. “That’s for dinner.”

My car was still at the park, so I walked out of Rowan’s house without a plan. Not ready to walk through the park at night and get eaten by a rabid raccoon, I started the long walk back to my apartment. Of course, he didn’t come after me, or text, because he was always going to be Rowan Ellis. And why did I care? It’s Rowan Ellis, for the sake of all things holy.

I was more annoyed and angrier with each step away from his house than I should’ve been. It took an hour to walk home, but when locked inside, I called Aubrey.

I wanted to tell her the truth, but hearing her warm greeting made it harder to lie and be honest. So, I listened to her tell me about a how she and Ethan prepared her classroom earlier in the day. They were so cute, I could puke glitter. Ethan and Aubrey were meant to be, while I was stuck in a

fake relationship, when I knew better. Because fake or real, I had feelings... And they were starting to really nag.

FOURTEEN

September

Aubrey and Ethan invited me over to watch my fake boyfriend play baseball later in the week. I went for my best friend and the free pizza and wine, spending the game curled on their couch trying to pretend it didn't frustrate me each time Rowan moved.

Did it overwhelm me how I hadn't heard from him at all since the night I walked home from his place? Unfortunately. Did I try to tell him that? Of course not.

"Is everything okay between you two?" Aubrey asked during a commercial break. "Because he asked me to feed his cat. Do you think it was out of habit? I mean," she nervously glanced between Ethan and I, "are you two okay?"

"More wine, please." I mumbled, closing my eyes. I heard Aubrey get up and wander to the kitchen, muttering something in the distance.

Ethan poked me with his toe. "You haven't been watching."

"Nope."

"Good." He turned the volume back on once the commercials ended. "Ouch," he hissed. "He is not himself out there."

Sitting up, I looked from Ethan's worried eyes to the game. Rowan struck out at bat. That never happened to him. Ever.

“What’s going on with him?” Ethan wondered aloud. “The last time he was ever this off was... Hey, Aubs?”

“Yeah?” She came back into the living room carrying a bottle of wine and a pint of ice cream with a spoon. “Here,” she shrugged, offering the ice cream to me, “looks like you might need this. What, Ethan?”

“I was just thinking about college and that one game Row had when he let the other team get a run when he was at second base. What happened that he was so off then?”

Aubrey groaned, sitting next to me and muting the commercials. “I think he broke up with that redhead he was dating. Oh,” she turned to me, “did you guys...”

“Did we what? Break up?” I answered, looking between their worried eyes, laughing a little at how ridiculous I sounded to myself. We weren’t really dating. We couldn’t break up. “No. I don’t know why he sucks today. Maybe,” I dug my spoon into the cookies and cream, “he just sucks, period.”

“Well,” Ethan snickered, “at least one of you is your normal self today.”

With the game resuming, I devoured the ice cream and pretended I didn’t enjoy watching Rowan mess up. Not in a vindictive, horrible person sort of way, but I was just thinking that he was a jerk.

“You two are so freaking cute,” Aubrey cooed, pointing to the screen. As the seventh inning stretch began, the screen turned to an announcement for the sweetest day contest. Fans could vote on who they thought were the sweetest so far, and our faces were front and center as the votes tallied in our favor.

“I’ll feed the cat,” I told Aubrey, staring at the screen when the game resumed.

“There we go!” Ethan bounced from the couch, jumping up and down when Rowan was back in the game, hitting a home run over the outfield and getting two more runs in for the team.

“I guess he just needed to see his girlfriend,” Aubrey squealed, spilling my pint of ice cream as she hugged me tightly.

“Finally,” Ethan shouted at the screen. “He turned it around! Let’s see them get through the batting lineup and he’ll do it again.”

At Rowan’s second time to bat in the inning, the camera closed in on him. He paced the plate, swinging the bat around his shoulders to warm up, shifting his weight as he settled into position. Watching him before the pitch, I noticed things about him I hadn’t before. The details. The way his jaw clenched beneath his helmet, as though he was fighting through something. His blue eyes were potent, stiffly focused on the pitcher. But as focused as he appeared, I worried there was something missing underneath the beautiful, dirty exterior.

After his reaction on Saturday, I knew it wasn’t my place to probe. Once the game ended, I was thankful Ethan and Aubrey only asked two more questions about us because I was starting to not have answers myself.

Crashing at Ethan and Aubrey’s house after the game meant I could scour her fancy wardrobe for work the following morning. Aubrey was going into her school early to meet with some teachers, which left me in free reign of her clothes.

“I’m heading out,” Ethan called from the front door. “Brunch on Sunday?”

“Sure!”

“Love you, Mer.”

“Love you, too,” I shouted back at him, leaving the bathroom when I heard the door latch. Sorting through Aubrey’s closet was like Christmas. I was debating between a violet dress with a neckline to kill, or black pants and a lacey white top, when my alarm buzzed. I had fifteen minutes to throw myself together and get to work, while I still had a job to go to.

Maggie was waiting for me when I got into my office, twirling her curls, when I dropped my car keys on my desk and sat down across from her.

“That dress is gorgeous!” She shrieked, her eyes wide as she grinned at me. When I thanked her for the compliment, she started rambling unprofessionally about the effect she thought it would have on my boyfriend, and then she asked when we planned to take another group to an Emeralds game.

It was a flurry of a ramble, but I handled it by trying to remember when I was her age a few years ago and wild about someone as pretty as Diego Leon.

“Today’s the meeting with Portland University and Willamette State,” she told me. “I have the conference room set up for you and Harrison.”

“Thank you, Maggie. It’ll be great if you can join us. I know your professors will want to see firsthand what a magnificent job you’re doing here.” I owed it to her to give as great of a review as I could, while she still had time to work with us.

We were meeting about taking on new interns, and I had to work with Harrison to explain how there might not be a future. The meeting went well as Harrison’s charisma left open the possibility of changes while still keeping the relationship intact.

I sent Maggie home early, wanting quiet to finish some data analysis for Harrison before a big meeting on Monday. Barely noticing when people left for the weekend, I was glued to my laptop before I realized it was almost nine. With my morning being so rushed, I hadn’t been to Rowan’s for his cat and the poor thing couldn’t starve on my watch.

It didn’t help my mood being stuck behind a protest and barricades downtown while trying to get from work to Rowan’s house. It was almost ten by the time I got there. Going in the way I had always done, I turned the kitchen light on and his cat came running to me.

The house was quiet; the silence bringing with it a flood of memories from last weekend. We seemed to work so well together before I brought up his limits. I know whatever happened wasn't my fault, and I was still mad at him for the way he treated me, but then why was I there? Why was I even feeling offended? We weren't friends. At least not like Ethan and I, or Ezra and I. We were something else, and the longer I stood in his kitchen staring at the pieces of his life, those boundaries blurred.

His cat rubbed against my legs, almost tripping me on the stairs as I went into the laundry room. Rowan's clothes were in a basket or hanging to dry from before he'd left for his away games. The laundry room smelled like his cologne and fabric softener, something about that mix making me feel at ease.

Once the cat had happily eaten, I picked it up and started carrying it out of the laundry room when the asshole puked right down the front of Aubrey's dress. This is not happening. Maybe it was Rowan's house laughing at me for coming back, but Aubrey wouldn't think it was so funny if I returned her dress with a stain. Feeling a little frantic, I looked around for detergent, hoping to not set the stain. When I tried opening the carton, the damn thing spilled everywhere. My legs were blue, the floor was blue. The damn cat is blue.

I handled washing the cat first, and that was a treat. My arms were only a little scratched, and now Rowan's cat hated me. The silver lining was that Aubrey's dress was soaking in detergent the whole time I dealt with the rest of the mess. Kneeling beneath the dryer, I sorted through what laundry was in there, knowing I should've been out of there an hour ago, but still ankle-deep in detergent and cleavage-high with the other mess. Praying Rowan wouldn't notice or that he'd at least be more forgiving than last weekend, I pulled on a pair of his gray sweats and a white t-shirt while I rinsed Aubrey's dress in the washtub.

Rich people and their designer appliances. It was tricky to figure out how to use his washer and dryer, but after some curse words and swift kicks, I had Aubrey's dress in the wash. At Rowan's. Hitting my palm against my face, I pulled it out

before the full cycle could go and tossed it in the dryer, hoping that would be quicker so I could leave.

Tapping my nails along the top of the dryer didn't speed things up. Pacing the laundry room didn't either. The cat followed me upstairs, trying to trip and kill me again before I walked to the living room and sat on the couch. I'd only wait a few more minutes and take the dress out. It just needed to dry a little more. But who am I kidding? My eyes are closed and these clothes are too comfy. Crap.

I was dreaming about high school, the type that pops up when I'm already feeling humiliated in reality, when Rowan's cat woke me. It jumped on my back, sliding its tail along my cheek before its warm head pressed against my cheek. That's not the cat. Definitely not the—

"I'm sorry, Meredith." Rowan whispered, kissing my forehead. He hadn't seen my eyes open, so I bought some time and tried to still my heart. I limply burrowed into the blanket he placed over me, trying not to stir when his fingers grazed my bare feet. Rowan's footsteps trailed away, and I squinted to see where he was, only to catch him kick off his shoes and go upstairs. The sound of his shower should've lulled me to sleep, but I'd seen too much in Seattle and my thoughts were everywhere they shouldn't be.

Rolling over to face the cushion and not stare at the stairs waiting for him to come out of the bathroom dripping with water and every woman's fantasy, I resented the twisting knot in my stomach. The one that told my brain to go upstairs.

I couldn't have feelings for Rowan. My nerves were a lie. Sleep deprivation. The warm, soft cocoon of his blanket and sweats. They had to be.

The smell of coffee woke me sometime the following morning. Peeking through squinting eyes, I noticed the streetlights were still on and the light barely shifted from gray to gold. I had to face Rowan eventually, especially after I broke into his laundry and stole his clothes before falling asleep on the couch. But those pesky feelings crept back in. He apologized. He covered me with a blanket. He let me sleep

there. He didn't wake me up and make me leave. He kissed me.

Wrapping the blanket around me, I took my time following a path lit only by the kitchen stove light. The clock read four thirty. I waited, wondering when Rowan would come down so we could start over and go back to being a not-real-fighting fake couple.

Looking around the empty kitchen, I noticed Aubrey's dress draped over the back of a chair with a fluffy white towel folded next to it. Carrying it with me, I peered in every room I passed on my way to the bathroom, feeling more alone with each step. After I showered and slipped back into yesterday's dress, I prepared myself emotionally to leave. I ran down the stairs to find my heels and bag, slamming into Rowan as I reached the foyer.

"I'm sorry," we spoke in unison. He stepped back, holding a white box in his hands, with his lips turned in.

"I ran down to get you a cinnamon roll. Coffee's in the kitchen. I'm," he swallowed, his eyes landing on my legs, "heading out."

"Can we talk about last weekend?" I reached for his wrist, making sure he wouldn't leave, letting go when our eyes met.

"No," Rowan replied. "There's nothing to talk about. You're amazing and I was a jerk. The discussion ends there. And somehow," he smiled at me, "you slept on my couch last night."

Closing my eyes in embarrassment, I considered how ridiculous that might have seemed. "The cat. Aubrey told me you asked her to do it. She thought we weren't okay." I watched his eyes flick to the floor. "And I didn't know what to tell her, so the right thing to do was to feed your cat. Then that evil thing puked on me, and I didn't mean to fall asleep."

"In my clothes."

"In your clothes. This looks worse than it is," I blushed, "but I promise you it won't happen again. It's almost October, anyway."

Rowan started walking away toward the kitchen, his voice trailing his footsteps. “You’re welcome to sleep over whenever you want to.”

Say what now? I waited in the hallway for the burning blush to leave my cheeks before following him into the kitchen where the room was still softly lit by the stove light.

“Whoa,” he blurted, his lips pursed over his coffee mug. “I wondered what that might look like on.” Rowan blinked, tensing his jaw. “Coffee?”

“Thank you.” I helped myself to a cup, suddenly aware of my dress, his eyes, the quiet, and the dark. The mugs rattled as I took one from the cupboard, willing myself to act like a respectable human being and not some hormonal teenager.

“I have to go,” he uttered behind me.

“Big game?”

“Big game.” Rowan repeated. He slid the white box toward me on the kitchen island when I turned around, sipping my coffee as I stood barefoot in his kitchen.

We stared at each other until I broke the silence. “Good luck.”

“Thanks. Meredith?” Rowan approached the doorway, spinning once to ask me something. “You’re slowly becoming one of my closest friends,” he confessed. “I choked with the journalist because she asked about my past and,” he paused, shaking his head, “I just don’t go there. I don’t do,” he waved between us, “this for real.”

