



*Rival*

NEIGHBOR

ALEXANDRA BECK

# RIVAL NEIGHBOR

ALEXANDRA BECK



**Copyright 2022 by Alexandra Beck - All rights reserved.**

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

All rights reserved.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

# CONTENTS

1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15

16. Chapter 16

17. Chapter 17

18. Chapter 18

19. Chapter 19

20. Chapter 20

21. Chapter 21

22. Chapter 22

23. Chapter 23

24. Chapter 24

Epilogue

# CHAPTER 1

---

## Teagan

The sweet gentle song of fairy tales whistled outside my window as the light from the rising sun began to trickle through the drawn drapes. I snuggled into my bed, feeling the warmth of the room, anchoring me further into my slumbering state. If only wake-ups were that peaceful for me...like ever.

Within seconds, the whisper of a perfect morning flew right out the window into the jagged Hydrangea bushes outside. The sharp blare of my phone's ringer cut through my sleep like a rusty knife, prying my eyelids open with force. For a split second, I thought of not answering, quitting my job, and lying in bed indefinitely. Then the thought of the property taxes on the enormous house I lived in, coupled with the fact that I had my dream job, no matter how miserable the mornings could sometimes be, forced my hands to un-clutch the blanket and pick up the phone.

I didn't have to look at the screen to know who was calling. There was only one human brave enough to call me at this time of day without news of some dire emergency or nuclear blast warning.

"Morning, Russell," I said through my yawn. "Do you ever sleep?"

"I try," he replied in his usual frantic speed talk. "But there's so much to think about. So much to do, and I'm still feverishly going over the notes you sent yesterday for chapters one through seven of the books."



I sat up on the edge of the bed, rubbing my face. Seven years of college, a torturous internship, and several years of working for the largest publishing company in the world did not prepare me for Russell Barcroft. He was a world-renowned fantasy writer. His books had been flying off the shelves for over ten years. There were also movies, series, podcasts, and fanfiction based on his books. He was the golden ticket for any publishing firm.

When my company was in the process of wooing him over from his former publisher, we all heard the stories. He was a recluse, described as frantic, rushing around his house in his maroon bathrobe, piles of notes and newspaper clippings, and research piled everywhere. He panicked about everything and was incredibly long-winded when it came to writing. Rumor had it that the last book he published with his old company was half the size he had originally turned in by the time it hit the shelves.

Oddly enough, his books did not read the same way his brain functioned, making his books excellent literary works. But no one wanted to read a three-hundred-thousand-word book that was so detailed, you didn't need an imagination to complete it. So, when they assigned him to me, I was anything but thrilled. The publishing company treated the people that worked for them like family. They knew a lot about my family, and had published multiple biographies about my mother's life. When I decided to work from the States, I was open and honest with them about the care I felt I needed to give to my family. I still wasn't sure if my candid plea had been a good or

bad thing. Nonetheless, they knew I was a comforter, having done it my whole life with my little sister and my two half brothers. I had a way with Russell that no one else did, and it sucked.

He never noticed when I was barely responsive. “I just don’t know how we’re going to cut down those chapters without thoroughly shifting the storyline.”

I slipped my feet into my pink fuzzy slippers and put on my robe, shuffling down the hallway toward the smell of brewing coffee. If I didn’t have an automatic coffee pot, I would make it halfway and just give up, living the rest of my days as a permanent fixture on the hallway wood floors.

Pulling down one of my sarcastically witty themed coffee mugs, I poured a cup, turning and holding it under my nose as I inhaled deeply. “Russell, we’ve talked about this. Remember, you are a phenomenal writer, but there is no need to spend six pages talking about the history of the fabric that the Fae Queen’s dress was made of. It doesn’t pertain to the story at all, and it gets lost. You want your words, your very exceptional story, to be unstoppable. You want them to drink in the words, the images, the expression. You don’t want them forgetting what they’re reading, and instead of pre-ordering the next book, they find themselves ordering fabric from Djibouti. Remember?”

He sniffled, and I could hear papers shuffling around as I took that moment to sip my hot elixir of life. I could feel it smooth over the jagged edges of my nerves as I relaxed a bit.

It took me some time to get used to the violent wake-ups that working remotely for a London based company offered.

“You’re...you’re right. I trust you, Teagan. You’ve been on my side.”

I nodded. “That’s right. I’m on your side. So, I want you to take a deep breath, call your butler into the room and have him prepare you a coffee, a fry-up, minus the pudding, and sit out on that beautiful terrace you have, overlooking the English countryside, and let the story flow out of your head. Can you do that?”

He mumbled a bit before answering. “Yeah, yes. I surely can. I...thank you. I will call you later once I’ve thought about it more.”

“I know you will,” I said pleasantly, gritting my teeth, before hanging up.

I dropped the phone on the counter and leaned my head back, rolling my eyes. Another day in paradise. At least Russell did one thing for me every day. He got my blood shooting through my veins and my brain cranking despite the sparks shooting from the gears. That morning was a short conversation. I never knew when I picked up the phone if I would have to calm and redirect him or if I’d be sitting in my office chair, my body fused to the leather, listening to him spiral out of control.

I guess it was my lucky morning.

My phone rang again, and I sighed, picking it up and immediately sliding the answer button before looking. “Russell, why are you not relaxing?”

“Teagan?” My little sister’s voice was mouse-like and quiet, and I could tell she had been crying.

I immediately stood up straight, nerves rattling through me. “Ella. Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“He’s such an asshole,” she shouted through her sobs. “My damn husband is literally the worst human ever. When we married, I knew he had his moments, but I didn’t think he would just turn into a complete piece of crap.”

“Are you ok?” I asked nervously.

Teagan’s husband had a nasty habit of violence when he started drinking, and though he hadn’t struck her yet, that I knew of, he was always very close. He screamed, yelled, took away her car, threw things, and broke things. He was a complete douchebag, with a ton of money, power, and he had never been told “no” when he was growing up. He expected Ella to be the perfect little housewife trophy. We all saw he was a douche when they dated, but my sister was wooed by dinners in Paris, dreams of big houses, babies, and a life of ease with some prince. Only he was a self-proclaimed prince, not Prince Charming.

“I’m ok,” she groaned. “William returned from his business trip and, as usual, told me to unpack his laundry. Well, also, as usual, it smelled of cheap perfume. This time though, there was a little love note from some whore named Misty in it. We

got in a huge fight over it. He threw Mom's vase and broke it. It's the only thing I had in the house of hers and he went right for it."

She started weeping wildly again.

I took another gulp of my coffee. "Where is he now?"

"Work," she sniffled. "He leaves straight from work for another trip, so he won't be home for a few days. At least, that's what his schedule says. And he never misses a chance to get away from me."

"Okay. I want you to leave the mess, go to the bathroom, and shower. Leave his laundry. The asshole can do it himself when he gets back. Then, ask the housekeeper to clean up the vase. I don't want you cutting yourself. Breathe, work out, and then contact that lawyer I gave you the information for and set up a consultation. You can't keep living like this, and you know it's never going to change."

"I know," she sobbed. "I just really thought...and Mom's vase!"

I shook my head. "Ella, it's just a vase. It's probably bought him a good two weeks of mom haunting the hell out of him. Besides, we have a lot of Mom's things, and you have a ton of pieces that were important to her. They're here in her house, so you don't have to worry about him destroying them. Remember, mom left this house to both of us. I might take care of it, but this is your home too."

“Okay,” she sniffled again. “I’ll go shower. I’m sorry for bothering you.”

“You are not bothering me,” I said, looking out the window for the source of the backup beeping coming from outside. “I am your big sister. I will always be here for you. Have you done any more with that painting you were working on?”

As I listened to my sister, trying to get her mind away from the vase and her crap husband, I leaned over, trying to see the neighbor’s driveway. It was right at the edge of the window. I shrugged and set my coffee cup down, heading for the front door. My sister was talking the whole time I looked out the window.

“That’s okay,” I said. “You don’t have to work on it every day. It’s something you enjoy, and we need some more art for the walls.”

I trotted down the steps while she continued to talk, walking down the drive toward the paper lying at the end of the driveway. Glancing next door, I noticed a moving truck attempting to do a thousand-point turn. Someone had finally bought the house next door. It had been sitting empty for an entire year, with random people coming in and out to view it. It didn’t shock me, though; we lived in a neighborhood that was extremely expensive, in a prime location just twenty minutes from Chicago.

“What’s that beeping?” my sister asked.

“Moving truck. Someone bought the house next door.”

“Oh,” she replied. “That’s right. I saw the sold sign when I was heading home the other day.”

Ella lived in the same neighborhood, just two streets over. I loved having her that close, especially with the amount of drama she found herself in. She was a sweet thing, sheltered most of her life by our mom, and she trusted far too easily. She needed me, and in ways, after our mom died, I needed her too.

“Yeah, I haven’t seen who bought it yet,” I sighed. “I don’t really care; I just hope they don’t have like seven hundred small children and a lot of barking animals. Not that I have anything against kids, I just...”

The truck’s wheels turned, sliding off the driveway. The space between their drive and mine was only around six feet wide, with a row of azaleas my mother had planted separating the space. My hand tightened on the phone as the truck continued back. “Ella, I’ll call you back.”

I hung up the phone and slipped it into my pocket, running forward, waving my arms in the air. “STOP! Hey! Stop! You’re going to run over the...”

I cringed, closing my eyes at the sound of twigs cracking. The wheels on the truck squealed to a stop, and I gritted my teeth, trying to remind myself that it was just a bush. But it was a bush I had spent the day planting with my mother, smiling and laughing later into her cancer diagnosis. It was a memory, a reminder, a moment with someone I could never have again.

The driver got out and ran back, his eyes widening. “Oh, God. I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry?” I whispered. “When you bump into someone on a crowded street, you say I’m sorry. When you learn that someone passed away, you say I’m sorry. When you forget to hold the door at the grocery store, you say I’m sorry. NOT when you run off the driveway, through the yard, and mow down several VERY large, VERY noticeable plants!”

I stopped, breathing heavily. *In through your nose, out through your mouth. Calm down, Teagan. Calm down. You are going to traumatize this poor kid.*

“Everything okay out here?” a man’s voice said, pulling me from my anxiety attack.

I stood, smoothing down my shirt, and pulling my robe closed. Looking up, my eyes met his, the new homeowner. He was absolutely not what I had expected. He smiled at me and glanced over at the young guy that was driving the truck. My new neighbor was incredibly handsome, his demeanor light. He then glanced over at the crushed bushes and winced.

“Ouch. Looks like you took out the hedges. I’ll call the landscaper tomorrow and have those replaced.”

I blinked at him, feeling irritated by his nonchalant attitude and the slight “friendly” smile on his face. “Just replace them?”

He nodded. “Sure. They’re what? Azaleas? No problem.”



I chuckled maniacally. “Those were four-year-old Azaleas, specifically hand-picked, specifically purple, pruned, cared for, and nursed to a perfect bloom.”

His smile stayed, and this time, a chuckle wiggled through. He glanced at the driver who shrugged his shoulders, then back at me, taking a couple steps forward. “Right. Okay. If you’d like to...pick out new ones, I’d be happy to reimburse you. I apologize. Things are always crazy moving in. I’m doing this on my own today, so I was dealing with something else and couldn’t help the backing out.”

I swallowed hard, realizing I was probably coming off as a bat-shit crazy cat lady over the bushes. Still, his charm and smirk irritated me for some reason. Or maybe it was how it made me not hate him.

He put out his hand. “I’m Hunter. I know meeting after the utter murder of your plants is not the best. But luckily, we didn’t take any people out.”

He chuckled, and I just stared at him, shaking his hand and then pulling it back. “I have to go.”

With a nod, Hunter stepped back. “What was your name, plant lady?”

My lip twitched at his strange glare, attempting to diffuse the situation with humor. “Teagan. Please, just back the truck down the driveway.”

With that, I turned, clutching my newspaper in my arms, and headed straight for the door. As soon as I was inside, I

slammed my palm to my forehead. Despite my insane eruption moments before, I was not normally an emotional person, especially not over foliage. But they were special, and every day I felt like I was losing another part of my mother. I understood my mania, and understood that I needed to chill. What I didn't understand was the effect that the neighbor, Hot Hunter, had on me.

It was like all the normal things a woman would swoon over, immediately struck a nerve with me. A nerve that apparently turned me into the protector of the hedges. My phone rang in my pocket, and I pulled it out, finding Russell's name on the screen. Tossing the paper on the entryway table, I sighed, pushing the crushed bushes from my mind, and heading into my office for another day of babysitting writers.

First my sister, then the mover, then the hot new neighbor and now this. I put my phone on the desk and pressed speakerphone, talking to Russell as I checked the notification from my app. It was a simple app, connecting you with random people through text. The Relate app had users from all over the world. You created a profile, answered some questions on what type of connections you were looking for, and pressed the "Roulette Relate" button, or so they called it. It would match up criteria and a chat window would appear with information on the connection. I managed to get lucky, using it shortly after it came out. I didn't have to sift through the barrage of dick pics and requests for nudes.

I had met TJ shortly after downloading the app, a guy I could talk to, joke with, and never ever have to meet. I didn't

even use my real name or profession. And I was pretty sure TJ wasn't his either, but I liked to imagine he really was the lonely rancher from the Midwest, holding a texting friendship for the last couple of years. I talked to him more than I talked to my own friends.

**Good morning, buttercup.**

I smiled. **Is it good?**

**Uh oh. Another long morning already?**

I sighed, messaging back. **Is it ever not? One thing after another. Stress will make me old.**

**Sounds like you need a good vacation. Come on over to South Dakota, drink some tea on the porch at the ranch, and put your feet up.**

I smiled. We played this game constantly. Making plans to “get away” and meet up somewhere far away. We'd been doing it for two years, and even though I knew I would never go. And probably would never meet TJ, it was nice to think about escaping. Escaping the stress, the loss, the pain, and the responsibility of my life. Deep down, though, I knew no matter how far I went, I'd still miss my mom. I'd still worry about my sister and my two half brothers. I knew I'd still get wildly upset at a hot neighbor for destroying a plant.

**Ugh. That sounds so nice. A cool breeze, life at my back, relaxation staring me straight in the face.**

I sat, waiting for his reply, thinking about that dream place. It was almost like a mini vacation in my mind.

**You could stay as long as you want. Just know, after a while I might put you to work. Would be nice to have someone to work beside out here.**

I smiled, typing back. **You'd probably send me packing in a day. I'm not the best with manual labor. It's not so much my dislike for it as my severe inability to not screw it up completely. I do like to bake though. I could bake some apple pies, since I know they're your favorite.**

**It's a deal. Just breathe through today. You'll be okay and with your brains and careful thinking, no one will even notice you want to run away to a smelly ranch.**

Laughing, I shook my head. **Wouldn't it be beautiful if we could run away from our lives and leave the anxiety behind?**

**It is that kind of world.**

I shook my head and looked at the pile of work I had in front of me.

My kind of stress could never be outrun.

# CHAPTER 2

---

## Hunter

I watched as Teagan walked back in the house, clutching her robe closed, steam practically radiating off her. I chuckled to myself, enjoying the view of her ass, even though it was covered by her robe and pajamas. I glanced over at the young guy driving the moving truck. He sighed and handed me a card. “My boss is Raymond.”

I waved it off. “It’s fine. It’s a strange reaction to something like that, but hey, it happens. Just try to get the truck out of here without mowing down any more precious plants, okay?”

He nodded exuberantly and jumped back in the truck. I made sure to get to the front door quickly to avoid being run over myself. As I closed the front door, knowing I had to finish getting ready, my phone buzzed. I smiled, seeing Anya’s name pop up. The Relate app had done its number crunching and landed me in a chat room with Anya. We have been chatting for two years now. She was the only one I ever had the need to connect. I had heard though, it was now the home of random surprise dick pics. It definitely This made me think twice about the quality of men out there, though.

I didn’t know who Anya truly was, as I was sure she made up a completely fake persona, just like I did, but it didn’t matter. She had become a friend, a confidant in some ways. From her profile, she was a single, late twenties professional from New York. I, on the other hand, was a rancher cowboy.

I had messaged her before the whole flower disaster and was glad to see she was up and functioning.

I smiled at her response to my good morning message. **Is it good?**

**Uh oh. Another long morning already?**

Her reply was exasperated. **Is it ever not? One thing after another. Stress will make me old.**

And then came the proverbial making of plans we would never follow through with. **Sounds like you need a good vacation. Come on over to South Dakota, drink some tea on the porch at the ranch, and put your feet up.**

We talked a bit longer, and like most days when Anya was stressed, I really did worry about her. She seemed like she had a lot on her plate, things I'd probably never really know about. But she had become my friend, and I cared about her, even if neither of us were actually who we said we were.

Chuckling, I shoved my phone in my pocket and grabbed my jacket and keys. The drive from my new house in Wilmette to my job was only about fourteen miles, but with the morning traffic, I knew it would take almost an hour to get there.

Moving from the city to Wilmette wasn't as big of a shock to the system as my friends thought it would be. I grew up in Southern California, outside of the city, and enjoyed being able to shut off the hectic world when I went home to relax. Besides, I had a lot more house and privacy in the suburbs than I did in Chicago. I hadn't worked my butt off as a record

producer to get the job at the largest recording company in the world just to be stressed out every time I went home. I took advantage of the major salary increase and the bonuses that seemed to flow like water.

I was lucky, but even more so because when I met the VP of the company, Parker and I became good friends. I had no idea he was who he was at first. The third time we hung out was at his top-floor condo in the city, overlooking the water, I realized from the gold records hanging everywhere exactly who he worked for. I was afraid at first to tell him working for his company was my ultimate goal, not wanting him to think I was some creeper. But it turned out, he came out to meet me initially because he had thought about recruiting me anyway. I had already had my first interview with the company, and with his good word, I was in.

So, there I was, having gone through all the procedural stuff, gotten my feet on the ground, and now I was working with my first talent. She was young, just fourteen years old, but a phenom. One of the most talented artists I had heard in a very long time. I could tell from the first meeting she was under the thumb of her very ambitious parents. They picked her apart every chance they got. I managed to make the recording sessions private, just the tech, me, and her. We spouted something about room, noise, and privacy, making the parents think it was for the betterment of Miranda's career.

In many ways, it was. She clammed up around them. She beat herself up constantly, and her true talent never fully came



out when they were there. I felt for her, especially growing up in a household with overbearing family members.

The morning traffic was light, and I got to the studio right as Miranda was saying goodbye to her parents. When I walked up, they were inundating her with tips on pitch and sound. “Good morning, team.”

“Hunter,” her mother said, taking me by the arm. “Miranda had a small cough two days ago. Do you think it puts a strain on her vocal cords? We could reschedule. Or maybe an ice pack in case her throat hurts.”

I glanced over at Miranda. “I don’t know, kiddo. What do you think? You still coughing?”

She shook her head. “No.”

I nodded. “And how does your throat feel?”

“Fine,” she said with a small smirk.

I opened up the door, letting her slip under my arm. Nodding to the parents as I backed up, I lifted my coffee to them. “We’ll keep a good eye on her. We have lots of ice. See you in a few hours.”

Before they could say anything else, I shut the door and turned to Miranda, crossing my eyes. She laughed and puffed out her cheeks, sitting down on the leather sofa. The tech, Roger, gave me a salute. “Morning.”

“Yes, it is, and I am not a fan,” I replied with a chuckle.

“Alright, Miranda. Before you get into any lyrics why don’t you step in the box and do some warmups. Just get yourself flowing so we can make some checks and so you don’t develop a scary cough again.”

She nodded with a smile. As she walked past me, she paused, lowering her voice. “I didn’t really have a cough. I just didn’t want to go to school. Some kids are teasing me about my new contract, and I didn’t feel like dealing with it.”

I stuck out my bottom lip. “Kids are assholes, no offence. They won’t have much to say when they’re wishing they had tickets to your show, will they?”

She smirked. “No, I guess not.”

With a nod, I watched her climb in and situate herself behind the mic. Roger glanced up at me. “You’re good with her. The first time I met her, she was a ball of nerves. Though it could be the two parents that act as if one is part of her liver, and the other is infused to her spine.”

“That is definitely the culprit. So, today, when she’s really going, and she’ll get going, trust me, try not to stop her mid-song. Let her get through it even if we have to redo something small. We may have to sew some things together here and there, but she’ll loosen up. I’ve heard her do it.”

“Sounds good, boss.”

I grabbed the bagel out of my bag and sat down on the couch, eating my breakfast as Roger worked the levels. With the first note, I could tell Miranda was in a better place than

when her parents were hanging on to every single sound that came from her. She was going to be a star; I could feel it.

The door cracked open, and Parker stuck his head in. “Hey, you got a second?”

I nodded, giving Miranda a thumbs up as I inched out into the hallway. “What’s up?”

Parker shook his head. “Just wanted to see how you felt this morning. I see the parents didn’t put up too much of a fight.”

I chuckled, pulling my vibrating phone from my pocket. “Can’t put up a fight if they’ve got no one to fight with. It’s a quick escape. Miranda already sounds better than last time.”

I glanced at my phone, smirking at Anya’s response. I typed a quick reply and shoved my phone back into my pocket. When I looked up, Parker was staring at me with one lifted brow. “Your make-believe girlfriend again?”

“She’s not a girlfriend,” I replied. “A friend. She’s a friend.”

Parker snorted. “She’s probably a fifty-year-old video game nerd named Steve, living in his grandmother’s basement apartment.”

With a chuckle, I shrugged. “It’s not like I’m sending pics or anything. Harmless banter. Anyway, did you come down here to grill me on Anya? Or did you need something else?”

“What a way to speak to your boss,” he scoffed.

I rolled my eyes. “My boss who is two years older than me, and who is only my boss because his dad is the President of

the company.”

Parker put up his hands. “Hey, hey. No need to jab low, man. I’m going out tonight. I’d like to have my masculinity intact. Speaking of, why don’t you come with? You can maybe meet a real girl and have a real date, or real conversation, or real blow job or something.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “I would, but I just literally moved into the new house last night, got the moving truck in at four this morning, and have not unpacked a single box. Raincheck, though.”

Parker’s phone started to ring. “Saved by the ringer. Fine. But I’m calling you on that raincheck.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied, scooting back into the studio.

I liked working with Parker; he was a good friend. What I hated was everyone’s incessant need to make sure I had a love life. There were a lot of things other than dating on my mind, and I was especially preoccupied with work.

The entire day went by in the blink of an eye, something I was cherishing because I knew every day wouldn’t be that productive. Miranda laid down some really amazing work, and I kept her parents from hearing the raw tracks, just to give the kid some breathing room for a bit. Afterward, I did some paperwork at the office, returned some emails, and sat back, stoked at how well things were going. Maybe it was because I finally reached my goals, or the beginning of them at least, and while Parker was a major player in that, I had proved my talents on my own.

Heading home from work, when things were finally quiet, thoughts I had pushed to the side all day began to surface. For some reason, despite the laundry list of things I needed to get done, my neighbor was on my mind. Her sassy personality, and her irritation, it was almost exciting to me. I didn't like angering her and could tell there was definitely more to the story of the azalea than she let on, but there was something about her fire that lit one in me.

Before leaving the city, I pulled over and stopped at a flower shop on the edge of town. I was positive they wouldn't have an azalea, but I just felt like I should do something. Or maybe I just wanted an excuse to get Teagan's attention. I didn't know, but it pushed me into buying a single planted Iris with a small card that read, "I will replace your plant, but take this as a peace offering until we can make that happen."

I'd drop it at her door tonight, and she could find it in the morning. Sure, it was strange that I cared that much about the neighbor's anger at me, but kindness ran in my blood, something taught to me by my grandmother.

And kindness wasn't all I felt the urge to show my neighbor.

# CHAPTER 3

---

## Teagan

I turned my phone on silent, shoving it in my purse. My sister was good for the time being, and I needed to run some errands in the city while I had a chance. I loved Chicago, but not for the same reasons everyone else did. My mother loved Chicago her whole life. She had a love affair with it, back from her days as an actress. My sister believed it had something to do with some great love affair she may have had, possibly even the reason our parents split, but I thought differently. I thought the energy of the city appealed to her.

My mother was magic and loved places that made her feel free. She was incredibly eccentric, and Chicago always embraced her wild side. The lights, the architecture, the way it felt at night, under the stars, the wind blowing hard, chilling you to the bone. Everything made Chicago eccentric. Those days though, it only made my longing for my mother that much harder, so I tended to make my trips to the city few and far between.

As I turned on the heat to fight the morning chill, I glanced over at the iris sitting in the passenger seat. My eyes narrowed on it before returning to the road. It was just a plant, but it felt like a gift from my arch-nemesis. I had woken up that morning, sipping my coffee, talking to my sister, and watching out for any more rogue moving trucks. I had been so busy getting ready to go, I hadn't even gone out for the paper. So,

when I left for the city and found a single planted iris on the steps from my neighbor, it threw me off guard.

My first reaction to it was almost worse. I felt a warmth bubble in my chest, something I hadn't felt in a very long time. In fact, it was something I attempted to avoid at all costs. But the vision of my, unfortunately, very handsome neighbor dropping off a small plant on my front porch at night, without pressing for conversation, just to show me he thought of the situation, was endearing.

"Endearing and enraging," I grumbled, switching the heat back off.

The man's whole persona made my spines come out. His little smirk, with those dimples, that perfect body stature, and his suave and easy to speak to demeanor made me furious. Or maybe the fact that I had any thought about him at all was making me furious.

I grabbed my coffee and chugged it, pushing the warm and gentle thoughts from my mind, focusing on the tires of the moving truck breaking the branches of my mother's azalea. Hunter was an arrogant douche, or at least that was what I would tell myself. And the last thing I needed in my life was for someone like him to take up any of my headspace. I had already spent far too much of my obnoxious bumper to bumper drive into the city thinking about him.

Turning on the radio, I drowned him out with talk show hosts and sporadic playing of eighties music. I kept it up all the way into the city. Luckily, all of the places I needed to go



that day were all within a five-block radius, so I found a parking garage, parked, and headed out. I left the iris alone in the car to stew over its purpose.

The first couple of stops were easy, just dropping off a manuscript to be overnighted for a client, picking up some new cookware since I had used mine down to chipping Teflon and grabbing a couple of things for the office. My time in my favorite bookstore took a bit longer, perusing the shelves, talking to the manager who was impatiently awaiting another release from me, and finally picking out a couple of new books for my collection of “will read in the future” shelf in my library. That was my favorite part of my mother’s enormous house, the library. I filled it with books I told myself I’d take the time to read but hadn’t yet found the time or peace and quiet.

By the time I left, it was nearly noon. I walked out of the bookshop, looking down at my phone to make sure my sister hadn’t texted. As I turned, I ran straight into someone, dropping my bag.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, leaning down to grab my books.

He leaned down as well, standing up at the same time as me, one of the books in his hand. As I looked up with a big smile and embarrassed chuckle, my heart flipped in my chest. Hunter grinned, handing over one of my books. “At least this time I didn’t murder any of your plants.”

I opened my mouth to say something sassy back but figured I might want to take that moment to make myself not look like

the crazy woman on the block. He was going to be living next door to me after all.

I chuckled, dropping the book into my bag. “Yeah. Technically, you didn’t murder anything, your driver did. Though I think I scared the kid enough; he’ll never go near another plant again.”

Hunter laughed. “He’ll be alright. If you’re going to work in that area, you have to have a tough skin.”