“I don’t know what that means.” I lied. I knew too well he was warning me not to think too deeply about the messed-up thoughts he didn’t even know I had when I watched him go upstairs last night. “I’ll walk out with you.” Taking one more sip of my coffee and grabbing the white box with my purse, I followed Rowan out to his garage. When he finished packing his duffel bag in the trunk, Rowan turned to me.

I was more secure around him in my heels than barefoot, and the fresh air helped clear out the fog of his cologne.

“There’s a dinner for the college team at Willamette State tomorrow. Will you come with me?” Rowan cocked his head, eyeing me as he asked.

“It won’t be like last Saturday?”

Rolling his eyes, Rowan’s warm laugh filled the space between us. “I promise.” Nodding my reply, I turned from Rowan to head toward my car, waiting to devour the cinnamon roll in privacy.

“Meredith,” he whistled, pausing until I turned around. “You look beautiful.” Choking on my heart, I fumbled with the cinnamon roll box.

FIFTEEN

Rowan picked me up from my apartment, the cool air in his car a needed relief from my steaming apartment and the scorching afternoon sun on the sidewalk where I waited for him. He climbed out of his Audi to open the door for me.

“Do you ever sleep?” I asked, considering his schedule of games, travel, and fake relationship social obligations. I tried not to notice his white button down, the undone top two buttons, the cuffs folded crisply over his muscular and tanned forearms, while he stood at the door.

“Never enough.” His gaze sparkled as he studied my face, time slowing for a moment until the train clanked by. “I don’t mind my night off the field in the company of my fake girlfriend, as long as everyone plays fair.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” I stammered, suddenly feeling nervous strapped into the seat next to him. Play fair? Like this is a game? Does he know my brain is playing tricks on me? Worse, I wondered if I might’ve said something in my sleep.

“The competition will be there. Levi and his girlfriend, Diego, and Ryan. I’ll have a hard time,” he peered over at me, his knuckles tightening on the steering wheel, “restraining myself.”

“I won’t let you punch anyone,” I blurted, really unsure about the deep rasp of his voice and how my knees locked to keep myself from melting when he looked at me.

Rowan groaned a little, maybe because I annoyed him, maybe because it was just a reflex, but the sound was a

lightning bolt to my nerves. This is not happening. I kept myself contained to the passenger seat, turning a little to look out the window while we drove across the river to Willamette State's campus.

The event was on the first floor of a building overlooking the river, with tables and decorations scattered about. Rowan offered me his arm when we left the car, and I was thankful for the stability because leaning against him was making me melt. It was a catch, being with him seeming more confusing after I slept on his couch, all the while knowing I needed to be there.

Inside, students guided us to a table near a small stage where the college baseball team would sit for dinner. Some players quickly approached Rowan the moment we entered, following him in awe as he pulled out a chair for me and we settled into our seats.

"Meredith West?" I turned away from Rowan and some players when I heard my name. It was Cassidy, the student programs director I connected with for my work. "I wondered if the rumors were true." She grinned, pointing to my date. "May I sit?"

She didn't let me answer, instead she quickly sat on my other side and asked me about work. When she began with the disclaimer that she didn't want to stir a pot and asked me why we weren't expanding our programs and why we hadn't posted our spring calendar yet. Neglecting to tell her the reason I was even at the dinner with her was because my fake boyfriend and I were trying to save my job so there would even be a spring calendar, I smiled and told her we were flexible and working on it.

After the school's coach gave a speech thanking the Emeralds for joining them, praising his team's efforts, they served dinner. I could feel the competition staring at us every once in a while, when they'd walk by or if I turned in their direction. Whatever connection Rowan and I had seemed so natural to the outside world, making the fake appear perfectly genuine. Unlike Levi and Erica, whose affection was quite appalling to watch.

Rowan promised he'd take me home after talking to some of the team, so I took the time to wander outside. The warm summer air smelled sweet as I stepped onto the patio overlooking the Willamette River, canopied by rhododendrons and blooming roses. A breeze tickled my shoulders, a cautious reminder that fall was near. So was October.

"I played like shit last week." Rowan stated, crossing his arms as he leaned against the railing. "You know why, too."

"I have no clue what goes on in that head of yours, Ellis."

His weight shifted, and I watched him turn to rest his forearms on the railing, joining me in looking at the river. As he lifted his left foot to a beam on the railing, he leaned a little closer to me.

"I told you before that the conversation about last weekend was over, but I don't really think it is. Why do you think I was striking out, playing like I was in college, unable to focus on the field? It's my one sacred place, where it's just me and the game, but I was a mess." He lifted his gaze to mine, but I was too worried to meet his eyes. "Why do you think that was?"

"Because you're practicing abstinence to avoid another news scandal and it finally caught up with you?"

Rowan nudged me with his shoulder. "Maybe." I followed his lead when he stood up from leaning over the railing. "Or maybe it's because I was a jerk to you and you've made me consider more than myself these last few weeks." Wrapping his arm around my shoulders, he asked, "Ready to go? I may have invited Ezra and his new lady over to borrow a cat carrier."

"That's so random," I giggled, smiling politely at someone who took our picture as we walked through the dining area and out the main doors.

"He's allergic, and he got her a kitten." Rowan rolled his eyes as he unlocked the car. "They've been dating for a minute, and the smitten kitten now owns his own."

"I don't trust men with cats." In the quiet, I slowly turned to see Rowan gaping at me. "I don't." I shrugged. "It took me

six years to get into this car with you and I still don't know what's going on in your mind.”

“You'd kill me if you did,” he replied, his lips parting into a devilish grin.

Pretty sure my legs were noodles when we got to his house, I faked a text message and told him I'd follow him inside in just a minute. What I wanted to do was call Aubrey, but I couldn't.

Slipping out of the car, I took my time going into Rowan's house, where he was already charming Ezra and Heather. Their laughter carried into the foyer, warming the space.

“Hey, you!” Ezra pulled me into a hug when he saw me. “Quit sneaking around and come in here.”

“I heard you got a kitten.”

“And they're staying for a drink,” Rowan added, squeezing between me and the wall to reach into his pantry. “Ez, take Heather out on the patio. Meredith and I will be right out there.”

“Sure,” Ezra replied, winking at me. Giving him a thumbs up, I stood outside the open pantry door while Ezra and Heather left the kitchen. He held his arms around her, whispering something in her ear. They were cute. They were real.

While I was staring out the window, Rowan's fingers wrapped around my wrist and he pulled me back into the pantry with him. “What?” I snapped, surprised. Vulnerable. Totally trying not to breathe as we crammed into the small area together.

“Thanks for coming tonight, especially on such short notice.” He told me, still holding my wrist while he reached above him for a bottle of wine. Did he know he was still holding me? “I can't believe October's right around the corner.”

“Why do you even need a fake girlfriend, Rowan? Come to think of it,” I thought back to the last few years, “I think Aubrey and I might actually be your longest relationships with

women. Buddy,” I pouted, patting his chest, “I’m so sorry for you.”

“I love Aubrey,” he replied. “You’re just trouble.”

“I love you, too,” I mocked, sticking out my tongue at him while I took the bottle he handed me once he turned around, grinning at me. He followed me into the kitchen moments later, quietly pulling a corkscrew and four glasses from the cabinet next to his fridge.

“I hate dating,” he confessed, uncorking the bottle of red. “I don’t believe in romance.”

“You... what? With all of your stunts with me out there, surely you’ve seen at least a few movies?” Rowan walked over to me, lifting my chin so my gaping mouth closed. “You make it seem so easy.”

“Maybe it’s because I’m lying with you, Meredith.” He shrugged, stating what he thought was a fact. “You’re my friend. I trust you. That makes all of this easy. Do you have to go?”

Looking at the clock on his stove, I knew I had to go if I wanted to get any sleep. “No,” I lied. Rowan nodded to the backdoor, pulling a fleece from the back of a kitchen chair and carrying our wine glasses as I followed him out to the backyard.

Ezra and Heather were several feet away down in the yard, with her nose stuck in the roses. Once Rowan set everything down on a table, he took off the fleece and lifted it over my shoulders, holding the collar together as his eyes caught mine. There was a spark in his gaze. A small ember tickling its way out, but I couldn’t let it burn into me.

“My mom walked out on my dad when I was a kid. She wasn’t happy, and she didn’t think about whether I’d be happy. She didn’t fight. She just gave up. So,” his eyes met mine, “I don’t believe in romance and I don’t date.”

“But that’s not you or your future, Rowan.”

“It is when all I can think of is being a kid and watching my dad’s heart break. Everything I do is for him, to show him

his sacrifices were worth it. But I draw the line at expecting anything else to come to me.”

“You want a family here someday,” I motioned around his backyard. “You told me that before.”

Rowan sighed, staring off at the gardens losing their luster in the autumn chill. “Maybe someday I’ll find someone who will love me enough not to leave.”

“You will,” I assured him. “If you can be the Rowan I get to see right now, then she’s not far away.”

He turned to me, slowly nodding as a small smile met his lips. “You’re growing on me, Meredith.”

Bashfully curtsying, I sat down as Ezra and Heather walked up to the patio with us. She was gushing about the kitten and, rightfully so, Ezra. He was in love after the minute they’d been together, and anyone could see it. His eyes never left her, his laugh was meant for her, and even the way he sat was to protect her. Thinking of how lucky they must’ve felt, I risked a glance at my fake boyfriend.

“Ten games from the divisional series,” Ezra broke the stare that seared my conscience.

“Oh!” Heather cooed, placing her hand on Rowan’s thigh in excitement. “And it’s almost the team’s sweetest day contest!” He chuckled, probably amused at my eyebrow raising at her hand on him. She pulled it away to reach for her wine, which was good because I didn’t like that I even cared. A month ago, someone touching Rowan would’ve grossed me out. Now, I wasn’t sure if the heat on my neck was August or envy.

“You’re going to win,” Ezra added. “No doubt. You probably can’t see it from the field, Row, but people are going wild over how perfect you two are.”

“Well,” I cleared my throat, “just a matter of time before you’re in the World Series and you can take a well-deserved break.” From baseball, from us.

Heather asked a little about Aubrey and Ethan’s wedding, but something distracted me. I tried looking away, but he was

always there in my periphery, being gorgeous or being gorgeous and looking at me. Stepping down to the garden, I shook out my hands. I paced between the rainbow of blooms and tried to tell myself that I loved my job, that this conflicting pain in my heart wasn't worth it.

"Ezra's in the bathroom and then they're leaving," Rowan told me, coming from behind too quietly that it left my heart pounding. "I'll take you home then. If you want."

"Please." I nodded, embarrassed that I didn't want to look at him anymore. Ezra called out to us from the backdoor and I joined him, resting maybe a little too long in his hug because it was honest.

The car ride home was quieter than others. I thanked Rowan for taking me with him when I climbed out of his car.

"Do you want to get breakfast tomorrow?"

It was too much. All of it. I replied honestly, "I think I need a day off."

He shifted in his seat, his eyes widening slightly. "I didn't mean as fake. I just meant, like, as us. Friends."

"Another time." Closing the door, I waved goodbye to him and turned before he could pull me back into his trap. He didn't leave until I turned the light on in my apartment, so he wasn't all that horrible. His newfound chivalry didn't make things any easier.

SIXTEEN

October

The baseball schedule ramped up as the season ended, with the Emeralds securely in the running for the World Series. We were going to travel to Seattle for a championship series game against the Mariners, but I choked. The last time I saw Rowan was when he dropped me off after the Willamette State dinner two weeks ago. He called me to ask if I could watch his cat, but I made Aubrey do it. He'd only find out if she brought baked goods for the neighbors.

Sitting across from her at a coffee shop early on a Sunday morning, I couldn't hide it from her much longer. "I need to tell you something," I began.

"Is it your bridesmaid dress? I knew you hated it."

"Not at all. Men will die watching me walk down the aisle in that." I tried to make her smile. I couldn't forget how fragile she was just three months from the wedding. "It's about—"

Aubrey picked up my ringing phone, waving it at me with a stupid grin plastered on her face. "Lover boy." She answered it, bubblier than detergent. "Hi! It's Aubrey. I'm with her now. Yep. Oh. You're," she covered her gasp, "amazing." Handing my phone to me, Aubrey looked like she might cry.

Trying not to groan too loudly, I took the phone and stepped away from the table and went outside.

"Hi."

“What’s going on, Meredith?”

“Nothing.” Total, one hundred percent, complete, utter lie.
“Sorry about the game last night.”

“I need you,” his tired voice croaked through the phone.
“I’m striking out for the second time since college because you aren’t here.”

“I’m not your actual girlfriend. I don’t have to be there.”
What’s wrong with me? Rowan deserved my grief when I hated him, but not now.

“Maybe I want my friend here?” Rowan snapped, his voice no longer a sexy crackle of exhaustion but a livid monster.
“Are you always this ungrateful and distant when people need you?”

“I have a lot on my mind,” I quasi-confessed. Rowan sighed quietly, and I daydreamed about what he looked like, what he was wearing. It was early, so he was probably in bed, his hair a mess and his body perfectly warm. “You’re going to make it to the series, Rowan. That’s your dream. Don’t let me distract you.”

Aubrey was waving at me from inside, so I eased up on the aggression, knowing it would only hurt me more in the long run. “Aubrey’s waiting for me,” I told him.

“If we get to the series, can you be there? You’re my good luck charm, Meredith. For now, at least,” he paused, “can you tell me we’re okay?” His good luck charm? Heart, keep it together. He’s out for the kill.

“Yeah,” I answered, walking back inside. “Let me know when you’re back in town.”

“Well?” Aubrey bounced in the seat when I hung up, staring at me expectantly.

Taking the froth off my latte and licking it from my index finger, I wondered how I could answer that. Do I tell her the truth or prepare her for November, when we fake break up?

“We’re going through some things.”

Her smile quickly faded, like I'd ripped away a dream of hers. It was like I told her Santa wasn't real and neither were Rowan and I.

"What's the problem? Give it another chance. Do what I do when faced with the impossible," Aubrey cheered me on.

"I don't think writing a pro and con list while eating mac and cheese pizza is my answer."

"Maybe not right now, because we're both going to look fabulous in our dresses at the wedding, but we could drink these coffees and start with the pro. Oh my god," her eyes almost rolled back in her head, "can we start with his body?"

"No."

"His back, though. Right? I mean, my god, Mer. His arms!"

"Excuse me," I snapped, laughing at my best friend, "which one of them are you marrying?"

"Oh," she blushed, "Ethan knows all about my crush on Rowan, and maybe Rowie does, too. Anyway, I love Ethan. I don't love Rowan. That's your job. Give me your phone. I'll start taking notes. Pro? His smile."

"The way his eyes squint when he smiles," I added, biting my lip. "But there's a lot more to him than how hot he is. He drives me wherever we go. He opens the door for me. He makes sure I'm locked in before he leaves. His touch is perfect. It's gentle and dominant, secure. I don't know..."

Aubrey's eyes were wide, her mouth gaping. "Sure, you do. Tell me all of it."

So, I did. As much as I could, I let Aubrey know how he'd changed my perception of him, putting pesky feelings in my heart and making everything he did worth watching. "He kisses my forehead and just lingers there for the smallest moment, but it's like time stops. It's like my body is made for him, like we're—"

"A perfect match," she sobbed, nodding vigorously. "Holy shit, Meredith."

“What?”

“Rowan loves you.”

“So,” I froze, “on to the list of cons?”

“Does he not spoil you enough?” She mocked me, still tearing up at the fictional romance she had no clue was about to crumble in just a few weeks.

The following day, Rowan sent a text telling me he would be home late that night before spending the day at news conferences at the stadium. Monday was chaotic and stressful at work, so I spent the night pretending it didn’t exist at all by indulging in too much chocolate and drawing a hot bath.

It was relaxing until Aubrey ruined my life with her phone call. “I did something. It was a mistake. I swear on my wedding dress,” she whimpered into the phone.

“What happened?” I put the phone on speaker while I changed into my pajamas and dried my hair. Aubrey was in a panic. I could tell by how long it took her to talk before it all came out in one messy ramble.

“I was sending you a message about our pro and con list, just to make you laugh, but,” she started crying again, sounding gooey and a mess, “I accidentally sent it to R—”

“No.”

“I am so sorry, Mer!”

“Aubrey! That’s going to make him hate me! That was something stupid I did just to entertain you. I don’t seriously think anything is a con, but now... what the hell?”

Water saturated my rug as I stood with dripping hair, frozen in fear of the mess Aubrey started. I hung up on her and tried calling Rowan, hoping to tell him it was Aubrey being stupid and apologize for whatever she said. No answer.

I tried calling two more times, probably annoying him with how needy I seemed. I ignored Aubrey’s calls, not ready to handle her, and fell onto my couch with my head dangling over the edge while plotting her death.

Rain pelted the open windows in my living room, splashing onto me while I hung upside down. It was refreshing for a second before I slowly got up to close the window, moving like molasses so I didn't pass out from the rush of blood.

The pane stuck, lodging in the warped frame while I struggled to close it. Groaning and wet, I tried one last time, finally getting it to slam. I scowled at the glass, taking a second to admire the rain from inside, when taillights flashed along the sidewalk below.

Oh no. I was not ready for company, and definitely too much of a mess for him, but I didn't have time to even process what to say when there were three knocks on my door. I stood there in the middle of my living room when he knocked once more, my heart leaping into my throat.

The doorknob was fire under my clammy palm as I turned the deadbolt and opened the door, peeking only around the opened crack at Rowan.

"How has your time off been?" he asked, no other greeting after two weeks. He stared at me, his deep blue eyes wide beneath his slightly furrowed eyebrows. "Because mine has been torture."

"You've been playing fine."

"Fine isn't what I strive for. That's not why I have a contract. It's not why I'm never home, or why I realize two weeks too late that I haven't seen you."

"You're not here because you're curious about my time off," I noted, moving to the side as I held the door so he could come inside. "Look, let me explain Aubrey's messages."

"Great," he crossed his arms, "because that's all I've been thinking about since I got off the plane tonight."

"You came here from the airport?"

He pushed up the sleeve on his raglan while rubbing his forearm, shrugging and looking at me like I shouldn't think it was a ridiculous plan.

“Yeah. I’ve been wondering about how you’d consider dating me if I weren’t,” he took out his phone and read verbatim from Aubrey’s mistake of a message, “devastatingly gorgeous, full of myself, with enough money to pay rent for my groupies, and if I were actually ever home and noticed you.”

“I’m going to kill her.” I went to sit on my couch, closing my eyes tightly in hopes of him being a figment of my imagination when I opened them again. “Damn it.”

“I notice you. I’m here, aren’t I?” Rowan pressed, pulling on the back of his neck. His biceps bulged, distracting me from his serious tone.

“You never asked why I took time off.”

“Is this about my limits?” Rowan inhaled sharply. “Yeah. I got defensive and I have a wall, but it’s like no matter what I do, you come in when I least expect it and you break them down.” He moved to sit on the other end of the couch, turning to face me with his left leg tucked under his right. “That’s terrifying. I don’t do this. I just...” I watched him look away from me, his mouth parting without words. They left me, too, except for the rare few I reserved for chewing out Aubrey.

“Then why are you here?”

He cocked his head toward me. “I care about you, Meredith.”

“Well,” I blinked, pissed that the tingle of tears began behind my eyes, “it’s hard to hate you when you can pretend to be so good.”

“I am good!” He leaned closer, his sudden movement swirling his cologne around me. “I just didn’t know we were... Considering... That. And how am I supposed to feel when you’re actually listing reasons against me? I’ve worked too damn hard to not take pride in my career and what it’s offered. You should know, you’re in this bogus thing with me because you love your job.”

I wanted to crawl into a hole. Rowan was staring at me, waiting for something, and I couldn’t make a sound because

that meant I'd have to admit to myself how hopelessly deep I'd fallen for him. There was one event left and then we'd go our separate ways. Then maybe I wouldn't have to pretend like the way he was looking at me now wasn't weakening every fiber holding me together. It wasn't bogus, not for me, but now Aubrey had meddled and brought us to the point where Rowan drove here from the airport and I couldn't answer him because I was the terrified one.

"I can't do anything about my salary, but I promise the groupies aren't who I'm after." Rowan lifted his hand, gently gliding his knuckles across my cheek. "I'm not as arrogant as you think I am. But," his palm spread around my shoulder, a wave of sparks fanning my skin, "I have limits."

My stomach swirled, spreading warmth from my core the longer Rowan's eyes burned into mine. Safe from the rain outside, the air was heavy, weighing us into the corner of the couch as I reached out for him. Limits. I had some, too, and they were being stretched just by sitting there. Waiting for him to say something, I hated myself for thinking of how wrong Aubrey was for thinking he could love me. That's his limit.

"You should go," I muttered, blinking free of his stare.

"I should."

Rowan smiled at me for the first time that night and I wanted to return it and hope we could just make it through the last event we had for the contest, but there wasn't time. He leaned forward, wrapping his arms around me as he flipped me onto my back beneath him.

He was heavy and warm, pressing me into the couch as his grasp tightened with one arm around me as the other held my head in his palm, lifting our faces together. We'd kissed, we practiced before, but the tentative way Rowan pressed his mouth around my bottom lip was torture. It meant more. I could feel it, and I also knew of his limits... And my heart.

It felt incredible beneath him, secure and desired. Rowan's hand moved along my curves as I reached for his face, holding him as close to me as I could while twisting my tongue with his. He even tasted different, the delicious flavor of need. His

lips trailed my throat, his touch melting away my thoughts with every shiver rippled from his mouth.

I wiggled beneath Rowan, my fingers working to lift his shirt. His stomach was hard, his skin burning with my touch. It was different, and I had to stop myself. I could've responded to the way Rowan's body egged mine on, but I knew I would be the one suffering and I couldn't do that.

“Rowan, stop.”

“What?” He lifted his head from my chest, his brows furrowed with concern. “Of course. Are... Shit, Meredith.” He lifted to his knees, combing his hands through his hair and grabbing the waves in his whitened knuckles. “I'm so sorry.”

“There's nothing to apologize for. Clearly,” I blushed, “I felt the same way there. It's bound to happen when we're—”

“Perfect for each other in every way.” Rowan stood from the couch, lifting me up with him. His words struck me in the heart, and even his soft kiss to my hair couldn't stir me. “I guess I'll see you with everyone else at the game.”

“Yeah.” I blinked, still trying to breathe, when I noticed he was getting ready to leave. “Hey, Rowan?” I needed to save part of this, whatever we were.

“Hmm?” He turned from the door, his adorable boyish smile flashing across his face, making me feel at ease.

“We're going to crush the competition.”

It felt like I was standing in a pool of sunshine when he laughed, making everything feel better. “You bet we will, babe.”

SEVENTEEN

“Rowan Ellis, first baseman for the Portland Emeralds has done it again, leading his team to the World Series with a near-unstoppable home run record. The question this season is, does the team’s blue-eyed all-star have what it takes to bring it home for Rose City?” the reporter grilled the camera while he stood near the first base line during warmup. It was blasting from the mega screen for everyone in the stands to wonder alongside him.

“What the hell do his eyes have to do with it?” I groaned, one part annoyed, the other parts overwhelmed with a restless angst I was struggling to contain.

“I guess that depends where his eyes are looking,” Ethan responded, nudging my shoulder while pointing at first base. Rowan looked beyond the reporter, fixing on me.

“He’s hopeless,” Ethan snickered. “You better go down there and give him a kiss for good luck so he doesn’t blow this game.”

“I’m right here. That’s good luck enough.”

“Row,” Ethan bellowed between his cupped hands, getting Rowan’s attention on the field. “Mer’s coming down!”

Smacking him in the chest, I glared at Ethan. It was the last day together and a huge deal to me, making it harder than I planned to put on the show. But Rowan grinning at me as he rushed toward the railing softened everything for just a moment.

“Hey, you,” he greeted me, holding his hands against the railing. I waved, words leaving when he was up close in his uniform. “Come down here,” he demanded with a wink, opening the gate.

“There she is!” The reporter had followed, his cameraman getting the shot of both of us up on the screen as Rowan took my hand and helped me down three steps before pulling me off and spinning me in his arms.

“Big day today,” he whispered in my ear.

“You’re going to be fine,” I told him, pulling back and absorbing every detail I could.

“Miss West,” the reporter tapped my arm, “you’ve been at almost every game, the perfect lucky charm. I think it’s safe to say you’ve carried this team on your shoulders!”

“I’ve had nothing to do with it. The players are incredible and what Ellis does out here reflects their determination to win.” Rowan kissed my hair once I responded, squeezing my hips as he held me from behind.

“She’s being modest,” he teased, moving to hold me at his side. “Meredith’s my moon shot. She’s the love of my life,” he told the reporter, smiling down at me. That was my cue, his perfect grin being the reminder I needed to get on my tiptoes and press my mouth against his soft lips. “I’m lucky,” his gaze burned into mine, “to have fallen for my friend.”