I winced. “I guess, but I’m not the crazy plant lady on the block. Talk about bad first impressions. I apologize for being a...snappy bitch, not to put it too bluntly. It was bad timing.”

Hunter put up his hands. “Hey, we all have moments. And I do not judge you on it at all. Though, I am curious...”

He paused, like he was afraid to ask. I took a deep breath and waved him on. “Go ahead. You probably want to know if I was really upset about the plant, and if so, why?”

“Yeah,” he replied, his smile actually coming off as genuine.

I shrugged. “It wasn’t the plant so much. It wasn’t special or anything as far as azaleas go. My mom planted those azaleas, and she passed away a couple of years ago.”

“Oof,” he said, putting his hand over his heart. “I feel like a complete asshole. Now I understand why it caught you in the feels.”

I gave a tight-lipped smile, looking down. “Yeah, well, you didn’t know. And that kid definitely didn’t know, so all is

okay.”

I looked at my watch, ready to make an excuse to jet, when he bent down, grabbing my attention. He smiled and pointed down the block. “I was just on my lunch break and was going to grab a sandwich at the deli a block down. Could I ask you to join me? I at least owe you a sandwich for destroying your azaleas.”

“Oh,” I said with a nervous chuckle. “I...uhm...I...” I stopped and pressed my lips together. “I can’t think of any non-ridiculous excuse, so yes, sure. Why not.”

We headed down to the deli, weaving through the Chicago foot traffic, and grabbed a table at the back. Hunter went up and ordered for us, waited, and brought the trays back, sitting down across from me. “I feel like this is not the fanciest of lunches, but they have amazing food.”

I nodded. “Yeah. My mom liked to come here. She knew the original owner back in the seventies.”

He looked surprised. “Wow. Wasn’t the original owner of this place a famous actor?”

“Mhmm,” I replied, hating that part of conversations. “My mom was Diana Crest.”

His lips pursed. “The Diana Crest? The famous actress?”

With a smile, I nodded. I always loved seeing admiration and recognition of my mother. Even in death, she deserved every bit of it. “That’s her.”

He shook his head. “That’s amazing. Now that you say that, I totally see it. You look so much like her. I remember reading about her battle with cancer. I’m sorry for your loss.”

“Thanks,” I replied, taking a deep breath. “So, Hunter from next door. What do you do?”

He chuckled, swallowing a bite of his sandwich. “I’m a record producer. And I’m Hunter Harwell, just in case you accidentally get my mail one day.”

“Any relation to super huge Harwell Corporations?” I didn’t actually think he would say yes.

“My dad runs the company,” he replied, looking down at his drink.

“Oh,” I replied, surprised. “Okay. Sorry. I was actually just joking. I would have assumed the son of Harwell would be...”

“The future of Harwell?” he said with a laugh. “So did my father. But I grew up with a silver spoon, and the world is a big place with a lot of lessons to learn, and a lot of things to do. And none of those things included running a real estate firm, so I never had any intentions of following in my father’s footsteps. I have been obsessed with music my whole life. I wanted to be the lead singer in a band for a long time.”

“What happened with that?”

“I can’t carry a tune in a bucket,” he said, bursting into laughter. “So, I made my own way, went to college, worked my way up at a record company in Los Angeles, and headed out here.”

I was actually incredibly impressed. As someone who grew up with a famous mother, with a family with a ton of money, I knew what that world could be like. Even though he definitely carried an air of douche canoe the first time I met him, he did seem like he was determined to be his own person. It was definitely not a quality I expected.

“How about you?” he asked. “Are you in acting?”

I scoffed. “God, no. Not that my mother’s friends didn’t try. No, I am an editor for a publishing company.”

“Interesting,” he said. “What’s that like?”

I lifted both brows, swallowing my chip. “Well, I work with very eccentric authors, give them bad news, tell them they have to rewrite and talk them off of ledges. But I do get to work from home, which is nice because I have a sister and two brothers here in the States, and being in London, especially with my mom gone, would be difficult.”

“I think I know how you feel about the client part. Musicians are very touchy about their music and hate to be told when something isn’t good. They are so dramatic.”

I rolled my eyes and we both laughed. As the laughter quieted, a calm silence came between us. I was taken back by how comfortable I felt across the table from him. His phone buzzed and he looked at his watch, groaning.

I smiled. “Gotta get back to the grind?”

“Unfortunately,” he replied. “Or fortunately, I guess.”

I dusted off my hands and sipped the last bit of my drink. “Well, I appreciate the neighborly lunch. It was nice getting to know you. And I promise I will not be holding the bush over your head.”

“Good to know,” he laughed. “But I’m still going to get that replacement.”

We both stood up, and he waited for me to grab my bags before walking from the deli. We didn’t say anything as we walked back in the direction we came, but I couldn’t help but feel his presence close to me. We awkwardly shook hands when we reached my parking garage, and I hurried off. I kept a steady pace, taking the steps, all the way to the car. I put my bags in the back, and turned it on, stopping for a moment to catch my breath.

I wasn’t sure if I was running from him, or myself. I had such nice warm vibes for Hunter suddenly. And the iris in the passenger seat was almost staring at me with a snarky wave of its little petals. I narrowed my eyes and grabbed it, sticking it in the back. After each of the two times I had come across him, the man had a way of getting under my skin.

First, it was with his sarcastic, snarky blasé attitude. Now, it was because even though I wanted to hate him, I couldn’t.

I rolled my eyes and put the car in reverse. “Get it together, Teagan. You hate that you don’t totally hate your neighbor. You’re definitely losing it.”

# CHAPTER 4

---

## Hunter

I sat in the only chair I had arranged yet in the house, facing the front window, with a book in my hands. I read and reread the same paragraph about four times before stopping and leaning my head back against the chair. The movement of a tree limb drew my attention outside, but I saw that it was just that the breeze had picked up again.

The book I was reading was a great murder mystery, written by a friend of mine's soon to be wife, but damn if I couldn't stop losing track to glance out the window every three minutes. I tried to tell myself I was just having a rough day with focus, but the truth was, I hadn't been able to get visions of Teagan out of my head since we had lunch. Her smile and laugh lingered in my mind like the lyrics to one of my favorite songs. I had never been the guy that panted over a girl, and waited to catch a glimpse of her, but there I was, planted in my chair, with a view of Teagan's front door.

I wasn't sure exactly what I was waiting for. If I did see her, what was I going to do? Run out the door, across the lawn, and start a random conversation? That would definitely come across as creepy. But there was something in me that longed to see her. I wasn't sure what it was exactly. It was a culmination of things, starting from the moment of her meltdown over the azalea. I had just met her, though, like two days before. Everything about her including her snarky and sarcastic personality irritated the hell out of me.



Or did I find it sexy?

Or was it both?

I sighed and shut my book, rolling my eyes at myself. My phone buzzed and I pulled it from my pocket. It was Anya.

**What are you up to?**

Looking at the book and then out the window, I shook my head as I typed back. **Trying to read while being annoyed by my neighbor.**

She sent back a sad face emoji. **I would have figured a ranch out there would be pretty free and clear of close by neighbors.**

I had almost forgotten I wasn't Hunter Harwell to Anya. I was TJ. **Yeah, no neighbors in viewing distance. I ran into them at the feed store earlier. They're just the kind of person that gets under your skin. You know?**

With a nod, I sent the message. Seemed like the kind of thing someone who owned a ranch would say. Of course, the closest to a ranch owner I had ever been was when I was eight and my two hamsters had babies.

**Yeah. I know that feeling. Unfortunately, all too well.**

I realized that I had gone from bitching about Teagan to myself, to bitching about Teagan to my friend. The woman had completely taken me over. I shook my head and changed the subject. **What are you up to?**

**Nothing much. Just watching a movie and getting ready to head to bed. You?**

Glancing at the window, I decided to lie, obviously. **Pretty much the same. Just decompressing from my day. You ever sit and wonder what your life would be like if you made small different decisions through your life?**

**Like the Butterfly Effect?**

Wrinkling my nose, I tried to think of a way to say what I wanted to say, but couldn't come up with the words. I more meant, if I had just asked Teagan out. If I had just stopped being so closed in. Even further back than that. **Yeah, kind of. I don't know, I'm overthinking.**

**That's not always a bad thing, she replied. Sometimes, you can't help but to overthink. For me, 90% of the time I drive myself crazy with it. But the other ten percent, I actually work things out in my head, come up with some good ideas, or realize something is a bad idea. But the past...it's better to leave that where it is, because that's not overthinking, that's torture.**

I laughed at myself, realizing once again, Anya was right. I was torturing myself. **Good point. Well, have a good day tomorrow, and don't stay up too late overthinking.**

**Likewise. Goodnight.**

**Night.**

I stood up, looking down at my phone, finding that moment the perfect time to force myself to stop spying on the neighbor. As I did, though, the door opened and Teagan walked out, in pajamas again, carrying a bag of trash. I dropped the phone on

the chair and watched as she shut the lid to the trashcan and began to wheel it down the driveway. I backed up, trying to keep myself from making any weird decisions, but after several minutes of talking myself out of it, I failed miserably.

“Fuck it,” I sighed, hurrying to the kitchen.

I had already taken my trashcan down, and the trash bag in the kitchen was empty. I glanced around for anything I hadn't thrown away, then grabbed a trash bag and started randomly throwing things into it. I walked through the pile of boxes left to me unpacked, picking a bookend, a frying pan, several sweaters to fill the bag, and topped it off by dumping a box of books on the floor. I shoved the empty box on the top. I tied the bag and hurried to the front door, taking a deep breath before opening it, attempting to look calm and collected.

I walked quickly down the driveway, coming up next to her as she situated the trashcan and looked up at me. I chuckled, opening the lid to the trash can. “We meet again. Up to anything wild and crazy tonight?”

She chuckled, her eyes glistening in the dim hue of the streetlamp. “That we do. I almost forgot it was trash day. Nothing too wild. Just watching a movie and getting ready to get to bed.”

“Me too. I only knew to take out the trash because the realtor left a very large list of things I could and could not throw out.”

Teagan smiled. “Yeah, they are particular around here. But a little secret...if you leave the trash truck driver a separate

package of brownies and snacks once a month, he lets things slide.”

I chuckled, nodding as she began walking up the driveway. “I’ll remember that.”

She waved over her shoulder, looking back with a smile. “Good night.”

“Night,” I replied, feeling my heart beating wildly in my chest.

I watched until she disappeared into the house, glancing back at the bag I had just thrown in there. It was too risky to take it back out.

“Damn,” I whispered, shutting the lid. “I really liked that sweater.”

I liked something else even better, though. I glanced at Teagan’s house as I made it to my front door. The front lights clicked off, and I imagined her walking through that large place, her hair in a messy ponytail, no makeup, in the cutest llama pajamas I had ever seen. It was absolutely ridiculous, just how amazing I thought she looked. No glitz and glam. No pouty lips or six-inch heels. Just this beautiful curvaceous beauty, all natural, giving me tips on how to sweet talk the garbage man. For some reason, I didn’t think her brownies had anything to do with why they let her slide on trash day.

If I were her garbage man, I’d haul her trash from her house for her. As her front porch light clicked off, I snapped out of it, slapping my hand to my forehead. I opened the door and

locked it behind me, turning my porch light off as well. I didn't know what had gotten into me, but getting involved with the sassy, not afraid to let it all out, neighbor was not what I needed in my life. I had everything I thought I'd never find in my career, and letting another woman into my life that could break that trend, was a bad idea.

No matter how cute her fuzzy llama pajamas were.

# CHAPTER 5

---

## Teagan

The attorney sat back in his chair, his hand resting on his chin, reading over the information Ella had given him. I reached over and gripped my little sister's hand. She was constantly blotting at tears threatening to erupt. No matter how much I hated her ex, I knew that she had fallen in love with him at some point. She had entertained the visions of a future with a man she realized never actually existed. I knew that feeling all too well, maybe not through marriage, but heartbreak was a familiar friend.

“You are lucky,” the attorney said. “With your marriage being the length of time it has been, he will be required to pay you alimony. This prenup that he had you sign is not very good. I would have expected it to be ironclad for a man like him, and we all know who he is. You will still have rights to half of all marital assets, a settlement, and alimony. Does he know you are filing?”

Ella sighed. “No. He is away on business, and I am going to tell him when he gets home.”

The attorney glanced at me and back at the paperwork. I turned to Ella, holding her hand tightly. “I know you want to be civil, and you're hoping he can be too, but with the drastic...change in him, do you really think that's wise. Why don't you just come stay with me. Let the attorney serve him, and we all know you're safe.”

She squeezed my hand in that same way she did when she was younger, a glimmer of naïveté in her eyes. “We once could hold perfectly good conversations. We are married, and this cannot be a shock to him I owe it to our marriage to be the one that acts in good faith.”

The attorney cleared his throat. “Well, we will be ready to serve, so just call my office after you’ve talked to him, and we’ll get the papers to him within the hour. If it’s at night, I want you to text my personal cell so we can get them over first thing in the morning, so he can’t file on you first.”

Ella nodded, swallowing hard. “Thank you.”

I shook the attorney’s hand and smiled. “I appreciate all your help.”

As we walked back to the car, my hand stayed latched to Ella’s. I made sure she got in comfortably and shut the door behind her. When I climbed in, she sniffled but took a strong deep breath, shaking her head. “It sucks. The things that break my heart about this aren’t even things that ever happened. They were visions of our future that I had created in my mind.”

I gave her a comforting smile and squeezed her hand before turning on the car. “I have to do some grocery shopping; do you want to tag along?”

Ella, looking out the window, shook her head. “No. I want to start putting some of my things together. Whether we have a good conversation or not, we won’t be able to live together forever. I’m sure he’ll go stay somewhere, but just in case...



besides, I have a new bubble bath and a full bottle of wine waiting for me.”

I chuckled, nodding. “Whatever you need. And I’m here. Just say the word if you need me to come over when you tell him.”

She gave me a tight-lipped smile and turned back, staring out the window. We drove in silence to her house, where she gave me a kiss on the cheek and headed inside. I hated that she wanted to tell him herself, and I knew it was incredibly dangerous. But I couldn’t force her to come stay with me, and I knew my presence would definitely make it worse. I could only hope he was happy about it, waiting for her to initiate the process.

Feeling the weight of my sister’s broken heart, I headed to the grocery store, going through the aisles, looking at all the different choices. For some reason, grocery shopping calmed me. I never really bought many things outside of my normal list but getting my mind on something else during hard times, helped me clear my subconscious. After thousands of dollars of therapy, I finally realized rows of cereal and pastas did the trick better than anything else.

I meandered through the cereal aisle to the end, looking down at my list. As I looked up, I caught a glimpse of Hunter across the way in the meat section. I immediately backed up, ducking down. Scooting a row of cereal slightly to the side, I peered through at him, under the cover of wheat and barley.

God, he's so hot...NO! Damnit, Teagan...he's annoying and egotistical...except when he's not...and that smile...ugh. Stop it!

I was having an inner battle over Hunter Harwell as I hid behind a line of marshmallow cereal. I could feel the characters on the boxes glaring down at me, judging me. Hell, I was judging myself, but I couldn't stop staring at him.

"Teagan?!" an older woman's voice said, very loudly.

I jumped up, hitting my head on the shelf. Multiple boxes of cereal began cascading down. I moved right and left, trying to catch them all. Everyone in the vicinity stopped and stared as I wildly juggled Fruity Oh's and Marshmallow Elves, even catching one with my foot. I put them back on the shelf one by one, nervously chuckling at people staring as they passed.

The older woman walked up and laughed. "Oh my. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

I put my hand on the shelf, breathing heavily. "No, Mrs. Brown, how are you? I was just...mulling over a cereal purchase."

Mrs. Brown nodded, motioning to the boxes in her cart. "Personally, I go for high bran. It's never too early to keep yourself regular, dear. It's so good to see you. Tell that beautiful sister of yours I said hello."

"I will," I said, waving as I continued to catch my breath, my face reddening like fire.

She stopped and turned back, wagging her finger at me. “You know, you look so much like your mother. For a split second, I thought it was her.”

I smiled kindly as she waddled off, disappearing into the next aisle. I turned and glanced in Hunter’s direction, finding him standing there, with a very snarky smile on his face, watching me in my disaster of a moment. He slowly put his hand up and waved. I let out a deep breath and grinned, embarrassed to the point of turning the corner and racing toward the register, despite the three boxes of Cocoa Dracula with Marshmallows that had fallen in my cart.

The very last thing I wanted was to actually have to face Hunter and hold a conversation with him. I didn’t know if he knew I was spying on him, but he definitely saw my insane display of cereal juggling, along with the wonderful tip of regularity from one of the women that used to bring my mother soup when she was sick. To say I was mortified wasn’t even close to explaining how I felt in that moment. I even thought of just abandoning the cart in the store and picking a new grocery store to frequent. I would just act like that one didn’t exist.

Moving through the line up front, I had to hold back my irritation at the chatty attendant. I was never very chatty, but it was one thing I liked about the place, the sweet people that worked there. That day, though, I would have taken anyone else at the register.

“You really like Cocoa Dracula,” she said with a perky spirit to her voice.

“My...niece and nephew are coming to visit...for a couple of months.”

She nodded, glancing around as she put the items in bags and set them in my cart. She finished ringing me up, took my payment, and as soon as the receipt was in my hand, I bolted toward the door. I was even too afraid to look around, worried I would make eye contact with him, and have to make the choice to refuse to speak to him, or face my own embarrassment. Avoidance was the best policy at the moment. I didn't trust myself not to say something stupid in my panic.

When I made it to my car and got it fully packed up, I slid into the driver's seat and wiped the sweat from my brow. I turned on the car and clicked on the air conditioning, suddenly realizing how crazy and frantic I must have looked inside of the car. I laughed to myself, even though I didn't find my weird reactions to Hunter funny in the least.

“Great, Teagan, you are losing your God Damn mind. And now you have a crap-ton of chocolate cereal to eat.”

I gripped the steering wheel and closed my eyes, letting the cool air brush across my collarbone and around my neck. Just as soon as I thought I had finally caught my breath, and sanity, there was a loud knock on my window. I jumped and looked over, finding Hunter standing there, waving at me. I stared at him for several moments, mostly frozen in fear, before

pressing every window button but my own before finally getting it down.

He glanced inside the car as if he expected to see a full keg tapped in the passenger seat. “You, okay?”

What came out of me was something I had never actually personally experienced before. While I wanted to state calmly and firmly that I was indeed okay, when I opened my mouth, an insane giggle rolled from my throat. Hunter smiled and chuckled with me. He pointed over his shoulder at the supermarket. “I saw your sweet moves back there with the cereal. You were like a juggler and a pro soccer player. I never imagined you killing it like that with the morning meal, but those were really sweet moves.”

I giggled again. In my head, I was screaming at myself to stop giggling. What was I? High on helium? Was I a fifteen-year-old girl?

Finally, I shut my mouth and took a deep breath, turning and looking at him. “Thanks. I practice in my free time.”

He smiled at me and nodded. “I gotta run. See you around?”

I gave a stout nod, pointed at him, and flipped my hand into a thumbs up before rolling up the window. In that moment, I had two choices, let the embarrassment wash over me and live with it, or leave, catch a plane, move to some remote area of the jungle, and never show my face again. Despite my desperate hatred of humidity, for a moment, I seriously considered the move.

Whatever Hunter had done, he had done it good. He was under my skin, and I couldn't decide whether I liked him there, or if I wanted to remove him. I needed to make a choice, and in the meantime, stop acting like a nut case.

# CHAPTER 6

---

## Hunter

“Trevor, it’s Hunter Harwell. How are you doing?” I said, leaning back in my chair.

“I’m good, Hunter. Look, I know you really want to sign my guy, and he’s pretty impressed by the company, but what you originally went over isn’t going to be enough. We both know that.”

Great, he was playing hardball right out of the gate. “Hey, I know that it was just an initial interest letter. Our company is one of the biggest in the world, and we’re that way because of the success we push our talent to. But we are picky, and we don’t just take anyone.”

“I would hope not,” the agent said. “But my client doesn’t care about anyone else. He wants to know he will get a fair deal. Did you get my email?”

I smiled, shaking my head. “I got it.”

“And?”

I chuckled. “Trevor, you’ve been in this business long enough to know that those numbers aren’t realistic. The highest grossing talent out there doesn’t make those numbers.”

“No,” he replied. “But my client has an established fan base, which continues to grow, without any drop off in sight. Three singles in one year, with a tiny label out of Albuquerque. Obviously, it’s not the label selling these songs, Hunter.”



I rubbed my temples. I had dealt with Trevor in the past, but he never had a talent like the client my company was trying to woo over now. He knew exactly what he had too, and he would negotiate down to the penny. Parker had given me the lead on it, and if I landed it, I would get the bonus and the production title on it. That would be golden, but the way Trevor was acting, and the way I knew how flippant he was in the industry, made him volatile at best. I wouldn't put it past him to walk away from us for some smaller label with a higher bonus for him.

“Alright, here's what I can promise as a starting point, and then if you come here, sit face to face with my team and me, we can negotiate the terms everyone will be happy about. Remember, it's only the beginning here. You'll keep representing him and that means yearly bonuses, that's notoriety, that's big clients.”

I sent the minimums back and waited as he read them. I knew I had struck a nerve with the notoriety bit. Trevor wasn't the guy that really looked down the road. He saw what was in front of him and had a good chance of cutting himself off. But signing with a huge label made him a commodity for artists. They would be calling him right and left, and we'd have an in with him. He'd bring all his new talent to us first.

After several minutes, Trevor cleared his throat. “Alright. Alright, fine. Get me your secretary, and I'll fly out next week and meet with you. But don't screw me here, Hunter.”

“No chance,” I replied. “I look forward to seeing you, dude.”

Before he could go on anymore, I passed him to my secretary, sending her a note to schedule him for the next week, pay for his flight and hotel as extra sugar on top. I clapped my hands together and nodded, proud of myself for that. Trevor wasn't hard to work with. He was just dumb and never knew what he really had when he had it. Which made him annoying and difficult. But his current client was a golden ticket.

My cell rang, and I picked it up, seeing Parker's name on the screen. “Meeting set up for next week with Trevor. I hooked him with the future bonuses and the clients he would get flocking in. I even sent him a minimum lower than what the company okayed.”

“Nice,” Parker replied. “Honestly, I knew you could do it. I just didn't want to deal with that douche. He's a real pain in my ass.”

I chuckled. “Thanks. Appreciate the career-long headache you just saddled me with.”

“Speaking of headaches,” Parker replied. “Can you come down to production? There's some sort of issue with some of Miranda's tracks, and I need you to make a last call on this.”

I rolled my eyes, sighing. “Be there in five.”

Hanging up the phone, I grabbed my suit jacket, buttoned it, and combed my fingers through my hair. My secretary was

still working with Trevor, giving me a blank stare as I walked past. I chuckled and headed to the elevator, heading down to production. Parker and two of the techs were there when I arrived.

“Alright, what’s the fire? She laid those down so beautifully.”

One of the tech guys nodded. “Yeah, but there was a blip in the system. It’s created this weird hum to her tone, and we’ve done everything, even called the system’s company, and can’t get it out.”

“How bad is it? Like recognizable to the public? Or just recognizable to you guys because you’re paid to hear it?”

Parker nodded to them. “Play it to him.”

They played the first song, which started out okay but quickly melted down. I cringed, sighed, shook my head. “How many songs are like this?”

“Track 4, 5, and 9.”

I punched my fist into my palm. “Damn. Track five is the single. Damnit.”

Parker clapped his hand on my back. “Sorry, man. Give her folks a call, trip on us, but she’s gonna have to come back out from LA as soon as possible and relay those three tracks. We have a replacement coming for the system tomorrow, so we’ll be good to go.”

I nodded, heading from the office. Parker followed. “Hey, and good job on the new client. You got it in the bag, don’t

worry about that. Things never run smoothly, but in the end, when it's done and released, you can sit back and breathe.”

I smiled and waved as he headed off in the other direction, taking a call. Heading back to the office, I sent Miranda a text, knowing I wanted to head her off before talking to her parents. I wanted her to know the whole situation, so she knew from the source that it was nothing she had done. I chuckled at my secretary as I passed, still on the phone with Trevor. She smirked and flipped me off.

My day didn't have a ton more on the books, but I knew the Miranda thing would take quite a bit of time. While I waited for her call, I sat back, resting my head against the chair. I let my mind wander back to where it had been for days, to Teagan. I replayed her in the grocery store, over and over again, knocking her head on the shelf and then circus juggling multiple boxes of cereal. Part of me wondered if she bought the ones that had fallen in her cart or not, but I could tell she was embarrassed.

To be honest, I thought the whole thing was adorable. Not to mention the fact that I hadn't ever heard a grown woman giggle the way she did when I walked up to her window. I would have stayed longer and talked to her, but I finally realized I was the cause of her laughter. She was nervous, and I didn't know how to take that. Up to that point, I wasn't sure I had any effect on her at all, giggles or frowns. In reality, though, I didn't know why I was putting so much thought into it. The woman was kind of a mess, and half the time, I didn't know whether I wanted to fuck her or fight her.

Or maybe it was a little bit of both.

My phone rang, pulling me from my thought. I looked down to see it was Miranda calling. “Hey, kiddo. How’s school going?”

She sighed. “You know, teenage life in California where everyone thinks they are better than you, and teenagers are having plastic surgery.”

I chuckled. “So, I have some news. Three of your tracks got messed up.”

“Oh god,” she gasped. “I thought I did everything right. I mean, are they going to drop me because of this? I know it’s my first record deal, but please tell them I can fix it.”

“Hey, hey,” I said, chuckling. “Take a deep breath. Not a single part of it was your fault. Something happened with the system, which attached a weird mechanical whining sound to three of the tracks. Unfortunately, there is nothing we can do to remove the sound. I’m gonna call your parents and arrange for you to come back asap to relay them. I just wanted to tell you before they do, so you know that it was nothing you did. Everyone loves the tracks. You did amazing.”

“Oh god,” she said, panting. “I’m gonna have a heart attack. I’m so glad it’s not my fault. My parents will find something to blame on me, but now I know. Besides, I like Chicago. If I could, I would move there. You should adopt me.”

I laughed, leaning back. “Sorry, kid. I’m a single guy living it up in Chicago.”

Miranda scoffed. “Boring. Okay, I have to get back to class. I’ll see you soon, then.”

Smiling, I hung up the phone. Miranda was a good kid, and I felt almost like a big brother to her. In some ways, since the issue wasn’t her fault, she was probably happy to come back out to Chicago and get away from the assholes in California. I knew exactly the kind of people she was talking about too. I grew up there, went to school with those kids, and dealt with the stress of everyone thinking they were better than you. It sucked.

Glancing at my watch, I was glad the day was nearing an end. I spent the rest of it returning emails to prospective clients, and handling Miranda’s parents. They were actually pretty chill about everything, and since I told them that their little girl was perfect and it was our fault actually reinforced their bloated views of themselves as super parents. If nothing else, it would keep the heat off her for a bit and give her something to look forward to. Before long, she would be out of those schools, touring, home schooling, and surrounded by enough people who would be able to buffer the insanity of her parents for a bit. The closest thing I could compare them to were pageant moms, only instead of their daughter being pink ruffles, she was soul and blues.

After everything was squared away, I headed home, thankful for the peace and quiet that awaited me. Working at the label had been challenging and rewarding, but at the same time, I didn’t have two seconds throughout my day to relax. I knew that with big clients coming, records being released, and

awards seasons around the corner, my window of relaxation would grow smaller and smaller. So a beer, a book, and some unpacking sounded like the perfect way to spend my evening. Maybe some messaging with Anya too. I had been so busy I had barely been able to chat with her lately.

As I turned down my driveway, I glanced at Teagan's place. The white Mercedes parked in her driveway was not a car I had ever seen there before. Actually, I had never seen any car parked there. She parked in the garage, and she wasn't the girl with a ton of visitors. This, though, something about it wasn't sitting right with me, and even though I felt a twinge of jealousy roll through me, that wasn't it either. My day had come with challenge after challenge, and for some reason, I felt like it wasn't done yet.

# CHAPTER 7

---



## Teagan

**M**y thoughts over the last few days had been bouncing around so much. From the chaotic client I had, to the tiresome routine, I had gotten myself into, to my embarrassment in the store, and the way Hunter looked when he smiled at me. There was something playful in his eye, almost like our snarky banter and the incredibly thick cloud of tension between us was a game. If it was, I still wasn't sure whether I liked the game, or wanted to set the whole thing ablaze.

Sighing, I shifted my attention back to the edited manuscript on my computer, rereading the last couple of paragraphs. I was losing my mind with the extra work the company had handed me when they realized Russell, my main client, was going to be in a feverish neurotic frenzy for the next several months. These additional books I was working on weren't nested under their large publishing title, but instead, a small sister firm, specializing in non-fiction books. The current read was giving me the low down on the wild world of hedge funds.

To be fair, I had actually retained far more information than I normally would reading a book like that, which boasted very well for the author, but still...zzzzz. It was far too easy to give into the rush of dopamine I received anytime my mind began to wander toward the neighbor. Then again, over the last few days I was almost positive I could have been reading the next

great American novel and my mind still would have filtered over to Hunter's great ass.

I took off my reading glasses for a moment and rubbed my eyes, squeezing the bridge of my nose. I was over-tired, burnt out, and just far too stressed. That was all that my weird little infatuation had to do with. That was the lie I had been trying to convince myself of for days. Because my body was craving relaxation, fun, and basically anything to do with life outside of work, it latched onto the first feel good thing it could. That happened to be Hunter.

Did I truly believe that?

No. Not a chance in hell. I had more free time with the publishing company over the last two years than I'd had the last ten years combined. But there had to be a good reason I felt like I was being pulled toward the man like a magnet to metal. There had to be a reason I couldn't get him out of my mind. Maybe I was just losing my own.

A loud knock on the front door startled me. My body jolted in my chair, and my eyes shifted up, looking down the hallways toward the front door. I sat there for a moment, slightly fearful, unsure why anyone would need to bang that loudly on the door. Several seconds went by and the bagging started again, this time frantic. I jumped up and headed slowly toward the door.

"Who is it?"

I reached out and put my hand on the lock, waiting. My sister's muffled whimper was barely audible. Immediately, I

swung open the door, finding Ella standing there, two bags, barely closed, in her hands. Her hood was pulled up, but I could see the tears streaming down her face. I grabbed the bags from her, stepping to the side. “Holy hell, get in here. What happened?”

I closed and locked the door, spinning around as my sister pulled her hood down. Her ponytail was half out, mascara ran down her face, and a forming bruise was bright red on her forehead. My eyes widened, and anger rushed me, nearly blinding me. “He came home. I guess someone clued him in on me filing before I could tell him...”

Her voice broke into sobs. I grabbed her before her knees could buckle, holding her tightly in my arms. “Shhh. Okay. Come on. Let’s get you in here and cleaned up.”

I had to hold back the rage. I had to do everything I could to not stomp out of that house and beat the man with my own fists. Seeing my sister like that tore through me, but at that moment, I needed to get her calm, breathing and sensibly thinking. Then, we could decide what came next. It was probably the best decision, considering I didn’t think landing myself in jail would do much good.

Her breath was jagged through her tears as I sat her down in the kitchen chair and grabbed some supplies. I handed her an ice pack. “Hold this to your forehead, okay? Try to take deep breaths. I just want to make sure the swelling goes down.”

She breathed deeply through her nose and clenched her eyes shut as I wiped away the mascara and tears. The bump was big

but wouldn't need anything medically. I threw away the unneeded bandages that were already out of the package and sat across from her, leaning forward and taking her hands. "Ella, we need to call the police."

She sat up, stiff in the chair, shaking her head. "No. I mean, trust me, the man deserves it, but I just want this to be over with. He didn't really do anything for the police to arrest him for. I don't want to go through court and all of that."

Ella's voice was panicky, and I nodded, knowing I could approach the subject when she was a bit calmer and more level-headed. For that moment, though, I just wanted her to relax. "Okay. Calm down. Try to relax. You are safe, here with me."

She nodded, sinking back into the chair as she grimaced, pulling the ice pack from her forehead. The tears had stopped, and an angered look moved across her face. "Dick. He is such a dick." She closed her eyes for a moment and gathered herself. "He didn't hit me. But, he was angry, really angry, and he came home screaming. I was scared, you know? So, I grabbed the bags I had started to pack and threw more stuff in them. I refused to speak to him at that point. I knew...I knew you were right. There was nothing left of the man I thought I married...if he was ever there at all."

I nodded, letting her talk. Reaching over, I grabbed a water bottle and handed it to her. She twisted off the cap and took a sip, shaking her head. "When I was done packing, he was standing in the doorway. I could smell the liquor on him,

permeating through his skin. He wouldn't get out of the way, so eventually, I just shoved past him. He grabbed me, my bags, trying to stop me from leaving. I screamed at him to let me go. You know I have two left feet even when I'm calm. When he let me go, I just ran down the steps, wanting to get away from the whole thing. I really thought we could have an actual adult conversation. On the halfway landing, I tripped over nothing. My feet just caught the carpet and I slammed myself in the wall like a dummy. He tried to make sure I was okay, but I didn't want to fall back into his trap."

I gritted my teeth. "And what happened then?"

She rolled her eyes. "I shook it off, and I stopped and looked at him. I told him it was over. To let me go. He basically told me I was his property and would do what he told me. I told him, calmly, not anymore. He roared and threw our wedding photo down the steps. The glass cracked when it crashed against the stairs. I stood there for a moment, gathering myself. He was just fucking laughing. I turned to get out, and he started chasing me. So, I didn't even put my shoes on."

Her voice cracked, and I leaned forward, wrapping my arms around her. "Shhh. I know. I'm so sorry, Ella. You are safe now, and you never have to go back there. Don't worry about your things; we'll sort all of that out later. I may live here, but this is your house too. Mom would have wanted you here. You know she would have done anything to keep you safe."

Ella chuckled through her tears. “I know. She would have already gone over there, pointing her manicured fingers into his chest. She was freaking fearless. I think that trait skipped me. You’re so much like Mom.”

I laughed. “Well, I think we both got a lot of Mom. You got her comfort and sweetness, her smile, her love. I got her sass and feeling like I have to take care of the world. As far as being fearless, don’t count yourself out. It took a lot of guts to pack up, to file for divorce, and to leave like you did.”

She shrugged. “The part I’m more worried about is telling our brothers.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, they’re gonna want to kill him. But don’t worry, they aren’t around the corner like me, so we should be able to talk them down before they get here.”

Ella showed a small smile, and I squeezed her hands. “We should do a warm bath for you, and some movies, and I can sort out your suitcases.”

As she nodded, the sound of a car coming up the driveway put us both on alert. I patted her knees and walked up to the front door, peeking out of the side window. William, her husband, was in the driver’s seat. Next door, I could see Hunter pulling up to his house. Immediately, I turned and headed back, pulling my sister to her feet. “I want you to go sit in the living room. Don’t come around the corner. Don’t say a word. If you hear anything dangerous, call the cops.”

Ella’s face twisted in fear. “Oh, God. He’s here.”

I shook my head, calming my tone. “It’s fine. He is not allowed in here. Please, just do this for me, and I’ll get rid of him.”

She swallowed hard and nodded, tears filling her eyes again. I smiled at her as she walked into the living room and sat down on the corner of the couch, looking back at me. As soon as I turned, the smile left my lips. Adrenaline was pumping through me, and my heart was beating wildly in my chest. I knew William, but I wasn’t comfortable around him in the least.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door and stepped out on the stoop, closing it behind me. William slammed the car door and marched toward me, his tie half undone, his hair a mess, and a significant waver in his step. It was obvious he had been drinking.

As soon as he saw me, he pointed at me. “This is none of your business, Teagan. I want my wife. She needs to stop this bullshit and come home now.”

I firmly planted my feet as he walked up the steps, stopping right in front of me. I crossed my arms over my chest. “Leave. You are not welcome here.”

William smirked, shaking his head as he whispered. “Get out of my way, Teagan. My wife owns part of this house, and I’ll come and go as I please.”

He tried to move around me, and I shifted with him, keeping him from the door. “I’ll call the cops. Go home and sober up. Ella is not coming out here, and she is not leaving with you.”

His jaw tightened, and he lunged forward, grabbing me by both of my arms, squeezing tightly. He yelled loudly, his voice echoing across the lawn. “GET OUT OF MY WAY, BITCH. NOW!”

I may have looked brave and held my ground, but my knees were beginning to shake, and from the look in William’s eyes, I could see that no boundaries were holding him back.



# CHAPTER 8

---

## Hunter

*I really need to get the garage cleaned out* , I told myself as I parked in front of it. The one thing I had really been adamant about when picking out a house, was that it needed to have a garage. Living in the city, you either found street parking, or you lived in a nice enough place to have a parking garage. Before I got the job at the label, I had the street parking, a nonstop game of loops around a block until someone left and you squeezed into their spot. But moving on my own had been a bit stressful, and I had become the guy who put off unpacking by stacking boxes in the garage, so I didn't have to stare at them.

Glancing over at the car parked next door, I watched as a guy climbed out of the driver's seat, looking a mess. Teagan walked out of the front door and stood in front of it with her arms crossed. She did not look happy to see whoever the guy was. I paused, watching for a moment, getting the feeling that whatever was going on, was not some happy arrival of a guest. The guy swayed back and forth as he walked, obviously drunk.

I couldn't hear what they were saying, but he was steadily approaching her, and I didn't like that one bit. Slowly, I opened my door and got out, setting my bag and coffee mug on the top of the car. I watched, trying to pretend like I was doing something, not wanting to be that nosy neighbor. Part of me was praying to see some sort of smile or laugh out of

Teagan, anything to show me that my gut instinct was completely wrong.

The guy climbed the stairs and stood directly in front of her. He was saying something, but I couldn't hear them at all. Teagan shook her head defiantly. The guy moved to go around her, and she moved with him, obviously blocking his entrance into the house. It wasn't like he was some unknown intruder, but it was definitely someone who was unwanted.

When he smiled, I almost let my guard down, but suddenly he lunged forward and grabbed her by the arms, screaming so loudly, that the entire neighborhood could hear him. "GET OUT OF MY WAY, BITCH. NOW!"

Teagan thrashed right and left, trying to get out of his grip. She couldn't get loose from his grip. In those moments, I wasn't quite sure how I got from where I was parked, to the base of her stairs. One minute I was watching, and the next, something so primal and instinctual came over me, that I had no control over it. Seeing that man's hands on Teagan in anger blinded me.

Grabbing the guy by the back of the shirt, I yanked him down the steps and tossed him back. Turning to face him, I immediately reared back, slamming my fist into his cheek. He stumbled backward, trying to keep himself on his feet. Hunched over, his hand pressed to his cheek, I could see him take several deep breaths before looking up at me with a rageful calm that would have normally set off immediate alarms in my head.

“Obviously, the lady doesn’t want you here,” I growled.  
“So, leave.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” the guy growled, his eyes shifting from my feet up to my head.

He looked me up and down several times, seeing that I was a bit taller than him, and definitely a lot broader than he was. He was lean but had no real muscle mass to him. He rolled his shoulders and shifted his eyes to Teagan behind me.

“You tell your little sister I hope she got everything she wanted, because we’re done. I don’t need her nagging shit in my life anymore. I should have known not to marry her. You’re both just like your mother. Useless, and you have no idea where your place truly is.”

I squared my shoulders at him, and he scoffed, shaking his head. He reached in his pocket and turned, stumbling back to his car. I stood there in protective mode, waiting and watching as he got in his car and squealed down the driveway, nearly taking out the mailbox. As he pulled off, he stuck his hand out the window, flipping the bird. I rolled my eyes and waited until he had completely disappeared out of sight.

Behind me, I could hear Teagan, let out a long deep breath. Quickly I turned to find her standing there, one hand on her forehead, the other pressed to the doorframe, holding herself up. I quickly raced up the steps and put my hands gently on her elbows. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, gathering herself. “No, I’m fine. I’m so sorry. The last thing someone wants is to move into their new house

and find some crazy drama next door.”

I shook my head. “Please. I lived in downtown Chicago. There was way worse than that when it came to neighbors. I knew the day we ran down your azaleas you would be interesting.”

She chuckled and then shoved out her bottom lip. I could tell she was trying to hold it together. “Hey. Come here.”

I wrapped my arms around her, and for a moment, she relaxed into me. “That was not the way I thought my night would end.”

“Me either,” I chuckled as she pulled back, wiping away a tear. “But I’m glad I came home when I did.”

She nodded. “My little sister, Ella, she filed for divorce, and that is her husband. He found out. I found her knocking on my door an hour ago, no shoes, carrying suitcases, with a whole lot of tears and a welt on her forehead from when she tried to run out of the house because of his incessant need to scream and threaten people. I had just gotten her to calm down when he pulled up. Thank you.”

I gave her a smile. “Did you call the police?”

She shook her head. “Not yet. I need Ella to be the one to do it, and right now, she doesn’t want to. But I think she’ll come around...Oh no. That looks like it hurts.”

I followed her eyes down to my fist. I hadn’t actually noticed any pain until she said something. My knuckles were swollen and red, and there was a small cut on the top, the

blood smeared across my skin. “Oh. Ha. Guess I’m not really the guy who punches people on a regular basis. It’ll be fine.”

Teagan took a deep breath, her face shifting. She shook her head. “No. I’ll get that cleaned up and iced. Come in. I’ll pour you a drink. Just give me a few minutes to get my sister situated. I’m sure she’s freaking out in the living room right now.”

I glanced over at the window to the side with a smirk. “Or she’s watching from the window right there.”

Teagan opened the door, and I followed her in, finding her sister popping out from the room to the right. Teagan closed the door and I stepped to the side. Her sister stood there, looking from her to me and back again before throwing herself into my arms, hugging me tightly. “Thank you so much. You saved my sister. You’re my sister’s hero.”

I chuckled, glancing over at Teagan, who smiled and clicked the locks on the front door. “Come on, Ella. Don’t choke the man out.”

She smiled under her purple bruise and stepped back abashedly. “Sorry. Thank you.”

I nodded. “Of course.”

Teagan put her arm around her sister’s waist. “This is my sister, Ella. Ella, this is my neighbor, Hunter.”

Ella smiled. “I guess he made up for running down Mom’s azalea.”

Teagan chuckled with red cheeks. “I guess so. Um, Hunter, if you want to come in and make yourself comfortable in the living room, I’m going to get Ella into a nice calming bath.”

I nodded and followed them into the living room, looking around at the beautiful painting hanging on the walls. Teagan winked at me, sending a flourishment of butterflies through my stomach as she walked her sister down the hall to the other part of the house. I could tell by the way she carefully handled her sister, and how she wanted to fix my hand, that Teagan was a caregiver. She put her emotions aside to ensure other people were taken care of. It was sweet, but I still worried about how she would handle everything.

As I sat in the quiet, I looked around at the décor of the place. It felt like a combination of the woman the media portrayed her mother as, eccentric and artsy, and Teagan. Or at least what I had come to know about Teagan. She seemed practical, almost simplistic in a way. To the right was a set of glass double doors. I picked myself up from the very comfortable couch and walked over, looking through the glass. It was a library, and the shelves were brimming with books from floor to ceiling. I took note, knowing it would be the perfect way to talk to Teagan again, knowing I could come borrow my next book from her.

Not many people knew that behind the boyish charm and music persona, I actually loved to read. I read all genres, no matter what they were. I loved fiction books. I knew it came from my youth, escaping to another world for a little while, forgetting my daily troubles and the drama and stress of my

family. As I got older, though, I had actually started to appreciate the language and art of fiction, not that I told anyone that. My friends weren't really the type of guys you sat around talking literature with.

“That’s my favorite room,” Teagan said from behind me. “I actually renovated it when I moved in, making it larger. This house had far too many bedrooms, so I extended it. You can have too many bedrooms, but you can never have too many books.”

Smiling, I turned to find her holding a small tray with rubbing alcohol, gauze, and ointment. “It’s amazing. Have you read all of them?”

Teagan scoffed, nodding for me to walk over to the couch. “I wish. I have not had the time to really read a lot. I mean, I obviously read a lot for work, but its different reading to edit and reading for the enjoyment of it. I’ll get around it to it one day.”

I sat down across from her, my eyes fixated on her face as she went to work, cleaning my cut, putting ointment on it, and then a band-aid. I looked down at the purple unicorn bandage and lifted my brows.

She laughed. “Sorry. I didn’t realize I didn’t have any normal band-aids. I bought those for my brother’s daughter when she was here visiting.”

“I like it,” I said with a smirk. “It fits my personality. You have a brother?”



She broke up an ice pack, glancing up and nodding. “We have two half-brothers. My father remarried a long time ago and had the boys. They are both married now with kids. We have a big family, and I miss them. They live in Boston, where my father and stepmother live. They usually visit a couple of times a year. Do you have siblings?”

I shook my head. “No, just me. My family is in Southern California where my father still runs his company. Well, I moved my grandmother out here with me. She loves it here and stays at a senior place outside of the city. It’s nicer than anything I’ve ever lived in. She has a ton of friends, which I’m glad because she’s a wonderful woman.”

“That’s really sweet,” Teagan said, meeting my eyes for the first time. “Okay, hold this on there to get the swelling down. If it’s still red and swollen tomorrow, you should probably get it checked to make sure you didn’t break anything.”

I chuckled. “Yes, nurse.”

She smiled as she cleaned up the supplies, setting them on the coffee table. “Really, I’m so thankful that you did what you did. I feel terrible. Is there anything I can do to show my thanks for you having to dawn your superhero cape in broad daylight?”

I didn’t think. The words just spilled out. “Have dinner with me.”

Her eyes roved over my face several times before she smiled sweetly. “I think I can manage that. No crime fighting this time.”

“It’s a date then,” I replied.

# CHAPTER 9

---

## Teagan

“I’m sorry I’m late,” I said, putting my bag down and sitting at the table. “Traffic was stupid, and I had to make sure Ella was good to go before I left.”

Linds looked at me, surprised. “Ella? Did she get lonely while the idiot is away on business?”

Lindsey, or “Linds” as I had always called her, was my best friend. We met at Northwestern when we were assigned as roommates. After that, we were attached at the hip. Linds was the complete opposite of me, personality-wise. She was outgoing, wide-eyed, and loved feeling every emotion she could possibly get her hands on. Even in tears over a heartbreak, she feels alive. She also happened to be the first person to hate William, after an awkward flirtation with him at my sister’s wedding. It was something we never told my sister, making the excuse that he had far too much to drink that night.

“Oh boy,” I sighed. “I haven’t gotten to tell you yet.”

Linds poured me a glass of wine and leaned forward. “Oh boy. And I thought we were going to have nothing to talk about but my disaster of a love life.”

I chuckled. “Well, a week ago, my sister filed for divorce while William was away on a business trip.”

Linds rolled her eyes. “You mean a rendezvous with his mistress. Right. Go on.”

“Yeah, well, he found out and came home early,” I replied. “There was a fight, some bickering, and my sister showed up at my door barefoot with two bags, and a bruise on her forehead.”

“That son of a bitch,” she growled. “Did you castrate him? I would have castrated him.”

“I wanted to, trust me,” I said, gulping my first glass of wine. “But she needed me more, so I put on the responsible sister suit and got to work. Well, about an hour into it, William showed up at the house.”

Linds gasped, sipping her wine. “Baseball bat to that pretty perfect smile.”

I chuckled. “I went outside to send him off, but he was drunk, as usual, and definitely did not have the best process of thought. He grabbed me, tried to get past me , and get in the house.”

Linds sat forward. “Oh my God. What did you do?”

“I didn’t have a chance to do anything. My neighbor, Hunter, came racing over, grabbed William, threw him into the yard and gave him the most satisfying sucker punch I’ve ever seen in my life.”

Linds rolled her eyes and groaned. “I wish I could have seen that. It would’ve been the ultimate point of my life. Seriously.”

“Right?! It was so crazy.”

“So, is Ella going to press charges?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t think it’s in her hands anymore. We called the lawyer the next day and he had her do a full report with the police and filed an emergency restraining order. The judge is allowing him to represent her without her being in the courtroom Right now, the emergency order is standing. The rest of it, to determine whether the restraining order can stay in place for an extended period will be in a month or so. Hopefully, things are getting settled by then. We’ll see.”

Linds shook her head. “Poor baby Ella. She’s so sweet. Until the wedding, though, I have to admit, William fooled everyone.”

I shrugged. “I always thought he was a douche, but most rich boys are. I just thought she saw a different side of him that we didn’t, you know?”

Linds sneered. “She did, it just wasn’t a good one. So, your neighbor...this is the recording guy that you freaked out on over a bush, right?”

I groaned. “I feel like that’s going to define our friendship forever.”

Lindsey laughed. “No, I just mean, I thought he was an arrogant ass too.”

“I mean, ugh, he kind of is,” I replied. “I saw him the next day downtown and he seems like he’s maybe a bit more normal than I thought. Maybe...I guess I’ll find out tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Yeah...so afterwards, I felt really bad about him stepping in like that. I was icing his hand and asked him what I could do to make it up to him. He asked me to have dinner with him...and I said yes.”

Linds’ mouth dropped open. “You’re going on a date with him!”

I shook my head. “No. No. It’s not a date. It’s a thank you for being a good guy, not letting me be assaulted by a drunk guy, dinner at his house next door.”

Linds put up an eyebrow. “Mhmm. It’s a date.”

I groaned, shaking my head. “Not a date. Besides, I have no time for that stuff. And the last guy a girl would ever want to date is her neighbor. The housing market is abysmal right now.”

Linds snorted. “So is the dating market.”

I took that opportunity to shift the conversation to her latest dating failure. Thankfully, she took the bait. In the back of my mind though, as much as I told myself it was not a date, I was pretty nervous about it. Not only had I not been on a date in a very long time, but the idea of being alone with Hunter made me a combination of giddy and nervous at the same time. It was not an emotion that I was used to or understood. But plans had been made, and I wasn’t going to cancel on him.

Since I hadn’t seen Linds in weeks, our meet-up went on for hours, and by the time I got home, I had about an hour to get ready. Ella was napping, as she had been since she got there,

especially with the medication her therapist gave her for anxiety. She would most likely be out until after I got back from dinner. She knew I had plans though, and I'd be right next door if anything happened. For all intents and purposes, Ella was being a trooper, strong willed, and much braver than I would have expected.

I didn't have time for a second shower, but seeing as the weather was cool, and I hadn't done anything that day except chatting with Linds, I changed my clothes and straightened my hair, spritzing on some perfume. I wasn't sure what to wear, and I didn't want to go too fancy, but I didn't want to show up in a sweatshirt and jeans either. I changed three times before landing on a pair of wide-leg dress pants, a white bodysuit, and a pair of flats. It was more office casual than date.

Then again...it wasn't a date, right?

My phone buzzed, showing a message from TJ. **I have a date tonight and I can't decide on wine.**

I smiled. **Are you eating red meat?**

**No meat. Pasta.**

**I would go with white,** I replied. **But get both and offer a choice.**

**You rock.**

**I know. You owe me. I'll put it on the tab.**

**I'll be well into my next life before I pay your friendship tab back.**



I smiled and just about put my phone down when I got a text from Hunter. “Dinner is done, so come over anytime. I set us up on the back deck.”

“Thanks. Be there in ten minutes.”

Puffing out my cheeks, I stared at my reflection. I wasn’t sure why I was so obsessed with how I looked; the man had seen me in llama pajamas before. Finally, in my own frustration, I waved it off and grabbed the house keys, checking on my sleeping sis one more time before heading out. I locked and set the alarm and headed over, stopping midway in surprise. Lining the small stone walkway to the fenced backyard were candles with a handwritten sign. “This way, Teagan.”

I chuckled and walked the path into the backyard, finding Hunter standing on the deck, wearing a pair of khakis and a button down. He looked relaxed, and far different from the man I was used to seeing. The one who looked like he always had somewhere to be.

“Good evening,” he said, walking over to the steps as I climbed them. “Welcome to the Café Hunter.”

I chuckled, finding a table with a tablecloth, a candle in the middle, and sparkly lights strung around for lighting. A silver dome covering the food was on each place setting, and there was a cart with different beverages. He pulled out my chair and pushed it in as I took a seat.

“What can I get you to drink? This evening we are having a broccoli fettuccini with a side salad.”

I couldn't help but smile. "I'll have a glass of water, and a glass of white wine."

Hunter's voice had a French accent. "Ah, perfect choice, mademoiselle. This is a tart, earthy chardonnay from the Tacoma Valley..."

He poured me a glass and sat down across from me, laughing. "Thanks for coming. How is your sister doing?"

I took a sip of my wine and sighed. "Good, considering. We got the restraining order. She is recovering and is tougher than she looks."

"She has you to look up to," he replied, raising his glass. "It's hard not to be strong around strong people. But how are you doing with all of this?"

"Well, it's stressful and takes up my brain space all the time. I guess I'm just moving through it, doing the best I can to be there for my sister, and make sure that she's okay. It will eventually all be over, and she can try to move forward and start a new life. That's one thing me and her both know about, starting over. We were with our mother when she started over after her divorce. Though, my father is nothing like William. They actually had a relatively quiet divorce, thankfully."

Hunter nodded. "Quiet or not, I'm sure it was hard in its own way. But...I propose that for tonight, we make a rule, that unless you want to talk about it, we have a night of no drama, discussing whatever else you want to talk about. Just relax for a moment in this bubble restaurant."

I smiled, surprised by his thoughtfulness. The man had a lot of layers, and though I knew it could literally all be an act, he wasn't coming off as arrogant as I had once thought. I didn't lower any of my walls, and definitely was not going to let there be any...physical contact, but I would give him the benefit of the doubt for the evening. Maybe he would surprise me, and if nothing else, it was a nice break from the stressors of my life.

Maybe, the date but not a date, wasn't going to be such a bad thing after all.

# CHAPTER 10

---

## Hunter

I opened the drawer in the kitchen, rolling my eyes at myself. I had put out everything but silverware. My phone buzzed in my pocket. Pulling it out, I saw Anya's name on the screen.

### **How's the date?**

I chuckled, glancing over at the sliding glass door. Teagan was sitting outside, looking at her phone. The candlelight flickered on her beautiful face, and a warmth filled my chest. I started to type something mushy but stopped myself. Anya had been the only female contact I had for a long time, and my feelings recently with Teagan had been confusing. I wanted to keep Anya exactly what she was, someone separated, someone I could talk nonsense with.

**You know, just another date. At least I'm not bored on a Saturday night.**

I shoved the phone back in my pocket and headed outside. Teagan put her phone away and smiled as I handed her the silverware. "Oh, good. I was starting to think I should have brought my smock. I never thought of alfredo as finger food, but I don't judge."

Chuckling, I sat back down. "So, you have a dad and stepmother in Boston, with your two brothers. What does your father do?"