Rowan used his free hand to put some hair behind my ear, letting his touch linger against my jaw. Is he flirting with me? Is it the fake or real Rowan? I couldn’t tell anymore, but I also wasn’t sure I could handle knowing. For a fleeting second, his touch was real, and that was enough.

When security ushered me back to our seats, Aubrey was holding an enormous margarita out for me. She hadn’t stopped apologizing for days and I was fine taking her apology drinks.

“What’s a moon shot?” Heather asked, poking a straw into her soda. Ethan looked at me, waiting to see who might answer first.

“It’s a baseball term,” Ethan explained. “It’s a long and high home run. Not just anybody can get one.”

I stared at the field, thinking about the other night when I cut myself off from the intoxicant that became Rowan Ellis. Heather asked more, cuddling up to Ezra as she batted her eyelashes.

“They’ve got to win the next two games,” Ezra explained to Heather when I started sipping from my drink, “or they lose the series.”

“Then what?”

Oh, she is adorable. “Then it’s back to not winning anything until spring,” I told her.

“You two are going to win that contest today,” Aubrey chimed in. “When are they awarding that?”

“Seventh inning stretch,” Ezra added while eating his hot dog.

Seven more innings. I was on the edge of my seat watching Rowan play. His chance in the World Series didn’t end that day, but we did. It was exhilarating and addictive to watch his reaction, to hear his bat snap when hitting a home run, but something entirely exhausting to think our game ended.

In the fifth inning, the Emeralds were up by eight points. By the sixth, I had two margaritas and needed Ethan to hold me still. He didn’t know why I was a ball of nerves, but blaming it on baseball passed his test.

“Miss West?” A security guard leaned over Ezra and Heather to get my attention, tapping me on my shoulder. “It’s time for you to join Mr. Ellis on the field.”

Every profanity ran through my head. Thrice. I felt more vulnerable than ever, especially when an entire stadium was going to watch the intimacy of him smiling at me for the last time.

“We’re going to make it!” Rowan shouted, running out of the dugout to hug me. I knew he was talking about the World

Series, but I had my fingers crossed for the contest. I didn't like losing, especially to the sort of competition lined up next to us near home plate.

The crowd cheered as videos played on the large screen. There were snapshots of every public appearance we had, and Rowan was right. We were perfect for each other in every way. He lowered his forehead to mine while the Emerald's owner gave a speech and talked about being in love, blah, blah. I nearly fainted when he announced the couple in third place was Levi and Erica. Something about that made me feel like a winner already.

"Portland has voted," the owner roared with excitement, waving an envelope in his wrinkled hands. "The couple in second place is..."

I didn't hear. I couldn't. Lifted into the air, my legs wrapped around Rowan's waist as he held me against him with one hand and knotted his hand through my hair with the other. The crowd was erupting like a volcano, deafening me as Rowan spun us around. As he lowered me back to the dirt, his mouth on mine, I realized we weren't in second place.

"We won," he repeated in my ear. "We pulled it off!"

People on the field began asking where we planned on donating the money, commenting and praising the volunteer work and connections we built over the season. But my mask was cracking. It was sweetest day. The Emeralds were winning the game. Our production was over, except for however we planned on fake breaking up.

I'd helped him fix his image, making even more people obsessed with him, and he helped me save my job. If I focused on that, I could leave the field and pretend my tears were the lucky kind.

"Go win the game," I told him, patting his chest as we stood together near his dugout.

"Thank you," Rowan cupped my face in his palms, "for saving me from myself."

"What are friends for?"

The security guard whisked me back up to our aisle when Rowan joined his team in the dugout, waiting for their turn at bat.

The crowd was relentless, shaking the stands and rattling the roof as they cheered on the Emeralds at the bottom of the ninth. It came down to this, and everyone knew it as they cleared their seats and stood wherever anyone could watch the field. People were desperate to get closer, to be part of the action.

Two men were on base, with Diego at bat and Rowan on deck. Diego cracked a dinger into the outfield, running in Ryan on third. The air was palpable, buzzing with the excited tension only Rowan could break when at bat.

Ezra was almost blue from holding his breath. Aubrey clung to Ethan, and I nearly chewed off my thumb. Rowan fastened and unfastened his batting glove twice. He twisted with the bat on his shoulders, before settling into his stance at home plate. The pitcher called the catcher over to him, giving Rowan another chance to prepare.

“They’re probably going to just try to walk him,” Ethan groaned. “They know there’s no chance of winning, so why not take Rowan out on a low note to mess with him?”

“That’s evil,” Aubrey grimaced. She cupped her mouth, shouting at the opposing team, as if they heard her voice over the pandemonium.

My margarita settled happily into my nerves, vanquishing them while I focused on the game. I was in knots when the catcher went back behind the plate, watching how coolly Rowan could carry the weight of his team.

Ball one. Don’t let them mock you. You can do it. He couldn’t read my mind. If he had, he might’ve fake broken up a month ago. His bat snapped in half, shards of wood spraying the fence behind him as Rowan took off running to first. I’d never seen him move so fast, his graceful leaps pushing him around second, third, and home.

The Emeralds flooded the field, the small mob swallowing Rowan before he floated on top of them. We were just as boisterous, bouncing up and down, hugging and acting out. He did it again, winning with an ease I was envious of.

“Now it’s one more game and they win the World Series,” Ezra continued explaining baseball to Heather. “It’s an out-of-town game, on the other team’s dirt.”

“That was amazing,” she gaped, staring at the field. “Are you going out there?” She turned to me, squeezing my arm.

“No.” I returned her smile. “Too much testosterone for me. Besides, they’re going to celebrate as a team and then who knows what sort of debauchery will be had.”

Ethan checked his phone. “I say we wait twenty minutes for the traffic to clear and head out.” There was something comforting about him getting back to business. Maybe because it was over. All of it.

None of us followed the Emeralds to their last game, but I’d be fooling myself if I said I didn’t have it on at home while I ate carryout in my pajamas. I skipped the party at Ethan and Aubrey’s house. I wasn’t in a place to talk about Rowan, even though I couldn’t keep my eyes off the screen. I was shoving food in my face at the top of the eighth, when Rowan was preparing to catch at first. The batter stormed toward him as the ball made a clear line into Rowan’s glove.

Rowan leapt into the air, his right arm reaching into the air and catching the ball right as the batter slammed into his stomach, taking them both down onto the field.

Choking on my dinner, I jumped up and stood inches away from the screen, waiting for Rowan to move from under the other guy.

Coaches and players ran out from the dugout, everyone huddling on top of each other while trying to unknot the pair. I was screaming at the screen, now too worried to eat. The commentators were blabbering about Rowan’s record, replaying the tumble that had him flopping over like a limp toy. Glancing back at my couch, I remembered him as

anything but limp when we kissed. I couldn't imagine someone as taut and conditioned as Rowan could look so helpless. My mind went back to the night he held me on the couch, how us together in reality felt just as incredible as I'd imagined.

The commentators broke my daydream, excitedly shouting when Rowan gave a thumbs up while standing with help from Diego and one of their coaches. The crowd lost their shit. So did I.

Falling to the floor, it hit my chest like Rowan going down on that play. I'd fallen for him, and I was still falling.

He said we were perfect together in every way, but I knew it stopped there. He told me countless times there wasn't a future to the fantasy, in his own way. How else would I interpret him not being romantic, not dating, and the entire list of reasons he was single? That kiss on my couch wasn't the game, it wasn't part of the act, and it left me regretting listening to rationality.

Alone and curled on the same couch where he held me beneath him, I watched the Emeralds win the World Series. They stormed the field, running out like a tidal wave to embrace each other. The coaches came next, then the media, and finally it was the families. Wives and girlfriends clung to the players, children danced around the pitcher mound, everyone so picture perfect. Even Erica, my once competition, was there. It didn't matter anymore. It was November in two days.

EIGHTEEN

I woke to the autumn rain tapping the window in my bedroom. It was the middle of the night on a weeknight, meaning I'd be sending Maggie for coffee more than once at work. When I reached for my phone, a nervous tickle rattled my chest. I had two missed calls and one message from Rowan.

Sitting up in bed, I listened to the message, with the low crackle of his voice untying the feelings I'd sewn up tightly the night the Emeralds won the World Series.

"Meredith, it's me," his message began, "and I'm just... We won! All of it. The team, the series, you and I. I, shit... I don't know. You're the first person I called. I guess I wanted to see if you were awake so we could celebrate. I'll be out of town until Saturday. Heather took my cat to socialize their kitten. It sounds weird, but whatever." He was rambling. Normally, every word he said had purpose, like he processed it all to be perfect, just like his image, but his message was far from it, and all the while adorable. It ended with his voice faltering in a crowd of others, and I sat on the edge of my bed, listening to it two more times just to hear the way he said my name.

I got to work early, having trouble falling asleep after the rain woke me and Rowan's message kept me up. With the quiet office, I got my bearings before anyone else arrived. When I looked at my baseball calendar on my desk, I realized the date. Even though it was Halloween, I peeled off October's page to reveal November. Ryan Marshall's grin mocked me as

he plastered the page, standing in his uniform with a bat in his hand.

It was him pushing whatever limits my friends put around me with Rowan's teammates that brought me to that morning, wondering how to prepare myself for my fake up. Nobody remembered Rowan knocking him down because I was off limits, not after the scheme we pulled to clear his image. He was Mr. Wholesome, Mr. Perfect. Mr. Not Mine.

"Good morning, Meredith," Harrison greeted me, eyeing the crumbled calendar page I was tossing across the room for the trash. "That was quite a game!" I smiled in agreement, not sure I could talk about it.

If I thought about our fake relationship, then that game was quite a game. I should've known better. I should've made a keyword to tell him my heart was in play, but I never thought it would be. And now, I didn't think I could ever dislike Rowan like I once had. He gave me another part of him. We kissed in my apartment, that time because we wanted to, not because we were on camera. Was he thinking of me? Of course. He called me first. But what was he thinking and how much?

"Thank you for your dedication to our organization," Harrison continued, sitting across from me. "You could've chosen any place in Portland to donate your winnings to, and you chose here."

"I believe in what we do," I argued. "It wasn't a question."

He fiddled with his wristwatch, his wrinkled eyes squinting with excitement when he looked back up at me. "It's more than enough."

"What do you mean?" I thought back to the staff meetings in which Harrison showed us the prognosis. Worry etched across his face when he had to admit the organization he founded might not last to the end of the year.

"Have you ever heard the saying about reaching for the moon and landing on the stars?" Harrison inquired, still not

giving up why his smile was so bright. “And if you hit for home, you’re not alone?”

“That’s cute,” I playfully mocked him, meanwhile feeling disheartened by the baseball reference. “Tell me what star we’re on, or who we’re with on the field.”

Harrison leaned closer. “First base.”

I stopped wiggling my ankle and stared at my boss, blinking to clear the daydream I must’ve been having.

“Pardon?”

“I’m trying to tell you we didn’t need the donation after all. We’re thrilled you shared it with us, beyond words, but before you won the contest, I received a call from Rupert in our financial office.”

My stomach sank. If it was all for nothing, I’m going to be crushed. Our fake break up was imminent and now I was losing my job. “Wh-what did he say?”

“It was about two weeks ago that the owner of the Emeralds made a significant donation.” Harrison glowed, grinning and gesturing wildly as he told me the story. Two weeks ago, I told Rowan I needed time off. Then we kissed. For real, not for fake, making it all so much messier.

“They want to partner with us and bring us on as a bridge to help kids access baseball, learn about working as a team. I want you to lead the program.” He tapped my desk as he stood. “Just think about it. Any fun plans for this weekend?”

Still gaping, my mind elsewhere, I looked at him. “My friends have a party every year that I usually skip. I don’t like Halloween.” Or sweetest day. No. I did like that one now.

I called Aubrey during a lull in the afternoon, checking on what she needed me to bring to her party on the weekend, but she went into a ramble about the wedding. Their rehearsal dinner was in another few weeks and their moms switched the food order without checking. It was a mess, but I took it on to distract myself.

The train ride home felt longer than usual, but maybe it was Rowan and Diego's faces in an advertisement that made it feel that way. Staring at the fake, tiny Rowan was easier to do than confront the real one. I could stare at his smile without butterflies blinding me, and I could look at his hair without the temptation to grab it in my fist and finish the kiss we started in my apartment.

Part of me hoped everyone would forget about our relationship so I could find the next cutest guy and release some of this Rowan-sustained tension. I would've done almost anything to have someone just lift me against a wall or lie on top of me, but my body didn't want just anyone. I wanted Rowan. Pretending anyone could fill that void made me feel slimy and guilty.

When the train stopped, I jerked forward and almost tumbled onto the elderly woman sitting next to me. I hoped she would've understood my steamy daydream about Rowan, and maybe she had her own considering how she was also staring at the poster of his perfect face.

A steady autumn rain puddled the sidewalks and splashed me as I ran from the train stop to my building two blocks away. I hated Halloween and running through downtown in a dress and heels while cheerful people walked everywhere in the rain made my night worse.

I told myself not to be so damn negative, and it worked a little. It also helped that I wore all black and called it a costume.

Ethan and Aubrey's door was open, the sound of their Halloween party blasting into the hallway. Guests gathered in the foyer, the kitchen, and everywhere else I looked. Everyone was laughing, drinking, or talking to someone else. I was happy to be somewhere and not the center of attention or attached to the center of attention.

Ezra was crossing the room when he saw me, rushing over with a humongous hug. I hoped Heather didn't mind that I couldn't let go.

“Mer?” He asked, leaning back and trying to lift my face. “Are you crying?” Was I? I hadn’t noticed.

“Hey,” Ezra hushed me, “come here.” He guided us through party guests and down the hall into Ethan and Aubrey’s bedroom. Closing the door behind us, Ezra and I walked onto their balcony overlooking downtown. He pulled out one of their bistro chairs for me to sit in while settling into the other, eyeing me with concern plastered across his face.

“I don’t know what’s going on with me,” I confessed. “I just wanted to see you guys and be here...”

“Need me to run and get you chocolate? I bet Aubrey has some ice cream in the freezer. Wine?” God, I loved him.

“Remind me to tell Heather to keep you forever, Ez.” I smiled at him, getting his bashful shrug in return. I wanted to confess to him everything about Rowan, but then I had to think about why I was making a fool of myself with these feelings. It started when Ezra hugged me and I just felt so safe for a minute. But I couldn’t tell him it wasn’t true. Rowan was his best friend.

“I’m glad it’s not raining for a change,” Ezra distracted me. “We can sit out here all night. Ethan’s mom is in town and I’m trying to stockpile happiness to distract me when she presses her wedding ideas on me. You’re next, you know. She’s already talking about group discounts.” Ezra laughed so hard he almost cried, turning to me as he caught his breath. “Is that why you’re upset? If it’s Rowan, tell me so I can kill him,” he read my mind.

“Yeah.” It wasn’t a lie. “I can’t believe it’s November already.” That wasn’t a lie either.

“Things are getting pretty serious with you two. Aren’t they?”

“No,” I admitted, being as honest as I could. “I’m feeling better just being out here with you, Ezra. Thank you. I almost lost my job, and that’s been weighing on me, and I guess...” I glanced at him, his eyes hopeful and earnest. “It’s hard.”

“What are you doing out here? The party’s inside,” Ethan told us from the doorway. “I’m telling Row to get more beer. You guys want anything else? Perhaps a door that locks, Ez?”

Ethan leaned against the balcony door frame, giving Ezra a hard time. When Ethan had his list from us, he left the balcony and went inside.

“He’s coming?” My throat tightened.

“Yeah.” Ezra furrowed his brows, shifting to move from beneath Heather. “He didn’t tell you?”

I nodded, lying. Blinking a few times to clear my head, I stood up and looked over the balcony. It was raining again, typical for the fall in Portland, and I shivered with the chill.

Heather went inside shortly after Ethan, leaving Ezra and I outside. He was sitting back in his chair with his eyes closed, mumbling something about the kitten and Rowan’s cat, when I saw the bedroom door open inside. Aubrey was waving for us to come in, her cheetah costume tricky to see in the dark.

“We’re being beckoned,” I told Ezra, nudging him in the shoulder as I passed by. Aubrey was waving her tail when we went inside, locking the balcony door behind us.

“You’re not in a costume!” She whined, hugging me.

“I’m a black crayon.”

Ezra snickered behind me as I followed Aubrey out of her room and back into the party. “Black crayon,” he laughed, patting my shoulders as we fell into the crowd of guests.

“Did you see I let Heather borrow my costume?” Aubrey linked arms with me. I was still annoyed that she sent Rowan the pro and con list. But if she hadn’t done that, would he have kissed me and meant it?

“You need to clean out your closet. That thing’s almost ten years old.” I started walking into the kitchen with her attached to me, too thirsty to talk.

“It came in handy!”

“Aubrey,” I turned to her, “let it go.”

“Well,” she scoffed, thinking she was funny, “if you can let go of something that happened almost ten years ago, then I guess I could.”

“Let go of what?” I was squatting near the empty bar cart, searching for a clean glass, when his voice stilled me. It was even more melodic than on the phone, and I would know after listening to his message on repeat in the middle of the night, like some lovesick teenager.

“Rowie!” Aubrey abandoned me, running toward him so quickly that her cheetah tail whipped him in the eye when she ran to him.

“Am I late?” Rowan questioned, looking between us while holding a cardboard box in both arms as he stood in the kitchen.

“I’m so glad you could make it!” Aubrey held her arms around him. “When did your plane get in?”

“I caught an earlier flight. I really wanted to see you,” he spoke to her, but his eyes were on me, deep and blue.

That nickname was horrendous, and I’d need to tell him when things were a little more colorful, not when we were in this weird gray limbo of uncertainty. He set the box down in front of the fridge and returned Aubrey’s inebriated high five.

Rowan put the bottles and cans from his box inside the fridge and took out a bottle of beer for himself before closing the door and greeting me with a chaste kiss to the forehead.

Aubrey giggled, peeling herself from him and holding the stupid tail. “Well, just don’t have sex on the counters because I cook in here. I’ll let you two catch up. I’m so glad you made it, Rowie!”

We watched Aubrey leave, shaking her tail behind her as she went in search of Ethan or another drink. It didn’t matter to me because I didn’t plan on staying. Although, my feet were suddenly melting into the floor, so I wasn’t sure if I should plan on sleeping next to the stove or call a doctor.

It was Rowan, the way his mouth twitched when he tried not to smile, the way his hair was perfect even after walking in

the rain, and the fact he took an early flight just to see his friends on Halloween.

“How are you?” He asked, pulling off the bottle cap.

“Honestly,” I blew air out, “I’m a mess.” Someone came into the kitchen, giving a quick word of greeting to Rowan before taking their fresh drink and leaving. I tried, but my toes froze.

Rowan was imposing in the middle of the kitchen, watching me as I felt the last four months crash in on me. “I know the feeling,” he agreed. His muscular chest rose with a deep breath as Rowan approached me, his free hand tentatively reaching for mine.

His touch was electric, sending its pulse up my arm and straight into my heart as his fingers twisted a ring I wore. “Did you get my message the other night?”

“Are we real or pretend here, Rowan?” I blurted, feeling his hand tighten around mine. “Is this where we break up?”

“What?”

Rowan turned, still holding my hand and his beer, and I peered over his chest to see Ethan and Aubrey staring at us. Their poor faces were more distressed than mine and I felt for them. He was biting his bottom lip when he turned back to me, silent.

“You’re breaking up?” Aubrey probed, trying to come closer to us before Ethan grabbed her tail and yanked her back to him. “Ethan, stop. They’re breaking up!”

NINETEEN

“Aubrey,” Rowan’s nostrils flared a little as he closed his eyes, maybe as annoyed as me, or maybe preparing to agree with her, “could you just give us a minute? We haven’t really seen each other in a few days.”

“Hey,” Ethan called to me. “Are you okay, Meredith?”

“I’m fine. We’re fine.” I stammered, offering my quickest smile. Thanking the stars when Ethan pulled Aubrey out of the kitchen, I took my hand back from Rowan.

“She’s incessant.” He groaned, leaning against the sink.

“I’m sorry I didn’t call you back. I didn’t even see you called until the middle of the night. I figured you were asleep or busy by then.”

He swallowed a gulp of his beer, shaking his head at me. “I’m never too busy for you, Meredith. I wouldn’t be a good friend if I were. I can promise, though, not to be as annoying as Aubrey.”

“You love her,” I rebuked, smiling at how things seemed to soften between us once more.

“And you’re trouble,” he repeated what he once told me, staring softly into my eyes while his knuckles grazed my cheek.

Once word spread that Rowan was in the apartment, party guests flooded the kitchen with their celebration about his World Series win. Even some of Ethan’s and Aubrey’s friends, who were not single, found their way to touch Rowan while

congratulating him. I held my breath and my fists, wondering just how a black crayon would look taking down a naughty nurse, a cheerleader, or a cat.

“I really think we should talk,” Rowan told me once we moved into the living room, “but I don’t think we’ll get two words in without an interruption.”

It didn’t take long for more people to connect with us, and eventually Aubrey came back and tried to talk to me about what was happening. I couldn’t answer because I didn’t even know.

Having him there, still sort of pretending to be my boyfriend, made things calmer. I thought it would’ve been awkward, even painful, but it felt normal. Like we’re a damn perfect match.

“Come here,” Ethan called for us, motioning to where he and Ezra sat with Aubrey on the couch near their window overlooking downtown.

“You okay?” Ezra questioned when I sat down, patting my shoulder.

“Why aren’t you okay?” Rowan asked, looking between Ezra and I. Waving him off, I sat next to Ethan and Aubrey on the couch and let Rowan sit by Ezra. Heather passed by, her red and black blur catching our attention.

“Don’t you remember when you wore that in college?” Ethan snickered, pulling her head to his as he held his arm around her shoulders, kissing her.

“I remember kissing Aubrey that night,” Rowan started laughing at the memory. “I swore Ethan was going to kill me. He had such a crush on you, Aubs.”

“You knew he liked her and you still kissed her?” Ezra gaped, shaking his head at Rowan.

Aubrey looked at me, and I could feel her panicked eyes searing mine. “Uh-uh,” she corrected. “It wasn’t me.”

Reaching for the beer bottle in Ethan’s hand, I lifted it to my lips and swallowed. And swallowed. And avoided their

eyes, which were all on me.

Ethan pointed at her, then me, then back again. “Mer?”

“Look,” I told them, wiping some beer from my mouth, “it’s really not a big deal.”

“Not a big deal?” Aubrey screamed, pointing at me. “You hated Rowan’s guts because he didn’t know it was you.”

“That’s why you hated me so much?” He stiffened, his blue eyes burning a hole in mine. “Meredith?”

“Aubrey, what the hell?” Ezra groaned, standing up and swatting at Ethan’s head.

“Time to play!” Heather sang, running from the hallway with an empty bottle in her hand.

We all stood when she came close to us, the bounce in her step making the ladybug wings wiggle behind her. I wasn’t sure who felt what, and at whom, but we all stood there waiting to see if Heather was really attempting to play spin the freaking bottle.

As Ezra moved around us to join her, I moved next to Rowan, feeling protected by his imposing frame even if he was upset.

“We’re going to talk about this,” Rowan warned, his expression cold and hurt as he spoke to me.

“Who wants to choose?” Heather beamed, waving the bottle between all of us.

“Holy hell no,” I replied, hiding behind Rowan.

Breathing in that moment was dangerous because Rowan smelled more delicious than I remembered. His warmth radiated from beneath his shirt as I moved closer to him, almost touching his back with my forehead.

“Spin the bottle?” Rowan muttered, tipping his head so I could hear him. “Is she serious? I want my cat back.”

Laughing, I dropped my head against him, his warm muscles anchoring me, before Rowan reached around and held his palm against my back.

There was some discussion about which game the almost-thirty-year-olds wanted to play and somehow nobody but me disagreed when Heather put her bottle on the floor and changed some rules.

“Whoever it lands on gets to pick their date for seven minutes in heaven,” she announced. “Let’s just hope this doesn’t land on Ethan,” she teased Ezra, “or Rowan.”

“I’m good,” Rowan quipped, stepping backward with me behind him. “I’m going to sit this round out.” He stiffened, but nobody else noticed. They were all swooning over him and anything he said.

Peeking over his arm when Heather spun it, it relieved me when it landed on Ezra. I felt embarrassed for all of us there, wishing I was one who wasn’t near the damn bottle or one who was too tipsy to second guess how moronic it was.

Until it landed on Rowan.

“Seven minutes?” He confirmed with Heather, listening to her and Aubrey shriek and giggle. “Give us thirty.”

“Us? Huh?” I fumbled, not sure where to look as Rowan turned to me. Aubrey cheered him on as Rowan kneeled to lift me over his shoulder, carrying me out of the living room and through the hall to the guest bedroom.