She swallowed a bite of food. “My father was in the movie business until he and my mother split. He was an editor. But he now works as a professor at a film school in Boston. My stepmother is an elementary school teacher.”

“Oh wow,” I said. “That’s a big change. He was married to a movie star and then a teacher.”

She giggled sweetly. “Yeah. I think she is more my father’s speed. He was always so quiet and private. He divorced my mother when Ella and I were young and married a few years later. We were still in school. My brothers are barely adults, I will say that. But they both married their high school sweethearts and had babies. I am the oldest, and am four years older than Ella, and ten years older than Kyle, and eleven years older than Ethan. Makes me feel old.”

I laughed. “You’re not old.”

“Mhmm,” she joked. “Buttering me up, I see.”

There were moments when Teagan talked, that she was letting it flow, but I could immediately tell, she clammed up the rest of the time. Anything complimentary or flirty, and she put up a wall. I wanted her to stay comfortable and free when she was talking to me. “I would never!”

She chuckled, glancing up at me. “And what about your family? I know you are an only child, and you have your grandma here. What are your parents like?”

I took a deep breath. “My father is that typical stereotype of a very rich business owner. My mother is sweet, or she can be,

but she is just like all the other women she hangs around. She is the rich housewife, which is not really a typical housewife. She's more the one that makes choices but has a full staff to carry it all out. She was hands-on when I was little, but I really think she dives into that lifestyle to find something she's happy with."

Teagan tilted her head to the side. "Is she unhappy with your dad?"

I shrugged. "They seem to have a marriage of convenience now. My mother grew up poor, very poor, since her father died when she was young. My father was like this knight in shining armor, with money, and nice things. I can tell they loved each other at one point, but now it's like they are together because it's been so long, and what else would they do?"

Glancing up, I could see the look of understanding on Teagan's face. She was really easy to talk to. I didn't talk about my family very much at all. "Is that hard on you?"

I chuckled. "Not really. I mean it wasn't the greatest example of relationships growing up, but I never knew it any different. My mother seems content, my father isn't abusive, and they both do what they want to do. I'm just wondering what will happen if my father ever retires. He might go crazy with boredom."

Teagan's laughter lit up the dark night. "I feel like that will be me one day. As much as I crave relaxation, I would be so bored if I suddenly didn't have work."

“Do you have hobbies?” I asked. “I saw all of those paintings in your house.”

Teagan shook her head, blotting her lips with the napkin. “No. I didn’t paint those. Those were my mother’s, and then a couple Ella painted. I don’t have an artistic talent like that. I am a writer, though. I have a couple of published books. I’m trying to work on another, but my current client is a handful.”

“Can I ask who it is?”

Teagan rolled her eyes. “Russell Barcroft.”

“Ha,” I said loudly. “I have all of his books. I was wondering when the next one will come out.”

She looked a bit surprised. “I did not take you as a fantasy reader.”

Shrugging, I took a swig of my drink to hide the red spreading across my cheeks. “A little hidden secret of mine.”

“Well, right now I’m trying to get him to cut down the pages,” she said. “But it’s proving to be a tough job. I’m hoping he’ll be ready for publishing in a couple of months.”

Both of us were done with dinner, so I reached over and took her plate, setting it on the tray next to us. “Would you like dessert?”

“I think I have to say no to dessert, but this wine is amazing,” she replied. “I would love another glass.”

Relieved she didn’t want to leave yet, I stood up and grabbed the bottle, walking over next to her. I poured the glass



and glanced down at her as she looked up at me. We stared for several moments until she cleared her throat and looked back down. Each time I got close to her, I felt this intense need to touch her. At the same time, she was quick to shift away, showing me that the wall had come right back up.

I headed around the table and sat back down. I wanted to scoot over next to her, but I could tell she was still trying to figure me out. We had a strange push and pull to us. It was like we were trying to one-up each other, but at the same time, we enjoyed talking with each other. She was definitely challenging me, and everything I thought I knew about women.

“So,” she said, breaking the silence. “What is the life of a record producer like? I always envisioned parties, women, and someone having to clean up hotel rooms.”

I laughed. “The hotel part is definitely the agent’s job, not mine. And it really depends on your clients. I am not the partier so much anymore. I really have been focused on my career for a long time. My client right now is a teenager, really sweet, and has an amazing talent. Overbearing parents, but an amazing talent nonetheless.”

I was starting to enjoy the look of surprise on her face. That time though, a lightbulb went off in my head. She thought I was some sort of womanizing, party boy, that she needed to be weary of. She pulled away because she assumed I was ready to put the moves on her. In all honesty, with the way she looked, the heat between us, and the fact that I hadn’t been able to get

her off my mind, putting the moves on her was definitely something I wanted to do. However, there was also this need to make her see me, and not be the guy she thought I was. I wanted to prove her wrong.

Right then and there I knew exactly what I had to do. There would be no cute moments of touching or attempts at a kiss. I was going to be overly gentleman-like, and I was going to show her that dinner was more than just an attempt to get her in my bed. I didn't know what that more was, but it was definitely there. That, and I really liked proving her wrong.

We talked about work and travel for about an hour before her sister texted. Teagan laughed. "My sister, for as small as she has always been, is constantly hungry."

I thumbed over my shoulder. "Why don't I wrap up some fettuccine, and you can take it home for her."

"I don't want to take your food," she replied.

I scoffed. "Seriously, I made so much. I still haven't mastered the measuring of noodles for two. So, I made enough for like sixteen. I might eat one meal of it and then toss it."

She finished her glass and glanced over at her house. "Okay. She does love pasta."

"Perfect," I replied, heading inside.

I wrapped up a plate, finding her standing and waiting when I got outside. I didn't ask, I just started walking with her, heading through the yard and over to her front door. "Thank you for having dinner with me."

She took Ella's plate. "Thank you for being our hero the other evening. But it was fun, and it was nice to relax for a minute."

We stood there awkwardly for a moment. I took a step up and leaned in, kissing her cheek. When I pulled away, there was that look of surprise again, her hand on her cheek. She chuckled and turned, heading inside. I backed down the steps and waved as she closed the door. My heart fluttered wildly in my chest, and I had to stop myself from basically dancing my way back to my house.

I didn't know what that woman had that made her so irresistible to me, but I was starting to think I was less trying to prove myself to her, and more trying to prove something to myself. It was almost like she made me want to be better than I was. Now that was not the kind of emotion I had ever felt, and as soon as I was on the porch, I poured myself a glass of bourbon. Whatever the reason was, I knew that Teagan was different. And I knew, after that dinner, keeping her at a distance was going to be much harder than I thought.

*elle*

## Teagan

I could feel my thoughts bottled up inside of me, wanting to flood my mind. As soon as I stepped into the house, my heart fluttered wildly. I was not going to let him kiss me, or make any moves on me, but he didn't even try. I wasn't sure why that disappointed me, considering that was what I wanted to start with.

Ella was more than excited about the pasta and took it to eat in her room. She wasn't depressed, but she was definitely healing, and I thought some time on her own was good for her. That night, I appreciated the fact that she didn't press me to find out about the date, since it had completely thrown me for a loop. Still, I managed to get a shower, change, and climb into bed before I let the feelings and thoughts flood me.

Hunter was turning out to be different than I assumed. Much different. He was sweet, thoughtful, and not as much of a party boy as I thought. I had enjoyed talking with him, and even found myself spilling out things I rarely ever talked with anyone about. Sure, he challenged me, and it sometimes irritated me, but there was something about it that was endearing. It was almost like he challenged me, which made me challenge myself.

I lay in bed, staring at the moon, thinking about him, the night, and my issues. I was definitely not used to the thought of opening up to a man again, but Hunter tested that theory. Was I going to ask him out? No. I was far too stubborn for

that. In the back of my mind, though, part of me really wanted him to ask me out again. Part of me knew that it would take a lot for me to say no.

# CHAPTER 11

---

## Teagan

Falling asleep at two in the morning is only torture when your phone rings at seven, by a very nervous, very anxiety ridden voice. I snorted awake at the sound of my phone, knowing full well it was Sunday and I should be asleep for the next several hours. Unfortunately, when you were Russell's editor, Sundays were not sacred.

"Hello," I grumbled, putting the phone to my ear, my head still buried in my pillow.

"Did I wake you?" Russell asked, not waiting for me to answer. "I'm sorry. I was just going through some of the next section changes and the stuff I'm supposed to take out of it. I just wasn't sure if I had to do this, or this was going to make or break me."

Breathing deeply, I noticed the smell of coffee wafting through the house. Strange, I didn't have the coffee maker set for Sunday mornings. "Russell, I need you to just hold on the line and give me just a few moments to gather myself."

"Of course, of course."

I took one last moment of bliss and then pulled my body upright. The sound of shuffling feet reminded me that my sister was living with me. I had somehow forgotten that from the time I fell asleep until the jarring wakeup call by my client. Then again, I had spent the night lying in bed, daydreaming

about Hunter like I was a teenager. I didn't exactly fall asleep in the real world.

I shuffled out to the kitchen, my phone in my hand, and gave a half smile at Ella. I looked like a bag of trash, while Ella was up, makeup applied, hair done, an actual smile on her face.

"Morning," she chirped. "Coffee is ready. I'm gonna do some painting today. I ordered supplies, and they are delivering them to me. If you need anything...or want to talk about the date let me know."

I snorted. "Not a date."

She giggled as she hurried off. I poured a cup of coffee and took several sips before bringing the phone back to my ear. "Russell."

"I'm here," he said quickly.

"So, the changes in that section are vital. That section is a flow between the action. You have far too much description. And then there's that random chapter on the mason. Does the mason play out in the long story? Because you never hear about him again in this book."

"No," he said flatly.

I lifted a brow. "Cut the chapter, Russell."

He sighed. "Alright. Were my changes sufficient for the last section?"



I glanced at the clock. “I am going to start looking at it today. But it’s Sunday so I’m not going to be working a full day.”

“Right, right,” he mumbled to himself. “Thank you, Teagan. I’ll cut the chapter and then go to the other notes.”

“You are a rockstar,” I replied. “And Russell, don’t forget to eat.”

“Yes, of course,” he replied as if he were taking notes. “I’ll get right on that.”

Before I could ask which part, he was referring to, breakfast or editing, he hung up. I blinked several times and set the phone on the counter, taking a moment to enjoy my coffee. My laptop was sitting by the window, at my little workspace for when I wanted the light of day to shine on me, instead of my dark dungeon. I figured that since I was up, I might as well just get some work done. There wouldn’t be any emails to check, so I could dive right into the changes that Russell made to the last section.

I wasn’t, however, going to change out of my pajamas. I sat in the comfy chair and glanced out the window, my eyes immediately shifting over to Hunter’s front door. I quickly looked away, turning on my laptop. I sat there for several hours, reading through notes, checking for flow of the story with the changes, and doing my general editorial job. The only problem was that I found myself glancing in Hunter’s direction every few minutes, wondering if I would catch a glance of him coming out of the house.

I wasn't exactly sure what I would do if I did see him. It wasn't like I could run out there looking like I did, but the urge was there nonetheless. We had left the evening without the promise of contact, without expectation of further meetings, but I still couldn't help but wonder if he would ask me out again.

*No, Teagan. That would be exactly what you don't want.*

I was constantly trying to convince myself that I didn't need Hunter in my life. More than that, I was trying to convince myself that I didn't want him in my life. He made it really hard to keep telling myself that though, after an amazing dinner, saving me from William, and that sweet cheek kiss he planted on me at the door. Part of me wished he would just go back to being the asshole I thought he was at the beginning.

By the end of my second cup of coffee, I was no longer looking at the manuscript. Instead, I was just staring out the window. The only thing that could have made it worse would be a telescope or a camera in my hand. My phone buzzed, shaking me from the tunnel vision I had developed, once again lost in my thoughts. My heart jumped when I saw Hunter's name on the screen. Had he seen me sitting here, staring at his front door like a psycho?

I grimaced as I opened it, worried at what it would say.

**Morning! I wanted to thank you for having dinner with me last night.**

I let out the air trapped in my lungs, thinking for a second about how I should answer. **It was fun. Thanks for cooking**

**for us. Ella loved the pasta.**

I had no idea if Ella loved the pasta, but it was the first thing that came to my mind. He texted back almost immediately. **Awesome. I was actually wondering if I could take you out again, this time a real date, like pick you up, dinner, a show maybe?**

I read the text message ten times, wanting so desperately to say yes. But then again, everything in me was fighting me to say no. I knew I needed to think about it. Besides not knowing what to say because I was constantly fighting myself about Hunter, I had no idea what the rules were. I hadn't dated anyone in a very long time. If I texted back yes immediately, would I seem too eager? Were there rules about that? Did the rules even matter anyway?

For about twenty minutes, pacing the floor, I typed and retyped a message replying, one with yes, one with no, and several variations of each. When I had successfully deleted the tenth message, I put my phone down on the counter and shook my head. If I couldn't come up with exactly the right thing to say, then I shouldn't say anything until, I was sure. Even though I wanted to answer right away, I also didn't want to seem...too available. Or at least that's what my mother had told me when I was younger. Never seem too eager or overzealous.

Leaving my phone there, I grabbed my laptop and sat down at the table, glancing up at the phone. I went back to the manuscript, but spent all day, glancing up every few moments,

wondering if it was time or not. I didn't know how I had gotten so overwhelmed by a simple request for dinner, but I was driving myself absolutely crazy. I hadn't even decided what I was going to say.

"Whatcha doing?" my sister asked, coming around the corner in a smock, her hair tied back.

"Uh...working on a manuscript. Did your paints come?"

Ella lifted a brow. "Yeah, like hours ago. You were in here pacing on your phone. Figured you were putting out a fire."

I was trying to put out a fire...in the pit of my own stomach. "Yeah, just small stuff. Trying to figure some things out."

She nodded, looking at me curiously as she grabbed a bottle of water. "Well, if I can help, let me know. I'm gonna get back to painting,"

I waved at her, my eyes on the manuscript. However, after her footsteps disappeared upstairs, my eyes shifted back to the phone sitting on the counter. The light on it was flashing, letting me know it needed to be plugged in. Maybe that was for the best. Maybe I should just let it die, and then I wouldn't be so obsessed over texting back.

Why was it so hard for me to just admit to myself that I enjoyed being around Hunter? I was driving myself crazy with it all. I stood up and walked over to my phone, picking it up. I stared down at the keys knowing there were two choices. Neither one of them was foolproof. I knew which one I should send and which one I shouldn't. I just hoped that whatever

choice I made, I was content with whatever consequences followed.

# CHAPTER 12

---

## Hunter

The recording business never sleeps, or at least producers don't, and techs don't mind working Sundays at all, considering they get paid time and a half for the inconvenience. With my artist's release closing in, and since she was in school, the weekend was the only time we could work in the studio, and hope that there weren't any problems. So, my mind being on Teagan that day was not the best distraction.

I stood on the other side of the glass, watching Miranda, keeping my phone on silent so she wouldn't see me distracted. Since her parents induced so much anxiety for her, she looked to me for cues, for security in what she was doing. I wanted to give her one hundred percent, especially since she had to basically record, make sure it was good, and jet back to California. In some ways, with Teagan not responding, it was a welcomed focus, otherwise, I might have lost my mind.

The last song ended, and everything went silent as the tech put on his headphones and played back through it twice, wanting to make sure everything we got was usable before we let her go. Miranda sat on her stool, her little legs kicking, her Chuck Taylors glittering pink with sequins. The tech turned in his chair and smiled, giving me the thumbs up. I let out a deep breath and put two thumbs up to Miranda.

She put her arms in the air and hopped down, racing in to give me a hug. "Oh man, I really was scared. But I also felt

like I nailed that one really good.”

I gave her a high five. “Good. I like when you use your intuition. Eventually, you’ll be able to use that for creative exploration. Sometimes the best stuff on albums is completely improvised in the moment by artists. You’ll get there. You just have to start being more confident with that talent of yours. Of course...not too talented, we don’t need a little diva in here.”

She jokingly flung her hair over her shoulder and poked out her hip. “I’ll only sing if there is a bowl of blue M&Ms, sparkling water at exactly sixty-four degrees, and ripple potato chips, but all the small pieces have to be picked out.”

Tilting my head back, I laughed. “You go platinum, and I’ll pick the chips out for you with my own hands.”

“Deal,” she replied with a giggle.

“Alright, well, that’s a wrap. You guys are scheduled back out here for the reveal when all the editing is done, which will be about two months. Then it’s go time.”

Miranda sighed, poking out her lip. “Can’t I just stay here? I’ll live on that couch. You’ll never even know I’m here.”

I put my arm over her shoulder, chuckling. “Go home and enjoy your time. If everything goes as planned, this time next year, you’ll be touring, and you’ll miss your bed and your friends.”

We walked toward the door, and she scoffed. “Not likely. But okay. I’ll see you in two months.”



Luckily, for me at least, the driver was waiting for Miranda and not her parents. We had sent them out on a nice lunch paid for by the company, hoping for just that. The driver lowered his glasses and looked at Miranda. “How did we do Little Miss?”

“Nailed it,” she replied, giving him a high five.

“That’s right,” he replied, giving me a nod.

I waved at Miranda as they left, momentarily forgetting my torture, until I shoved my hand in my pocket, feeling my phone. I sighed, pulling it out, not finding anything from Teagan. I wasn’t sure if she was playing hard to get, was ghosting me, was genuinely busy, or if there was some rule in the dating game that I hadn’t been made aware of. I never played by those rules anyway. If I liked someone, I usually just asked them out. However, it had been a very long time since I asked anyone on a second date.

Heading to my office, I mulled over the details I had already put into motion for our date. I had snagged two tickets to a private, intimate show for one of our new artists. The place was amazing, the seats were all at tables, and dinner and drinks were served as well. It would be everything all in one place, and it would be something not many other people would have the chance to be a part of. Yeah, I kind of put the cart before the horse, planning the date before I even knew if there would be one, but I figured if she didn’t say yes, I’d gift the tickets to one of our connections in the agent world, or one of the company friends.

I wanted the possible date to be perfect, and I had really schmoozed it up to get it that way. My brain was all over the place when I reached the office. I sat down behind my computer and put my phone to the side, switching it on to vibrate. I tried to focus on work, knowing full well I could go home, but then I'd end up sitting there staring at her front door from my window like a creepy stalker. At least staring at my phone for a text back was socially acceptable.

However, as the minutes slowly and painfully ticked by, I was starting to get anxious and fidgety. My eyes darted to the phone, each time experiencing a different emotion. I was disappointed, I was nervous, then I was irritated. I got irritated with Teagan a lot, but it was never in a negative way. It was always a she drives me nuts and I want to just grab her and kiss her, kind of way. I had a feeling she was letting me dangle on purpose. She was playing the game the same way I had. I specifically didn't text her the night before because I didn't want to seem too eager. I wanted her to think about me for a bit. With her not responding after almost eight hours, though, I was starting to think I had waited too long.

When my watch beeped at five, I lost my patience and I reached over and grabbed my phone. I couldn't wait any longer. Seriously, I was experiencing complete torture. Sure, I could text her again, and she very well may not answer that one either, but at least it would lessen some of the tension I was feeling. I typed up four different messages, deleting each one before sending. The first just came off as needy. The

second came off as far too nonchalant, the third I was just a straight dick, and in the fourth I was needy again.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I tried one last time with a simple, “hey, lazy Sunday girl. Wanted to see if you cleared your schedule for dinner with me?”

I read it three times, and nodded, finding that it was to the point, cute, and let her know I was still waiting. I hovered my finger over the send button, but before I could press it, my phone buzzed, a message popping up from Teagan.

**Sorry, it took me so long, busy day. Work apparently doesn't stop on the weekends, who'd have thought? Sure, that sounds great.**

I let out a deep breath and leaned back in my chair, closing my eyes for a second. I quickly deleted my message, so I didn't accidentally send it to her. Talk about timing. I shook my head and texted back.

**No problem. I've been at the studio all day with an artist. We had to relay some tracks in about six hours' time, so it was crazy. So, tomorrow night, I'll pick you up at six, dress is cocktail. Cool place with some good music and amazing food.**

Sending the message, I was suddenly very nervous about the date. When she immediately replied, I forced myself to take it as a positive sign and go with it. I was exhausted from a day of trying to read Teagan's mind from a distance.

**Sounds fun. I'll be ready. You know where I live.**

I chuckled and sent back a smiling emoji.

“Either grandma learned how to text, or you are talking to a woman,” Parker said from the doorway.

“What are you doing here? Don't big wigs like you never work on the weekends?”

Parker laughed, walking over and sitting down in the chair. “No, no. I always work, it's the investors that sit back and smoke their pipes and drink their whiskey.”

“Goals,” I replied with a laugh.

“So, was that your invisible girlfriend on that app again?”

I shook my head, trying to play it cool. “No. Actually, she's a real girl.”

Parker gasped dramatically. “Nice. Is this a ‘she just send you boob pics’ or is this is an ‘I'm smiling because there are feelings.’”

Chuckling, I shook my head. “No boob pics. This will be our first real date. Nothing serious. I'm taking her to the Avanti show tomorrow night.”

“Ooh La La,” Parker said, whistling. “Pulling out the stops. Who is she?”

I sighed, trying to act like I wasn't super stoked about the night out with Teagan. “My neighbor.”

Parker curled his lip. “Bro, you never shit in your own box.”

Laughing, I put the phone down. “Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“Your sandbox, bro. That’s your sacred place. It would be like dating your roommate. Only if you break up, instead of finding a new roommate, you have to sell your house.”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s not that serious. We just have good conversation. That’s all.”

Parker pursed his lips. “Wait, is this Teagan, like the daughter of...”

I nodded. “Yes, but trust me, besides looking very much like her mom, she does not have the eccentric wildness to her. She’s definitely a fixer. The oldest child taking care of the whole family.”

“Too bad,” Parker said with a smirk. “Eccentric chicks can be super wild in bed. Tell me she’s at least exciting in the sack.”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. We haven’t slept together.”

Parker narrowed his eyes. “You mean you got tickets to the hottest show in town tomorrow night, and you haven’t slept with her? Whoa...whoa...whoa...intervention.”

I groaned, leaning my head back. “None needed. Seriously, it’s just me taking her out for a fun night. She’s been through a lot in the past week, and I want to have a good time with her. Besides, if I take some random arm candy, I’ll have no one to talk to all night. It’ll be just her smiling and looking at her nails. I can’t have a friend?”

“I’m your friend,” Parker replied. “You never take me out to the show and buy me dinner.”

I leaned forward, patting his hand. “Maybe if you didn’t give it up on the first greet, you’d have more dinner invitations.”

We both sat back and laughed. Parker waved his hands. “Hey man, I’m just kidding. If you’re happy, I’m good. I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“Hey, I never knew you cared like that,” I replied.

Parker nodded. “I mean, heartbreak fucks with your creativity, and we have a big schedule coming up.”

I shook my head. “Yes, sir. I will make sure to be on my game.”

Parker slapped his hands to his legs. “Good. Because you are killing it already, and I see you having a huge future in this industry. And I don’t have best friends who are whiny heartbreak boys. So, just think of us when making decisions about your love life.”

Chuckling, I nodded. “Noted. Always think of Parker first.”

“Exactly,” he replied, looking around the office. “I never realized you had so many books in here. Usually, people fill the shelves with pictures and stuff. Not you. Gotta be all smart with books and shit.”

He has been in my office plenty, but this is typical Parker. always so caught up in his own world not noticing much

around him. “People do read from time to time,” I replied. “You should try it.”

Parker stood up, buttoning his jacket. He sneered and shook his head. “Nope, not into it. Far too many things to do. Barely read the label on my toothpaste. Time is money, my friend. But my time today, is done. I don’t like the building on the weekends, it’s too quiet and creepy.”

“Worried about the ghosts of your past coming for you to rattle chains and show you how you’re a miserable miser?” I yelled out as he headed out of the room.

“They wouldn’t dare,” he yelled back from down the hall.

I laughed, turned off my laptop, and stuck my phone in my pocket. Parker had a good sense of humor, which was what made us such good friends to start with. Heading out of the city, I let my mind wander, enjoying the relatively traffic free drive on a Sunday. Part of me wanted to stop and grab some flowers to leave for Teagan and Ella, but I was going to wait. She made me wait, and apparently, the game was definitely still on. There was something about her torture, something that made me crave it more and more. She was intoxicating, and addictive, and I knew that could spell serious trouble.

I was in it, though, ready for the date to come so I could have uninterrupted time with her. I wasn’t sure at that point, there was any way I could turn back. I was pretty sure Teagan had somehow caught me that very first day, standing in her robe, letting me have it over her crushed azalea. In reality, it didn’t matter when it happened. I was on a mission to win the

game, even though I had no idea what that meant. I did know, it didn't matter to me how long it took, because she was on fire, and I was not putting it out anytime soon.



# CHAPTER 13

---

## Teagan

“**Y**ou look stunning,” Hunter said for the third time since he had picked me up.

Heat flushed over my cheeks. “You mentioned that before. But thank you.”

He chuckled and raised his glass of champagne. “To a beautiful evening, with lovely company, and of course, awesome food.”

“Mm,” I replied, raising my glass. “Food is always on the top of the list.”

Hunter chuckled and looked around at the packed restaurant. The lighting was dim, the tables were covered with silk tablecloths, and candles flickered by the hundreds throughout the space. The stage was set and ready for the musician who would go on later that evening. But my attention stayed firmly focused on Hunter in his very well-cut black suit, crisp white button up shirt, and perfectly knotted teal tie. His eyes sparkled like the silverware did, and his smile made me wonder if I could keep breathing.

He had picked me up in a chauffeured car and had whistled at me as I walked down the steps in my short black dress, the tie around the neck tied perfectly with the help of my sister. I wore my mother’s favorite rose pin and four-inch heels, which I knew eventually would come off, it was just a matter of when. I had felt pretty when I finished getting ready but felt

beautiful when he looked at me like I was the only woman in the room. I wasn't sure if he had perfected that craft, or if it had come to him naturally. Either way, I liked it...a lot.

“So, tell me about your love life.”

I choked on my sip of champagne. “Well, we cut straight to the point, don't we?”

He laughed. “I tend to do that when I want to size up the competition early.”

“Ha,” I snorted. “You won't find much competition. I don't really date much. I had a very long-term boyfriend in college, but that's about the last experience I have with dating.”

“What happened to him?”

I rolled my eyes. “He was an author. I thought we had everything planned out, but apparently, I forgot to include the hot 22-year-old fan of his. Very cliché, caught in the backroom kind of moment.”

He grimaced. “Ouch.”

“Yeah. Well, they seem to be happy. Last I saw, they were engaged. How about you?”

“I've been on a few dates over the last few years, but nothing stuck. I had a long-term girlfriend, and was ready to propose, when I realized she was not the woman I thought she was. She was cheating, yes, but even worse, she was a completely different person, having this double life. The one I thought I had was sweet and kind, but really only wanted to be

with me for my money. She hadn't yet realized I wasn't going to be taking over the family business."

"Ouch," I replied, mimicking his grimace. "Seems we have our fair share of douche bags in our past."

"True," he replied, with a smirk. "Personally, I like to look toward the future. And tonight is definitely a nice surprise. Not something I was looking for, but I'm glad you're here with me."

Heat surged up the back of my neck, and I drank down my champagne, glancing over at the waitress who was already coming to refill. I had never been very good with compliments, unlike my mother and sister who took them gracefully. I was the "glowing beet red, avoid eye contact" kind of gal. With Hunter, though, it wasn't as easy to do as I thought. His eyes were different, and I found a calmness in them.

The night went off without a hitch, and we were talking and laughing the entire time. He learned about my parent's divorce, and in return he told me about his family dysfunction. When the music started, I was almost disappointed, but that feeling quickly left when he moved around to my side and took my hand in his. We sat quietly, sipping more alcohol and listening to the melodic tones. The whole evening was enchanting, and by the time we left, I was double enchanted... by him and the alcohol.

My arm clutched in his as we walked from the restaurant into the night air. I took in a deep breath and looked around.

“I’m not ready to go back to the real world.”

He chuckled. “Me either.”

I stopped and waited for him to turn and look at me. “Then let’s not. Let’s say fuck it and get a hotel room. We can sit on the floor drinking champagne from the bottle, telling more funny stories about our childhood.”

Hunter fanned himself with his hand. “Why Teagan, are you suggesting we be left alone in a room together?”

“Damn right,” I said with a snort.

“That sounds like a hell of a good time. Let’s do it.”

Laughing, we hurried across the street to one of the big hotels nearby and got a suite. I genuinely believe we had every intention of doing exactly what we had planned. However, plans had a tendency to change when alcohol was involved and two people were obviously incredibly attracted to each other. We walked into the room, and I dropped my purse on the floor, taking my shoes off. I groaned as my feet flattened out on the cool wood floors.

Hunter walked steadily toward me, sliding his arm around my waist. He took my hand in his other and began to dance with me across the floor. “I figured since we didn’t dance at the event, now is as good a time as any.”

Smiling, I leaned into him, letting him lead. There was no music, but we didn’t need it. The closeness, the warmth, the rapid rate of our hearts was enough music for both of us. He twirled me around and brought me back in before my drunken

legs could wobble. As his pace slowed, I looked up at him, our eyes locked on one another. Very slowly, he leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, holding them there for several moments. As he pulled back, we both paused for just a moment before throwing ourselves into each other's arms.

The heat exploded between us, the fire engulfing us with passion and booze. I pulled at his tie, loosening it and pulling it over his head. My fingers fiddled with the buttons on his shirt as he pulled his jacket off and let it fall. We moved toward the bedroom in the suite, stopping right in front of the bed. I pressed my hands against his chest, pushing his shirt to the side. His hands came down and took mine, gently turning me around to unzip my dress.

With my back to him, he gently untied the bow and let the dress fall to my feet. His hands reached around me, cupping my bare breasts as my ass rubbed up against his already swollen manhood, trapped in his pants. I turned toward him, staring him in the eyes as I unbuttoned his pants and dropped them, holding still as he flipped off his shoes and socks. Carefully, he hooked his fingers into the sides of my black satin panties, pulling them down and off.

A wicked passion swirled through me, giving me a boldness I had never felt before. After removing his boxer briefs, I pushed against his chest. He fell back onto the bed and smirked as he scooted back, my body crawling toward him. When I reached his legs, I situated mine on either side of his, hovering over his hard cock, erect and waiting. I gripped it with one hand and smoothed the tip between my swollen lips,

feeling my wetness on his shaft. As he bit his lip, watching me intently, I slowly sank down, pulling him deep inside of me.

My head fell back and I gasped, our bodies interlocked. As my hips rolled against him, his hands gripped my waist, his eyes darkening more and more as I rose up and back down again. After several moments, he growled, flipping me over on my back. His hands pulled my thighs up and his hips dipped, pushing back into me. I reached my arms up and over my head, scratching at the headboard behind me. His body was strong and shimmering under the pale lights shifting through the curtains.

As his hips rolled, I moaned, feeling myself growing closer and closer to explosion. He picked up his pace with every sound, pushing in and out with his hands tightening to my hips. As I reached the edge, I screamed out in pleasure. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine as I erupted, my body pulsing and shaking around him.

He groaned at the vibrations of pleasure teasing his own end. My back arched as he pumped once again before pushing in deep and hard. He gasped into my mouth as his body grew stiff overtop of me. I could feel his cock pulsing inside of me as he released, pleasure circulating through both of us. My hands came up, gripping onto his back as my hips lifted, pushing him as deep inside of me as possible.

We held there for several minutes, letting the passion of our orgasms decrease. Carefully, he rolled over onto his side and gripped me tightly, yanking me up against him. His mouth

hovered over my ear, and I could feel the warmth of his breath trickle down my neck.

“You are amazing,” he whispered, pulling a blanket up and over us.

Normally, in moments like those, I felt awkward and unsure of myself. However, between the alcohol and the orgasm, I was spent. His arms held me secure, and the rhythmic beating of his heart quickly lulled me into a deep slumber. So deep, in fact, that it was the first night I had slept dreamlessly through the night since my mom passed away, not waking until the morning light lit the room.

Even then, I didn't want to give up the comfort of the hotel bed. I remembered everything, and my heart was still shivering every time I thought of his body over mine.

“Good morning, beautiful,” Hunter whispered.

I scrunched my nose and groaned, opening only one eye. “I wouldn't jump so quickly to beautiful until I've sat up with my wild rat's nest of hair.”

He chuckled, holding a tray. “I thought you might be hungry, so I ordered us some breakfast.”

My head was pounding from the hangover, but my stomach growled. Slowly, gripping the sheet to my bare body, I sat up, leaning against the headboard. “I feel like I fell into a vat of champagne last night.”

He chuckled. “There's aspirin and water here for you.”



I cocked a half grin and took the tray in my lap, running my finger over the flower in the small vase. “You know the way to a girl’s heart. Food and recovery medication.”

I took two of the aspirin and drank the water, feeling my headache start to ease already. Tearing off a piece of toast, I glanced up at Hunter, sipping his coffee. “You’re not eating?”

He took a deep breath. “No. I don’t think I have the stomach for it this morning. I am not the kid who can eat my way out of a hangover.”

“I’m so sorry,” I joked. “It’s such an excellent excuse for terrible greasy food.”

As he chuckled, he turned toward me. I tried not to stare, feeling a bit sheepish about the night before. I was fully expecting some sort of talk about it being a great one-night stand but...there was always a but.

“Teagan, I really had an amazing time last night,” he said, a nervous grin on his lips. “And I want to be honest here. I can’t get you off my mind. I haven’t been able to since I met you. I want to keep seeing you, just you. I am a one girl at a time kind of guy, and I don’t know where any of this will go, but I don’t want to miss out on something amazing. I know it’s really soon, and I promise I’m not going to propose next week. I just like to know where I stand. Would you like to keep seeing me?”

A decision like that should take careful thought. It should take weighing the pros and cons. It should take a good hard look at where I was in life and what I wanted. Then again,

sometimes the heart knows what it wants. My brain seemed to be on cue, and I didn't skip a beat.

“I'd like that.”

After all was said and done, I just hoped I didn't set myself up for another heartbreak. I wasn't sure I had anything left in me, especially not the strength to deal with another broken heart.

# CHAPTER 14

---

# Hunter

## 2 Months Later

I had never been very good at meeting someone's family, but everything always felt so easy with Teagan. Her brothers, Kyle and Ethan were in town and I had agreed to come over for dinner to meet them. I knew they were younger brothers but I had no idea what kind of guys they were. I didn't know if I would get the third degree, the cold shoulder, or be welcomed warmly. I had been so concerned about it, I had been freaking out all week about it.

It turned out, I had nothing to worry about. Kyle and Ethan were even more relaxed and down to earth than Teagan was. They looked up to her, I could see it in their eyes. I had met a ton of half siblings in my life, and there was always something different about the way they were with their siblings, but not that family. Ella, Teagan, Kyle, and Ethan acted as if they had lived in the same household their entire lives.

“So, what's it like working with musicians?” Kyle asked.

I swallowed my bite of pot roast. “It's definitely interesting. Some of them are really cool people, others, well, they took the definition of diva too far. Most of the talent I work with aren't established yet in the professional recording business. So, minus a couple of irritating seeds, I genuinely get to work with really awesome people.”

“He is really good with the younger kids too,” Teagan said, winking at me. “I got to see him working a couple weeks ago. The young girl was getting ready for her tour, her first one, and she was so nervous. But as soon as she saw Hunter, she was all smiles and confidence.”

Ethan nodded, grabbing a roll. “That’s awesome, man. I’ve heard the business is hard on kids. Especially kids who have parents reliving their glory days or making up for lost opportunity through their kids.”

I nodded. “Yeah, they are the worst. Luckily, we have ways to help with that when we can. At least while they are in the studio. But generally, anything in the public is a game changer. There’s a lot of pressure out there from the studio, the fans, the reps, everyone. You have to be a special kind of person to handle all that as a teenager and do it without becoming a dysfunctional adult.”

“I feel like even without all of those pressures it’s hard not to become a dysfunctional adult,” Ella said with a pout.

Kyle put his arm over Ella’s shoulder. “And we love you for all of your dysfunction.”

Teagan laughed and I chuckled, finishing my beer. I loved the sound of Teagan’s laugh, even after two months of spending almost every day together. She was my neighbor, so it wasn’t hard to see each other, but it wasn’t out of feeling like it was required. I wanted to see her every day. She had become the first woman I had ever really opened up to. After a couple of months, most relationships started to get comfortable,

almost boring. With Teagan, I still felt that skip in my heartbeat every time I was getting ready to see her. It was strange for me, and some days, I wasn't sure how to handle my own emotions for her. I didn't just care about her, but I cared about Ella too, wanting to protect her like she was my own little sister.

Having had such a bad past experience with relationships, I never thought it would be possible to excel at work at the same time as excelling in my personal life. My father had taught me that I had to pick one or the other. It was obvious that my father had picked work, considering my parents were basically just roommates at that point in life. But ever since I met Teagan, I had almost done more at work. I've been in a good mood, I worked very hard during working hours, and rarely had to spend extra time at work because everything I had to get done, was done.

Coming home and seeing Teagan was the highlight of my night. Of course, I never knew if I would get the put together and smiling Teagan, or the disheveled one still on the phone with her client, but I loved each version. She trusted me, I could tell it, and had let her guard down more and more over the last couple of months. She leaned on me for comfort and solace and let me take care of her when she was too exhausted with life to care. I did the same with her. It was the first time that the idea of couples not always being 50/50 really meant something to me.

None of this came without my own share of issues though. There was no way I wanted to be away from her, but

sometimes, the intensity of it all freaked me out. I had to constantly remind myself that Teagan wasn't out for my money. She wasn't playing me, and she was still the same crazy woman I had met that first day. And she definitely wasn't trying to impress me that day.

“I'm gonna grab another beer. Anybody want one?”

Kyle and Ethan both nodded, making the most of their time away from daddy/husband duty. Ella shook her head with a smile. Teagan reached up and squeezed my hand. “I'm okay. Thank you.”

I smiled at her and headed into the kitchen, tossing my bottle in the trash. I grabbed another beer but didn't hurry back out. Instead, I popped the top and leaned against the counter, taking a sip. As I did, my phone buzzed in my pocket. It was a message from Anya on the app.

**Hey stranger. You still all cozy with the girl you've been seeing? Or did the cattle get you?**

I smirked and set down my drink. I thought about my answer for a moment and typed out the easiest thing. **It's really not a big deal. Something to pass the time, you know? Something to stave off the boredom of the fields and hay.**

I hesitated for a moment before sending. Part of me felt bad saying that about Teagan, knowing that wasn't how I felt at all. The other part of me figured it was nothing more than me not wanting to get all emotional with my friend, who happened to be a perfect stranger. Still, there was part of me that wondered

if I didn't tell the truth because I was still wrestling with the idea of a serious relationship myself. I wasn't the guy that was against relationships, but I also didn't have to have one. I had always been comfortable being on my own.

With Teagan it wasn't like there was a loss of freedom. There was no feeling of burden or stress. It was just my old fears showing their ugly heads again.

Anya messaged back. **Hey, I get it. Do you? Just don't hurt anyone's feelings.**

**Yes, Mom,** I replied with a smirk. **It's only been a couple of months. I have cans of soup in my cupboard older than that. We all deserve a little break from reality once in a while.**

**That we do,** she replied. **Just wanted to check on you and make sure you were still in one piece.**

**And I appreciate it. Promise I'll message soon. Work has been crazy.**

I closed the app and shoved the phone in my pocket, letting the guilt just filter past. What did it matter if some person I never met, and would never meet, knew my feelings for Teagan or not? Besides, Anya and I had never been emotional friends. We joked around and made make believe plans that we would never follow through with. She was the kind of friend I needed before. But Teagan took up so much of that space now, and naturally, I didn't think to message Anya on a regular basis anymore.



After taking a few more sips of my beer, I grabbed beers for Kyle and Ethan and headed back out. I rejoined the party like I had never left, and it ended up being a really great evening. With the guys staying with Ella and Teagan, I decided to stay at my place that night. Teagan wrapped up some leftovers, knowing full well I'd be hungry later when I couldn't sleep, and walked me outside.

“Uh oh, it's smoochie time,” Kyle yelled from the living room.

Teagan rolled her eyes and shut the front door behind her. “Ignore them. They are grown men stuck in ten-year-old bodies. Now I understand why their wives were so excited to have a weekend to themselves.”

I laughed, pulling Teagan close to me. “Well, are we going to have smoochie time or what?”

She shook her head. “I would suggest you never again call it that if you want to get laid again.”

Chuckling, I leaned in and gave her a long, deep kiss. As we pulled away, her brows went high. “Wow. You are just going next door, right? Not leaving town or anything.”

“Just next door, wishing you were coming over with that apron you were wearing earlier...and nothing else.”

She chuckled, shaking her head. “It only gets used twice a year, so it's gone back into hibernation. I would sneak over later, but I have that conference in Chicago tomorrow and won't be home until after five.”

“Oh yeah,” I replied, remembering the book convention she had been not looking forward to at all. “How about this? You text me when you get home, and I’ll come over and cook you and Ella a home cooked meal. You can shower, change into comfy clothes, and eat good food.”

Teagan pinched my butt and grinned. “I knew there was a reason I keep you around. That...and other things.”

She leaned up and kissed me again, her brothers now knocking on the window, making faces at us. Teagan groaned, stepping back. “Enjoy the leftovers. I’m going to go put these children in time-out before bedtime. They have to on a plane at the butt crack of dawn.”

I laughed, waving at the guys as I headed down the steps and across the lawn to my house. I could hear Teagan chastising them as I walked up to my door, laughing. Every time I was around Teagan, I saw a new side of her. I had seen the older sister routine with Ella, but she was different with her brothers. She was playful and loving, and I could tell she really enjoyed having her family around her. In fact, she had made me feel like part of that family, and so did her brothers and Ella. It was the kind of relationship I had always imagined, but had never seen, and never experienced before Teagan.

I was already looking forward to a nice relaxing evening with them the next night. Drama-free had become my new favorite lifestyle.

# CHAPTER 15

---

## Teagan

**B**ook conferences are the bane of my existence.

You spend hours after hours, tucked behind a table, answering the same questions over and over again for authors who are learning about the process of being published by a publishing house. You explain the difference between submitting to us versus an agent and why agents are necessary. You spend hours answering questions about submission letters, self-publishing, and small publishing houses versus large ones. All the while you watch submissions pile up during the two-hour opening for the company.

Afterward, the lucky ones, who had the money to purchase luncheon tickets, have their hopes and dreams carefully but specifically crushed. Why? Because most of them are first-time writers, writing autobiographies about something that happened in their lives. I have to carefully explain that it's not that their story isn't interesting, or even downright amazing, but publishing houses are there to make money. Time and time again, studies have shown that unless the writer is already famous, no one will buy their book.

One of the biggest suggestions I give out at these conferences is to take their story and create a work of fiction based on true events. Razzle and dazzle the story, write it like one of the fiction greats, and then submit. It doesn't mean they'll get a contract, but they have a much higher likelihood of someone picking it up and pitching it to a publishing firm.

Sounds deceptive, sure, but I've seen wanna be biographical writers shift their story into a pure fantasy world and make hundreds of thousands from it. If they write a few of those, hit the book circuit, and have amazing sales, they may actually get to write their true story one day.

It's that or self-publish, and while many in the industry scoff at the self-publishers, I envy them. The number of fantastic books and authors the publishing world has missed over the last century is probably innumerable. Self-publishing allows writers, who, for whatever reason, didn't get signed, a chance to publish their work. They have a chance to interact, create worlds, and sometimes make a hell of a lot more than they would have with a publisher. That, and the sheer number of books flooding the publishing houses, greatly decreases...thus making my job simpler.

I let out an exhausted breath as I pulled up the driveway and parked. My head was swimming with bits and bobs of different stories pitched, names I'll never remember, and a growling stomach from not getting two seconds of time to eat between talking at the luncheon. I did get paid a bonus for doing it though, and I was pretty sure that was one of the reasons the publishing house kept telling me how thankful they were to have someone in the U.S. working with them. It cost far less money to send me to these things than someone from London. That, and they knew I would never say no.

Luckily, this one was in Chicago, unlike my last one somewhere near Boise. At least when I left the city, it felt like I was getting away on a mini-vacation. It was over though, and

I had a nice evening ahead of me. I was going to drag my body inside, shower, change into my favorite pajamas and wait for Hunter to cook us dinner. Hopefully, I could stay awake long enough to enjoy it.

As I approached the front door, digging for my keys, I heard my sister's screeching angry tone wavering through the entire house. I hurried up, dug the keys from the bottom of my bag and let myself in, disarming the alarm; ever since the drama with William, my sister was afraid he might try to get in the house, so she wanted that extra protection. For a moment, the screaming stopped, but it quickly picked up again.

“Oh, you think so? You think you are so important that anyone is going to give two shits what you think?”

I raced down the hall, dropping my things on the floor, fearful of who I would find standing in my living room with my sister. As I rounded the corner though, I found Ella alone, pacing the floor. Her face was red, her jaw clenched, and tears streamed down her cheeks. She always cried when she was angry, and she hated that about herself.

Her mouth dropped open and she shook her fist. “Fuck you! Don't you dare say anything about my mother. You're nothing but a small-dicked, flatulent, drunk, balding son of a bitch.”

I took a deep breath, letting my heart beat slow before stepping up to the edge of the living room. “Ella, sweetie, hang up the phone.”

She was so irate that she didn't even hear me. She had tunnel vision. She threw her head back and laughed

maniacally. “I should. I should drive the car over and run...”

“ELLA!” I yelled, grabbing her attention mid-sentence. “Hang up the phone, now!”

Her eyes unglazed as she stared at me. She dropped the phone down and clicked the off button, tossing it on the couch. Again, tears immediately flooded her. “I’m sorry, Teagan.”

I shook my head, hurrying over to her. “No, no, no. You have nothing to be sorry for. Seriously, I’m sorry I screamed at you. You were in that mode though, where you can’t hear or see anything going on around you. I had to get your attention. I’m assuming that was William?”

She hugged me and went over to the couch, plopping down with a huff. “Yes. He tricked me. He texted and said he wanted to talk to me civilly about our separation of assets, so we could get things moving along. I was an idiot and called him. He immediately launched into one of his self-absorbed, over-inflated ego-tripping monologues about how I was going to get nothing, and I should be glad he doesn’t bill me for the suitcase I took. How I was nothing but a maid in the house, sucking the life out of him and I was at fault for everything. He said I verbally abused him.”

I chuckled. “Please, you wouldn’t even tell the dog to get down when we were kids because you were afraid to hurt its feelings. So you slept with the dog and eventually had to get a new comforter because it kept eating the corners.”

She smiled through her tears. “I tried to hide it for so long, but eventually I was working with a towel sized piece of

fabric.”

Laughing, I rubbed her back. “Me and Mom noticed long before that but we wanted to see how long you would go, stealing the needle and thread, turning your comforter into a dish towel.”

We both laughed for several minutes, until finally, Ella took a deep breath and relaxed back into the couch. “He just makes me so mad. He literally lies to my face about things I didn’t do. I can’t tell if he is doing it because he thinks he’s so important that if he says it out loud, it becomes fact, or he’s just so deluded he believes these things actually happened.”

“I don’t think it’s either,” I replied. “I think he does it because he gets a high from doing this to you. He’s a narcissist, Ella. He feeds on drama and attention. And when he realized you’re no longer going to take his abuse and follow him like a lap dog, he gets your attention in other ways.”

“He’s going to get my four-inch heel up his butt hole.”

I burst out laughing hearing my little sister say that. She was so sweet and mannerly, that even the word “asshole” was too much for her. But she was definitely letting it all out at that point. How she ever stayed so innocent and sweet I couldn’t figure out. Between our mother, brothers, and me, she had front row seats growing up to the shit show that we called life. Then again, all of us knew that Ella was the fragile one, the one that needed to be sheltered from some of the pain of the world. She was just too sweet to be able to handle the messiness of life.



“Just remember, you no longer have an obligation to speak to him. He is not just your soon to be ex-husband, but he is your abuser. Which means you should put your foot down to your own PTSD, and start thinking about how he doesn’t deserve a single second of your time. You have expensive lawyers now, let them hash out the details of it all. In fact, you are free to block his number and his email address. Just let your lawyer know you’re doing it. And save all contact with him in case you need it.”

Ella sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes. “You’re right. Darn it, he took far too much of me already and I won’t give him a single second more of my time.”

She picked up her phone and texted her lawyer. He texted back almost immediately giving her the go ahead. She clicked a few buttons and then tossed her phone to the side, putting her arms up as she leaned back again. “Ahhh. Done and done. The freedom of it all.”

I smirked and leaned over, kissing her cheek. “I’m proud of you.”

Ella looked at her watch. “You got home late tonight. I’m not used to you working anywhere other than your office...or couch...or deck...or living room floor.”

I blew the fallen hairs out of my face and leaned my head back. “Yeah, it was a big convention. I’m about to go take a shower and change. Hunter will be over any time now to make dinner for us.”

Ella smirked and sat forward. “Speaking of Hunter, he was a hit with the brothers. Does his attendance at dinner the other night mean things are super serious now?”

I flopped my head to the side, lifting a brow at Ella. “He met our stepbrothers, not our father. But we are serious, I guess. As serious as two people can be after only a couple of months of dating. I haven’t really given it a ton of thought. I was terrified of another relationship, and I fought hard against him, but when I finally let go, I decided to fully let go. I micromanage everything in my own life, and the more I do it with Hunter, the more I set myself up for heartbreak. I figure if I just go with the flow...it’ll end up where it’s supposed to be.”

Ella narrowed her eyes. “Who are you and what did you do with my sister?”

I chuckled. “Trust me, I’m still here, micromanaging the rest of my life, and your life, and this house, and my client.”

My sister scooted closer and draped her arms around me. “I never thought I would say this, but thank you for micromanaging my life right now. I love you, big sister.”

She gave me a big smooch face kiss on the cheek and I groaned. “Don’t go getting all mushy on me. We still have to get to the finish line without you sharpening your toothbrush into a shiv and stabby stabbing the man. Number one goal, keep my sister out of prison. She would never last.”

Sitting back, Ella laughed. “Promise I won’t stabby stab him anytime soon. Accidently run off the road and take him out at

the knees? I can't make any promises because accidents happen."

I rubbed my hand over my face and groaned. "Note to self, save some bail money for baby sister." I stood up, rubbing my back. "I'm gonna hop in the shower. Would you keep an ear out for Hunter?"

"Yep," she chirped, already back to her old self.

I headed upstairs to the shower, thankful that the drama for the evening had presented itself early, and I could look forward to relaxation, food, and Hunter.

*elle*

## Hunter

Normally, I would pull into my driveway and walk over with the groceries, but it had been a long day, and I had several bags to bring in. I figured ravioli and meat sauce with garlic bread and salad was great and simple for dinner. Then I started thinking of dessert, so I snatched up a tiramisu from the bakery isle. As I walked through though, my sweet tooth took over and I started adding things to the cart.

After that, I realized we needed drinks, so I grabbed both alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks. I knew I'd be going the soda route since I was already tired, and one beer might send me straight to sleep, face down in my ravioli. At least I knew that Ella and Teagan cared enough not to let me drown in my own sauce.

I pulled into Teagan's driveway and parked next to her car, figuring she must be exhausted since she didn't even take the time to pull into the garage. I made a mental note to do that for her before I left. One by one, I gathered the bags, stacking them up the arms until I could barely lift them. The weight of the groceries transferred to the stretching plastic, cutting off most of the sensation in my hands. I grabbed the last thing and bumped the door to the car with my hip before heading up to the front door.

I juggled several things, realizing I was going to have to head butt the door because my hands weren't going to do the

job. Before I could though, Ella opened the front door with a grin. “Hey, Hunter. Here, let me help.”

I shook my head. “Just open the door for me and I got it. I fear if you take anything the tetris of bags will spiral out of control and Teagan will find us buried in a pile of groceries.”

She laughed and stepped to the side, watching as I walked quickly in and down the hall. I could hear her close and lock the door before setting the alarm. Carefully I put the bags down and rubbed my arms as Ella poked around in the bags. “Mmm, I love tiramisu...and cupcakes...oh! I love lemon cake.”

I laughed, taking things out of the bags. “Where’s Teagan?”

“She just got out of the shower,” Ella said, wiggling her brow at me. “Wanted to smell nice for you.”

“I appreciate that,” I replied with a chuckle. “Go relax. I’ve got this. Dinner won’t take too long.”

Ella grinned and skipped out of the kitchen into the living room. I had never met someone with so much peppiness and energy. I was starting to understand why Teagan was always tired. It took a lot of energy to keep up with Ella.

I went to the cabinet with the cookware, now knowing Teagan’s kitchen better than I knew my own. I grabbed out the pot, a saucepan, and the colander and set them on the counter. Turning on the hot water, I rolled up my sleeves and lathered soap into my hands, letting my body relax a bit. One thing about Teagan’s house that I loved, was the fact that I felt just

as comfortable there as I did at my own house. Whenever I made it there in the evenings, I felt like I could relax and breathe again.

As I rinsed off my hands and grabbed a towel to dry them with, I heard the sound of a car door slamming shut. It caught me by surprise since Teagan's house sat back off the street, and her closest neighbor aside from me was two lots away. As I turned toward the front door, a loud banging echoed out, shaking the pictures on the walls. Teagan's feet tapped down the hall at a run, and clip clopped down the steps. She stood in her robe, her wet hair flipped to one side, looking out the side window.

I slowly took a step forward and loud bangs echoed out again. Teagan hurried past and toward me, her eyes wide. "It's William and he looks ready for a fight."

# CHAPTER 16

---

## Hunter

Ella came racing up from the living room, right into Teagan's arms. William slammed against the door again, this time sounding as if he had thrown his whole body against it. I put my hand on Teagan's back and pushed them toward the living room. "Take Ella in there. Do not come out here. Call the cops right now."

Teagan didn't argue, ushering Ella into the living room by the arms. Poor Ella looked shell shocked, her lip quivering and her hands shaking. It made me even angrier at the asshole on the other side of the door. Still, I needed to play it calm and cool. I needed to keep my wits about me and either get him to leave, or get him to talk long enough for the cops to get there.

I walked up to the door and stood there, waiting for him to pound on it again. Glancing through peep hole, I could see William standing there in his dress shirt, his tie half undone, his hair wild, and a major wobble to his step. He was obviously drunk again, holding one of Teagan's potted plants in his right hand. He paced back and forth before lunging at the door, pounding hard with his fist.

"Ella! Get your ass out here, bitch."

"William, you need to stop. There is a restraining order against you, and you are breaking that. Get back in your car and go home, sober up, and get ahold of yourself."