The view from up there was amazing, but I couldn’t focus on how great his butt looked when he was charging us into another room so quickly and I started seeing stars as blood rushed to my head.

When he set me down, Rowan closed the door and paced back and forth at the foot of the bed.

“Rowan,” I uttered, holding my head in my hands, “I didn’t tell you it was me because it embarrassed me.”

“Now I’m embarrassed!” He snapped.

“Well,” I tried to humor him, “if it makes you feel any better, it was the best kiss I had in college.”

He stopped pacing, looking at me impassively. “Meredith, you hated me because of something I didn’t even know

about.”

“I didn’t hate you like you were a villain.”

“You wrote your own narrative,” he snapped. “I made a mistake almost a decade ago, and you didn’t let it go.”

“Clearly, I have.” I turned to him, hoping he’d realize I’d finally moved on. After all the fake kisses.

“Fine,” he muttered, sitting next to me on the bed. “Next time, be honest with me. The first time.”

“The next time you kiss me because you think I’m someone else? I’ll tell you,” I laughed, patting his thigh. I shouldn’t have done that, even thought about touching him. It just came like a second language, the need to be near him, to feel him. His side was against mine, leaving me to wonder if he felt nearly as affected as me.

“I like arguing with you.” His voice was quiet. “It makes making up easier.”

Alone in that room, I couldn’t hear the party outside. Rowan’s warm palms cupped my cheeks, the comforting motion he’d done before that made me feel protected by his touch, letting me know, for a fleeting second, we shared a connection.

I slipped right back to how I felt before the party, confused and desperate for an answer.

“The grand gestures are fake, and they’ve been pulled off perfectly, but they’re not real,” I uttered, mostly to remind myself.

“Meredith,” Rowan uttered, his warm breath tickling my lips as we were inches apart. I wanted him to hold me, to touch him, to pretend we were somewhere public so it could happen. But it was happening right there, in private.

“Do you ever think you could do this and be serious?” I confronted him.

Rowan stared at me, and I knew his answer by the silence painting his lips. It was all I needed to know, permission for me to back the hell out. I inhaled a shaky breath and tried to

ground myself, willing the strange burn of tears not to fall until I was out of Aubrey and Ethan's.

"Meredith," he called after me, "wait!"

I ignored our friends as I left, thinking only of sparing myself the scene and embarrassment of my broken heart.

I was opening my car door when he caught up with me, pulling on my shoulder to spin me around. My eyes were everywhere but on him. I didn't like how much it hurt.

"I could've given you the money for your work," he snapped. "So, why did you stay with me? It had to have been for more than what they offered with the stupid contest."

"You needed me," I confessed, resenting the tear falling from my cheek. "But it's November, you hit great games, you made it to the World Series. Everybody loves you, and you don't need me anymore."

The fact I learned to need him was something else, something I'd keep to myself to protect my heart.

"That's not true, Meredith." His voice cracked, a weakness I never thought I'd see in him. I wanted to leave, I wanted to stay, I wanted to rewind and have ended this before it started, so I wouldn't feel the pain.

"I'll see you in a few weeks at the wedding," I told him, wriggling from his hold and sitting in my car. Just keep it together. Don't let him see you cry. I was not falling for my enemy turned friend turned lover turned... What were we? I couldn't.

What was I thinking? I've hated Rowan as long as I can remember. I agreed to pretend to be his girlfriend so I could save my dream job, not so I could fall in love with him. Furious with myself, I ran up the stairs to my apartment and bolted the door, not making it beyond my couch before I crumpled into a ball.

I'd get over it, eventually. It was just a crush. It had to have been, because there was no way my heart could hurt so much from him. We pulled it off too well, fooling even me. That was the embarrassing part. I was such a fool.

“Meredith!” His voice broke through my headache while I cried on my couch. Rowan called my name two more times while he knocked on the door, his tone growing more frantic.

Shaking my hands and wiping tears from beneath my eyes, I stood up and slumped to the door. I had to brace myself for what would come, whether it be him telling me I was as foolish as I thought, or maybe even apologizing for being a jerk who took my heart and stomped on it.

“What are you doing here?” His stare was intense when his eyes met mine, full of concern and beauty.

“I couldn’t wait until the wedding,” Rowan told me, lifting his hands to my face. His blue eyes burned darker than I’d ever seen, wide and staring into mine. “I love you, Meredith.”

His stare flicked between my eyes, my thoughts a blur as his four words settled into my heart.

“You don’t do romance, Rowan.” I lifted my hands to his as they cupped my cheeks. “You’re high on how successful you became.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” he snarled, stepping into my apartment and slamming the door behind us. “You’re not fooling anyone. Look at you right now. Look at,” he pulled my palm to his chest, his rapid pulse beating through me, “us.”

“I am.” I swallowed, the effort to contain my feelings futile. Slowly, his footsteps guided us further into my apartment until my back met my closed bedroom door.

My stomach burned, the pounding need for him consuming me as his arms lifted to cage me in. Rowan inhaled deeply, lowering his forehead to mine as my body ached for him. The strings from his sweatshirt grazed my chest, and I pulled them down, lowering Rowan closer to me.

“Can I kiss you?” His words were a whisper, a low and sexy sound against my cheek responded to with my weak nod.

Rowan’s mouth was warm, his touch gentle, as he took my bottom lip and slid his tongue across. I couldn’t fight it anymore. Standing on my tiptoes, I wrapped my arms around his neck with Rowan’s hands gliding along my back until they

curved around my thighs as I held them around his hips. He opened my bedroom door, rushing us toward my bed. Falling into the mattress underneath Rowan, I couldn't touch him fast enough. He was there, on top of me, knotting his perfect fingers into my hair while his teeth grazed my neck.

My hips lifted closer to him, my body desperate for Rowan. I scrambled to pull his sweatshirt off, grateful for the sight of him half naked above me. He rolled us over so I was on top, the view incredible. His grin widened as he held my thighs spread above his hips.

"I want to do more than kiss you," I told him, moving backward with my fingers on the waistband of his sweatpants. The air was heavy, like right before a storm, and we were the thunder about to shatter it all.

Scooting back along his legs, I pulled down Rowan's sweatpants and boxers, marveling at what so many women wanted, but I won. Before I could stare in awe, his hands latched around my arms and Rowan threw me back down on my back. The cool air from my cracked window tickled across my stomach as he lifted off my shirt, lowering his face to kiss a trail from my throat to my navel.

When he came back to kiss me, the pressure and warmth of his chest was euphoric, exploding even more when his fingers slid beneath my pants. If his touch could make my body do what it was doing, responding to him like he owned it, then I wasn't ready for having him inside of me. Everything built up inside of me, my body moving in rhythm with his touch, as I reached for him while falling apart. From just his touch.

Frantically tearing off my clothes, I moved to be on top of him once more. Neither of us said anything, but his dark eyes egged me on. Spreading my palms over his chest, I lowered myself onto him, gasping for breath as Rowan stretched and filled me. Rocking my hips, each thrust against each other, I wanted more. Rowan was more. This was more. I wanted him.

"I need you," he growled, his fingertips piercing my hips as he quickened our pace. Clawing my nails over the ridges of

his stomach, I felt him stiffen, reveling in how I made him feel. When I leaned forward to kiss him, Rowan bit my lip and rolled me over to finish. Beads of sweat dripped from his body onto mine, heat building between us as we fell apart together. My name broke the silence, coming through Rowan's lips with a panting breath.

Rowan rolled his head to meet mine as we lay on our backs. His gentle gaze crossed my face, stopping on my mouth as he combed my messy hair behind my ear.

“Did we just have our first fight?” I smiled, rolling to press myself against him, loving how his warm, hard body protected me.

“If they end in that, I'll fight with you whenever you want.” He teased, tracing his fingers along my shoulder. When he wrapped his arms around me, hugging me closer to him, I closed my eyes and exhaled, my weak body perfectly content.

Cradling me in his arms, Rowan kissed each of my cheeks. “Be my girlfriend, Meredith.”

TWENTY

“This is where we fake break up,” he told me, grinning hopefully as I looked at him through blurry eyes. “So we can be real. It’s not over for me. It’s just getting started.”

Watching Rowan’s gaze move across my face, I listened to him while my heart felt at ease.

“We don’t have to date. We know each other. We know what we hate, what we love,” he tugged on my chin, lowering his mouth to mine, “so maybe we could just pick up where we left off.”

“Where was that?”

“In love,” he shrugged, “and happy as hell.”

I moved to settle next to him in bed, staring at the glow of passing headlights stream across my ceiling as I still tried to breathe.

Dripping in sweat, I woke up later, tangled in a knot with Rowan, sleeping deeper than I could ever remember. My everything ached. Except my heart and mind. Those were perfect.

Rowan’s right arm crossed my stomach, his hand folded beneath me as he cradled me against him in his sleep. His mess of hair tickled my skin whenever he moved, especially when I combed my fingers through it as he lay on my chest.

Trying not to wake my sleeping first baseman, I carefully rolled from beneath him. His shirt was the closest thing I could find on the floor, so I slipped into it and closed the door behind

me. Even my ankles were sore as I crossed my small apartment to the kitchen.

The oven clock and hissing bus breaks nearby informed me it was a quarter to six. Opening the fridge, I realized the half-empty carryout boxes and bottle of wine wouldn't be enough for breakfast. I wondered if my new position at work would pay enough for me to stock my fridge more than twice a month, or if I would even take the promotion.

I wanted nothing more than to crawl back in bed with Rowan, but, as I stood in just his shirt in my dingy kitchen, I remembered how he'd gone out to get me coffee and a cinnamon roll when I slept on his couch.

Grabbing some pants and a bra from my laundry basket in the bathroom, I dressed in the dark and snuck out into the early morning drizzle and headed down the block to a diner. There was actually a line ahead of me, but it was no surprise as the place made the best waffles. I was giggling to myself, smiling like a fool, because none of the people moving in and out of the diner around me had Rowan Ellis asleep in their bed.

When I left the diner with a bag of food, the rain picked up and splashed my legs as fat drops slammed from the sky. Even as the train came to a stop, it sprayed the sidewalk, so I ran home.

Rowan was coming out of the bathroom when I walked inside, rubbing his eyes and yawning. It was ridiculous how handsome he looked no matter his mood, and I stood in the doorway gaping and dripping with rain.

"Coffee," he told me, pointing behind him to the kitchen. His sleepy arms reached out for me as I got closer to him, melting beneath his warm body and almost falling asleep listening to the soft rhythm of his heartbeat.

"I didn't want to wake you," I explained, moving to carry the bag into the kitchen, "but my fridge is empty, so I ran down the block and got waffles."

Rowan kissed the top of my head, squeezing me tightly before spinning us around so he was closer to the coffeemaker.

He'd already started it when I left, and the comforting aroma swirled around us. As he took two mugs from the cupboard, I went to the table.

"I guess this is our first real date," Rowan mused, joining me and helping sort through the boxes of carryout. "Speaking of dates..."

I stopped pouring syrup on my waffle, rolling my eyes up to meet his. "Yes?"

"You'll be mine at Aubrey and Ethan's wedding?"

"Of course," I laughed, smiling at how innocent he looked with his hopeful blue eyes and sleepy face. "What else? I can tell by that smile there's more."

"The parade downtown next week goes right by your office."

"I can't flash you from the window, Rowan."

His laugh did something to me, the low chuckle rumbling straight into my chest. Swallowing his bite of waffle, he let out a low moan. "That's all I'm going to be thinking about now. Thanks, Meredith."

It was like we'd spent every morning for the last ten years at that table, happy in each other's company. The stress and worry left and we could simply be together. We sat at the table for hours that morning, with Rowan wrapped in a blanket, and I changed into his shirt from earlier. It was the weekend, cold and rainy, and staying in together only felt right.

When we talked about his last game in the World Series, Rowan lit up with excitement. He described every play, how his stomach still hurt from being slammed into, and how much it meant to him we'd gone to support him at his games. There was still a lot left for him to do as part of a winning team, and discussing it brought us back to reality a little.

"I don't want to go. I feel like this is still so perfect, so new. It's like I really have you now and I don't want to let go," he confessed, his boyish grin toying with my heart. "I'm going to the White House in a week," he told me. "And then some more press tours, but then I'm all yours."

“You’re mine during all of that, you know.”

“You won’t let me forget,” he winked, “and it’s all I’ll think about. Do you want to come with me?”

I thought about my work. “I need to tell you something. I can’t take off to join you, as great as it would be to see a bunch of baseball players. You know they’re my weakness.” Rowan coughed, glaring at me. “You’re my weakness.”

Rowan stirred some cream into his coffee cup before he refilled my cup, remembering I preferred mine dark. “Tell me your something.”