He laughed. “Oh boy, the boyfriend’s here. What’s it to you? You screwing them both? Wouldn’t surprise me, the little slut. My advice to you is to mind your fucking business. I’ll talk to my wife whenever and however I fucking please. Neither you nor some judge is going to tell me different.”

I shook my head, my fists curled into tight balls. “Go home, William. Ella is not going to see you. Nor does she have to. You don’t own her, you never did. And you especially don’t now.”

I watched as he put one hand on his hip and paused for a moment before rearing back and throwing a pot as hard as he could at the door. It shattered and I could hear the dirt slide down the door and onto the ground. I watched as he stomped down the steps and began grabbing one potted plant after another, lobbing them at the door. When he picked up the last within reach, he pulled his arm way back. As he stepped forward, he tripped throwing the pot straight at the tall narrow window on the right side of the door. It crashed straight through the glass, sending sharp shards and soil everywhere. I stumbled back, covering my face as glass shattered all over the ground. Glancing back I saw Ella and Teagan standing at the end of the hall, holding onto one another. Teagan was trying to pull Ella back.

William turned sideways, attempting to come through the open window. I rushed him, pushing him back out onto the porch. “We’ve called the police, William. They’re on their way.”

“Fuck you,” he yelled. “Ella, you bitch. Get your ass out here. See what you cause? See what you do? If you think you’re going to take what I have, you have another thing coming. I’ll fucking burn the house down before you get your grubby little hands on anything of mine.”

He rushed the window again, but this time I was prepared. I rammed into him, sending him spiraling backward. He lost his footing and tumbled down the steps. He picked himself up, his forearm skinned, a scrape on his chin, and started to walk toward the steps again, pure hatred in his eyes. As he reached for the handrail, the sound of sirens wailed behind him, the blue lights bouncing off the house. Two cops jumped out, guns drawn, shouting to William.

He smirked at me, licking the blood from his lip as he put his hands up and stepped back, dropping to his knees.

“Get down on the ground,” the cop yelled at him as he pulled his arms down and behind his back.

They stood him up, patting him down. I opened up the front door and Teagan and Ella stood behind me, peering around. William smiled at Ella and blew her a kiss. “This doesn’t change anything, bitch.”

The cop looked up at Ella and smacked William on the back of the head. “Shut your mouth.”

We watched as more police arrived, and an ambulance as well. They got William in the back of the cop car and then came back up to the house. “Everyone okay?”

As I looked over at Ella, her eyes rolled back and she passed out. Teagan caught her under the arms and I lifted her up, carrying her into the living room. The EMT's followed in after me, making sure she was okay. She woke up almost immediately and began to cry. Teagan looked at me with adoration, stretching upwards to kiss my cheek before rushing to Ella's side. The officer nodded toward my hand. "Why don't I start with the girls, get their statement while you get that looked at."

Following his eyes, I realized for the first time I had a gash in the palm of my hand. It must have happened when I was pushing William out of the window. The next three hours seemed to go by in a blur. The EMT's checked out my cut, cleaned it, and put a bandage on it. It wasn't deep enough to need stitches, but I'd have to have it checked out by a doctor to avoid any kind of infection.

The officers took Ella's statement, Teagan's statement, and then mine. When he was done with me, he shook his head, closing his notebook. "It's a good thing you were here. Guy's drunk out of his mind, and obviously prone to these kinds of things. Who knows what he would have done to those two if he had gotten in here."

I nodded. "Will you guys let us know when he gets released?"

The officer gave me his card and took down my number. "Sure. Relax for this weekend. He won't go before the judge until Monday sometime. Since he caused property damage,

threatened to kill, and was drunk, on top of breaking a restraining order, she'll most likely make him see a judge for bail hearings before doing anything else. Those don't happen until Wednesdays. So, earliest, Monday afternoon, or Ella's attorney will be contacted for the bail hearing on Wednesday. Piece of shit should have to sit in that jail cell until then. Thinks he's made of money so he can do whatever he wants. The judge isn't going to be too happy with him. If you guys need anything, feel free to call me."

"Thank you," I said, giving a slight smile.

He patted me on the back and nodded over at Teagan who was sitting on the couch next to Ella, holding her hand. I walked the officers and EMT out, watching as they drove off with William in the back seat, staring up at me. The adrenaline from the night's events was quickly wearing off and I could feel the pain beating in my hand. I looked down at the broken glass and shook my head, heading to the kitchen and grabbing the broom and dustpan. I swept up as much as I could and took it outside to the trashcan. I grabbed the few pieces of glass on the porch and disposed of them before coming back inside, standing and staring at the broken window.

"I'll call someone tonight and have them come out to replace that this weekend," Teagan said, walking up behind me.

She rubbed her hands up my back and pressed her face to it. I turned around and wrapped my arms around her, hugging her tightly. "Are you okay?"

She looked up at me and gave me a small smile, nodding. “Yeah. Just glad that at least we can count on a quiet couple of days while he sits in jail. I hope he drops the soap.”

I snorted. “You sound like Ella.”

I could feel her shake as she laughed. “I hope he is indoctrinated into the prison system through the anal probe welcome committee. Is that better?”

I nodded, hugging her again. “Better. Very well explained. Just like a true author. In the meantime, I saw some wood in your garage. Go see to Ella and I’ll board it up so its secure for the night.”

She leaned back and smiled at me, lifting up and kissing my lips. “Thank you.”

While Teagan saw to Ella, I browsed around the garage, finding some 2x4’s that would fit the opening perfectly. I stapled a black plastic bag on the outside and inside first, attempting to keep the weather out, and then screwed in the wood. It was sturdier than the glass before it, just not quite as enticing to look at. It would do until they could get it fixed.

I walked into the kitchen and looked around at the groceries, picking up things and putting them in the fridge. I had a feeling dinner was a wash that night, but we could make everything the next night, if Ella was feeling up to it. Teagan walked in and grabbed the tea kettle. “I can put that away. I’m just going to make Ella some chamomile. I gave her anxiety meds and a sleeping pill so she can just go to sleep and put

some time between what happened and dealing with the fallout. ”

“Good,” I replied. “What do you need me to do?”

Teagan put the kettle on the stove and turned it on, turning back to me with a smile. “Nothing. You were our hero once again. You’ve done more than enough. Go home, take some Tylenol for your hand, and relax. I’m going to wait until she is asleep, and then I’ll come over and decompress with you. If you want me to.”

I puffed out my cheeks, putting my arms around her. “Mm, I don’t know. That’s a tough one. Promise to not bring any crazies over?”

“Besides myself? I’m all out of crazies. That one wasn’t even mine.”

I smiled and leaned down, giving her a kiss. “I’ll be there waiting. Take your time. I’ll order a pizza and pick out a movie.”

“No horror movies this time.”

“What?” I said with a grin, backing toward the door. “No bat wielding maniacs tonight?”

Teagan rolled her eyes. “Had my fill, thanks.”

I opened the door and stepped out. “Lock the door and set the alarm.”

She gave me a salute as I closed the door. Jogging down the steps, I glanced over at the one planted pot still standing after

the hurricane of a husband went through. It was the orchid I had gotten Teagan after meeting her for the first time. I smiled as I headed across the drive toward the house. I left my car parked there just in case, figuring maybe my presence would be a deterrent if William happened to break out and come back for round two.

Getting home, I closed the door and looked down at my hand, a small bit of blood soaked through the bandage. I replayed my emotions in those moments when the potted plant came crashing through the door. My only focus was to keep Teagan and Ella safe, no matter what I had to do. They had become almost like family to me, only a type of family I had never known before. The type who would protect me the same way I protected them if they needed to. It felt nice to have someone like that. To belong.

Now all I had to do was not screw it up.

# CHAPTER 17

---



## Teagan

Sitting on the edge of Ella's bed, I stroked her hair. Her nose was red from crying, but her body had finally stopped shaking. She yawned, glancing up at me. "Tell Hunter thank you. Tell him sorry I ruined dinner."

I shook my head. "You didn't ruin dinner. And I will tell him thank you, from you. If its okay, after you fall asleep, I'm going to go over there for a bit. I'll lock up, set the alarm, and I'll monitor it from my phone. Hunter nailed up wood over the window, and no one is getting through that. He made sure of it."

She nodded, snuggling into her pillow. "Thank you for taking care of me. Promise I won't be a mess forever."

I chuckled. "Please, we love your mess. You wouldn't be you without it. I'll always protect you. Now, close your eyes and let the sleep medicine take you into the dream world."

She nodded and closed her eyes. I continued stroking her hair, singing a song our mother used to sing us when we were kids. We had always been afraid of storms, and our mother would come in, turn on some ambient noise, and stroke our hair as she sang to us. When we would go stay at our dad's and Ella missed home, I would sing her to sleep for the first couple of nights. I hadn't sung that song in a very long time. Still, it worked just as good as always, and Ella was fast asleep within minutes.

I cleaned up a little, and then headed over to Hunter's. He had left the door open for me. As I tiptoed down the hall, still barefoot, I found him standing next to the table where a dozen candles surrounded a large pepperoni pizza. I rolled my eyes and groaned. "You know the way to a woman's heart."

He chuckled and walked forward, cupping my face in his hand. He stared into my eyes for several moments before leaning in and passionately kissing me. Immediately, all thoughts of pizza disappeared from my mind. I wrapped my arms over his shoulders and leaned into him, rising up on my tip toes. I could feel his tongue swirl over my lips and across mine as I invited him in. His arm curved around my waist and pulled me in tightly. Bending slightly, he put his other arm around my shoulders and lifted me up into the air, cradling me against his chest.

I kept my lips pressed to his as we walked through the house and into his bedroom. Gently, he laid me down on the bed and pulled his shirt over his head. He tugged at my llama pajama pants, pulling them down and off. Leaning forward, he kissed my belly, letting his lips trail my skin as he pulled off my panties. I lifted up and took off my t-shirt, running my hands up and over my bare breasts. As his hands trickled down my skin, I laid back down, watching as he scooted down the bed on his stomach, spreading my thighs apart.

Gently, he kissed my thigh, moving upward. His mouth lingered over my swollen pussy before leaning in, running his tongue through my wetness. He swirled around my clit, sucking it into his mouth. I moaned, lifting my hips into his

hands. He gripped my waist and yanked my body forward and up, sitting up on his elbows. His mouth waved back and forth, his tongue tickling and lapping at my body.

My hands gripped onto the pillow above my head as my body raged with pleasure. My hips moved on their own, rolling against his mouth, feeling the warmth of his breath trickle over my skin. As his tongue did another loop my back arched and I screamed out in pleasure, feeling an orgasm overtake me. My thighs went stiff against his face and I reached down, gripping his hair as my body shook wildly in his hands.

His tongue didn't stop, sending electricity racing through my core. Finally, I tapped his head, laughing through the pain. He lowered me back down, looking up at me with a grin. Hunter unclasped his pants and slid them off, taking his boxer briefs with him. As he climbed up my body, I opened up wide for him, wanting him, needing him inside of me. He reached between my thighs and grabbed his cock, rubbing the head through my wetness before slowly pushing deep inside.

We laid, my legs at his sides, his hands entangled with mine, staring deeply into each other's soul as he pushed deep and pulled back. The emotion behind it was powerful, and heightened every nerve ending in my body. In the dim light of the room our bodies twisted and rolled, our movements becoming more and more heated. Our hands stayed latched together as we circled around the avalanche of passion neither of us could hold out for any longer.

I gasped into his shoulder as he rolled his hips against me. He pulled back again and pushed in deep, pressing his forehead to mine as both of our bodies stiffened. My hands clung to his tightly as rolls of passion washed over us. I could feel my body tightening against him, and his pulsing back. We came at the same moment, holding on to one another, feeling as if we were the only two people in the whole world, in that moment.

I had never had an orgasm last that long, or be that strong before. Our bodies twitched against each other as we both attempted to catch our breaths and slow our heart rates. After several moments, I unclenched my hands from his and chuckled. “That was a bold move, getting between a woman and her pizza. But you did good.”

He grinned, rolling to the side and sitting up. He reached over and grabbed the throw at the end of the bed, wrapping it over my shoulders. “Then the lady must not wait. I’ll go get us some drinks and some pizza.”

I smiled at him, my hands attempting to smooth down the wild, still half wet hair on my head. I took a deep breath and giggled to myself, wondering if I was ever going to stop feeling like we were still in the honeymoon stage of our relationship. My thoughts returned to my sister for a moment and I reached down, checking my phone for any texts or calls from her. She was still fast asleep, and probably would be like that until morning.

Looking up for any sign of Hunter returning, hearing him still pulling down dishes, I opened up my app, having forgotten to text TJ back earlier.

**Sorry for the late response. It's been a hell of a day.**

I pressed send. As soon as I did, Hunter's phone lit up across the room, on the dresser. That was a weird coincidence. I shook it off and messaged again, answering his question from earlier.

**As for the conference I had to attend, it was boring, annoying, and I am so glad it's over.**

I pressed send, and again, Hunter's phone lit up. What were the odds? I narrowed my eyes and sent an emoji to TJ, watching the phone light up again. Slowly, I stood and sent another emoji, watching the phone light up again. I made my way to the dresser and looked down at Hunter's phone, seeing that there were notifications for the same app I used. Glancing toward the door again, I grabbed the phone and walked over to the bed, sitting down. I knew his passcode because he had asked me to get a number from his phone before. Other than that one time, I didn't actually think I would ever use it.

I slid the open screen and clicked on the notifications. When the app opened, my eyes went wide. It was my conversation with TJ. I scrolled through the messages, further and further back. They just kept going and going. Anger flooded me, figuring for whatever reason, he was spying on me. I clicked his profile link and it all hit me at once. Hunter wasn't spying on me and TJ, Hunter *was* TJ. It was one hundred percent his

account, the rancher picture and all. My mouth dropped open and I started to replay the messages in my head, the ones since I had met Hunter. I didn't think I had said anything offensive.

As I replayed my messages, I also replayed his, remembering several messages where he described the girl he was dating as someone to just take up time. How the length of time we had been together was nothing.

"Hey," Hunter said walking in the room with two plates and two sodas. As soon as he saw me he stopped. "What are you doing?"

I pressed my lips together and held up the phone, showing him the profile page. He chuckled and shook his head. "It's nothing. I've had that thing forever."

I nodded, my eyes shifting to my phone. "Since you met a nice person, stayed friends, exchanged jokes, made plans you never planned on following through with?"

Hunter's eyes shifted over me and put the food down on the dresser. "Sure, something like that."

Slowly, I picked up my phone and shifted to the profile page, holding it up for him. "I'm Anya. You're TJ."

His expression fell, and he took a step forward, but I put my hand up. "Don't. You told...TJ told Anya I was just someone to pass the damn time. I was just a convenience."

"Teagan, you have to understand, I wasn't going to spill my guts about someone I cared about to someone I barely even

knew. Someone who I was quite certain was not the person they said they were.”

I stood up and grabbed my clothes, pulling them on. “Then why even tell her? Me? Whatever. It’s not like you were Mr. Up Front And Honest Rancher.”

Hunter sighed and shook his head. “Teagan, you are being ridiculous. Both of us played the part of someone else. Actually, don’t you think its kind of poetic that our alter egos are actual us?”

Scrunching my brow as I pulled my head through my shirt, smoothing it down. “No. Hunter. I do not think it’s romantic to find out all you think of me as is a way to pass the time.”

“It’s not like you were gushing about me.”

I scoffed, walking over to him, slamming his phone against his chest. “You’re right. I didn’t. But there’s a huge difference between not talking about someone and acting like they’re no more important than...what did you say...a can of soup in your cupboard. I can’t believe I fell for this shit. You know, it’s fucking par for the course. Just...stay away from me. I should have gone with my instinct and stayed away.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he yelled after me.

I didn’t stop. I kept going, heading straight out of his house and over to mine. For the first time since I had met Hunter, the distance between our houses was nowhere near far enough. I should have never let my guard down.

# CHAPTER 18

---



## Hunter

“Are you fucking shitting me?” Parker said, loudly, turning toward me. “Teagan and your cyber girlfriend are the same exact person?”

I nodded, drinking my fifth beer of the day. “Yep. That really happened.”

Parker put his beer down on the bar. “Wait, wait. So, was this like a shock to both of you, or is this some crazy movie script worthy stalker situation?”

“She was definitely just as surprised, but way more pissed than I was.”

Shaking his head, Parker put up two fingers to the bartender. “Why is she pissed? You’d think she would find this some sort of romantic kismet. Wait. You weren’t like cyber humping the chick were you? There weren’t like late night cock pics sent or anything.”

“NO,” I growled. “Jesus. I’m not a creeper man. We were just friends. But a few days ago, when cyber Teagan asked me how my dating life was going with the new girl, I kind of said something stupid. I said it was fine, something to pass the time.”

“Oh, shit,” Parker replied. “Why would you say that?”

I shrugged dramatically. “I don’t know. Because I didn’t want to get into my deep emotional feelings with someone I didn’t know. Or thought I didn’t know.”

Parker narrowed his eyes. “Sooooo, why didn’t you just not tell her in the first place?”

I finished my beer and grabbed the new one the bartender set down. I turned toward Parker and shook my head. “I don’t fucking know. Because I’m a moron. I didn’t think there would be anything to it. Like it didn’t even cross my mind. It ended the discussion and I went back to keeping my feelings for Teagan between me and Teagan.”

Parker shook his head again, sipping his beer. “You think maybe subconsciously you knew and you were self-sabotaging.”

“No, what are you a psychiatrist now? I had no clue. Absolutely none. I never suspected it for even a second. And she didn’t either. She messaged ‘TJ’ while I was in the other room and noticed my phone going off every time she sent a message. Then she remembered the other messages I had sent.”

“Did you explain to her why?”

I sighed, hanging my head. “She didn’t really give me the chance. I got defensive, she got angrier and basically told me to go to hell. She wouldn’t answer my calls or texts all day.”

“Do you love her?”

I stared down at the beer, my vision wavering from all the alcohol. “Yes. Of course, I love her. I wouldn’t be this big of a shit show if I didn’t.”

Parker patted me hard on the back. “Then go home, go to her house, and apologize. Tell her you love her. Explain it.”

I groaned, chugging my beer. “She won’t hear me out. In fact, if I even got in front of her, she’d probably just punch me. Then I’d have a broken heart and a broken nose.”

Parker’s phone buzzed, and he stood up, putting on his coat. “Listen, I’m not the most romantic of guys, but give it a little time. Once the initial sting is gone, you’ll be able to talk with her, nose punch or not. I don’t want you to be all emo on me, but you’ll regret it if you don’t try. I gotta jet. Client just got in and I want to make sure they are settled and have everything they need. You’ll be okay, I swear.”

I nodded at Parker and watched as he left the bar, realizing it was already getting dark out. It was that time of year, though, and the wind gusts had already started to pick up in the city. I sat there for another hour or so, nursing my last beer, before calling a car to drive me home. I kept my forehead pressed to the cold glass the whole way there, leaving a big tip and stumbling out into my driveway when we arrived.

The sky was clear and the air cold, but I didn’t seem to notice at all. I stared over at Teagan’s house, the lights looking so warm and comforting. I missed her already. Hell, I missed her the moment she stormed out of my house and headed back to hers. Maybe Parker was right. Maybe I did need to suck it up and have a little bit of courage. Maybe I needed to ring her doorbell every day until she came to the door. I needed to tell

her I loved her, that I fucked up, and that I didn't want to be without her.

Between the pep talk and the alcohol, I was feeling rather brave. I decided in that moment I was going to march right over and tell her how I felt. I straightened my jacket and squared my shoulders stomping toward Teagan's house. I didn't make it very far though. My foot slipped off the edge of my drive into the grass and I tripped forward, taking a nosedive right into one of her newly replanted azalea bushes. I could feel the sting from the branches scratching my face. I groaned and turned over, lying in the bush.

Staring up at the stars, I contemplated making that bush my home. Just staying right there in my drunken misery, watching the seasons change, the branches growing up and around me until the bush had devoured me. The moon glistened in the clear night sky, making me think of the first date that Teagan and I had ever had. We sat out on my porch, eating, getting to know a little about each other. We were playing games from that first moment, both of us desperately trying to keep our walls up. We both failed at that, but it was a good failure. No matter how much recent events stung my soul, I still didn't regret a single moment of it.

I had a feeling Teagan did not feel the same way. In fact, she had good reason for not wanting to speak to me. In some ways, her azaleas saved me that evening. They saved me from making a fool of myself, being yet another unwanted visitor, drunk on her porch. If she didn't listen to me sober, she would be offended if I tried completely wasted.

Knowing full well Teagan would spot me in the azaleas if I laid there too long, I groaned, pulling myself from the bushes. Turning to look at it, I sighed, realizing I had basically broken the entire plant in half. I drunkenly tried to fluff the branches, moving them around, but there was no use, the damage had been done. The plant was like a metaphor for my always broken love life, the one I was trying to put back together so nobody noticed I was wreck, but I never fooled the people closest to me.

Starting to feel the frostiness on my neck, I gave up on the plant CPR and headed inside. I locked the door behind me, kicked off my shoes, and dragged myself to my bedroom. With every step, I took another piece of clothing off, leaving a trail all the way to the bed. When I collapsed into it, I smashed my face into the pillow Teagan had laid on, the scent of her shampoo still lingering from the night before. I yelled into the pillow and turned over, putting my hand to my head.

I had come to Chicago to chase my dreams. I had left heartbreak behind and had made a really nice life for myself. I could go out and hook almost any girl I wanted, but I didn't. I ended up madly in love with my neighbor. The truth was, I wasn't the one who hooked Teagan, she had hooked me from the first glare. I had fought against my feelings, but just being around her was intoxicating. It had been a long time since I loved someone, and while I was afraid she would hurt me, I basically destroyed my chances at love by being a complete and utter moron.

Rolling over to the edge of the bed, I reached out, grabbing my pants. I pulled my phone out and looked at the screen, just like I had done a thousand times that day. And just like a thousand times that day, there were no new texts, no new messages, and no missed calls. Teagan had done what she knew how to do best: she had shut me out completely.

# CHAPTER 19

---

## Teagan

Standing at the sink, I stared out the kitchen window into the backyard as the kettle filled with water. My mind was in a different place, thinking about the heartbreak, Hunter, TJ, and how even though they were the same person, I felt like I had lost two people at the same time. There were several moments where I had picked up my phone to message TJ and quickly remembered TJ was not TJ. There was no rancher friend open to support, jokes, and escape. That person had been Hunter all along. And the messed up part was, Hunter himself had become my lover and my friend, my support, my sarcastic humor partner, and my escape from the stresses of the world.

I was stuck back in the present, miserable, and begrudgingly catering to the whims of crazy authors, being a mom to my siblings while having absolutely no life for myself. I wasn't sure why I was so shocked over it. From the moment I met Hunter, I couldn't decide if I wanted to choke him or screw him. I was pretty sure at this point, I had picked the wrong avenue. I should have choked him when his moving truck destroyed my mother's azalea bushes when I had the chance.

Turning off the water, I set the kettle on the stove and turned on the heat. I wanted to hate Hunter. I wanted to loathe every moment we had spent together, but I couldn't. I couldn't let go of the idea that no matter how it ended up, I didn't really regret my time with him. I learned something about myself. I opened



up for the first time since my mother died, and allowed someone into my life romantically for the first time since my ex and I broke up years ago. Why couldn't I have done that with someone that was mentally and emotionally available, instead of someone who wanted nothing more than to pass the time?

Just the thought of that made me cringe. Pulling down a mug from the cabinet, I could hear the low chatter between Ella and Linds. They had put together a breakup party, bringing ice cream, movies, booze, and tissues. I hadn't used any tissues yet that night, but I was pretty sure I cried my eyes out the night before and had nothing left. My stomach was so upset, I couldn't even think about drinking alcohol, despite the idea that it could take the edge off sounded amazing. I would start with tea and go from there.

Heading into the living room, Linds and Ella raised their arms and cheered. While it was early afternoon, they were both wearing matching bunny adult onesie pajamas. I plopped down on the couch and cradled a bowl of M&M's in my lap. "Guys, I broke up with a guy. I didn't get kicked from the cheer squad."

Ella sat up on her knees, sitting on the floor surrounded by snacks. "Positive happy emotions create chemicals in the brain. If you create enough, you can't help but to feel less sad."

"Or you could down a bunch of shrooms," Linds replied with a shrug. "I know a guy."

I blinked at her. “Why does that not surprise me?”

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Ella asked.

“No,” I replied, shoving a handful of candy in my mouth. “I just don’t understand how anyone can be that stupid. Like, even if I wasn’t Anya, and I saw those messages, I ask who the hell is this chick? But I mean, I guess I don’t have any room to talk.”

“TJ was your main dude for a long time,” Linds replied with a shrug. “He was safe.”

I shook my head, leaning forward. “I thought he was safe. Stupid me. Like, seriously, what are the odds? I am talking to someone for two years, as friends, and they happen to move in next door. And they happen to run over my bush...”

Linds snickered. “That’s what I’m saying.”

I rolled my eyes. “Then, I fall in love with them. Like who does that happen to?”

Ella scooted closer, putting her hand on my ankle. “It shouldn’t be you. You deserve happiness. You make sure everyone else is happy all the time. You take care of everyone else. It really isn’t fair. Fuck TJ.”

“Yeah,” Linds roared. “Fuck Hunter too.”

I sighed. “My anger and embarrassment for getting tricked are right there with you. Fuck them. But damn it if I don’t miss Hunter. And it makes me hate him even more. I know we’re both at fault, since both of us were pretending to be someone else. It makes it hard to be really mad at him.”

I caught Ella and Linds exchanging glances, and Linds gave a short shake of her head. She scooted closer, putting her hand on my other ankle. “Maybe. But you didn’t do anything wrong. You didn’t talk shit about Hunter to...TJ...Hunter... whatever. You know what I mean. You had a friend and that was it. Hunter was a douche pontoon.”

“I know,” I groaned, leaning my head back. “It’s just that when you put TJ and Hunter together, they are like the perfect guy. Doesn’t that mean Hunter is the perfect guy because he is both of them?”

“I won’t lie,” Ella said. “I’m starting to get confused.”

Linds shook her head. “Look. The point of the matter is, it’s not about either of you playing someone else on an app. It’s about what he said about you on the app. Does it sound like the guy you two tell me about? No. But who am I to judge character. I mean, seriously. I’m the girl that ended up selling MLM because I thought it would be a great way to earn some extra cash. I trusted a guy in a clown suit once. Don’t let me near a white van with candy sprayed on the side of it.”

I glanced over at the window and furrowed my brow, looking back at Linds and Ella. “You know, if anyone happens to look in our windows, this is really a strange scene. I’m sitting here shoving chocolate in my mouth while two rabbits sit at my feet.”

Ella and Linds looked over at the reflection and then back at me. All three of us burst into laughter. I wasn’t going to lie, it felt good to laugh, but it wasn’t fully genuine. It broke the

silence in the room, forcing me out of my head. The truth was, I couldn't even begin to think I could trust Hunter again. It would take a really good excuse and a lot of work, and in reality, I wasn't sure I could do that. I wanted to. I wanted him to tell me it wasn't his app, just a ruse for a friend. Or, it was his, but he thought Anya was getting attached, so he played the asshole. Something, anything to make me think he wouldn't just use me like that.

It really didn't matter at that point how perfect Hunter was. It didn't matter what excuse he had or even what I wanted. My heart had been pummeled, and my mind wasn't going to leave me open and vulnerable. The wall that he had meticulously chipped away was already building back up. This time though, I wasn't building it with brick or stone. This wall was steel, reinforced, and impenetrable. I didn't want it. I didn't want to go back to being numb and detached from emotion and caring for people outside of my family, but I didn't really have a choice in the matter.

The more I thought about it, the more it pissed me off. I can't beat myself up for letting down my guard, Hunter gave me every reason to believe I could trust him. I was pissed at him for not handling my heart with care. He was the reason the wall was going back up, and he was the reason I didn't have any control over that whatsoever.

Ella and Linds started up a rom-com and settled in, leaning against the couch on either side of me. I caught them exchanging glances multiple times, but they knew better than to push me to talk about something I wasn't ready to hear. I

wasn't stupid, they both wanted me to hear Hunter out, and at least give it one last shot, but neither of them would say that to me, not at that point. So they played the role that I needed at that moment, something friends did for their friends. They were the man haters club. They were the cheerleaders of death when it came to Hunter.

Part of me was relieved for that, but the other part of me, buried deep in the back, wanted that validation that it was okay to miss Hunter. I wanted someone to slap me, shake me and scream at me to call Hunter and talk things out. But with each passing moment, that silent part of me was being pushed out to the other side of the wall.

I tried to quiet my mind, watching rom-com after rom-com for the entire afternoon until I looked up and found Linds and Ella asleep on the floor in a sea of snack cake wrappers. I hadn't moved an inch and the candy in the bowl was starting to melt from the heat of my body. I set the bowl down on the floor and tiptoed through the living room, to the sitting area at the front of the house. I cracked the window and let the cold air wash over my face and neck. It awakened my senses, and brought any kind of feeling to my bleak, emotionless state.

Sitting back, I folded my hands in my lap and stared out the window, seeing how Hunter's front porch light seemed to flicker as the barren branches of the tree in his yard waved back and forth in the wind. At first, I wasn't actually staring at Hunter's house, I was merely staring off into the distance. I didn't even really have any thoughts on my mind. However, as the wind picked up, swirling a blast of cold air over my skin, I

shook the trance away. Still, I stayed staring at Hunter's front porch. Part of me hoped I would catch a glimpse of him, just like I had done months before, smitten by him. This time, though, I didn't want to see him because I was curious. I wanted to see him because I felt like at least seeing his comforting face and kind eyes would relieve the turmoil inside of me.

I hated breakups. I mean, who didn't? This one though, it was far worse than anything I had felt before. I had only been with him for a couple of months and I was acting like I had known him forever. It felt like I had. There had been moments, laying in the warmth of his embrace, late at night, that I would watch him sleeping and wonder how I made it that long in life without him by my side. Being with him made me question everything about myself, but in a good way.

Groaning, I rubbed my hands over my face and stood up, forcing myself away from the window. I made it this long without him because when it came down to it, I didn't need him. I only needed myself, Linds, and my family. I was tough enough, I knew that. All I had to do at that point was convince myself that I didn't want him in my life. That was the hardest part to break free from. That was the part about Hunter and me that I wasn't sure I would ever truly convince myself of.

# CHAPTER 20

---

## Hunter

“So when did we switch from beers at the bar to brunch?” Parker asked, glancing around at the older crowd in the restaurant.

“Since I drank myself into a bush the other night,” I replied.

Parker looked at me, confused. “From the scratches on your face and tail between your legs, I am assuming you don’t mean the former President. I would ask how you ended up in a bush but frankly, I don’t want to know. I like the nice even level of respect I have for you.”

“At least one of us still respects me,” I grumped.

Parker rolled his eyes. “I’m assuming you still haven’t talked to Teagan.”

“I want to,” I said. “I do. I stare at her front door every day and I want to go over there and knock on the door and tell it to her straight. Like one of those cheesy love scenes in chick flicks. But I can’t seem to get myself to do it. I miss her. I never thought I would say that about a girl. I freaking miss her just being there. I miss our friendship and closeness.”

“Have you considered adopting a puppy?” Parker replied, pointing to what he wanted to order as the waitress jotted it down.

I watched as the waitress gave us a double take and smiled, heading off to put the order in. “Be serious man. This isn’t some infatuation. It’s not guilt speaking. It’s not that I’m



lonely and would take any warm body. I literally miss Teagan as a person. And oddly, Anya too.”

Parker blinked at me. “You do know they are the same person, right?”

“Yes,” I groaned. “I know that. It’s just I’ve been friends with Anya for so long, it feels weird not messaging with her.”

Parker took a sip of his water and looked around. “I don’t know why so many people strive for this. Growing old and wrinkly with the same person, year after year, day after day, eating cucumber sandwiches, with an alarm set to remind them of when they have to leave to catch their shows. Maybe, in some weird way, this actually works out for the best for you.”

I shook my head. “I’m not you, Parker. I actually would like to have that with someone. I just want it to be the right someone.”

“And you already thought Teagan was that someone?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. I know that I love her. I know that I could see a future together at one point. I know that none of that scared me for even a second. Well, at least after I asked her to be exclusive with me.”

Parker cleared his throat and leaned forward. “Life is fucking messy, bro. It’s messy, and painful, and unfair. The only thing is you actually have the power to control some of that. You have the power to decide just how miserable you want to be in this life. Either you have things you want and

people you love and it's not so bad, or you are alone old, and bitter.”

“Why do I feel like I'm in the audience of a Tony Robbins seminar?”

Parker chuckled. “Nah. You know why? Because I am way to amazing to share my secrets with the world. Even if it is for a profit. Most people don't really want to be happy and successful. They just like to think about it, but they don't do what's necessary to get there. Take me for example. I know what will make me happy. I won't settle for less than that, and I make it happen one way or another.”

“Yes, but your experience with what makes you happy revolves around work. It's easier to make a company successful, than to make someone care about you and love you. You can manipulate that to a certain extent, but in the end, if you're not genuine, it'll come back and bite you in the ass later.”

Parker smiled at the waitress as she set our salads down. “You know what type of man will never catch Teagan's attention romantically?”

I shook my head. “No, please enlighten me.”

Parker pointed his fork at me. “A homeless one. You've taken an entire week of family leave. People in this business normally can't do that. They can't just decide their heart is broken so they're going to hang out at home and sulk. This business is cutthroat. Luckily, you have a friend in high places, so I moved the schedule around, so you didn't lose your

artists. I can't do it much longer though. You gotta keep going with work, man. You have built this career you really wanted. No matter what happens with Teagan, you can't let it completely reduce your entire life to a pile of rubble."

I closed my eyes briefly, remembering who I was: the guy Parker was talking about. The guy who defied family expectations. The guy who took a chance on a career and made it happen. A guy who, professionally, had reached goals he hadn't been sure he'd meet in twenty years in the industry. "I know. You're right. If I'm going to be alone and miserable, I might as well do it and not get my house taken by the mortgage company. I might as well have nice things. At least the money can buy me really nice vacations so the distance between me and Teagan isn't fifteen paces."

"Did you count that? Like is that a real number? I'm only asking because I care."

I stabbed my salad and moved it around. "I'll be back at work next week. Maybe it'll make me feel better."

"Look at it this way, if it doesn't, you can at least stare at beautiful women all day...no, that probably won't make you feel better. You can steal artists from other companies and laugh maniacally as the checks roll in. Though, you do have a bit of a bleeding heart. Okay, okay. If you don't feel better, I will personally take you to Bora Bora, get you wasted, set you up in a cabana with some beautiful natives, and you can cry your salty tears into the sea. Then, you'll come back feeling much better."

“You really are the worst at this friendship thing,” I said with a chuckle. “Do you have any other close friends? Am I really the only one? I mean, from this conversation I can absolutely see why, but still.”

Parker shrugged, taking a bite of his salad. “Hey. I’m usually the fun guy. Not the wipe your tears and tell you it’ll be okay guy. I’m trying here. Besides, you bring me to a place where ninety percent of the customers will be dead in the next five years and expect heartfelt conversation. I’m not that cheap. You gotta caress and impress me.”

I smiled for the first time in days. It felt good, but I knew that it wasn’t fully genuine. I knew that my heart was shattered, trying to continue on, but so hurt it didn’t know which way to turn. My mind wanted to shut down and wall myself off again. I wasn’t going to let it though. Part of life was pain, and I was tired of living in this little bubble where I was fine but only because I never let anyone inside. I never took the chance of getting hurt, of realizing what was most important to me. That was something Teagan had done for me. She had fully opened me up to the possibility of love again.

I knew when that happened that it also opened me up to the possibility of hurt as well, but I didn’t care. I only started caring when the pain became all too real. I was tougher than that, and the one thing I never wanted to become was my father. He didn’t work all the time because he was so driven, his company was set and wasn’t going anywhere for a long time. He worked all the time because he has never let anyone

into his bubble. He didn't have anyone to turn to even if he wanted.

Parker interrupted my thoughts, not even noticing I had retreated into my head. "Look man, here's the deal. I'll tell it to you straight, one time. One thing I liked about you, and the reason I knew you would excel in the job, is your human side. The way you care about the artists, about the kids, and all that emotional stuff I stay away from. You not only know the business, are good at the business, and live the business, you make people feel like they are genuinely important to you."

"Thanks, man," I replied, smirking. "Are you going to ask me on a date?"

He shook his head. "Shut up. The point I'm trying to make is, this little coward sitting here crying over his iceberg lettuce is not the Hunter I became friends with. For the first time in history, I'm going to give you a piece of advice that no one else has ever thought to say. Start treating your life like you treat your business. Grow a pair. If you love her, tell her. Don't let anything stand in the way. Make it known and let the chips fall where they may. Regret is worse than rejection, and you don't want that on your conscience."

"Even if I did find the courage..."

"You grow a pair."

I rolled my eyes. "Right. Even if I grew a pair, I don't even know if she'll see me."

Parker shook his head. “No man, see that’s on her. You can only control you. And what she decides to do at that point, that’s on her conscience. If you do everything you can to tell her you love her, to get her back, and she rejects you, that’s not on you. You can have closure at that point. Without closure, you’re just going to end up old and alone eating this shit ass iceberg salad for the rest of eternity. You owe it to you, and you owe it to her to try.”

I knew everything he was saying was right. I knew that I had to have the courage to tell her. My courage wasn’t about facing her. My courage was about taking the blow if she rejected me. At that point, though, I wasn’t sure how I could be any more miserable. Maybe closure, in whatever form that it came, was what I needed to pull myself out of the funk.

If she accepted my apology, I’d have her back. If she didn’t, at least she would know how I felt, and I could know that there was no more I could do. Maybe my next move wouldn’t be the dating world, but I’d at least be able to get back to a functional existence. Anything was better than staring at her house, hoping to see her walk out to take the trash out. This time though, instead of taking a short cut through the bushes of hell, I’d walk around. Even if she did forgive me, if she found out I demolished six more bushes in my attempt, she’d probably murder me.

Closure could come in many ways, but death wasn’t one I wanted. I wanted my heart to heal, and my future to keep moving forward. The only problem was, no matter how much it all made sense, even thinking about moving forward without

Teagan by my side made me plummet back into my depths of despair. I knew the torture I was putting myself through was way worse, but apparently I had suddenly taken a liking to making myself miserable.

“What did you order for lunch?” Parker asked. “I got the salmon.”

“Meatloaf,” I replied, taking a deep breath.

Parker put his fork down and reached across the table. “Had I known you were so far down that you would order meatloaf, I would have driven you straight to the hospital.”

“As long as they sedate me,” I replied. “At least numbness will break me out of this.”

I looked up at Parker, who eyed me for a moment before looking back down at his salad. “Grow a pair.”

# CHAPTER 21

---



## Teagan

“I’m really starting to like this whole, get together multiple times a week thing,” Linds said, setting down the plates on the table. “It’s like adulting, but not really. I’m gonna need you to have another crisis of the heart, Teagan.”

I snorted, taking the pasta bake out of the oven. “Um, no. Your turn.”

“Please,” Ella giggled. “Linds forfeited her heart like ten years ago.”

“True, my little maven,” Linds replied, grinning. “Besides, you know my healing involves breaking things, reckless lewd behavior, and sexy shirtless men.”

“That sounds fun,” Ella replied.

I glanced over at Linds. “Please stop corrupting my baby sister. She is far too fragile for your lifestyle.”

Linds patted Ella on the head as she sat down in her chair. “Sorry little, Mom said you can’t have lewd reckless fun with sexy shirtless men.”

Ella pouted, crossing her arms. “Not fair.”

I set the bake on the table and took the foil off the top, rolling my eyes. “Trust me, you will thank me in ten years.”

“Not likely,” Ella replied, smiling. “But you do have a point. I am quite fragile when it comes to wild behavior.”

Linds put her elbow on the table and leaned her chin into her palm. “Tell me the wildest thing you’ve done, and I will tell you mine.”

“NO,” I shouted, setting the garlic bread on the table. “Good lord, Linds. Are you trying to give my sister nightmares? No one needs a replay of your wildest moments, especially not me considering I was there to witness most of them. Or at least be filled in on them in graphic, nauseating detail the next day. I still have nightmares over your story with the snake, the horse costume, and the turkey dinner.”

“What?” Ella asked, her eyes twinkling like a 12-year-old that just overheard her parents talking about things she isn’t supposed to hear.

Linds shook her head. “No. We don’t talk about that night anymore. Forget you ever heard anything.”

I laughed as I sat down, spooning out the pasta on each of our plates. Linds filled the wine glasses, and Ella passed out the garlic bread. We all took a sip of the wine first, each nodding in approval at Ella’s choice. Ella knew wine better than most, and though she rarely drank it, had picked up on the different types in her days as a rich housewife. Linds folded her hands in front of her. “So, who has something interesting to talk about? Ella?”

Ella curled her lip. “Not really. I have a meeting with the admissions officer for an art school next week. If nothing else, I figured I could perfect my craft and meet some people. I

don't really need a degree, but its something I skipped when I married William. It's a bucket list item."

"Nice, nice," Linds said, glancing over at me. "How about you, Teagan? Anything new in the last couple of days to share with us?"

Immediately my nerves began to take control. I did have something to talk about, but I knew it wouldn't be something that either of them would like. It wasn't really anything I was too excited about but seemed like at least a viable option.

"Actually, yeah, there is something I want to talk to you guys about."

Linds lifted her brow and smiled. "Oh, good. What is it?"

I cleared my throat, trying to will my heart to slow down. "Well, I was in a meeting with the office the other day, and they brought up internal positions coming available. They are hoping to promote from within. There is an Editorial Director position opening up really soon, and I asked my boss what they thought about me applying, and they thought it was a fantastic idea. Less one on one with clients, less work hours, more time to write and maybe have a life."

Ella grinned, nodding. "That sounds awesome, Teagan. You would be perfect in that role. And then you'd have more time to do the things you love."

I nodded, turning my attention to Linds. She knew me all too well, and I could tell by the narrowed eyes and glaring stare, that was not all that the position came with. "It does

sound like a great opportunity for someone, Teagan. Tell me, is that a work from home position as well?”

My eyes shifted back and forth between them. “Well, I mean, there are a certain amount of hours per month allotted for working from home, if you choose.”

Ella furrowed her brow. “Did they open an office here in Chicago?”

Linds smacked her lips, raising both eyebrows. “No, Ella. What Teagan here is leaving out, is that in order to fill that position, she would have to move back to London.”

Ella sat up straight. “What?”

I put my hands in the air, trying to calm the situation. “Look, it’s a really great position, exactly where I’d like to end up.”

“I thought you wanted to own your own publishing house one day,” Linds said flatly.

“Yeah, of course. But this would give me another avenue of learning so when I do, I know what needs to be done, what kind of person to hire. I thought, since Ella is getting divorced, and ready to start a new life...well, you could live here and take care of the house. With the money I’ll be making, I’ll be able to fly home a lot, and you can come to London to visit me. It just seemed like the right timing.”

“But I thought you hated living in London,” Ella said, no longer eating. “I thought you wanted to be here because it’s home.”

I shrugged. “London won’t be too bad with a fresh set of eyes. And here will always be my home. A fresh start seems like a really great thing.”

Linds cleared her throat and looked at Ella. “Let me translate. Teagan fell in love with, literally, the boy next door. And now that she isn’t in a relationship with him, she is trying to run away. She can’t admit to herself that she should talk to him, and gets pissy if anyone tries to insinuate that. So instead she thinks that moving across the globe will put enough distance between her and Hunter, that she’ll feel better.”

“Linds,” I said, attempting to protest.

Linds put her hand up. “I’m not done. What she isn’t admitting to herself is that no matter what distance she puts between them, she will always feel that loss and pain. But giving it a shot is better than sitting in that chair in the front room, staring at his front door like he’s going to magically appear there, roses in his hands, the perfect excuse for his dumbassery, and a ticket to a happily ever after. She knows that without concession, hearing him out, that will never happen. But she is too dead set on keeping the wall up, she can’t fathom holding a conversation with him.”

Ella blinked and looked over at me. “Teagan?”

Linds smirked, taking a bite of pasta. “Did I hit that one on the nose or what?”

I pursed my lips for several moments, trying to think of anything to combat that with. After several moments of silence, I conceded. “Yeah, that’s pretty much dead on.”

Ella rolled her eyes and threw her napkin in her plate. “Enough. Teagan, you and Hunter are perfect for each other. I haven’t seen any couple that I thought were that downright perfect for each other. You finish each other’s sentences, have the same sense of humor, and he actually brought you out of the catacombs you have been living in since Mom died.”

My mouth dropped open and I looked to Linds for backup. What I found was my best friend shrugging her shoulders at me. “She’s right. You want to go interview for this job, fine. But do yourself a favor, and at least hear him out before you accept it and move to the other side of the world. I have seen a lot of versions of you over the years, but the one with Hunter was by far the closest to the best I’ve ever seen. And the one post Hunter is a train wreck.”

“But maybe you’re wrong. Maybe it only seemed like that because I was in some trance.”

Ella shrugged. “You’re scared. I get it. I’ve been scared too, but I made the best choice, regardless of the outcome. I know you feel like you have to be the mother to me and our brothers, but you don’t. We love you for it, but you deserve to be happy too. You also are allowed to fear the hurt, but only if you move past it.”

Linds slapped me on the shoulder, nodding toward Ella. “You did good with this one. I bet you’re thinking maybe a little too good.”

I smirked and set down my fork. “Look, I appreciate that sentiment, and you’re probably right. I should hear him out. I

should look at the fact that I love him and miss him, and take that as a sign that I should give it a chance. While my brain says, yes, yes, that's exactly right, my heart is cowering in the corner."

Linds reached over and squeezed my hand. "But you don't have to do it alone."

I smiled at her and then over at Ella. "I know and I love you guys for that, but in the end, I do. Ultimately, I'm the only one who will truly feel the pain. In some ways, having felt that pain, makes it even more impossible for me to try again. I just don't think I have it in me. I don't know if I can trust again. For all I know, standing in front of him could take all my fears away, but it could do the opposite too."

There were several moments of silence as I stared at the new glass window by the front door. "I already accepted the interview. And if I get the job, I will have to start right away. I'll have to send for my personal stuff, and then come back when I have a break for the rest of it. Is my mind set in stone?"

"Not fully," Linds replied. "But enough to guess which way this will go."

Ella hung her head. I reached across and took her hand. "I don't want to leave you, or Linds. I don't want to leave Mom's house, but I've been living in the shadows of the past my whole life. And until this, I was okay with that because I loved Mom so much. Now, living in the literal shadow of Hunter is too much. I know it sounds insane, but I will be broken forever if I don't make a change. I will pine for him in that damn chair

knowing I'm too afraid to talk to him, until the house sits empty again. I do wish there was a fairytale ending here. I really do. I just know that's not in the cards. My life never works out like that."

"You don't know that," Ella replied, sniffing.

I smiled. "I do, and that's okay. Just the fact that after the first two days, Hunter stopped trying to contact me was a message. That he hasn't been camped outside our front door waiting for the chance to explain tells me something."

Linds groaned. "You're stubborn and expect more from him than you will give yourself. I love you Teagan, and support you one hundred percent, but this is a mistake."

I nodded. "Maybe. But it'll be my mistake."

Ella nodded and picked her fork back up. I took a sip of my wine. Linds let out a deep breath and slapped her hands on the table. "Well, long live the Queen, I guess."

All I could think about was whether everything I just said was a complete lie, or was I really willing to run away from happiness?



# CHAPTER 22

---

## Hunter

**M**y feet had officially worn a path in the carpet after pacing for most of the night, and all morning. I had come to a conclusion, Parker was right. I needed to have closure, no matter what that meant. It was more than that, though. I had taken the time and effort to open up to Teagan. I had trusted her, cared for her, and I realized I love her. Regardless if my heart ever truly felt closure or not, Teagan was absolutely worth fighting for.

It wasn't the medieval period. I wouldn't ride up on my white steed. I wouldn't slay a dragon to get to her tower. But I would face something far worse than a dragon: my own fear. It didn't start with Teagan, it started long before her. It started before I ever had a relationship. I watched my mother and father live like roommates basically, never showing love or affection toward each other. I watched friends' parents acting the complete opposite. I resigned myself to the idea that there was not some magical fate that brought two people together. That love hurt.

My realizations were even further cemented when those parents I watched, the ones who seemed so in love, later divorced. I watched women cry, get angry, get even. I watched men speak of their wives like they were objects and accessories. I was just glad that the idea of no real love was the worst thing I got out of all of that. The disrespect and anger toward each other only ever made me want to be the

opposite. That was probably why my last relationship, years before, lasted far longer than it should have.

Teagan, though, she was the woman for me, I knew it in my very bones. Would we have a fairytale? The chances were slim, and that was life, but I wasn't going to give up without a fight. I had been pumping myself up all morning, readying myself to go over to her house, knock on her door, and tell her exactly how I felt. I would let the decision be in her court at that point, and whatever she decided, I would respect it. I figured there were a lot of different possible outcomes from taking action, and I had imagined just about all of them.

I could leave there with a broken nose and heart to match. I could leave there with more waiting, a hike uphill I'd be willing to take on for Teagan. I could leave there with a friend and nothing more. But the last possibility was what kept me pacing, readying myself. The possibility that she might hear me, truly hear me. That she may have missed me too but was too stubborn to talk to me. That she forgave me and loved me.

At first, I tried to push back the urge to want for that last possibility, but as the night turned to day, I let go of that fear. I knew, whether I hoped for it or not, if I didn't get her back, I would be crushed just the same. Hope was driving away my fear, and I needed that courage to force my legs to walk across the lawn.

When the clock struck eight, I knew no matter what, Teagan would be awake. I gave myself one last look in the mirror and forced my legs to start on the path to Teagan's house, heading

down the stairs. When I reached the bottom, I didn't stop, knowing if I did, even for a second, I might lose my courage. I kept a vision of Teagan in my head, laughing in the candlelight on our second date. It both warmed and broke my heart at the same time.

When I reached the door, I stopped, staring at it. They hadn't replaced it yet after William threw a hissy fit, and a few potted plants. I ran my fingers over the notches in the wood, remembering that night. It was a terrible night from start to finish, minus the amazing sex we had in between. The events after that put a damper on that memory though.

Reaching out, I paused two or three times before finally pushing the doorbell. That was it, there was no turning back. My heart was racing in my chest and nerves flushed down my arms and legs. I could feel sweat start to gather on my forehead, even in the cold morning air. The sound of footsteps could be faintly heard, approaching the door. I looked down at my blue polo and jeans, wondering if I should have worn something different.

Before I could come to a conclusion about that, the door opened. Ella smiled sweetly at me, and I could see a look of pity behind her eyes. My heart sank, but I persisted. "Did she already say she won't see me? I promise I won't take too much time. And I promise this will be the only time I come by. I just want to tell her something important."

Ella shook her head, reached out and punched me in the arm. "Why didn't you come before today?"

“Ouch,” I said, feeling the sting of her small fist in my shoulder. “What do you mean? I figured I needed to give her space. Time to cool down and be open to speaking to me.”

Ella rolled her eyes. “Seriously, men are so dumb. You know Teagan, and you know the more time she has, the crazier her ideas get.”

I sighed. “So, she won’t come speak to me.”

“It’s not that,” she said sadly. “Teagan is on a plane to London right now. She has a job interview for a new position and a raise and if she gets it, she has to decide right then and there if she’s staying in London permanently.”

“What? But she never liked London.”

“No. But think about how far you’d travel just to break the connection, to stop the heartache. Even if she refused to admit it.”

My heart sank. “Right. Okay. Well, thanks, Ella.”

“Wait,” Ella said. “Does that mean you’re giving up?”

I scratched the top of my head. “I don’t know what I’m doing right now. I have to go.”

As I walked toward my house, I suddenly felt the need to get away. I was doing what Teagan was doing, I was running, trying to outrun the pain. I pulled my keys from my pocket and jumped in the car, backing down the driveway. I cracked the windows to let the cold air wash over me, wake me up to the reality. Teagan was gone. She left and she went halfway around the world.

I drove around for several hours, trying to clear my head, but clarity would just not come. So, I went to the one person I knew could see right to my core. If she didn't have good advice, I was doomed. I flipped a u-turn and headed to the retirement facility where my grandmother lived. I knew she would be mad as hell that I never brought Teagan to meet her, but it wasn't on purpose. Two months had just blown by with everything we had going on.

Parking out front, I waved to one of the grounds crew who hollered to me, "Your grandma's out back painting."

"Thanks," I replied, waving to him, taking the walkway around the building to the gardens.

There she was, standing on the overlook, a canvas on a stand, a smock over her yellow floral dress, her head tilted to the side. She looked focused, so I walked up and stood, waiting for her to notice.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in," she said, glancing over with her perfect smile and meticulously pinned white hair. "I thought you moved away and left me here. Not that I'd complain."

"You paint?"

She tossed down the paintbrush and grabbed a towel. "Hell no, but I was tired of playing board games with those cheaters inside."

I chuckled. "Grandma, are you making enemies?"

She tilted her chin up indignantly. “I would never. I can’t help they are jealous. Anyway, what brings my favorite grandson here today?”

With a smirk, I kissed her cheek. “I’m your only grandson.”

“I know,” she grumped. “Your mother did not understand the assignment. So, tell me. What’s going on and why do you look like the world has ended. Must be a woman.”

I let out a sigh and slumped my shoulders. “I really messed things up.”

She put her arm around me and patted my back. “Tell me all about it.”

So, I did. I told her the whole story, including the app, what I said, and how Teagan had run off to London. “I feel like every time I turn around, I’m making the wrong choice. I thought for sure that today was the day, but I was too late.”

My grandmother chuckled. “You’re not too late. You just have a further distance to go to tell her how you feel. Ever since you were a little boy, I knew you would never be like your parents. Who you took after, I have no idea. But you were kind, thoughtful, and loving to everyone. When your little hussy ex cheated, I could have beaten her with my cane...”

“You never had a cane,” I noted.

“I’d buy one just to do it,” she replied. “But you went on your way, doing big things, being who you were meant to be. I got lucky and was brought along. But the one thing you’ve

been missing in this life is love. I know it's really easy right now to feel sorry for yourself, and let the fear take over. It's easier to walk across the street than it is to go all the way to London, but you can't let that stop you. Do you love her?"

"Do I love her? Uh, yes. Yes, I love her very much."

My grandmother nodded. "Can you think of being without her?"

I smiled just thinking of her. "No. I can't imagine being without her."

"Then you know what you have to do. All this other nonsense with past drama and building up these damn walls it's all nonsense. It's excuses. If you truly love her, you will not let a few miles get in the way. You have to suck it up and grow a pair."