Thanking him for the refill, I took a sip and told him about the promotion at work and how I hadn’t decided on what to do.

“You’d be working with my team?” His grin spread so wide it almost broke his beautiful face. “I’d see you all the time? I’d get to sneak you off to the all the secret nooks and crannies in the stadium.”

“Or I could focus on making a professional name for myself separate from my famous boyfriend.”

“I support that,” he agreed, smiling at me, “but I still vote for taking off your clothes somewhere nobody will find us.”

“I wouldn’t be working there or with you. Harrison just wants to make me the bride, the one in charge. You don’t think it’s because of you, do you?” My heart sank a little, only bubbling again when Rowan took my hands and pressed his lips against my knuckles.

“You did this all on your own. Even if I had a part of it, you sold your image and restored mine. That was all you, Meredith. We should celebrate this!”

“I told you I haven’t decided if I’m going to take it.”

“How much time do you need?” Rowan questioned, standing at the table. He waved the blanket out to straighten it before folding it over the chair and checked the clock on my stove. “Because it’s after noon and I have to rescue my cat from Heather.”

“I think I’m falling in love with her,” I giggled, “and I know that sounds weird. Who the hell plays spin the bottle and seven minutes in heaven as a grown ass woman?”

Rowan playfully lifted his eyebrows. “I knew we’d need more than thirty minutes.”

My heart went straight to my stomach, knowing the pulsing tingle of need for him could only be relieved one way. But it’d have to wait. “Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? I feel like there’s so much I want to spoil you with and fix.”

“There’s nothing to fix,” I assured him, standing next to him. I moved to press myself against him, hoping I could just absorb the memory of his muscles beneath me and his warmth surrounding me. “Dinner sounds great. What should I bring?”

“Just an overnight bag.” Rowan winked, reaching to hold my face in his hands as he pressed his lips to mine. His kiss was a lethal intoxicant, making me dizzy and giddy at the same time.

When he changed into his clothes from last night, the outfit he wore to Aubrey and Ethan’s party, I wondered more about what brought us to the point in their guest bedroom. The moment that lead us here, to my apartment, where we became real.

Rowan tangled his fingers in my hair as we said goodbye on the front steps outside my apartment building. His tongue slid across my bottom lip, tickling my mouth to open further and let him in. It felt like we were the only people out there and I wished we were because the way his fingers moved along my hips as he pulled me closer to him just about made me take our clothes off again.

One more kiss and he pressed his forehead against mine. “See you later.”

“I promise. Now go.”

“Before I get to home base right here on your steps?”

Spreading my palms across his broad chest, I couldn’t help but smile. “You can’t make those jokes when you’re a

professional baseball player. Now go rescue your cat and tell them I say hi.”

Rowan nuzzled my neck, sending a shiver across my skin. “Fine.” He pulled away, making sure I knew how hard it was for him, as he promised me we’d make up for it later.

Watching him walk away, I smiled with the chance to check him out. I wasn’t looking to place knives like I told him once, but this time I could look without guilt. I could’ve screamed, standing there staring at just his butt. He’d done something to me and I hated having to close my eyes to pull myself together. Moments from last night flashed into my thoughts as he reached his car, especially when Rowan told me he loved me.

“When did you know?” I shouted to him from the steps, the rain muffling my voice. Rowan turned from his car door and smiled at me, wide and beautiful through the gray sky. The torturously slow twist of his grin weakened my knees as I stood there, knowing exactly what those lips could do.

“That I loved you?” He read my mind.

“When did you know?” I repeated, moving down one step.

Rowan looked to the sky, his smile widening, and back at me. “When you fell asleep on my couch.”

The night I went to feed the cat and turned it blue with detergent after it puked on me and I tossed Aubrey’s dress in the wash. The night I started feeling the same way. When Rowan kissed me on his couch as I slept.

Waiting for people to pass on the sidewalk, I crept closer to Rowan at his car, all ears as he continued talking to me. Within arm’s reach, he pulled me against him once more, wiping rain-covered hair from my face.

I warmed in the chilly drizzle as his lips met mine, lingering just long enough to make my heart stop.

“When I couldn’t breathe seeing you there when I got home. When I spent two hours in the shower trying to not think about how you were sleeping in my clothes, that you’d

been naked for even a minute in my house,” he whispered into my ear as he nipped my earlobe.

TWENTY-ONE

It took me an eternity to get dressed after showering and spinning around in my room once Rowan left. Without an idea of what to put in my overnight bag, I scoured my closet for anything that helped me feel confident when my stomach was storming with butterflies.

Wearing the same dress I wore when we went out in Vegas, I carried a bag with a change of clothes and toiletries down to my car. Smiling to myself on the drive to Rowan's, I couldn't stop thinking about when he knew he loved me and how that was the last time I slept at his house. The ache in my core promised I wouldn't get much sleep, hoping for at least an hour so I could function the following morning to do it all over again.

Pulling up to his house, I could see his lights were on in different rooms. It took a minute for me to turn off the car, feeling like it was different now. We'd slept together. He told me he loved me. There was nothing for me to worry about. But I did. All the way up his front steps before almost breaking an ankle when he stood from the porch swing.

"Holy crap," I muttered, trying to catch my breath.

"I'm sorry," he fought a laugh, "but that was priceless and you look incredible. Dinner's almost done, so I wanted to wait out here for you." Rowan came to get me on the steps, wrapping his arms around me and spinning me onto the porch. "What were you thinking about for so long in your car just now?" Squeezing me against him, Rowan looked down at me with a smile.

“You. Actually.”

“Good.” He kissed me, slowly reminding me how much I meant to him with just his lips. He took my bag off my shoulder and set it down at the bottom of the stairs before we headed toward the kitchen. When we walked inside, his home felt more like I belonged there than when I came to help or hang out and plan our fake relationship. It smelled even better too, but that could also have been my senses on overload next to Rowan.

He checked the oven when we got into the kitchen and corked a bottle of wine, pouring us each a glass.

“How did you spend your afternoon?” He inquired, clinking our glasses together while we stood in the middle of his kitchen.

“Honestly?” I grinned over the rim of my wineglass.

“Only,” he replied, his stare darkening.

“I spent too much time trying to get ready for a sleepover where I wouldn’t have my clothes on much,” I admitted, maybe doing too good of a job licking the dribbling wine from my bottom lip.

“Meredith, Meredith,” Rowan groaned, taking my wine glass and setting it with his on the counter. I loved the way his lips spread into a grin, and if I had been wearing panties, they might’ve melted with just that look.

My skin was on fire as he closed the distance between us, his eyes flicking between mine while his palms spread around my hips, pulling us closer together.

I reached up for him, but Rowan was too quick and slid his hands along my legs and hoisted me up against him.

Rowan’s fingers kneaded my hips as he pressed me against the wall. Balanced between his hard chest and the cool wall, I felt free. He pulled on my hair, tipping my head back as his tongue licked along my neck. This wasn’t makeup sex. This was honest, blinding passion that overtook us in the kitchen. Using the wall and his hips to balance me, Rowan’s lips consumed mine as his warm hands grazed my stomach to lift

my dress off. It bunched at my waist, leaving little between us, especially once he pulled it off and I was bare to him.

The heat from his skin rubbing against mine mixed with just how much I needed him inside of me, on top of me, was overwhelming. As his teeth grazed my throat and his fingers teased me, I knew I couldn't wait much longer.

I scraped my fingernails along his back, Rowan's deep growl letting me know he felt the same was as I. Holding me against him, in just my bra, Rowan carried me up the stairs almost effortlessly. He threw me onto the bed and I rolled over, making room for him as he tore off his clothes.

My skin was humming, electrified by just the thought of him touching me as I waited for him to sort through his drawer for a condom.

"You're perfect," he told me as he hovered above me. His flexed biceps were on each side of me as he lowered to kiss me. His lips were soft as their trail started against my mouth, but the pressure of each kiss grew as he made his way from my throat to my chest, along my stomach, making me gasp for air when his teeth grazed my inner thigh.

His tongue tortured me, making me forget everything but Rowan and his touch. I grabbed his hair in my hands, pulling him back to me as his mouth followed its trail back along my body.

Lifting my legs around his waist, I tried pulling him down to me, but he was too strong. He barely moved when I tried again, his laugh tickling my throat.

"Please," I whimpered, not caring that I begged him.

Rowan softly sucked my bottom lip, lifting one hand to spread my legs farther apart as he hovered above me.

"I love you, Meredith," he murmured, pulling away to brush hair from my face. He smiled at me, his grin perfectly devastating and making me want him so much more. Rowan knew he was in control, and I let him because we both knew it was only a matter of seconds before the world fell apart around us.

I sank into the mattress as he moved above me, my legs spread beneath him, while Rowan inched closer to me. Feeling him against me, I almost lost it. Keeping my eyes open, I wanted to absorb every moment with him.

With a taunting graze, Rowan moved closer, and I followed. His tormenting tease was impossible to resist. Not that I wanted to try. Clawing his back, he gave in and thrust himself into me. It was incredible, the feeling of floating on a cloud as his kisses burned a trail across my body.

Rowan held me against him with one hand behind my back, pressing my chest into his as he caressed the length of my body with his other hand. There were fireworks behind my eyes as they rolled out of control with each powerful push he drove into me. Building higher and higher, I couldn't get enough. I felt small but mighty beneath him, able to roll us over so I could be on top. His eyes lit up wildly as I slid onto him, moving my hips back and forth to the rhythm he set with his palms spread against my hips.

Arching my back, my hair tickled his legs as I leaned into each quickening rush of movement on top of him. He was close. I could feel every inch of him tense beneath me.

Moaning my name, he reached for my face and I lowered to him, slowly riding out the wave that brought us down together.

Spread on top of him, my body rising and falling with his panting breath, I knew I had to tell him.

"I love you, too," I spoke into his chest, the warm skin lulling me further into euphoria.

I stirred from his touch, his fingers stroking my bare back as I lay across him in his bed.

"Hungry?" Rowan whispered beneath me, a smile in his voice.

"Famished," I replied, limply peeling myself from the warmth of his naked body. Rolling off of him, I was too dizzy to look for my dress. Stars and Rowan swirled around in my head.

“Here.” He tossed the thermal he was wearing over to me before pulling out a pair of sweatpants from his dresser. Only sweatpants.

Gnawing my lip, I couldn’t help but stare at him from the waist down and at how perfectly placed everything was.

“My eyes are up here,” he teased, pecking my cheek as he walked by to the door.

“So are your muscles.” I swooned, falling back onto the mattress. My legs jerked with a shiver as his fingertips traced circles along my thighs and under the hem of the shirt I wore. He took my hands and pulled me up, guiding me back down to the kitchen, where his stove timer screamed at us for the detour.

“It smells amazing,” I commented, inhaling the flavors floating around the room.

“Thank you. I think you’ll like it.”

I returned to my wineglass, watching Rowan seamlessly fuss over whatever he cooked on the stove.

“This way.” Rowan smiled at me when he turned from the stove, his hands full with a tray of food, nodding toward the dining room.

He had the table set in his dining room already, including a small vase filled with two red roses and candles waiting to be lit. I took the seat opposite him as he set the tray down and ripped a match across a small box from the tray, the tall candles flickering softly in the center of the table.

“This is perfect, Rowan.” A blush tickled my cheeks, and I didn’t care. It was absolutely perfect. “Although usually,” I bit my lip, thinking back to five minutes prior, “you buy the girl dinner first.”

“You’re not just any girl,” he replied, winking at me as he started serving us.

After my stomach felt as good as the rest of my body and I praised him repeatedly for his impressive culinary skills, our conversation went back to both of our jobs. I didn’t think

about my promotion at all since we talked about it in the morning, my mind happily distracted by Rowan.

When he started talking about his travel schedule, I willed time to fly so we could repeat today a few more times.

“I was wondering how you felt about staying here when I’m gone,” he asked when we were washing dishes later. “I’ll get in really late and it’d be so nice to come home to you.”

The daydream of waking up in Rowan’s bed with him slipping in next to me was something I could get used to, so I happily agreed.

Saying goodbye when he finally went with his team to Washington, D.C. was easier than I thought it would be. I imagined missing him, but watching his pride and everything about him in his element was exciting. Our kiss goodbye at the airport almost made him miss the flight, but his charm got him back on the jetway in time.

The local news broadcast every second they could of the Emeralds meeting the president and fans who were lucky enough to get access. It was on repeat for the entire time he was gone, but I had my own time with him via video when he got back into his hotel at night that made the time pass faster.

Stretching my arms and legs, I slowly opened my eyes in the darkened room. Rowan’s cat purred on the empty pillow next to me, opening one sliver of an eye to watch me. He was flying in from Washington, D.C. that night, and I planned on our friends coming to his house for dinner. He had no idea, but I thought we owed it to each other, and them, to be real seriously. When he asked me to stay at his house, I gladly accepted. Not only because his house was beautiful, the thread count on his sheets was beyond measure, and I could sleep in his t-shirt, but because it felt like home there. And knowing he was coming home to me made every night without him worth it.

The rain stopped long enough to let me pick some roses from the garden, the blooms long overdue but somehow still glowing a soft pink and radiant purple. I dropped them into a

vase on the dining room table just as Ethan knocked on the back door.

He carried a wooden crate into the kitchen, describing the scotch he brought that flew right over my head. I was too worried about ruining the roast I had hopefully baked in the oven. I didn't cook. I should've ordered food.

"It smells amazing in here," Ethan told me, inhaling deeply as he walked toward the oven. "Damn, Mer. I'm going to marry you, too." He lifted lids off pots on the stove, eagerly inspecting what I was making. "Seriously. Want to trade?"

"I love you, but no." I smiled at him, falling happily into his hug.

"He still doesn't know we're all coming?"

"No. He won't mind, though. He loves filling this place with family," I replied, taking the scotch Ethan offered from a small glass. The two ice cubes cracked in the warm liquid, another sound I'd remember in my attempt to make dinner.

By the time Ezra, Heather, and Aubrey came, Ethan and I were halfway into one bottle and I felt weightless. I didn't realize I needed the liquid courage. I was nervous as hell about so many things. Making dinner, hosting, and being with Rowan for real that time. Having it be just us who knew this time was real made it seem even more risqué, and I liked quietly reveling in that secret. However, it also amped up my nerves.

"He's here!" Aubrey shouted from the front door, on the lookout for the cab to roll up to the house. I was too flustered to use the spatula in my hand, so Ezra took it from me and tried not to laugh too hard.

Running across the hardwood, I clenched the doorknob and tried to catch my breath. "How do I look?"

"You sound like you just had amazing sex," she admitted, "which I'm like a million percent jealous about because I know it's true, but you also look fabulous." Rolling my eyes when she kissed me, I waved her back into the kitchen when

we heard his cab door close and the deep sound of his voice outside.

I went outside to meet him on the front porch, taking in my adorably exhausted boyfriend as he climbed the steps with his lips twisting in the corner, grinning at me.

“Holy shit,” he raced up the last steps, wrapping his arms around me, “I missed you.”

“Tell me about it,” I groaned, returning his kiss. “Come on inside. I made you dinner.”

“I’d rather start with dessert.” Rowan slapped my backside as I turned in front of him, grabbing my hand when I swatted him away as we both laughed. “I missed you, Meredith. Tell me why you taste like scotch.”

“I will when we get inside,” I taunted, pulling him with me through the foyer and into the kitchen.

“Surprise!” Everyone shouted as we stepped inside. Rowan squeezed my shoulders from behind as we stood there. Aubrey ran up to him first, cutting between us to hug her Rowie. I hated that name so much.

“Welcome home,” I told him when Aubrey finally let go, receiving his tight embrace and a kiss to my hair in return.

“This is great. Thank you guys so much,” he beamed. It was adorable and sexy, and I couldn’t wait for our friends to leave.

“We figured we didn’t get a real chance to celebrate you winning the damn World Series, so why not do so when you came home?” Ezra added when it was his turn to hug Rowan.

“I love you so much,” he told me. Ethan came to us with my freshened glass of scotch and a new one for Rowan, chatting him up about the trip to DC.

Rowan lit a fire after we ate, most of us too full to move from the living room, and joined me in the kitchen where I was trying to clean up.

“I could get used to this,” he murmured in my ear, wrapping his arms around me from behind.

“You have plenty of people who you pay to do things for you. You don’t know any other way,” I joked, turning on his dishwasher.

“Maybe it’s really just because I enjoy coming home to you. I thought about that a lot over the last month.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I promised him. “I like our sleepovers. I also really like the no-shave look... And feel. Since we’re talking about you.”

Rowan spun me around, his hips holding me against the counter as he caged me in. “What if you didn’t leave after sleeping over? What if we woke up next to each other,” he traced my cheek with the back of his index finger, teasing my skin, “and fell asleep next to each other?”

“Are you asking me to move in with you?”

“Did you want to move in with me?”

“Well,” I froze, “someday. Ask me again in a month.” I knew I’d never leave, no matter where I paid rent, but, as much as I was falling hopelessly in love with Rowan, I wasn’t ready to move that fast.

He looked at his watch, then at me. “Okay. I’ll ask you again on December ninth. What will you say then?”

“I’ll ask if you had as much scotch as you’ve had tonight,” I teased, stepping on my tiptoes to kiss him, “and then I’ll tell you I love you before snuggling up against you in bed. Now, come on. Let’s go kick out our friends so we can go to bed.”

TWENTY-TWO

Harrison stared at me, clicking his black pen while waiting for me to answer his question. It had been a month since he told me about the promotion, and he finally demanded an answer. Of course, his demand was patient and paternal, but it was still a deadline I had to answer.

Thinking about working with the Emeralds more closely than any other organization we had a relationship with was tempting. I loved baseball. I was in love with a baseball player. The player. It made sense. But so did everything relating to Rowan over the last month.

I looked at my baseball calendar, knowing I'd have more than one man in my life to answer to that day. It was December ninth and, with the last four weeks spent in a romantic fantasy switching between our beds, I didn't know how I'd respond if Rowan asked me to move in with him again.

"Can you tell me something, Harrison?" I asked, thinking more about Rowan and the promotion.

"Ask me anything, Meredith."

How do I phrase this? I wished I had a clicky pen like Harrison so I could release some of my angst and uncertainty. "I need your assurance that the team's owner donated the money, and that he wants us, and you're just putting me up to it because you love me."

He shook his head at me; the clicking stopped. "If you think I'd let that hot shot boyfriend of yours have any sway

over anything we do, you're gravely mistaken." I felt myself sink into my body, ashamed for insulting my boss. "If any person thinks I wouldn't put you and your dedication and work ethic first, then they're missing the most important piece of this all. I want you to take the promotion because you deserve it. It has nothing to do with your boyfriend. Now," he smiled again, the sparkle in his wrinkled eyes bringing me back down from the mountain of worry, "you'll take it?"

I started shaking my head at him, marveling at his manipulative tactic and how I could want my boss to adopt me as his kid. "I will!"

"Thank goodness! Now," he checked his watch, "aren't you leaving early today for that wedding?"

We'd talked so long, I lost track of time, and I knew Aubrey would kill me. It was their rehearsal dinner, and I should've been there before anyone else getting everything set up.

After I set Maggie up with a task of things to do to cover the next two days, I was on my way. Driving to work that day had the biggest advantage of getting through downtown traffic to the riverfront hotel in less than ten minutes.

"I've been calling you for an hour!" Aubrey screamed at me when she saw me pull up, already running out to take her jitters out on me.

"I'm here now. You're not supposed to be. Why are you here?" I held her shoulders as she sobbed, her mascara running. Maid of honor rule number one was to always have tissue, so I pulled a wad from my clutch and helped Aubrey wipe it up as she tried talking through the tears.

"They double booked! We can't have the rehearsal dinner here tonight, and everyone's supposed to be here in three hours. There isn't enough time to even tell everyone or find somewhere new!"

As I hugged Aubrey without a solution, the boxes of decorations for the rehearsal dinner caught my attention.

“I have an idea,” I told her, stepping out of our hug to reach for my phone. I dialed Rowan’s phone with Aubrey almost hyperventilating on the damp pavement behind me.

“Hi, beautiful. You know what day it is?” I could hear his smirk through the phone when he answered.

“The same day it was when you asked me this morning,” I teased. “We’re having a wedding emergency and I have maybe the biggest favor to ask of you, Rowan.”

“I’m all yours,” he told me, patiently listening to me as best he could with Aubrey shouting in the background.

Once we hung up and we set our plan in action, I shoved Aubrey in the car and wouldn’t tell her anything. Knowing too much would’ve driven her even more batty, so I assured her that the maid of honor and best man had everything under control, and all she had to worry about was whether she wanted to marry Ethan. She didn’t laugh at that, but I had to amuse myself after listening to her sob for half an hour.

I had to keep her out for another two hours, which gave us enough time to get Aubrey a drink to calm down. I took her phone away after she called Ethan seven times. He was busy with Rowan; they had an entire phone tree to call and things to set up. I knew she’d thank me the minute we got out of the car.

Pulling into Rowan’s neighborhood, Aubrey was telling me about their honeymoon and how she couldn’t wait to marry Ethan. I tried reminding her that’s what mattered, but I wasn’t the bride to be with a mis-communicated booking.

“Why are we here?” She asked, unbuckling her seatbelt, when I stopped my car outside Rowan’s house.

I climbed out and reached into the backseat for the decorations, the pile of roses on top making me think of Rowan and our phone call hours prior when we devised the plan to save their rehearsal dinner.

He jogged down the stairs, buttoning the cuff of his white button down, when I stepped onto the sidewalk.

“Is she okay?” He asked, kissing me in greeting before taking the box from me.

“She will be. Thanks to you. Take those inside and I’ll bring her in. Is Ethan here?”

Rowan nodded, winking at me before his long strides took him back inside. I closed my eyes for a second and turned back to the car, watching Aubrey close her door.

“I saw the roses in my car earlier,” I told her. “Rowan took me to the rose garden that day our photo was first in the news. The one you freaked out about. Remember?”

“Yeah,” she smiled, “I remember when my two best friends fell in love. What about it?”

“The roses made me think of him and I knew he’d help.” I took Aubrey’s hand and pulled her along the sidewalk and up Rowan’s steps into the house that pulsed with life. “So,” I began, scanning the flurry of activity just as she did, “we’re hosting your rehearsal dinner here. He and Ethan called the caterer, the guests. It’s all taken care of. All you need to—”

Aubrey smashed into me, squeezing me so hard I almost crushed a lung. “I love you. I love you two so much. Thank you! Where is that hunk so I can tell him myself?”

“Which one?” I returned her hug, joining in her fit of giggles.

Everything came together, thanks to Rowan. Aubrey wandered through his house, admiring the decorations and completely reversing how she felt before as she nearly skipped and spun around before the rehearsal.

When we returned to his house in the evening, it felt like home. Guests filled the rooms, their conversation and congratulations exciting anyone who walked by.

I found Rowan on the back patio, standing with his hands in his pockets while he looked at the stars.

“What are you doing out here?” I snuck up behind him and hugged him, pressing my face against his back. He moaned happily and turned around to face me, taking his hands from his pockets and holding me against him.

“Thinking about growing up here. I always said it deserved to be filled with family,” Rowan told me, wrapping his arm around my shoulders and kissing the top of my head.

“Thank you for this, Rowan. You’re really an amazing man. I love you so much more for this.”

“I know a way you could repay me,” he hummed, “and it doesn’t involve your body naked with mine just yet.” Smacking his hard stomach, I tried to shush him but he kept laughing at me. “What do you say, roomie?”

“It terrifies me how much I want you,” I whispered, pulling back from him as we watched the party inside through the large kitchen windows.

“What do you love about me?” Rowan asked, his eyes flicking across my face when he spun me back to him.

“You’re the only one who calls me by my name. You never call me anything but Meredith.” I started, biting my lip.

“I’m going to call you a lot more in our room lat—” He smiled against my ear as I continued with my list of reasons I was head over heels for him.

“I love the way you hold me, how your smile takes everything bad away, and how you’re so gentle with me. When you want to be.” I grinned.

“I love how you make me a better man.” He admitted, smiling at me when he intertwined our fingers. “You make me a better friend, a better player, and a better partner.”

“Well,” I nodded, “first base is really important. The catcher’s good and all, but you really decide the game.”

I moved to stand in front of him, letting Rowan’s hands fall at the small of my back while we looked at each other.

“Is that so?” he pondered, his blue eyes sparkling beneath the starlight. “Let’s decide this game, then. How are we swinging, Meredith?”

Standing on my tiptoes, I pressed my lips against his, pulling back just enough to answer him. “Moon shot.”

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Getting lost in the pages of a book is Fiona's favorite escape. Bouncing between YA, contemporary, and romantic suspense, Fiona writes about love because she believes the world needs more of it. Writing from the Pacific Northwest, Fiona can be found creating memories with her family, and daydreaming of her next story while wandering the aisles of local bookstores and coffee shops in the rain.



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