I gave her a double take. "What did they put in your oatmeal this morning?"

She chuckled, putting her hand on my knee. "I sit here, and I'm happy here, but I see people day in and day out that are full of regrets. They sit all alone, grumpy, angry. I don't want that to be you."

Suddenly, a burst of courage hit my chest. The hope raced back to me like never before. I nodded my head and stood up. "You're right, grandma."

"Of course, I am," she snickered. "Now give me a kiss and go get her. And when you bring her back here, you better bring her to meet me."



I kissed her cheek. “Yes, ma’am.”

With that I ran off, unsure of why my grandmother’s words hit me so much harder than anyone else. The important thing was, they did. They gave me that umph I needed to throw caution to the wind and go after Teagan. If I didn’t do it then, I’d never have another chance and I wasn’t ready to give up hope.

# CHAPTER 23

---

## Teagan

“Thank you so much for coming all the way out here, Teagan. We’ve had some amazing references sent our way, and we really do value you with the company.” The board shifted papers around for a moment. “We have one more interview, but we will be making a decision this evening, and we’ll call you and let you know either way.”

I stood up, shaking each of the member’s hands. “Thank you so much for this opportunity to interview. Either way, I love working for the company, and look forward to the projects we have coming out over the next year.”

Life was strange, it shifted and moved so quickly. A year before, I would have been incredibly nervous to sit in front of that board and interview. Sure, some of that was the confidence I carried after doing my job and being in the industry for so long. The other part was something more internal. From the moment I got on the plane to London, my emotions shut down. Maybe I did it, or maybe my subconscious did it, avoiding an early in life heart attack due to all the emotions I had faced over the last ten years.

Either way, I felt like I was walking around in someone else’s body, completely disconnected from my emotions and my heartbreak. To be honest, it was a nice break. I was concerned I would come all the way to London and break down in tears during the interview. I really didn’t need to come

out for one job and lose both because they thought I was completely neurotic.

Heading back to the hotel, I walked slowly, out of the way of the racing foot traffic. I was only a block away, and the evening air felt nice. It soothed my soul, but it didn't keep me from questioning whether I was doing the right thing or not. I had been questioning myself the entire way, and quite frankly, I was exhausted. I just wanted to be sure about something, anything really. I wanted to feel like I was in control of my life again. Then again, maybe I never was. Maybe my bubble of safety only gave that illusion.

I ordered room service before heading to my room. I threw off my interview clothes and pulled on a new set of pajamas. I couldn't even look at my llama pjs anymore. I couldn't find joy in anything I used to love. I sighed away the tinge of heartache that threatened to fill my chest again, opening up the balcony doors and stepping out. I was six floors up and had a decent view of the city. London wasn't my cup of tea, but it was definitely beautiful at night. Nothing compared to the view of Chicago though, especially at night during the holidays. The whole city was sparkling in Christmas lights, and if you could withstand the winds that chilled you to the bone, you got a really amazing show.

A knock on the door brought my thoughts back to London. The room service was fast there, and though I thought I was hungry when I ordered, I tipped the guy and went straight for the champagne. Grabbing a throw, I wrapped it around me and sat out on the balcony, thinking about Hunter. I wasn't angry

anymore. When the emotions quelled and my brain started to think straight again, I realized why he had said those things to Anya. If I thought about Hunter's behavior, that showed me that there was no way he truly felt like I was just filling some space. It made sense for a rancher in the middle of nowhere but not for a successful, handsome guy in Chicago.

My revelations always came too late, though. It took me flying almost half a world away from him to realize that he never actually meant to hurt me. He was trying to tell me the truth, but I was too blinded by fear to trust the man I knew I loved. What was done was done though, and I had left nothing but regret in my wake. There was no way I could contact him at that point, and I wasn't even sure he ever wanted to be contacted.

It had been almost two weeks at that point, and not a single word from him. All he had to do was walk fifteen steps from his door over to mine and he just didn't. I imagined putting my life on the line for someone who wouldn't even give me two seconds to explain was hurtful in itself. There was a panic rising in me, the one where you know you've missed out on something good, but it's too late to fix it.

I finished my glass of champagne and grabbed my cell, wanting to call Ella and hear her voice. Before I could, I realized the time difference made it far too early to be contacting her. I set my phone to the side and propped my legs up, taking in a deep breath. It was a good thing that I couldn't call her. If I was going to make the choice to move to London, to be on my own, I had to start relying on one person, and that

was me. I had spent far too much time relying on Hunter, and even though it was only a couple of months, I felt lost.

My phone buzzed on the seat next to me, and I picked it up, seeing a local London number. “This is Teagan.”

“Hi, Teagan,” the woman said with a pep in her voice. “This is Andrea from the hiring department. I was asked to give you a call.”

I sat up in my chair. “Yes. How are you? Shouldn’t it be about time for you to go home?”

“I’m getting there,” she said, chuckling. “You are my last call of the night. I wanted to thank you for coming all the way to London to interview. The board was very impressed by your knowledge and experience, and would like to offer you the position.”

“Oh,” I said, genuinely surprised.

“As you know, this position is in dire need, and the new position will start in three days time. The board knows it’s a big decision, so they would like to give you until the morning to think it over. Is it alright if I call you back at this number?”

“Absolutely,” I replied. “Thank you so much. I will be ready with an answer for you then.”

“Excellent, talk soon.”

I hung up the phone and tossed it the side. I reveled in the excitement and pride for being given the position, but it quickly receded because of the weight of the decision in front of me. It would have been better if I had just made a choice

right then and there, but that wasn't how I worked. Even in my state, I liked to give things time, mull it over, and sleep on it.

I grabbed another glass of champagne and my dinner and ate outside in the cold. I was used to the weather where I lived, and the only thing not so wonderful was the amount of rain London got. Nonetheless, with no one tied to me, and extra time I would have, I might be able to find some really beautiful and interesting places in London. The company provided a beautifully modern furnished apartment, an amazing salary, and took care of all the legalities working abroad. I would have everything I needed, and most of what I wanted.

Still, one thing lingered, something I knew I couldn't have even if I didn't take the job. That was Hunter. I could feel the frustration bubble up inside of me as I thought about the lengths I had gone to outrun the heartbreak. Yet I sat on the balcony of a five-star hotel, eating filet and drinking champagne, and all I could think about was him.

All I could think about was where I wanted to be but couldn't. I finished my dinner and stood up, looking out across the city. I knew what I had to do, and it didn't include wasting away in my mother's house, staring out the window at the house of a man I could never have. I would have to take the job. The only thing that could change my mind didn't even know I was in London. Hunter wouldn't find out for weeks, if not more, that I had left the country. It broke my heart wondering if he would even care when he finally did find out.

I lost a love and I knew deep in my gut I would never be the same. I would never find what Hunter and I had with anyone else.



# CHAPTER 24

---

## Hunter

Walking from the plane with nothing but a carry-on and a passport felt almost liberating. I had enough money that I could start a whole new life there if I needed to, so I wasn't concerned with taking the time to pack. I wanted to get to Teagan as fast as I could. Before I left, I went back to her house and sat down with Ella, telling her everything. She seemed certain I was doing the right thing, but warned that I needed to get there before she made a choice about the new job. So, I paid for the only ticket left on a trip to London, rode first class, which was nice but more expensive than my first car, and arrived late.

Following the signs through the airport, I pulled the small piece of paper from my pocket. It had Teagan's hotel and room number written down on it. I was glad I had stopped to see Ella or I would've been wandering through London, calling out her name, hoping she heard me. Most likely, I'd end up arrested. Crazy American screaming through the city streets.

Outside of the airport, I hailed a cab and climbed in the back. I gave him the name of the hotel and sat back, anxiously strumming my fingers. I had been to London a couple of times when I was younger, but it was definitely a lot more bustling than I remembered. Luckily, it didn't take long to get to the hotel. I hurried inside into the enormous lobby and looked around, unsure of what my next step was. My plans had essentially ended at finding Teagan.

“Can I help you, sir?” one of the attendants asked.

“Uhm...no, I am just waiting for someone, thank you.”

She smiled at me, giving me a second glance before helping someone who had come up to the counter. My phone buzzed in my pocket and I pulled it out, seeing a notification for the change of time zone. I swiped it away, pausing for a moment as my finger lingered over the apps on my home screen. My mind shifted to Teagan, and I wondered if it was the best way to start things off. I realized though, despite the mishap and all the heartbreak, I had known Teagan a lot longer than I ever realized. Between the lies and bullshit we both made up, were truths about both of us, truths I could now pick out without a doubt.

I walked over to the elevators and pressed the button, glancing at the paper for the room number. She was on the sixth floor. She would most likely be asleep, but if I knew her like I thought I did, she would have her phone on in case her sister needed her. As the elevator opened and closed, I smiled, heading upward to either my future or my ultimate devastation.

*elle*

## Teagan

Tossing and turning was my least favorite thing to do, and I had been doing it for weeks. I lived in a perpetual half state of sleep. I tossed and turned, groaned and growled, and eventually I knew I would fall asleep just about an hour and a half before I had to be up. No wonder I couldn't feel anything anymore. I was literally the walking dead.

I turned over on my back and let out a deep sigh, refusing to open my eyes, no matter how awake I knew I was. I was defying my brain and the anxiety that kept me awake. If it didn't give me a good night's sleep, I wouldn't give it the satisfaction of stimulus.

My phone beeped on my nightstand as I attempted to lull myself back to sleep. I sat up, eyes wide, figuring the only person that would text me at that time would be my sister. And if my sister was texting me knowing it was the middle of the night, something had to be wrong. I flung my hair out of my eyes and grabbed the phone, putting in the code. I didn't take the time to look at the notifications and quickly opened my texts. However, there were no new messages in my text inbox.

I closed the tab and opened it again, figuring my phone was just misfiring, confused from the drastic change of time. Still, no new messages. Swiping down, my heart stopped for a moment, and I could feel the air immediately trap in my lungs. It was a message from TJ on the app. The notification didn't say what he was messaging, just that I had an unread message.

A warmth flooded me almost instantly, allowing the air to express from my lungs. Just knowing that it was Hunter on the other line made me feel better. I immediately shook the feeling, figuring it had been a mistake or an old message. I tossed the phone down next to me, not even opening it to see. I didn't want disappointment. I was already beating myself up enough. After taking several side glances at it, I groaned at myself, setting it back on the nightstand where it belonged.

Just as soon as I laid down it began to chime again, this time, one, then another, then another. I cupped my hands over my ears but the dinging continued. Finally I sat up and grabbed the phone, growling at myself. I sat cross legged on the bed, opening up the app. The messages were in fact new. My heart began to race wildly in my chest.

**Hey there, pretty lady. Was thinking about you while I'm on vacation.**

My brow furled, confused at his message. I opened the next.

**When I was a little boy, my mom used to sing me a song about London bridge. It was a nursery song. It made me think, for some reason, all of London was made of wood.**

I chuckled, shaking my head. He knew I was in London. I didn't know how, but he knew.

The next message read, **I don't know why you picked London for a getaway when you could be on a warm beach, on a rancher farm, or up in a skyscraper. But it has its charms.**

I wondered how many times he had been to London. I had never actually asked if he had ever been. The phone dinged again.

**Personally, I don't know why you would leave the beautiful city of Chicago for there. Your company could have at least picked a less gawdy hotel to put you up in. Sure, five stars, but man, there is so much floral wallpaper.**

I stopped, reading that again. How did he know about the wallpaper in the hotel?

Another message populated on the screen. **I am glad the elevators are working because walking up six flights of stairs would have made me really sweaty. Nobody likes a sweaty American.**

“No,” I whispered. “There’s no way. He’s absolutely messing with me right now.”

With a smirk on my lips, I began to message him back. **It has charm. If you're really here, prove it.**

I smirked as I sent the message. His reply came almost immediately.

**Knock, knock.**

I jumped at the sound of knocking on my hotel room door.

*elle*

## Hunter

I stood with my phone in my hand, right outside Teagan's door. I had it turned to silent so she wouldn't hear it go off as I messaged her. I knew she was awake and reading the messages because they were marked read when she opened them. I didn't know how long it would take for her to finally answer me, but I had a feeling she wouldn't be able to resist.

She finally messaged me back.

If you're really here, prove it.

I smiled and texted back. Knock, knock.

Reaching up, I counted to five and then knocked. I could hear her gasp from the other side of the door. I chuckled, the nerves rising again as I listened to her footsteps slowly approach. She undid the chain and then clasp on the door before cracking it to peer outside. She blinked deeply at me as if she were wondering if she had imagined me standing there outside of her room. "I can assure you, I'm real. Would you like to pinch me?"

She opened the door the rest of the way, wearing pink cloud pajamas. "You would have to pinch me."

"What?"

She shook her head. "For me to tell if I was dreaming, you'd have to pinch me."

I slowly nodded. "I like those pajamas. New?"

She looked down at her clothes and nodded. “How did you...”

“Your sister,” I answered, already knowing she would be wondering how I found her. “I’ve come quite a ways, and my plane doesn’t leave for another nine hours so I was hoping you’d let me come in.”

She took several steps back and opened the door, letting me in. I walked into the room, glancing down at the empty champagne bottle. Hearing the door click shut, I whirled around to face her. “I’m sorry it’s so late here. I took the first flight out.”

“I wasn’t really asleep anyway,” she said, looking down at the floor. “Why are you here?”

My heart dropped, fearful that she was not the least bit happy to see me. My face must have shown that emotion because she immediately shook her head. “No, that sounded rude. I mean, it’s good to see you. Really. I just don’t know why you would be here.”

“Right,” I replied, letting out a deep breath. “I missed you. Like I went to your house to talk to you and you had already left.”

“Oh,” she said, nodding. “Yeah, I had this job interview. I got the job.”

“Congrats,” I said. “Did you accept?”

“Not yet. I have to answer them by morning.”



I took a step closer to her. “Why, if I may ask, would you come all the way here to apply for a job that you weren’t certain you wanted?”

She bit her bottom lip. “I was waiting until the last second, just in case...”

“Just in case what?”

She licked her lips, her shoulders relaxing. “Honestly? In the one percent chance, you showed up here to tell me not to take it.”

A small smile pulled at the corner of my lips. I took another step closer, reaching out and taking her hand in mine. “Don’t take it.”

A tear ran down her cheek, and she wiped it away. We both spoke at the same time and then chuckled. She nodded to me. “Go ahead.”

“Teagan, I’m sorry for what happened. I never meant to hurt you, and I didn’t mean any of what I said to...Anya...you... The truth is, I’ve been mystified and mesmerized by you from the first moment that I met you. You blew my mind when you came out there, defender of the azaleas. You had me hooked during our first dinner under the stars and then again and again every single time I was around you. I was stupid not to come running, knocking on your door every day until you finally agreed to talk to me. The truth is, I was scared. I felt your loss more than anything else I have ever felt in my entire life. I knew if I tried to get you back and you said no, I was be destroyed. I feared how strongly I cared about you.”

I took a deep breath, reaching up and wiping one of her tears. “You are beautiful, amazing, and smart, and you don’t need me. The fact that you wanted me was something I’d never experienced before. I love you more than I can explain in words, or flights, or stupid jokes about London. I truly cannot picture my life without you by my side, you are that much a part of me. And you will continue to be a part of me if I leave today with my tail between my legs.”

She sniffled and smiled. “Wow. Did you write that and memorize it?”

I chuckled, nodding. “On about fifty cocktail napkins on the plane. I’m not sure I got it all correct.”

“That poor stewardess,” she said with a laugh.

I reached out and took her other hand. “I’m asking for your forgiveness and your understanding, and for you to not leave my side and not take this job. Come back to Chicago. Come back to me.”

She puffed her cheeks out. “That’s a lot to follow. Um. I didn’t write a speech or anything, but I’ve thought about what I would say if this ever happened. So, here goes. You don’t owe me an apology. I owe you one. I know you did what you did to keep a distance from who you thought was someone else. When it comes down to it, I realized I was judging you based on two lines of message versus everything you had done for me and Ella. For every kiss you gave me. For every moment, you made me feel like the most beautiful woman in

the world. So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I didn't let you explain and that I let my own fear immediately cloud my judgment."

Immediately I pulled her in tight and wrapped my arms around her. She gripped me around the waist and squeezed. "I missed you so much."

She pulled back and nodded. "I missed you too. I missed you a stupid amount. It really was unhealthy."

I laughed. "So does this mean you'll turn down the job and come home to Chicago?"

"Yes," she replied with a smile. "Besides, there is no one that is going to be crazy enough to work with my clients. I have to keep things moving, and I run a tight ship."

"You are so amazing."

I leaned down, cupping her face in my hands, pressing her lips to mine. The beautiful cityscape of London out the windows didn't even compare to the love and beauty in that hotel room. I never thought I would ever find someone that truly made me happy, down to my core happy. The kind of love that would make you want to be a better person, but I had it. I had Teagan in my arms again, and I knew I would do everything I could to keep her there. She was the light in my darkness.

As we toppled over into the bed, the passion still just as strong, I could feel every bit of fear I had lifted away. I could feel the years of anger and irritation over life leave me. I could

feel that sense of comfort and home I had searched for without really ever knowing I was looking for it.

Teagan was home, and she was the fairytale I never thought I'd find.

## **EPILOGUE**

# Hunter

## One Year Later

What a difference a year could make. Teagan and I had been together for over a year, reunited that very day in the hotel overlooking London. She thanked the company but declined the job, heading back to Chicago to resume her duties as an editor. After hearing the person who took the position worked non-stop and took the blame for everything that went wrong, we were both glad she didn't take that position.

When we returned to Chicago, Teagan only lived in her mother's house a few more months before officially moving in with me. She clung to her mother's home, and understood, never pushing her before she was ready. Thankfully, after spending more nights at my place than hers, she let go, and moved her stuff over one box at a time. It was also a great motivator for me since at that point I still hadn't unpacked all the boxes in the garage.

I would have unpacked a thousand boxes if it meant that I got to wake up next to Teagan every morning. I didn't think we could get any closer, but things just got better every day. The timing for Teagan moving out of her place was perfect. Ella had finalized her divorce. She had even started spending some time with a really nice guy. He was genuinely nice, and not just an act. The two were a perfect match, always giggling

together, and I could tell he absolutely adored everything about Ella.

In some ways, I felt protective, like I imagined a sibling would feel for her. I was happy to see her find peace, and find her voice too. She was enrolled in college, loving art, and, I imagined making friends everywhere, she went. I wasn't there when she married William, but for as young as she was and how free she had become, it was like she had a second chance at life.

It seemed the last year was full of second chances and just like Ella, I was not going to waste a single moment of my second chance.

“Hey man,” Parker said, walking up behind me. “It’s fucking cold out here. I still don’t know how you made all of this happen.”

I looked around the garden and smiled. “It’s not over yet, though. This is going to be a very interesting night.”

Parker took a deep breath. “Man, you really went all in on the meatloaf and salad didn’t you?”

I laughed shaking my head. “Stop whining and take that cord across but don’t plug it in yet. This has to be perfect. Everything does.”

Since I got Teagan back, I have been obsessed with making things perfect for her. From the way she liked her coffee, to big moments in her life. She did the same for me, sharing a mutual admiration for the life we were creating together. We

celebrated when her company went into a bidding war to sign her for her new romance series. When she finished the first book, we celebrated. When I got a promotion, we celebrated. I supported her and she supported me. There was nothing we didn't want for each other.

Her love of writing created this liveliness in her. I could tell she loved being able to be creative and free. My love of music was just the same, and when I talked about maybe opening my own label, she was on board without question. I never had anyone believe in me like she did. I used to think I worked so hard to prove everyone wrong. But I quickly found out that I worked even harder when I was appreciated and believed in.

“So, hey, who is the hot chick with Teagan?” Parker asked.

I glanced over to the window, finding Teagan and Linds standing there, talking and laughing. I smirked and glanced over at Parker. “Linds, her best friend. And one of the biggest ball busters I have ever met. I'm not sure you could handle her brand of crazy. Good crazy. But crazy nonetheless.”

Parker scoffed. “Please, I've seen crazy. Nothing surprises me anymore. Doesn't matter. I'm not hooking up with your girl's best friend. That makes way for a whole lot of issues. Not to mention that after tonight, I don't want her to get any ooey gooey ideas.”

I smirked as I finished tying off the lights. Taking a deep breath, I could feel the nerves starting to shimmer through me. I had no doubts and was absolutely certain in what I was about to do. Nonetheless, it was a huge thing, and I knew it was



going to surprise the hell out of Teagan. She was never very fond of surprises, but I was pretty sure she would make an exception for this one. At least I hoped so.

“So, you ready for all this?” Parker asked.

“No,” I replied, glancing over at him.

He smirked and nodded. “You’re ready. More ready than anyone I ever met. Besides, if it all goes bad, my car is parked on the street. Just make a break for it and I’ll meet you there. I have a bungalow in the islands we can hide out in until it all blows over.”

I slowly looked over at him. “If this wasn’t an improvement on your friendship skill from a year ago, I might be offended.”

Parker grinned. “I told you I was working on it. I accepted you into my inner circle...”

“Of one.”

Parker sneered. “And as a member of my inner circle, I will do things from time to time to make you believe that I care. Whether or not I do, will remain a mystery. But seriously, you’re ready. I have no doubt in my mind.”

My heart beat faster in my chest and I glanced up at Teagan inside the house, her smile radiating. I didn’t need Parker to tell me that time. I knew I was ready.

*elle*

## Teagan

“So, he’s been acting weird all day?” Linds asked, chewing on a licorice stick. “Like weird how? Like he has a secret or something?”

“Maybe,” I said, folding the laundry from the night before. “Nothing bad, but like he’s going to jump out from a room and yell Surprise! Happy Birthday!”

“It’s not your birthday,” Linds replied.

I threw a sock at her. “I know. I was just trying to explain the weirdness.”

“Maybe it’s his strange, jackass best friend hanging out all day. Seriously, he’s like here but not here. You could hold a whole conversation with him, and he literally might not hear one single word of it. But, he is hot.”

“He’s his own special brand of crazy,” I said with a laugh.

Linds put up her hands. “Hell no. No way. I do not do crazy. I am enough crazy for a relationship. You introduce more and you’re looking at some weird movie about Bonnie and Clyde.”

I chuckled. “I did always assume we would one day be Thelma and Louise.”

“That would mean we would have to get old, no thanks.”

I snorted. “You don’t want to get old?”

“I mean, yeah, but I don’t want to think about it. Anyway, maybe he got you a present or something. Something he wants

to wait to give to you.”

I slowly turned my head toward her. “Oh my God! You know what’s going on! You traitor!”

Linds jumped up as I raced toward her. “Okay, okay, I know something is going on, but they would not tell me what because Hunter knew that this exact thing would happen, and if I knew, I’d spill the beans. He literally just said, I need you to hang out with my girlfriend at home, keep her happy, and divert suspicion.”

I shook my head. “You are terrible at this stuff. I’m not only suspicious, I am solving the riddle one step at a time.”

Linds chuckled. “I don’t know. I have been trying to figure it out all day but I can’t. And Hunter’s guard dog nips at me if I get anywhere near him. I’m starting to think they opened some sort of portal to hell and this whole thing has been a ruse to get us sucked into it.”

“Well, you’d feel right at home then.”

Linds sneered. “Funny. Hey, where’s your sister? Canoodling with the new boy toy?”

“Probably, but she said they’d be over later.”

“Oh, joy, Barbie and her nerdy lap dog giggling in the corner.”

I picked up the basket and headed upstairs, Linds following after me. “Oh, stop. She deserves to be happy. Don’t be jealous. You are the worst with that.”

“I’m not jealous. I’m just now the only single friend and feel like either the third wheel or the one that has to entertain the strange single guy friend. No biggie.”

I set the basket down and wrapped my arms around Linds, hugging her tightly. “I love you Linds bear.”

“You are asking for it,” she grumbled. “I love you too, now get your love off of me before I catch something.”

I laughed as I broke the embrace. From downstairs, Hunter called out. “Teagan, can you come out back for a minute?”

Wiggling my eyebrows at Linds, I contained the excitement for whatever present he got me. “Sure, be down in a sec.” Turning to Linds I grinned. “It’s going to be something totally cheesy like a tree swing or something. Watch.”

We headed downstairs and I grabbed my jacket before sliding open the door. The lights in the house were off and I carefully stepped onto the porch. “It’s pitch black. I am going to break my neck.”

Hunter whispered in the dark. “Now....Parker...plug it in damn it.”

“I’m trying,” he whispered back.

Finally, lights erupted all through the backyard. What had been a perfectly manicured lawn just that morning, had been transformed into a garden. There were twinkling lights hung all over the place, some fading in and out like fairies in a garden. My mouth fell open at the view, counting ten azaleas, fully bloomed despite the frigid temps.

“Oh my god,” I whispered.

Hunter stepped into the center of them and put his hand out to me. I giggled and hurried forward, taking his hand. “How did you get all of these fully bloomed azaleas in the cold season?”

“Magic,” he whispered, as he clicked a button on a remote in his hand.

The lights all over the garden began to dance and swirl, transforming the space into something out of a fairy tale. I turned and pressed my back to Hunter, covering my mouth. He wrapped one arm around my waist and leaned his head down to my shoulder. “Every single day of my life I wake up next to you with butterflies in my stomach. I never got to meet your mother, but in some ways, I feel like she brought us together. These azaleas won’t last until the spring without serious care, but I couldn’t ask you what I want to ask you without a small piece of your mom here with us.”

My brow furled, and I turned toward Hunter. “Ask me what?”

I watched as Hunter lowered down on one knee, pulling out a small red velvet box. He opened the lid revealing an enormous princess cut diamond. “Teagan, I love you more than anything in the world, and I know this is just the beginning for us. I want to have a family, to walk through life together, to grow old, bitter, and angry together. I want you to be mine and I want to be yours for the rest of our lives. So, I’m

asking you today, will you do me the honor of being my wife?"

Surprised was an understatement, but just like when he asked me to keep seeing him, I didn't think twice about the answer. I knew from the bottom of my soul that I absolutely wanted to be married to Hunter.

"Yes," I said, tears flowing down my cheeks.

He stood up and slid the ring onto my finger before leaning in and kissing me sweetly. I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he picked me up off the ground. I had done it. I had found something I didn't even ever really think existed. I didn't just find my own real life fairytale, I found my Happily Ever After.

The End.

Do you like FREEBIE Romance books?

Sign up for my newsletter and get ‘Most Eligible Bachelor’  
for free!

Ever since I can remember, I’ve had a plan. It didn’t include having a one-night stand with my best friend’s brother. The future CEO of the tech company I just started working for.

Alex Fellows is my best friend’s brother, and Chicago’s most eligible bachelor. His playboy antics are next level. Having a different girl on his arm every night. Day one – he walks into my office, showing off his flirtatious smile. Can you say tall, dark and...*Hold on, let me catch my breath!*

At the company’s annual retreat, Alex won’t let up, seeming to be everywhere I turn. I slip away trying to escape the pretentiousness of the retreat. And Alex finds me. Whiskey bottle and all.

I should just walk away, but I don’t. The banter getting funnier as the whiskey flows. And we end up hooking up under the country sky. *NOT* part of the plan.

We agree to keep things strictly business. But the push and pull of our interactions has my mind reeling. And invade my dreams, waking me hot and bothered.

I can't let this billionaire playboy derail my plan... Even if his eyes keep making me want more.

**Sign Up Now!**

**Follow me on Facebook!**